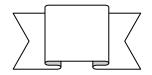
ON THE SECRET OF DEGENERATION

BY BARON JULIUS EVOLA



On the Secret of Degeneration By Baron Julius Evola (from Deutsches Volkstum, Nr. 11, 1938)

Anyone who has come to reject the rationalist myth of "progress" and the interpretation of history as an unbroken positive development of mankind will find himself gradually drawn towards the world-view that was common to all the great traditional cultures, and which had at its centre the memory of a process of degeneration, slow obscuration, or collapse of a higher preceding world. As we penetrate deeper into this new (and old) interpretation, we encounter various problems, foremost among which is the question of the secret of degeneration.

In its literal sense, this question is by no means a novel one. While contemplating the magnificent remains of cultures whose very name has not even come down to us, but which seem to have conveyed, even in their physical material, a greatness and power that is more than earthly, scarcely anyone has failed to ask themselves questions about the death of cultures, and sensed the inadequacy of the reasons that are usually given to explain it.

We can thank the Comte de Gobineau for the best and best-known summary of this problem, and also for a masterly criticism of the main hypotheses about it. His solution on the basis of racial thought and racial purity also has a lot of truth in it, but it needs to be expanded by a few observations concerning a higher order of things. For there have been many cases in which a culture has collapsed even when its race has remained pure, as is especially clear in certain groups that have suffered slow, inexorable extinction despite remaining as racially isolated as if they were islands. An example quite close at hand is the case of the Swedes and the Dutch. These people are in the same racial condition today as they were two centuries ago, but there is little to be found now of the heroic disposition and the racial awareness that they once possessed. Other great cultures seem merely to have remained standing in the condition of mummies: they have long been inwardly dead, so that it takes only the slightest push to knock them down. This was the case, for example, with ancient Peru, that giant solar empire which was annihilated by a few adventurers drawn from the worst rabble of Europe.

If we look at the secret of degeneration from the exclusively traditional point of view, it becomes even harder to solve it completely. It is then a matter of the division of all cultures into two main types. On the one hand there are the traditional cultures, whose principle is identical and unchangeable, despite all the differences evident on the surface. The axis of these cultures and the summit of their hierarchical order consists of metaphysical, supra-individual powers and actions, which serve to inform and justify everything that is merely human, temporal, subject to becoming and to "history." On the other hand there is "modern culture," which is actually the anti-tradition and which exhausts itself in a construction of purely human and earthly conditions and in the total development of these, in pursuit of a life entirely detached from the "higher world."

From the standpoint of the latter, the whole of history is degeneration, because it shows the universal decline of earlier cultures of the traditional type, and the decisive and violent rise of a new universal civilization of the "modern" type.

A double question arises from this.

First, how was it ever possible for this to come to pass? There is a logical error underlying the whole doctrine of evolution: it is impossible that the higher can emerge from the lower, and the greater from the less. But doesn't a similar difficulty face us in the solution of the doctrine of involution? How is it ever possible for the higher to fall? If we could make do with simple analogies, it would be easy to deal with this question. A healthy man can become sick; a virtuous one can turn to vice. There is a natural law that everyone takes from granted: that every living being starts with birth, growth, and strength, then come old age, weakening, and disintegration. And so forth. But this is just making statements, not explaining, even if we allow that such analogies actually relate to the question posed here.

Secondly, it is not only a matter of explaining the possibility of the degeneration of a particular cultural world, but also the possibility that the degeneration of one cultural cycle may pass to other peoples and take them down with it. For example, we have not only to explain how the ancient Western reality collapsed, but also have to show the reason why it was possible for "modern" culture to conquer practically the whole world, and why it possessed the power to divert so many peoples from any other type of culture, and to hold sway even where states of a traditional kind seemed to be alive (one need only recall the Aryan East).

In this respect, it is not enough to say that we are dealing with a purely material and economic conquest. That view seems very superficial, for two reasons. In the first place, a land that is conquered on the material level also experiences, in the long run, influences of a higher kind corresponding to the cultural type of its conqueror. We can state, in fact, that European conquest almost everywhere sows the seeds of "Europeanization," i.e., the "modern" rationalist, traditionhostile, individualistic way of thinking. Secondly, the traditional conception of culture and the state is hierarchical, not dualistic. Its bearers could never subscribe, without severe reservations, to the principles of "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's" and "My kingdom is not of this world." For us, "Tradition" is the victorious and creative presence in the world of that which is "not of this world," i.e., of the Spirit, understood as a power that is mightier than any merely human or material one.

This is a basic idea of the authentically traditional view of life, which does not permit us to speak with contempt of merely material conquests. On the contrary, the material conquest is the sign, if not of a spiritual victory, at least of a spiritual weakness or a kind of spiritual "retreat" in the cultures that are conquered and lose their independence. Everywhere that the Spirit, regarded as the stronger power, was truly present, it never lacked for means - visible or otherwise - to enable all the opponent's technical and material superiority to be resisted. But this has not happened. It must be concluded, then, that degeneracy was lurking behind the traditional facade of every people that the "modern" world has been able to conquer. The West must then have been the culture in which a crisis that was already universal assumed its acutest form. There the degeneration amounted, so to speak, to a knockout blow, and as it took effect, it brought down with more or less ease other peoples in whom the involution had certainly not "progressed" as far, but whose tradition had already lost its original power, so that these peoples were no longer able to protect themselves from an outside assault.

With these considerations, the second aspect of our problem is traced back to the first one. It is mainly a question of explicating the meaning and the possibility of degeneracy, without reference to other circumstances.

For this we must be clear about one thing: it is an error to assume that the hierarchy of the traditional world is based on a tyranny of the upper classes. That is merely a "modern" conception, completely alien to the traditional way of thinking. The traditional doctrine in fact conceived of spiritual action as an "action without acting"; it spoke of the "unmoved mover"; everywhere it used the symbolism of the "pole," the unalterable axis around which every ordered movement takes place (and elsewhere we have shown that this is the meaning of the swastika, the "arctic cross"); it always stressed the "Olympian," spirituality, and genuine authority, as well as its way of acting directly on its subordinates, not through violence but through "presence"; finally, it used the simile of the magnet, wherein lies the key to our question, as we shall now see.

Only today could anyone imagine that the authentic bearers of the Spirit, or of Tradition, pursue people so as to seize them and put them in their places - in short, that they "manage" people, or have any personal interest in setting up and maintaining those hierarchical relationships by virtue of which they can appear visibly as the rulers. This would be ridiculous and senseless. It is much more the recognition on the part of the lower ones that is the true basis of any traditional ranking. It is not the higher that needs the lower, but the other way round. The essence of hierarchy is that there is something living as a reality in certain people, which in the rest is only present in the condition of an ideal, a premonition, an unfocused effort. Thus the latter are fatefully attracted to the former, and their lower condition is one of subordination less to something foreign, than to their own true "self." Herein lies the secret, in the traditional world, of all readiness for sacrifice, all heroism, all loyalty; and, on the other side, of a prestige, an authority, and a calm power which the most heavilyarmed tyrant can never count upon.

With these considerations, we have come very close to solving not only the problem of degeneration, but also the possibility of a particular fall. Are we perhaps not tired of hearing that the success of every revolution indicates the weakness and degeneracy of the previous rulers? An understanding of this kind is very one-sided. This would indeed be the case if wild dogs were tied up, and suddenly broke loose: that would be proof that the hands holding their leashes had become impotent or weak. But things are arranged very differently in the framework of spiritual ranking, whose real basis we have explained above. This hierarchy degenerates and is able to be overthrown in one case only: when the individual degenerates, when he uses his fundamental freedom to deny the Spirit, to cut his life loose from any higher reference-point, and to exist "only for himself." Then the contacts are fatefully broken, the metaphysical tension, to which the traditional organism owes its unity, gives way, every force wavers in its path and finally breaks free. The peaks, of course, remain pure and inviolable in their heights, but the rest, which depended on them, now becomes an avalanche, a mass that has lost its equilibrium and falls, at first imperceptibly but with ever accelerating movement down to the depths and lowest levels of the valley. This is the secret of every degeneration and revolution. The European had first slain the hierarchy in himself by extirpating his own inner possibilities, to which corresponded the basis of the order that he would then destroy externally.

If Christian mythology attributes the Fall of Man and the Rebellion of the Angels to the freedom of the will, then it comes to much the same significance. It concerns the frightening potential that dwells in man of using freedom to destroy spiritually and to banish everything that could ensure him a supra-natural value. This is a metaphysical decision: the stream that traverses history in the most varied forms of the traditional-hating, revolutionary, individualistic, and humanistic spirit, or in short, the "modern" spirit. This decision is the only positive and decisive cause in the secret of degeneration, the destruction of Tradition.

If we understand this, we can perhaps also grasp the sense of those legends that speak of mysterious rulers who "always" exist and have never died (shades of the Emperor sleeping beneath the Kyffhôuser mountain!). Such rulers can be rediscovered only when one achieves spiritual completeness and awakens a quality in oneself like that of a metal that suddenly feels "the magnet", finds the magnet and irresistibly orients itself and moves towards it. For now, we must restrict ourselves to this hint. A comprehensive explanation of legends of that sort, which come to us from the most ancient Aryan source, would take us too far. At another opportunity we will perhaps return to the secret of reconstruction, to the "magic" that is capable of restoring the fallen mass to the unalterable, lonely, and invisible peaks that are still there in the heights.