of daily life “seem exhausted; the stages of development have been run through.”

In Douthat’s words, decadence combines “economic stagnation, institutional decay, and cultural and intellectual exhaustion at a high level of material prosperity and technological development.” It is the tension—not to say surface contradiction—between the West’s undeniable prosperity and its more arguable dissipation that gives Douthat’s argument its force and propels the book forward.

Riches and advanced technology may actually be necessary conditions for slipping into decay. When a hungry society has visions of grand Alps just beyond the horizon, that tends to stir innovation, excitement, dreams of greatness, activity. Douthat asserts that those visions and energies are often missing in our society. Even innovation doesn’t inspire as it once did. Entrepreneur and philanthropist Peter Thiel comments that the digital revolution “promised flying cars. We got 140 characters.” The triviality of much Internet content, its failure to transform culture as the invention of electricity or

As a professional opinion slinger, Ross Douthat is an ambidextrous wonder. He can take an “idealet”—a word coined by master newspaper columnist Charles Krauthammer—and deftly spin it into a weekly squib of 750 words for the pleasure, or outrage, of his readers in the New York Times. And he is also able to produce serious cultural criticism at book length. Rarely do we find a commentator who can pitch it short and pitch it long, with the same level of liveliness and penetration. If his columns are finger food, his books are feasts—and in the case of The Decadent Society, almost impossibly rich.

This is Douthat’s fourth effort as a solo author, and his most ambitious and comprehensive. Though he finished writing before the coronavirus was even a gleam in the eye of a wet-market pangolin, The Decadent Society is his most timely work. His prophecies and observations have useful relevance during our present emergency. So let’s hope the fact that this book arrived in stores just as the stores closed won’t inhibit the reach of its ideas.

The title, while accurate, is unfortunate. Given Douthat’s role as the token right-winger on the Times’ op-ed page (he is, among other admirable distinctions, the only regular columnist in the paper’s modern history to be pro-life) readers might assume The Decadent Society offers a screechy jeremiad against rutting, weed-whacked college kids and the bearded, beret-wearing, fair-trade-sipping professors who tote the handbasket now conveying them all to perdition. Douthat, however, has a tone and erudition that make him incapable of crude caricature. (That’s my job.) He’s not gung-ho about the undergraduate rutting and weed smoking, and he’s fully aware of the dangers of a uniformly leftish academy like ours. When he speaks of decadence, though, he draws on the more clinical, less moralistic meaning provided by the American historian Jacques Barzun.

In his career-capping summa From Dawn to Decadence (published in 2000, at the age of 93!), Barzun denied that the term decadence was “a slur.” It was, he said, “a technical label.” A decadent culture, according to Barzun, “sees no clear lines of advance” for itself. The activities and forms of daily life “seem exhausted; the stages of development have been run through.”

In Douthat’s words, decadence combines “economic stagnation, institutional decay, and cultural and intellectual exhaustion at a high level of material prosperity and technological development.” It is the tension—not to say surface contradiction—between the West’s undoubted prosperity and its more arguable dissipation that gives Douthat’s argument its force and propels the book forward.

Riches and advanced technology may actually be necessary conditions for slipping into decay. When a hungry society has visions of grand Alps just beyond the horizon, that tends to stir innovation, excitement, dreams of greatness, activity. Douthat asserts that those visions and energies are often missing in our society. Even innovation doesn’t inspire as it once did. Entrepreneur and philanthropist Peter Thiel comments that the digital revolution “promised flying cars. We got 140 characters.” The triviality of much Internet content, its failure to transform culture as the invention of electricity or
Private philanthropy, carried on independent of government diktat, cuts straight to the heart of decadence—attacks it at its root.

Douthat notes that “American entrepreneurship has been declining fairly steadily since the 1970s.” The once churning waters of start-ups have consolidated into massive corporate consolidations like Google, Facebook, Apple, and Amazon. Dynamic work opportunities have slowed along with the pace of innovation: “Americans are less likely to switch employers than they were a generation ago.”

This economic stagnation is entangled with an even more disturbing development—what Douthat calls sterility. “Large-scale fertility decline looks like an inevitable corollary of liberal capitalist modernity,” he writes. Young people are less likely to have children, to connect themselves loyally to others, to step outside of their immediate self-interest. The individualism that was once the celebrated fruit of prosperity has now become a “seedbed of stagnation.”

The book gathers energy as the author catalogs his evidence, and even achieves a kind of suspense when he weighs the possibilities of what comes next. More mediocritiy? A genteel decline, misunderstood as equilibrium? Religious awakening? A populist-nationalist revolution? Other unfamiliar, and perhaps frightening, outcomes that scramble stagnant Western culture into some fresh synthesis?

Douthat turns his gaze south, to the globe’s developing countries. He raises the possibility of a fecund blending of their people potential with the richness of Western culture, in Europe particularly. Though mass migration from south to north creates instability, Douthat suggests “the global south also holds the key to many scenarios of renaissance.”

At the close of the book a kind of hero unexpectedly emerges. He is Robert Sarah, 75, an African, and cardinal of the Catholic church. Like Douthat he has traditionalist, pro-Western views. He is fully aware of today’s cultural decadence, yet refuses to be pessimistic.

Sarah envisions a melding of the strengths of today’s developed and developing countries. In a Christianized Eurafrica he sees “an opportunity for entirely new, pan-racial configurations that would reach back into Europe’s past to reshape both continents’ third-millennium future.”

Is there a place for philanthropy in all this? In a decadent society that “sees no clear lines of advance,” where might one best funnel money and imagination to spark some renaissance? The possibilities sketched by Robert Sarah and Ross Douthat are shared by some religiously inclined givers today. They are funding initiatives by missionaries, educators, entrepreneurs, rule-of-law advocates, and charitable activists that aim to combine the West’s rational Judeo-Christian heritage with the family vigor, religious confidence, and traditional cultural wisdom of the South, resulting in surprising and appealing new social forms that could revivify modern nations.

Douthat doesn’t say so, but by his own analysis I think he’d agree that the mere act of targeted giving would be as important as the object, perhaps more so—honorable alike, to paraphrase Lincoln, in what we give and what we encourage. Private philanthropy, carried on independent of government direction or diktat, cuts straight to the heart of decadence, attacks it at its root. Such a campaign would reestablish community, enliven imaginations, become a seedbed for an exfoliation of civil institutions to enoble the individualism that is at once the glory of the West and, left to itself, a danger to it too.

Andrew Ferguson is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

Givers Can Do Better
Striving to improve, without discouragement
By Joanne Fiorino
philanthropy. We found ourselves together again in early March 2020, at an elbow-bumping event in New York City, as she was awaiting delivery of the first copies of her work. Now, in a charitable environment changing rapidly and unpredictably, her new book is reaching an audience with less time and more stress, as donors confront a current crisis and an uncertain future. Perhaps, though, this is perfect timing for a treatise designed to help philanthropists “get out of their own way.”

The title may strike readers as insulting. Is the author suggesting that many philanthropists are kidding themselves about doing good? Are they accomplishing nothing with their gifts? Not quite.

What Putnam-Walkerly is suggesting is that lots of givers are failing to have the effect they seek. Those of us who have worked in institutional philanthropies recognize many of the symptoms of delusion. The foundation board that routinely approves grant amounts lower than nonprofits request on the assumption that the budgets are “padded.” The foundation executive who spends an inordinate amount of time and money to identify the “just right” consultant—and then fails to follow through on the consultant’s advice. The program officer who includes a large dollop of micromanagement on top of every check she sends out the door. The organizational president who hates to say “no,” leaving staff to piece together hundreds of scattershot initiatives each year. And the many givers who are so fearful that their gifts will be insufficiently consequential, or not measured or reported just as they want, that they fail to contribute anything.

Using a mix of real-life stories and snappy advice, *Delusional Altruism* reassures donors that they can get past their fear and their “scarcity mentality.” For new and experienced funders alike, the book is an easy read. Seven chapters on the symptoms of delusion are followed by seven chapters on the cures. Numbered and bulleted lists abound. The presentation makes it possible to move through the book quickly, while allowing readers to stop and more fully digest those lessons which strike a chord. Unfortunately, this also leads to unnecessary repetition (particularly around time management) and, occasionally, to inapt comparisons. A random list of “bad behaviors” lumps together a program officer who doesn’t always read grant reports with a sexual harasser.

The strongest parts of this treatise contain valuable advice to donors: Understand clearly what you want to accomplish. Remember why you want to achieve it. Don’t rush too quickly to the how. Avoid spending so much time worrying about the best grantmaking strategy that you ignore other valuable options. Don’t forget that timeliness is crucial to success.

The author’s two chapters on strategy are well done. Her recommendation to ask, “What should be abandoned?” is refreshing. Equally noteworthy is her reminder that while some research is necessary for wise grantmaking, especially in issue areas where you lack knowledge, fear of making a mistake can be paralyzing and result in missed opportunities to make a difference. “Sometimes,” she counsels, “you just need to do it and learn.”

The book’s practical suggestions for simplifying and speeding up the grantmaking process are already being implemented by many foundations in response to covid-19: Reduce bureaucracy, streamline applications, expedite the approval process, provide general-operating support, offer multi-year grants, trust your grantees, be trustworthy yourself, and take risks worth pursuing. By May, nearly 750 foundations had signed a pledge to adopt many of these practices during the coronavirus crisis, simultaneously promising to “consider adjusting our practices more fundamentally in the future, in more stable times, based on all we learn.”

This reviewer wishes that Putnam-Walkerly had also discussed how a savvy living donor or a powerful donor-intent statement might hasten the management and grantmaking changes she advocates. She says she has known philanthropists who refined their giving by “living and breathing their values.” Alas, she doesn’t follow through with examples or information her readers might apply to their own situations.

Ultimately, Americans shouldn’t be intimidated or discouraged by the author’s warnings about “delusional altruism.” Our deep commitment to generosity, so rare historically, and precious in any society, is able to compensate for many of our human shortcomings as givers. The author acknowledges midway through her book that, “You already know 80 percent of the answer to any question you have about philanthropy.” Getting that last 20 percent right is a noble goal for any grantmaker, and worth pursuing diligently—but without crippling criticism or guilt.


---

Fear of making a mistake in grantmaking can be paralyzing and result in missed opportunities to make a difference.