

Decline and Britishness: Europe and the Barbarians ?

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Introduction

Discussion of the “relative decline” of the United Kingdom has become a commonplace, almost a cliché, of Britain’s post-war historiography. Interpretations of the British experience since 1945 show significant variations, as one would expect, but the theme of a slow downward trend in national wealth and prestige is very often a central one. Whatever the precise causes, it now appears axiomatic that Britain, from omnipotent, imperial centre at the start of the twentieth century, has now become a flimsy, hollow thing, entirely constituted, it would seem, of marginal groups. The gravitas of Britannia exerts so little attraction, one might say, that she is even struggling, after devolution, to hold on to her most immediate satellites. Moreover, this infra-nationalism is rivalled in its explosive, centrifugal capabilities by the encroachments of supra-national institutions, held by many to be equally intent on the destruction of the British nation-state. Stalked, then, by an unholy alliance of its former vassals, mired in la fange celte and Eurocracy, Britain has apparently advanced well down Friedrich Von Hayek’s “road to serfdom”. In what follows I attempt to sketch out some of the features of this discourse of decline, in relation to British politics, but also from a cultural and rhetorical point of view. Ultimately, the discourse of decline can be seen as an especially resistant, quasi-theological grand narrative, the effect of which is to disable Britain’s capacity for change.

I

Margaret Thatcher – at the height of her disagreement with Chancellor Nigel Lawson in 1988 – said, “You cannot buck the market”. Speaking from the trading floor of the New York Stock Exchange when it reopened on 17th September 2001 following the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, CNN’s reporter, Lou Dobbs, declared “the market is never wrong”... We are invited in both cases to conclude that the invisible hand of the market, or Fortune, directs economic events according to its own arcane logic. Its workings, that is, apparently defy human control, are beyond the power of science or the mere reason of individuals. In common with meteorologists – from whom they borrow many of their metaphors – market analysts usually fail to forecast with any precision, though they frequently insist a posteriori, on the inevitability of the phenomena they have been tracking. For the fanatical (neo-)liberal, indeed, the market has replaced God. Fortune, like God in the universe, is everywhere present, but nowhere visible and the risks taken by money brokers involve a corresponding leap of faith....

Like the actions of the money markets – where the whole is held to be more than the sum of its parts – general economic phenomena also obey laws which elude or mock the best laid plans. In the case of Britain’s economy, a cynic might say that economic growth seems almost to have been inversely proportional to the prevailing quantity of theorising. Economists drafted in by successive British governments from the inter-war years onwards, have wrestled gamely with Britain’s relative economic weaknesses. And yet, the strictures of “middle-way” planners, technocrats, monetarist gurus and perhaps even New Labour strategists, have often

failed to find solutions to the country's nagging economic difficulties. Over the years there have been many attempts to corner the culprits. The gloves were already off, in 1940, for the "guilty" "the guilty men" held to be responsible for Britain's parlous position at the outbreak of the war, but also for her deeper economic malaise over which the Conservatives had presided during the 1930s. A number of other suspects have been rounded-up by "revisionist" historians: the post-war settlement, for example, especially the burdensome Welfare State. Decline is a consequence of too much planning; there has been too little planning: the planning has been of the wrong kind. The list of potential causes for Britain's slide is long indeed: the excessive importance of the trade unions, the post-war consensus, or even Britain's accession to the EEC in 1973. 1973...

It has, further, been argued, since economic performance is always to a greater or lesser extent predicated upon political structures, that Britain's economy has suffered not only from the "hidden god" of market forces, but also from the "hidden wiring" of the British state. Britain's relative (economic) decline, that is, is sometimes seen as ironic proof of the pernicious vitality of its age-old state machinery, the unseen but all-pervasive upper (middle) class "chumdom". Monarchy, the House of Lords, the City, the public schools, Oxbridge, old boys' networks, inner circles: the seemingly indestructible conservatism of the British state has easily been able to fend off the sporadic sporadic, half-hearted attacks on its privileges. Even and—especially? — the Labour Government elected in July 1945 to drive Britain forward to its New Jerusalem, left these crucial social and political institutions virtually untouched.

Taken together these hidden gods and hidden wiring begin to help us understand, though they do not justify, why appeals to reason, theory and ideas, are often unconvincing for so many British politicians, voters and commentators. At one level this is a very human reaction to the increasingly uneven contest between the globalisation of economic phenomena and the (thus far) largely unsuccessful attempts at international political co-operation: people can see in their everyday lives that economic facts impose themselves on political ones, rather than the reverse. But this attitude is not the preserve of the wo/man on the Clapham omnibus. Beyond the bemused, frequently apathetic, gaze of the floating vote, the British attitude to theory is presented as a symptom of Britain's quaint and irredeemable pragmatism, what is referred to in France — with more than a hint of complaisance and etymological licence — as *le modèle anglo-saxon*, an avatar of 1920s "rugged individualism", now sometimes referred to as "turbo capitalism" or "shareholder value capitalism". This is opposed to the acceptable face of capitalism, the soft or firm left, the politics of social conscience, of the "social market"... If anxiety in respect of globalisation is widespread, the path to political rejection of the neo-liberal agenda remains blocked, in Britain, by a deep-rooted resistance to theory and ideology. It is almost as though the British seem were flaunting their inability to think, parodying their more technocratic, more successful French neighbours: "we have oil, but no ideas"... But inherent in the relationship many British observers have with economics, the financial markets or with constitutional structures there is a more insinuating relationship with History and, at a deeper level still, with Time. The discourse of decline, it seems to me, is inscribed as a permanent, latent potential within this broader, British deference to "hidden" agents, to the all-powerful, unseen goings-on of the British polity, the unknowable workings of the state: in short, to tropes of the divine.

The British state, of course, is precisely that which stands, it is ... static. Its profile is

etchedcarved indelibly in the institutional granite of Hansard, written vertically through this political geology of the ages. The key value is continuity, the unbroken line. By extension, the present is a point of convergence for all the significant elements of the past. Time, that is, is a co-existence in the present of all periods of the past. Reactionary time is not vectorial, but vertical. The vastness of this conservative conception of time, the quasi-Darwinian or Lyellian perspective, means that the evolution of the state must be so imperceptibly slow as to appear unchanging.

At most, for the conservative mind, still wedded to Burkean caution, the state admits of minor changes as and when they become absolutely necessary, and then only in order to avoid bigger changes which would affect the core of the state apparatus and the time-honoured, hierarchical balance between the components of the state. It follows that, for the English conservative, any suggestion of change is doom-laden, and that s/he is nearly always “marching backwards into the future” and is someone “for whom change always means change for the worse”. The avoidance of decline thus requires the avoidance of change, and whenever possible a return, or repli, to a safer position, one which protects the present situation and all that it has accumulated. The past – peopled with giants, beautiful, secure, unchanging – is where we should be. The discourse of decline, therefore, is radically anti-existentialist: we are not what we do, but what we were, and must remain so if we wish to avoid decline, to avoid becoming something, or someone else. The anxiety or “moral panic” generated by (the prospect of) significant change produces, indeed, a repli identitaire. Identity, that is, is deemed to be non-developmental, a function of the integrity of the earlier state of things. Change, in other words, amounts to destruction of the state, but also of the British “self”.

II

The gradual evolution of post-war foreign policy towards membership of the EEC and, since 1973, towards an increasingly active role within “Europe”, represents one of the key developments in relation to which such a discourse of decline now defines itself. The centre of gravity of that rhetoric, not surprisingly, is located within the Conservative (and Unionist) Party and was very much to the fore during the months leading up to the 2001 general election. In a keynote speech to the Conservative Spring Forum, William Hague quickly brings conservative time into play by underlining that “the values that shaped our past must also guide our future”. Any further moves away from those values, Hague suggests, will convert Britain into “a foreign land”. Setting his face against such developments, Hague pledges to Conservative supporters to “bring Britain home”.

Hague’s discourse of decline, that is, alerts the audience to the degradation of the collective self of the nation, by affirming the fundamental foreignness of the European project. The alteration (the “making other”) of British identity as a consequence of that project is further emphasised through the language of invasion, infiltration or contamination. Hague, referring later in the same speech to the “desperate people [who] hide in the undercarriage of high speed trains to get through the Channel Tunnel”, exploits one of the most potent founding myths of British specificity and a permanent sub-text within the discourse of decline: namely, insularity. The fixed link to “the continent” both facilitates the contamination of Britishness by the inward flow of foreign elements and weakens Britishness by promoting the outward flow of native elements: as, for example, in the “powers [which are] draining away from our Parliament”.

Tony Blair's assertion, in a television interview during the September 2000 lorry-drivers' protests, that direct action was not "the British way", may have been passed off as a mild New Labour massage, it none the less aspires to the status of cultural protectionism, an affirmation that British industrial relations were being contaminated by "foreign" methods. To whatever extent New Labour markets itself as a political novelty, therefore, the connotations of Blair's reprimand are indeed similar to those of Hague's, or indeed of Margaret Thatcher's conviction, at the time of the 1984-85 miners' strike, that the National Union of Mineworkers, with its obviously foreign, ideological approach to industrial relations, constituted "the enemy within".

Whether in terms of William Hague's latter-day, grandee Toryism, Margaret Thatcher's neo-liberal, conviction politics, or the Blairite "third way", the exclusive nature of the discourse of decline, its marginalisation of what is perceived as not being "one of us", works fundamentally to protect the historical, political and economic integrity of Britishness. Foremost among the constituents of that integrity, as we have seen, is the separateness of the national "moi" moi from the foreign "other", a separation which is cultural and, most primitively, geographical. The discourse of decline, above all, concerns territory.

William Hague taps into this tellurism by underlining the importance of "the independence and integrity of our country" and by insisting on the "law of our land" and the importance of this to "people in every part of our land". The people, then, but also the institutions and other trappings of Britishness are the natural attributes of Britain. The national currency, for example, is "the currency of our people": the link is presented as naturally motivated, not culturally or historically conditioned. Further, given that the link is a living, quasi-genetic partnership, it follows that Labour's plans to adopt the single currency mean that the pound is "threatened with extinction", itself another allusion to the Lyellian or Darwinian time frame mentioned earlier.

The specificity of Britain, then, begins to shade into a British species, a symbiosis of national infrastructures and national territory, the "countryside which has grown up over centuries". The specificity of the countryside, like the separateness of the greater Britain of which it is a part, needs to be protected: not least by the aggressively anti-Labour "Countryside Alliance". The countryside must remain unchanged because it is a repository of the memory of the species and "the deepest instincts of the British people" with which the Conservative Party claims to be infallibly in tune. To increase the degree of British integration with Europe, notably by joining the Euro, is therefore to "betray all that past generations down the ages lived and died to defend". The European project, as a vision of the foreseeable future, is necessarily at odds with conservative visions of the deep, resonant, redolent past.

Remembrance of things past.... The discourse of decline is necessarily shot through with an elaborate nostalgia. As with any nostalgic position a central component is the desire to return to a comforting simplicity, a regressive utopia. Whether it be Marcel Proust's monument to the "baiser nocturne" baiser nocturne or, more colloquially, the "good old days", the "then" is presented as better than the "now". The discourse of decline peoples its past readily with folk heroes, that is protectors of the people or ethnies. Mrs Thatcher's election address in Plymouth, for example, makes a three-course maritime meal of the past glories of the port "from where Francis Drake, Walter Raleigh and Captain Cook set out to take the ways of these islands to the

uttermost bounds of the earth . . . from where the Pilgrim Fathers left in that cockle-shell vessel on a voyage which would create the most powerful force for freedom that the world has known". Shorn of their context the remarks strike us as basic in the extreme. And their objective is indeed to take us back to basics, to restate, through a simple paradigm of national virtues, the superlative achievements of Britain's past, and thus to claim to demonstrate the possibility of regaining greatness now.

Such nostalgia for simple explanations, for stable paradigms, is frequently synonymous with a wistfulness for a pre-democratic age. In this sense, the discourse of decline could be qualified as a neo-classical or anti-Enlightenment discourse, in the sense that the scheme of things it endorses, since it marginalizes change, is in direct conflict with the notions of reform and Progress. Contemporary conservative discourse, even when it is stridently neo-liberal, is none the less dismissive of change. The reforms conducted by the successive Thatcher governments, in practice, were indeed a radical form of conservatism to the extent that they aspired to return the country to an earlier rapport de forces and to assert the entirely superfluous nature – as she saw it – of development. When Thatcher presses her band of Plymouth brothers into service, therefore, she does so to evoke what she sees as the eternal values of Britishness: non-conformist moral fibre, but also enterprise, the open sea. . . The pomp and circumstance of Thatcher's remarks are an explicit rejection of the essentially un-British drift away from "the age of capital", – that nineteenth-century version of the Whig oligarchy to which she attempted to return the British state – and towards the modern age of economic regulation and planning : those un-British, twin turbines of continental socialism. The lady was indeed for turning, turning back to what she perceived as the greatest expression of British "freedoms" : freedoms which, very much in line with Von Hayek's thesis, are deemed to inhabit economic processes rather than political ones.

The inspiration and models for our actions, then, are to be found in the past. That past is kept alive by means of constant reference and deference. Reintegrating Drake, Raleigh, the Pilgrim Fathers and Cook, and their impressive colonial baggage, points us very clearly towards the British thalassocracy and imperialism: the triumph of the liberal state. In so doing, the discourse of decline allies its vision of the vastness of true "British" time with the colossal connotations of the British Empire. It is within this giant space that the booming bass notes of the discourse of decline can best resound. Thus Churchill could envisage, in 1940, the hypothesis of "a thousand years" of British imperial domination; thus Gaitskell, in 1962, at the prospect of British membership of the EEC, could refer to the end of Britain as an independent state, the end of "a thousand years of history"; thus, finally, Enoch Powell could integrate his own Gibbon-esque, imperial metaphor and "the river Tiber foaming with much blood", as "native" Britons reject the intolerable numbers of immigrants then arriving in Britain.

William Hague turns to the racial tolerance threshold himself in a speech made on the 18th May 2001. The "simple truth" is "that this country can't take in unlimited numbers of people who want to come to our shores for economic reasons". The "shores" evoke not only the island, the natural fortress which they protect, those "beaches" on which Churchill vowed to fight, but also the "waves" of outlanders arriving from Europe, a flow of alien fluids, the "steady stream of directives [which] has poured forth from the Council of Ministers in Brussels". The "simple truth" of this fact – the natural limits of what Britain can accept – is

derived from “common sense”, the common sense which “we need to inject into the way the existing law [on asylum seekers] is applied”. This is “Conservative common sense” and the “Conservatives will deliver common sense” in government. Hague’s eulogy on straightforwardness is a restatement in many ways of what Isaiah Berlin calls “negative” liberties, the absence of control, the freedom from interference, itself an avatar of the Von Hayek position. Accordingly, it is clear that the “stream” of European directives is un-British to the extent that it is un-simple. The harmonisation of tax systems, of institutional practices, the extension of supranational competences and the drift towards a European superstate: these developments bring unnecessary, fussy, complicated regulation to Britain. The decline of Britishness – whether at the hands of “Europe” or those of an acquiescent Labour Government – stems from the corruption of the native “common sense” by a continental complexity: the “governing of [Britain] has drifted far away from the decent, plain-speaking common sense of its people”. Restating the virtues of native British common sense is a way of protecting the British part from being confused with or – picking up on the liquid metaphor – poured into the (w)hole of the European Other, from being “dissolved in a federal Europe”. The bureaucratic complexities of “Brussels”, the “rigid straightjacket of legislation” and the Labour Party which has espoused these, are part of a genealogy of corruption of the native British people’s common sense and as such are largely responsible for the general downward trend of things British.

Reinstating the simple, the common-sensical, is the corollary of removing un-British excrescences. The British polity needs to be washed clean of developing syncretism, of the alien “bureaucracy which has grown up like a fungus”. The discourse of decline, then, clearly has its biological, not to say genetic dimension, functioning around an organicist metaphor. The discourse of decline, indeed, is an elegy for a common-sense civilisation under attack from mushrooming directives. In this variation on the theme of cultural decadence, the final boundaries of the declining civilisation, “all traces of Britishness” are being erased by continental over-regulation.... It is only a small step from this to the integration into the discourse of decline of a full-blown historical/cultural pessimism. The great achievements of the past, the moral superiority of our ancestors, imply the inevitable mediocrity of the present: factors which combine to create deep anxieties about the future. In other words, the discourse of decline is, to a greater or lesser extent, eschatological. The end which is in sight is irreversible and the “declinist” is a sombre angel, has insider information on the ultimate, on the cataclysmic. The discourse of decline, in this sense, is the product of prophets of doom, the triumph of proleptic vision or what is sometimes referred to as “endism”.

In terms of British politics, however, the very real advances in the integration of Britain’s ethnic minorities, as well as the prevailing political correctness, are among the factors which require that the racial vector of catastrophic decline has had to be subjected to a clinamen, or deviation. Rather than Powell’s spectre of immigration of non-white peoples or racial intermingling, the principal threat and source of decline in Britishness now becomes institutional intermingling with the members of the European Union. This is an attitude which sits easily enough with traditional British foreign policy in the sense that freedom from involvement in European affairs – another negative liberty – washas been a cornerstone of British strategy for much of the modern period: arguably, for many in the British establishment it still is. The possibility of a European superstate is a “nightmare”. Even something as reviled as the British tax system is now apparently “under threat from the EU tax harmonisation juggernaut”.

Finance, in the form of the pound sterling as opposed to the more traditional theme of economic management, loomed large in the 2001 election campaign. The future of the national currency was a central feature of the Conservative agenda, Hague emphasising that Tony Blair had passed a “death sentence on the pound”, that Labour policy was ringing the “death knell for the pound” and that the 2001 election was “the last chance for British people to keep [it]”. With just over a week to go before the election, Hague returned to this mantra, suggesting that “this could be the last general election of its kind” and that it was “the last time that the people of the United Kingdom [would be] able to elect a Parliament which is supreme in this country”. Hammering home the urgency of the situation, Hague counts down to British annihilation by Europe: “Nine days to save the pound. Nine days to secure our independence. Nine days to decide whether our children and grandchildren will inherit the same freedoms that we inherited”. It is in this break in generations, the break in tradition, in the passing on of fundamental British characteristics, that the discourse of decline flirts with the spectre of national degeneration and with the attendant implications of cultural purity and integrity and, with them, the most distasteful attributes of exclusive nationalism.

Conclusion

Some might want to argue that by choosing to highlight the doubtful, right-wing politics of today’s British Conservative Party, I have gone for something of a sitting duck. But the adoption of elements of the discourse of decline by representatives of other parts of the political spectrum – Hugh Gaitskell, David Owen, Tony Blair – underlines the extent to which the decay of Britishness may be perceived in similar terms (albeit for different reasons) by proponents of the Greater Britain, and those of Little England. After all, ever since the early votes on Britain’s membership of Europe in 1970-1971 first cut across party lines – with “Enoch Powell and Michael Foot united in the ‘No’ lobby” at the June 1975 referendum – the European question has continued to generate virtual cross-bench politics in Britain: the current anti-euro camp includes Baroness Thatcher and Dennis Skinner, Teresa Gorman and Diane Abbott, Jeremy Corbyn and John Redwood and, outside Parliament, the Institute of Directors and the TGWU...

Indeed, while the duck. But, while my intentioneffect of my remarks has been to point to a number of ways in which the Conservative Party thehas obviously moved “to the right”, my main objective has been a broader one. I have tried to suggest that the discourse of decline, in its post-postcolonial phase in Britain, using “Europe” as the principal vector of its discours identitaire, highlights the fragility of the British social contract. The “conviction politics” of the period c.1975 onwards underlined the extent to which “consensus” could be marketed as an un-British excrescence, the unfortunate application of dubious ideas and theory imported from “the continent”: to wit, a mixed economy, planning, nationalisation, a role in government for trade unions... These ideological fancies, however, could only partially and temporarily obscure Liberal England, reports of whose strange death, it seems, had been very much exaggerated. The success of the neo-liberalisation of Britain was a clear demonstration of the operational power of the founding myths of modern British identity: retrenchment at home, jingoism abroad – living within one’s means, but punching above one’s weight. The slump in the Conservative vote to around 30%, may mean that this kind of Liberal Toryism is a spent force and that New Labour will enjoy a long period in power. But it also means that roughly a (largely ageing) third

of the British electorate is still willing to vote for a vision of national decadence which illustrates exclusive versions of political nationalism and, further still, to the most reactionary, fin de siècle anxieties. In addition, the more sporadic adoption of elements of this discourse of decline by centrists such as David Owen and Tony Blair, or even by fathers of the left like Tony Benn, underlines the extent to which the decay of Britishness may be nationalism, irrational anxieties concerning Britain's very *élan vital* and a generalised cultural pessimism.

Yet the spontaneous, almost unconditional support for the United States' action in Afghanistan on the part of the Labour government elected in June 2001, also underlines the traditional nationalism of large parts of the British Labour Party, a thoroughly British conservatism which is clearly present on both left and right. It further suggests that "the politics of inclusion" – whether New Labour or Liberal Democrat – is required to do homage to that conservatism. Finally, it seems to confirm that the rise of a "Europe of the regions" has now painted the British debate about national identity into an awkward corner, where the post-1945 moral credit of British nationalism is now fully exhausted and exclusive nationalism is attempting to re-establish itself in mainstream politics, unchallenged by any internationalist, multicultural or federal traditions. It remains to be seen whether New Labour's desire to see Britain less as a great power and more as a great country will be able to constitute a viable discourse of renewal. New Labour will need to grow old, perhaps, be in power for at least a generation, if such a lasting, fundamental change is to be achieved, since, in the British state, change still requires continuity.