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## Reviews

### *Concerned with Everything in the Universe*

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**From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present, 500 Years of Western Cultural Life**, by Jacques Barzun. *New York: HarperCollins, 2000. 877 pp. \$36.*

In the history of writing history, there are a handful of volumes that become established as a model owing to tone, insightful content, and excellence of style. The most recent historical work by Jacques Barzun is such a volume. It is a cultural history of the highest standard. Massive in scope, *From Dawn to Decadence* is a tightly woven, extremely engaging narrative history wealthy in detail and interpretative insights.

*From Dawn to Decadence* is impressive both in depth and breadth. Barzun establishes several themes that he traces throughout the book. Among them are *abstraction, analysis, emancipation, individualism, primitivism, secularism, self-consciousness, specialism, and scientism*, all of which are developed within their concrete historical context. "History is above all concrete and particular, not general and abstract" (xvi). Barzun demonstrates this truth with several

"cross sections" that function as windows into particular moments and places. The author also provides within the margins numerous quotes from primary sources that enhance each chapter.

Barzun is a practitioner of the traditional form of cultural history. "[C]ulture," he writes, "is a web of many strands; none is spun by itself" (ix). It is because of the intricately connected nature of culture that the author often relates the ideas to specific institutions, events, or even manners.

While Barzun acknowledges some of the everyday artifacts that have shaped western cultural life, he gives more attention to the great revolutions that impacted the western way of life by "giv[ing] culture a new face" (3). Employing extraordinarily clear and concise prose, Barzun traces the birth, development, and continued effect of these revolutions.

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Barzun's work is broadly conservative, but this does not prevent an occasional challenge of received "wisdom," particularly regarding the late middle ages and early Renaissance.

The reader is exposed to many special insights throughout this work. Barzun skillfully traces the thread that runs from Luther's 95 theses to America's "Me Decade" of the 1970s. He also keenly observes that the current consumer culture has its roots in the scientific and industrial revolution.

Barzun is gracious even when reflecting on differing convictions and results. He contends that the basic flaw of Utopists is "taking it for granted that under fair conditions people would be sensible" (126). On the other hand he praises them: "in letting wish and fancy roam, this galaxy of writers have imagined institutions that are workable" (126).

*From Dawn to Decadence* is filled with key figures, major social and cultural movements, and great books and ideas that have had momentous consequences. Barzun demonstrates his immense scholarship as he relates religious, political, artistic, cultural, and social revolutions to the shape of western civilization. Both encyclopedic and anecdotal, this impressive book introduces the reader to significant men (and yes, many women) who for good and ill influenced their eras.

Barzun may give more credit than is appropriate to certain cultural figures such as Sigmund Freud. As he himself observes, "note that although the world understands what

Freud meant by the Oedipus complex, nobody has the slightest notion of how Oedipus felt when he killed his father and married his mother" (141).

Barzun offers a powerful and prophet-like critique of the past together with prospects for the future. In particular, the last chapter, "Demotic Life and Times," describes a culture tragically drifting into the abyss. "In attempting a sketch of a culture at its close, the elements to look for may be classed under the headings of style and society, style meaning the choices made by individuals, and society meaning the ways of institutions" (773).

Among the many markers of the demotic in our current moment, the clearest is related to clothing. "The Unfitting appealed to the young but was not their monopoly. A sample of the casual style among adults had been to sport a business suit at the opera; this expanded into the open collar and no tie or jerseys and T-shirts almost anywhere, even in church" (782). The internal, introspective, character is replaced by the momentarily temporal and easily changed external life.

Barzun accurately describes the demotic society as a society overseen by bureaucrats and inhabited by consumers who are shaped by a dominant therapeutic consciousness. This society is amused by journalism *qua* entertainment and has shifted en masse from the concrete to the virtual via the Internet.

Another marker of the demotic spirit is the obviously diminished language. "The demotic languages

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were decadent because verbal inflation and misuse interfered with vigor, precision, and clarity. Correctness had ceased to be recognized; it was, on the contrary, denounced" (792-93).

However, all is not lost. Barzun concludes on a more hopeful note by imagining, "What saved the masses from brutishness was the survival (though in odd shapes) of a good deal of literature and history from 500 years of western culture, mingled with a sizeable infusion of the eastern" (800).

Some may find fault with the book's giving greater attention to the first 300 years than to the last 200. This emphasis may simply reflect the fact that the decadent end of a civilization is more burdensome to chronicle than the glorious dawn of the same civilization.

Barzun generally treats religion

respectfully; his own convictions are apparent when it comes to the place divine providence may have in the unfolding of human cultural history. "Acting together with character, circumstance accounts for the chaos of history, and its unpredictable twists and turns, which cannot always be referred to motives" (136).

Nearly 900 pages in length, this history book may be a bit overwhelming for some readers. Yet the explanation for the book's size and breadth may be found within its own pages. Barzun provides a simple definition of the Renaissance man in the fullest sense of that term. He is one who is "concerned with everything in the universe" (141). By his own definition, Barzun is a true Renaissance man. He has given us a masterpiece of cultural history for renewed reflection.