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Narratives of Decline Among the US and UK Elites

By Kenneth Surin
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Narratives of decline (and fall) have been something of a staple of western consciousness, beginning with Augustine's *City of God* (CE 413), the starting point of which is the fall of Rome to the Goths in CE 410, and, depending on one's viewpoint, reaching something of a literary highpoint with Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (12 volumes, published in 1776), and Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1922).

Nowadays cartoon versions of this narrative have become the province of ignoramuses such as Donald Trump, and the leaders of far-right parties in Europe (most notably Nigel Farage and Marine le Pen).

These decline-and-fall narratives are pressed, more often than not, into the service of rightwing ideologies, canvassed much of the time both by someone like Trump whose knowledge of history would not fill the back of an envelope (Trump, after all, seems to believe the escaped slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) is his contemporary, and doing “a good job”!), as well as scholarly types with PhDs from Ivy League universities.

Decline-and-fall narratives are “equal opportunity” in the promiscuity of their appeal. They appeal alike to Rush Limbaugh (Cape Girardeau, Missouri Central High School) and George Will (PhD Princeton), albeit with the requisite inflections and modifications. Limbaugh and Will, from very different backgrounds, have nothing but contempt for each other, even though they underwrite versions of much the same narrative. Who says class does not matter in the great US of A?

The Orange Swindler’s “Make America Great Again” slogan embodies this narrative, but as many have pointed out, it is chockfull of ambiguities and lacunae, depending on the criteria used to define “greatness” – America was great once upon a time but alas is no longer what it was (the bombastic Orange Swindler), America is still great (the pandering Hillary Clinton and other Democrats), America never was great (a host of representatives from black communities and the native American nations, deeply cynical over incantations of “greatness” since their captivity and subjugation was integral to it), and so on.

The appeal of Trump and his slogan has been wide-ranging. The conventional wisdom that Trump’s appeal is confined to less-educated white blue-collar voters has been shown by Mike Davis and others to be too simplistic. Yes, he did appeal to the struggling victims of the relentless growth in precariousness – most notably, those bearing the brunt of growing inequality, a decline in health and education provision, greatly reduced public services, reduced incomes, and the rising unaffordability of decent housing. The Orange Swindler somehow managed to convince these unfortunates that immigrants from Mexico who cleaned swimming pools in Beverley Hills and Filipina childminders in Long Island were responsible for their economic precariousness. Nothing though was said by him about the banksters at Goldman Sachs or JP Morgan Chase.

But while many of the above-mentioned white voters supported Trump and believed his promise to “drain the swamp”, he also appealed to affluent country-club Republicans wanting even greater tax-reductions, the corporatocracy wanting even more deregulation, and evangelical Christians seduced by his ostensible pro-Zionism and his love fests with the preacher men Jerry Falwell Jnr, Pat Robertson, Franklin Graham, and Robert Jeffress.

Meanwhile, the “swamp” is being deepened and widened– anyone who believes the “swamp” will be drained by Trump’s coterie of blood-sucking featherweight family “advisers”, cabinet of unqualified billionaires and “mad dog” generals, and consiglieres such as the grotesque Kellyanne Conway and the now-departed Anthony Scaramucci, will probably believe a penguin

will win the pole-vault at the next Olympics. In a massive self-inflicted wounding for most of them, about 30% of Americans remain believers in the Trumpian equivalent of pole-vaulting penguins.

Such people will probably find it easy to put their trust in the stratospheric flights of fancy integral to Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again". Those inclined to think this is just stuff made up by "liberals" like yours truly, need only to talk to people with family members who voted for the Orange Swindler.

Several of my friends say their visits to Trump-loving family members, none of them wealthy, are now kept to a brief minimum just for this reason— such tension-inducing visits involve avoiding a crucial item of conversation, namely, why on earth did you think it was such a good idea to vote for him? The orange bastard wants to take away the little healthcare you have! He is your enemy! The challenge for my peace-keeping friends is finding a way to avoid talking about the orange elephant in the room.

The situation in pre-Brexit Ukania is not much less disastrous or comical. However, the drawing of enmity lines in the UK with regard to its ruling elites is a less easy undertaking than in the US. For now, the ground in the UK is muddier. Brexit, for and against, involves a range of constituencies, whose alignments have something of a regional basis, all with differing interests at stake. As a result, Left and Right alike can be lined-up for or against Brexit.

London and its environs service the UK's business sector, which depends heavily on labour from overseas. This is an educated and high-wage segment of the UK population, consisting of people with backgrounds conducive to a cosmopolitan outlook. In the Brexit referendum, this part of the UK was predominantly anti-Brexit.

The rest of England, especially its rust-belt in the Midlands and the north, generally was in favour of Brexit. As was Wales, with a substantial rust-belt in its former coal- and steel-producing areas.

Scotland and the north of Ireland were against Brexit.

Scotland, contemplating its prospects as an independent country within the EU, viewed Brexit as a move to chain it even more tightly to the UK's English-dominated constitutional framework. Once severed from the EU, many Scots feared their country would become wholly captive, if they are not already, to English interests.

The north of Ireland's peace arrangements since the end of the Troubles have depended crucially on a delicately negotiated framework between the UK and the Republic of Ireland, both for now EU members. Brexit will almost certainly make a version of this framework harder to maintain, especially when the common border between two EU countries (the Republic and the north of Ireland-UK) no longer exists.

But once again, narratives of decline are very much in evidence. Both the Tory right-wing and Farage's UKIP somehow believe, or purport to believe, that leaving the EU will restore a

fantasized “greatness” the UK lost when it got mixed-up with that bunch across the English Channel.

Hence their slogan “Take back Control”. Again, in a situation paralleling the one in Trumplandia, there are countless Brits for whom things were never that great (moreover, these Brits were controlled by forces and individuals within their own country, and not by foreigners)— such as the hundreds of thousands of miners and steelworkers who for generations were the cogs and levers of the Industrial Revolution, but who were thrown on the unemployment scrapheap the moment Thatcher and her repellent crew decided they were no longer to be a part of her country’s future.

The right-wing Brexiteers have another affinity with the décliniste Orange Swindler— just as he implies that letting in too many Mexican pool-cleaners was somehow responsible for America’s “decline”, his British-politician counterparts state in equally unsubtle ways that their country is no longer “great” because too many Polish plumbers and Romanian fruit pickers are being allowed in, thanks to the EU’s free movement of labour policy.

Just as the barker Trump refrains studiously from shouting-out the names of real swamp-dwellers such as the banksters at Goldman Sachs and JPM Chase, his UK counterparts fail to identify the real source of their country’s “loss of control”, namely, the completely free lunches and free rides given to the rapacious global corporations and malfeasant banks such as Barclays and HSBC since the 1970s.

A Tory or New Labour prime minister from Thatcher onwards is much more likely to have a fine dinner at Downing Street with Rupert Murdoch or Richard Branson than a cup of tea with the head of a charity for homeless people, let alone a group of homeless persons.

As my late mother, though somewhat limited in her wisdom, used to say: “you judge people by the company they keep”.

Of course, it’s a great deal easier to lay the blame for the ills besetting the US and UK at the feet of a just-about-managing (JAM) Guatemalan hotel maid or Romanian fruit picker. Or refugees and asylum seekers.

The sad thing is that so many people have fallen for this twaddle.

Anyone— not wealthy— who thinks the interests of ordinary Americans and Brits coincide with those of the plutocratic creeps who run Goldman Sachs and Barclays, or Murdoch and Branson, needs to have their head examined. The real interests of any American or Brit who is, or almost is, a JAM, are much more likely to coincide with those of a Guatemalan hotel maid working in Los Angeles or a Romanian fruit picker working in an orchard in Kent.

The US and UK have been in a crisis of capitalist accumulation since Thatcher and Reagan (and before that of course), but their alleged “decline” is not due to the JAMs subsisting on capitalism’s crumbs.

These crumb-feeders include a sizeable proportion of society's underdogs: the disabled who can't work, those who work but still live below the poverty line (these amount to 60% of the UK's poor), those who have little or no alternative to "contingent" employment (e.g. those living in derelict West Virginian or Yorkshire coal-mining towns where coal is no longer mined), those who subsist on ever-diminishing welfare, the above-mentioned immigrant JAMs, and so forth.

These crumb-feeders struggle while those who benefit inordinately from neoliberalism, primarily the stock-portfolio class, prosper at levels unprecedented since the 1920s.

Contrast the crumb-feeders' standard diet, where fresh vegetables in the poorer inner-city areas are often unaffordable or unavailable, with the Huffington Post report highlighting the contrast between Theresa May's cursory 15-minute visit to the site of the huge fire that destroyed the high-rise Grenfell Tower in London and the 50-minute arse-licking fest she had at the swanky Savoy hotel, the same day, with multimillionaire banksters who donate to the Conservative Party.

The menu at the Savoy shindig included truffles, slow-roasted salt marsh rump of lamb, mango pie with Italian meringue and exotic jelly, and a tropical fruit sorbet, washed down with a Brook Ridge Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc 2016 and Casa Silva Coleccion Merlot 2014.

For the crumb-feeders, "taking back control" must involve getting rid of an economic system which gives them tidbits while the stock-portfolio class corrals immense wealth. This regaining of "control" will have nothing to do with a confected but still vicious nationalist xenophobia, of the kind sponsored by the malign dolts Trump and Farage, and everything to do with the project of a radical democratic socialism/communism.

A splendid Casa Silva Coleccion Merlot 2014, or "exotic jelly" (whatever that is), for everyone who desires it, and not just Theresa May and her multimillionaire banker supporters!