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Recommended Citation

Diaz, Elliot, "'Degenerate' Rome and Racial 'Purity': Comparing Historiographies of Race and Rome from Nineteenth Century Europe to Contemporary American Neo-Nazi Websites" (2021). *Friends of the Libraries Excellence in Research Awards*. 36.
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8/31/21

‘Degenerate’ Rome and Racial ‘Purity’: Historiographies of Race and Rome from Nineteenth Century

Europe to Contemporary American Neo-Nazi Websites

Although the ‘decline’ of Rome is often framed as “some representation of some essential human and historical ‘truth,’” as Johnathan Theodore remarks in his work, *The Modern Cultural Myth of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, “it is better described as something akin to a myth or moral tale...”¹ Although the narration of degeneration often centers upon similar themes, it is used to advocate for purposes as varied as those who invoke its mythos. It nonetheless creates a “historical consciousness” out of which is otherwise ahistorical.² Much ink has been spilled about the role of *romanità* in Benito Mussolini’s Fascist Italy, as well as Nazi appropriation of ancient Greece.³ Concurrently, as Maria Wyke and Michael Biddiss write in the introduction to *The Uses and Abuses of Antiquity*, various scholars of ancient Rome and Greece have attempted to acknowledge and explore the “various misogynies, ethnocentrisms, elitisms and imperialism” within both antiquity and its later reception.⁴ Discussions of Late Antiquity within ancient Greco-Roman scholarship have flourished, but, up until very recently, there has not been much of a reckoning with the historical (and contemporary) ideological implications of Rome’s ‘decline’ among modern historians, anthropologists, and scholars of fascism. The ‘degeneration’ or ‘decline’ of Rome has a substantial historiographical place in racial theories that, although disproved in contemporary academia, still retain significant political and cultural weight. Specifically, Arthur de

¹ Jonathan Theodore, *The Modern Cultural Myth of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56997-4>, 7. The sentence continues that this myth is “one broadly constant, and yet appropriated for a range of different purposes by its authors. In this way, these creative, artistic, and (what might otherwise be deemed) ‘unhistorical’ qualities can directly lead to the formation of a historical consciousness, a paradigm that embraces the popular as much as it does academic or intellectual domains.”

² Theodore, *The Modern Cultural Myth of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 7.

³ For further reading, see Helen Roche and Kyriakos N. Demetriou, *Brill's Companion to the Classics, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, Brill's Companions to Classical Reception, vol. 12 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2018); Helen Roche, *Sparta's German Children*, (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2013).

⁴ Maria Wyke and Michael Biddiss, *The Uses and Abuses of Antiquity* (Bern: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999), 13.

Gobineau's *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853-1855), Houston Stewart Chamberlain's *Grundlagen des XIX Jahrhunderts* (1899), and Oswald Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (1918) laid foundational elements for the narrative of Rome's 'decline' and 'degeneration' among Nazis and neo-Nazis. Their impact can be seen, not only in Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and Alfred Rosenberg's *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, with various important differences, but in blog posts from sites such as the Occidental Observer, AltRight.com, and the National Vanguard. The 'decline' of ancient Rome provided, to both influential racist 'historian' ideologues of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and to American neo-Nazis today, essential ancient 'evidence' of the superiority of racially homogenous societies over 'degenerate,' multiracial ones.

This alleged decline of civilizations due to race can be traced back to French theorist Arthur Gobineau's *Essai*, which was, in its own right, a turning point in racist thought. Whereas previous 'scientific' racists and philologists had constructed a racial hierarchy with white people on its top, they had nonetheless viewed history as reflecting Europeans' rightful triumph over and subjugation of others due to Europeans' superiority.⁵ Intermingling earlier racial theories with the linguistic work of those who coined the term 'Aryan,' Gobineau posited, as he wrote in the introduction to the *Essai*, a view of history in which "the racial question overshadows all other problems in history, that it holds a key to them all, and that the inequality of the races from whose fusion a people is formed is enough to explain the whole course of its destiny."⁶ Not only is race a defining force in Gobineau's view, but the 'fusion' of 'unequal' races drives civilizations' inevitable fall.

Although Gobineau relied heavily upon previous European theories of 'Aryans' and scientific racism, he opted to take a comparative historical approach to confirm his assertion that all European culture and creativity was derived from a single, biological source: Aryans (or Indo-Europeans). In five

⁵ Arthur Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History* (Riverside: Free Press, 2007), 55-6.

⁶ Ivan Hannaford, *Race: The History of an Idea in the West* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1996), 265; Michael Biddiss, "History as Destiny: Gobineau, H. S. Chamberlain and Spengler," in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 7 (Dec, 1997): 73-100. doi:10.2307/3679271, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3679271>, 74.

volumes published from 1853-1855, Gobineau chose to focus not only on the superiority of this ‘source’ of great civilizations throughout history, but also on that bloodline’s, and therefore those societies’, inevitable and total degeneration. He defined the word “‘degenerate,’ when applied to a people, [as meaning]...that the people has no longer the same intrinsic value as it had before, because it has no longer the same blood in its veins, continual adulterations having gradually affected the quality of that blood.”⁷ A large portion of the *Essai*, three out of its five volumes, was devoted to tracing the decline of ten civilizations, which Indo-Europeans or Aryans had supposedly ‘founded,’ but would later degenerate.⁸ One of these civilizations is Rome. The “seed of inevitable death,” every great people’s impending doom, Gobineau’s pessimistic treatise lamented, is their success through empire, which leads to the dilution of the pure race of Aryans to racelessness. Through expansion, Gobineau writes, conquerors gradually and inexorably succumb to miscegenation with their racial inferiors; thus is “‘the blood of the civilizing race is gradually drained away.’”⁹ The hopeless Gobineau’s view of the unavoidable decline of the Aryan bloodline and, therefore, as Herman summarizes, the “creative period of humanity,” ‘proven,’ among other examples, by Rome, managed to stay fairly uninfluential for a while.¹⁰ This changed about thirty-five years later, when Ludwig Schemann founded the Gobineau Society in 1894 and diffused Gobineau’s ideas and vocabulary throughout Richard Wagner’s circle in Bayreuth and the Pan-German League.¹¹ It was from here at the turn of the twentieth century that Gobineau’s ideas would be taken and

⁷ John Nale, "Arthur De Gobineau on Blood and Race." *Critical Philosophy of Race* 2, no. 1 (Feb 01, 2014): 106-124. doi:10.5325/critphilrace.2.1.0106, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/critphilrace.2.1.0106>, 111.

⁸ Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History* (Riverside: Free Press, 2007), 58.

⁹ Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, 59-60.

¹⁰ Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, 63.

¹¹ Robert Pois, Introduction to *Race and Race History and other Essays by Alfred Rosenberg*, 1st ed (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 22. See also: Felix Wiedemann, “The Aryans: Ideology and Historiographical Narrative Types in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” in *Brill's Companion to the Classics, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, edited by Roche, Helen and Kyriakos N. Demetriou, 31-51 (Boston: Brill, 2018), 42; Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, 70; Geoffrey G. Field, *Evangelist of Race: The Germanic Vision of Houston Stewart Chamberlain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 154; George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich*, 1st ed (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), 91.

altered by Houston Stewart Chamberlain to create an ‘optimistic’ vision of a specifically German, ‘bright’ Aryan future.

British-born Germanophile Houston Stewart Chamberlain, along with his predecessor Ludwig Schemann, in the words of Arthur Herman in his book, *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, gave “Gobineau’s Aryan myth” a “happy ending.”¹² In his 1899 book *Grundlagen des XIX Jahrhunderts* (“The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century”), Chamberlain vehemently rejected the notion put forth by Gobineau that racial degeneration was unavoidable, responding that ““The sound and normal evolution of man...is not from race to racelessness, but on the contrary, from racelessness to ever clearer distinctness of race.””¹³ The man whom Hitler would allegedly address as a “spiritual father” in 1927, whose ideas would be emulated both by Hitler and Alfred Rosenberg, put a twist on Gobineau’s debauched Rome, attributing its degeneration to Jews but contrasting it with the purity of the German *Völk*.¹⁴ Drawing upon the pseudo-historical and pseudo-scientific work of Gobineau, Chamberlain placed the same mystical racist ideas of earlier German racists into a ‘historical’ and ‘scientific’ framework.¹⁵ This framework helped to legitimize his circular logic, which drew upon not only ‘scientific’ racism but also European anti-Semitism.

Part of Chamberlain’s lasting influence in the development of Nazi ideology is that in his *Grundlagen* he took the Aryan myth provided by Gobineau and provided a villain: Jews. Jews were then placed in opposition with their ‘natural’ enemies: Germans. Germans, according to Chamberlain, faced the dilution of their superior blood at the hands of the Jews. Chamberlain described the German people as having a mythic spirit bound to nature due to their racial heritage and purity—something that could not be found in any other European nation.¹⁶ This idea of a German *Mythus*, fundamental to the writings of Nazis

¹² Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, 70; Field, *Evangelist of Race*, 153-4.

¹³ Biddiss, “History as Destiny,” 91.

¹⁴ Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, 74. The accounts of Hitler’s visitations to a sick and dying Chamberlain vary. See Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology*, 91.

¹⁵ Paul A. Fortier, “Gobineau and German Racism,” *Comparative Literature* 19, no. 4 (Oct 01, 1967): 341-350. doi:10.2307/1769493, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1769493>, 344.

¹⁶ Pois, *Race and Race History and other Essays by Alfred Rosenberg*, 22.

like Rosenberg, was an idea that Chamberlain was central in creating. In a fashion similar to Gobineau's, the *Grundlagen* traced the 'unique spirit' of the German people by relying on comparative historical 'evidence' of civilizations that Aryans had founded throughout history, one of which was Rome.

Although Chamberlain's conclusion that racial decline from Aryanism was not inevitable was a significant turning point from Gobineau's ideology, his appropriation and characterization of Rome are very similar to Gobineau's. "Like Gobineau and many other racist authors," Geoffrey G. Field notes in his book on Chamberlain, *Evangelist of Race: The Germanic Vision of Houston Stewart Chamberlain*, that "Chamberlain believed that the protracted infiltration of the blood of slaves and freedmen, mostly of Semitic and African extraction, had transformed the mass without definite racial character. 'Like a cataract the alien blood poured down into the nearly depopulated city of Rome, and soon the Romans ceased to exist.'"¹⁷ In the *Grundlagen*, Chamberlain drew a causative relationship between the 'alien blood' of foreigners brought into Rome and the destruction of the ancient Romans as a 'people.'

Despite their similarities, Chamberlain did modify the narrative seen in Gobineau's *Essai* slightly. But he asserted, that instead of Rome's founders being Indo-European/Aryans as is expressed in Gobineau's *Essai*, Chamberlain insisted that the Romans (before their degeneration) were actually Germans.¹⁸ This specific aspect of Chamberlain's characterization of Rome would be widely adopted and echoed in later official *völkisch* Nazi ideology. Described in "From Humanism to Nazism: Antiquity in the Work of Houston Stewart Chamberlain" by Johann Chapoutot, for Chamberlain, "a Germanic golden age in...Rome which was scattered and shattered by the Jews. This would be taught in the ideological courses every member of the party...had to take. Rome was destroyed by the Jews because it had not protected the purity of its race and because it was never able to lead a proper racial war: a total war of annihilation."¹⁹ So as Chamberlain was describing the degeneration of the Romans by the Jews, he (and those who would

¹⁷ Field, *Evangelist of Race*, 182.

¹⁸ Johann Chapoutot, "From Humanism to Nazism: Antiquity in the Work of Houston Stewart Chamberlain," *Miranda* 11 (Jul 16, 2015), <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/6680>, 4.

¹⁹ Chapoutot, "From Humanism to Nazism," 8.

cite his work) were advocating, or at least implying, what must be done in their specific context to prevent such ‘decline.’ This work would be taken up by Hitler, whom Chamberlain had written a note after their first visit in October of 1923 saying that, “‘That Germany in its hour of greatest need has given birth to a Hitler is proof of its vitality.’”²⁰ Chamberlain would die in 1929 and never get the satisfaction of seeing Hitler attempt to realize his vision of a pure, Aryan future, but his work would have a substantial impact on the Nazis he inspired and the people they would go onto murder in pursuit of that future.²¹

The influence of Chamberlain and Gobineau was not only in official Nazi propaganda courses, Hitler would go on to personally echo many of Gobineau’s and Chamberlain’s points in *Mein Kampf*. Although he does not specifically mention Rome, Hitler’s assertion that, to quote Arthur Herman, “‘all great cultures of the past perished only because the original creative race died out from blood pollution’ captured the original spirit of Gobineau’s racial pessimism...Yet Hitler also shared Chamberlain’s Wagnerian hope of redemption.”²² Hitler capitalized on a narrative already put forth and popularized by racists like Gobineau and Chamberlain—combining the pessimism of Gobineau and the vision of a ‘bright’ Aryan future by ideologues like Chamberlain, both of whom cited Rome ‘proof’ of their universalizing assertions on the importance of racial harmony within civilizations.

Similar to Hitler and Alfred Rosenberg, American neo-Nazis certainly echo elements of both Gobineau’s and Chamberlain’s ideology around race and the decline of Rome, specifically around miscegenation. However, they often specifically cite the works of Oswald Spengler. Spengler’s vocabulary of the ‘Faustian spirit of the West’ dominates the neo-Nazi sphere, shifting the focus from the specifically Pan-German *Völkish* ideology of ideologues like Chamberlain to one that can be more easily manipulated to fit the interests of contemporary American neo-Nazis.

²⁰ Biddiss, “History as Destiny,” 87.

²¹ Chapoutot, “From Humanism to Nazism,” 3.

²² Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, 74.

This is surprising due to the fact that Spengler, whose work *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (“The Decline of the West/Occident”) was published in Germany during 1918 when the German armies were near defeat.²³ By 1926, sales of the *Untergang* reached 100,000 copies, and Spengler went from an unknown high school teacher to a well-known figure, both in Germany and abroad.²⁴ His historiography portrays history, not as a linear process like in the *Essai* or *Grundlagen*, instead as repeated loops, signified in part within a metaphor of ‘seasons’ of civilization, that all ‘great’ civilizations experience.²⁵ Although he conceived history as a cyclical process, his ideology concerning civilizations, including Rome, mirrors Gobineau’s work more than Chamberlain’s, as he embraces a paradoxical mix of cultural pessimism about inevitable decline. He claims to reject a purely scientific racist view and relies on a mythic spirit to define race. Herman sums up this idea throughout the *Untergang*, describing how “[a]s Spengler puts it, ‘races do not migrate, men migrate.’ Instead, race for Spengler is a matter of feeling, through ‘the greater or lesser communicability of intuition, sensations, and thoughts from one to another’ in words, symbols, and artifacts. That communication inevitably forms ‘a common world-feeling,’ which links the race’s successive generations together into one whole.”²⁶ For Spengler, living in a society, what he defines as ‘Culture,’ that invades and subjugates others, *creates* in a ‘spiritual’ sense, a race; a tempting notion for neo-Nazis, considering the historically flexible concept of whiteness in America.²⁷

However, this doesn’t fully encapsulate the extent to which Spengler relied upon both this mystical link of a collective spirit of a race, which Chamberlain also described, as well as scientific racism. “But,” as he writes in the *Untergang*, “further, we shall never understand a man’s higher history if we ignore the fact that man, as a derivative of a blood-unit and as a member of an understanding-unit, has

²³ Northrop Frye, “The Decline of the West by Oswald Spengler,” *Daedalus* 103, no. 1 (1973): 1-13, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20024181>, 1.

²⁴ John Farrenkopf, “The Transformation of Spengler’s Philosophy of World History,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 52, no. 3 (Jul 01, 1991): 463-485. doi:10.2307/2710047, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2710047>, 466; Biddis, “History as Destiny,” 88.

²⁵ Biddiss, “History as Destiny,” 89-90.

²⁶ Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, 238.

²⁷ See, among other sources: Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*, (New York: Viking, 2016) as one account of the American creation and history of ‘whiteness.’

different Destinies...”²⁸ He separates these ‘blood-units’ and ‘understanding-units’ into ‘Faustian,’ ‘Apollonian,’ and ‘Magian’ or ‘Oriental,’ which are mirrored by their respective cultures (Western, Classical, and Arabic).²⁹ Within the discussions of these cultures he defines the ‘decline’ of Rome’s population as one example of his larger theory of “race-suicide,” which he characterizes as when the “best and oldest” “stock” becomes extinct;³⁰ this conception clearly calls upon the larger history of scientific racism.

Spengler compares his characterization of ‘Classical Culture,’ mainly of ancient Rome, to the ‘Faustian’ one of modern Europe and America, in order to ‘prove’ that they will inevitably meet the same end due to imperialism and ‘race-suicide.’ He writes: “Imperialism is so necessary a product of any Civilization that when a people refuses to assume the role of master, it is seized and pushed onto it. The Roman Empire was not conquered—the ‘*orbis terrarum*’ condensed itself into that form and forced the Romans to give it their name. It is all very Classical.”³¹ Drawing in his choice of vocabulary upon the influential German folktale of Faust (a man who sells his soul to the devil for power), Spengler characterizes the ‘Faustian’ spirit as longing for the conquest of space. As Julia Hell describes in *The Conquest of Ruins: The Third Reich and the Fall of Rome*, the Faustian spirit for Spengler dreams of “distant shores, and remote futures, experiencing the world historically by looking back at ‘the distant past.’”³² He puts forth a view in which ‘the West’ has an inherently imperialist and colonialist spirit—defined by a longing for ‘infinite extension’ and mastery over space.³³ This is different from the tone he takes towards Roman (and Greek for that matter) antiquity, in which imperialism is not due to

²⁸ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, translated by Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1989), 114.

²⁹ Julia Hell, "Empires, Ruins, and the Conservative Critique of Modernity: Friedrich Ratzel and Oswald Spengler," in *The Conquest of Ruins: The Third Reich and the Fall of Rome*, 278-306 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), <https://chicago.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.7208/chicago/9780226588223.001.0001/upso-9780226588056-chapter-017>, 289.

³⁰ Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 106. See also: Biddis, “History as Destiny,” 93.

³¹ Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 422.

³² Hell, "Empires, Ruins, and the Conservative Critique of Modernity," 290.

³³ Hell, "Empires, Ruins, and the Conservative Critique of Modernity," 289-290.

their spirit, but to historical circumstances that act upon them. The 'Faustian spirit' is distinct from other spirits of civilization who do not have the same longing, but who are forced into expansion because, in Spengler's view, that is the natural course of history for cultures. But, 'Faustian' or 'Western' culture, for Spengler, only began with the Germanic invasions of Rome, which is quite different from neo-Nazis' use of his terms.³⁴

Neo-Nazis' and white supremacists' inarticulate and inaccurate characterization of writers influential to the development of their ideology is reflected in the article "Faustian Rome: The Indo-European Nature of the Roman Republic, Part 1," published on the website the Occidental Observer, which has been documented by the Anti-Defamation League and the progressive classicist group Pharos as white supremacist and anti-Semitic.³⁵ Chad Crowley writes in his article "Faustian Rome" that "the fall of Rome coincides with its abandonment of its Faustian Indo-European patrimony," citing the "demographic shift" of the Roman Empire "after the second century A.D."³⁶ This is simply incongruent with the vocabulary of Spengler's that Crowley is drawing upon; Spengler initially used the language of the German story of Faust to define the 'Faustian spirit' of 'Western civilization' in parallel to, but distinct from, 'Classical civilization.' However, the article continues, universalizing the 'degeneration' of Rome similarly to Gobineau and Chamberlain, that peoples' proximity due to conquest leads to the 'degeneration' of, the implied 'Aryan,' race. "Regardless of the sociohistorical context," Crowley writes,

³⁴ Hell, "Empires, Ruins, and the Conservative Critique of Modernity," 286.

³⁵ Anti-Defamation League, "The Occidental Observer: Online Anti-Semitism's New Voice," December 14, 2012, <https://www.adl.org/news/article/the-occidental-observer-online-anti-semitisms-new-voice>; Pharos, "Introduction to Pharos," Accessed August 26, 2021. <https://pharos.vassarspaces.net>. For Pharos's previous documentations of the Occidental Observer's appropriations of Greco-Roman antiquity, see: Pharos, "Election Defeat Prompts Comparisons to Roman Emperors by White Supremacists," December 2, 2020, <https://pharos.vassarspaces.net/2020/12/02/trump-election-defeat-comparison-roman-emperors/>; Pharos, "Not just Sparta: White Supremacist Admiration of Athens," November 8, 2016, <https://pharos.vassarspaces.net/2019/11/08/not-just-sparta-white-supremacist-admiration-of-athens/>; Pharos, "White Supremacist Takes Inspiration from Ancient Eugenics," March 8, 2019, <https://pharos.vassarspaces.net/2019/03/08/white-supremacist-takes-inspiration-from-ancient-eugenics/>.

³⁶ Chad Crowley, "Faustian Rome: The Indo-European Nature of the Roman Republic, Part 1," Occidental Observer, January 19, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210815164138/https://www.theoccidentalobserver.net/2018/01/19/faustian-rome-the-indo-european-nature-of-the-roman-republic/>.

“population proximity engrains a people with familiarity, which in turn encourages racial miscegenation, which leads to racio-cultural hybridization, and ultimately racial degeneration.”³⁷ Crowley is by no means alone in how elements of his ideology have notable similarities to the works of Gobineau, Chamberlain, and Spengler. On June 28th, 2020, the neo-Nazi website National Vanguard published an article by Matt Koehl entitled “The Revolutionary Nature of National Socialism.” Koehl writes:

When Oswald Spengler spoke of the “decline of the West,” he was describing an awesome historical process which today has reached its final stages...*Not since the declining days of Rome* has the Earth been witness to a similar phenomenon...*As long as Aryan man exists, he will bear within him the Promethean spark, which cataclysmic tragedy can only serve to fan into a bright new flame of creative expression*...Perhaps nowhere is the general disintegration of Western civilization more apparent than in North America, where the special problem of unformed nationhood presents itself. Whereas in Europe the respective state configurations have, for the most part, tended – at least until quite recently – to conform to distinct ethnic types, *in America there exists no true Volk*.³⁸

Crafting a universal, cyclical, and moral tale of history, Koehl blends elements found in Gobineau’s, Chamberlain’s, and Spengler’s writing. The idea of ‘Aryans’ bearing the spark of creativity can be seen in Gobineau’s, Chamberlain’s, and Hitler’s writings. However, Koehl applies (what has been called) Chamberlain’s or Hitler’s more ‘optimistic’ outlook to Gobineau’s racial ‘pessimism’ and Spengler’s similarly pessimistic, cyclical conception of history. But he also stumbles into implicitly revealing the reason American neo-Nazis flock to Spengler and, in a larger sense, Rome’s decline: they are narratives more easily manipulated to serve the purposes of American neo-Nazis who have no ‘true Volk’ to harken back to within their conception of mytho-history. Instead, American neo-Nazi websites seem to rely on a presumption that ‘Aryan’ and the American conception of ‘whiteness’ are equivalent, placing racists like Gobineau’s and Chamberlain’s specific European contexts and outlooks conveniently to the side. Calling upon the same vision of a line of ‘great’ civilizations, they insert America (after Germany and Britain) as the cultural and ideological heir to Rome. “We have become used to living under *pax Americana*,” A

³⁷ Crowley, “Faustian Rome.”

³⁸ Matt Koehl, “The Revolutionary Nature of National Socialism,” National Vanguard, June 28, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210815173740/https://nationalvanguard.org/2020/06/the-revolutionary-nature-of-national-socialism/>. Emphasis my own.

person with the screenname AltAtlantic posted on Radix Journal, run by well-known neo-Nazi Richard Spencer, and that “[t]here was a *pax Britannica* preceding the American order.”³⁹ This explicitly appeals to the belief of a *pax Romana*, a time of relative peace and prosperity beginning under the Emperor Augustus Caesar from 27 B.C.E. to 180 C.E.⁴⁰ The crucial, and often overlooked, question here is: an era of peace for whom? In this approximately 200 year era, the Roman Empire would stretch to its largest extent. To do this, the Roman Empire waged various wars, set up client states and provinces, and razed the cities of those who resisted or revolted. One such case that neo-Nazis revel in citing is the utter razing of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. So, one need only look at the Table of Contents in volume XI of *The Cambridge Ancient History* to see that this was not a time of peace for all those considered within Rome’s Empire, rather it was a time of particular prosperity for the male Roman elite.⁴¹ Similarly, the idea of a *pax Britannica* or a current *pax Americana* has no historical basis when one decenters the experiences of British or American white men. Nonetheless, neo-Nazis’ invocations of historiographies that center and universalize the experiences of elite men under empires lends itself an air of historical credibility in a society in which this logical leap is accepted by the influential and powerful. The credibility does not rely on any legitimate historical basis for invoking the ‘degeneration’ of Rome as its society’s parallel; it only needs the universalization of and identification with the experiences of those whose power would decline at the fragmentation of empire.

The ‘degeneration’ and ‘decline’ of Rome, then, constitutes a rhetorical appropriation, not an attempt at historical synthesis. This posturing of supposed historical ‘evidence’ of the ‘decline of Rome’

³⁹ Alt Atlantic, "Empire Or Nationalism," Radix Journal, May 27, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210815165804/https://radixjournal.com/2020/05/empire-or-nationalism/>.

⁴⁰ Ali Parchami, *Hegemonic Peace and Empire: The Pax Romana, Britannica, and Americana*, War, History, and Politics, (London: Routledge, 2009), 20-42; Editors of the Encyclopedia Britannica, "Pax Romana," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 4, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Pax-Romana>.

⁴¹ Alan K. Bowman, John B. Bury, and Averil Cameron, *The Cambridge Ancient History*, 2nd ed. Vol. 11, "The High Empire A.D. 70-192," (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), v-x; Ali Parchami, *Hegemonic Peace and Empire: The Pax Romana, Britannica, and Americana*, War, History, and Politics, (London: Routledge, 2009), 43.

to support racist conclusions have been a hallmark of various influential racists and is not a new phenomena. Looking at various historiographies by authors from various contexts that all utilize some version of a ‘degenerate Rome,’ reveals a common belief: that ancient Rome rightfully occupies a special place within historiographies due to its relevance with contemporary societies. These neo-Nazis are utilizing the cultural reverence for the history of ancient Rome to support racist and genocidal conclusions, something that merely pointing out historical inaccuracies in their appropriations of Roman antiquity will not adequately address. The inadequacy of this approach has been pointed out by Princeton Classics Professor Dan-el Padilla Peralta. In a *New York Times* article by Rachel Poser about Peralta, Poser writes:

Padilla argues that exposing untruths about antiquity, while important, is not enough: Explaining that an almighty, lily-white Roman Empire never existed will not stop white nationalists from pining for its return. The job of classicists is not to ‘point out the howlers,’ he said on a 2017 panel. ‘To simply take the position of the teacher, the qualified classicist who knows things and can point to these mistakes, is not sufficient.’ Dismantling structures of power that have been shored up by the classical tradition will require more than fact-checking; it will require writing an entirely new story about antiquity, and about who we are today.⁴²

The depiction of Rome and Greece as progenitors of ‘Western,’ and particularly American, civilization, stretches from influential racists like Gobineau who traced the ‘genealogy’ of civilizations founded by Aryans to the popular *Percy Jackson* novels.⁴³ This allows the moral ‘lesson’ attached to the ‘decline’ of Rome to hold cultural and political relevance for more Americans than just self-avowed neo-Nazis. Therefore, as Poser noted, the deconstruction of this myth necessitates not only conceiving of the ancient

⁴² Rachel Poser, "He Wants to Save Classics from Whiteness. Can the Field Survive?," *New York Times*, February 2, 2021, updated April 25, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/02/magazine/classics-greece-rome-whiteness.html>.

⁴³ For discussion of how the ideology within the *Percy Jackson* novels’ world-building upholds white supremacy, see: Paule, Maxwell T. "The Whitening Thief: Latent White Supremacy in *Percy Jackson*." January 22, 2020. <https://eidolon.pub/the-whitening-thief-1f5f70e74cac>. Considering the context already given by this paper, the reliance upon white supremacist ideas can be seen even just within Paule’s quotation directly from pages 72-3 of *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*: “The gods move with the heart of the West. ... What you call ‘Western civilization’ ... is a living force. A collective consciousness that has burned bright for thousands of years... The fire started in Greece. Then, as you well know, the heart of the fire moved to Rome, and so did the gods. ... [They] moved to Germany, to France, to Spain, for a while. Wherever the flame was brightest, the gods were there. They spent several centuries in England. ... And yes, Percy, of course they are now in your United States. ... America is now the heart of the flame.”

world in a new way, but also, for Americans, a new history of America, which explores the true relevance of ancient Rome to America. Additionally, those who invoke the ‘decline’ of Rome—who are not limited to conservatives, right-wingers, and neo-fascists—must reckon with the ways it has lent unearned credibility to violent, racist, and anti-Semitic ideologies. Understanding this, perhaps, may lead to a larger reckoning among largely educated, white Americans of the centrality of Rome in American rhetorical allusions and just how deeply that is tied to assumptions about the superiority of and identification with empire and structures of white supremacy.

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I have adhered to the Honor Code on this assignment-Elliot Diaz, updated 10/5/21