

Does liberty lead to decadence?

The liberty to be decadent should be valued, says **Misha Saloukvadze**

For centuries, decadence has been found wherever a given beholder, of any prejudice or inclination, has cared to declare its discovery, usually thick within the bosom of that beholder's latest distaste. It conjures up images of anything between Antoinettean aristocratic delights to Marquis de Sade-esque sexual excesses; to mere breaches of religious codes, and even the alleged frivolities and waste of capitalism. Almost certainly the word is derogatory. Irrespective of its object, it is difficult to imagine it escaping from lips uncurled in pretentious distaste, or not spat out in pompous disgust. It invariably carries a moral charge—a critique against an indulgence that offends the accuser's sense of decency of lifestyle and conduct. Rarely is it a criticism levelled against a person for harm affected upon another—except in the loosest sense of undesirable moral influence.

The broad trend over the last few centuries, certainly in the Western world, has been towards liberalisation. The use of markets has been extensively harnessed, and free trade and deregulation have been generally encouraged. Contemporaneously, the fight for social liberty has been significantly progressed, and today we live in a freer world than ever before. Broad, nuanced examples are aplenty: slavery, and later entrenched racial discrimination, has long made way for the broad victory of the civil rights movement; sodomy's illegality has been condemned to the dustbin of bigotry; and twenty-four-hour convenience stores are abundant. We have ample evidence of liberty's advance from which we can decide whether decadence follows.

Liberty may well allow for the indulgence of exotic tastes and interests, or the cultivation of personal 'excesses' and fulfilment of the infinite number of unique desires that colour the human soul. To morally reprimand liberty and charge it with the grievous offence of allowing people to conduct their own lives in a manner inconsistent

with the accuser's values is, however, more a reflection of the accuser's arrogance, or even totalitarian tendencies, rather than any moral wrong on the part of the accused. Does liberty lead to decadence? It certainly cultivates plenty and choice, but there is nothing morally repugnant about that.

The deliverance of plenty

Over the past few centuries, liberty has led to the unprecedented creation of wealth for the benefit of the greatest number of people. Freedom to innovate, enterprise, trade, and allocate capital has provided hundreds of millions of people affordable and ready access to basic needs, as well as allowed them to pursue their fancies as they see fit. Not only have we witnessed this astounding growth in wealth over many decades, but we see it today most astutely (and perhaps fashionably) in developing nations such as China and India, and have seen its capacity to increase standards of living perhaps most powerfully in the stark contrast between the twin developments of the erstwhile East and West Germany and North and South Korea. This wealth has undoubtedly allowed individuals to pursue an unprecedented number of activities. Eat sweets, view an unprecedented amount of pornography, exercise, pursue extravagant luxury, work less or work more, watch television and play video games: almost all activities would be subject to an accusation of decadence from someone,

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somewhere. With such a broad view of decadence, it is easy to announce, unequivocally and absolutely, that liberty does lead to it. Moreover, it is hoped that liberty is defended in part because it leads to such decadence; because it allows people to choose what paths they tread in life and from what fruit they eat.

Capitalist frivolity and excess

An argument foretelling Western civilisation's Armageddon through its sheer decadence has recently become very popular. It will be brought about, it is prophesied, by overconsumption and the deadly grip of Affluenza, a silent killer trampling through the souls of good people everywhere, born of too much choice, too little understanding of what's good for one's self, and the overpriced dens of Sydney's northern shores. We are vacant dupes, the theory goes, who do what marketing agencies tell us, and cannot help but eat fatty foods, puff away at the produce of evil tobacco companies, and try to look good in the newest designer outfits. Our culture forces us to want and buy what we don't need, and in the end, all the choice we simple folk have, without the guidance of the knowing hand of those cleverer and better than us, overwhelms us and society implodes. These charges describe a society where liberty has led to capitalist excess and frivolity.

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It should be clear that such arguments are premised upon the notion that people do not know what is best for them, and more profound in its ugliness, the notion that others do know better; and not only should the general populace listen to them, but it should be coerced into changing its conduct accordingly. They judge that Gillette's five-blade razor as excessive and too much,¹ and no one of sound mind would buy it or believe it to be a genuinely superior product to a more modest and morally upright fewer-bladed razor. Thus people must not be of sound mind. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to pick out goods, like the five blade razor, that may seem excessive (or

decadent) to many—who needs a large-caramel-skim-soy-double-shot-frappuccino? Or Tiffany & Co collar stays? Or a \$230 million home?² It is almost certainly the case that the more liberal a society, the more excesses of this nature there are to point at. It is difficult to imagine a sensible Soviet administrator approving such bourgeois indulgences. So from this perspective, liberty does lead to decadence. Again, the question that must be asked is what is wrong with people choosing to live large and spend their earnings on their expensive tastes? On the prospect that doing so is at the expense of the poor, we may turn to Ronald Reagan when he said '[w]e have so many people who can't see a fat man standing beside a thin one without coming to the conclusion that the fat man got that way by taking advantage of the thin one.' Decadence in this light must too be defended, so that not only may more people escape the clutches of poverty, but if they so choose, may pursue whatever luxuries they please—whether travel, sport, and yes, that second Ferrari.

Decadence as irreligiousness

The charge of decadence to the effects of liberty and modernity often corresponds with the idea that today people are living meaningless lives packed full of unworthy pursuits. Apart from the attack on consumerist tendencies, there is also often a distinct religious element to this critique. It stems from an entirely divorced pool of critics, not usually associated with the generic anti-globalisation movement. Rather, it correlates the decline of religious influence and observance in our society with a perceived moral decline brought forth from the decadence born of liberty. The decline in religiosity in the developed world is a well-known phenomenon. Western Europe has for some time had declining levels of observance, and the dominant religion, Christianity, has been on the wane. There has been a similar trend in the United States though this has been far less pronounced. But is it liberty that leads to irreligion? The Soviet Union was anti-religious, and its liberalisation has led to a significant strengthening of the Orthodox Church in Russia. The Solidarity movement in Poland, with strong backing from the Vatican, was important in liberalising Poland, and preceded what is now one of Europe's most religious countries, along

with Ireland (a country that is one of the most commercially free in Europe). It is difficult to find any strong correlation between liberty and religion.

Despite this, the degree of religiosity in our society, and liberty's effect on it, is beside the point. Certainly there are those who would view a decline in religiosity as decadent in itself. Nevertheless, the empowerment of the individual to make that choice, to be allowed to lead a decadent lifestyle, should be viewed as another valuable experiment in how to live best. If people choose to reject religion, or be less observant, and would rather be lazy, watch American sit-coms, buy a new pair of shoes, follow Scientology, or read de Sade, then so be it. Criticism of this has less to do with an interest in the wellbeing of others than the desire to shape society into a reflection of the accuser's own values and beliefs.

Inhospitality and selfishness

The fierce destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah suggests another view of decadence. In Ezekiel 16:50 God explains that the sin of Sodom was that '[s]he and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me.' This paragraph neatly touches on a number of the issues discussed. 'Overfed' suggests gluttony and excess, and the 'detestable things' are a reference to, among other things, perceived sexual deviance, particularly homosexuality (in the defence of the destruction of Sodom, the sins are not limited to sexual deviance, but to horrendous and shocking brutality and sadism). In line with other widely held views on the destruction of Sodom, it also clearly suggests that a lack of charitable inclination and hospitality comprise the city's sins. This view of decadence is important, and empirically measurable. It is important also in the broader dialogue about charity's role as a more effective and morally justified substitute for coerced welfare, and its displacement through crowding out by this coercion. So does liberty lead to selfishness? Statistics and trends with regard to individual giving internationally are not readily available, and are difficult to track over time. There is the well documented 'crowding out' effect of government grants and welfare on private charity, whereby there is an

inverse relationship between coerced government contributions (or 'social contributions') to charitable causes and private contributions.³ It is not the purpose here to argue that a reduction in social contributions would be more than exceeded by private contributions—but it seems clear that when people are free to choose how to spend their disposable income, they do choose charity and hospitality. Furthermore, it seems that with increasing incomes, the proportion of incomes donated to charity remains the same.⁴ Therefore, it may be asserted that the greater the wealth created, the greater amount in absolute terms is donated to charity—and with liberty's propensity to create wealth it is difficult to maintain that liberty leads to a decline in charity. It seems that liberal centres across the globe may be spared the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah for the time being (at least on the basis of inhospitality). So on the rough measure of selfishness, it does not seem that liberty does lead to decadence.

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Conclusion

It is possible to investigate the extent to which liberty leads to decadence on a number of metrics: religion, selfishness, and wealth have been discussed. Many more are available. Does liberty lead to corruption? An emphatic 'no' is the answer: there is a strong correlation between liberty and freedom from corruption.⁵ Does liberty lead to laziness? Employment regulation surely shows not: it is regulation that caps working hours, or makes it costlier for employers for employees to work longer hours. But whichever measure is used, and whether the result is that liberty does lead to people choosing decadent lifestyles or not, the response should invariably be delight: people's increased prosperity is surely something to be lauded, as is the increased capacity to satisfy tastes, desires, and indulgences that liberty heralds.