The Declinism Seminars

Decay

24th of February 2015
Harvard University, USA

A SEMINAR ARRANGED BY
AXEL AND MARGARET AX:SON JOHNSON FOUNDATION
The Declinism Seminars

Decay

The aim of this colloquium, the second of a three-part series, is to bring together a diverse group of scholars to examine the concept of Decay across a wide spectrum of historical periods from the classical world to the present day. Decadence, the subject of our first colloquium, suggests cultural and moral decay; it is a synonym for social decay. In music, science, engineering, biology, mathematics, psychology, biology, sociology, decay holds a variety of meanings: the exponential decay constant in mathematics; Edward Thorndike’s decay theory; mitochondrial decay leading to aging; urban decay which has blighted western cities since the 1970s; social, moral, religious decay, the decay of nature, death through natural decay.

The unremitting processes of decay and destruction, whether recent or distant, are constantly diminishing our evidence for the past. The forces of destruction and deterioration range in scale from the wholesale obliteration of landscapes as man continually remolds his surroundings, to the more subtle agencies of transformation and disintegration that steadily erode man’s remains in the buried environment. Often the loss is so great that it seems to be impossible to reconstruct with confidence man’s activities in the past.

Decay is part of a process, the continuous process of reduction that ends with disappearance without apparent trace; even memories decay. When the mechanisms of reduction and the decayed fragments of evidence are examined a wealth of information is revealed to be used to illuminate activities in the past. The analysis of the process of decay can be harnessed for the purposes of reconstruction, rejuvenation, remembering. Decay is as much a matter of perspective and interpretation as it is a reality. Much as Nietzsche, Baudelaire, and Huysmans offer portraits of decay that inevitably become reflections of the reader’s interpretive processes, so Oscar Wilde’s own treatment of decay in The Decay of Lying (1891) or The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) turns crucially on the question of interpretation. In The Picture much of this treatment centres on a painting: a painting of Dorian presents a portrait of decay in process and within a single generation, not over the course of centuries. Its mimesis is, as it were, more real than the original.

Decadence, we saw, is a term that moved easily across disciplinary boundaries, settling in different contexts with distinct connotations and effects, while at the same time highlighting the conventional nature of boundaries themselves.

The decay of boundaries – natural, physical, artistic, biological, and more- and the insistence on undermining boundaries and differences, is a central quality and effect of decay. To think of decay in this manner is to begin to understand the part that decay has played and plays in the development, and the dissolution, of boundaries, as well as to engage matters of aesthetics and politics, rhetoric and ideology, art and life.

In more recent times, debates on decay have orbited the core themes of moral, religious, environmental and societal decline, and how these and related themes are related and debase each other: the decay of societal structures including the family as a cause for religious radicalism; or the decay of religious fervor as a cause for the decay of respect for the natural world. This symposium will provide a forum for scholars addressing subjects across history to consider the place of decay in the post-modern world.
Tuesday 24th of February

Decay

11.30 a.m. Introduction Richard Miles and William O’Reilly

Decay of Societies I

11.40 a.m. Daniela Cammack
The Decay of Democracy from the Ancient to the Modern World

12.00 p.m. Teresa Shawcross
A Mediterranean Perspective on the Origins of Political Decay

12.20 p.m. Discussion

Decay of Societies II

12.35 p.m. Pernille Røge
Political Decay in the French Colonial Empire: a Martiniquan Planters’ Perspective

12.55 p.m. Adam Tooze
Capitalist Decay

1.15 p.m. Discussion

1.30 p.m. LUNCH

Physical Decay

2.45 p.m. John R. McNeill
Decay and Decline in Environmental History

3.05 p.m. Jonathan Rees
Everything Rots: Food Preservation in World History

3.25 p.m. Robert Beauregard
When Buildings Decay, and Cities Decline

3.45 p.m. Discussion

4.05 p.m. TEA

Decay of Knowledge and Information

4.25 p.m. William O’Reilly
Non-Knowledge and the Decay of Knowledge in History and Economics

4.45 p.m. Michael L. Nelson
Information Loss and the Decay of the World Wide Web

5.05 p.m. Discussion

5.30 p.m. DRINKS

6.30 p.m. DINNER
Participants

Professor Robert Beauregard,
Professor of Urban Planning, Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation, Columbia University. USA.

Dr Daniela Cammack,
Junior Fellow, Harvard Society of Fellows. USA.

Professor John R. McNeill,
History Department, Georgetown University. USA.

Dr Richard Miles,
Associate Professor and Chair, Department of Classics and Ancient History, University of Sydney. Australia.

Dr Michael L. Nelson,
Department of Computer Science, Old Dominion University. USA.

Dr William O’Reilly,
Faculty of History, University of Cambridge, UK and Visiting Scholar, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University. USA.

Assistant Professor Pernille Røge,
Department of History, University of Pittsburgh. USA.

Professor Jonathan Rees,
Professor of History, Colorado State University-Pueblo. USA.

Professor Teresa Shawcross,
Assistant Professor of History, Princeton University. USA.

Professor Adam Tooze,
Professor of History, Yale University Department of History. USA.

Organisation

President: Kurt Almqvist
Project Leaders: Mattias Hessérus, Richard Miles, William O’Reilly
Project Coordinators: Alexander Nyquist and Magdalena Bujak