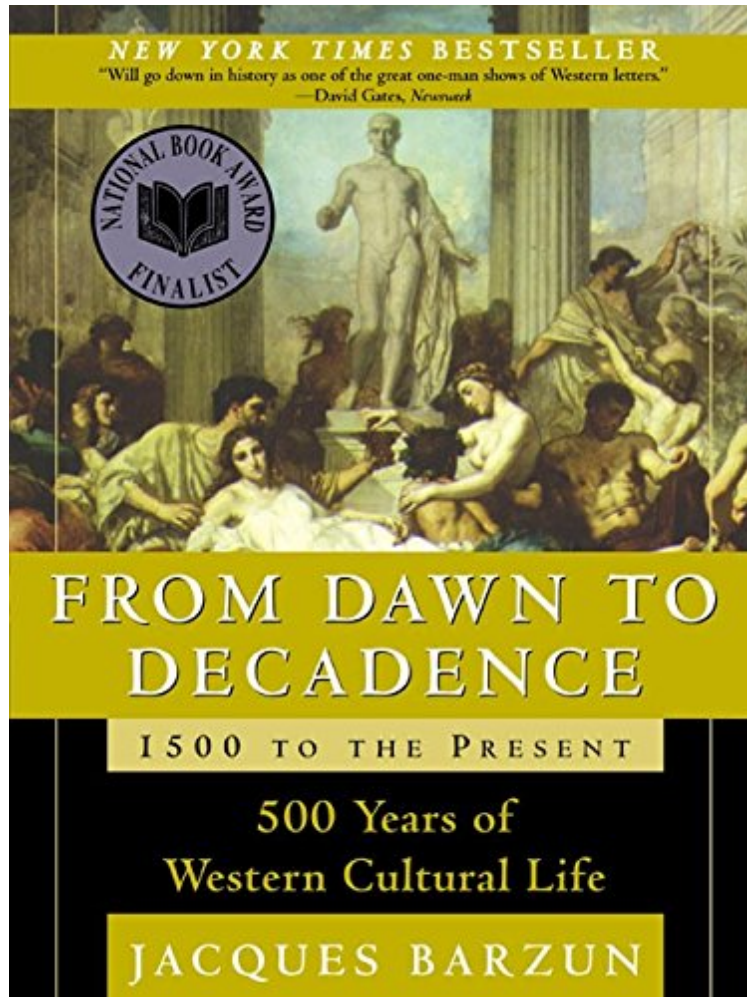


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From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life

Jacques Barzun

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#64293 in Books Jacques Barzun 2001-05-15 2001-05-15 Original language: English PDF # 1 8.00 x 1.46 x 6.00l, 1.81 #File Name: 0060928832912 pagesA massive and impressive work, with 500 years of cultural history into a masterpiece by a preeminent historian. | File size: 74.Mb

Jacques Barzun : From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Res IpsaBy Ashley A.For those who might order it as a gift: upon receipt I noticed there were rumbled pages folded in (easily flattened) and the back cover had a huge crease half way. It seems the cover and pages are very delicate. If you were planning to give this to someone, it might damper your spirits. I paid for a new copy, and was a little miffed it wasn't pristine.11 of 13 people found the following review helpful. Triumph of CalvinismBy AllegrippusPhenomenal, insightful, densely-packed cultural handbook of modern

Western civilization from its origin to its unraveling. The author identifies four pivotal revolutions to segment the demi-millennium under examination. Initiating the era was the back-to-basics Protestant Reformation which inadvertently dethroned the universality of the Roman Catholic Church, objecting to the encroachment of the worldly Renaissance (pioneered by restive college students) into its backward-focused purity. A century later the concept of the civil nation-state substituted individual infallible monarchs for the Pope as national unifying potentates. Third was the French Revolution which propelled the tantalizing ideal of equality into the realm of possibility. Fourth came the aftershocks of the French Revolution resulting from World War I which transformed numerous discredited inegalitarian imperial monarchies into centrally planned utopian dictatorships more effectively repressive and expansion-minded than the regimes they replaced. A major theme persisting through the entire era is the longing to return to primitive universal purity and simplicity represented by the Garden of Eden, complete with obsession over the insubordination of seeking knowledge more advanced than the Stone Age, and the concept of the Noble Savage. The Jesuit Order sought to reunify Christendom under Papal leadership. As time wore on, the accoutrements and superstitious rituals of the advancing civilization which had accumulated since a preceding revolution, were thrown off by a subsequent one. The Protestant sects spawned by the Reformation were re-purified during the emotion-driven Romantic period which ensued the French Revolution, which itself had overthrown all trappings of monarchy, religion (including the Christian calendar), and feudal tradition, leading to legal prohibition of slaveholding throughout the industrialized world. The unprecedented widespread physical and intellectual welfare, consequent population growth, and standardized mass-produced worldly goods generated by the Industrial Revolution, relaxing the influence of religion, ran contrary to this theme, drawing condemnation from appalled cultural leaders, some of whom were invested in perpetuating inegalitarian distinctions, often for the sake of provoking resentment. Eventually religion and the arts coalesced into the new universality of aestheticism under the supremacy of the inscrutable artist and interpretive critic as self-anointed high priests, determined to keep beneath the radar to avoid alarming the authorities they sought to subvert or the accomplices they would need to fulfill their objective. Following the disillusioning cataclysm of World War I, the first war involving the entire industrialized world, employing the panoply of advanced technology, pitting militaristic central planning against competitive individualism, and dissolving cultural globalization, traditional Western civilization abruptly ran out of steam, unmoored from tradition and common sense, caught in a deconstructionist spiral of rootless, inbred, over-specialized, and short-lived artistic, architectural, musical, theatrical, and literary movements like so many Protestant sects (or Roman Catholic Orders) or product model lines generating a glut of trivial, ephemeral, indistinguishable, and redundant output in jarring, offensive, irreverent, alienating, depressing, unintelligible, and obsessed competition with the blandishments of the despicable Industrial Revolution. Despite the multifaceted and enduring cultural impact of both the classical Renaissance and the rationalist Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution (including its earlier manifestation, the printing press, which performed the same role in the Reformation that its successor Internet performs in the current agitation), neither was included on the author's list of pivotal revolutions, evidently because they were interruptions in the prevailing trend. They have been overwhelmed by the Romantic German-nationalist philosophies which arose in reaction to the Industrial Revolution and to the German princelings' infatuation with effeminate neoclassical French culture (as the Reformation had arisen from Luther's disgust with the classical infatuation of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, and following the lead of ancient Spartans and medieval Arabs), relegating the rationalist philosophers to second-class pretender status in contrast to the mystical philosophers of the 19th Century, and stranding the Renaissance and Enlightenment as mere stepping stones rather than building blocks to the 21st Century; they comprise the very elements which have decayed. Backward-looking mediaeval concepts became fashionable once again. Drawing on encyclopedic wisdom accumulated through a lengthy lifetime of scholarly erudition which he fortunately remained capable of deploying, in a manner accessible to non-scholars, the author advances a plausible conclusion that the ongoing cultural frenzy is leading to a creative dead end in which advanced Western civilization itself will be overthrown by more primitive groups just as befell the Scholastic-bound Catholic Church at the beginning of the modern era. Universities have been molded by the revolving door through which their faculty are recruited by progressive financial foundations to influence passive and compliant academic administrations, awarding specialized, compartmentalized proficiency certificates like the Wizard of Oz to a platoon of scarecrows. The mission is to discredit and furthermore eradicate all positive recollection of individualistic Western culture. The author's French origin and familiarity with French sources positioned him to emphasize French influences in the development of Western culture. A less exalted perspective might extrapolate the following synopsis: Malthusian puritan disparagers of the Industrial Revolution were held at bay for a time through effective satirization as Ebenezer Scrooge and ridicule of the Dark Ages, abetted by popular confidence and delight in enlightened scientific, technological, and material progress, promoted by the forward-looking British authorities, who thereby achieved global supremacy. What the author portrays as decadent chaos in the 20th Century may be nothing other than the concerted effort to rehabilitate Scrooge's viewpoint ("always winter but never Christmas") through relentless mockery of industrial methods and output self-righteously branded as humbug, moral decay, extremism, materialism, unimaginative, readymade, dehumanizing, alienating, unsustainable, undeserved, forbidden fruit, satanic mischief, desecration of the Garden of Eden, and Hell on Earth; the institutions, instruments, products, and vocabulary of

progress have been usurped as a deliberate scam in the manner of the cuckoo bird through the Great Switch of liberalism into liberality to beguile as many primitive unwitting footsoldiers as possible into subverting and progressively undoing and reversing that very progress, and remaining in their primitive state. While mediocrity was praised extravagantly, unacknowledged excellence withered like the husk of a dead beetle, and appreciated in value as a consequence of increasing scarcity. In all-out warfare against photography, which captured the chief artistic livelihood of representational images, the advanced techniques of the classical artist were banished from the repertory. Although the field was necessarily ceded to lower-cost photography, contempt was reserved for its indiscriminate mechanized perfection. The notion arose that any artwork not derived from unaided primitive instinct was invalid. The concept of earning a living was scorned, and the stereotype of the starving artist was reinforced. Artists, churchmen, and aristocrats, the hereditary landed warrior and governing class deprived of its accustomed economic supremacy by competition from enterprising lowly pretentious upstarts, have converged with Marxists, even though the last-named had evidently accepted the Industrial Revolution as inevitable and intended merely to transform all human activities into centrally planned functions of the State. Hatred of the Industrial Revolution was strongest among those inclined to resent Great Britain, which had invented and unfairly prospered from it. The headlong pace of snowballing complexity in the 20th Century was just as disorienting to its contemporary critics as it had been to the Luddites who resisted adaptation to the original upheaval, rendering one entrenched interest after another instantly obsolete. Their increasingly primitive movement, a tribute to Oriental pre-industrial simplicity, gathered momentum about the time when machinery was displacing horses, mules, and oxen in street transport, farming, and warfare; it was in full swing during the decadent 1920's, when assembly lines assumed an oversized presence. This was a period of unbridled postwar hedonism catering to the predilections of young men in short supply, characterized by excesses among the victorious individualistic Western allies and privations among the collectivist Central and Eastern powers who had not fared as well, followed by enforced conformity through totalitarian regulation worldwide. Suppression of consumer demand which succeeded in amplifying the Great Depression was temporarily thwarted when imaginative streamlined designs and colors revitalized the flagging popularity of lackluster industrial products. Less-alluring utilitarian boxy styling abruptly resurfaced three decades later when streamlining was exaggerated into an outlandish parody of itself. Thus two organic strands of Western culture which became separated from each other have both survived as opponents: Reformation vs. Renaissance, Puritanism vs. rationalism, emotion vs. intellect, Gothic vs. classical, feudal vs. industrial, Sparta vs. Athens, Paris vs. London, Glastonbury vs. Manchester. The author developed an ingenious technique for clarifying the different trends as they shift in precedence, submerge and resurface, leap-frogging or displacing one another, each catching fire or synthesizing elements from the others by turns. He makes plain that the successive movements do not materialize in a vacuum, but revive a precedent, embody a thread, modify or react against current conditions, or a combination. A dynamic which favors resurgence of previously discredited practices is the swift evaporation from public memory of their undesirable aspects, more so when the active segment is inexperienced, allowing proponents an uncontested field to project an idealized prospect; history is easily rewritten. Although industrialization has been successfully stigmatized, exiled, and regulated nearly to extinction in the West, one advance yet undecided is which type of equality will prevail: the primitive uniformity of asceticism (the ultimate Buddhist vanishing act as demonstrated and encouraged by Conceptualism, returning the genii into his bottle, paint into its tube, and the World's troubles into Pandora's box, leaving no trace of ingenuity on Earth beyond some perplexing monumental ruins), or the uniform modest comfort of mass production. Whichever one emerges victorious will still be an outgrowth of Western civilization, as the author proclaims, a recurring cycle since antiquity. He traces the triumphant strand from the Middle Ages through Reformation, English Civil War, Great Awakening, French Revolution, Romanticism, Gothic Revival, chivalry, primitivism, environmentalism, mob rule, demagoguery, universal repression, and evidently projected reversion to astrology, alchemy, and the occult prehistoric Druid rituals of Camelot, where everyone and everything was assigned its immutable hereditary role in efficiently organized feudal collective guilds under aristocratic leadership, the Old and New Worlds were unknown to each other, and there was no State of Israel. Even the Middle Ages are a mere way-station on the return to the primeval pre-agricultural ideal of the Mesopotamian or Alaskan Garden of Eden, with a population level reduced to match, where humans were just another instinctual animal species before their Faustian bargain with the Devil, nibbling on the forbidden tree of knowledge (or their forbidden assist from Prometheus), propelled them into the Bronze Age. The Middle Ages were in fact the most successful of numerous attempts deliberately to ingrain in Western culture a taste for the purity of primeval society in reaction to the decadence of pagan civilization. Sentimental mysticism and mythology commonly trump sober rationality. As an esteemed member of the cultural network, the author does not doubt the superiority of the socialist Romantic movement, but cautions extremists that their guiding spirit J.-J. Rousseau contemplated stopping short of a full return to the Stone Age, since advanced human intellect has some positive virtue in improving over the anarchic state of nature; however, like most revolutionaries, Rousseau failed to retain control of the movement he had started. The author and his fellow classical scholars evidently feel as stranded, beleaguered, and out of place amidst their decadent society as the Superfluous Man imbued with cultivated Western values which suddenly became unfashionable, as personified by the aristocratic novelist Ivan Turgenev. The author perhaps equates himself with the

magus Prospero, lording it over his idealized primitive island before casting aside his obsessive and unfair advanced learning in later years, as did Sir John Gielgud and William Shakespeare, the difference being that this author never forsook scholarship. Although the author displays awesome breadth and depth of knowledge, mastering both primary and secondary sources, powers of memory, analysis, and precision, his socialist proclivities evidently led him to overlook a perceived reason prompting Louis XIV to enforce piety for most of his reign, and adoption of simplified masculine dress styles in the 19th Century. Louis had succeeded so well in neutering his noblemen that he apparently recognized that even his own relatives were turning away from martial skills needed to command his military exploits, skills he still retained himself. So without compromising his policy of centralized classicism, he began enforcing church attendance and other religious observances long before he would have naturally turned to piety on his own. Likewise patricians caught unawares by the French Revolution cast aside their effeminate habits in the aftermath, adopting the subdued styles of their conquerors (the author would have attributed this to boredom). The book features two handy indices and sturdy enough binding to withstand repeated reference to the comprehensive series of intellectual movements and leaders treated in their context.²³ of 24 people found the following review helpful. Fascinating History and Essay Combined -- but obtuse. By P. M. This book is a grand review of the past five hundred years of cultural history. It is also an essay written by a fascinating man, as he wanders through what he considers important. The two threads sometimes unravel, making for difficult reading. Warning: As you read this book, you will be tempted to buy a hundred more books mentioned in the text -- Tasso sounds fascinating, why not read his stories? The author has a clear view, but is honest about showing it -- the title gives it away. The decadence he sees is intellectual, spiritual, cultural... a grossness of sensualism, a dumbing down of high culture, various trends that appear in capitals (PRIMITIVISM). These views make the historical work juicier, but a tad more tendentious. My one complaint is that the book reads a bit choppy, as the author writes in short hand, introducing topics suddenly, and moving on from them quickly. This requires an adjustment by the reader, but has a certain charm if you can get used to it. The book is rich and anyone who reads it needs some weeks, some good Port, and a comfortable chair. One question: why do you WANT to read a history of the past five hundred years? If it is simply to re-affirm your belief in western decadence, skip this book. The work is cultured and layered and will strongly challenge simplistic preconceptions while confirming a thesis that the west has been in decline. This is a Big Read -- it takes time, thought, patience, and work by the reader. I started reading the book five months ago, and have been picking it up off and on since then, finishing recently. The book needs this sort of time, and is worth the investment, but only if you have the desire.

Highly regarded here and abroad for some thirty works of cultural history and criticism, master historian Jacques Barzun has now set down in one continuous narrative the sum of his discoveries and conclusions about the whole of Western culture since 1500. In this account, Barzun describes what Western Man wrought from the Renaissance and Reformation down to the present in the double light of its own time and our pressing concerns. He introduces characters and incidents with his unusual literary style and grace, bringing to the fore those that have "Puritans as Democrats," "The Monarch's Revolution," "The Artist Prophet and Jester" -- show the recurrent role of great themes throughout the eras. The triumphs and defeats of five hundred years form an inspiring saga that modifies the current impression of one long tale of oppression by white European males. Women and their deeds are prominent, and freedom (even in sexual matters) is not an invention of the last decades. And when Barzun rates the present not as a culmination but a decline, he is in no way a prophet of doom. Instead, he shows decadence as the creative novelty that will burst forth -- tomorrow or the next day. Only after a lifetime of separate studies covering a broad territory could a writer create with such ease the synthesis displayed in this magnificent volume.

.com In the last half-millennium, as the noted cultural critic and historian Jacques Barzun observes, great revolutions have swept the Western world. Each has brought profound change--for instance, the remaking of the commercial and social worlds wrought by the rise of Protestantism and by the decline of hereditary monarchies. And each, Barzun hints, is too little studied or appreciated today, in a time he does not hesitate to label as decadent. To leaf through Barzun's sweeping, densely detailed but lightly written survey of the last 500 years is to ride a whirlwind of world-changing events. Barzun ponders, for instance, the tumultuous political climate of Renaissance Italy, which yielded mayhem and chaos, but also the work of Michelangelo and Leonardo--and, he adds, the scientific foundations for today's consumer culture of boom boxes and rollerblades. He considers the 16th-century varieties of religious experimentation that arose in the wake of Martin Luther's 95 theses, some of which led to the repression of individual personality, others of which might easily have come from the "Me Decade." Along the way, he offers a miniature history of the detective novel, defends Surrealism from its detractors, and derides the rise of professional sports, packing in a wealth of learned and often barbed asides. Never shy of controversy, Barzun writes from a generally conservative position; he insists on the importance of moral values, celebrates the historical contributions of Christopher Columbus, and twits the academic practitioners of political correctness. Whether accepting of those views or not, even the most casual reader will find much that is new or little-explored in this attractive venture into cultural

history. --Gregory McNameeFrom Publishers WeeklyNow 92, Barzun, the renowned cultural critic, historian and former Columbia provost and professor, offers much more than a summation of his life's work in this profound, eloquent, often witty historical survey. A book of enormous riches, it's sprinkled with provocations. For example, Barzun contradicts Max Weber, arguing that the Protestant Reformation did not galvanize the capitalist spirit. With feminist ardor, he depicts the 16th century as molded and directed by women "as brilliant as the men, and sometimes more powerful" (e.g., Queens Elizabeth and Isabella). His eclectic synthesis is organized around a dozen or so themes--including emancipation, abstraction and individualism--that in his judgment define the modern era. Barzun keeps up the momentum with scores of snappy profiles, including of Luther, Erasmus, Cromwell, Mozart, Rousseau and Byron, as well as of numerous unsung figures such as German educator Friedrich Froebel, inventor of kindergarten, and turn-of-the-century American pioneer ecologist George Marsh. Other devices help make this tome user-friendly--the margins are chock-full of quotes, while vignettes of Venice in 1650, Weimar in 1790 and Chicago in 1895 give a taste of the zeitgeist. In Barzun's glum estimate, the late 20th century has brought decadence into full bloom--separatism in all forms, apathetic electorates, amoral art that embraces filth or mere shock value, the decline of the humanities, the mechanization of life--but he remains hopeful that humanity will find its way again. This is a book to be reckoned with. First serial to American Scholar; BOMC selection. (May) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.From Library JournalNearly 100, the noted thinker contemplates the last half-millennium. Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.