ning” or the “end” of Roman history. The origins of Rome are lost in myths—themselves of uncertain age. And there are ways of arguing that Rome never “ended” at all.

Sociological theory suggests that every human society is a highly precarious construction. It is an intricate network of assumptions and procedures which only acquires the appearance of stability, of permanence, because its members come to take it for granted. This taken-for-grantedness is the child of habit. Habits change, or are forced to change, sometimes abruptly. Anyone who has lived through periods of rapid social change (and that is many people in our own time) can testify to an experience that involves a retrospective insight: If institutions could collapse or be transformed so quickly, then the earlier perception of their stability must have been an illusion. This insight is essentially correct; it is good sociology. But then the whole organic analogy no longer makes sense: Societies do not grow, mature and decline. Always, even in statu nascendi, they are on the brink of dissolution. The wonder is not that a society “ends” at a given moment, but that it kept going for as long as it did.

All the same, the concept of decadence has a certain utility. It is capable of being abstracted from the aforementioned view of history and being used as a simply descriptive category, as follows: It is possible to speak of decadence when the symbols that sustain a society lose plausibility. Put differently, a society may be said to be decadent when its underlying values become empty, hollowed out. Only by having common symbols—language, cognitive structures, norms—can a group of human beings constitute a society. More specifically, a society is held together by an order of values, which provide individual meaning and collective moral guidance for its members. No amount of material power or wealth, by itself, can hold a society together. Only common symbols, values, can do that. But symbols and values cannot exist by themselves, apart from the consciousness of living human beings. That is, symbols and values must be plausible: People must consider them to refer to reality and to have moral authority. When this is no longer the case, when the societal symbolism is widely perceived to be unreal and morally non-binding, then the institutions thus symbolized become very fragile indeed. To be sure, the old symbols may still be used, as on ceremonial occasions, but they will not longer be taken seriously. They may even, quite literally, have “become a joke.” And that, precisely, is decadence.

If decadence is understood in this way, rather than in terms of the organic analogy of a society getting “old”, there is much in the present American situation that seems to fit the concept.