

Book Reviews

Suicide of a Superpower

Patrick J. Buchanan

New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011. 488 pages.

Both a book of lamentation about the presumably collapsing American way of life and a populist right-wing anti-establishment agenda of ethno-nationalist xenophobia, euphemistically referred to as “ethno-pluralism,” author Patrick Buchanan presents an alarmist message of doom and gloom about the fate of his country. He adopts this “master frame,” which allows him and the current he represents to mobilize anti-immigrant sentiments as well as political protest in ways that limit vulnerabilities to accusations of racism or of being antidemocratic (Rydgren 2004).¹

Buchanan starts his book by asserting that this generation of Americans is witnessing “one of the most stunning declines of a great power in the history of the world” (p. 10). His thesis is that “America is disintegrating” and that the “centrifugal forces pulling [it] apart are growing inexorably. What once united us is dissolving. And this is true of Western *civilization*” (p. 7; my emphasis). The explanation he offers for this is framed within the context of the United States losing its Christian character, implying that non-Christians do not belong there; the breakdown of society’s moral, cultural, and social fabric, read as opposition to multiculturalism as well as to liberal values and policies; and the dying of the people who created this nation, which is now being overwhelmed by a rapidly increasing flow of immigrants and members of other races and ethnicities. Having rung the alarm, whether true or false, Buchanan proceeds in the following eleven chapters to make his case, addressing sensitive issues of religion, race and ethnicity, demography, multiculturalism, expansive government, values of equality, and foreign relations – all of which he has something to say about in what appears to be some kind of an ideological tract.

Buchanan’s passion is admirable, but sometimes seems to get in the way of his argument. He starts the first chapter by lamenting the “passing of a superpower” and putting much of the blame mainly at the feet of free trade and

globalization, among other factors (p. 12ff). He argues that every nation that rose to power has achieved this by protecting its industry and not through free trade – except for one: the Soviet Union did try to do this and it failed. He offers several explanations for the triumph of the United States and the West: (1) they were free, not only politically but economically and trade-wise as well; (2) much of Great Britain’s historical prosperity has been explained in terms of free trade protected by a powerful navy created for just that purpose; (3) the United States sought to maintain its hegemony through free trade and globalization, probably recognizing that such hegemony could no longer be sustained by military might. After all, if the United States adopts a protective policy and China decides to retaliate, it is unlikely that the former could force the latter to open its markets like it did with Japan in the mid-nineteenth century. The balance of relative power would no longer allow for this. It is not free trade and globalization that caused the United States’ decline, for after all both of these were its own baby, but the fact that other players learned how to beat it at its own game or, at least, could level the playing field. The country’s waning, therefore, may be the cause for difficult choices made and policies pursued rather than their effect. Buchanan here acts more like a sore loser than a perceptive observer.

But he does not stop there. Insinuating that ethnic communities (read “the barbarians”) threaten democracy, he points out that while free markets tend to concentrate a nation’s wealth among ethnic minorities, democracy gives power to impoverished ethnic majorities. This, according to him, “has proven a combustible and lethal cocktail” (p. 318). The implication is that power and wealth should remain in the hands of the same ethnic minority. As far as the United States is concerned, this means the whites who must be and have both. Buchanan here is not necessarily criticizing democracy, but rather saying that it should remain a white ethnic monopoly, while espousing the separation of races rather than multiculturalism. Through such separation, non-Europeans would have no access to the system’s democratic privileges and would be left to their own devices. In essence, he is suggesting that what the United States inflicts on many less-developed countries in the international system should be replicated domestically.

Buchanan laments the loss of religious values; however, part of such values requires one to recognize that the inevitable rise and fall of nations is a matter of the Divine Will. The United States is no exception to this. It is a nation that came into existence by destroying an entire continent with tens of millions of indigenous inhabitants, has seen its heyday of grandeur – perhaps still does – and will eventually decline, inevitably so. One may surmise about

the causes and reasons, as Buchanan has done, and try to reverse them, but rarely does this happen. It also neither changes the course of events nor stymies the inexorable. Whether accepted with grace or with dismay, treading the same path is ordained. Where the sun rises, it is fated to set.

Endnote

1. Jens Rydgren, "Explaining the emergence of radical right-wing populist parties: the case of Denmark," May 1, 2004. www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-119572924.html.

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