

ROSWALD SPENGLER REVISITED: A VISION OF GLOBAL HISTORY

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We are revisiting Oswald Spengler (1880-1936) on the one hundred anniversary of his magnum opus *Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*, Volume 1 (Decline of the West: An Outline of a Morphology of World History), in September 1918 in Vienna; the second volume followed in 1922.¹ Over one thousand pages, the work gained “bestseller” status in the Weimar Republic, in due course, in Europe and the United States. By 2003 the work, combining the two volumes, was published as a paperback as 16th edition. At this point, it is difficult to say if everyone read all the over thousand pages (in the original German), not to say in the major languages of the world. No doubt, Spengler hit upon a theme that was ripe to be discussed in public after the First World War; now, in the process of globalization, Spengler’s thesis seems to be even more relevant.

In the 1920s, *Untergang* (Decline) notion was part of the *Zeitgeist* (the sign of the times); especially since the British passenger liner Titanic sank in April 1912, the mode of the times was negative. Hence, the so-called Jazz Age and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “lost generation”, a reaction against the overly optimistic attitudes in the late 19th century of the Kaiserreich. Spengler decided on the title “*Untergang*” in 1912, probably in reference to the sinking of the Titanic, at that time a ship that was understood to be unsinkable.²

At this point, we should point out that the German term “*Untergang*” does not only mean decline but suggests a total sinking of something; it need not simply be a ship but also a mode or attitude, they Germans sometimes say “*Untergangsstimmung*”, meaning an atmosphere of doom. It is in that sense that Spengler uses the term applied to his famous work. It is misleading to think of the downfall of the West; that was not strictly speaking his thesis. Spengler meant the decline of civilization, a sociological organism that developed, thrived,

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1 See Oswald Spengler, *Untergang des Abendlandes*. Munich: DTV Verlag, 16th edition, 2003.

2 Cf. Vorwort, 1917, *Spengler*. Munich December 1917, First edition, vol. 1.

but then declined, according to the law of nature.³ In short, every civilization has to face the natural cycle of birth and death. The time framework, of course, varies from civilization to civilization, some fall quicker than others. Thus, Spengler's work must be seen as a philosophy of history, rather than a strictly historical account of the world, seen through the eyes of a critical historian. One of the reasons why academic historians at the time, except the foremost professor of ancient history Eduard Meyer at Berlin University, were highly critical of Spengler approach, "not *wissenschaftlich*" (not scientific), in the typical German academic jargon. Meyer and Max Weber understood very well that Spengler's work needed to be understood as a philosophy of history, and not, necessarily, a scientific narrative academically defined. It is no surprise that the great Max Weber, shortly before his untimely death, held a widely acclaimed discussion with Spengler in December of 1919 at the Munich City Hall. Marianne Weber, in her biography of Max, notes that her husband was highly respectful toward Spengler, although he did not agree with many points the latter made. Yet, Weber understood immediately that Spengler work should not be understood as a strictly historical narrative of world history, but leave a lot of space open to speculation, that is to say, there was much room for searching ideas to be followed. Many academics in Germany of 1920, even in the humanities, still had the inherited notion of the late 19th century of a positivist scientific approach to everything, including history. This is the reason why philosophy, at large, was suspect, surrounded by the odor of speculative nonsense and trivial pursuit of truth. Only the scientific method, of laboratory experimentation and empirical evidence, were admitted to be taken seriously. Of course, the younger generation started to be skeptical, considering the disastrous war, the overturn of former powerful monarchies and the economic chaos and slump of Black Friday. Spengler was in the midst of all the events and understood very well that a new perspective was needed to make sense of what happened. Not only of the past but also how the future was to be approached; we know that the British historian Toynbee's challenge and the response was partly based on these chaotic times.

Toynbee learned many things from Spengler but decided to leave the more speculative ideas aside. His well-known *A Study of History* is a sort of continuation of Spengler but only a more documentary foothold and Toynbee's own travel experience.⁴

Thus, it is important to assess Spengler's achievements and efforts in the context of

the early 20th century. In addition, to make a long story short, the influence of Goethe and Nietzsche are paramount to Spengler, not to say, Leibniz. Spengler saw correctly that Goethe was influenced unconsciously by Leibniz since we can experience and describe a city, or world history, from different angles, as a monad does. However, Spengler was not satisfied with being merely a monad but wanted to attain a bird's-eye view of world history. In that sense, he felt that Goethe's ideas of Gestalt (Form, like *Gestaltpsychology*) and the famous Faustian gaze on reality, were of paramount importance to him; in addition, Weber's notion of *Wirklichkeit* (reality as effect) and Nietzsche's terminology of Apollonian and Dionysian, served him also as metaphors to describe aspects of historical perspectives. Thus, his first volume entitled "*Gestalt und Wirklichkeit*" means in English patterns as they emerge during the development of a civilization confronting the reality, that is to say, the conditions of nature that impose themselves on human society. The second volume deals with "*Welthistorische Perspektiven*", that is to say, human development and civilization formations seen from a world-historical perspective. In that sense, Spengler plays the philosopher, the anthropologist, the sociologist, and the historian.

In this discussion, we focus on several aspects of Spengler's work that will enable us to get a better grip on his vision of the world, or global history. Of course, Spengler studies the paradigm of "The Rise and Fall", since Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Edward Gibbon's monumental work on the *Roman Empire*. In the 20th century that was followed up, aside Spengler, by Kurt Breysig's *Geschichte der Menschheit* (History of Humankind) in five volumes (between 1936 and 1955), or the late Yale University professor of history of religion, Jaroslav Pelikan's, *The Excellent Empire: The Fall of Rome and the Church*, based on the Rauschenbush Lectures of Fall semester 1985, that I had the opportunity to attend as a post-doctoral fellow. Pelikan's style of delivering in front of one hundred students and adults was magisterial, encompassing from ancient Rome to Gibbon, to Spengler to Marx: the rise and the fall of civilizations and the mighty, apparently relevant in the early 21st century.⁵ Aside from this paramount theme, Spengler was keen to take a critical view of our historical classification and categories, such as "Ancient, Medieval, Modern". He felt these categories were far too narrow and needed to be revised or replaced by categories that do justice to the historical developments, aside from Europe, of America (North and South). Near East (since 1924 Middle East), and the Far East

3 Cf. Hans Norbert Fuegen, *Max Weber* (Hamburg; Rowohlt Monographien, 1985); and Arthur Mitzman, *The Iron Cage: An Historical Interpretation* (New York: Knopf, 1970).

4 See William H. McNeill, *Arnold J. Toynbee: A Life* (Oxford University Press, 1989): "A powerful factor in forwarding this alteration of Toynbee's outlook was his encounter with the ideas of Oswald Spengler ...", 98.

5 In the Fall Semester 1985 the author attended a lecture series on "The Rise and Fall Theme" given by Prof. Jaroslav Pelikan at Yale University; there was great interest by the audience shown, students as well as senior citizens; also see Ernest Wolf-Gazo, "The Relevance of the Rise and Fall Paradigm" in *Dialogue and Civilization*, ed. by S. G. Safari (London: Solman-Azadahe Publication 2003), 33-47.

(China, Japan, Korea). Thus, the Decline theme was not to be narrowed to Europe but also to extend to other civilizations and culture, historically and geographically. In order to get a shortcut view of Spengler's vision, in this lecture, we will refrain from the general outline and sketches he provided with three tables of historical orientation that helps not to get lost in the reading of the work. Thus, we suggest that any novice reader of Spengler major work follow his guideline outlined in the three tables found in the first part of the first volume.⁶

I. ON THE RISE AND FALL PARADIGM IN HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

Ever since Gibbon dealt with ancient Rome's decline and fall this sort of narrative developed into a paradigm of understanding empires.⁷ Especially after the disastrous results of the aftermath of the First World War, which topples several monarchies, in Germany, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire, not only historians but the world public turned its eyes on the fascination of the drama of the Empire's growth, decline, and fall. Needless to say, revolution became a byproduct of empire toppling, especially since the French Revolution. In the early 21st century there seems to be a fascination with the decline of the United States of America and the rise of China. Thus, the theme of decline and fall seems to be relevant again in social media and Twitter culture. A certain Schadenfreude (entertaining secretly a pleasure) as to the USA forfeiting a monopoly of world power the empire fall celebrates many talk shows and book publishing. The revolutions in Germany are reviewed on German new media respectively, the Russian revolution reflected upon, and the Iranian revolution still active on many fronts. Thus the Rise and Fall paradigm is enmeshed in revolutionary discourse. The Portuguese, the Spanish, the French, the Dutch, and the British empires gone, dealt with in the colonial discourse, with Marxist slants by some, but little understood. Migration and enculturation are processes that are intimately connected to empire, but, in due course of contemporary globalization not too well understood. The two world wars halted the thinking process on these historical events, after all, most people fighting a war try to win, or are sidelined to survive. In Gibbon the reader is presented an ancient Rome in polished 18th century English, by now classified as classic, whereby history is transformed into high class literature about the

events of the mighty. The social, economic, psychological, not to mention political details are hardly discussed in the modern understanding of the social sciences.⁸

The new media of photography, film and audiovisual possibilities of the digital age makes it possible to grasp, in more detail, the events of historical, at least the last two centuries. The re-discovery of the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs by Champollion enhanced our understanding of Ancient Egyptian civilization. It is no accident that the modern audience of social media is fascinated with any news report of a new tomb discovered in Egypt. The archeology of human history is deeply ingrained in our consciousness; Freud is the modern pioneer archeologist of the soul. Thus, the rise and fall narrative is not simply a story that has a beginning and an end, but provides us with a track in which we can operate in, as best as we can: we have nothing else. Also, the paradigm under discussion is simple to understand for the non-academic person, for everyone, somehow, understands that where there is a beginning, birth, there is, inevitably an end, death. The rest seems to be nature's course. Of course, when we deal with historical events we do not deal with nature, but human action. That puts us into a quandary. Historical events can't simply be explained by natural causes or cycles. At this point, Spengler is helping us out by offering some open perspectives that we can explore. As in any human affairs success is not predetermined. And we have to expect failure, at times. Spengler emphasizes the practical reality, the praxis of human endeavors, more like Napoleon operations, never predetermine, but keep his options open, since every moment we are likely to be surprised by the unexpected. One of the secrets of Napoleon's success in military affairs. The costs were never limited, there was no public opinion to worry about and there were no mothers who could demonstrate in public on behalf of their sons. Soldiers were material needed to get the job done; the victors appeared in glossy magazines and textbooks as heroes. The dead and murdered receive monumental stone blocks to remember them by; the rest is silence.

Thus, the "Rise and Fall" theme usually refers to Empires and not to national states. Of course, there had been states that vanished, such as Poland one time, Prussia, and of late East Germany. They lived a relatively short span. Empires usually take several hundred years, or in the case of Ancient Egypt several thousand years. The paradigmatic case study in modern times since Gibbon is Ancient Rome; gives us a historical platform from which to see the whole development in centuries, epochs, and stages. The question follows: can we speak of Empire

8 Cf. Fernand Braudel, *A History of Civilizations*, trans. R. Mayne (New York: Penguin Books, 1993); relevant, Manfred B. Steger, *Globalization* (Oxford University Press, 2003); Paul Morland, *The Human Tide: How Populations Shaped the Modern World* (London: John Murray, 2019); Darell Bricker/John Ibbitson, *Empty Planet: The Shock of Global Population* (New York: Penguin, 2019).

6 Cf. DTV Edition, 71ff.

7 Cf. Alan Palmer. *The Decline and Fall of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Fall River Press, 2011).

after the globalization process? As you know, Americans have never understood themselves as Empire people, more like, liberators of the oppressed and delivering the messages of democracy. This leads us not only to the temporal aspects of Empire but also to historical categories in which we think.

In order to appreciate Spengler's speculative approach to the historical understanding, we must be aware that cultures, in his scheme, traverse a life-cycle, analogue to any individual. The categories of biology are applied such as cultures as being subjected to organic growth, represented in the life-cycle of the seasons, expressed in morphological categories, like Goethe's comparative morphology of plants. We should mention that Spengler had an excellent science education in mathematics and natural science despite his dissertation written at Halle University on "The Metaphysical Basis of Heraclitus's Philosophy". As was traditional for many, Spengler wrote a special thesis (Staatsexamen), after earning his Ph.D., to qualify for teaching on a secondary school level (Gymnasium). His topic was pure natural science, "On the development of the organ of the eyes in the animal kingdom", focusing on the special theme of the eagle's hunter perception. Needless to say, there is a small step from the animal kingdom and its hunter activities to the adoption by Spengler of the Faustian gaze. It is a transformed Faust as an Imperialist. Spengler travels widely and does not go unnoticed by the Prussian minister of Education Carl Heinrich Becker, whose field of research was the Near East. Spengler not only got to know Nietzsche's sister Elisabeth but was active in the Nietzsche Archive activities in Weimar. Although Spengler developed a disliking for academia, he, nevertheless, despite critical attitudes toward him and his work, earned the respect of many established figures of the Weimar cultural life, such as Max Weber, or the Weimar's Foreign Minister Gustave Stresemann. Spengler's letter certainly shows him into the limelight not only in the cultural sense but also in the sphere of politics. However, Spengler, the letters make very clear, was not a joiner of political parties.⁹

Thus, after exploiting "the rise and fall historical paradigm", Spengler focused on the historical categories, such as Ancient, Medieval, and Modern, in which the West has been thinking since the Enlightenment. Let us take a quick view of his critical handling of historical categories.

⁹ Cf Spengler's Briefe; Spengler's letters to Nazi propaganda Minister Goebbels is telling: he made clear that he was not available to the Nazi party.

II. ON THE CRITIQUE OF HISTORICAL CATEGORIES

Spengler questions the classification of Ancient, Medieval, Modern, in Western historical narrative. By applying a comparative morphology, he wonders if the specifically Western morphological pattern adequately captures the rest of the World's development, such as Chinese civilization or the Near East. Civilizations, as far as he is concerned, demonstrate a certain formation to reflect and express their encounter with Reality (*Wirklichkeit*) that forces us to go beyond our traditional historical categories and be able to envision a Global perspective, as to historical understanding and assessment. No doubt, Spengler forces us to think searching for a more viable historical understanding of non-Western civilizations and cultures. No doubt, European ancient, medieval, and modern times can't simply be applied to non-European developments. At this point, it is telling, since the 20th century Europe and North America became aware of their Modernity, the question emerges, what comes after the Modern, post-modernity. No doubt this category of post-modern is not very original and simply tells us that we have a problem with historical categories.¹⁰

No doubt, people living in ancient Egypt certainly did not think of themselves as ancient Egyptians, or, likewise, people living during the ages of Cathedral building, did not think of themselves as medieval people. With the advent of the French Revolution, the historical awareness in Europe grew to the extent that post-revolutionary Europe asked itself, where exactly we stand in history, in regard to the "ancient world". Medieval time was made out to be the "Dark Ages", defaming especially the Roman Catholic Church and its system of belief. A novel criterion was set up as a benchmark, to understand the order within history, namely the Enlightenment. Thus, since the French Revolution, any other historical period was compared to the Enlightenment, understood as the new pinnacle of world history. Certainly, Hegel's comprehensive world history follows this scheme, from the tyranny of the East to the Enlightenment of the West that was how history is understood in Hegel, with its many followers. In a kind of way, we can assert that post-Hegelian perspective, the Marxist, owes much to Hegel and transforms his teleological perspective, with the fulfilment of world history of Geist (the Spirit as rationality in the secular sense), into the development of the end result of history, the Proletariat. This is the famous standing Hegel on his feet; theory turns praxis. All this was still manifested within the realm of old Europe, until the two world wars in the

¹⁰ See Spengler, *Untergang* (DTV Edition 2003), 1: 77ff.

20th century turned this scheme of history into a myth, from which many benefitted, not to mention Mao's China.

It is an open secret that the Hegelian and Marxian versions of world history, with its main actors of Geist and the Proletariat, cannot be simply turned into Global history. Spengler understood this very quickly. By the time we arrived at the magic year 2000, it became clear that the traditional categories of historical understanding were inadequate to understand the migration phenomena or international terrorism. If many intellectual European maintain that religion has outlived its message, then we must ask, what happens after Religion? Yet, ironically many refugees and migrant who tend toward Europe had not given up their religion which put the intellectual public in Europe into a quandary. The response is logical: we must educate these people who come from "backward" countries, to bring them up-to-date. Ironically, in this process, the issue of religion has come forward in view that the traditional Western middle class finds that the time of undiminished growth, on their behalf, seems to have run its course. That is the reason why capitalism is aimed at from a moral point of view, being exploitative and evil. The solution is at hand: socialism with a touch of capital praxis, as contemporary China, seems to demonstrate. It now becomes clear there is a crisis of applying the traditional historical categories to the present globalization process. It is no wonder that Spengler, after the publication of his main work, is being rediscovered. Many questions arise, but no answers. This is the reason why, in the early 21st Century, there is a sense of crisis, after reviewing a century of modern history. What comes after Modernity? Spengler never asked this question, but, he pushes us to ask these kinds of questions since there are no quick solutions, or answers to the present, the global crisis in world history.

III. SPENGLER IN LETTERS

At this point, we want to assess Spengler's development as we see him through his correspondence with various peoples, including academician, and especially, after the publications of his *Der Untergang*, in 1919/1920, with well-known public figures in German politics of the Weimar Republic, Reichskanzler Gustav Stresemann, or the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset, or the sister of Nietzsche (Elizabeth Foerster-Nietzsche), or Goebbels himself, the Nazi propaganda minister. We also should remind ourselves that Spengler's work had some impact in New York City and the United States in general, in particular the American writer

of the Jazz age, F. Scott Fitzgerald, who was a great admirer of Spengler work; recommended it to his publisher and to his friend Ernest Hemingway. In short, we should see that Spengler, at one time, became international and did not stay a local figure in Germany. It also should be added, that Gertrud Stein, during her 1920s, was advertising for Fitzgerald, while supporting art people, such as Picasso, Hemingway, or James Joyce. Spengler's ideas were in the air during international discussions of the literary elite.

In a certain way, we can say that Spengler's *Untergang* book is a sort of self-portrait of the author's own development of his own peculiar understanding of world history. The work was not a typical presentation of a classic history book or a general classificatory presentation of his time. In addition, it should be mentioned that Spengler was not a member of any university, or faculty member, which made it more difficult for him to be accepted among the established academician of his time. The exception was the well-known historian Edward Meyer, leading historian of Roman Empire history at Berlin University, and the sociologist Georg Simmel. At one time, Spengler was to debate Max Weber, at the end of December 1919 at the Munich municipality, in which Weber pointed out at the importance of Spengler's work and authenticity.¹¹

Spengler sees a serious crisis not only in Germany and Europe but for civilization as a whole in world history.¹² He envisions the emergence of new types of human organization, thereof new types of human beings. The logical consequence would be a new type of world civilization. Spengler sees the emergence of the so-called "self-made-man" a new type of person operating in the economic and political sphere.¹³ In one letter he discusses the issues and themes of a "philosophy of history" with Weimar foreign minister Walther Rathenau.¹⁴ Spengler sees himself as a realist, but the results of his overall results are more of an intuition type of insight, based on empirical evidence; he acknowledges a sort of unconscious level and, step by step transforms into a conscious sense for specific form and style in which societies and civilizations turn into.¹⁵ He points out that, aside from art history, music and mathematics, critically important to understand specific types of forms of society. He was very conscious to be ahead of his times, always emphasizing style and form of human organization. It is clear

11 Cf. Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: Ein Lebensbild (1926)* (Muenchen: Piper Verlag, 1989), 686ff.

12 Letter 18.12.1914, edited Koktanek, 31 in Anton M Koktanik (Hrsg.), *Oswald Spengler: Briefe 1913-1936* (Muenchen: Beck Verlag, 1963).

13 Letter 7.9.1915, 48.

14 Letter 11.5.1918, 101.

15 Letter 14.6.1919, 103.

that the emerging German sociology, under Ferdinand Toennies, Georg Simmel, then Max Weber took note of Spengler's work, with a critical perspective, but they took Spengler serious, unlike many other academics in his time.¹⁶ In a decisive letter to Georg Misch, Professor of Philosophy at Goettingen University, Spengler outlines his thesis and makes clear that with Hegel's philosophy of history, history itself, becomes a conscious force in historical thinking; however, he wanted to rectify the classic presentation of world history, that usually ignorant the achievements and historical patterns for Chinese, Indian, and Islamic lands.¹⁷ In short, Spengler intends to correct these omissions by being comprehensive in our understanding of world history; despite the pioneering work of Hegel, we must go beyond Hegel, if we want to provide a complete and adequate pattern of global history. It seems, in the first part of the 21st Century we begin to materialize Spengler's vision: the reason why his work has been "rediscovered", especially in India and China. By the 1920s Spengler even became a fashion among the upper middle-class academics, seminars, lectures (*Vorlesungen*), at Heidelberg dealt with Spengler.¹⁸ The Berlin historian Eduard Meyers promoted Spengler's work with added comments that it is time that the West took Arabic culture serious and specifically referred to Spengler's chapters on Arabic culture in *Der Untergang*.¹⁹ Meyer repeats this plus made a special point about how important Asia is for world history.²⁰

By 1924 a special lecture at Leipzig University was announced to deal with "Spengler's Magical Culture on the Old Orient".²¹ And in 1926 the first PhD thesis on Spengler's work was written.²² No doubt despite his academic critics Spengler find himself in the center of discussion and debates in Weimar Germany; of course, the idea of the Decline of the West, after the First World War, was in everyone's mind. Spengler, however, sensed that this was only the beginning and not the result; needless to say, he was not to witness the even more devastating Second World War. He was offered a professorship at Leipzig but refused. In 1926 Elizabeth Foerster-Nietzsche congratulates Spengler on the One hundred thousand copies sold of *Der Untergang*.²³ In the United States, Spengler's work sold well and was received with positive acclaim, especially by F. Scott Fitzgerald; Spengler was invited by the New York Times

to contribute a special article on his thesis.²⁴ In the winter of 1919/1920, four lectures were given by Fedor Stepun in Moscow on Spengler and the *Untergang*; many people attended and the Russian translation of the *Untergang* was sold out.²⁵

The upcoming National Socialist Party (Nazi) also became aware of the importance of Spengler in the discussion of the place of Germany in world history. In fact, Spengler had a discussion with Hitler in Bayreuth and again, in Munich.²⁶ Spengler was not persuaded and, in fact, had a low opinion of the Nazi's views and character. Even Nazi propaganda minister Goebbels had invited Spengler to be available for the party; Spengler, in return, made it very clear that he had no interest in him nor the party and that he was not available.²⁷ Perhaps it was fortunate Spengler died already in 1936; no doubt, his fate during the Third Reich would not have been comfortable and Hitler and Goebbels would have reminded him of his negative attitudes toward them.

The German Ambassador to the United States, Hans Luther, understands very clearly Spengler's consequence for the development and movement of world history: history in its global form would move from the South to the North.²⁸ Of course, at this point we find ourselves in a new situation in which Asia, especially China, is emerging as an important World power, meaning, the direction of Global history, is moving from the North to the Far East. These new developments are at the forefront of the historical process in the early 21st century. In that sense we can refer to Spengler and built upon him, going beyond Spengler and assessing the development of Global history, as it is encountered in terms of Chinese world power. At present, no doubt we find ourselves in a critical situation, not unlike after the World Wars, in which we come to terms with the new direction of Global history, with the entrance of China as the new world power. The triangular competition between the United States, Russia, and China will be decisive in the 21st century. One of the reasons why Spengler is remembered and republished is precisely is that he went beyond the typical paradigmatic world-historical presentation, in which Global history ends up in the West. Yet, experience has shown, Global history finds itself at the very beginning, in that sense Spengler's work is relevant.

Shortly before he died Spengler formulated his understanding of world history, precisely, to the Berlin professor of philosophy, Eduard Spranger, where he says in one of his last letters:

24 Letters 23.11. 1928, 480; also Letter 18.1.1927, 493.

25 Letter 16.2.1933, 717.

26 Letter 26.7.1933, 698.

27 Letter 3.11.1933, 710.

28 Letter 27.4.1934, 724.

16 Letter 18.12.1918, 114.

17 Letter 5.1.1919, 116.

18 Letter 3.2.1921, 179.

19 Letter 25.6.1922, 202.

20 Letter 26.10. 1924, 363.

21 Letter 27.12.1924, 370.

22 Letter 21.10.1926, 470.

23 Letter 26.10. 1926, 473.

“Culture is, for me, an inner Form of historical becoming and not an amalgam of look-alike objects” (“Kultur ist fuer mich eine innere Form geschichtlichen Werdens und nicht eine Summe von aehnlichen Gegenstaende.”)²⁹ Thus, we can see that the letters are useful to get a grasp of Spengler’s own development of understanding world history, or, if we like Global history, being a continuous dynamic process, without necessarily a final goal, but a diversity of civilizations.

At this point, we are ready to take a look at Spengler’s three tables in which he outlines his understanding of the historical process on a global level.

IV. ON SPENGLER’S CLASSIFICATION OF EPOCHS IN WORLD HISTORY

Spengler presents his work from a bird’s-eye view of history (*Vogelperspektive*). He operates in the sense of “thinking in progress” (*lebendiges Denken*) and represents historical time symbolically. He follows Goethe’s method of configuration and thinking (*Gestalten und Gedanken*). He deals not only with the decline of European culture (1922) but with a European culture that had spread across the globe. In essence, it turns out to be a critique of modern civilization. Thus, his basic goal was to develop a philosophy of comparative morphology of world history. The idea of decline (*Untergang*) referred to the sinking of the Titanic in 1912, for the public, and was applied to the general political, economic, and cultural spirit of the time (the 1920s and 1930s). He emphasizes historical praxis and historical experience and hinted at the idea that the future could be engineered (in terms of *Gestalten*). Epochs are stratified, compared and confronted in order to arrive at a sense of periodization of the world.

Table 1 deals with the contemporary mind-epoch (*Geist*) and stratifies cultures: Indian since 1500, Ancient since 1100, Arabic since the break-away from Christianity, and European since 1900. He uses the metaphorical symbolism of the season of the year: the spring time finds culture in its agricultural activity and thinking in terms of contemporaneous intuition; the summer time shows a developing situation with a sense of consciousness; the Autumn see the emergence of the metropolitan city-scape with intelligence and engineering-planning at work. The wintertime of culture represents the urban development of world-city civilization: life becomes problematic, in general, we find a non-metaphysical and irreligious mentality,

²⁹ Letter 5.4.1936, 773, see also Anton M Koktanik, *Oswald Spengler: Briefe*, op. cit., 633.

with the soul’s capacity reduced. At the very moment where civilization “celebrates” its achievements, the decline has already started. This, according to Spengler, will only become apparent a generation later.

Table 2 deals with contemporary Art epochs; cultures such as Egyptian, Ancient, Arabic and Occidental cultures are compared: in pre-history we find chaos and mystic symbolism prevailing. As specific art culture emerges we find a development of style, language of forms and symbolism, the making of great masters. With the arrival of civilization, art becomes existence without form; sports, news, lifestyle, less symbolic formation, imagery, and PR (public propaganda about modern life).

Table 3 focuses on the contemporary epoch of Politics: Spengler compares and stratifies Egyptian, Ancient, Chinese, and Occidental politics: in pre-history, we find tribal forms of organizations, clans and no state; in fact, no real politics. As culture emerges within the political ramifications we find Nations, Feudal society, a State developed, and differentiation between the city and rural life, as well as the development of the third estate (*Buergetum*, bourgeoisie). Civilization emerges, along with capitalism that produces two important elements of modern civilization: Money and the Masses. *Metropolis* (acclaimed as the classic silent movie of 1930) and the rise of the 4th Estate: Masses. *Untergang* refers to all civilization not exclusively to Western culture; with *Metropolis* (1930) the decline starts as a completion of a culture; the world city becomes a monument of modern civilization: the cycle is complete. From a planetary perspective, Spengler sees West-European-American culture in its final stages.

CONCLUSION

Contrary to Spengler’s critics, especially in academia, he did not write a “history book”. Spengler’s approach was clearly in terms of philosophy. In short, the Decline of the West is a philosophy of history. The emphasis is on the decline and fall, not only of western European culture but of civilization at large. Spengler follows a biological paradigm: culture is an organism that has its beginning, develops into maturity, and, finally succumbs to its own failure, at the very point of its highest zenith. There is a certain irony in the whole development: at the end, nothing lasts forever and is subject to the paradigmatic theme of “Rise and Fall”, made famous by Gibbon’s work on the Roman Empire. The Decline was published at the right time, after

Germany's defeat of the First World War, and the negative atmosphere and radical politics ushering into Nazi Germany, with even worse consequences. But the philosophical aspect of Spengler's work remained of interest. Especially, his emphasis on non-European histories, such as China and the Arabic culture.

Spengler questions the classification of the historical period of ancient, medieval, and modern. He asks, does non-European history make sense in terms of historical periodization based exclusively on Europe? He felt, considering China and Arabia, that European periodization was not adequate to grasp the complex developments in Chinese and Arabian history. That is what was needed: to write a Chinese and Arabian history on its own terms. Needless to say, it is only in the last 20th and early 21st century that scientific research has begun to deal with China and Arabia, not as colonies of the West, but its own history. At this point, with the development of globalization, the historical perspective of global history will have to be re-assessed. This, if we may put it this way, was the enduring achievement of Spengler: to work out a truly global history.

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