The Declinism Seminars

Declinism

14th December 2015
Engelsberg Ironworks, Sweden

A SEMINAR ARRANGED BY
AXEL AND MARGARET AX:SON JOHNSON FOUNDATION
This seminar will examine how the concept of decline has helped to define and fashion a wide range of political, economic, social, cultural and religious entities including empires, nation states, commercial corporations, religious faiths and new political bodies such as market states. The specialist areas of our participants reflect the broad span of human history from the Assyrian Empire of the First Millennium BC to 21st Century America. Similarly the project has been designed to take a truly global perspective with papers examining decline across the Americas, Europe, Africa and Asia.

Our collective aim is to look beyond the simplistic model of decline as a fixed objective, i.e. ‘reality’, and instead to investigate the often conflicting strands of thought that lie behind such claims. Although a relatively recent invention the notion of declinism – a society’s fixation on its own imminent decline – is particularly useful in this context. Yet, equally, what makes the study of ‘declinism’ so pertinent to contemporary events is that, although essentially impressionistic, it is always grounded in its protagonists’ perceptions of their own circumstances and therefore has real consequences for the societies in which it exists.

Of particular note for our purposes is the prevalence of discussions about decline in societies that are in the throes of transition and/or are the locus for inter- and intra-community conflict. Similarly, in historiography the idea of perpetual decline is clearly a powerful tool for re-organizing competing visions of the past, present and future.
**Monday 14th December**

**Declinism**

1.00 p.m.  Welcome  
**Kurt Almqvist**  
*Introduction*  
**Mattias Hessérus**

**Decline and the Ancient World**

1.05 p.m.  Peter Bedford  
Before ‘Decline’: Threats to Social Order in the Neo-Assyrian Empire

1.25 p.m.  Jon Hesk  
Inter-generational Rhetorics of Decline and Progress from Homer to Hyperides

1.45 p.m.  María Fernanda Valencia Suárez  
Decline and Fall of the Aztec Empire from the Perspective of Early Modern Europeans

2.05 p.m.  *Discussion*

2.25 p.m.  *Coffee*

**Decline and Empires**

2.55 p.m.  Natalia Nowakowska  
The Jagiellonian Dynasty: Ideas of Decline and Rebirth

3.15 p.m.  Igor Pérez Tostado  
Decadence Critique and Reform in the 17th Century Iberian World

3.35 p.m.  William Smiley  
Decline and its Uses: A Eurasian View from the Ottoman and Russian Empires

3.55 p.m.  Martyn Rady  
Ideas of Decline in Central Europe

4.15 p.m.  *Discussion*

4.35 p.m.  *Break*

**Decline in the 20th Century and After**

5.05 p.m.  Andreas Eckert  
‘Only Bad News on Radio Africa’: Postcolonial Africa as a History of Decline

5.25 p.m.  Andrew Preston  
American Hegemony and Its Discontents

5.45 p.m.  Franz Mauelshagen  
Environment and Societal Collapse in Human History

6.05 p.m.  *Discussion*

6.25 p.m.  William O’Reilly  
Summing-up

6.30 p.m.  *DRINKS*

7.30 p.m.  *DINNER*
The Declinism Seminars

Lecturers

Professor Peter Bedford
*Wold Professor of Religious Studies. Director, Program in Religious Studies, Union College. USA.*

Professor, Dr Andreas Eckert
*Chair African History, Institute for Asian and African Studies, Humboldt University Berlin. Germany.*

Dr Jon Hesk
*School of Classics, University of St Andrews. UK.*

Dr Franz Mauelshagen
*Senior Fellow, Anthropocene/Sustainable Interactions with the Atmosphere, Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies. Germany.*

Dr Natalia Nowakowska
*History Faculty, University of Oxford. UK.*

Dr William O’Reilly
*Faculty of History, University of Cambridge. UK.*

Dr Igor Pérez Tostado
*Universidad Pablo de Olavide. Spain.*

Professor Andrew Preston
*Professor of American History, Clare College, University of Cambridge. UK.*

Professor Martyn Rady
*Professor of Central European History, School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London. UK.*

Assistant Professor William Smiley
*Assistant Professor of History and Humanities, Reed College. USA.*

Dr María Fernanda Valencia Suárez
*National Autonomous University of Mexico. Mexico.*

Organisation

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