Oswald Spengler: Criticism and Tribute

by Revilo P. Oliver

Oswald Spengler

Conceived before the First World War is Oswald Spengler's magisterial work, Der Untergang des Abendlandes (Munich, 1918). Read in this country chiefly in the brilliantly faithful translation by Charles Francis Atkinson, The Decline of the West (New York, two volumes, 1926-28), Spengler's morphology of history was the great intellectual achievement of our century. Whatever our opinion of his methods or conclusions, we cannot deny that he was the Copernicus of historionomy. All subsequent writings on the philosophy of history may fairly be described as criticism of the Decline of the West.

Spengler, having formulated a universal history, undertook an analysis of the forces operating in the immediately contemporary world. This he set forth in a masterly work, Die Jahre der Entscheidung, of which only the first volume could be published in Germany (Munich, 1933) and translated into English (The Hour of Decision, New York, 1934). One had only to read this brilliant work, with its lucid analysis of forces that even acute observers did not perceive until 25 or 30 years later, and with its prevision that subsequent events have now shown to have been absolutely correct, to recognize that its author was one of the great political and philosophical minds of the West. One should remember, however, that the amazing accuracy of his analysis of the contemporary situation does not necessarily prove the validity of his historical morphology.

The publication of Spengler's first volume in 1918 released a spate of controversy that continues to the present day. Manfred Schroeter in Der Streit um Spengler (Munich, 1922) was able to give a précis of the critiques that had appeared in a little more than three years; today, a mere bibliography, if reasonably complete, would take years to compile and would probably run to eight hundred or a thousand printed pages.

Spengler naturally stirred up swarms of nit-wits, who were particularly incensed by his immoral and preposterous suggestion that there could be another war in Europe, when everybody knew that there just couldn't be anything but World Peace after 1918, 'cause Santa had just brought a nice, new, shiny "League of Nations." Such "liberal" chatterboxes are always making a noise, but no one with the slightest knowledge of human history pays any attention to them, except as symptoms.

Unfortunately, much more intelligent criticism of Spengler was motivated by emotional dissatisfaction with his conclusions. In an article in Antiquity for 1927, the learned R.S. Collingwood of Oxford went so far as to claim that Spengler's two volumes had not given him "a single genuinely new idea," and that he had "long ago carried out for himself" -- and, of course, rejected -- even Spengler's detailed analyses of individual cultures. As a cursory glance at Spengler's work will suffice to show, that assertion is less plausible than a claim to know everything contained in the Twelfth Edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Collingwood, the author of the Speculum Mentis and other philosophical works, must have been bedeviled with emotional resentments so strong that he could not see how conceited, arrogant and improbable his vaunt would seem to most readers.

It is now a truism that Spengler's "pessimism" and "fatalism" was an unbearable shock to minds nurtured in the Nineteenth-century illusion that everything would get better and better forever and ever. Spengler's cyclic interpretation of history stated that a civilization was an organism having a definite and fixed life-span and moving from infancy to senescence and death by an internal necessity comparable to the biological necessity that decrees the development of the human organism from infantile imbecility to senile decrepitude. Napoleon, for example, was the counterpart of Alexander in the ancient world.

We were now, therefore, in a phase of civilizational life in which constitutional forms are supplanted by the prestige of individuals. By 2000, we shall be "contemporary" with the Rome of Sulla, the Egypt of the Eighteenth Dynasty, and China at the time when the "Contending States" were welded into an empire. That means that we face an age of world wars and what is worse, civil wars and proscriptions, and that around 2060 the West (if not destroyed by its alien enemies) will be united under the personal rule of a Caesar or Augustus. That is not a pleasant prospect.

Greatness or Optimism

The only question before us, however, is whether Spengler is correct in his analysis. Rational men will regard as irrelevant the fact that his conclusions are not charming. If a physician informs you that you have symptoms of arteriosclerosis, he may or may not be right in his diagnosis, but it is absolutely certain that you cannot rejuvenate yourself by slapping his face.

Every detached observer of our times, I think, will agree that Spengler's "pessimism" aroused emotions that precluded rational consideration. I am inclined to believe that the moral level of his thinking was a greater obstacle. His "fatalism" was not the comforting kind that permits men to throw up their hands and eschew responsibilities. Consider, for example, the concluding lines of his Men and Technics (New York, 1932):

Already the danger is so great, for every individual, every class, every people, that to cherish any illusion whatever is deplorable. Time does not suffer itself to be halted; there is no question of prudent retreat or wise renunciation. Only dreamers believe that there is a way out. Optimism is cowardice.

We are born into this time and must bravely follow the path to the destined end. There is no other way. Our duty is to hold on to the lost position, without hope, without rescue, like that Roman soldier whose bones were found in front of a door in Pompeii, who, during the eruption of Vesuvius, died at his post because they forgot to relieve him. That is greatness. That is what it means to be a thoroughbred. The honorable end is the one thing that can not be taken from a man.

Now, whether or not the stern prognostication that lies back of that conclusion is correct, no man fit to live in the present can read those lines without feeling his heart lifted by the great ethos of a noble culture -- the spiritual strength of the West that can know tragedy and be unafraid. And simultaneously, that pronouncement will affright to hysteria the epicene homunculi among us, the puling cowards who hope only to scuttle about safely in the darkness and to batten on the decay of a culture infinitely beyond their comprehension.

That contrast is in itself a very significant datum for an estimate of the present condition of our civilization...

Three Points of Criticism

Criticism of Spengler, therefore, if it is not to seem mere quibbling about details, must deal with major premises. Now, so far as I can see, Spengler's thesis can be challenged at three really fundamental points, namely:

(1) Spengler regards each civilization as a closed and isolated entity animated by a dominant idea, or Weltanschauung, that is its "soul." Why should ideas, or concepts, the impalpable creations of the human mind, undergo an organic evolution as though they were living protoplasm, which, as a material substance, is understandably subject to chemical change and hence biological laws? This logical objection is not conclusive: Men may observe the tides, for example, and even predict them, without being able to explain what causes them. But when we must deduce historical laws from the four of five civilizations of which we have some fairly accurate knowledge, we do not have enough repetitions of a phenomenon to calculate its periodicity with assurance, if we do not know why it happens.

(2) A far graver difficulty arises from the historical fact that we have already mentioned. For five centuries, at least, the men of the West regarded modern civilization as a revival or prolongation of Graeco-Roman antiquity. Spengler, as the very basis of his hypothesis, regards the Classical world as a civilization distinct from, and alien to, our own -- a civilization that, like the Egyptian, lived, died, and is now gone. It was dominated by an entirely different Weltanschauung, and consequently the educated men of Europe and America, who for five centuries believed in continuity, were merely suffering from an illusion or hallucination.

Even if we grant that, however, we are still confronted by a unique historical phenomenon. The Egyptian, Babylonian, Chinese, Hindu, and Arabian ("Magian"), civilizations are all regarded by Spengler (and other proponents of an organic structure of culture) as single and unrelated organisms: Each came into being without deriving its concepts from another civilization (or, alternatively, seeing its own concepts in the records of an earlier civilization), and each died leaving no offspring (or, alternatively, no subsequent civilization thought to see in them its own concepts). There is simply no parallel or precedent for the relationship (real or imaginary) which links Graeco-Roman culture to our own.

Since Spengler wrote, a great historical discovery has further complicated the question. We now know that the Mycenaean peoples were Greeks, and it is virtually certain that the essentials of their culture survived the disintegration caused by the Dorian invasion, and were the basis of later Greek culture. (For a good summary, see Leonard R. Palmer, Mycenaeans and Minoans, London, 1961). We therefore have a sequence that is, so far as we know, unique:

Mycenaean → Dark Ages → Graeco-Roman → Dark Ages → Modern. If this is one civilization, it has had a creative life-span far longer than that of any other that has thus far appeared in the world. If it is more than one, the interrelations form an exception to Spengler's general law, and suggest the possibility that a civilization, if it dies by some kind of quasi-biological process, may in some cases have a quasi-biological power of reproduction.

The exception becomes even more remarkable if we, unlike Spengler, regard as fundamentally important the concept of self-government, which may have been present even in Mycenaean times (see L. R. Palmer, Mycenaeans and Minoans). Democracies and constitutional republics are found only in the Graeco-Roman world and our own; such institutions seem to have been incomprehensible to other cultures.

(3) For all practical purposes, Spengler ignores hereditary and racial differences. He even uses the word "race" to represent a qualitative difference between members of what we should call the same race, and he denies that that difference is to any significant extent caused by heredity. He regards biological races as plastic and mutable, even in their physical characteristics, under the influence of geographical factors (including the soil, which is said to affect the physical organism through food) and of what Spengler terms "a mysterious cosmic force" that has nothing to do with biology. The only real unity is cultural, that is, the fundamental ideas and beliefs shared by the peoples who form a civilization. Thus Spengler, who makes those ideas subject to quasi-biological growth and decay, oddly rejects as insignificant the findings of biological science concerning living organisms.

It is true, of course, that man is in part a spiritual being. Of that, persons who have a religious faith need no assurance. Others, unless they are determined blindly to deny the evidence before us, must admit the existence of phenomena of the kind described by Franz E. Winkler, M.D., in Man the Bridge Between Two Worlds (New York, Harper, 1960), and, of course, by many other writers. And every historian knows that no one of the higher cultures could conceivably have come into being, if human beings are merely animals.

But it is also true that the science of genetics, founded by Father Mendel only a century ago and almost totally neglected down to the early years of the Twentieth Century, has ascertained biological laws that can be denied only by denying the reality of the physical world. Every educated person knows that the color of a man's eyes, the shape of the lobes of his ears, and every one of his other physiological characteristics is determined by hereditary factors. It is virtually certain that intellectual capacity is likewise produced by inheritance, and there is a fair amount of evidence that indicated that even moral capacities are likewise innate.

Man's power of intervention in the development of inherited qualities appears to be entirely negative, thus affording another melancholy proof that human ingenuity can easily destroy what it can never create. Any fool with a knife can in three minutes make the most beautiful woman forever hideous, and one of our "mental health experts," even without using a knife, can as quickly and permanently destroy the finest intellect. And it appears that less drastic interventions, through education and other control of environment, may temporarily or even permanently pervert and deform, but are powerless to create capacities that an individual did not inherit from near or more remote ancestors.

The facts are beyond question, although the Secret Police in Soviet Russia and "liberal" spitting-squads in the United States have largely succeeded in keeping these facts from the general public in the areas they control. But no amount of terrorism can alter the laws of nature. For a readable exposition of genetics, see Garrett Hardin's Nature and Man's Fate (New York, Rinehart, 1959), which is subject only to the reservation that the laws of genetics, like the laws of chemistry, are verified by observation every day, whereas the doctrine of biological evolution is necessarily an hypothesis that cannot be verified by experiment.

The Race Factor

It is also beyond question that the races of mankind differ greatly in physical appearance, in susceptibility to specific diseases, and in average intellectual capacity. There are indications that they differ also in nervous organization, and possibly, in moral instincts. It would be a miracle if that were not so, for, as is well known, the three primary races were distinct and separate at the time that intelligent men first appeared on this planet, and have so remained ever since. The differences are so pronounced and stable that the proponents of biological evolution are finding it more and more necessary to postulate that the differences go back to species that preceded the appearance of the homo sapiens. (See the new and revised edition of Dr. Carleton S. Coon's The Story of Man, New York, Knopf, 1962).

That such differences exist is doubtless deplorable. It is certainly deplorable that all men must die, and there are persons who think it deplorable that there are differences, both anatomical and spiritual between men and women. However, no amount of concerted lying by "liberals," and no amount of decreeing by the Warren [Supreme Court] Gang, will in the least change the laws of nature.

Now there is a great deal that we do not know about genetics, both individual and racial, and these uncertainties permit widely differing estimates of the relative importance of biologically determined factors and cultural concepts in the development of a civilization. Our only point here is that it is highly improbable that biological factors have no influence at all on the origin and course of civilizations. And to the extent that they do have an influence, Spengler's theory is defective and probably misleading.

Profound Insights

One could add a few minor points to the three objections stated above, but these will suffice to show that the Spenglerian historionomy cannot be accepted as a certainty. It is, however, a great philosophical formulation that poses questions of the utmost importance and deepens our perception of historical causality. No student of history needed Spengler to tell him that a decline of religious faith necessarily weakens the moral bonds that make civilized society possible. But Spengler's showing that such a decline seems to have occurred at a definite point in the development of a number of fundamentally different civilizations with, of course, radically different religions provides us with data that we must take into account when we try to ascertain the true causes of the decline. And his further observation that the decline was eventually followed by a sweeping revival of religious belief is equally significant.

However wrong he may have been about some things, Spengler has given us profound insights into the nature of our own culture. But for him, we might have gone on believing that our great technology was merely a matter of economics -- of trying to make more things more cheaply. But he has shown us, I think, that our technology has a deeper significance -- that for us, the men of Western civilization, it answers a certain spiritual need inherent in us, and that we derive from its triumphs as satisfaction analogous to that which is derived from great music or great art.

And Spengler, above all, has forced us to inquire into the nature of civilization and to ask ourselves by what means -- if any -- we can repair and preserve the long and narrow dikes that alone protect us from the vast and turbulent ocean of eternal barbarism. For that, we must always honor him.

About the Author

Revilo P. Oliver (1910-1994), an American scholar of international stature, taught Classics at the University of Illinois for 32 years. He knew twelve languages and wrote articles in four of them for academic publications in the US and Europe. Between 1955 and 1959, he was a frequent contributor to William Buckley’s National Review. He helped to organize the anti-Communist John Birch Society, and for some years was a frequent contributor to its main periodical American Opinion. Oliver was a friend and supporter of the Institute for Historical Review. From 1980 until his death he was a member of Editorial Advisory Committee of the IHR’s Journal of Historical Review.

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Revilo Oliver on History

... The development of a working philosophy of history is the most urgent, as well as the most difficult, task of Twentieth Century thought.

The future will always resemble the past because human nature does not change.

The social and political questions of our day are all primarily historical problems. To think about them rationally, we must begin by consulting the record of human experience in the past. And we soon realize that if only we knew enough about history – and understood it – we should have the answers to all our questions.

No man lives long enough to behold with his own eyes a pattern of change in society. He is like the midge that is born in the afternoon and dies at sunset, and which, therefore, no matter how intelligent it might be, could never discover, or even suspect, that day and night come in regular alternation. Unlike the midge, however, man can consult the experience of the comparatively few generations of his species that have preceded him during the comparatively brief period of about five thousand years in which human beings have had the power to leave records for the instruction of their posterity.