

Roman Redux

A historian sees America burning, corporations fiddling

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Dark Ages America: The Final Phase of Empire

By Morris Berman

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In 1984 Ronald Reagan announced, with characteristic indifference to fact, that it was “morning in America.” A quarter of a century later, the twilight, then already perceptible, has deepened. The international financial position of the United States is ruinous. Globally, attitudes toward American policy range from misgiving to loathing. The foreseeable consequences of climate change and environmental pollution range from painful to catastrophic. For most Americans (especially the tens of millions without health insurance), medical care is the worst of any advanced industrial society. The (until recently) governing party openly aspires to permanent one-party rule and a Caesarist executive branch. Civic virtue, lately renamed “social capital,” is waning; neighborliness has dwindled to the point of near anomie. In many non-affluent communities, public education is failing and functional illiteracy is the rule. Nearly half of all Americans believe that the earth is 10,000 years old or less and that angels and other supernatural beings regularly intervene in terrestrial affairs. The average American’s day includes six minutes playing sports, five minutes reading books, one minute making music, thirty seconds attending a play or concert, twenty-five seconds making or viewing art, and four hours watching television. And even Americans who don’t watch television are perfused by a stream of commercial messages so intense and ubiquitous as to constitute a culture of consumption, in the biological as well as social sense. Compared with the imagined noonday brilliance of that vibrant idyll, Walt Whitman’s Democratic Vistas, the prospects for contemporary American civilization are heartbreakingly bleak.

Morris Berman’s *Dark Ages America* was one of the most important books published in 2006, though it was little noted thanks to a peevish and uncomprehending review by Michiko Kakutani in *The New York Times*. It is a sequel to Berman’s *The Twilight of American Culture* (2000), a shorter, more impressionistic book that

persuasively evoked contemporary parallels to the collapse of Roman imperial civilization and suggested that Enlightenment ideals, like the Greco-Roman heritage, may survive the coming era of globalized barbarism, albeit underground, in quasi-monastic networks and communities.

Dark Ages America does not try to go beyond *The Twilight of American Culture* so much as underneath it. The earlier book was primarily descriptive; the later one is diagnostic as well. Berman is a distinguished historian of medieval and early modern culture, and he imports from his study of alchemy the maxim “as above, so below.” That is, the macrocosm and the microcosm—the visible dynamics of the global political economy and the subtleties of culture and social psychology; the grand strategy and the grain of everyday life—reflect and determine each other.

Thus, for example, the unrestricted movement of capital, the ultimate rationale of American foreign and domestic policy, requires weak or corrupt—in any case, acquiescent—governments, because otherwise they might try to improve their bargaining positions by combining with other governments and encouraging labor organization. Rendering governments and labor unions ineffectual in turn requires a weakening of impulses toward cooperation, solidarity, and citizen initiative. Very helpful to that end is to redefine the good life as a life of continuous and increasing individual consumption—which, because it is a false definition, necessitates unremitting indoctrination by means of advertising. For its part, expanding consumption requires technological innovation, mass production, a population willing to put up with insecure, regimented, and frequently stupefying work (the effects of which are assuaged by entertainment only a little more refined and wholesome than Roman circuses), and the exploitation of resources on a vast scale. And these requirements of expanding consumption promote the concentration and mobility of capital. In Berman’s apt formulation: “Global process, local fallout.”

Whether or not the elites who profit from the degradation of

culture and character intend these consequences, or even perceive them, is beside the point. Whatever anyone may intend, political and economic systems produce individuals adapted to them, just as physical environments do. “Civilizations are a package deal,” Berman observes. Much of the value of *Dark Ages America* lies in tracing the adaptations and interdependencies implicit in the civilization we have evolved.

Berman is particularly preoccupied with the ethos of American individualism, which has frontier roots but is also an effect (as well as a contributing cause) of the victory of automobiles and suburbanization over mass transit and European-style city planning. “The relentless American habit of choosing the individual solution over the collective one,” Berman writes, underlies “the design of our cities, including the rise of a car culture, the growth of the suburbs, and the nature of our architecture, [which] has had an overwhelming impact on the life of the nation as a whole, reflecting back on all the issues discussed [in the book]: work, children, media, community, economy, technology, globalization, and, especially, U.S. foreign policy. The physical arrangements of our lives mirror the spiritual ones.”

American foreign policy all too clearly expresses its preference for “individual solutions over collective ones.” The basic ideal of world order—willingness to accept limits on national sovereignty in deference to international law and public opinion—has always been unpopular here. As a result, American international behavior has been so high-handed that, even among normally sympathetic foreign elites, the United States is widely regarded as a rogue nation and the chief threat to global peace and welfare. And individualism affects the substance as well as the style of our foreign policy. The culture of cars, suburbs, and shopping is resource-intensive, and control of global energy resources has therefore been the linchpin of U.S. policy since World War II.

From macrocosm to microcosm: the texture of daily life and the contours of individual psychology are intimately related to a civilization’s science and technology. In the first chapter of *Dark Ages*

America, Berman elaborates “liquid modernity,” a concept borrowed from the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. This names a society “characterized by speed, fluidity, and transience ... a permanent state of contingency.” This acceleration has been underway since the Industrial Revolution, and Marx discussed it brilliantly in the Communist Manifesto. But the pace of social change has increased in the last few decades, thanks to both computer technology and the demise of the Bretton Woods international economic order, which freed capital to move around the world instantaneously. Along with all of the blessings of electronic technology have come unprecedented stresses on our psyches and metabolisms. “Everything in contemporary society discourages inwardness,” the literary critic Sven Birkerts has written. Berman agrees, and proves the point.

***Dark Ages America* is a synthesis. All of the elements of Berman’s critique have been made before, though they are assembled here with rare skill and comprehensiveness. What is perhaps most original is Berman’s frank admission that he sees no way out. Indignation is usually followed by exhortation, but not in this book or its predecessor. It’s not that Berman sees nothing valuable in contemporary American society, or no one struggling against the trends he has identified. He simply doesn’t hold out much hope for them. He regrets John Kerry’s defeat and no doubt welcomed the Democratic congressional victories in November 2006, but he also points out that “in the process of decline a civilization may, from time to time, rally for a while; but it is the overall trajectory, the structural properties of the situation, that ultimately determine the outcome.”**

Just what form the new Dark Ages may take does not emerge from Berman’s account. The Dark Ages were indeed dark: a half-millennium-long, nearly complete eclipse of reason, which classical culture barely and fortuitously survived. It is bound to be different this time around. Then the imagination was starved, but now it will be smothered: by commercial images, by ersatz sensations, by media babble, by corporate and governmental doublespeak. Still, we have

at least learned a lot about information storage and retrieval. Maybe those skills will also prove useful to store and retrieve imagination.

It is not much easier to accept the death of one’s culture than one’s own death—it is perhaps harder if one has had a happy life and known intellectual or aesthetic pleasure. That is why Berman wrote this book, though he is convinced of its futility. Thankfully, he cites a few lines from the ending of Gore Vidal’s *Julian* that temper the pain a little:

With Julian, the light went out, and now nothing remains but to let the darkness come, and hope for a new sun and another day, born of time’s mystery and man’s love of light.