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Back to the Future | Peter Thiel

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The Decadent Society:
How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success
by ross douthat
avid, 272 pages, $27

When Boeing introduced its flagship 707 jet airliner in 1958, the power to cruise at 977 kilometers per hour did more than enable routine transcontinental commercial flights. It fed the optimistic self-understanding of a society proud to have entered the Jet Age. More than sixty years later, we are not moving any faster. Boeing's latest plane, the 737 MAX, has a cruising speed of just 839 kilometers per hour—to say nothing of its more catastrophic limitations.

The since-retired 707 was a success. The new MAX looks like a failure. As for the 747 jumbo jets that we are still flying today fifty years after their 1969 debut, they are a sign of what Ross Douthat calls decadence. By "decadence" he does not mean delicious sensuality or over-the-top indulgence (think Margot Robbie's Sharon Tate dancing mid-flight in the upper-deck cocktail bar of a 747 in last year's *Once Upon a Time . . . in Hollywood*) but stagnation and complacency, a dissipation of creative energy, a jaded will merely to muddle through.

Douthat's book is well-timed. The fiftieth anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing and Quentin Tarantino's painstaking recreation of the year 1969 summon the same nagging question: How far have we come since then? Few men in the street would be able to evaluate the progress of, say, physics as instantiated in string theory. But everyone should be able to tell whether or not the streets around us, and the expectations of life, have been transformed for the better.

Are we making progress? Not so much, Douthat answers. Baby boomers will wince at his title, since "decadence" sounds to them like the complaint of an old curmudgeon. They cannot stand to think of themselves as old, nor can they bear to think of the society they dominate as dysfunctional. But this is a young man's book. Douthat can see our sclerotic institutions clearly because his vision is not distorted by out-of-date memories from a more functional era.

Douthat outlines four aspects of decadence: stagnation (technological and economic mediocrity), sterility (declining birth rates), sclerosis (institutional failure), and repetition (cultural exhaustion).

Stagnation is the most evident. Look up from your phone, and compare our time to 1969. "Over the last two generations," Douthat writes, "the only truly radical change has taken place in the devices we use for communication and entertainment, so that a single one of the nineteenth century's great inventions [running water] still looms larger in our everyday existence than most of what we think of as technological breakthroughs nowadays."

Sterility is not immediately obvious outside of a few places like San Francisco. In public debates, low birth rates are treated as a matter of personal preference. If they mean anything more, it is as a drag on future economic performance—hence an argument for immigration. Douthat goes beyond economistic abstractions to point out that missing kids weaken a society's connection to the future. He thus explains a key current in "populist" skepticism of the elite consensus: "[Immigration] replaces some of the missing workers but exacerbates intergenerational alienation and native-immigrant friction because it heightens precisely the anxieties about inheritance and loss that below-replacement fertility is heightening already." Douthat does not ignore racism, but he focuses on the dynamics that explain our unique moment instead of inveighing against an age-old evil.

"Sclerosis" refers to our diseased institutions, especially the inability of our government to get anything done. Assessing the record of rule by experts, Douthat again emphasizes historical contingency rather than doctrinaire ideology:

> Time makes these problems worse, as popular programs become part of an informal social contract that makes them nearly impossible to reform; as the administrative state gets barnacled by interest groups that can buy off and bludgeon would-be reformers; and as the proliferation of regulations handcuffs administrators and deprives them of the room to respond to changing times.

In other words, the New Deal could only happen once, and whatever competence prevailed at its experimental dawn no longer exists.

"Repetition" names the condition of our culture, endlessly remaking remakes of remakes. Whereas the fifties, the sixties, the seventies, and the eighties all had distinctive by-the-decade styles in design, clothing, music, and art, from the nineties to now feels like one big remix. We are stuck in a boomer culture loop, explains Douthat, from J. J. Abrams remaking George Lucas's *Star Wars* to Martin Scorsese remaking himself:

> The boomers were the last rebellious generation to come of age not only with various traditional edifices still standing but also with a sense, in the Eisenhower fifties, that those edifices had actually been *strengthened* by the experiences of the Depression and World War II. This gave the rebel culture of the sixties a real adversary to struggle against: the old bourgeois norms refreshed by suburbanization and prosperity; a Christianity that had just experienced a sustained revival; a patriotic narrative of history that had been burnished by victory in the Second World War; a common culture that had become more binding through the influence of radio, television, mass-market periodicals, and movies.

Now the old family structure has been smashed, religion is in decline, patriotism is passé, and the cultural marketplace is fragmented. Because there is no longer a healthy dominant culture, would-be rebels have nothing to resist. So they playact the battles of a previous age.

Every aspect of decadence feeds back into the others. Legal sclerosis is likely a bigger obstacle to the adoption of flying cars than any engineering problem. Poor transportation makes it more expensive to raise a family and so lowers birth rates. Aging brings risk-aversion and arrests creativity.

Douthat rightly stresses material stagnation. He does not, however, treat deeply of the ultimate engine of both technology and the economy: science. This is for good reason. Back in 1958, when new technologies such as the Boeing 707 really were changing the physical world around us, Leo Strauss had already pointed out an "appalling discrepancy" between the exactness of science itself and our seeming incapacity to evaluate its progress.

We have determined the value of the fine-structure constant, which describes interaction between elementary particles, to a dozen significant digits. But if you ask the authorities for a measurement of the health of science as an enterprise, the reply will be vehement and very vague: "Never has the pace of discovery been so rapid, the range of achievements so broad, and the changing nature of our understanding so revolutionary," asserted the former president of MIT in *Science* in 2018.

Such statements may seem like so much hand-waving, but they are hard to challenge given the extreme specialization and implicit invincibility of thousands of scientific subfields. We are forced to wonder whether things are as rosy as the grant writers insist. As for the world outside of MIT's PR materials, it appears much the same as it was in 1969—just with faster computers and uglier cars.

If you can get a university president (almost every one of whom is a boomer) to take stagnation seriously, you are likely to hear two talking points: First, we need to spend more money on education and research. Second, progress is harder now than it used to be because the "low-hanging fruit" is all gone and we are up against the limits of nature. Douthat rejects these excuses. He maintains that more of the same is not enough, and stagnation is not a fate imposed by the universe. Choosing agency over boomer complacency, *The Decadent Society* sets the stakes for the most urgent public debate of the 2020s: How do we get back to the future?

If there is a problem with the book, it is that Douthat does not press his own theme urgently enough. When considering ways out of our impasse, he singles out religious revival and technological - acceleration—specifically, interstellar travel. Thus his final sentence: "So down on your knees—and start working on that warp drive." Here the urbane tone that makes the rest of the book both charming and persuasive undermines the argument, as if winking to the reader that the author does not, after all, take any of this stuff very seriously.

Warp drive is in fact hard to take seriously because its basic physics are so far beyond the furthest reaches of our knowledge as to debilitate would-be researchers—not to mention reasonable doubts

about the friendliness of faraway foreign species. (Some of them, I assume, are good aliens.)

A renaissance will require motivational goals. To be motivational, a goal must be both ambitious and achievable. For this reason, I suspect that we should hesitate to put our faith in distant star systems. The fountain of youth and the Tree of Life are not waiting for us in Tau Ceti or on Planet Vulcan in 40 Eridani. We need not be “loyal to the earth” like the atheist Zarathustra, but we would do well to expect our salvation to be worked out in the solar system we have been given.

For technologists, that means pursuing goals that are difficult but possible: cures for cancer and Alzheimer’s; compact nuclear reactors and fusion power. For statesmen, that means deconstructing the corrupt institutions that have falsely claimed to pursue those goals on our behalf.

It is a paradox of our time that the path to radical progress begins with moderation. Extreme optimism and fatalistic pessimism may seem to be stark opposites, but they both end in apathy. If things were sure to improve or bound to collapse, then our actions would not matter one way or the other.

Not only do our actions matter, I believe they matter eternally. If we do not find a way to take the narrow and moderate path, then we may find out that stagnation and decadence were all that kept immoderate men from stumbling into the apocalypse.

Peter Thiel is an entrepreneur, investor, and the author of Zero to One: Notes on Startups, or How to Build the Future.