productivity of the economic system or of the presence in the society of large numbers of people apparently untouched by the crisis of confidence (people, say, who not only do not read the New York Times, but have never heard of it). For another thing, notions of societal decline are very often based on highly distorted recollections of a past in which, supposedly, life was so much better: Thus, there is a good chance that every generation in history saw its own period as one of decline, looking backward to an allegedly better past, be it in their own youth or in the age of parents or grandparents. More importantly, though, the idea of decadence comes out of a specific philosophy of history. This can be stated quite simply: The periods of human history are understood in analogy to the cycles of nature, as a sequence of birth, growth, decline and death: societies, then, can be categorized as “young”, “mature” or “old”, with appropriate traits in each phase. This view of history dates back to ancient Greece. It was classically stated by Thucydides when he claimed that it is “the nature of all things to grow as well as to decay”. This view of history was sharply challenged by a long line of Christian thinkers, beginning with Augustine, who saw history not as a series of recurring cycles but as a line moving toward fulfilment in the Kingdom of God. The old view was taken up again by a number of modern thinkers, very importantly by Friedrich Nietzsche in the 19th century, and by Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee in the 20th.

This is obviously not the place to discuss the philosophical and theological issues involved. There is good reason, however, to be skeptical about the aforementioned view on the grounds of historical and social science. Societies are not organisms, and to think of them in biological analogies can be very misleading. And, if one looks more closely at any historical period, the putative phases seem quite dubious. When does a society stop “growing” and attain the status of “maturity”? Just when does a society begin to be “old”? When can it be said to have “died”? In the development of modern historical scholarship these questions were endlessly debated in the case of ancient Rome—endlessly and, in the final analysis, fruitlessly. It always comes as a shock when one reads sources, which in one’s own scheme of periodization fall in the “growth” or “young” phase of a particular society, only to come upon authors from that period who look back longingly to an earlier time when they thought that their society was “young”. Depending on which contemporary sources one relies upon, the age of Julius Caesar, say, was one of undiminished youthful vigor, of mature power, or of beginning decadence. Nor is one better off when one looks to the “begin-