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By the time the British historian Arnold J. Toynbee died in 1975, he was world famous. His multivolume magnum opus, *A Study of History* (which began appearing in the mid-1930s), had secured his place as an intellectual celebrity—part sage, part scholar. Purporting to demonstrate how civilizations begin, develop, and, inevitably, disintegrate, *A Study of History* is a curious mixture of recondite learning and moral admonition. Bold, lofty, adventurous, it is an immensely ambitious book. It is also, in many respects, an immensely silly one. In this it resembles its author. For Toynbee, history had the structure of a Greek tragedy. It was the story of Hubris ineluctably calling forth “*ate*”—infatuation, blindness, delusion—which was followed in turn by Nemesis and ruination. This story has a certain poetic appeal. What it has to do with real history is another matter.

Toynbee epitomized a certain type of modern anti-secular, left-wing intellectual. The product of an elite English education—Winchester and Oxford—he harbored a special loathing for the social and political institutions of the West. In the 1950s he assured his readers that “Western imperialism, not Russian Communism, is Enemy no. 1 for the majority of the human race.” A decade later he observed that “Madison Avenue is more of a danger to the West than Communism.” If Toynbee was at various points in his career well-disposed to Communism, he felt no compunction about ignoring its fundamental hostility to religion. Whatever Toynbee’s personal ambivalence to religion, *A Study in History* sits in a veritable aspic of religious sentimentality. Indeed, that glaze of religiosity doubtless helps explain the book’s extraordinary popularity. Toynbee caters to all those who like their spirituality plush but indeterminate, ubiquitous but without the inconvenience of specific beliefs. For Toynbee, Nirvana and the beatific vision describe more or less the same thing; in his view, “every higher religion” aspires to the misty vagueness of “the universal church.”

Toynbee’s syncretism only went so far, however. His defenders deny he was anti-Semitic. But as Elie Kedourie pointed out, Toynbee did not hesitate to describe the Jews as a “fossil” civilization or, in 1948, to equate the Palestinian Jews, battling to establish the state of Israel, with the Nazis. When he finally got around to reconsidering his position on Judaism, it was in the context of celebrating the idea of world government and insisting that the Jews lead the way in demonstrating
to mankind the folly of capitalism, nationalism, and territorial attachment. (Perhaps it was to encourage such leadership that, when Egypt and Syria attacked Israel in 1973, Toynbee wrote the Syrian minister of defense to convey his “heartfelt wishes for an Arab victory.”)

We air these reservations to provide a context for the praise we feel is due, not to Toynbee’s work, exactly, but to the use made of it recently by the social commentator Charles Murray. In “Prole Models,” a remarkable op-ed piece for The Wall Street Journal that appeared on February 6, Mr. Murray drew on some of Toynbee’s thoughts about how civilizations disintegrate to reflect on the situation in the United States circa 2001. Toynbee was never happy unless he was dealing with a pattern he believed fit two or three millennia. That is part of what gives his writing such sweep. It is also one reason to take his prognostications with a grain of salt: a history that finds the same plot recapitulated in ancient China, classical Greece, the Roman Empire, and modern Europe and America is a story in need of nuance, qualification, and correction.

Nevertheless, whatever hesitations we may have about Toynbee’s theory writ large, there can be no doubt that he had many perceptive and illuminating things to say about some of the forces operating in our civilization. Mr. Murray’s reflections have to do in particular with Toynbee’s observations, in a section called the “Schism in the Soul,” about how the dominant elite in a society succumbs to “vulgarity and barbarism in manners” by “merging itself in its own proletariats.” Toynbee distinguished between “internal proletariats”—what we might call the underclass—and “external proletariats,” by which he meant culturally less sophisticated military rivals.

It is a curious process. When a society is robust and self-confident, Toynbee suggested, the influence travels largely from the elites to the proletariats. The proletariats are “softened” (in Toynbee’s phrase) by their imitation of the manners and morals of a dominant elite. But when a society begins to falter, the imitation proceeds largely in the opposite direction: the dominant elite is coarsened by its imitation of proletarian manners: Toynbee spoke in this context of a growing “sense of drift,” “truancy,” “promiscuity,” and general “vulgarization” of manners, morals, and the arts. The elites, instead of holding fast to their own standards, suddenly begin to “go native” and adopt the dress, attitudes, and behavior of the lower classes. As Mr. Murray notes, “That sounds very much like what has been happening in the U.S.”

Truancy and promiscuity, in Toynbee’s sense, are not new in America. But until a few decades ago they were publicly despised and largely confined to the bottom layer of Toynbee’s proletariat—the group we used to call “low-class” or “trash,” and which we now call the underclass. Today, those behaviors have been transmuted into a code that the elites sometimes imitate, sometimes placate, and fear to challenge. Meanwhile, they no longer have a code of their own in which they have confidence.

As for examples, they are not far to seek. Consider the acceptance, in what used to be called “polite society,” of obscene language. It is not just that four-letter words are now an accepted fixture in conversation; they are also increasingly accepted in mainstream publications, radio
shows, and television programs. That change of standards about what is and what isn’t appropriate in linguistic manners is more than a fashion statement: it is a token of spiritual disintegration. And it is, as Mr. Murray notes, hardly an isolated symptom. The litany is as familiar as it is depressing.

The hooker look in fashion, tattoos, and body piercing is the obvious evidence [we might also mention the recent phenomenon of “heroin chic”], although Toynbee would probably see as much significance in wearing jeans to church. I find the intriguing element here to be the respectfulness extended toward underclass appearance. No one in the public eye calls any kind of dress “cheap” or “sleazy” any more.

Sexual behavior? As late as 1960, sleeping with one’s boyfriend was still a lower-class thing to do. Except in a few sophisticated circles, a woman of the elites did it furtively, and usually with the person she expected to marry. Behavior that is now considered absolutely normal was considered sluttish in 1960.

Family? The divorce rate in 1960 was only a notch higher than it had been in the first recorded figures from 1920. It happened among members of the dominant minority, but rarely and with extreme reluctance. As for living together without being married and having babies without marrying the father, language alone conveys their change in status over the years. People used to shack up; now they cohabit. The woman used to have a bastard, then an illegitimate child; now she has a nonmarital birth.

Language, appearance, sex, and family: Each of the signs by which we used to recognize a member of the underclass fails today. But the proletarianization of the dominant minority has broader implications than changes in social norms. What we are witnessing is the aftermath of a collapse of the code of the elites, creating a vacuum in which underclass behavior takes on the elements of a code.

Of course, as Mr. Murray hastens to add, the process of proletarianization is not monolithic. There are plenty of exceptions, challenges, reversals, and reconsiderations of the development that Toynbee described. But there is an important sense in which such qualifications are beside the point. What we are talking about is the drift, the tendency of our culture. And that is to be measured not so much by what we permit or forbid as by what we unthinkingly accept as normal. “If the question is whether America’s elites are being proletarianized,” Mr. Murray observes,

the answer is found by identifying the things that are no longer taken for granted. It may be a positive sign that important voices have again begun to talk about virtue, but the salient fact is that they must start by defending the proposition that virtue and vice are valid concepts. Important voices are talking about the coarsening of American life, but the salient fact is that they can no longer appeal to a common understanding of vulgarity and a common contempt for the vulgar. In these senses, the elites have already been proletarianized, and only remnants protest.
In the end, what we are talking about is the fate of a way of life that is also a way of looking at the world. The memory still lingers for which “virtue” and “vice” are not abstractions but living realities, for which mannerly behavior in speech and action is a token of self-respect as well as respect for others, for which terms like “honor” and “justice,” “manliness” and “womanliness,” “duty” and “respectability” can be used without irony or scare quotes. There are still individuals and institutions in our culture for which high standards of behavior and accomplishment enjoy the presumption of deference. The question is whether such individuals and institutions are social dinosaurs, awaiting the calamity that will seal their extinction, or whether they are harbingers of galvanizing new energies. Like Mr. Murray, we are saddened by much that we see happening in our culture. And we agree with his concluding observation that “Bill Clinton’s presidency, in both its conduct and in the reactions to that conduct, was a paradigmatic example of elites that have been infected by ‘the sickness of proletarianization.’” But no one—not Mr. Murray, not Arnold Toynbee—knows enough to plot the course of history. The swamp through which we trudge today may give way to darker, more mephitic ponds. It may lead on to golden pastures. The only thing foreordained is that no conclusion is certain. Which is to say that our loss is measured chiefly by our acquiescence. Today’s “remnants” may well be tomorrow’s vanguard.