It is not mere irony, let alone pessimism, that motivates the European Review of History / Revue d'histoire européenne to devote this anniversary conference to the theme of “decline”. It is a theme that looks both highly topical, and one that lends itself naturally to being explored in diverse historical perspectives.

Barely two decades after the process of European integration entered its advanced stage with the Treaty of Maastricht, and at a time when the process of EU enlargement is still moving ahead, the voice of sceptics is stronger than ever. The countries of the European Union, individually and as a collectivity, are seen to be undergoing a structural crisis of political institutions, economic and social relations, cultural and moral values. The continent is struggling with a complex web of strongly interrelated challenges, not triggered but amplified by the recent global economic crisis, ranging from the pressures of immigration and inequality, through the fluctuation of markets and the ailing condition of the shared currency, to the broken confidence in institutions and politicians, and beyond. A pan-European trend of anti-integration movements is emerging ever more robustly, while mainstream political leaders, including ones of the new accession countries, speak of the ultimate Spenglerian Untergang des Abendlandes, when European nations need to seek their separate paths and relationships in finding their place in a new global order.

Neither the experience of structural tensions, nor the atmosphere of gloom generated by those tensions, is unprecedented in European history. Cultural-intellectual responses to decline were central to the thought of ancient Greek philosophers and historians, whose legacy was a critical impact on certain strands of medieval and early modern thought. Roman moralists and Christian church fathers lamented the corruptions that exposed Roman civilization to the blows of barbarian vigour – a theme keenly embraced a millennium and a half later by Edward Gibbon in the work whose title is echoed in our conference call, at a time when the overall enthusiasm about progress inevitably fed an interest in its counterpart, decline, as well. In the intervening centuries, the vision of impending apocalypse was kept vivid, in the Middle Ages by the combined impact of baronial feuds, famines and epidemics, and in the early-modern period by that of endemic, large scale religious, civil and international warfare. In modern and contemporary times, self-styled apostles of progress, from Jacobins through Bolsheviks to National Socialists, presumed to be saving European civilization from decline, only to throw – and to be seen throwing – it into the hitherto unseen and incomprehensible, barbarous abysses of revolutionary terror, world wars and the Holocaust.
Such an abyss is hopefully far from being a real threat today, while the sense of living in a fragmented and uncertain world, and the loss of self-confidence on the part of Europeans as Europeans, which the phenomena synoptically listed above denote, is undoubtedly present. “Absolute” decline – whether of demographic trends, the gross national product, or habits of religious devotion, to mention but a few areas - should not be mistaken for “relative” decline or mere retardation (a slowdown of growth in the first two cases, and a shift in denominational balance in the third one). Nonetheless, the perception of the latter could be as alarming, and as likely to be caught up in alarmist discourses and representations as the former. It must be added, however, that today, as in the past, “decline” and its companion terms that define a whole conceptual area – such as “crisis”, for example - have not necessarily been invested with negative connotations. The decline of e.g. the Habsburg, Ottoman or Soviet empires was viewed with optimism (at any rate by outsiders), and their fall, celebrated; the “crisis of the seventeenth century” diagnosed by modern historians has been understood by them as a catalyst for accelerated progress; etc.

We have in mind a conference that historicizes the current experience and discussion of “decline” in each of these senses. While there is scope for addressing “real” processes in the economic, social and political realm, we are more interested in the conditions under which the perception of “decline”, “crisis”, “decay”, “disintegration” etc. has tended to become prominent in public discourse; more generally, in the ways in which such perceptions have shaped mentalities and cultural-intellectual responses of Europeans over the past three millennia.

Keynote speakers will include:

Ian Wood (University of Leeds), on “The Decline and Fall of Rome since before Gibbon”

Mary Gluck (Brown University), on “The Discourse of Decadence as Historical Metaphor and Cultural Criticism in the European Fin deSiècle”

Jürgen Kocka (Freie Universität, Berlin / Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung), on “Rise and Decline in the History of Capitalism and its Critique”

Please submit proposals for 20 minute papers by 30 September 2012 to ERHDeclinesandFalls@ceu.hu

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