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Decline

Steven C. Hertler, Aurelio José Figueredo,
and Mateo Peñaherrera-Aguirre

*Customs are first barbaric, then severe, next noble, later refined, and finally
dissolute and corrupt.*

—Vico (Cited, page 83, in Cambridge University Press's 2002 edition of
Giambattista Vico's *The First New Science*).

1 Introduction

Where Chap. 5 reviewed the growth and maintenance of states, this chapter reviews their deterioration and decline. At the outset, however, it is important to precisely specify what, if anything, is declining. Most obviously, we can speak of this process after the fashion of the great declinists: Montesquieu, Gibbon, Spengler, Toynbee, and McNeill. Nevertheless, we must ask whether the process of *civilizational* decline described, while relevant, is distinguishable or not from the results of declining group-selective pressures. The relative strength of group-selective pressures experienced may vary among disparate societies while fluctuating within societies over evolutionary time.¹ Thus, we can speak directly of increasing or decreasing group-selective pressures which drive the evolution of group-selected traits, such as an utter absence of internal warfare and commercial competition. We can also speak of decline among

a society's group-selected traits, such as loyalty and altruism. Lastly, we can speak of societal decline as traditionally discussed in the declinist literature, involving martial and economic power. While conceptually distinct, these processes are causally related. When group-selective pressures decline, it lowers mean levels of group-selected traits within societies, leaving them vulnerable to generalized civilizational decline. All three forms of decline concern us, and all will be addressed. Nevertheless, it is necessary to specify which particular group characteristics or social dimensions are enhanced by increasing group selection and eroded by decreasing group selection. To begin with, however, we review insufficient responses to competition followed by elite betrayal and factionalism, ending with a review and analysis of declining group-selected traits within the population at large.

2 The Scylla of Stagnation and the Charybdis of Progress

Decline can result from either failing to change² or changing too rapidly. In the first case, a society can be overtaken by rivals and, in the second, risk its stability. Continuous, moderate changes made in response to rival groups allow societies to walk the fine line between these two perils, just as species evolve incrementally in response to environmental challenges and changes.

Red Queen effects have operated throughout history, wherein competition from rival states required ever-advancing military and economic efficiency. "The right to continued existence," North and Thomas (1973) assert, depended on increasingly efficient government extractions of revenue. States were imperiled by war with one another as always, though more frequently in modernity this threat was fiscal as much as military, with the interrelation between the two captured by North and Thomas (1973):

The magnitude of the increasing cost was staggering. A year of warfare represented at least a fourfold increase in costs of government – and most years were characterized by war, not peace. Monarchs were continuously

beset by immense indebtedness and forced to desperate expedients; the specter of bankruptcy was a recurring threat and for many states a reality. The fact of the matter is that princes were not free – they were bound to an unending runaway fiscal crisis. (p. 95)

When one state began taking loans against the future to augment war-making capacity in the present, other nations were forced to either follow suit or succumb. These loans could “tide a king through a war but then he faced the awesome task of repayment” (North & Thomas, 1973, p. 96). Decline often followed from the failure to secure loans or otherwise from the inability to repay them. Confiscation was a tempting option, as was renegeing on the loans. Both methods undermined the stability and credibility of the state. In the case of confiscation, future property rights were imperiled, which curtailed investment and economic productivity. In the case of renegeing, this only augmented future interest rates at which later loans could be secured, necessary to offset the increased risk to the lender. Rulers were also tempted to transgress customs, prerogatives, and rights of lesser elites in attempting to solve fiscal problems in the face of Red Queen competition; in this, they were in danger of crossing the line, on the other side of which lay revolt. It was necessary to increase revenues by more efficient extraction and by securing new revenue sources or otherwise face fiscal insolvency, which would, in turn, differentiate those states which would decline from those that would survive, grow, or expand.³

The declining Spanish Empire illustrates these Red Queen effects precisely. Citing expansion as “the price of survival,” Maltby (2009, p. 15) compiles threats from the west, north, and south, respectively from Portuguese commercial hegemony, French military conquest, and Muslim rule. A succession of events, including the marriage of Isabella I to Ferdinand II, the Reconquista, and the accession of Charles I, brought Aragon, Castile, and the Kingdom of Grenada under the umbrella of a unified Spain (Maltby, 2009), which, with the aid of South American silver, expanded rapidly to an empire. Reminiscent of modern-day oil-rich *OPEC* countries, the abundance of silver inhibited agricultural, social, and economic reforms necessitated in France and England among other contemporary Northern European states (Parsons, 2010).⁴ In the

short term, the Spanish monarchy could lord over its own nobility rather than making concessions to them and expand imperially at the expense of other nations rather than making trade agreements with them. With reserves of silver spent, the Spanish Empire found itself disadvantaged, overextended, and vulnerable (Flynn, 1982). By 1562, Spain assumed loans on which the interest absorbed more than 25% of its annual budget. The remedy proved worse than the disease, for Spain battled indebtedness across several cycles wherein “lengthening maturities, reducing interest rates, [and] raising the price of gold” eventually ended in bankruptcy. Decline was expressed in the form of external signs and internal symptoms. For instance, in an effort to fund wars of the Empire, the Spanish Crown so rapaciously “mulcted” its populace that nobles began to look upon their titles as *positive liabilities*, while merchants were subject to arbitrary confiscation and taxation to the detriment of credit and commerce (Elliott, 1961; North & Thomas, 1973). In a way, the influx of silver proved a stimulus to northern countries, inducing them to adopt the agricultural, social, and economic reforms neglected by Spain. The decline of Spain most especially relates to the rise of the Netherlands, the inhabitants of which united and modernized in the face of Spanish domination.

Rapid change can be as dangerous as stagnation. We see the danger in Burke’s writings on the French Revolution, which looks with revulsion upon the unbridled impulse that unseated order, custom, law, and religion in revolutionary France (De Bruyn, 2004; Hirst, 1935). Burke was an *organicist*, a philosophical position inviting comparisons between societies and organisms, holding the survivability of a system dependent upon the connected functionality of its constituent parts. It was from this position that, in his, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke remarks, “All circumstances taken together, the French Revolution is the most astonishing that has hitherto happened in the world” (1790/1992, p. 11). Conferring upon themselves an unauthorized extension of delegated authority, while dispensing with custom, form, law, and religion, in a matter of months France’s *National Assembly* tore down centuries of

accreted refinements that had been superadded to an existing governmental structure over many years. As evident in the full title of this work, *Reflections on the Revolution in France and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event*, Burke feared the spread of Jacobinism across the channel, the uprooting of the aristocracy that bound English society (Brody, 2000), and the destruction of the “organic nature and historical legitimacy of the constitution” as well as the “sanctity of the Crown” (Philip, 2014, p. 129). As was the case with the Spanish Empire *vis-à-vis* the Netherlands, the decline of France through the Revolution and Napoleonic Wars served to stimulate British development, as described by Philip (2014):

Largely as a result of the war with France, the early nineteenth-century British state became a nation state, no longer just a fiscal-military apparatus; the people were no longer an agglomeration, but a mobilized unity with national symbols and a national identity. Although France did not cause all this, its revolutionary and internationalist path, together with the level of mobilization required by the war, forced the pace of existing trends. (pp. 129–130)

To survive the warmaking capacity of France’s *levée en masse*, while simultaneously suppressing Irish revolts and Jacobin cadres and clubs within London, England cautiously changed by reluctantly taking slow steps toward the liberal democratic institutions that had so suddenly replaced France’s *Ancien Régime* (Philip, 2014). Avoiding decline by walking the line between stagnation and progress can also be seen in Peter the Great’s reforms of custom and administration, aimed at keeping Russia competitive with Western rivals but evoking rumblings short of insurrection from noble and religious elites (Massie, 2012). Likewise, one can look to the slow-liberalizing concessions from the top-down in nineteenth-century Germanic polities, which vented revolutionary steam, which might have otherwise ushered in decline and collapse (Evans & Von Strandmann, 2002; Robertson, 1952).

3 Disunity: From Patrician Parasitism to Faction, Rebellion, and Revolution

Decline follows disunity. Disunity manifests in manifold manners. Like cancerous cells, rebellious subgroups can promote their interest at the expense of the collective interest. It can be perpetrated by demagogic and degenerate elites; yet, disunity often comes from the bottom-up in the form of military coups, political factions, regional separatists, or religious schisms. We take up each in turn.

When ruling elites subject ethnic or religious factions to exploitative *exchange relationships* and deny to them some measure of political inclusion (Wimmer, 2018), the disaffection that ensues leaves groups vulnerable to external exploitation and eventual conquest, as happened when the *British East India Company* exploited divisions between Indians and their Muslim overlords within a waning Mughal Empire (Parsons, 2010). Indeed, as Parsons (2010) states:

The most vulnerable societies were those divided sharply along the lines of class, religion, ethnicity, or some other form of identity. These divisions led to military weakness, hindered organized resistance, and made it easier for conquering powers to recruit local allies. (p. 13)

By leading well or exploiting selfishly, elites either stitch these lower-order group allegiances into a superordinate group identity or otherwise expose the polity to conquest by division. As in the French Revolution where climatic events initiated a succession of meager harvests, elites are now and then unjustly blamed for fully exogenous hardships. However, by engaging in speculation, demagoguery, or any other self-serving vice, elites manufacture endogenous hardships. There may be notable exceptions such as the prosperous American colonists, though, generally speaking, subjects rebel only when the status quo becomes insupportable. Before irresponsible elites drive their populaces to insurrection, they may first come to a point of lackluster disaffection or even allow, acquiesce in, or aid, external conquest, as illustrated by England's *Glorious Revolution* wherein English and Scottish elements enabled William of Orange to

effect an unopposed landing from the Netherlands and a bloodless coup to the English Throne.

Still, especially when coming in succession as did the Roman Emperors Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius, competent elites can have quite the opposite effect as that which was described above. Yet, even this string of conscientious competence gives way to plebian parasitism, which extends from the bottom-up, sapping the foundation of the state. Elite leadership only forestalls decline because reduction in the strength of group selection evokes downstream changes in altruism, valor, deference, and other fitness-relevant meta-population variables operating evolutionarily and culturally over time scales beyond the reign of a single man or even those of five great men.

Danger also derives from the military. As discussed in Chap. 5, delegating martial authority is necessitated by growth, though not all generals subordinate themselves to civil authority as did Washington. Again, elaborate bureaucracies, deliberative bodies, and powers balanced one against the other promote stability in peace, but their dilatory inability to respond to imminent existential threats motivates the delegation of extraordinary powers. Foreign threats, Skocpol (1979, p. 51) reminds us, come of the ability to “mobilize extraordinary resources from the society and to implement... structural transformations.” This can be seen in the Roman office of dictator, the efficacy of which Machiavelli (2010) describes:

And truly, of all the institutions of Rome, this one deserves to be counted amongst those to which she was most indebted for her greatness and dominion. For without some such an institution Rome would with difficulty have escaped the many extraordinary dangers that befell her; for the customary proceedings of republics are slow, no magistrate or council being permitted to act independently, but being in almost all instances obliged to act in concert one with the other, so that often much time is required to harmonize their several opinions; and tardy measures are most dangerous when the occasion requires prompt action. And therefore, all republics should have some institution similar to the dictatorship. (p. 165)

Machiavelli⁵ praised Roman law for having the wisdom to establish legal and controlled means of temporarily vesting dictatorial power in a single person relative to the invariable threat of conquest by an outgroup.

Without in any way detracting from Machiavelli's logic, one will observe that Julius Caesar was a dictator and by his hand the Republic ended. The dictator and the external rivalries that make it necessary illustrate the reality of group selection. Most obviously, rival nations are competing biocultural groups. In turn, from the broader multilevel selectionist perspective, we see the dictator as imposing group unity, with the capacity to harshly suppress individually selected behavior through courts martial, execution, imprisonment, and confiscation, among other means. Nevertheless, as is the point of revisiting the issue here in this sixth chapter, distancing a state from external danger by means of elite fighting forces and standing armies, which were widely suspected through the early modern period, precipitates military coups (Braddick, 2015; Brownson, 1865/2005; Burgess, 1915; Casey, 2007; Cressy, 2006).

As with military defection, political factions can fracture a larger group into constituent parts where the cohesiveness of those constituent parts exceeds the binding force of the larger group. In consequence, much thought has been given to factionalism's ills and remedies. For instance, Montesquieu (1965) thought that a republic had to be small so as to avoid faction and fractionalization, whereas Madison thought that faction could check faction. In either case, faction was recognized as potentially fatal, with only the prescription differing. Large republics, nations, and of course empires, having no hope in Montesquieu's solution, can only employ Madison's. Factions and fractionalization within groups straightforwardly promote fissures and fission but indirectly enable sociopolitical aggregation by piecemeal incorporation into neighboring empires, which often succeed in conquering fragmented groups by exploiting parochial differences (Parsons, 2010). External groups then exploit prevailing divisions and provincial rivalries, as when the Umayyad Caliphate, Spanish *Conquistadores*, and Napoleon, respectively, outmaneuvered the Visigoth Kingdom of Spain, the so-called Inca Empire (*Tawantinsuyu*), and pre-nation-state Italy. Related to this latter point, Wimmer observes that ancient empires easily expanded over lower-level political structures but, in doing so, created local cohesion while providing templates for infrastructure and bureaucracies, later co-opted by emergent nation-states. In Wimmer's view, exposure to empire inoculates

populations from future incorporation by virtue of evoking national consciousness.

The tenuous and tumultuous confederation of Great Britain was often exploited by enemies stoking Ireland's longing for independence via diplomacy, aid, or military expedition. Thus, at the instigation of the Spanish during the Anglo-Spanish War (1585–1604) and the French during the 1789 Revolution, we see that *England's difficulty* was used as *Ireland's opportunity*. Though Ireland was not dissevered from England, America was with the aid of England's longtime rival, France. Distance and custom, compounded by a policy of benign neglect and de facto self-rule practiced for more than a century, operated like the cultural analogue to the evolutionary process of *genetic drift*, allowing cultural and political distinctiveness to grow and later form the fault line of division between rulers and revolutionaries. The American revolutionary struggle witnesses the cleaving and welding of group identities across the Atlantic, across colonial lines, and across the allegiances that separated patriots and loyalists. The winners of the Revolution were those that were able to maintain superior cohesion. The British policy was calamitous, as embodied in the actions of the Howe brothers, General William Howe and Admiral Richard Howe. The Howe brothers proceeded to prosecute the war as if one could marry *Pax*, goddess of peace, to *Mars*, god of war. Together, the Howes seemed to lackadaisically pursue the rebels, offering conferences and peace overtures, showing spurts of strategic success, but without the dogged follow-through that was required. Recalling Chap. 4, we see this policy of ineffectual oppression kept the *stimulus of blows* at the optimum arc along the aforementioned curvilinear relationship. In other words, British military presence, being intermediate in strength, could not subdue and suppress. Rather, it was ultimately effectual only in creating colonial cohesion against a shared enemy. This is why Machiavelli (2010) suggests that a threatened state temporize with rivals to the extent that they cannot vanquish those rivals decisively. Temporizing will defer or diminish a threat excessively formidable, whereas ineffectually opposing a threat will only serve to spur an enemy to unity and action, as was the case of Rome when belatedly attacked by a league of neighboring tribes:

For their league had no other effect than to unite the people of Rome more closely, and to make them more ready for war, and to cause them to adopt new institutions that enabled them in a brief time to increase their power. (p. 163)

Learning from the British, the new American government placed the laurel branch and arrows in separate claws of their national eagle. Moreover, above the squeamishness of staid Republicans, Hamilton was among the influential voices insisting that the newly formed federal government appear as a colossus in the field when faced with rebellious factions, as it did when suppressing the *Whiskey Rebellion* by conscripting a force of federalized militia that was comparable to those armies fielded during the Revolution. Presenting as a colossus in the field accessed the strategy of the fit antelope whose high spring (*stotting*) serves as an *honest signal* of fitness to a would-be predator, cautioning against a costly exchange that would be likely to end unfavorably for the hunter. Nearly unique among the founders, the immigrant Hamilton was able to promote this unyielding policy precisely because he was not divided in his loyalties, as were the other founders who generally identified more closely with their respective states than with the federal government they created. As we have seen, such divided loyalties had been at issue with the Howe brothers before them, who similarly sought to walk the untenable middle road between suppression and appeasement partially from sympathies with the co-ethnics they were supposed to subdue. An admirer of Julius Caesar (Morris, 1973), and possessed by an imperialist temperament, Hamilton hailed from the West Indies and thereafter ranged across the American colonies at the behest of education, war, and politics, leaving him unattached to any local region (Elkins & McKittrick, 1993). It was thus that the fear of foreign threat had no counterweight in his mind, leaving Hamilton to characterize the constitution as “frail and worthless” (Lodge, 1898, p. 262), favoring a *completely sovereign* centralized government to the annihilation of “state distinctions and state operations” (Newman, 2004, p. 48).

As with secular authority, religions employ coercive measures meant to compel adherence. The *Spanish Inquisition* is unjustly cited as the unparalleled exemplar of religious coercion but is truly only one in a long series

of campaigns mounted to root out heretical nonconformists and non-conforming ideas in the interest of forging a national unity based on shared religious loyalties. The Protestants, having loosed the tether and slipped the trace of Catholicism, recapitulated the trend of devolution as they degenerated into innumerable sects: *Calvinists, Puritans, Anabaptists, Methodists, Shakers, Quakers*, and so on. This was justifiable based on the originally declared right of separation from Catholicism, which was an act of conscience and an appeal directly to God that would brook no intermediary. The Bible translated into the vernacular was increasingly preferred. The Puritans, the most fiercely separatist sect, would not get their scripture second hand, filtered through pagan Platonism, the teachings of Augustine or Aquinas, the Church of Rome, the Holy See of Peter, or the Council of Trent or Nicaea. No, they would read the word of God for themselves as it had been translated into English by King James. In doing so, they would think, they would judge, and they would theorize. Among the Puritans then, the process is once more repeated. After having sailed to America in order to establish the fabled “city on a hill,” a mythical beacon for reformed Christendom sheltered from the Old World’s corruption, the Puritans found themselves acting the part of inquisitors, banishing dissidents, such as Anne Hutchinson, Roger Bacon, and other founders of Rhode Island.

Thus, in both the secular and sacred spheres, decline toward lower levels of aggregation is often precipitated from rebellious internal factions where the *hegemon* can no longer radiate credible authority over its client states. As a body in motion stays in motion except when acted on by an outside force, the process of disaggregation, once started by a faction, must be arrested thereafter or otherwise persists down to lower and lower levels of aggregation.

4 “Mystical” Theories of Decline

When we speak of decline, especially when referring to decline in the meta-population traits evolved by multilevel selection itself, it calls to mind the writings of the great declinists, such as Ibn Khaldun, Montesquieu, Vico, Spengler, and Toynbee. Vico spoke of shirking civic responsibilities

in favor of individualistic goals, which brought men back to barbarism. Toynbee (1951) spoke of spirit and spiritualism, being morally routed or experiencing a loss of *élan* or moral courage. Writing in Wagnerian tones of *Gotterdammerung*, Spengler (1991) referred to inexorable societal degeneration (Farrenkopf, 2001). In explaining decline, these authors recur to difficult-to-operationalize intangibles, classed as *mystical* explanations by Tainter (1988), to which he adds Adams's *energetic material*, Dawson's *vital rhythm and balance*, Sorokin's *value systems*, and Griffin's *cultural fatigue*. As part of a larger critique, Tainter savages the mystical genre of declinist writings for relying on biological growth analogies⁶ and being imbued with value judgments, though he ultimately classes them as mystical and deems them irremediable for their reference to *intangibles*. "Mystical explanations," Tainter (1988, p. 85) states, "simply fail to identify any isolatable, observable, measurable factor controlling cultural change." Focusing on Spengler and Toynbee as exemplars of the genre, Tainter (1988, p. 84) finds references to biological vitalism, which are "unknowable, unspecifiable, unmeasurable, and unexplainable."

In the eighth chapter of our *Life History Evolution: A Biological Meta-Theory for the Social Sciences*, we share Tainter's criticism in speaking thus of Toynbee:

Though he rested his hopes of surpassing Spengler via superior causal explanation, it was precisely in the arena of explanation that Toynbee first faltered; for, at the outset, he seemed to reject the lens of Western science, with its fixed laws and reductive methods, in favor of mythical and religious allegory, pivotal leadership, and particular descriptions. (p. 133)

If Tainter were correct, a truly "mystical" genre would be indeed ungrounded, particular, pontifical, vague, murky, superficial, dogmatic, and idiosyncratic. However, we do not believe that all of these concepts fall completely out of the reach of careful psychological measurement. An alternative approach to the operationalization of this traditional wisdom is suggested by multilevel selection theory, which is one of several candidate mechanisms that can stand in the stead of intangible references to *asabiyyah*, *élan*, or *spirit*. Future studies must further operationalize the trait-based products of group selection in terms of measurable biological

phenomena that might be able to capture what the so-called mystical authors were attempting to communicate in their metaphorical narratives of decline. Nevertheless, we contend that this declinist theme persists because it is indeed referring to an actual psychological property of human groups, eminently important for the cohesion of a society and its ability to subsist amid a competitive landscape. We insist that this is not semantic legerdemain. We are not simply entering another name into the lists, spuriously arguing for its semantic superiority to *vigor*, *virtue*, *asabiyyah*, or any like variant.⁷ To say a society is *group selected*⁸ denotes not only a description of what *is*, but an explanation of how it *came to be*. A *group-selected* society is one that has been forged within a selective regime favoring cooperation among members of a group, in competition with members of a rival group.

By reviewing *soft selective regimes* in the remainder of this section, and by providing a historical lexicographic analysis of *asabiyyah* in the subsequent section, this chapter closes with a preliminary attempt to explain how replacing vague, immeasurable terms, with measurable group-selected traits, can rescue what we believe has been mischaracterized as the “mystical” genre of decline.

In beginning to describe soft selective regimes, we first turn to Vico. “The century of Roman virtue,” Vico (Pompa, 2010, p. 112) insisted, “lasted until the Carthaginian Wars.” Whether measured by territorial extent, military power, or economic activity, the future efflorescence of Rome lay far ahead, well past the end of the Punic Wars of which Vico speaks. Machiavelli finds the same sentiments in Juvenal:

conquest of foreign countries had caused the Romans to adopt foreign manners and customs, and that, in exchange for their accustomed frugality and other most admirable virtues, gluttony and luxury dwell there, and will avenge the conquered universe. (p. 282)

Toynbee (1951; volume IV) writes in the same vein, thinking Gibbon’s epic (1846) oxymoronic:

The degree of Gibbon’s hallucination is betrayed by the very title of his great work. The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire! The

author of a history that bears this name is surely beginning his narrative at a point which is very near the end of the actual story; for the Roman Empire itself was a monumental symptom of the far-advanced decline. (p. 61)

Careful reading finds some semblance of specificity across these authors. For example, a group assuming hegemonic status by subjugating all rivals eliminates the martial pressures shaping its founding; in Toynbee's terminology, it eliminates the *stimulus of blows*. There is then the curse of conquest. The taking of slaves, gold, harvests, and booty of all kinds export toil and hardships to the conquered. In speaking of the effects of luxuries, wealth, slaveholding, and hegemonic peace, Vico, Toynbee, Ibn Khaldun, and likeminded declinists are speaking of decadence. In biocultural terms, decadence amounts to a selective regime favoring the more individualistically inclined, self-interested members of the population. Making one further inference, one might say that, *in founding a successful state, founders change the selective regime which created them*. Though much more must be said by way of elaboration, this is the driver of cyclical history: The group selected found a society that thereafter selects against their ilk.

In our aforementioned book, *Life History Evolution: A Biological Meta-Theory for the Social Sciences* (2018), we noted several parallel themes relevant to group selection, nowhere more so than when writing Chap. 8, which treated Toynbee's work. In addition to reviewing the significance of nomadic incursions in Chap. 4 of this book, we here recall our prior discussion of selective regimes, equally relevant to life history evolution and group selection:

Extending the cooperative venture of small settlements to the national level, however difficult to initiate, proved more difficult to maintain... The selective pressures associated with state formation... slowly relax as the state matures. Entropy ensues. It does so especially when civilizations become hegemonic universal states free from the fitness enhancing group selective pressures that come in the guise of war and competition. Within walls erected against external conquest, no matter if they are the stone ramparts of Constantinople, riverine or montane barriers, or a phalanx of mercenary

arms, there arises a changed selective regime, increasingly opening niches to Machiavellian leaders, free riders, psychopathic manipulators, thieves, mendicants, adulterers, and dissidents...[who] come to thrive on the increasing anonymity, trust, and abundance, within the walls. (p. 135)

Without presently involving ourselves in any detailed discussion of the complex evolutionary relationships between group selection and life history theory, it suffices to say that some productive combination of group-selected and slow life history-selected elements create stable societies; these then become, in effect, altered selective regimes subject to invasion by individually selected and fast life history-selected elements. The security of a well-secured stable state can produce dissidents and decadence, but it affords cultural and evolutionary progression toward more benign forms of individualism, which can in time prove nearly as inimical to group-selected societal strength. These are values often celebrated in the modern West, classed as rights and liberties. To say nothing of rights and liberties as a positive good from a cultural perspective, their ability to undermine vigorous collective action remains. Emphasizing equity and equality, due process, legal protections, and related rights and liberties is a luxury indulged in by strong states that have substantially reduced external threat. Rival nations can augment powers by dispensing with any excess of rights and liberties and thereby more effectively select in favor of group-selected persons and principles that come to threaten freer, mature societies.

5 Operationalizing *Asabiyyah*

As we have seen in the foregoing section, the many terminological variants employed by authors writing in the so-called mystical genre seem to be describing a decline in the psychological traits found among highly group-selected populations. Following that inference, we can render these many variants tractable by specifying mechanistically how they arise. As we have seen, soft selective regimes, those inviting decadence and sheltering the populace from competition and war, change the basis of economic and reproductive success. Self-sacrifice and bravery,

abstemiousness, and disinterested patriotism, those Ciceronian values that can seem so starkly extreme, become less relevant and thus are less often propagated and rewarded. These traits can decline generation after generation, slowly eroding the strength of the state, which attains to its heights of grandeur on the inertia of group-selected founders.

Coming before all the other aforementioned authors within the *mystical* genre, and most precisely describing the trait underlying a group-selected society, was Ibn Khaldun and his concept of *asabiyyah*. *Asabiyyah* is augmented in the tribal or barbarian conquest phase (called “savagery” by Ibn Khaldun, in contradiction to the more precise taxonomy of Morgan, 1877) and thereafter depleted amid effete and effeminate dissipation of high civilization (Irwin, 2018). For these reasons, and also to illustrate the importance of selective regimes and the possibility of measuring their effects, we performed a test of Ibn Khaldun’s (1377) theory of the decline of *asabiyyah* as a consequence of increased wealth (“luxury”) and ease of living. Ahead of the following details and methodological descriptions, these analyses can be taken as empirically supporting Ibn Khaldun’s (1377) hypothesis that declining *asabiyyah* is historically associated with increasing wealth, independent of the effects of time.

Following Sarraf, Woodley of Menie, and Feltham (2019), we performed a historical lexicographic analysis of the use of words associated with each of the five *Moral Foundations* identified by Haidt (2012): (1) care; (2) fairness; (3) loyalty; (4) authority; and (5) sanctity. The diachronic utilization of these specific classes of English language words was evaluated via their relative frequencies of usage through *Google Ngram Viewer* (Michel et al., 2011), an interactive textual corpus encompassing over 5.9 million texts and 500 billion written words from AD 1500 to 2008. The lexicographic data were obtained in the form of frequency counts of each word within its respective language across the 200 years spanning AD 1800–1999.

The lists of words for each of the five *Moral Foundations* were harvested⁹ from keywords used in the online *Moral Foundations Questionnaire*¹⁰ and in Haidt (2012), when describing these theoretical constructs. The words then used as items in each of these lexicographic scales were psychometrically selected on the basis of obtaining adequate part-whole correlations for each word to the corresponding aggregate scale score for

each lexicographic scale. We thus empirically selected the best words from the initially larger lists based on their convergent validity with respect to each other, as indicated by the internal consistency of the constructed scales. Our psychometric selection procedure was deemed to be the most straightforward way of identifying the best item-level indicators of these constructs under the presumption that the items would be differentially valid as a function of how well they reflected the central latent constructs, which were the five Moral Foundations.

Unit-weighted common factor scales (Gorsuch, 1983) were estimated as the means of the standardized scores for the lexicographic items on each scale (Figueredo, McKnight, McKnight, & Sidani, 2000). As per Moral Foundations theory, the five scales, as depicted below in Fig. 6.1, were aggregated into two lower-order factors: *binding* and *individualizing*. By reverse-scoring the individualizing factor, we further aggregated these two lower-order factors into a single higher-order factor (*asabiyyah*), based on the preliminary results reported by Sarraf et al. (2019), indicating that these two trends were diverging from each other systematically throughout the twentieth century and might therefore indicate a single tendency for one to increase at the expense of the other.

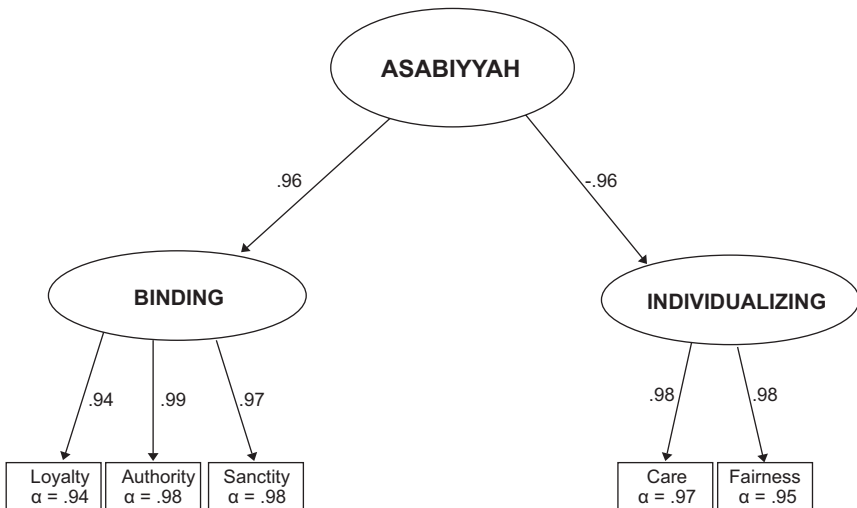


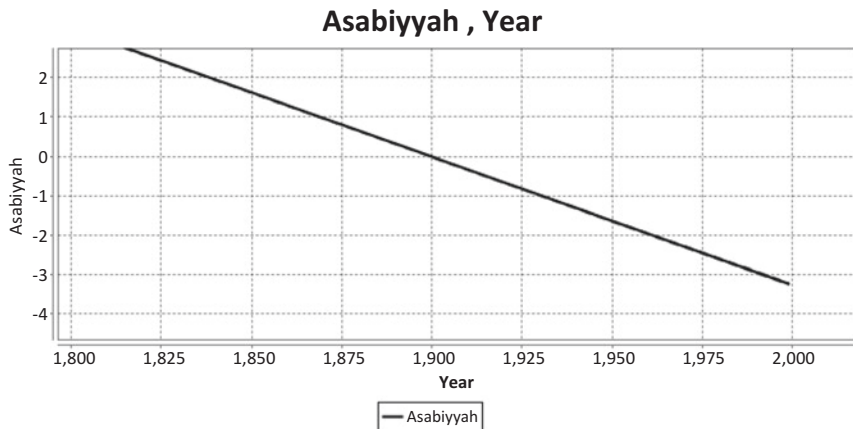
Fig. 6.1 Latent hierarchical structure of lexicographic *asabiyyah*

The unit-weighted factors were then used as manifest variables in longitudinal multilevel models (MLMs). Four nested MLMs were estimated to test the need for increasing parameterization as alternative hypotheses: (1) *MLM1* estimated a single intercept and a single logarithmic slope (unconditional “*asabiyyah*”) for all lexicographic factors, lexicographic scales, and lexicographic items (words) over time; (2) *MLM2* estimated a separate intercept and a separate logarithmic slope for each lexicographic factor over time but the same intercepts and logarithmic slopes over time for all scales within each factor and for all words within each scale; (3) *MLM3* estimated a separate intercept and a separate logarithmic slope for each lexicographic scale over time but the same intercepts and logarithmic slopes over time for all words within each scale; and (4) *MLM4* estimated a separate intercept and a separate logarithmic slope over time for each word.

Table 6.1 displays the pertinent nested model comparisons. The systematic AIC and -2RLL comparisons performed among the nested models representing the specific variance components accounted for by each level of the aggregative hierarchy indicated that most of these incremental improvements in model fit were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) but relatively trivial in magnitude. Comparisons of squared multiple correlations among the four nested MLMs yielded essentially the same results. The magnitude of the specific variances explained at each level of aggregation (ΔR^2) were found to be negligibly small ($<< 1\%$) in contrast with the common factor variance of the highest unconditional “*asabiyyah*” level of aggregation, which was found to be quite large ($> 75\%$). Given the strength of these findings, we chose to retain the model parameters for only the unconditional “*asabiyyah*” level (MLM1), as the extra model parameters added by the lower levels of aggregation (MLM2, MLM3, and MLM4) were virtually irrelevant to an adequate account of the diachronic variances in the Moral Foundations factors, scales, and words. The logarithmic slope of this unitary higher-order “*asabiyyah*” construct over time was negative and statistically significant: $r = -0.96$ (90% *CI*: $-0.97, -0.95$), $F(1198) = 2546.99$, $p < 0.0001$. No significant serially autoregressive effects were found ($ARHI = 0$) and the incremental variance due to curvilinearity was statistically significant but negligibly small: $r = -0.05$ (90% *CI*: $-0.19, 0.09$), $F(1197) = 10.99$, $p < 0.001$.

Table 6.1 Fit indices for nested multilevel models (MLMs) for lexicographic indicators of moral foundations factors, scales, and psychometrically selected words

Multilevel model	MLM1	MLM2	MLM3	MLM4
	Year	+ Factor + Factor*Year	+ Scale + Scale*Year	+ Word + Word*Year
AIC	7986.7	7982.2	7994.1	8023.1
-2RLL	7870.7	7958.2	7982.1	8015.1
	$\Delta\chi^2 =$	87.5*	23.9*	33.0
R^2	0.7538	0.75524	0.75628	0.76006
	$\Delta R^2 =$	0.00145*	0.00104*	0.00378*
NDF	1	3	9	55
	$\Delta NDF =$	2	6	46

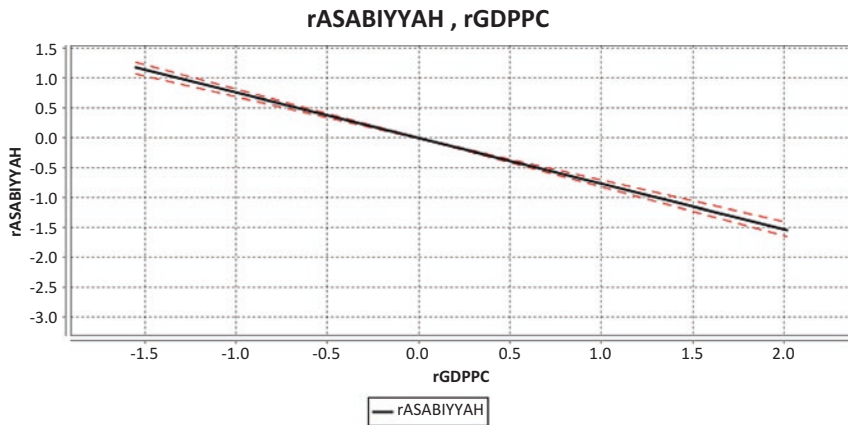


Note: Dashes are upper and lower confidence intervals.

Fig. 6.2 Bivariate linear regression of *asabiyyah* over time (AD 1800–1999)

As depicted in Fig. 6.2, GDP per capita data from AD 1800 to 1999 were obtained for the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, from the Maddison Project database (Bolt, Inklaar, de Jong, & van Zanden, 2018), a repository curated by the Groningen Growth and Development Centre (GGDC). MLM residuals were then exported for both GDP per capita and the unitary *asabiyyah* factor and used for subsequent general linear modeling. MLM residuals

were thus statistically adjusted for the logarithmic effect of time as well as of any single-lagged heterogeneous autoregressive serial dependencies among successive data prior to regression modeling, thus circumventing this potential problem as a threat to the validity of correlational analysis. It was especially important to statistically control for the effects of time to ascertain that any association was not a simply coincidental one of GDP increasing ($r = 0.88$) and *asabiyyah* simultaneously but independently decreasing ($r = -0.97$) over the same period of time. The bivariate correlation of the time-adjusted MLM residuals of GDP per capita with those of *asabiyyah* was $r = -0.76$ (90% CI: $-0.82, -0.70$), $F(1198) = 276.21$, $p < 0.0001$, empirically supporting Ibn Khaldun’s (1377) hypothesis that declining *asabiyyah* is historically associated with increasing wealth, independently of the effects of time, as depicted in Fig. 6.3.



Note: Dashes are upper and lower confidence intervals.

Fig. 6.3 Time-adjusted MLM residuals of GDP per capita predicting MLM residuals of *asabiyyah* (AD 1800–1999)

6 Conclusions

Decline can come of falling behind advancing rivals, as seen in the waning Spanish Empire, or destroying the organic substructure of society through excessive change, as nearly happened in Petrine Russia. Similarly, decline can come just as well from subjects rebelling against their rulers as from rulers betraying their subjects. All such factors can precipitate decline or signal impending collapse to a lower level of societal aggregation. Distinct from these is the crowded genre of declinist literature, which Tainter (1988) refers to as *mystical*, wherein decline comes of *senility* and *decadence* or of waning *martial spirit*, *vigor*, and *virtue*. Plato and Polybius are listed as ancient forerunners, Gibbon and Montesquieu are Enlightenment exemplars, while Spengler and Toynbee are classed as famous modern examples of this *mystical* tradition of decline. Mystical explanations, Tainter argues, fail to account scientifically for decline or collapse. They are crippled by reliance on biological growth analogies, value judgments, and references to intangibles. Whether using virtue or spirit or any related term, one can ask from whence came its abundance and why was it lost. Though much methodological and measurement must ensue, conceptually replacing these various terms with measurable traits derived of the biological process of multilevel selection promises a way forward, marrying intuitive wisdom with rigorous science, as has been shown by example in the analyses presented above. These analyses show that concepts like *asabiyyah*, although perhaps “mystical” and intangible to historians, are well within the purview of modern psychological measurement when guided by appropriate scientific theory. Indeed, this allegedly *mystical* form of decline is qualitatively distinct from those signs and symptoms treated at the outset of this chapter, within Sects. 2 and 3. Instead of indicating a decline to hierarchically lower levels of group organization, authors within this genre seem to concern themselves with meta-population processes related to multilevel selection and its resultant traits, the decline of which is less easily reversible and often precipitates future collapse.

Notes

1. Just as societies may be characterized as having different mean life history speeds produced by differential K -selection among groups, societies may also be characterized as having varying mean strengths of social cohesion and integrity produced by the differential group selection to which they have been subjected.
2. Tainter (1988, p. 54) discusses a declinist genre referred to as *insufficient response to circumstances*, which is admired by Tainter for its recognition of external causes as mediated through internal characteristics: there is a pressure that does not mechanistically make for collapse but only leads to collapse for failure to adapt.
3. Having just read Chap. 4, one will see war serves equally as a stimulus to growth or an impetus to decline, depending on whether it comes in salutary or toxic doses; as was said, war has a curvilinear relationship with aggregation, and we are now, in this sixth chapter on decline, looking at the downside of the relationship.
4. Eventually, such was the prodigal outflow of treasure that Sir Robert Walpole attempted to convince the House of Commons to prop up the shell of the Spanish Empire in its twilight years, for it had become only a “canal” through which American silver passed before being distributed throughout Europe. The British among other nations had previously assisted in curtailing piracy on Spain’s behalf when Spain was no longer able to defend her shipments of silver (Kamen, 2003).
5. Machiavelli can be mined for group selectionist reasoning, perhaps most evident in *The Discourses*, which, in comparison with *The Prince*, addresses itself more generally to national stability and power, of which the tenure of the leader is only one component. Ever didactic, *The Discourses* espouses maxim after maxim relevant to ingroup solidarity as it survives in the acid bath of outgroup competition.
6. The following is a description of the intellectual history of biological growth analogies such as those employed by Spengler (Farrenkopf, 2001):

In the late eighteenth century, biological analogies began to displace those derived from the mechanistic universe of Newtonian physics in historical and political thought. Herder, in exemplifying this trend, conceives of nations, within the flow of historical change, as organisms. They have a morphology; they are dynamic and alive. These

organisms are not rational in character; they are things in themselves and not means. Like a person, nations have characteristics: a life span and their own spirit. (p. 79)

7. As described in Chap. 4, these terms, especially when used in the declinist literature, are descriptively similar, some being nearly synonymous.
8. Please excuse this neologism invented for the sake of convenience. Of course, the term “group selection” refers to an evolutionary selective regime that selects for particular traits (such as altruism), and it is these traits that are actually the product of the group selection process.
9. We thank Maya Louise Bose for her excellent work in identifying these items from the original texts.
10. <http://yourmorals.org/haidtlab/mft/index.php?t=questionnaires>

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