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**THE LONGUE DUREE OF SPENGLER'S THESIS OF  
THE DECLINE OF THE WEST**

**Abstract**

Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* was a major publishing success Weimar Germany. The study presents the end of Western civilization as an inevitable process of birth, maturity and death.

Civilization is conceived as an inflexible 'morphology'. Spengler's thinking was influenced by a profound distaste with the optimism of the *Belle Epoque*. He saw this optimism as sheer complacency. The argument had a good deal of attraction to readers, especially German readers, who were lashed to what Keynes called, the 'Carthaginian Peace', of the Versailles Treaty (1919). Adorno, and other critics, rejected the thesis for its 'monstrous', 'mechanical', reductive view of social development. It seemed to give no place for human insight or self determination. Interestingly, despite Adorno's

rejection, he returned to the thesis on a number of occasions in later life. For Adorno, certain aspects of Spengler's insights into the failing nature of Western *kultur* retained traction. This paper reassesses the value of Spengler's thesis as a contribution to contemporary social theory. It does so at an historical juncture in which the 'New Caesarism' that Spengler predicted must, inevitably emerge from the failure of Plebiscitary Parliamentary Democracy to perpetually deliver what it perpetually promises. What does Spengler have to teach us about Trump, Putin, May, Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders or Nikolaos Michaloiakos today? Weighed in the balance, what does *The Decline of the West* mean today?

Who now reads Spengler? Adorno's (1966a, 1967a) demolition of Spengler's thesis in *The Decline of the West* is widely regarded to have settled accounts (Spengler 1926, 1928, 1991). Adorno repudiates Spengler's cyclical model of history as the rise and fall of civilizations on the grounds that it is absolutist and reductive. It rests upon 'a tyranny of categories' and numerous factual inaccuracies. He condemns it as finally, an 'astrological' account of the development of civilizations (Adorno 1966a; 1967a: 61). In spite

of this, as we shall see presently, Adorno retained a grudging respect for many of Spengler's observations and insights **pertaining to culture**, especially those having to do with the aridity of contemporary Western philosophy, metropolitan segregation, wealth inequalities, the exhaustion of high culture and the crisis in Parliamentary Democracy. This is one reason why he returns repeatedly, to *The Decline of the West*, despite hanging the thesis out to dry. Another reason, why he cannot quite rid himself of it, is the spell that Spengler's study cast over young Germans of Adorno's (post-Versailles Treaty) generation (1). In its day, *The Decline of the West*, which appeared in two volumes, was a publishing sensation (Spengler 1926, 1928; abridged edition, 1991). In a contemporary review of the second volume published in *The Annals of the American Academy*, Howard P. Becker described the book as a '*success fou*' (a fantastic success), especially in Germany, where the first volume achieved sales of over 100,000 (Becker

1929: 458; Almen 1996: 4). Spengler commenced preparing the manuscript before the Great War, and completed the first volume in 1917. The conflict left a mark upon the pessimistic course taken by his thesis. Consecutively, it shaped the public response to it, which was laudatory and fulsome. The first volume was published in the summer of 1918. A few months thereafter, the Armistice brought an end to hostilities. The calamity of World War 1 tarnished Western Europe's concept of Western civilization as the summit of world history. Estimates put total battle fatalities at 9.4 million; one out of every eight men who served, never returned home (Winter 2010: 249, 251). Some combat sites became infamous in European History: Ypres, Arras, Gallipoli, Passchendaele, Lys, the Somme, the Marne; 700,000 died at the battle of Verdun alone (Schurner 2008: 643). It was not just a matter of the unprecedented numbers of battle-dead and injured. The First World War produced a degree of cultural dislocation and psychological trauma

that seemed to render conventional techniques of mourning and healing obsolete. In aggregate, it is estimated that half the men who perished in battle were never found, or were unidentifiable (Jay 2014: 36). This then, was a war of erasure like no other in scale or technological sophistication. Not surprisingly, incredulity and incomprehension at what was widely experienced as the collapse of civilization, were among the most common public responses to the catastrophe. Readers of Spengler's *magnum opus* were gripped by a desperate craving to be supplied with answers to their state of frantic confusion about the ruins of the Western ideal of progress. Such was the backdrop to the publication of Spengler's first volume.

### *La Belle Epoque*

Before examining his thesis, it is necessary to go a little further into the historical context in which the study saw the light of day. Today,

it is easy to under-estimate the degree to which the Great War, eventually, shattered the West's civilized image of itself. *La Belle Epoque* (1871-1914), is the generic term given to the long period of calm, growth, and prosperity in Europe that preceded the War. The novelist, Henry James, referred to *La Belle Epoque* as, 'the high refinement of civilization' (Strachan 2014: 429). In every area of modern life, the West seemed unapologetically, paramount. In economic relations, the world's financial and trade operations, revolved around a shipping, insurance and banking network in which the City of London was a colossus. In science, medicine and technology, human systems of communication, transport, housing and public health appeared to be revolutionized. Experiments and movements in painting, dance, music and literature reinforced Europe's dominance, by portraying the continent's high culture, as the pinnacle of global achievement and aspiration (Macmillan 2013; Emmerson 2013). In short, for men like James,



Europe had unquestionably, established itself as the foremost economic, military and cultural power bloc on earth. After all was said and done, the West had good reason to regard itself as the greatest civilization in world history.

To be sure, there were a few dissenting voices. For example, Max Nordau, writing at the peak of *La Belle Epoque*, gathered intimations of total degeneration all around him (Nordau 1895). In his view, the so-called liberating, enriching achievements of the period obscured 'ego-mania', Max Nordau 'decadence', 'mysticism' and 'diabolism', no less. These constituted the real essence and direction of the times, albeit buried beneath the pomp, ceremony and arrogant equanimity that formed the veneer of civilization. Instead of the triumph of the West, Nordau portrayed a civilization enmeshed in toxic and hopeless decay. It was a note to which Spengler was to adopt and elaborate later.

Likewise, Simmel (1991, original 1907), working in a very different tradition of

'sociological impressionism', wrote of 'the leveling effect' of money on human relations (Frisby 1992). In advanced Western capitalism, money becomes the sole axis of interest. Simmel distinguishes two defining social tendencies, both of which he diagnoses as corrosive for culture and society. The spread of *cynicism*, which sees only the price of everything and the value of nothing; and the onset of, what he calls, *the blasé attitude*, which never raises its anchor from the shallow psycho-social bay of indifference, and colours all things with 'an equally dull and grey hue' (Simmel 1991: 256). The higher values of truth, nobility and virtue, which would have been readily understood by civilized men and women in the centuries stretching from Socrates, Aquinas, to Erasmus and Rousseau, bid their *adieu*. All that remains is the tawdry, ultimately meaningless, sport of the stock exchange, which operates as the avatar of everything in culture and life. Perhaps surprisingly, Spengler regarded the fully

developed money economy of the West in much the same terms (Spengler 1991: 365-70). In the glorification and blind worship of money, he found further, incontrovertible evidence that Western civilization is waning.

There are passages of beautifully written, penetrating, critical insight in *The Decline of the West*, which makes one appreciate why Adorno continued to return to it, despite condemning the logic of the thesis as the hocus pocus of a conservative reactionary. For example, on the relationship between money and democracy, Spengler writes, 'the concepts of Liberalism and Socialism are set in effective motion only by money ... with the franchise comes electioneering, in which he who pays the piper calls the tune' (Spengler 1991: 367). Largely, Spengler wrote at a rarefied level. However, this sort of realism about he who pays the tune, endeared him to young German readers pole-axed by the stark severity of *Versailles* (Weitz 2007: 335). The question of Spengler's seductive literary style is important

in explaining the endurance of his work. It will be taken up in more detail later.

Yet when all is said and done, the work of Nordau or Simmel, barely ruffled the composure and self-regard. Doubtless, Simmel would have regarded this haughty indifference as proof of how deeply entrenched the blasé attitude had grown in the West. The cosmopolitan cafes, government offices and University lecture halls of the great metropolitan centres of the West - mega-cities, which Spengler (1991) regarded as butcheries of savagery - remained largely indifferent. What could possibly disturb the equanimity of the greatest civilization known to mankind?

With hindsight, this serene outlook was akin to nothing so like pride before a fall. To begin with, when the threat came to peace, it was hardly even acknowledged in popular relations (Emmerson 2013; Macmillan 2013). Initially, the assassination of the Austrian Archduke, Franz Ferdinand, and his wife Sophie, in June 1914, in a nondescript Balkan town, that seldom figured on

anyone's itinerary or idea of the 'Grand European Tour', (Sarajevo), was absorbed as a containable tragedy. For a while, life in the cosmopolitan cities went on as before (Strachan 2014). The spectre of an impending rupture to the entire framework of world order was confined to the Foreign Office's and International Trade Department's of European capitals.

To begin with, the outbreak of hostilities was welcomed on both sides. An air of euphoria, buoyed by jingoism, ruled more or less unopposed over the public (Kershaw 2015). It was assumed that hostilities would end quickly, and that stability would follow in short order. Many commentators encountered this frenzy of festive nationalism as naive and distasteful. Freud, who rarely ventured into the fray on social or political matters, despaired of the 'obduracy', 'inaccessibility to the most forcible arguments', 'uncritical credulity' and 'logical bedazzlement' of the war-mongers and their cheer-leaders (Freud 1915: 287). He was soon proved right. The war,

that was meant to be over in a few weeks, or, at worst, a few months, dragged on for four grinding years. All generations felt the lash, but the cut ran deepest among the young. During hostilities Emile Durkheim, lost many of his most talented students. Maxime David, Antoine Bianconi, Charles Peguy, Jean Rainier and Robert Hertz, all perished at the front. For Durkheim, during the war years, the pace of time in his own life slackened. He complained of the war years 'passing slowly', as well as feeling 'remote', and always 'living in fear'. More bad news seemed to be forever just around the corner (Fournier 2013:692-701). When he learned the sad news that his son, Andre had succumbed from his battle wounds, he wrote, in a letter to his nephew, Marcel Maus, 'I feel detached from all worldly interests. I don't know if I ever laughed much, but I'm through with laughing ... due to no longer having any temporal interest' (Besnard and Fournier 1998: 508). For such a tireless student of society, who, by nature, was insatiably

curious about questions of social integration, moral density, normality, abnormality and social change, to confess to loosing 'temporal interest' is surely desolate. It was as if the war had opened a black hole extinguishing all of his energies and sense of purpose. Durkheim died on 15th November 1917, nearly a full year before the Armistice brought hostilities to cessation. One cannot rid oneself of the feeling that he died of a broken heart. Nor is it remotely convincing to see him as being alone in this respect. It was not just his son, his most promising students and the children of others, who had succumbed. The rational hopes of the Enlightenment, and the positive sociology of *La Belle Epoque*, lay in shreds.

### The Spengler Thesis

There is absolutely no doubt that the backdrop of Spengler's thesis was dreadful night. But what does the book actually profess? One suspects

that, today, and perhaps even in its own day, *The Decline of the West*, belongs to the class of books better known for their title than their contents. It is surely this that breaks the spell of absent-mindedness that usually surrounds Spengler, except when Western interests seem imperilled, is judged to be taking a turn for the worse. Thus, when America entered the second world war, anxieties about 'the decline of the West' began to bubble up and bring to the surface Spengler's half-forgotten prophecies (Weight 1942). Similarly, public anxieties about the Cold War in the 1950s and 60s, precipitated the fear that Western civilization was staring in the face of its own dissolution (Braun 1957). More recently, Spengler's title has been deployed as a catch-phrase to apply to the legitimation crisis in the European Union, and the reputed sunset of American leadership in world affairs (McNaughton 2012; Merry 2013). It must be granted that this is a strange state of affairs. Long after the essentials have been conclusively falsified,



Spengler's study seems, after all, to persist in the *longue duree* (Braudel and Matthews 1992; Braudel 1994) (2). Perhaps it is appropriate to speak of a double life to the thesis. Usually, in normal times, it is assumed to be dead and buried. But in times of disturbance and diplomatic hyper-tension it rises from the dead and superficially, seems to present insights that are rediscovered as if they are fresh and uncanny in their relevance. It is the *nosferatu* among modern theories of Western social development. It sucks the blood out of international crises, emergencies and economic slumps, to renew itself as a classic of begrudged profundity. Whereof this vampiric power?

The question commands us to consider what the study actually professes. To begin with, one must pay tribute to the dramatic, technical organization of the argument. Most academic studies end with a conclusion. Spengler commences with one. For him, The West is in irreversible, fatal decline. This startling beginning is not

offered as speculation or hypothesis. It is set forth more in the nature of an absolute, incontrovertible fact. The remainder of the book amounts to an exhaustive attempt to deliver a pretext that corroborates the conclusion. It draws from a vast array of resources in history, aesthetics, art, religion, philosophy, economics, mathematics, literature, geography and technology. Spengler was a heroic, tireless autodidact. His curiosity about humanity observed few boundaries. The legacy of this was an eventful, at times, scatter-brain, magpie quality to his exegesis. Facts, observations and asides pile-up, often without a discernible shape to explain their relevance to the general argument. This, together with a mostly, lapidary style of expression that seems to relish the virtue of not wearing its learning lightly, imposes steep challenges upon the reader. It is impossible to put the two volumes down without coming away with a sense of having been bludgeoned by the dense quality of the argument. For all of that, in

spite of the many detours and *cul de sacs*, the thing that Spengler keeps coming back to is the stubborn, invincible prelude: the West is coming to an inevitable end.

It might be surmised that the Great War provided all the proof that Spengler ever needed to verify his thesis. However, this would be to ignore the extraordinary historical range of his work. Long before Braudel and the *Annales* School of historiography, Spengler's historical method articulates the importance of what became known as the *longue duree* in social analysis.

Methodologically speaking, (1928, 1929, 1991) the chief contribution of his study in support of this is the insistence that civilization possesses a *morphology* (Farrenkopf 2000). In the history of ideas, this breaks sharply with the 18<sup>th</sup> century tradition of German historiography, championed by Herder and others, that the nation-state is the primary unit of historical analysis. For Spengler, the primary unit is civilization.

Posthumously, this way of proceeding commended his work as an early contribution to multi-culturalism. *Contra* critics like Lewis Mumford, Spengler never made a creed of national superiority (Mumford 1944). Instead, his study is a cyclical theory of world history in which nations are subordinate to the logic of the rise and fall of civilizations (Kidd 2012: 21-22; Farrenkopf 1993: 395). As we shall see presently, it enables him to posit that the inescapable contradictions that eventually emerge between high *kultur* and *zivilization*, are the secret behind the end of all civilizations. The recognition of plural civilizations here, is significant for multi-culturalist's. The concept of the morphology of civilization acknowledged that the civilizations that preceded the West possessed distinctive value. The West may excel in science, technology, medicine and militarism, but Spengler is unflappable in his conviction that preceding civilizations excelled in ways of their own. All

notions of the total historical superiority of the West must be taken with a pinch of salt.

Another reason why Spengler is often regarded as a forerunner of multi-culturalism is his insistence that Western civilization is, in no sense supremely, immutable. At a time when it was not common, or fashionable, to do so, Spengler taught that other civilization's had to be studied and understood as finite entities. Each civilization has its own morphology which goes a long way in explaining what made it dominant and notable *in its own time*. But no civilization is permanent in dominance. The West does not escape this law. Spengler's impatience with the notion that the West is a civilization of endless duration, carries over into hostility with the idea that it is truly standardizing and universal. Morphology then, is the crux of Spengler's thesis. But what does the concept really mean?

Spengler and the Morphology of Civilization

Of course, the morphology of civilization can be apprehended by human consciousness. How else could Spengler (or anyone else) possibly write about it? However, Spengler's exposition also made it abundantly clear that morphology is totally separate from all powers of human interference. It is reasonable to expect to understand it, but not to control it. Spengler is not so much making a methodological point here, as settling theoretical scores. Marx's historical materialism was famously based in the precept, beautifully articulated in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, that 'men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past' (Marx 1968: 96). Spengler's concept of morphology was deeply unsympathetic to this way of looking at things. It regarded the history that men make, and the conditions transmitted

from the past, to be incidental and secondary to the morphology. For Spengler, morphology is the matrix through which all human behaviour is played out. It is conceived as an organic structure that is impervious to human design and interference. The essence of all organic structures, is to be subject to a cycle of birth, maturity, decay and extinction. In Spengler's perspective, the most accurate **metaphor to explain morphology is the shape of the soul**. To his way of thinking, the economic, philosophical, political, religious, legal, technological and cultural constituents of culture are merely concrete expressions of this soul (Adorno 1967a: 69). For Spengler, humanity is not primarily subject to anthropological, sociological or 'zoological' constructs. 'The people,' he declares, '*is a unit of the soul*' (Spengler 1991: 264-265). Needless to say, the substance of what he really means in proposing that civilization has a soul is frustratingly elusive. It is an admonition truly receptive only to metaphysical

criteria. The metaphysical core in Spengler's work exposes his self vaunted cold 'realism' to be a husk. The implication that human life can be conceptualized in strictly standardized terms, as if it is essentially unitary, is a strain on credulity in our own multi-cultural, contingent, pluralist, liquid times (3). His preference for approaching and elucidating this question is to adopt what has been called an 'intuitive history', or to use Spengler's term, a 'physiognomic' approach, that relies on 'sympathy', 'compassion' and 'inward certainty' Hundert (1967: 105). Most methodologist's in the Social Sciences would find this deeply unsatisfactory. Intuitive history seems to be about adopting a point of view to the past that enables one to 'feel' the shape of human history and the direction of human development. In this respect, Spengler's metaphor that there is a soul to morphology suits his purpose very well. It is in the nature of the soul to be impervious to conscious attempts to disclose its dimensions, or



to test its functions. Yet if one believes in the proposition that civilization has a soul, there is a natural disposition to see its influence everywhere.

In the end, it is perhaps most valid to regard Spengler's physiognomic method to be a form of vitalism. That is, the philosophical doctrine that maintains that all things are driven by an internal force that makes things happen in the world, but which eludes the categories of positive science. Certainly, vitalism was hugely fashionable in Spengler's day. For example, Henri Bergson's notion of the *élan vital* (life drive), implies an evolutionary direction, and an inner connectedness, to all that is in the world, which sits comfortably with Spengler's signature concepts of morphology, physiognomy and the cycle of civilizational birth, maturity and decay (Bergson 2001; 2003). Vitalism is, of course, antithetical to science. It regards the latter as fragmenting the world and reifying motion for essentially managerial purposes. Precisely this

explains part of the appeal of Spengler's study in the Weimar years. For did not the authority of Western civilization in *La Belle Epoque* finally, rest upon Rationality? This was the main principle that the Enlightenment sought to advance: Rationality offers the basis for evidence-based government, the adjudication of Disputes and the impartial deliverance of progress. But was it not the purest expression of Rationality, namely, scientific knowledge and method, that was used to such terrible effect in the carnage of the Great War? In Weimar Germany, the popular sentiment was that something elemental, besides science, was required to explain the blind necessity of the Great War (Herf 1986: 53). It has been proposed that Spengler's thesis is ultimately an expression of 'mysticism' (Fischer 1989). But the catastrophic implosion of *La Belle Epoque*, caused by the Great War, was itself popularly regarded as a mystery that could not be explained by conventional, scientific means. It could only be contemplated

by the tools of analogy and symbolism. Not to beat about the bush, Spengler's method was perfectly pitched to appeal to those who had suffered the baffling devastation of the War.

*The Decline of the West* pays ample tribute to the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche as an influence. But the concept of the morphology of civilization is surely more indebted to the philosophy of Schopenhauer (1818). In particular, comparison with Schopenhauer's concept of 'the world as will' abounds with illuminating parallels. For Schopenhauer, all attempts to picture the world in terms of *a priori* deities or physical forces are groundless. Equally, it is futile to expect Reason to subdue the natural and social world to the commands or whims of men. *The world is will*. It has no intention, and obeys no master. It is simply a blind, impersonal, impassive, omnipotent force, upon which all things depend, and to which all things are subordinate. In respect of underlining the insignificance of human design and intentions,

Spengler's meaning of morphology has many of the same qualities. However, whereas Schopenhauer regarded the world as will to be fundamentally aimless, Spengler submitted that the morphology of civilization is subject to an innate, verifiable cycle of birth, maturity and death. To this, only the physiognomic approach can hope to gain access. Both thinkers teach that human affairs are dominated by an ineffable force that is absolute, profound and inexorable.

Reading between the lines, Spengler's thesis is an extended lament for what he sees as stricken German high culture, especially what he sees as the disastrous fall from the ideals of Goethe. This sense of living after the deluge, is very prominent in Spengler's study. In this respect, there is more than a grain of truth in Mumford's (1944: 374) comment that, for all of its unquestionable historical breadth, Spengler's thesis succeeds only in exposing the limitations of Weimar Germany, and his own generation. Herein, the relationship between Spengler's

writings and German National Socialism continues to be a subject of deep controversy (Mumford 1944: 373-376; Kidd 2012: 21-22). One of the most infamous propositions of *The Decline of the West* is that parliamentary democracy cannot, in the long run, deliver stable government. He shared this conviction with the Nazi jurist and legal theorist, Carl Schmitt (1988) (4). Both regarded Weimar constitutionalism as wholly incompatible with the real nature of human beings, rooted in race and tradition (Gusenjnova 2006: 11). Long before the emergence of Hitler or Mussolini, Spengler predicted that the crisis in Weimar parliamentary democracy would produce the 'new Caesarism' i.e. an era in which 'strong leaders' would seize power and peddle the illusion that civilization can be turned around from decline to **rebirth**. Mumford accuses Spengler's discussion of 'new Caesarism' as producing 'an epic justification of the fascist attack' on humanity (Mumford 1944:375). This is a misinterpretation of what Spengler actually meant. For Spengler,

the 'new Caesarism' was not a renaissance, but a symptom of the final stages of civilizational decline. We know that the young Josef Goebbels and Adolf Hitler were avid readers of *The Decline of the West* (Sherratt 2013:18-19, 59-60; Longerich 2016: 21, 23, 24). However, it is, I think, far-fetched to see Spengler as the philosophical father of the Nazi movement. Spengler did not have a high opinion of Hitler. 'A dreamer,' was his damning verdict, 'a numbskull ... a man without ideas ... in a word "stupid" (Kershaw 1998: 396). It is hardly Spengler's fault that Hitler and Mussolini cherry-picked the most purple passages in the study and threw them into the mill of *National Socialism*. For example, they interpreted Spengler's description of German *kultur* as 'an enduring and inward union of *eternal* land and *eternal* blood' as a summons to revitalize Aryan culture, after the humiliation of defeat in the War (Spengler 1928: 792, emphasis in original).

However, any careful reading of Spengler's text will reveal that the decline of civilization cannot be avoided by human design or intervention. His references to 'eternal' bonds were poetic motifs, intended to highlight and grieve for the futility of hoping to halt the decline of civilization. They were, so to speak, echoes from a world already lost. For Spengler, decline means decline. It is sheer wishful thinking to proffer that the descent of civilization is reversible.

Spengler identified eight civilizations in human history: Babylonian, Egyptian, Chinese, Indian, Apollonian (Graeco-Roman), Mexican, Magian (Arabian), Faustian (Western). Each is holistic, with its own *Kultursees* and its own morphology.

Once one knows how, and where, to look, the study of all eight civilizations reveals the same cyclical pattern of birth, maturity and death (Braun 1957: 527). Civilizations are born, develop and die in a bi-phasic pattern. First, high *Kultur* creates an organic, energetic sense

of motion and direction; then, as high *Kultur* ages and atrophies, civilization (*Zivilization*) starts to become culturally sterile, and decomposition sets in (Farrenkopf 2000: 25). In this regard Spengler is a consistent student of Darwin. The phase of *Kultur* borrows omnivorously from preceding cultural traditions, but it fuses all that it absorbs into its own tissue. Thus, Faustian *kultur* absorbs the lessons of medicine, architecture, technology, and much else besides, from earlier civilizations, particularly Chinese, Apollonian and Magian precedents. But it reframes these lessons with its own imprimatur. The duration of *Kultur* ideally spans a thousand years, while the decomposition of *zivilization* may be measured out in hundreds of years (5).

If one confines oneself to the Faustian case, culture can be pictured in terms of four stages or 'seasons' (Frye 1974:2). The West had its 'spring' in medieval times, with the emergence of a warrior aristocracy, a clergy, a peasantry bound to the land, limited urban



development, an anonymous art that served primarily, religious and military interests, and intense spiritual and poetic aspiration. The Renaissance was its 'summer' with the development of city states, court society, the rise of the merchant class, and a more personal form of art in which individuals, from all ranks of life, became important in the narrative. The 'autumn' begins in the eighteenth century when *kultur* started to exhaust its inner possibilities, loose its 'inner certainties', develop cities which divide urban man from the land, worship Reason as the controlling agent to rule over Nature and Society, and make the money economy ubiquitous and omnipresent. Its 'winter' begins in the late nineteenth century, in which the phase of culture gives way to the phase of civilization. In this era, art and philosophy become further exhausted and merely ape what has already been done; technology absorbs human attention; annihilation wars and dictatorships scar the face of humanity; the city becomes the mega-city, dissolving all

emotional connections with the land and transforming the soil into nothing but economic value; the faith in Reason becomes progressively distraught as Reason fails to deliver the rational harmony and happiness that it foretells. In terms of personality types that embody the character of civilization, Spengler nominates Napoleon as a forerunner of the winter season. However, in looking to the most complete personifications of the season in his own time, (winter), Spengler found Bismarck (the conqueror and the welder of the nation) and the empire builder, Cecil Rhodes as worthy specimens (Frye 1974: 3). In the phase of civilization mankind is driven down into a state of 'vegetative' servitude (Cervo 1990: 77). This is an appropriate condition, for, according to Spengler, in winter, civilization is literally rotting.

A 'Great Romantic Poem'?

The endurance of Spengler's study defies the reckoning made against it. Since the end of the second world war, most accounts in the history of ideas, have it as bound in the grave. Yet, repeatedly, it rises from the dead. It reclaims its privileged insight when some event - a massacre, a terrorist bombing, or some such - or more evasively, when a vague, but prolonged foreboding, presses down upon the media and public opinion. There are two levels upon which an approach to this issue should be conducted. Awkwardly, despite producing a theory of history that is generally seen to be conclusively falsified, quite a few of Spengler's predictions came true. In addition, a good deal of his thought regarding developments in culture and civilization remains of interest. The most helpful way of considering if there is some sort of 'posthumous' vindication, is to examine Adorno's two decisive assessments of *The Decline of the West* (Adorno 1966a; 1967a).

But before coming to this, it is necessary to tackle the first level by giving due to Spengler's extraordinary way with words.

Earlier, I used the word 'lapidary' to describe his prose style. The adverb 'mostly' was used to qualify this. Many passages and sections in the study are wonderfully expressed. Not without justice, Northrop Frye called the book 'one of the world's great romantic poems' (Frye 1974: 6). Others have also commented upon the poetic power of the text (Mumford 1944: 375). For reasons of space, it is not possible here to provide anything more than a flavour of this. However, because it is a critical factor in explaining the *longue duree* of *The Decline of the West*, some indication of the power of Spengler's language should be adduced, even *en passant*.

It is in the image of the metropolis that Spengler finds the surest signs of Western civilization's death warrant. The major cities of the West, he declares, are 'daemonic stone-deserts' (Spengler 1928: 788). Their dwelling

spaces have become atomized and estranged from Nature. People huddle in them with 'nomadic' thoughts, separated from the life outside, especially from contact with the land, and, more dangerously, from the inspiring ideals of *Kultur*. 'These final cities are *wholly* intellect' declares Spengler (1928: 788 emphasis in original). In his view, this breeds 'lamentable poverty' and 'degraded habits' (Spengler 1928: 790). The metropolis gives succor to moribund elites who live in the splendour of *temps perdue*. The remaining city dwellers are cast into the perdition of unrewarding labour. The wealthy retreat into their compounds and insulate themselves from history by feasting off the 'best blood' of the country (Spengler 1928: 790). He means by this that the elite use the majority of the population as anonymous providers of commodities and services. Spengler sees the metropolis as a barren plain of dehumanization.

As we shall see presently, it is a metaphor that appealed to thinkers for whom, outwardly, there

is no reason to claim a Spenglerian connection. Herbert Marcuse, in *One Dimensional Man*, guides the reader along the barren plain of capitalist dehumanization (Marcuse 1964). It is a journey that perhaps reveals, the true depth of Spengler's influence upon young German intellectuals in the 1920s and 30s. At civilization's end, the giant cities are nothing but gigantic **walled-compounds** for the elite, skulking behind their concrete walls, 'as men of the Stone Age, sheltered in caves and pile-dwellings' (Spengler 1928: 795).

This, then, is the conclusion of the city's history: growing from primitive barter-centre to Culture-city and at last to world-city, it sacrifices first the blood and soul of its creators to the needs of its majestic evolution, and then the last flower of that growth to the spirit of Civilization - and so, doomed, moves on to final

self-destruction (Spengler 1928: 796).

One can see why writing like this refuses to expire. Adorno was particularly struck with the cave man as an analogy of life in mass society (Adorno 1966a: 27; 1967a:56). The literary qualities of the study, surely go a long way to account for its longevity (Frye 1974).

However, there is also the matter of vindication. Spengler got some things right. It is this that Adorno wrestles with most, and it is this that persuades him that it is a major error to adopt a 'supercilious' attitude to Spengler (Adorno 1966a: 25). Spengler's insistence that Weimar Parliamentarianism is structurally impotent, and that its sterility must lead to the new Caesarism, has already been noted. In mitigation, Adorno (1966a: 26) first, makes the obvious point that Hitler and Mussolini were eventually defeated. By their deaths, and the collapse of their jackboot regimes, Western parliamentary democracy reinvented itself. In Western Europe

their passing was replaced by a long economic boom which, which, when Adorno was writing, was still in full throttle. The formation of the European Community may also be cited as an historical reaction to Caesarism. It was partly designed to ensure that war in Europe could never happen again (Judt 2004; Anderson 2009). Adorno takes all of this as hard evidence that Spengler's prediction of the 'new Caesarism' was based on a faulty premise, namely, that the decline of the West is irreversible.

Yet in our own day, the revival of nationalism in Europe, in the shape of the Brexit vote in the UK (2016); Geert Wilders and the *Party for Freedom* movement in the Netherlands; Marine Le Pen and the *Front National* in France; Nikolas Michaloiakos and the *Golden Dawn Party* in Greece and the *AfD* (Alternative for Germany); Vladimir Putin in Russia and, of course, the surprise Presidential election of Donald Trump in the USA (2016), hardly leave one sanguine that Spengler's comments about the defects of Parliamentary



democracy and their tendency to spawn 'Caesars' have lost relevance. The West may not be facing a new Hitler or a new Mussolini, but Caeserist tendencies have again, all too uncomfortably, become part of the current political terrain.

Another of Spengler's propositions that Adorno believed has been corroborated is that the exhaustion of high culture breeds an ethos of abstraction and indifference in the intelligentsia (Adorno 1966a: 28). In typical Frankfurt School fashion he maintained that social criticism has been replaced by ideas and arguments in philosophy, economics and political science whose purpose is to reproduce the dominant power structure. This blocks the meaningful empowerment of lower strata to achieve mobility or significant redistributions of economic wealth. Spengler wrote in the midst of an intellectual culture in Germany in which Western assurance had been profoundly disturbed by the war. But there were also new intellectual challenges to long-serving convictions about

Western supremacy and immutability. Two cases in points were Saussure's structural linguistics and the psychoanalytic movement led by Freud. Both tendencies imply that myth and syllogism are at the heart of meaning. This led to the theoretical and methodological invocation that final, ultimate conclusions in human analysis must be avoided. One result of this was to redefine truth as a process-based entity i.e. an entity that is perpetually conceiving. Emphatically, this was not Spengler's position. He regarded the traction of morphology in civilization to be remorseless. The scruples of structural linguistics and psychoanalysis would have meant nothing to him. They were the embodiment of abstract Rationalism, which he despised. For Spengler, Rationalism **finally** begets arid positivism. Positivism fillets the world, and subjects its compound components to disambiguated interrogation. It takes it as a procedural rule that only that which is manifest in experience is trustworthy. This is the opposite of the physiognomic approach

which relies so much on the rule of 'inner certainty' and the workings of the soul.

Conclusion: A Matter of Neglected Profoundity?

Despite Adorno's admonition to dissent from drawing a 'supercilious' judgement on Spengler, he finally rejects the thesis. He cannot stomach Spengler's crepuscular logic that history is a 'thoughtless mechanical process', set to a 'monstrous rhythm', that precludes the opportunity for mankind to learn to 'determine itself' (Adorno 1966a: 29). Despite this, Spengler continues to nip.

In the welter of comments that has accumulated to explain why this might be so, perhaps one remark, attributed to the great Dutch cultural historian, Johan Huizinga, rings most true. Whole chunks of Spengler's thesis, he maintains, are frequently 'absurd'; he 'bewitches' readers by compelling them 'to forget that we know better' (Dret 1980: 100). There is indeed, a type of Western

forgetfulness invoked at this point, with which Adorno was, beyond doubt, heavily preoccupied. We will come to the issue presently, but it is not the main subject of Huizinga's train of thought. For him, Spengler's fatalism portrays history as an **unbroken** chain of predestined causes. Once the thesis built-up a head of steam, 'the decline of the West' rapidly transfigured into an immutable law that comfortably assimilates the most flagrant incoherence and wildest contradictions. Everything can be boiled down, and reduced, to its premise. For Huizinga, this is bad history because it pre-judges observation and melts contrary shards of evidence into its own coinage. Those who reflect seriously upon the West, are required to think in terms of a morphology as a cycle of birth, life and death that cannot be moderated or overthrown. In contrast, Huizinga was a thinker of what we would now call, 'the middle range' (Merton 1968). In other words, he advocated that empirical research should be the basis for the formulation, and measurable

testing, of general statements of theory. This is the antithesis of Spengler's absolutist, universal, law-like approach which saw itself as explaining the entire life of civilization.

The notoriety of Spengler's thesis derives precisely from revealing the grand, and fateful, illusion of the Enlightenment that Reason is unidirectional and inherently positive.

Spengler's intense skepticism about this was very much congenial to Adorno (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979; Adorno 1966b). For him, famously, the holocaust flatly put paid to the Enlightenment twinning of Reason with Progress. Instead of venerating history as a unilinear, universal process, Adorno insisted that it is, like all that is human, uneven and dialectical. *Here,*

*Adorno stuck to his guns at a moment when some of his Frankfurt epigones took a distinctly Spenglerian turn. For example, in the 60's Herbert Marcuse concluded his highly influential critique of the West with a quote from Walter Benjamin, (an author who, incidentally, has more*

claim than most to be classed as a victim of the decline of the West):

It is only for the sake of those without hope that hope is given to us (Marcuse 1964: 200).

Given the profound pessimism of the preceding pages in his study, Marcuse's choice of Benjamin's words as an epitaph reads like a lame *non sequitor*. *Prima facie*, *One Dimensional Man* is strewn with literary formulations, such as 'the totally administered society', 'the society without opposition', 'the end of technological rationality', 'the happy consciousness' (the belief that the real is rational and that the system delivers the goods), which appear to vindicate Spengler's thesis. After all, what does a 'society without opposition' possibly mean, if not an entity in which dialectics has nothing to do with human choice? Further, what can 'one dimensional society' mean, if not the

absence of other dimensions, other stimulants for change? At bottom, what is this, if not, some kind of 'morphology' bent upon demonstrating unilateral, self-confirming, implacable dehumanization of life under capitalism? This is not to imply that Marcuse was actually a closet devotee of Spengler. If anything, the point plays into Adorno's hand. It implies that criticism of the West can, in certain circumstances, swiftly descend into primitive determinism i.e. an outlook that precludes the opportunity for mankind to 'determine itself'. Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* condemns the Enlightenment for heralding 'progress without dialectics' (Adorno 1966b). In this sense, he believed that the holocaust was not an aberration from the Enlightenment, but a logical outcome of its trajectory. For his part, had he lived, doubtless, Spengler would have recognized the holocaust as further incontrovertible proof of the imminent demise of *zivilization*.

Perhaps in subconscious homage to the 'cave man' idiom in Spengler, Adorno invites us to see modern men and women bearing the imprint of 'traces of the stone age', unable to accept 'the horror teeming under the stone of culture' (Adorno 1967b: 260). However, for him, the clock is not set. Resistance and opposition are meaningful. This does not come without crucial qualifications. Like David Hume, (1804), Adorno believes that it is perfectly acceptable to view Reason as the servant of the Passions. In modern times, the holocaust is perhaps the greatest, hurtful proof of this (Bauman 1989). Of course, to dismiss the supremacy of Reason is very different from abandoning the idea that Reason is indispensable. In riposte to Spengler's rigid absolutism, Adorno propounds the more generous hypothesis that, 'if there is any chance of changing the situation, it is only through undiminished insight' (Adorno 1991: 173). Incidentally, this is also, the main reason for the longevity of Spengler's thesis i.e. its



vampiric after-life. For the cold logic of *Negative Dialectics* is that there is no such thing as 'undiminished insight'. Every matter outwardly settled by Reason, will, in time, elicit unintended consequences. In the West when this occurs, Spengler is rediscovered anew, and apologetically proffered as a neglected, bygone contribution of forgotten profundity. Here is the real reason why Spengler continued to haunt Adorno. Spengler's ectoplasm manifests whenever any vicissitude, or cumulative downward propulsion, in the development of the West occurs. The task before us then is, not to squander any more time upon the quandary of deciding if Spengler was ultimately right or wrong. Adorno settled that issue in the negative long ago (Adorno 1966a; 1966b). If it may be concluded, by putting it like this: the question we face with Spengler is to elucidate what particular economic, social and psychological conditions make his version of fatalism endure? After all, there is more than enough evidence to

dismiss the thesis of inescapable, downward propulsion in the West as tommyrot (Pinker 2011). Yet it must be observed, even when the contrary evidence conclusively abounds, how readily the West falls into the path of grim-visaged fatalism. There is no light at the end of the tunnel; everything is slowly, but surely, getting worse. In the last hundred years, Spengler was the doyen of this position. Finally however, it is perhaps most accurate to see him as a symptom, rather than the cause, of a peculiarly, deathless Occidental *mentalite*.

## References

1. John Maynard Keynes rebuked the Treaty as 'a Carthaginian Peace' (Unterberger 1986). By this he meant that the terms of Versailles mirrored the peace brokered by the Romans after the defeat of Carthage. In both cases, argued Keynes, the terms were so brutal and humiliating that they laid the ground for a

negative reaction.

2. The term the *longue duree* (long duration) is foundational to the *Annales School*, of which Braudel was the dominant member. The *Annales* used the term to define a genuinely historical approach to issues, compared with the event-based episodic approach to time that characterizes popular journalism and the mainstream media.
3. For another article perhaps, it would be interesting to compare Herder's absolutist, universal theory with Bauman's theory of liquid modernity. The latter emphasizes the omnipresence of mobility.
4. As a Weimar legal theorist and, in time 'Crown Jurist' Schmitt was an enthusiastic participant in the attempt to justify Nazi rule. He was an ardent anti-semite (Mehring 2014). He defended Hitler's extra-judicial

killing's of political opponents and the  
'cleansing' of German jurisprudence of  
Jewish influence (Gross 2007).

5. Here, Hitler and the Nazi's clearly echo  
Spengler in claiming that it is the destiny  
of the Third Reich to last 'a thousand  
years'.

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