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Oswald Spengler and the Decline of the West

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"IN THIS BOOK is attempted for the first time the venture of predetermining history, of following the still untraveled stages in the destiny of a culture, and specifically of the only culture of our time and on our planet which is actually in the phase of fulfillment—the West-European-American."[1] These are the bold first words of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (*Der Untergang des Abendlandes*), the aim of which was to sketch the potential future of the West on the basis of the method of cultural comparison, and to provide the blueprint for each and every human high culture. Spengler often considered himself one of the last representatives of the bourgeois society of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and felt deeply unhappy with the twentieth century, an impression of "untimeliness," which also characterized several of his contemporaries, such as Thomas Mann and Herrmann Hesse. This explains the nostalgic overtones in Spengler's writings as well as his (unconvincing) attempts at overcoming his melancholy by posing as a dogged advocate of technology, imperialism, and mass civilization.

Oswald Spengler's fame is based on his *The Decline of the West*, a monumental historical study that endeavored to show that all human civilizations live through similar phases of evolution, roughly equivalent to the different ages of a biological entity. During the 1920s, Spengler's ideas were much debated not only in Germany but everywhere in Europe and America, and though the academic world remained generally skeptical, Spengler's prophecy of the impending decline and ultimate fall of

Western civilization influenced many writers and artists, then and now. Spengler also dabbled in politics and attempted, in a series of smaller essays such as *Prussianism and Socialism, Political Duties of German Youth*, and *Building the German Empire Anew*, to promote the idea of a conservative renaissance in Germany.[2]

The rise of National Socialism gradually put Spengler in a situation of ideological opposition, illustrated by his *The Hour of Decision*, which criticized Hitler's racial theory and made him persona non grata.[3] After the Second World War, Spengler's elitism and his expectation of the advent of a German-dominated Europe as a modern equivalent of the Roman Empire overshadowed the reception of his work until the 1990s. This somewhat masked the complexity of his thought, which prefigures such modern debates as the criticism of technology, ecological issues, interreligious questions, the rise of Asia, and prehistoric human evolution. However, since the end of the Cold War, Spengler's work has been gradually rediscovered and discussed, and gives an intriguing—if highly controversial—perspective on the numerous challenges the Western world has been confronted with since the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Life and context

Oswald Arnold Gottfried Spengler was born on May 29, 1880, at Blankenburg, Harz, in Germany, the son of Bernhard Spengler, a stern and anti-intellectual official in the post office, and Pauline Grantzow, the somewhat depressive descendant of an artistic family.[4] Oswald was the oldest surviving child of their union, which also brought forth three girls, Adele, Gertrud, and Hildegard, the youngest of whom later lived with her brother as his housekeeper. In 1891 the family moved to Halle an der Saale, where Spengler was educated as a pupil of the Francke Foundations, a religiously motivated educational institution strongly influenced by Protestant Pietism. The siblings later on remembered their childhood as difficult and sad, and Oswald, also suffering from severe headaches, tried to secure some form of inner autonomy by keeping away from his schoolmates, indulging in the most diverse autodidactic studies, describing, in great detail, imaginary world empires,[5] and writing, at seventeen, a drama titled *Montezuma*.[6]

Exempted from military service because of a severe heart problem, Spengler took courses in mathematics, natural sciences, and philosophy at the universities of Halle, Munich, and Berlin, and received, in 1904,

his PhD with a thesis on Heraclitus, "The Fundamental Metaphysical Thought of the Heraclitean Philosophy."[7] In 1905 he also submitted the secondary dissertation (*Staatsexamensarbeit*) needed to become a high-school teacher, this time on the evolution of the eye, "The Development of the Organ of Sight in the Higher Realms of the Animal Kingdom."[8] Despite his loathing for teaching (he reportedly suffered a nervous breakdown merely from looking at his first school), Spengler seems to have been appreciated by his pupils, though not by his colleagues, and he successively worked as a teacher in Saarbrücken, Düsseldorf, and Hamburg until 1911, when the small inheritance he received on the death of his mother (his father had died in 1901) enabled him to retire from teaching and live as an independent writer.

Spengler moved to Munich and started to write, alongside numerous smaller contributions for various journals and several (abortive) novels, his major scholarly work, *The Decline of the West*. The composition of this work, taking almost seven years, was particularly difficult, as is shown by Spengler's diaries from this period, *Eis heauton* ("On himself"), which permit valuable insights into his tormented personality and his permanent self-doubts.[9] The first volume of the *Decline of the West* appeared in 1918, shortly before the end of the First World War, and instantly made him a celebrity. While writing the second volume (published in 1922, followed by a revised edition of the first, varying marginally in style but not in content), Spengler also began to reflect on the German defeat and to actively engage with contemporary political questions. The first result was the publication, in 1919, of *Prussianism and Socialism*, followed by numerous shorter texts, which only marginally added to the positions developed in *The Decline of the West*, such as *Political Duties of German Youth* and *Building the German Empire Anew*. A confirmed bachelor and a man permanently riddled with deep psychological issues, Spengler never started a family but lived with his sister Hildegard, who had moved to Munich after her husband's death and acted as Spengler's housekeeper.[10]

After becoming something of a celebrity and, given his growing interest not only in political but also in economic and financial politics,[11] Spengler endeavored to get involved in politics in a decidedly conservative and elitist way.[12] His attempts, including his support in 1924 for General Hans von Seeckt's unsuccessful run at power, only demonstrated his personal shortcomings when it came to understanding the intrigues of everyday politics and to dealing with opponents and rivals. Over the

following decade, Spengler slowly dropped his political ambitions and concentrated instead on reassessing questions that *The Decline of the West* had left open, though he was severely hampered in his work by health issues, which included a cerebral hemorrhage in 1927. In 1931 he published *Man and Technics*, a visionary reflection on the history and environmental shortcomings of technology from earliest times to the predicted end of the West.[13]

Unfortunately, the major monograph Spengler had started to sketch after the publication of *The Decline of the West* never reached completion and remained a collection of shattered fragments and aphorisms. However, the material, edited posthumously,[14] is substantial enough to indicate the outlines and general content of the project.[15]

Spengler's last years were overshadowed by the rise of Hitler. While Spengler, on the basis of his comparative method, had considered the transformation of ultracapitalist mass democracies into dictatorial regimes as inevitable, and had expressed some sympathy for Mussolini's Fascist movement as a first symptom of this development (a sympathy returned by Mussolini, who favored the translation of Spengler's writings into Italian),[16] he took a much more critical view of National Socialism. As admirer of the spirit of the old Prussian aristocracy, he loathed what he saw as the proletarian and demagogic character of Hitler's party and, given his own assumption of a radical parallelism between all past and present civilizations, considered the Aryan racial doctrine to be nonsense.[17] Despite a personal and deeply unsatisfying meeting with Hitler himself and the regime's initial endeavor to win him over in order to benefit from his international standing, Spengler gradually expressed his open contempt for the alleged "national uprising," culminating in his publication of *The Hour of Decision* (*Jahre der Entscheidung*) in 1933, in which he openly criticized the new regime, though from the antiliberal perspective resulting from his belief in the inevitable trend of history.[18] In 1934 Spengler even pronounced the funeral oration for one of the victims of Hitler's crushing of the (alleged) Röhm Putsch and, in 1935, he retired from the board of the highly influential Nietzsche Archive because of its outspoken support for the new regime. After having predicted the end of the Third Reich within the next ten years,[19] Spengler died of a heart attack on May 8, 1936. The *Festschrift* devoted to him by some of his admirers was published quietly;[20] a contribution promised by Mussolini was retracted,[21] probably in order to avoid diplomatic frictions.

Inspirations

In the introduction to *The Decline of the West*, Spengler felt the urge "to name once more those to whom I owe practically everything: Goethe and Nietzsche. Goethe gave me method, Nietzsche the questioning faculty."[22] Although the influence of Goethe's vitalism—mostly his interest in botanic sciences and what he called the "primordial plant" as the blueprint for all other living entities—and of Nietzsche's cultural criticism can indeed be felt everywhere,[23] Goethe and Nietzsche (neither of whom was a proper historian) were not Spengler's only sources. Spengler himself, as like every self-declared genius, generally insisted on the absolute "novelty" of his theory:

> The system that is put forward in this work . . . I regard as the Copernican discovery in the historical sphere, in that it admits no sort of privileged position to the Classical or the Western Culture as against the Cultures of India, Babylon, China, Egypt, the Arabs, Mexico—separate worlds of dynamic being which in point of mass count for just as much in the general picture of history as the Classical, while frequently surpassing it in point of spiritual greatness and soaring power.[24]

This assertion, however, is not unproblematic. The scholarly literature cited by Spengler in his footnotes shows the wide array of the works he consulted, many of which prefigured some key features of his theory, including the universal and cyclical approach of world history, which was taken from the distinguished German academic historian Eduard Meyer, whom Spengler greatly appreciated. It is also clear that large parts of Spengler's personal worldview were deeply influenced by contemporary concepts in the philosophy of vitalism,[25] the belief that all living organisms as well as their social creations are fundamentally different from inorganic entities and submitted to their own set of laws characterized not merely by the mechanics of action and reaction but by the fate of birth, blossom, decline, and death. Furthermore, the idea that civilizations broadly follow the evolutionary steps of a living being and can thus be compared with reference to this common pattern goes back to classical antiquity and even beyond, although we cannot be sure to what extent Spengler himself was aware of this.[26] Cato the Elder, Cicero, Seneca, Florus, and Ammianus Marcellinus had all compared the rise,

maturity, and decline of the Roman state to the different ages of man, an approach which exerted a tremendous influence on many later historians including even Francis Bacon, who used the biological analogy in order to compare different empires with each other. To some extent, this pattern also underlay another, equally influential interpretation of history, that of the dialectic approach first formulated in the theologico-historical speculations of Joachim of Fiore, who compared the history of salvation to the three persons of the Holy Trinity, and the philosophy of history of Hegel, who compared not only the three dialectical phases of human evolution to the three ages of man but who also tried, rather like Giambattista Vico, to show how the spirit of every people (*Volksgeist*) in itself evolved in a dialectical and biological way.[27]

Nevertheless, Spengler is right in claiming that nobody in Western thought had pushed historical comparatism to such a degree as himself. Although he engaged for the most part with the classical, Arab, and European civilizations and barely sketched the broad outlines of the others, the effort and knowledge poured into *The Decline of the West* was unequaled until Toynbee's monumental *Study of History*, and Spengler's book made a thorough impression on his readers, even those who did not accept his hypothesis.

Key issues and key ideas

Spengler's historical philosophy was based on two basic assumptions. On the one hand, Spengler assumed the existence of social entities called "cultures" (*Kulturen*) as the largest possible actors in human history which, in itself, has no real philosophical aim or metaphysical sense:

> "Mankind" . . . has no aim, no idea, no plan, any more than the family of butterflies or orchids. "Mankind" is a zoological expression, or an empty word. . . . I see, in place of that empty figment of one linear history which can only be kept up by shutting one's eyes to the overwhelming multitude of the facts, 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 throughout its whole life-cycle; each stamping its material, its mankind, in its own image; each having its own idea, its own passions, its own life, will and feeling, its own death.[28]

These cultures—according to Spengler, nine (the Egyptian, the Babylonian, the Indian, the Chinese, the Greco-Roman, the "Magic" or "Arabic," which included early and Byzantine Christianity as well as Islam, the Mexican, the Western, and, finally, the Russian)—coexist in time and space and thus interact to some degree with each other, but have no real "internal" connection with one another. Their evolution thus only follows their own inner logic and cannot be influenced by outer factors, except for the "Mexican culture," literally "beheaded" by the conquistadores—a further and sad proof for the absence of any proper "sense" in history, if one is to believe Spengler.

Spengler's second major hypothesis is that the inner evolution of these cultures is essentially parallel and corresponds exactly to the evolutionary stages of a living being, an idea deeply rooted (as we saw) not only in the philosophy of vitalism as it developed during the nineteenth century but ultimately going back to antiquity:

> Cultures are organisms, and world-history is their collective biography. Morphologically, the immense history of the Chinese or of the Classical Culture is the exact equivalent of the petty history of the individual man, or of the animal, or the tree, or the flower.[29]

However, Spengler does not confine his analogies to botanical images. He also uses the paradigm of the different ages of man and even the rhythm of the four seasons as comparative foil, tying his analysis to a string of poignant metaphors all linked to the cycle of life, and differentiated enough to permit a subtle and suggestive description of the different evolutionary steps of each culture, as is also demonstrated through his use of these topoi in a series of synchronoptic comparative tables. Though somewhat long, the following quotation contains not only the blueprint of the evolution of each culture in a nutshell and brilliantly illustrates his play with historical references and allusions but also demonstrates the literary, nearly poetic quality Spengler tried to achieve:

> Every Culture passes through the age-phases of the individual man. Each has its childhood, youth, manhood and old age. It is a young and trembling soul, heavy with misgivings, that reveals itself in the morning of Romanesque and Gothic. It fills the Faustian landscape from the Provence of the troubadours to the Hildesheim cathedral of Bishop Bernward. The spring wind blows over it. . . . Childhood

> speaks to us also—and in the same tones—out of early-Homeric Doric, out of early-Christian (which is really early-Arabian) art and out of the works of the Old Kingdom in Egypt that began with the Fourth Dynasty. . . . The more nearly a Culture approaches the noon culmination of its being, the more virile, austere, controlled, intense the form-language it has secured for itself, the more assured its sense of its own power, the clearer its lineaments. In the spring all this had still been dim and confused, tentative, filled with childish yearning and fears—witness the ornament of Romanesque Gothic church porches of Saxony and southern France, the early-Christian catacombs, the Dipylon vases. But there is now the full consciousness of ripened creative power that we see in the time of the early Middle Kingdom of Egypt, in the Athens of the Pisistratids, in the age of Justinian, in that of the Counter-Reformation, and we find every individual trait of expression deliberate, strict, measured, marvelous in its ease and self-confidence. And we find, too, that everywhere, at moments, the coming fulfilment suggested itself; in such moments were created the head of Amenemhet III (the so-called "Hyksos Sphinx" of Tanis), the domes of Hagia Sophia, the paintings of Titian. Still later, tender to the point of fragility, fragrant with the sweetness of late October days, come the Cnidian Aphrodite and the Hall of the Maidens in the Erechtheum, the arabesques on Saracen horseshoe-arches, the Zwinger of Dresden, Watteau, Mozart. At last, in the grey dawn of Civilization, the fire in the Soul dies down. The dwindling powers rise to one more, half-successful, effort of creation, and produce the Classicism that is common to all dying Cultures. The soul thinks once again, and in Romanticism looks back piteously to its childhood; then finally, weary, reluctant, cold, it loses its desire to be, and, as in Imperial Rome, wishes itself out of the overlong daylight and back in the darkness of protomysticism, in the womb of the mother, in the grave.[30]

This description clearly defines the actual situation and imminent future of the Western world, which has entered, since Napoleon (the rough equivalent of Alexander), the late stage of the petrification of a culture into a civilization (*Zivilisation*), characterized by technology, expansion, imperialism, and mass society, and is expected to fossilize and decline from the year 2000 on. This dichotomy between "culture" and "civilization," central

to the understanding of Spengler's historical philosophy, is another concept deeply anchored in nineteenth-century German thought, for example in Schiller's 1795 treatise on naïve and sentimental poetry or in Thomas Mann's *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man*.[31] Accordingly, Spengler describes the current, "civilized" state of the West as follows:

> A century of purely extensive effectiveness, excluding big artistic and metaphysical production—let us say frankly an irreligious time which coincides exactly with the idea of the world-city—is a time of decline. True. But we have not chosen this time. We cannot help it if we are born as men of the early winter of full Civilization, instead of on the golden summit of a ripe Culture, in a Phidias or a Mozart time. Everything depends on our seeing our own position, our destiny, clearly, on our realizing that though we may lie to ourselves about it we cannot evade it. He who does not acknowledge this in his heart, ceases to be counted among the men of his generation, and remains either a simpleton, a charlatan, or a pedant.[32]

One of the consequence of Spengler's cultural monism is the debate about the extent to which cultures and civilizations are able to influence each other or even to merge. According to Spengler, who seems to be using the classic German concept of the *Volksgeist* (national character) first developed by Herder, each of these nine cultures is characterized by a specific, inimitable "soul image" (*Seelenbild*) or worldview, which is largely inaccessible to anyone from the outside. This also explains why any real intercultural dialog or fusion is considered as thoroughly impossible: the takeover of the spiritual or artistic creations of other cultures can be based only on their misinterpretation and must remain superficial, comparable to the use of architectural remnants of bygone societies through misplaced *spolia*.[33]

Whereas such a monolithic hypothesis is not difficult to uphold when it comes to describing the evolution of spatially rather isolated cultures such as the Chinese, Egyptian, or Indian, it becomes very difficult to argue the case for full cultural self-sufficiency for those overlapping each other, a fact most notable in Late Antiquity. This problem prompted Spengler to surmise that the whole first-millennium Near East was not, in fact, a mere "transition" between Classical Antiquity, Western Christianity, and Islam, but rather a wholly new and distinct culture (labeled "Arabian" or "Magic") merely borrowing its formal language partly from its Greco-Roman, partly

from its Babylonian predecessor, but filling it with a totally new content, a feature Spengler calls, in analogy to "pseudomorphosis," a mineralogical phenomenon. Unsurprisingly, Spengler's endeavor to explain Messianic Judaism, Zoroastrianism, early Christianity, and Islam as different expressions of a unique cultural worldview distinct from that of other cultures has provoked many criticisms, even though it prefigured, at the same time, the attempts of recent research to focus less on the differences than rather on the intense interactions of the first millennium as a "supermarket of religions."[34]

Spengler's determinist view of history has prompted many to label him a "pessimist" and to consider his philosophy as ultimately promoting fatalism and inaction. Spengler always denied such an attitude and—influenced by Nietzsche's heroic "Amor fati"—invited his readers to adopt a "realistic" approach toward the limited possibilities of the aging Western culture, to accept the inevitable outcome of the history of the next generations, and to do their best within the limits of the possible instead of fighting a lost battle for ideals long dead, while fully realizing that "optimism is cowardice."[35] Thus, in the last lines of the *Decline of the West*, he refers the reader to the philosophy of Stoicism when quoting Seneca in order to demonstrate his own view of a "heroic" pessimism, based on the acceptance of the inevitable:

> For us, however, whom a Destiny has placed in this Culture and at this moment of its development—the moment when money is celebrating its last victories, and the Caesarism that is to succeed approaches with quiet, firm step—our direction, willed and obligatory at once, is set for us within narrow limits, and on any other terms life is not worth the living. We have not the freedom to reach to this or to that, but the freedom to do the necessary or to do nothing. And a task that historic necessity has set will be accomplished with the individual or against him. *Ducunt Fata volentem, nolentem trahunt* [fate guides the willing, but drags the unwilling].[36]

Reception

The reception of Spengler is essentially bipartite. During the 1920s, he was one of the most discussed intellectuals of the Western world, his theory considered either as a thorough revolutionizing of the writing of history or as the fruit of mere dilettantism. Even though the scholarly reception

remained rather skeptical, the poetical qualities of Spengler's work and the suggestiveness of his pessimistic and tragic worldview made him very popular with many artists, not only in Europe but also in America. The Second World War proved an important hiatus: whereas the previous reception had focused on his achievements as a comparatist historian of past civilizations, his work was now reduced to its prophecy of the end of democracy and the rise of Caesarism, and accordingly considered as illiberal. Only since the end of the Cold War has Spengler's work triggered a new interest and led to a reevaluation, which is still in full course.

Prewar reception

The early reception of Spengler's *The Decline of the West* was a phenomenon of its own: everywhere in Europe, journalists and scholars discussed the interest, validity, and shortcomings of Spengler's "morphology of history." It would take us too long to discuss different positions in detail, even more so as the early reception has already been presented and analyzed in detail by Manfred Schröter in 1922.[37] Let us only stress that the discussion around Spengler rapidly became not only a German or even a European but an international phenomenon,[38] given the rapidity with which his work was translated into numerous other languages. Academic historians only reluctantly participated in this debate and, with a few notable exceptions such as Eduard Meyer or Ernst Kornemann, either ignored Spengler's work or drew attention only to selected inaccuracies related to their own fields. Very few historians or philosophers tried to discuss the validity of Spengler's theory in its entirety, an endeavor rendered even more complex by the intimate links between Spengler's analysis of the past and his claims concerning the advent of Caesarism and an inevitable impending showdown between the German and the Anglo-Saxon model of politics and society. This topic was mainly developed in *Prussianism and Socialism*, where the conflict is seen as a mere modern variation on the wars between Rome and Carthage, Spengler's personal sympathies lying, unsurprisingly, on the German rather than the Anglo-Saxon side, while he considered France as historically "finished."[39]

With some notable exceptions such as the Hispanic philosophy of history, where José Ortega y Gasset and Ernesto Quesada were deeply influenced by Spengler, and the juridical profession, where Spengler's theory on Roman and Germanic law was heavily discussed,[40] it was mainly in the domain of literature that Spengler's vision of a "declining"

West characterized by a dwindling creative impetus made the strongest impression. This is not altogether surprising, given that Spengler focused in large part on aesthetics[41] and tried to confer an inimitable literary quality to his own work, once characterized by the German novelist Thomas Mann as a "highly entertaining intellectual novel."[42] Outside Germany, where the book especially interested Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse,[43] it seems to have been essentially the English-speaking world where Spengler's thought rapidly entered the literary creations of writers as different as Henry Miller, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, and H. P. Lovecraft,[44] and where even some historians such as Arnold Toynbee and Philip Bagby endeavored to develop Spengler's approaches further.

The rise of National Socialism in 1933 represented a hiatus in the reception of Oswald Spengler. While Spengler found himself persona non grata in Nazi Germany and was publicly attacked by the proponents of the new regime as a "reactionary,"[45] his patriotic hope (not uncommon at that period) that Germany might constitute the nucleus of a future European-style Roman Empire was erroneously amalgamated, abroad, with the reigning National Socialist ideology and seen as its direct forerunner.[46] This was only very partly justified. Admittedly, Spengler helped to discredit the Weimar Republic because of his criticism of contemporary democracy as a mere transition toward Caesarism, and the collapse of the Weimar Republic indeed enabled Hitler's takeover. However, from an ideological point of view, National Socialist racial theory and the optimistic hope of creating a thousand-year Reich were fundamentally opposed to Spengler's belief in the irremediable decline of the West, even if under German rule, and his conviction that all human cultures were radically equal.

Postwar reception

Contrary to the expectation of Spengler's family and of some close friends such as the French scholar André Fauconnet, who hoped that the demise of Nazi Germany would finally open up the path to a new, politically more unbiased study of Spengler, the year 1945 brought no change to the increasingly hostile attitude toward the "morphology of history."[47] On the contrary, the hegemonic optimism of an increasingly American-styled capitalism in the West and of Russian-dominated socialism in the East made Spengler's prophecy of the decline and end of the West seem overly

pessimistic, perhaps even obsolete—an attitude even more pronounced after 1968 and its hostile stance toward bourgeois historiography and elite culture.

Despite some notable exceptions, such as Henry Kissinger and leading member of the Frankfurt School Theodor Adorno, who once stated that "forgotten, Spengler takes his revenge by threatening to be right. . . . Spengler found hardly an adversary who was his equal; his oblivion is the product of evasion,"[48] and the French scholar Gilbert Merlio, who devoted his influential PhD dissertation on the study of Spengler and his context,[49] Spengler and his philosophy of history were largely forgotten by academia and press alike.[50] When not forgotten, they were merely remembered in the narrower context of the German "Conservative Revolution," perhaps somewhat too simplistically, as Spengler, unlike many other thinkers of the Weimar Republic, had no illusions concerning the ultimate shortcomings of traditional conservatism; he was convinced that Western culture was doomed to decline and fossilize during coming generations, regardless of its political choices.

Only in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has there been something of a renaissance of Spengler, exemplified by an ever-growing series of studies and conferences.[51] The end of the Cold War, the slow decline of Western political domination over the globe, the rise of China, the unification of Europe, the return of religious fundamentalism, the dominant place of Germany within the European Union and the increasing strength of populism have led to a rediscovery of *The Decline of the West*, not only in academia but also in the media. Spengler has again become a figure of interest, and there have even been attempts to reapply Spengler's thought to the political realities and historical knowledge of the twenty-first century.[52]

Conclusion

No consensus has yet been reached on the place Spengler might or should occupy in our endeavor to understand history, and although the current discussion on the *Decline of the West* is becoming more and more lively, it is also characterized by a series of still somewhat monolithic methodological approaches, unwilling to make contact and to soften their positions.[53] However, this conflict is surprisingly representative of the different facets of Spengler's complex thought, situated somewhere in between historiography, philosophy, politics, and prophecy, and should be

quickly summarized in order to provide a conclusion and outlook to the present study.

First, there is what might be called an "orthodox" approach, essentially endeavoring to demonstrate the rightness of Spengler's philosophy of history, represented by an admittedly small group often battling with tendencies to make much of Spengler's occasional shortcomings as a historian and to define themselves in relation to Spengler's obvious elitism, a Nietzschean legacy that is unsurprisingly deeply unpopular and disturbing in a period of mass democracy and social inclusiveness.

Then there is what might be called the "moralizing" tendency, characteristic of most discussions of Spengler in the media, and reducing his morphology of history to the cliché of "yet another conservative philosopher" or even of a "precursor of National Socialism." This view exaggerates the limited place contemporary German politics played within Spengler's much larger oeuvre, and it is based on an insufficient distinction between Spengler's admittedly elitist view of social history, his disappointment with the Weimar Republic, and his (unenthusiastic) expectancy of Caesarism as the inevitable fate of every declining civilization.

Finally, we can refer to what may be called "antiquarian" scholarship, to which most of the current literature on Spengler belongs, and which is essentially interested in Spengler as a historical phenomenon while omitting any attempt to discuss or even consider the validity of his thought in itself. Of course, addressing this question is essential not only for the broader study of the intellectual evolution of the 1920s and 1930s but also for a deeper understanding of Spengler's life and work. However, there is an increasing tendency in the study of past philosophical and political thought to be more interested in form than in content, and in history rather than in "truth" (or even probability); most studies belonging to this school are able to propose fascinating enquiries into the psychological roots, sources, context, and reception of Spengler's historical analogies without even once referring to the question of their factual, logical, or metaphysical validity, leaving the general reader somewhat frustrated.

In view of this specific scholarly situation, given that Spengler not only described past events but also dared to forecast at length and with many details the future course of Western history for the next two hundred years, it should be one of the tasks of twenty-first-century scholarship to overcome and transcend the deficiencies of current research. Thus, one hopes that future studies will, on the one hand, finally discuss to what extent the present state of historical research factually confirms, alters, or even invalidates

Spengler's intercultural comparison of past events, and, on the other hand, objectively confront Spengler's prophecies to the actual history of the last decades in order to discuss to what extent his cultural morphology may be considered just another outdated piece of early twentieth-century scholarship or a reliable tool in our endeavor to understand past, present, and future.

Notes

1. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Outlines of a Morphology of World History*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927). Originally published as *Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Umrisse einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte* (vol. 1, Vienna: Braumüller, 1918; rev. ed. Munich: Beck, 1923; vol. 2, Munich: C. H. Beck, 1922), 1:3.
2. Oswald Spengler, *Preußentum und Sozialismus* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1919); *Neubau des deutschen Reiches* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1924); *Politische Pflichten der deutschen Jugend* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1924).
3. Oswald Spengler, *Jahre der Entscheidung* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1933).
4. On Spengler's life and times, see in general Anton M. Koktanek, *Oswald Spengler in seiner Zeit* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1968); Jürgen Naeher, *Oswald Spengler: In Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1984); Detlef Felken, *Oswald Spengler: Konservativer Denker zwischen Kaiserreich und Diktatur* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1988); Angela Van der Goten, *Im gespaltenen Zauberland: Oswald Spengler und die Aneignung des Fremden* (Heidelberg: Heidelberger Abhandlungen, 2016).
5. For an analysis of these early fantasies, see Van der Goten, *Im gespaltenen Zauberland*.
6. Oswald Spengler, "Montezuma: Ein Trauerspiel (1897)," in Anke Birkenmaier, *Versionen Montezumas: Lateinamerika in der historischen Imagination des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011).
7. "Der metaphysische Grundgedanke der Heraklitischen Philosophie," in *Reden und Aufsätze*, ed. Hildegard Kornhardt (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1937).
8. *Die Entwicklung des Sehorgans bei den Hauptstufen des Tierreiches*, a text now unfortunately lost.
9. Cf. Oswald Spengler, *Ich beneide jeden, der lebt: Die Aufzeichnungen "Eis heauton" aus dem Nachlaß*, ed. Gilbert Merlio (Düsseldorf: Lilienfeld Verlag, 2007).
10. She and her daughter Hilde later tried to organize his literary fragments, and proved important intermediaries between early scholarly research on Spengler and the extant archival material.
11. Cf. Max Otte, "Oswald Spengler und der moderne Finanzkapitalismus," in *Oswald Spenglers Kulturmorphologie—eine multiperspektivische Annäherung*, ed. Sebastian Fink and Robert Rollinger (Berlin: Springer, 2018), 355–392.

12. Cf. Markus Henkel, *Nationalkonservative Politik und mediale Repräsentation: Oswald Spenglers politische Philosophie und Programmatik im Netzwerk der Oligarchen* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2012).
13. Oswald Spengler, *Der Mensch und die Technik* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1931).
14. Oswald Spengler, *Urfragen; Fragmente aus dem Nachlaß*, ed. Anton Mirko Koktanek and Manfred Schröter (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1965); *Frühzeit der Weltgeschichte: Fragmente aus dem Nachlass*, ed. Anton Mirko Koktanek and Manfred Schröter (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1966).
15. Koktanek also published a selection of Spengler's letters permitting insights into the vast network of political and scholarly connections Spengler had managed to build up, and some selected fragments of his other correspondence have been published in other contexts. Oswald Spengler, *Briefe, 1913–1936*, ed. Anton Mirko Koktanek and Manfred Schröter (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1963); Oswald Spengler, *Der Briefwechsel zwischen Oswald Spengler und Wolfgang E. Groeger*, ed. Xenia Werner (Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag, 1987). Nevertheless, a substantial amount of material accessible in the Munich Staatsbibliothek library still remains unpublished, not least due to the extreme difficulty of deciphering Spengler's late handwriting, the near illegibility of which is due in part to not only the numerous abbreviations he used but also to the impact his 1927 cerebral hemorrhage had on his psychomotor capacities. See the "Spengler Nachlaß," Sign. Ana 533.
16. Cf. Michael Thöndl, *Oswald Spengler in Italien: Kulturexport politischer Ideen der "Konservativen Revolution"* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2010).
17. Cf. Michael Thöndl, "Das Politikbild von Oswald Spengler (1880–1936) mit einer Ortsbestimmung seines politischen Urteils über Hitler und Mussolini," *Zeitschrift für Politik* 40 (1993): 418–443.
18. Spengler, *Jahre der Entscheidung*.
19. Hans Frank, *Im Angesicht des Galgens* (Neuhaus: Eigenverlag Brigitte Frank, 1955), 247.
20. Paul Reusch and Richard Korherr, eds., *Oswald Spengler zum Gedenken* (Nördlingen: C. H. Beck, 1937).
21. Cf. David Engels, "André Fauconnet und Oswald Spengler (mitsamt der bislang unveröffentlichten Korrespondenz Fauconnets mit August Albers, Hildegard und Hilde Kornhardt und Richard Korherr)," in *Oswald Spengler als europäisches Phänomen*, ed. Zaur Gasimov and Cornelius A. Lemke Duque (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2013), 105–156.
22. Spengler, *Decline*, vol. 1, xiv.
23. On Spengler, Goethe, and Nietzsche, cf. Uwe Janensch, *Goethe und Nietzsche bei Spengler: Eine Untersuchung der strukturellen und konzeptionellen Grundlagen des Spenglerschen Systems* (Berlin: Wissenschaftsverlag, 2006).
24. Spengler, *Decline*, vol. 1, 18.
25. Cf. in general Hans Joachim Schoeps, *Vorläufer Spenglers: Studien zum Geschichtspessimismus im 19. Jahrhundert* (Leiden: Brill, 1955).

26. David Engels, ed., *Von Platon bis Fukuyama. Biologistische und zyklische Konzepte in der Geschichtsphilosophie der Antike und des Abendlandes* (Brussels: Latomus, 2015).
27. On Hegel and Spengler cf. David Engels, "Ducunt fata volentem, nolentem trahunt. Spengler, Hegel und das Problem der Willensfreiheit im Geschichtsdeterminismus," *Saeculum* 59 (2009): 269–298.
28. Spengler, *Decline*, vol. 1, 21.
29. Ibid., 104.
30. Ibid., 107f.
31. Thomas Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (Berlin: Fischer, 1918).
32. Spengler, *Decline*, vol. 1, 44.
33. Ibid., 165.
34. On this problem, see David Engels, "Is There a 'Persian' Culture? Critical Reflections on the Place of Ancient Iran in Oswald Spengler's Philosophy of History," in *Persianism in Antiquity*, ed. Miguel J. Versluys and Rolf Strootman (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2017), 21–44.
35. Spengler, *Der Mensch und die Technik*.
36. Spengler, *Decline*, vol. 2, 507.
37. Manfred Schröter, *Der Streit um Spengler: Kritik seiner Kritiker* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1922).
38. Cf. e.g., Gasimov and Lemke Duque, eds., *Oswald Spengler als europäisches Phänomen*.
39. This explains, for instance, the very hostile position of the French press, summarized in André Fauconnet, *Oswald Spengler, le prophète du déclin de l'occident* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1925). See also Engels, "André Fauconnet und Oswald Spengler."
40. Cf. Lutz Keppeler, *Oswald Spengler und die Jurisprudenz* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).
41. Cf. Marie-Elisabeth Parent, *Recherches sur les éléments d'une conception esthétique dans l'oeuvre d'Oswald Spengle* (Frankfurt/Bern: Peter Lang, 1982); Ingo Kaiserreiner, *Kunst und Weltgefühl: Die bildende Kunst in der Sicht Oswald Spenglers: Darstellung und Kritik* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1994).
42. Thomas Mann, *Von deutscher Republik* (Berlin: Fischer, 1923).
43. Cf. Barbara Beßlich, *Faszination des Verfalls: Thomas Mann und Oswald Spengler* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2002).
44. Cf. in general Hugh L. Trigg, "The Impact of a Pessimist. The Reception of Oswald Spengler in America 1919–1939" (PhD, Peabody College for Teachers of Vanderbilt University, 1968). See also the two following case studies: David Engels, "'Spengler Emerges Biggest and Best of All': Die Rezeption Oswald Spenglers bei Henry Miller," *Sprachkunst* 43 (2012): 113–130; David Engels, "'This Is an Extraordinary Thing You've Perhaps Heard of': Die Rezeption Oswald Spenglers bei Francis Scott Fitzgerald," in *Spengler ohne Ende*, ed. Gilbert Merlio and Daniel Meyer (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2014), 217–242.

45. For example, Arthur Zweiniger, *Spengler im Dritten Reich: Eine Antwort auf Oswald Spenglers "Jahre Der Entscheidung"* (Oldenburg: Stalling, 1933); Günther Gründel, *Jahre der Überwindung: Umfassende Abrechnung mit dem "Untergangs"-Magier* (Breslau: Korn, 1934).
46. Discussion in Alfred von Martin, *Geistige Wegbereiter des deutschen Zusammenbruchs, Hegel—Nietzsche—Spengler* (Recklinghausen: Bitter, 1948). It is noteworthy that Fauconnet gave a public lecture in France devoted to the question "Spengler a-t-il été national-socialiste?" in August 1945 and answered in the negative: André Fauconnet, "Spengler a-t-il été national-socialiste?" (public conference 1945), in *Mélanges littéraires de l'Université de Poitiers* (1946): 69–79.
47. Correspondence published in Engels, "André Fauconnet und Oswald Spengler"; see also Hildegard Kornhardt's 1941 attempt to launch a small volume with aphorisms, *Gedanken* (Munich: C. H. Beck, ca. 1941).
48. Theodor W. Adorno, "Spengler nach dem Untergang" (1950) in Adorno, *Prismen* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1955), 51–81.
49. Gilbert Merlio, *Oswald Spengler: Témoin de son temps* (Stuttgart: Akademischer Verlag Hans-Dieter Heinz, 1982).
50. Some noteworthy exceptions: Manfred Schröter, *Metaphysik des Untergangs: Eine kulturkritische Studie über Oswald Spengler* (Munich: Leibniz Verlag, 1949); Anton M. Koktanek, ed., *Spengler Studien: Festgabe für M. Schröter zum 85. Geburtstag* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1965); Peter Chr. Ludz, ed., *Spengler heute: Sechs Essays mit einem Vorwort von Hermann Lübbe* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1980).
51. Klaus P. Fischer, *History and Prophecy: Oswald Spengler and the Decline of the West* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989); Alexander Demandt and John Farrenkopf, eds., *Der Fall Spengler: Eine kritische Bilanz* (Köln: Böhlau, 1994); Karen Swassjan, *Der Untergang eines Abendländers: Oswald Spengler und sein Requiem auf Europa* (Berlin: Raphael Heinrich, 1998); Frits Boterman, *Oswald Spengler und sein "Untergang des Abendlandes"* (Cologne: SH-Verlag, 2000); John Farrenkopf, *Prophet of Decline: Spengler on World History and Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2001); Domenico Conte, *Oswald Spengler—Eine Einführung* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2004); Maurizio Guerri and Markus Ophälders, eds., *Oswald Spengler: Tramonto e metamorfosi dell'Occidente* (Milan: Mimesis, 2004); Frank Lisson, *Oswald Spengler: Philosoph des Schicksals* (Schnellroda: Antaios, 2005); Samir Osmancevic, *Oswald Spengler und das Ende der Geschichte* (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2007); Manfred Gangl, Gilbert Merlio, and Markus Ophälders, eds., *Spengler—Ein Denker der Zeitenwende* (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2009); Dezsö Csejtei and Aniko Juhász, *Oswald Spengler élete és filozófiája* (Máriabesnyő: Gödöllő, 2009); Gasimov and Lemke Duque, eds., *Oswald Spengler als europäisches Phänomen*; Merlio and Meyer, eds., *Spengler ohne Ende*; Arne De Winde et al., eds., *Tektonik der Systeme: Neulektüren von Oswald Spengler* (Heidelberg: Synchron, 2016); Alexander Demandt, *Untergänge des Abendlandes: Studien zu Oswald*

Spengler (Cologne: Böhlau, 2017); Fink and Rollinger, eds., *Oswald Spenglers Kulturmorphologie*; David Engels, Max Otte, and Michael Thöndl, eds., *Der lange Schatten Oswald Spenglers: 100 Jahre Untergang des Abendlandes* (Waltrop: Manuscriptum, 2018).

52. For example, David Engels, *Le Déclin: La crise de l'Union européenne et la chute de la république romaine—analogies historiques* (Paris: Toucan, 2013); David Engels, "Spengler im 21. Jahrhundert: Überlegungen und Perspektiven zu einer Überarbeit der Spengler'schen Kulturmorphologie," in Fink and Rollinger eds., *Oswald Spenglers Kulturmorphologie*, 451–486.
53. See also David Engels, "Déterminisme et morphologie culturelle: Quelques observations méthodologiques autour du 'Déclin de l'Occident' d'Oswald Spengler," forthcoming in *La philosophie allemande de l'histoire*, ed. Louis Carré and Quentin Landenne.