



Oswald Spengler (1880–1936)

General

Oswald Spengler was a controversial German historian and “philosopher” of history most famous for his *Decline of the West*, the first volume, subtitled “Form and Actuality,” published in 1918, and the second volume, subtitled “Perspectives on World History,” published in 1922, *Prussianism and Socialism*, published in 1919, *Man and Technics*, published in 1931, and “Hour of Decision,” which discusses the historical crisis in the Germany of his day, published in 1934. However, it is his *Decline of the West*, which argues that the West has exhausted its creative energies and is moving into inevitable decline, which has had the greatest influence. Spengler has been accused of being sympathetic to the Nazis but, in fact, strongly rebuffed them.¹

Biography

Oswald Spengler was born in Blankenburg in the German Reich in 1880. When he was age 10, his family moved to the university city of Halle where he received a classical education at the local Gymnasium (comparable to an academically inclined “high school”) and studied Greek, Latin, mathematics, and the sciences, but also developed an interest in poetry, drama and music. It was here that he discovered Goethe and Nietzsche, who were to have a momentous influence on his intellectual development, Goethe for his “scientific” method, and Nietzsche for his relentless willingness to question everything. He attended several universities in Munich, Berlin, and Halle, pursuing an unfocussed study of a wide range of subjects. In 1903 he failed his doctoral thesis on Heraclitus at Halle but received his Ph.D. from Halle the following year. In order to acquire a teaching certificate, he wrote a secondary thesis on the development of the organ of sight in the higher animals, the text of which has been lost. He had a nervous breakdown in 1905. He then taught at several schools around Germany before moving to Munich where he lived until his death at age 59 in 1936. He lived in poverty during the years leading up

to the publication of *Decline*, but pushed forward believing that he was expressing a great transformative idea. He never married and his last years were spent in poverty and loneliness.

Decline of the West

The central idea of *Decline of the West* is that each culture is like an organism animated by a fundamental “world-feeling” (of how the world fundamentally is) that gets expressed in all of its cultural products. For this reason, there will be a “family resemblance” between the forms of each culture’s various cultural products, e.g., the forms its art, music, science, mathematics, architecture and even war take. The purest expression of a culture is its mathematics, in which its primordial conception of *space and time* is expressed. The mathematics of a culture is reflected in its science, its music, its art and its architecture. Further, like a living organism, each culture is born and proceeds through a series of stages: a creative spring, a mature productive summer, a declining autumn and death in winter, resulting in a cyclical view of the history of human civilizations. It is important to note that Spengler distinguishes between a culture and a civilization, the former referring to the earlier creative period and the latter to the exhausted older periods. The word “civilized” in Spengler, therefore, denotes the *exhausted* phase of a culture.

Spengler distinguishes three main cultures, the Classical (Apollonian), the Magian (Arabian/Near Eastern/Early Christian), and the “Western” (Faustian), which latter begins around the 10th century A.D. Spengler does *not* use these expressions in their ordinary senses. The “West” for Spengler is his own “Faustian” culture. Each of these cultures will have a radically different “Prime Symbol.” The prime symbol of the classical Greek culture is the near and present bodily form of things that constituted its existence (think of the 4th century BC statue of Aphrodite of Knidos). This is why ancient Greek painting contains *no ordered distances, only bodies*, and why Euclidean geometry is the mathematics of *surface and volume, not* a Cartesian infinite space of points. By contrast, the “Magian” culture conceives of the universe as a *cavern*, symbolized in the domed Mosque, in which *the primordial struggle between light and dark is played out in the human race*. The “being” of the Faustian soul, by contrast, is “loneliness” fed by a “yearning” for “distance” in “infinity” (recall that Goethe’s Faust made a deal with the devil).² This, Spengler suggests, is why Western civilization attempts to conquer space by the railroad, telephone and long-range weapons. To illustrate the way these different “world-feelings” are expressed in architecture, Spengler explains that in contrast with the closed

universe symbolized in the Magian Mosque, the “character of the Faustian cathedral [of the Renaissance] is that of the forest” as its “clustered pillars ... grow up out of the earth” like trees “and spread on high into an infinite subdivision”³

Spengler attempts to buttress his argument by comparing these civilizations with Eastern, Egyptian, Babylonian, Mexican and Peruvian civilisations. These will also go through the same organic series of stages, but since each is founded on their own unique primordial world-feeling, their rise and decline will work itself out differently than it does in the West. However, one cannot understand an organism by means of the science and intellect of the Enlightenment, which are themselves symptoms of decline. Rather, one must produce a “morphology” conceived as the opposite of an analytical dissection of the organism into its parts, that maps out the structural forms taken by the whole organism over its life-cycle.⁴ Understanding the pulse of life in an organism does not, however, disclose itself to science or the intellect but only to a “physiognomic” feeling.⁵ Consider Spengler’s comparisons of China and Egypt! The “Prime Symbol” of China, “*Tao*,” means “way.” Thus, Chinese civilization conceives of life as a “way.” Egyptian civilization also conceives of life as a “way,” but where the Egyptian sees life as *an inexorable path to the judges among the dead*, the Chinese “wanders” *through their world guided by friendly Nature*.⁶ This difference in Prime Symbols will express itself in differences in Chinese and Egyptian art, music, architecture, economics, war, and mathematics, which, in turn, will be different from Western art, music, architecture, economics, war, and mathematics.⁷

Criticisms

The main criticism of Spengler’s *Decline* is that his scholarship is weak. It is better on some of the European civilizations, but much weaker on Eastern and Central and South American civilizations. Spengler appears to have pre-conceived ideas about these diverse civilizations and then predictably “finds” the evidence he is looking for in some painting or text. He would probably reply that his technique requires an *imaginative* grasp of the primordial world-feeling of cultures/civilizations.⁸ A “systematic” history, that produces impressive facts might miss the primordial world-feeling of the culture that makes those facts comprehensible.

Influence

In the 20th century an number of historians, philosophers, and sociologists have appeared whose works bear a “family resemblance” to Spenglers.⁹ The great philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein was influenced by Spengler but suggested that Spengler could have been better understood if he has suggested that history *may* have played out in a certain way rather than that it *must* play out in that way.¹⁰ However, in fact, a number of famous intellectuals, including Martin Heidegger, Whittaker Chambers, Paul Kennedy, Jeremy Griffith, and others have argued that there is considerable truth in Spengler’s pessimism about the future of the West.¹¹

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¹ Hughs, pp. 127-130

² *Decline*, v. 1, p. 386

³ *Decline*, v. 1, pp. 395-96

⁴ Hughs, pp. 10-11, 59

⁵ Hughs, p. 125

⁶ Hughs, p. 78

⁷ Hughs, p. 10

⁸ Hughs, p. 135

⁹ Hughs, pp. 59, 138ff, 176-187

¹⁰ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 19

¹¹ Tierney.

Online copy of v. 1 of *Decline of the West* in English: <https://archive.org/details/Decline-Of-The-West-Oswald-Spengler/page/n1/mode/2up>

Online copy of both volumes in German:

<http://www.zeno.org/Philosophie/M/Spengler,+Oswald/Der+Untergang+des+Abendlandes>

Online copy of *Technics and Man* in English:

<https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.53913/page/n5/mode/2up>