



OSWALD SPENGLER:
The Rise and Fall of Cultures

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Cultures are organisms and world history is their collective biography. ...Every culture, every adolescence and maturing and decay of a culture, every one of its intrinsically necessary stages and periods, has a definite duration, always the same, always recurring. (1)

INTRODUCTION

Oswald Spengler (1880-1936) was born in Blankenburg, Germany. He was the son of a postal official and attended Munich, Berlin and Halle Universities. His primary training was in mathematics but he also had a vast understanding in the natural sciences as well. At first he was a school teacher but by 1911 he gave up teaching to studying and writing history. But in general little is known of Spengler. Indeed, according to Edwin Franden Dakin (2), Spengler obscured all facts about his life stating only that his family was engaged in the mining business.

Spengler was thirty-eight when the first volume of *The Decline of the West* was first published having begun thinking about the idea of the book seven years earlier. With little public records to describe his life there are only the conflicting words of acquaintances. One shows him "carrying his precious manuscript around with him even while in war service, adding to it slowly"(3). Others deny he was in the service. Others remember him living "in a cold, dark tenement, eating in cheap restaurants frequented by labourers, trying to find a publisher."(4) In general, he lived the life of an artist/intellectual. Spengler's work was not that of Marx trying to start a revolutionary movement; rather, it was a text that laid bare the truth of history, the rise and fall of cultures.

Spengler wrote at a time when progress, democracy, and causality were not to be questioned. The West was civilization. To assert that the West had reached its completion, that it had finished the life history of its soul was a radical statement. Moreover to state that different cultures were equal in their history and followed a similar pattern directly confronted the highly Euro-centric view of the day. Spengler was a cultural relativist at the time when the West was unquestioned supreme. There was no third world movement, no deconstruction of reality, no quantum physics. Yet at the same time in German academic and bourgeois circles, there was a sense of cultural despair, a sense that something was wrong with industrialism and rationality, that somehow the nobler part of the past had been lost with modernity. From this conflicting environment Spengler produced a new theory of history that developed a science of history while simultaneously arguing that history was art, was interpretation, was poetry.

Spengler's contribution was a new perspective on history, the use of a new unit of analysis and the placement of this unit in a lifecycle (again echoing the "evolutionary" spirit of the time). Spengler also had stages: once a culture was born it went from its cultural phase to its civilization phase, from city to megalopolis; from feudalism to aristocracy to the bourgeois to the mass and then to the rise of the new Caesars. This unfolding of culture was isomorphic with the unfolding of the individual. "Morphologically, the immense history of a ... culture is the exact equivalent of the petty history of the individual man, or of the animal, or of the tree, or the flower... In the destinies of the several Cultures that follow upon one another, is compressed the whole content of human history."(5)

In Spengler's theory each of the world's great cultures, Egyptian, Chinese, Semitic, Indian, Magian (Muslim), Classical, and Western underwent a similar lifecycle that could be understood from the lifecycle of the natural world. The pattern of the cultures, their history and their soul, could be intuited by the sensitive historian.

TYPES OF HISTORY

Borrowing from Goethe, Spengler raises the key problem of the 20th century as that of exploring "the inner structure of the organic units through and in which world history fulfils itself, to separate the morphologically necessary from the accidental, and, by seizing the purpose of events, to ascertain the languages in which they speak."(6)

As with other macrohistorians, Spengler wished to find the causes of historical change, the unchanging that could make sense of the changing. His question was: (7)

Is there a logic of history? Is there, beyond all the casual and incalculable elements of the separate events, something that we may call a metaphysical structure of historical humanity, something that is essentially independent of the outward forms - social, spiritual and political--which we see so clearly? Are not these actualities indeed secondary or derived from that something? Does world-history present to the seeing eye certain grand traits, again and again with sufficient constancy to justify certain conclusions? And if so, what are the limits to which reasoning from such premises be pushed?

Thus, like other macrohistorians, Spengler searched for a science of society but not a science as Comte would define it, for the source of culture would remain a metaphysical mystery. The true

meaning of the culture could be understood by its corresponding mystical soul. While Comte would reject the search for a metaphysical interpretation of history, Spengler specifically rejects the positivistic notion of a science of history based on empiricism. For Spengler, science must be free of Darwinian causal and systematic influence. Rather, like German philosopher Eric Voegelin would write later, he uplifts the work of 12th century monk Joachim of Flora and sympathetically presents Joachim of Flora's mystical insight of history. (8) And like Voegelin, he locates the present problems of the West in the misreading of Joachim's mystical works, in the rearticulation of the transhistorical division of Father, Son and Holy Ghost into the historical language of scientific reasoning, of the Gnostics and of the division of history into ancient, medieval and modern with Western Europe as modern and others standing in lesser relationship to it.

Like other macrohistorians, Spengler tells us that his revelation is unprecedented. "The 'world as history' conceived, viewed and given forms from out of its opposite, the 'world as nature'-- here is a new aspect of human existence on this earth. As yet, in spite of its immense significance, both practical and theoretical, this aspect has not been realized, still less presented."(9)

Still, the history of Spengler is not based on truth or falsity, but on levels of insights: superficial and deep. Spengler is not the scientist but the artist. According to Spengler: (10)

We must not lose sight of the fact that at bottom the wish to write history scientifically involves a contradiction. True science reaches just as far as the notion of truth and falsity have validity. ...But real historical vision belongs to the domain of significances, in which the crucial words are not 'correct' and 'erroneous,' but 'deep' and 'shallow.'...Nature is to be handled scientifically. History poetically.

This is similar to the classical notion of truth, in this volume to writers such as Ssu-Ma Chien. In this view, there are levels of truth--the seer can see the more profound levels of history and thus illumine the past so that it can teach the people of the present. In addition, truth for Spengler is closer to understanding in the hermeneutic sense rather than explanation in the positive-empirical sense. For Spengler, "it is the method of living into the object as opposed to dissecting it."(11)

Spengler continues this notion of history as insight by dividing history into two types. The first is the Ptolemaic system of history which is primarily linear, causal and divides history into three phases: ancient, medieval, and modern. This history is Euro-centered and even when European philosophers moved out of the explanatory scientific model (Herder, Kant and Hegel), they remained within the threefold division. However, Spengler presents an alternative Copernican view. He writes: (12)

I see, in place of that empty figment of one linear history ... the drama of a number of mighty Cultures, each springing with primitive strength from the soil of a mother-region to which it remains firmly bound through its whole life-cycle; each stamping its material, its mankind, in its own images; each having its own idea, its own passions, its own life, will and feeling, its own death. Here the Cultures, people, languages, truths, gods, landscapes bloom and age as the oaks and the stone pines, the blossoms, twigs and leaves.

But there is no aging of Humankind. This macro unit of analysis does not exist for Spengler. Spengler then asserts, again, countering Eurocentric thought (or any universalizing thought): (13)

Each Culture has its own new possibilities of self-expression which arise, ripen, decay and die to never return. There is not one sculpture, one painting, one mathematics, one physics, but many, each in its deepest essence different from the others, each limited in duration and self-contained, just as species of plant has its peculiar blossoms or fruit, its special type of growth and decline.

THE LIFECYCLE OF CULTURES

Each culture in this sense is a separate person with its own equally valid view of the real. For Spengler culture truly is his unit. And there are many cultures each with its own pattern, each following a general overall pattern--birth, growth, maturity and death. These stages are also analogous to the seasons. Spring is the beginning (birth and infancy), followed by summer (youth), then autumn (maturity) and finally winter (old age and decay). This is the classic Hindu pattern of the decline of culture from the golden age (spring) to the silver (summer), to the copper (autumn) and finally iron (winter). History then degenerates. While it one level this is cultural pessimism, at the same time it depends which culture one is in: the rising culture or the declining culture. Spengler would even object to the of the word decline; rather it is the completion of the culture, the setting of the sun, the arrival of winter - a natural but not necessarily depressing event.

Thus Spengler does not see one grand culture, nor does write about the development of a unified human culture or the history of Being in search of Itself like other mystical spiritual writers. Spengler here is Western. This is not transcendental history. Just as there are many individual souls there are individual cultures. For the Chinese, the dynasty is replicated in the heavens and in the world; for the Indian there is eventually one grand soul that unites existence, but for the Westerner Spengler there are many separate souls and thus separate cultures.

The crucial distinction for Spengler is between culture and "civilization." For Spengler culture is a unique creation of various cosmic forces which eventually degenerates into civilization, meaning big city life dominated by the desire for money. Once this stage is reached then death will certainly follow. Cultures begins not with struggle or unity as with Ibn Khaldun, but with the awakening of a great soul. In his words: (14)

A culture is born in the moment when a great soul awakens out of the protospirituality of ever-childish humanity and detaches itself, a form from the formless, a bounded and mortal thing from the boundless and enduring. It blooms on the soil of an exactly definable landscape, to which plant-wise it remains bound. it dies when this soul has actualized the full sum of its possibilities in the shape of the peoples, languages, dogmas, arts, states, sciences and reverts into the protosoul.

Thus as with the German Hegel, the relationship between history and the great individual is central. But whereas as Hegel chooses the State as the unit of history, Spengler remains with culture (although the State is important). However, for both the passionate struggle for existence, the movement toward the ideas is central. As Spengler writes, "its living existence, the sequence of great epochs which define and display the stages of fulfilment, is an inner passionate struggle to maintain the Idea against the powers of chaos without and the unconscious muttering deep down within." (15)

Each culture has a prime characteristic symbol. The classical Greek culture is represented by the body, the Chinese culture by the Tao (the indefinable way) and Western culture is represented by pure and limitless space (expansion). In addition, there are specific types of art, music, literature that reflect that culture. These are the works that define the formative and climax phases of the culture that capture its spirit. It is through art, the unconscious, the myths that create our dramas that we can understand history, not through a scientific objectification of history. In Spengler's words: (16)

All great creations and forms in religion, art, politics, social life, economy and science appear, fulfil themselves, and die down contemporaneously in all the cultures; the inner structure of one corresponds strictly with that of all the others; there is not a single phenomena of deep physiognomic importance in the record of one for which we could not find a counterpart in the record of every other, and this counterpart is to be found under a characteristic form and in a perfectly definite chronological position.

Each culture then is a vast system in which the parts relate and can only be understood by the larger pattern. Each culture then exists in its own cosmology. Culture understood in this way follows the ordering of the classic episteme wherein the universe is symmetrically balanced: as above as below, as within as without. The person, the social and the cosmic can be understood as parts of the larger whole. When one dimension is perfectly understood, the whole reveals itself.

STAGES OF HISTORY

Spengler gives us stages for his scheme as well. The first is "preculture", the second is culture which is divided into an early and late, and the third is civilization. In the pre-culture stage "there are no classes, no mass, no state, no politics;"(17) an existence of tribes and peoples without politics and the state. This is obviously Ibn Khaldun's (18) early Bedouin stage, Sarkar's (19) early worker phase and Marx's (20) early communism. These "precultures" are the basis from which cultures can develop. Why some develop and others don't Spengler leaves to cosmic forces in contrast to Toynbee (21) who argues for the right mix of challenge and response. The development of culture is characterized by the emergence of two classes, the nobility and the priests (900 to 1500 for the West). However, over time, the culture passes into its late culture phase, wherein the idea of the state and national government are realized. At this point the next class emerges, the bourgeois, or the capitalist class. In the late period, the idea of the State is actualized and the bourgeoisie emerge (1500-1800). According to Sorokin in his interpretation of Spengler, "urban values replace agricultural ones. Money emerges victorious over landed property and values."(22) Also at this time money and democracy are destroyed from within. At the beginning, democracy is controlled by the intellect, soon however, money buys votes. And in Spengler's words, "Through money, democracy becomes its own destroyer, after money has destroyed intellect."(23) Or in from Sarkar's perspective, the capitalist destroys the intellectual ideal of democracy.

It is this money-spirit that leads directly to over extension, to an overweighted central unproductive superstructure). This money spirit does not distinguish between capitalism and socialism, for Spengler both were dominated by a materialistic, money oriented interpretation of life. This money spirit leads to imperialism (need to extract further material and cultural wealth) and is harbinger of the decline of culture. It was the decline of the Egyptian, Greco-Roman, Indian, and

Chinese cultures. Even if they continue (as the West today), they continue as "dead bodies, amorphous and dispirited masses of people." (24)

The mass civilization then emerges where the money spirit is triumphant. For the West this started in the 18th century and will continue for another 400 years, with the last two hundred dominated by Caesars, the strong force that can conquer money.

Civilization thus emerges from culture. This emergence is inevitable just as decay is inevitable. As Spengler writes: (25)

For every Culture has its own Civilization. In this work, for the first time the two words ... are used in a periodic sense, to express a strict and necessary organic succession. The Civilization is the inevitable destiny of the Culture ... Civilizations are the most external and artificial states of which a species of developed humanity is capable. They are a conclusion, the thing-become succeeding the thing-becoming, death following life, rigidity following expansion, intellectual age and the stone-built, petrifying world-city following mother-earth and the spiritual childhood of the Doric and Gothic. They are an end irrevocable, yet by inward necessity reached again and again.

Ibn Khaldun too follows this arrangement but he is not concerned with art but with unity, power and legitimacy. The group with *asabiya* grows and eventually the dominant groups conquers and establishes a dynasty, but overtime there is degeneration. Spengler moves this simple pattern of degeneration to the long time of history such that with Western culture, for example, the Romans become the natural successors of the Greeks (Greek soul with Roman intellect). But the twentieth century, culture has become civilization. There is only death to look forward to.

In this late stage, the balanced state, as Mosca writes, ends. (26) No longer are the nobility, clergy and bourgeoisie in a unified state. At this stage of civilization, the fourth class develops, the mass. There is no cycle, nor spiral, only death.

Spengler does not relate this, however, to pre-history as cyclical theorists would. The city develops into the megalopolis. Thus size, as Leopold Kohr later further articulated in his *The Overdeveloped Nations*, is a critical variable for Spengler. (27) In these world cities, there is no home. Instead of folk, there is mob. In Spengler's words. (28)

Its (the mass') uncomprehending hostility to all the traditions representative of the Culture (nobility, church, privileges, dynasties, convention in art and limits of knowledge in science), the keen and cold intelligence that confounds the wisdom of the peasant, the new found naturalism that in relation to all matters of sex and society goes back far to quite primitive instincts and conditions, the reappearance of the *panem et circenses* in the form of wage disputes and sports stadia--all these things betoken the definite closing down of the Culture and the opening of quite a new phase of human existence.

With this grand size, there is a revolution and anarchy; clearly, Sarkar's worker's revolution or Marx's proletarian revolution or Sorokin's stage of chaos. In Sorokin's interpretation, "just as in the late period of culture, money becomes victorious over aristocratic politics and values, so now the politics of rude force triumphs over money and the money policies of the bourgeoisie." (29) Once power is consolidated in a Caesar-like rule, a new religiosity develops. This for Sarkar is the next

cyclical transition from the warrior era to the intellectual era. For Spengler, this is already the end; there is no cycle, simply the last breath of a dying culture. Although as with Ibn Khaldun, there is often a brilliant moment in which it appears that all is well, that the culture is in bloom, but in fact death is near.

But in terms of pattern, Spengler has the notion of the life-cycle as the pattern of each culture, but once this lifecycle is exhausted then there is death. Unlike the Indian, there is no rebirth or unlike Sorokin there is no pendulum shift back. A culture like a person is born grows and then eventually dies.

Thus World War I became not an event to be understood by the economic discourse or the strategic discourse; rather it is "the type of historical change of phase occurring with a great historical organism of definable compass at the preordained for it hundreds of years ago." (30)

FINAL COMPARISONS

The links to Toynbee are also obvious: both use civilizations/cultures as their units of analysis, both see the arrival of the universal state (the Caesars) not as the culmination of civilization as many do but as an indicator of the coming decline.

While the similarities with Sarkar's (1921-1990) work are striking - the stages, the spiritual emphasis, the alternative interpretive epistemology of history, the life cycle - Sarkar does not use culture as his key variable. (31) It is not culture which rises and falls. Moreover, no civilization necessarily must die by itself. Civilizations can be regenerated by spiritual forces, or they can be vanquished by external forces if they are weak in some major areas (a universal social outlook, for example). And critically, Sarkar (and others) sees the workers' revolution not as a degeneracy of culture, but as a dialectically necessary event to balance the social forces again, to end their oppression. To Spengler the mass phase is only indicative of a culture which has passed on to its end phase. The earlier days of the agriculture, of the city, of chivalry, of religious ideas are over. Instead, the money spirit has conquered the culture, and now this money spirit is attacked by rude force, first in the form of the masses, and second in the form of Caesarism. Still there are fundamental similarities especially in their division of power into four types: military, normative, economic and mass. In addition, both fashion them in a stage like series.

The importance of Spengler is in his placing history in a lifecycle, his use of culture as his unit (thus allowing a cultural relativity) his questioning of progress, his critique of the classic order of history of ancient, medieval and modern, and his questioning of democracy as the final political structure. While his predictions appear possible (depending on one's reading of the West and other cultures), Dakin sums up his work as follows: "Whatever may be the final reputation of Oswald Spengler, whatever the fate of his philosophy or predictions ...whether or not his theories correspond to reality, he painted a world panorama that, like a great play or a great symphony, is its own justification for existence." (32)

Spengler's influence on modern social thinking is considerable so much so that the discourse of decline, especially of the West, has become a common phrase in our language used and reused at popular and scholarly levels. What Spengler perhaps does not see is the possibility of cultural synthesis in the next century, in the development of a human culture, but given his

metaphor of the individual soul and the cultural soul, we should not be surprised. His method does not allow for it. But it does reveal to us the differences and similarities in cultures and the patterns which they tend to follow through time; it does shed an alternative light on the interpretation of history.

Notes

1. Oswald Spengler, "The Life Cycle of Cultures," an excerpt from *The Decline of the West* in Eva Etzioni-Halevy and Amitai Etzioni, eds. *Social Change* (New York, Basic Books, 1973), 20-25.
2. Oswald Spengler, *Today and Destiny*. Introduction and biographical commentary by Edwin Franden Dakin. (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), 353.
3. *ibid*, 354.
4. *ibid*, 354.
5. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* trans. Charles Atkinson (New York, Alfred A Knopf, 1962), 104.
6. *ibid*, 105.
7. *ibid*, 3.
8. Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987).
9. Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 5.
10. Oswald Spengler, *The World-as-History* in Patrick Gardner, ed. *Theories of History* (Glencoe, Illinois, The Free Press, 1959), 198.
11. Spengler in *Social Change*, 20.
12. Spengler in *Theories of History*, 194.
13. *ibid*, 194.
14. Spengler in *Social Change*, 21.
15. *ibid*. 21.
16. *ibid*. 25.
17. Pitirim Sorokin, *Sociological Theories of Today* (New York, Harper and Row, 1966), 192.
18. Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah* trans. Franz Rosenthal, N.J. Dawood, ed. (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1967).
19. P.R. Sarkar, *The Human Society*, vol. 2 (Calcutta, Ananda Marga Publications, 1967).
20. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Peking, Foreign Language Press, 1975).

21. Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History* (London, Oxford University Press, 1972).
22. Sorokin, *Sociological Theories of Today*, 193.
23. *ibid.* 196.
24. Spengler, *The Decline of the West*,
25. Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 24.
26. Gaetano Mosca, *The Ruling Class*, trans. Hannah Kahn. intro. Arthur Livingston (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1939).
27. Leopold Kohr, *The Overdeveloped Nations* (New York, Schocken Books, 1978).
28. Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 25-26.
29. Sorokin, *Sociological Theories of Today*, 194.
30. Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 37.
31. P.R. Sarkar, *The Human Society*.
32. Oswald Spengler, *Today and Destiny*. Introduction and biographical commentary by Edwin Franden Dakin. (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), 364.