

# THE END OF THE AMERICAN ERA: EMERGENCY OR OPPORTUNITY?

*This article takes recent arguments that the US Empire is in decline, and asks whether this framing of current events is helpful, or even makes sense. It argues that the better way to view the age that we live in is one of the changing of the world order—and that with this transformation comes an opportunity to fix problems that have persisted for too long.*

Teoman Kenn Küçük\*



\* Teoman Kenn Küçük is a PhD candidate at the University of Naples Federico II.

**T**he stakes of a presidential election, whatever country it may be in, are always high; but it seems that with the recent US presidential elections, things were a lot more serious than usual. “It’s curtains for the Pax Americana if Trump remains on stage” argued Kim Ghattas, adding that “if Mr. Trump gets re-elected, it will be the end of the [US]-led global order as we know it.”<sup>1</sup> Thomas Engelhardt wrote that Trump had “turned the ‘people’s house’ into a micro-Green Zone in a Washington that, as it filled with National Guard troops and unidentified but militarized police types, was transformed into a Trumpian version of occupied Baghdad,” and that as a result “marked by disease, endless wars, and a dying planet, the American empire is finally reaching its decline.”<sup>2</sup> Adam Gopnik went even further, comparing the election to the American Civil War and painting it as a battle for the “survival of liberal democracy” between the “demonic” Trump and the “merely, unspectacularly good” Biden.<sup>3</sup>

While there are many reasons to take this presidential election seriously, one unifying factor in these and other such proclamations seems to be that there was something *more* than just American issues at stake. This election, in other words, decided not only the fate of America, but instead the American Empire, and with it the entire world. The fact that Biden seems to be the victor as of writing<sup>4</sup> should relieve those who compared Trump to the psychotic Roman emperor Caligula<sup>5</sup> and foretold the fall of the world order if he had a second term.

Others, however, will be less jubilant, as Biden is no clear salve to these imperial ills. David Klion brings back the refrain of “Trump is a symptom” to argue that the US empire was already in decline, and Trump is merely proof.<sup>6</sup> Authors Alfred McCoy and Thomas J. Wright each predict the downfall of the US empire in the coming decades, citing the rise of China and the inadequate competition put up by

<sup>1</sup> Kim Ghattas, “It’s Curtains for the Pax Americana If Donald Trump Stays on the World Stage,” *The Globe and Mail*, 26 October 2020, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-kim-ghattas-says-its-curtains-for-the-pax-americana-if-donald-trump/>

<sup>2</sup> Tom Engelhardt, “The End of the American Century,” *The Nation*, 19 June 2020, <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/trump-empire-decline/>

<sup>3</sup> Adam Gopnik, “What’s at Stake in the U.S. Election? The Survival of Liberal Democracy,” *The Globe and Mail*, 24 October 2020, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-whats-at-stake-in-the-us-election-the-survival-of-liberal/>

<sup>4</sup> “Biden Defeats Trump for White House, Says ‘Time to Heal,’” *AP NEWS*, 7 November 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-wins-white-house-ap-fd58df73aa677acb74fce2a69adb71f9>

<sup>5</sup> Mark Brown, “Donald Trump Has Fascinating Parallels’ with Caligula, Says Historian,” *Guardian*, 1 June 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jun/01/donald-trump-has-fascinating-parallels-with-caligula-says-historian>; Christopher Buckley, “Mr. President, Your Toga Is Showing,” *New York Times*, 12 January 2018 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/12/opinion/mr-president-your-toga-is-showing.html>; Nicholas Kristof, “There Once Was a Great Nation With an Unstable Leader,” *New York Times*, 26 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/26/opinion/sunday/caligula-roman-empire.html>

<sup>6</sup> David Klion, “The American Empire Is the Sick Man of the 21st Century,” *Foreign Policy* (blog), 2 April 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/02/the-american-empire-is-the-sick-man-of-the-21st-century/>

the American elite.<sup>7</sup> Others like Jeet Heer,<sup>8</sup> Ryan Cooper,<sup>9</sup> and Thomas McTague<sup>10</sup> point out that whatever the situation of US hard power, the Trump presidency has eroded international trust and thus the soft power the US so relies upon.

Though they bring out a variety of different reasons and arguments, these examples contain a common thesis: the US empire is in decline, and while some things will definitely make it worse, no one thing is guaranteed to fix it. In this common view is an interesting combination of anxiety and analysis—part worry over an impending chaos, and part cool-headed evaluation of what seems to be a natural end to a cycle. All that goes up must come down after all; but at the same time, whatever follows the American Century may be frightening and dangerous. This strange combination is the realm of *declinism*: the view that the world, or any part of it, is in terminal decline.<sup>11</sup> It combines the common wisdom of inevitable ends with a fear of change, and a call to action for the preservation of what is. What emerges is a curious mixture of fatalism and stubborn resilience.

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Curious as it may be—is it wrong? Is the US empire really approaching its deathbed, or is it actually doing fine?

Instead of answering this question head-on, however, we need to step back and understand something. Asking this question itself is buying into the narrative of declinism, that an empire is either declining, or it is not. Before doing so, it is better to ask ourselves: is this even the correct way to view the changes the world is facing? Does the idea of an empire “declining” even make any sense, beyond the dramatic ring it has to it?

<sup>7</sup> Murtaza Hussain, “The View From the End of the American Empire,” *The Intercept*, 24 September 2017, <https://theintercept.com/2017/09/24/decline-american-empire-donald-trump/>

<sup>8</sup> Jeet Heer, “Are We Witnessing the Fall of the American Empire?” *The New Republic*, 7 March 2018, <https://newrepublic.com/article/147319/witnessing-fall-american-empire>

<sup>9</sup> Ryan Cooper, “The American Empire Is Crumbling,” *The Week*, 29 December 2017, <https://theweek.com/articles/745597/american-empire-crumbling>

<sup>10</sup> Tom McTague, “The Decline of the American World,” *The Atlantic*, 24 June 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/06/america-image-power-trump/613228/>

<sup>11</sup> Jeremy Adelman, “Why the Idea That the World Is in Terminal Decline Is so Dangerous,” *Aeon*, 1 November 2017, <https://aeon.co/ideas/why-the-idea-that-the-world-is-in-terminal-decline-is-so-dangerous>

### *Rome Didn't Fall in a Day*

If we look for an example to perhaps the most famous empire in the West, Rome provides us no easy answers.<sup>12,13</sup> There are many instances where one could argue that the Roman polity declined without falling, and fell without declining, or did both but did not end. The transformation of Rome from kingdom to republic to empire is a series of falls that mirror the subsequent rises, and so contain no discernible decline of “Rome” as a whole. To be somewhat less pedantic, one can look to the Crisis of the Third Century<sup>14</sup> to see an instance where the Roman Empire as a contiguous polity did in fact fall—but was later revived by Emperor Aurelian, duly dubbed “Restitutor Orbis.”

Later the empire would be split in two, but whether this constitutes an end is also unclear, as it follows previous customs established under Diocletian’s reforms.<sup>15</sup> On the side of the Western Roman Empire, the traditional end is given by Edward Gibbon as the conquest of Rome and the dethroning of Romulus Augustulus by Odoacer;<sup>16</sup> except that Rome had not consistently been the administrative capital of the contiguous Roman empire for centuries, and the invading “barbarians” were by that point not alien forces, but often held posts in the administrative and military leadership of the Western Roman Empire,<sup>17</sup> thus blurring the between foreign conquests and internal power struggles. One such general, Stilicho,<sup>18</sup> had even held the post of regent under emperor Honorius, practically running the empire decades before Odoacer’s invasion.

Indeed, one could even argue, as they did do themselves, that Rome continued seamlessly with the Eastern Roman Empire.<sup>19</sup> Many former western provinces of the Roman Empire were even recaptured under the rule of Byzantine emperor Justinian I, though only temporarily. If this view is accepted, then Rome did not fall for another 1000 years after Odoacer took the city of Rome. Even after Constantinople was taken in 1453, the fact that the Ottoman Sultan added to his titles that of “Kayser-i Rum” or Caesar of Rome, and that Ottomans were long called the “Rumi” or Romans by states

<sup>12</sup> Mortimer Chambers, *The Fall of Rome: Can It Be Explained?* (European Problem Studies), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Holt, Rineheart and Winston, 1970).

<sup>13</sup> Richard Mansfield Haywood, *The Myth of Rome's Fall* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1959).

<sup>14</sup> “The Crisis of the Third Century,” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, [https://www.ancient.eu/Crisis\\_of\\_the\\_Third\\_Century/](https://www.ancient.eu/Crisis_of_the_Third_Century/).

<sup>15</sup> Richard Abdy, “Tetrarchy and the House of Constantine,” *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Coinage*, 10 February 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195305746.013.0032>

<sup>16</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Abridged edition (Phoenix, 2005), p. 716.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Erdkamp (ed.), *A Companion to the Roman Army*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World (Malden, Mass. u.a: Wiley-Blackwell, Blackwell Publishing, Wiley, John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996577>

<sup>18</sup> “Flavius Stilicho | Roman General,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Flavius-Stilicho>

<sup>19</sup> M. Whitby, “The Rome That Did Not Fall: The Survival of the East in the Fifth Century,” *The Classical Review*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (1999), pp. 498–500, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cr/49.2.498>

to the east,<sup>20</sup> adds them to the list of empires claiming the title of the “third Rome.”

### *The Sick Man with Healthy Children*

The Ottomans themselves are a case study in the perils of decline narratives. Accompanying most histories of the “rise of the West” from the 17th century onwards is that of the decline of its rivals, chief of which was the Ottoman empire.<sup>21</sup> The treaty of Karlowitz in 1699, the first instance where the Ottoman sultans signed a treaty surrendering significant land losses to European powers, is taken as a turning point from where starts the empire’s terminal decline as the proverbial “sick man of Europe.” Even if we overlook that the empire lasted for over 200 years after this, the Ottomans still won wars against Europeans in the ensuing years,<sup>22</sup> held onto most of their vast realm for the majority of those two centuries, and remained a major power crucial to the Concert of Europe until the 20th century.<sup>23</sup>

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“*Is the US empire really approaching its deathbed, or is it actually doing fine?*”

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Curiously enough, declinism of the Ottoman Empire was not limited to outside observers but constituted almost a literary tradition in the empire itself since the end of Suleiman the Magnificent’s reign, often considered the peak of the empire. While historians and officials bemoaned the decline of Ottoman institutions and culture from as early as the late 16th century,<sup>24</sup> movements like the Kadizadelis<sup>25</sup> and the Patrona Halil Revolt<sup>26</sup> attempted to take matters into their own hands and revert what they saw as harmful innovations. These movements were not merely short-sighted,

<sup>20</sup> Cemal Kafadar, *Kendine Ait Bir Roma - Diyar-i Rum'da Kültürel Coğrafya ve Kimlik Üzerine* (İstanbul: Metis Yayınları, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> Bernard Lewis, “Some Reflections on the Decline of the Ottoman Empire,” *Studia Islamica*, No. 9 (1958), pp. 111–27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1594978>

<sup>22</sup> Virginia Aksan, “Breaking the Spell of the Baron de Tott: Reframing the Question of Military Reform in the Ottoman Empire, 1760–1830,” *The International History Review*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2002), pp. 253–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2002.9640964>

<sup>23</sup> A. Nuri Yurdusev, “The Ottoman Attitude toward Diplomacy,” in A. Nuri Yurdusev (ed.), *Ottoman Diplomacy: Conventional or Unconventional?* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230554436>

<sup>24</sup> Ethan L. Menchinger, “Intellectual Creativity in a Time of Turmoil and Transition,” in Armando Salvatore (ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell History of Islam*, 1st ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018).

<sup>25</sup> Khaled El-Rouayheb, “17. Yüzyılda Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda 'Bağnazlığın Zaferi' Efsanesi [The Myth of 'The Triumph of Fanaticism' in the Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Empire],” *Mizanü'l-Hak: İslami İlimler Dergisi*, No. 9, 31 December 2019, pp. 293–315.

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Tuck, “‘All Innovation Leads to Hellfire’: Military Reform and the Ottoman Empire in the Eighteenth Century,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* Vol. 31, No. 3 (2008), pp. 467–502, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390802024734>

of course, but competed with reformists in order to maintain a competitive edge vis-à-vis the growing power of the West.

It is clear that they eventually failed in this task, however, as the 19th century saw the fast fragmentation of the Ottoman Empire's western provinces, and the 20th century saw its defeat and later abolition. Still, it is good to remember that although it held a sophisticated imperial state bureaucracy, the Ottoman Empire had never been fully centralized even in its classical period. It was instead made up of diverse groups all bound to the throne, or Sublime Porte, in varying ways.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, one of the central institutions tying together the Christian populations of the Ottoman Empire's European provinces was the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which had been absorbed into the imperial state after the conquest of the Byzantines. Historian İlber Ortaylı even goes as far as writing that the history of Ottoman dissolution in the 19th century can be summarized as the fall of the Patriarchate.<sup>28</sup>

### *Cui bono... qui curat?*

The issue that both of these historical examples raises is that it is difficult in narratives of decline to be sure of exactly *who* or *what* is declining. With the example of Rome, we can talk about overlapping declines of the Roman senate, the Roman military, the city of Rome, Roman paganism, Roman law and much else besides. Who counts? The same can be said about the Ottoman example, where the period covering the decline of the Ottoman Empire could just as easily be framed as the rise of those forces within it that would ultimately replace the imperial system.

At this point, we have two paths open to us. The first is to specify further and stand our ground on the decline of a very narrow interest group. This can be the Ottoman imperial bureaucracy in Istanbul, the Roman Julio-Claudian dynasty, American oil magnates, or anything besides. Each of these are specific, but are susceptible to the question: who cares? Sure, this kind of precision can make our claims more rigorous, but it also risks irrelevance to any regular person. The US rose to the status of sole superpower after effectively defeating the USSR in the Cold War; for all that victory, however, real wages in the US have remained nearly unchanged since the 1970s.<sup>29</sup> In other words, few people actually have a real share in the strategic governance of a country, and so this focus seems only the business of war rooms when it is happening, and history faculties once it is over.

<sup>27</sup> İlber Ortaylı, *İmparatorluğun En Uzun Yüzyılı*, 30th ed. (İstanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 2016), p. 47.

<sup>28</sup> İlber Ortaylı, *Avrupa ve Biz*, 2nd ed. (Ankara: Turhan Kitabevi, 2007), p. 77.

<sup>29</sup> "For Most Americans, Real Wages Have Barely Budged for Decades," *Pew Research Center* (blog), 7 August 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/07/for-most-us-workers-real-wages-have-barely-budged-for-decades/>

The alternative is to go bigger and talk about *systemic changes*. Systemic changes are, almost by definition, wide-ranging and represent transformations far more substantial than the shifting fortunes of any oligarch. The legal system, the economic system, the political system, the military system—all of these, even if we don't personally interact with one or another of them, form the web of order that comes to define the social realm of possibilities on which we base much of our lives. With Rome, we can see this as the shift from an imperial world into a feudal one, with threads stretching back to the walled cities of Aurelian,<sup>30</sup> the economic reforms of Diocletian,<sup>31</sup> and the urban retreats from the Hunnic invasions; all of which added up to a Europe defined by life in fortified towns under the protection of a lord and working a hereditary job. For the Ottomans, it is the fragmentation of a diverse and decentralized empire into ethnically homogeneous and centralized nation-states, emerging from the independent wealth of groups linking into the global capitalist system,<sup>32</sup> the independent military power of local notables, and the pressure from foreign powers hoping to exploit these divisions.

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### *A Changing Order*

What of the present day? If we give up the perspective of the ruling class and stop looking at today's news like some sort of wargame, what do we see? We see, as *The Economist* so urgently proclaimed in its 175th anniversary special issue, that “liberalism is under attack.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, in previous issues the publication had proclaimed that “The liberal order of the past 70 years is under threat”<sup>34</sup> and that countries needed to “team up to save the liberal order from Donald Trump.”<sup>35</sup> Given the groundbreaking upsets of the 2016 Trump victory and the Brexit vote, it is easy to

<sup>30</sup> Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire from the First Century A.D. to the Third* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 1976), <http://archive.org/details/grandstrategyofr00lutt>

<sup>31</sup> Gary M. Pecquet, “The Original Road to Serfdom: From Rome to Feudal Europe,” *The Journal of Private Enterprise* Vol. 32, No. 1 (2017), pp. 45–62.

<sup>32</sup> Ortaylı (2016).

<sup>33</sup> “The Economist at 175,” *The Economist*, 13 September 2018, <https://www.economist.com/essay/2018/09/13/the-economist-at-175>

<sup>34</sup> “The Liberal Order of the Past 70 Years Is under Threat,” *The Economist*, 21 September 2017, <https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2017/09/21/the-liberal-order-of-the-past-70-years-is-under-threat>

<sup>35</sup> “Countries Team up to Save the Liberal Order from Donald Trump,” *The Economist*, 2 August 2018, <https://www.economist.com/international/2018/08/02/countries-team-up-to-save-the-liberal-order-from-donald-trump>

understand why a publication that prides itself on being a pillar of the liberal order would ring the alarm bells so fervently.

What is interesting about this particular angle, however, is that it isn't unique to America, or even to the West. We can talk about leaders like Erdogan in Turkey, Modi in India, Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Duterte in the Philippines as challenging the liberal democratic systems in their countries and attempting through this to popularize new ideologies and ways of governance. And when it comes to the people at large, it seems that they have not just stumbled into having such leaders but are in fact shifting their views on the liberal world order. Yascha Mounk and Roberto Stefan Foa noted in 2016 that major indicators in the World Values Survey showed that people worldwide value democracy less, and are more willing to stomach, or even support, authoritarian rule.<sup>36</sup> These findings have drawn attention to the field of "democratic deconsolidation," studying how even established liberal democracies can and are, contrary to previous political science wisdom,<sup>37</sup> deteriorating.

Domestically, states where "illiberal" leaders have gained power see the erosion of their liberal institutions and principles such as the rule of law.<sup>38</sup> Internationally, we can see the decline of this order in the stagnation of global trade, which since the 2007-2008 financial crisis has declined in relation to global GDP growth.<sup>39</sup> And as the liberal order's influence declines, others rush to fill the space. Chinese business in Africa, for example, represents more than just a geostrategic shift—the unconditional Chinese loans given to African nations are outcompeting IMF and World Bank programs that set political and structural conditions aimed to liberalize and democratize the debtor states.<sup>40</sup> Turkey too is carving out a broader sphere of influence for itself, and using its position of greater strength in Syria, Libya and elsewhere to decrease its dependence on NATO allies,<sup>41</sup> thus weakening the alliance as a whole. And in Europe, the populist regimes of Fidesz and PiS have repeatedly butted heads with the EU, most recently blocking the coronavirus relief plan and the seven-year budget.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (2016), pp. 5–17, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0049>

<sup>37</sup> Juan J. Linz et al., *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 1996).

<sup>38</sup> Luke Graham, "Rule of Law at Risk in Turkey," *CNBC*, 20 July 2016, <https://www.cnbc.com/2016/07/20/rule-of-law-at-risk-in-turkey.html>; Deutsche Welle, "Hungary and the EU: Viktor Orban's Battle with the Rule of Law," 12 November 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/hungary-viktor-orban-rule-of-law-eu-budget/a-55581020>

<sup>39</sup> Aaditya Mattoo, "Does the Global Trade Slowdown Have a Silver Lining?" *World Economic Forum*, 13 April 2016, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/04/does-the-global-trade-slowdown-have-a-silver-lining/>

<sup>40</sup> Xiaojun Li, "China Is Offering 'No Strings Attached Aid' to Africa. Here's What That Means.," *Washington Post*, 27 September 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/09/27/china-is-offering-no-strings-attached-aid-to-africa-heres-what-that-means/>

<sup>41</sup> Alex Gatopoulos, "What Could Turkey's Latest S-400 Missile Tests Mean?" *Al-Jazeera*, 12 October 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/12/what-could-turkeys-latest-s-400-missile-tests-mean>

<sup>42</sup> Daniel Boffey, "EU Faces Crisis as Hungary and Poland Veto Seven-Year Budget," *Guardian*, 16 November 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/16/eu-hungary-veto-budget-viktor-orban>

But something we need to be cautious about when discussing the “decline” of this international system is in assuming that it can only breed chaos and disruption. Certainly, as some of the examples above have illustrated, this is entirely possible. But lumping all of the different movements rising to challenge liberalism at this moment, from MAGA and the BJP to Syriza and the AKP, as instances of “populism” and nothing more, is to miss a crucial aspect of our age.<sup>43</sup> Certainly some of the leaders capitalizing on and driving public discontent with liberalism are opportunistic populists—figures like Trump, Bolsonaro, and Johnson seem easy fits for this category. But others such as Erdogan and Modi<sup>44</sup> bring with them movements and ideologies that, while new to power, are not new to the game of politics. Whatever one thinks of leaders and movements such as these, it is difficult to underestimate the weight of the traditions they depend upon.

In other words, while the present decline of the liberal world order can indeed breed chaos and opportunism, it also opens the door for different ideologies and modes of governance to take root. And while it is wise to try to fend off the monsters, it’s also worth considering how this opportunity can be used for good. The turn away from liberalism is, at the very least, understandable given that this order has not lived up to the promises of freedom and prosperity for all. The last few decades have seen inequality skyrocket in many countries,<sup>45</sup> while achievements touted by advocates of liberalism, such as the reduction in world hunger, have begun to reverse.<sup>46</sup> With the coronavirus pandemic and the global financial crisis predicted in its wake,<sup>47</sup> these are likely to get even worse. What’s more, its failure<sup>48</sup> to stave off or even slow down the irreversible damage threatened by climate change<sup>49</sup> gives us even more reason to consider something new.

If we look at our current moment through this light, the “decline” of the American empire looks less like the usual song and dance of rise and fall. Instead, it becomes a moment of opportunity—a moment where more and more people are open to do

<sup>43</sup> Teoman Kenn Kucuk, “Look Beyond ‘Populism,’” *Centre for Global Constitutionalism Working Papers*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (May 2019), pp. 11–23.

<sup>44</sup> “The Powerful Group Shaping The Rise Of Hindu Nationalism In India,” *NPR*, 3 May 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/05/03/706808616/the-powerful-group-shaping-the-rise-of-hindu-nationalism-in-india>

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* in Arthur Goldhammer (trans.), Reprint edition (Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2017).

<sup>46</sup> “Global Hunger Fell for Decades, but It’s Rising Again,” *World Economic Forum*, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/07/global-hunger-rising-food-agriculture-organization-report/>

<sup>47</sup> “COVID-19 to Plunge Global Economy into Worst Recession since World War II,” *World Bank*, 6 August 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/06/08/covid-19-to-plunge-global-economy-into-worst-recession-since-world-war-ii>

<sup>48</sup> Teoman Kenn Kucuk, “A Walled-Off Garden,” *Sense and Sustainability*, 10 September 2020, <http://www.senseand-sustainability.net/2020/09/10/a-walled-off-garden/>

<sup>49</sup> “With Environment in Decline, UN Calls for Transformative Change,” *Sense and Sustainability*, 9 July 2019, <http://www.senseandsustainability.net/2019/07/09/with-environment-in-decline-transformative-change-needed/>

things *differently* from the status quo. In such a moment of disruptive politics, the narrative of decline presents us with two options: allow the opportunists to wreak havoc or stem the tide of “decline” and restore the previous order. This, however, is nothing more than false necessity.<sup>50</sup> We in fact have a third option: systemic change for the greater good. Given how little time we may have left for consideration,<sup>51</sup> the answer should be clear.

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<sup>50</sup> Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *False Necessity: Anti-Necessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy*, Revised Ed. (Verso, 2004).

<sup>51</sup> Jorgen Randers and Ulrich Goluke, “An Earth System Model Shows Self-Sustained Melting of Permafrost Even If All Man-Made GHG Emissions Stop in 2020,” *Scientific Reports*, Vol. 10 (2020), Article Number: 18456, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-75481-z>