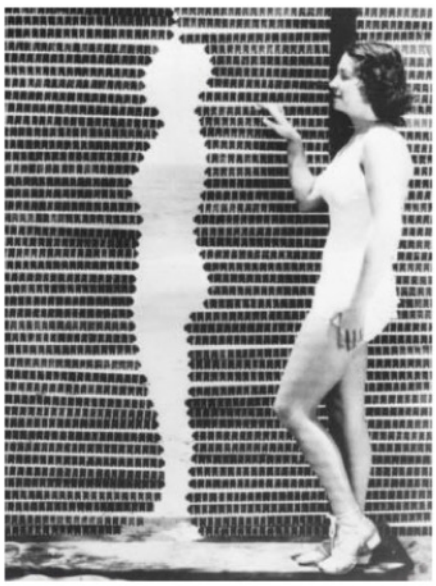
Social psychology

# The enemy of the good

**The Perfection Trap.** By Thomas Curran. *Cornerstone Press; 304 pages; £22. To be published in America by Scribner in August; $28*



Nobody's perfect

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Birth-Mark", a chemist called Aylmer marries a young woman, Georgiana, whose sole imperfection is a red blemish on her left cheek. He considers it a "fatal flaw"; she pleads with him to use his skills to remove it. Stumbling on his journal, however, Georgiana is astonished to find it is a catalogue of scientific mishaps. Might his loathing of her birthmark stem from his professional disappointment? At length Aylmer concocts a potion that has the desired effect—and promptly kills her.

Hawthorne's 180-year-old tale illustrates the perils of perfectionism. It is Thomas Curran's starting-point for a study of what he calls a "hidden epidemic". He thinks the obsessive pursuit of ever higher standards, rather than propelling achievement, is mainly a scourge. A social psychologist at the London School of Economics, he describes himself as "a recovering perfectionist". Drawing on both academic research and his own experiences of "deficit thinking", he makes a vigorous case, albeit one occasionally marked by cliché (he sees his younger self as a "chin-stroking, cardigan-wearing intellectual").

Mr Curran distinguishes between three sorts of perfectionism. The first, which looks inward, is the relentless self-scolding of the workaholic or punctilious student. A second version, directed towards others, is commonly found in bosses who have unrealistic expectations of their staff and decry their supposed failings (he cites Steve Jobs as an example). The third and most troublesome kind is the form imputed to society: "an all-encompassing belief that everybody, at all times, expects us to be perfect". Its victims tend to feel lonely; often they harm themselves and harbour thoughts of suicide.

Having noted the ways in which this pathology inflames vulnerabilities and erodes resilience, Mr Curran suggests some causes. These include a lack of job security, neurotic supervision by helicopter parents and the gaudy blandishments of advertising, which fuel consumption and anxiety. "The very fabric of this economy", he claims, "is woven from our discontent." Inevitably he blames social media, which inundate users with images of finely sculpted bodies, flawless outfits, ambrosial holidays and exquisite weddings.

A less familiar culprit is Don Hamachek, an American psychologist, who in the 1970s coined the term "normal perfectionism", thereby legitimising morbid self-criticism, says Mr Curran. He even reproaches Barack Obama for enjoining young people to learn from their mistakes. Instead, he says, failures should be "allowed to simply wash through us as a joyous reminder of what it means to be a fallible human".

The author's greatest odium, though, is directed at meritocracy. In this he draws on the thinking of Michael Sandel, a philosopher at Harvard. Especially in "The Tyranny of Merit" (published in 2020), Professor Sandel has argued that using education as a giant sorting machine creates a toxic obsession with credentials, dividing society into winners and losers and depleting the common good. Like other critics of meritocracy, Mr Curran has a point—until you consider the alternatives.

Daily life, in his view, now resembles an endless tribunal. Young people suffer most from the constant scrutiny of scores and rankings. Decrying a fixation on economic growth, he applauds countries, such as Bhutan and New Zealand, where decision-makers take account of citizens' happiness. Mr Curran's preferred fix is a universal basic income, which he says would "extinguish the fire of perfectionism".

Whatever its economic merits, his argument errs in treating perfectionism as a purely cultural phenomenon. Might it not also be a disposition embedded in the psyche? Tellingly, his guidance—"Keep going. Do not yield"; "Keep practising that acceptance of fortune and fate"—is couched in the language of the perfectionist's round-the-clock report card. ■

The decline of great powers

# Roman lessons

**Why Empires Fall**. By John Rapley and Peter Heather. *Yale University Press; 200 pages; $27. Allen Lane; £20*

Declinism is in fashion again. As relations between America and China worsen, studying the ends of earlier ages of hegemony becomes more popular. Books predicting the unstoppable rise of autocratic strongmen and the death of democracy proliferate. There is much talk of the "Thucydides trap": the inevitability of a clash between a rising power and an established one, as Athens challenged Sparta in the fifth century BC.

This provocative short book adapts this approach with a novel twist. It draws a comparison between the West in 1999, the zenith of its confidence, and Rome exactly 1,600 years earlier, in 399—just decades before the empire's collapse.

The most interesting part of the story concerns Rome. John Rapley, a political economist, and Peter Heather, a historian, dissent from the analysis familiar since Edward Gibbon of an empire in gradual decline almost from its inception under Augustus. Rome, they argue, was as strong as ever at the turn of the fifth century AD. An admittedly extensive and sometimes rickety empire was held together mainly by co-opting talented outsiders, devolving extensive power to strong commanders and doing deals with potential enemies. Yet within a decade Rome had pulled its legions out of Britain (the authors dub this withdrawal the first Brexit). Less than a century later, the last western emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was gone.

What went wrong? The book dwells on foreign forces that became ever harder to resist. At the empire's weakening periphery, local bigwigs began throwing in their lot with Goths, Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Huns, Vandals and the rest. The sister of one emperor even married a Visigoth leader (apparently voluntarily) and produced a son with serious imperial claims. As Gibbon laboured to explain 250 years ago, the eastern empire based in Constantinople continued for almost another millennium. But it, too, was weakening and steadily losing territory, initially through costly wars against Persia and later with the rise of Islam and the Ottomans.

Over the centuries western Europe recovered, first under Charlemagne and later even more spectacularly when it spread its power (and its own empires) across most ▸▸

of the known world. The question the authors pose is whether, despite its apparent dominance as recently as the turn of the 21st century, the West is now inexorably heading in the same direction as Rome in the fifth. They point to such issues as rising debt burdens, costly welfare states, depressed productivity growth, demographic decline and mass immigration. They see big challenges to the West from the growth of Asia, particularly China and India, and also from anti-Western powers such as Russia and the rise of Africa.

Yet the analogy with Rome's decline and fall is ultimately unconvincing. The rest of the world is certainly catching up with the West, both economically and demographically. China's economy may soon be bigger than America's. Europe accounted for a quarter of the global population in 1914, but has less than a tenth today. Immigration, especially from Africa and Latin America, is politically testing. Populism is on the march.

All the same, on a global scale it is hard to envisage a serious military rival to the clout of the United States and its European allies. Russia is revanchist in Ukraine, but it is also in long-term decline. China is brittle and its growth is slowing sharply. India is politically rancorous. The West's grip on the best technology and research is firm. And though Europe's economic prospects may be cloudy, American productivity leaves most competitors in the dust.

Declinists like to cite George Bernard Shaw, whose dictum on the transience of great powers jokily invoked an English village: "Rome fell. Babylon fell. Hindhead's turn will come." It is tempting to think that way. But for now, at least, it is not obvious when, if ever, the West will follow suit. ■

# Johnson A language for the world

*By learning English, people around the globe are changing it, too*

WHAT COUNTRY does French belong to? The answer seems obvious: France, as it says on the label. But there are roughly four times as many speakers of French outside France as there are within it. Who does Portuguese belong to? You might now hesitate to blurt out "Portugal", remembering that Brazil's population is about 20 times bigger than Portugal's. Maybe Portuguese belongs jointly to them both. But then 70m people live in African countries in which Portuguese is an official language. Perhaps it belongs to them, too.

The English can be under no illusion that the language of the same name is exclusively theirs. The small matters of the other nations in the British Isles, and of the superpower across the Atlantic, make clear that it is joint property. But these countries—along with Canada, Australia and other Anglophone peoples—must at some point come to terms with the fact that, even collectively, their language no longer belongs to them. Of the estimated billion people who speak English, less than half live in those core English-speaking countries.

Every day, the proportion of English-speakers born outside the traditional Anglosphere grows. Perhaps 40% of people in the European Union speak English, or about 180m—vastly more than the combined population of Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In India, calculations range from 60m to 200m. Most such estimates make it the second-biggest Anglophone country in the world.

English-speakers pride themselves on the spread of the language, and often attribute that to an open, liberal-minded attitude whereby it has happily soaked up words from around the world. In the coming century, though, English will do more than borrow words. In these non-Anglophone countries, it is becoming not just a useful second language, but a native one. Already it is easy to find children in northern Europe who speak as though they come from Kansas, the product of childhoods immersed in subtitled films and television in English, along with music, gaming and YouTube.

Today, many learners still aim for an American or British standard. Textbooks instruct Indian English-speakers to avoid Indianisms such as "What is your good name?" for "What is your first name?", or "I am working here for years" instead of "I have been working here for years." A guide to avoiding Europeanisms has long circulated in European Union institutions, to keep French- or German-speakers from (for example) using "actual" to mean "current", as it does in their languages.

Yet as hundreds of millions of new speakers make English their own, they are going to be less keen to sound British or American. A generation of post-colonial novelists has been mixing native words and phrasings into their English prose,

without translation, italics or explanation. Academic movements such as "English as a lingua franca" (ELF) have been developing the ideology that speakers—no longer referred to as "non-native" but rather "multilingual"—should feel free to ignore British or American norms. Karen Bennett of Nova University in Lisbon says the university website has been translated using words common in southern European English—like "scientific" for "academic", or "rector" for "vice-chancellor". The appropriate local dialect is not British or American but ELF.

Given enough time, new generations of native speakers contribute not just words but their own grammar to the language they learn—from older speakers' point of view, distorting it in the process. "I am working here for years" is a mistake today, but it is not hard to imagine it becoming standard in the future in culturally confident Anglophone Indian circles.

If this disturbs you, remember that this column is written in a mangled version of Anglo-Saxon, learned badly by waves of Celts, Vikings, Normans and others until it became an unrecognisably different tongue. And take comfort in the fact that such changes usually happen too slowly to affect comprehension in a single lifetime. Written language is less volatile than the spoken kind and exerts a stabilising force.

But if language is always evolving (true to the point of cliché), the adaptations are even more profound when they come as a result of new speakers hailing from different linguistic worlds. No language has ever reached more speakers than English. It is hard to predict how they will change it, but easy to rule out the notion that they will not change it at all. In the end, it will be theirs too.