Spengler, Epigenetics and the Idea of ‘Race’

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Series: Epigenetics and the Idea of ‘Race’

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Oswald Spengler’s teaching on human race, controversial to both the Right and the Left, might be vindicated by recent studies in epigenetics.

1. Introduction

Oswald Spengler affronts both the positivism of Liberalism and Marxism on the one hand (which are based on a lineal ‘march of history’ from ‘primitive to modern’, ending in a utopian ‘end of history’, at which humanity has reached its apex of striving), and the ‘Right’ on the other, from which Spengler himself emerged, but which has nevertheless often rejected his non-zoological definitions of ‘race’. Both concepts, whether of ‘Right’ or Left’, Spengler saw as hangovers of 19th century materialism, the Zeitgeist which was primarily represented by England. Hence, Marxism for example was just as much a product of that Zeitgeist as the Manchester School of Free Trade, and Darwinism. Indeed, these doctrines were often conflated (Social Darwinism), while Darwinism was brought to Germany by Haeckel and largely displaced German Idealism in the name of science. Because the present Zeitgeist remains that of the 19th century, with Free Trade now more entrenched over much of the Earth than ever, under the name of ‘globalization’ and ‘democracy’, materialist doctrines remain dominant. Spengler’s explication of such concepts as the race soul, the spirit of the age, and the metaphysical imprint of the landscape on race-formation, seem absurd to the scientism of the present, which is the legacy of the positivism of prior centuries. However, a new biological science, epigenetics, offers an explanation as to how race-formation can, as Spengler suggested, be shaped by history and culture giving meanings beyond calliper measurements and gene clusters.

Spengler stated that there is no such nebulous entity as ‘mankind’, and ‘no march of history’, understood as some kind of Darwinistic evolution from ‘primitive to modern’, in which every human participates in a market economy and votes for Westminster-style parliaments.

Oswald Spengler as a man of the ‘Right’ is anathema to the whole genre of the Left, as well as the Liberalism of the 19th century ‘Whig’ variety, if for no other reason (although there are a multitude) than that his organic, cyclical interpretation of history rejects the positivist, progressive-lineal history that continues to be the dominant outlook among academia. Spengler stated in his magnum opus The Decline of The West, and elsewhere, that there is no such nebulous entity as ‘mankind’ in historical terms, and ‘no march of history’, understood as some kind of Darwinistic evolution from ‘primitive to modern’, culminating in a global utopia in which every human, from Sweden’s fjords to the Kalahari and Amazon, participates in a market economy and votes for Westminster-style parliaments. This is precisely what one proponent of this positivist approach, Dr. Francis Fukuyama, optimistically predicted would be the ‘end of history’.1 It is the same outlook that possessed the Victorians, who saw the 19th century as the culmination of all anterior human striving, reflected in the Industrial Revolution. This was expressed in a particularly cogent manner by A. R. Wallace, as influential a proponent of biological evolution as Darwin, when in 1898 he ebulliently stated in his cheerfully titled The Wonderful Century:

Not only is our century superior to any that have gone before it but … it may be best compared with the whole preceding historical period. It must therefore be held to constitute the beginning of a new era of human progress. … We men of the 19th Century have not been slow to praise it. The wise and the foolish, the learned and the unlearned, the poet and the pressman, the rich and the poor, alike swell the chorus of admiration for the marvellous inventions and discoveries of our own age, and especially for those innumerable applications of science which now form part of our daily life, and which remind us every hour or our immense superiority over our comparatively ignorant forefathers.2

This utopian optimism, supposedly ‘proven’ by 19th century science and industry, was itself hardly new. Marquis de Condorcet had said much the same in the prior century.3 It seems that every century of the ‘Winter’ epoch of the West throws up a new prophet of ‘progress’ – de Condorcet, A. R. Wallace, Marx, Francis Fukuyama in our time – and in the name of such ‘progress’ wars and revolutions can be fought. The more democratic in name, the bloodier these ideologies seem to become (Jacobinism, Bolshevism). This is not to say that the prophets of a universal ‘march of progress’ went unchallenged. Rather, such types are not the norm, but are aberrations that emerge during what Spengler called the ‘Winter’ epoch of a Civilization, where the spirit has become ossified, and the instinct etiolated. To the contrary, throughout preceding culture epochs, the usual historical outlook is cyclic, and is reflected even in the conceptions of time among cultures in a traditional sense, as examined by Mircea Eliade.4 Spengler provided 20th century scholarship to the traditional cyclical outlook. In the West, Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), considered the father of historical-philosophy, had already stated that civilizations go through epochs similar to those of Spengler: Poetic, Heroic, Reasonable (Rationalism),5 analogous to Spengler’s Spring, Summer, Autumn/Winter.

World War I interrupted the optimism of the 19th century, as the war era brought not only economic distress, but a collapse of the social, moral and spiritual fabric of Western society, albeit a fabric that men such as Spengler could point out had long been in a state of decay. To paraphrase Nietzsche, the Great War gave a push to that which had been falling. There were those who saw the war’s aftermath and its culture-chaos as a victory of what Spengler in the final chapter of The Decline of The West calls the fight between ‘Money and Blood’, in which ‘Money’ won. Poets such as Ezra Pound and W. B. Yeats agreed with Spengler in regarding the democratic era as a façade for plutocracy, and they deplored the commercialization of the arts as a product of the epoch: culture as a commodity like everything else.

While Spengler emerged as a leading proponent of the so-called ‘Conservative Revolution’ in Weimar Germany, itself a reaction to this chaos, his continuation of the German Idealist legacy that placed spirit above matter in the formation of the Volk put him in opposition to many emerging elements of the ‘Right’ in Germany before the war, and those on much of the ‘Right’ outside of Germany after the war, over the question of ‘race’. Ironically, the Hitlerites owed more to English Darwinian and various Malthusian conceptions than to German Idealism, although the two mixed uneasily in the Third Reich. While the Left regard Spengler as a ‘racist’ philosopher, racial theorists conversely saw his rejection of biological racial taxonomy as having something of the ‘Left’ about it. Indeed, Spengler commits a heresy in citing the work of Franz Boas of Columbia University, who provided statistical analysis for the hypothesis that landscape changes skull shape among first generation immigrant children of Sicilians and Jews, and that the skulls of such children tend towards an ‘American’ skull type.

Yet Spengler did not reject race; rather he affirmed it. However, in his rejection of every facet of the Zeitgeist of 19th century materialism, Spengler affirmed the German Idealist philosophers, Hegel,6 Herder, Fichte, Goethe, and later Nietzsche, who had defined nationality, Volk and nation, as expressions of a ‘spirit’ of the land that impresses on its inhabitants in a metaphysical sense. For today’s materialism, this seems unscientific, whether from a Left-wing total rejection of ‘race’ as an illegitimate concept, or from the viewpoint of those scientists who insist – in the face of much adversity – that race is primarily based on gene clusters.7 Indeed, with respect to this legacy, Goethe was the basis of Spengler’s historical method. He is cited throughout The Decline of The West. Of the method of historical morphology developed from Goethe, Spengler states:

Culture is the prime phenomenon of all past history and future world-history. The deep, and scarcely appreciated, idea of Goethe, which he discovered in his ‘living nature’ and always made the basis of his morphological researches, we shall here apply – in its most precise sense – to all the formation of man’s history, whether fully matured, cut off in the prime, half opened or stifled in the seed. It is the method of living into (erfühlen) the object, as opposed to dissecting it.8

This is what Spengler calls Goethe’s ‘looking into the heart of things’, ‘but the century of Darwin is as remote from such a vision as it is possible to be’. We look in vain for any treatment of history that is ‘entirely free from the methods of Darwinism’.9 Spengler credits Goethe with describing the ‘epochs of the spirit’ of a civilization that agrees with his own, preliminary, early, late, and civilized stages,10 which Goethe called in an 1817 essay, Epochs of the Spirit, the Ages of Poetry, Theology, Philosophy, and the Prosaic. They equate with Spengler’s seasonal metaphors (Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter) which he calls ‘spiritual epochs’.

Ironically, and tragically, the predominant outlook adopted by the Hitlerites was not that of German idealist conceptions of the Volk, which implies a cultural-spiritual identity; but that of English biologism, including Darwinism, and hence, materialism, Darwinism itself having been imparted to Germany by Haeckel, and race doctrine by the Englishman Houston Stewart Chamberlain. In particular, Spengler’s Decline of The West stood in contradiction to the race doctrine of Hitler’s chief ideologue, Alfred Rosenberg, whose Myth of the Twentieth Century was intended as a sequel to Chamberlain’s Foundations of the Nineteenth Century. When Spengler refused to be appropriated by the Third Reich, despite Goebbels’ efforts,11 he became persona non grata, and his final book, The Hour of Decision, was proscribed, albeit widely read.12

Epigenetics implies that common experiences, or ‘history’, can shape the collective psyche of a group and can be passed along.

Spengler seemed to have been refuted as much as Lamarck and Lysenko, from every vantage point of science. The primary mystery, like the mechanism by which Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious can be somehow inherited, was how landscape can seemingly magically impress itself on clusters of individuals to form them into a ‘race’? The very idea seems to lie more in the realm of the supernatural than of science. However, there is presently a scientific revolution taking place that is altering many perceptions and giving possible answers to perplexing questions on the now-reconsidered ‘inheritance of acquired characteristics’. Although this is often confused in the popular press with the debunked theories of Lamarck and the USSR’s Lysenko, this branch of biology called ‘epigenetics’ does not replace the laws of Mendelian genetics, but shows that genetics is not the only mechanism by which characteristics can be passed along. Indeed, the original exponent of epigenetics, who coined the word in 1942, was the eminent British geneticist C. H. Waddington.13 What epigenetics seems to indicate is that the experiences of one generation can affect the character of subsequent generations. If this is correct, then it implies that these common experiences, or ‘history’, can shape the collective psyche of a group and be passed along. Such traits are also reinforced through generations by being maintained as collective memories in myths, legends, religions and customs.

Hence in hypothesizing that history shapes and forms ‘race’, epigenetics could be at least one of the factors that enables this process to occur. It means that rather than ‘race’ being the creator of history, as per the race theories that dominated the Third Reich,14 Spengler’s contention – and that of other conservative philosophers in the German Idealist tradition such as Eric Voegelin,15 namely,that history forms ‘race’ – becomes scientifically plausible, as does Jung’s theory of the inherited collective unconscious, archetypes, the ‘national spirit,’ and the spiritus loci.16

Rootedness of families in landscape produces what Spengler called ‘race’, defined as ‘a character of duration’.17 This ‘conception of a morphology of world history’, ‘of the world-as-history in contrast to the morphology of the world-as-nature’,18 is important in considering the decline and fall of civilizations as an organic process of life cycles, which genetic interpretations overlook or discount.

2. Spengler on ‘Race’

Spengler, in rejecting a zoological interpretation of history as well as a zoological categorization of ‘race’, stated that ‘what I for the first time have pointed out is that “nation”, like state, art, mathematics, is only a term, that race-forms like art-forms are determined by the style of a culture and cannot as stationery substances be made the foundation of history.’19 Spengler stated that ‘races’ have a ‘plant-like’ quality, insofar as ‘a race has roots.’ ‘Race and landscape belong together. Where a plant takes root, there it dies also.’ A race is permanently fixed in ‘its most essential characters of body and soul’ to its home. If the race can no longer be found in its home, it has ceased to exist.20

A race does not migrate. Men migrate, and their successive generations are born in ever-changing landscapes; but the landscape exercises a secret force upon the plant-nature in them, and eventually the race-expression is completely transformed by the extinction of the old and the appearance of a new one. Englishmen and Germans did not migrate to America, but human beings migrated thither as Englishmen and Germans, and their descendants are there as Americans.21

In The Hour of Decision, he wrote of this conception in contrast to a materialistic conception of race:

But in speaking of race, it is not intended in the same sense in which it is the fashion among anti-Semites in Europe and America to use it today: Darwinistically, materialistically. Race purity is a grotesque word in view of the fact that for centuries all stocks and species have been mixed, and that warlike – that is, healthy – generations with a future before them have from time immemorial always welcomed a stranger into the family if he had ‘race’, to whatever race it was he belonged. Those who talk too much about race no longer have it in them. What is needed is not a pure race, but a strong one, which has a nation within it.22

Spengler accepted the race-forming force of the landscape in changing the physiology and soul. Carl Jung said much the same.23 Spengler referred to studies that had shown that ‘Whites of all races, Indians and Negros have come to the same average in size of body and time of maturity’, referring to the research of American anthropologist Franz Boas that indicated the impact of environment on the change in skull shape of American-born children of Sicilian and German-Jewish migrants.24 Spengler stated that assumptions should not be made about race based on ancient skulls, such as those of the Etruscans, Dorians and others.25 He wrote that ‘of all expressions of race, the purest is the House’, expressing the ‘prime feeling of growth’ of a race.26 Hence, he studied the meaning of Doric columns, the domed mosque, and Gothic spires, each expressing the soul of a civilization much better than cranial angles. To Spengler one could tell more of the élan of a race or an individual representative of the leadership stratum of a race by a portrait painting than by an examination of the skull. A portrait captures a certain look of character and bearing, of the noble or of the craven, which skeletal indices do not indicate.

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Clearly, Spengler’s views on ‘race’ were antithetical to the National Socialists, and continue to be so by those of the ‘Right’ who are inspired by a genetic determinism. Nonetheless, Spengler remains intrinsically heretical to liberalism. His conception of ‘race’ is as objectionable as any other at a time when it is academically fashionable to deny that any such a concept exists. Spengler rejected every notion as ‘mankind’ as a historical and cultural unit. Each civilization is self-contained and follows its own life-course, to the extent that Spengler even rejects the notion of a continuity between the Classical and Western Civilizations which have long been assumed, by contending that there is a gulf that divides spiritual outlooks between peoples, reflected in the arts, architecture and even the sciences, including mathematics. Between the Doric Column and the Gothic Spire there was no kinship of Volk spirit. Hence, there is no ‘world history’, ‘history of mankind’, ‘world civilization’, etc. Such a rejection of any form of universalism or positivism forever makes Spengler anathema to large sections of the still-dominant liberal paradigm across academe. Nonetheless, given the times, or the Zeitgeist, in recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in Spengler, perhaps motivated by a broad unease at the direction of society under the impress of what is called ‘globalization’. The symposium entitled ‘Between Adoration and Contempt – the Transfer of the Cultural Morphology of Oswald Spengler into the Europe of the Interwar Period (1919–1939)’ held at the Leibniz Institute for European History (IEG) in Mainz in June 2012 is an example of the interest, as are the activities of The Oswald Spengler Society. Many academic studies are now forthcoming, such as the volume, Oswald Spenglers Kulturmorphologie,27 Michael Thöndl’s Rassebegriff, and Demandt’s Untergänge des Abendlandes.28

However, as one should expect, a more positive reconsideration of Spengler is also going to create a reaction. Some reaction has been prompted by the assumption to the U.S. presidency of Donald Trump. In this context the spectre of Spengler as a ‘pessimistic’29 ‘fascist’ arises. One present commentator, in describing Trump as a ‘fascist,’ using the straw-man argument that defines ‘fascism’30 to suit the writer’s intent, introduced Spengler to American readers by stating that The Decline of the West ‘may be considered one of the most extreme and comprehensive formulations of historical pessimism and cultural pessimism in recent centuries. It reeks of Trumpism.’ The writer, Dr. Tarpley, then attempts to summarize the outlook of Spengler:

Here Spengler is speaking as a historian or a would-be a philosopher of history. For him, the historical process is simply an unending chaos. History has no program, no goal, no reason – nothing but the most brutal caprice. No time and place is better than any other time and place – here Spengler takes over the famous slogan of the reactionary romantic Leopold von Ranke that all historical epochs are at the same distance from heaven, meaning that they are all from equal value. There is no lawfulness. There is no such thing as cause and effect – at one point Spengler argues that the very notion of causality is a provincial belief held in the Western world, or more precisely, a Baroque phenomenon (referring to the bombastic and highly ornamented style of the 1600s in Europe). In Spengler’s concept of history, there is no progress, and no development to be seen.31

While Dr. Tarpley fails to provide any connection between Spengler and ‘Trumpism’, he describes Spengler as the ‘race theorist’ who was influential in the assumption to government of National Socialism, captioning a picture of Spengler:

German ‘race scientist’ Oswald Spengler, who shares much responsibility for the coming of the National Socialist regime. Trump’s followers are students of Spengler’s book, The Decline of the West. Has Trump been reading this book as a manual for seizing power as a Caesarist?32

Dr. Tarpley does not present any example of a ‘Trump follower’ having read Spengler, for his allegation that Trump followers are ‘students’ of The Decline of The West. However Dr. Tarpley does provide a summary of why Spengler remains abhorrent to those who adhere to 19th century positivism, as defined by Dr. Tarpley:

We must therefore turn away from the artificial national identity demanded by Trump and reaffirm the democratic universalism of American ideas and the American mission. There is no ethnocultural basis for an American nation in Philly cheese steaks or the National Football League, as demagogues like Trump and Michael Savage seem to believe. Rather, the nation needs a mission. This can only be to lead the world into an era of economic recovery and unprecedented material and cultural prosperity. And this must be supplemented by assuming a role second to none in the permanent colonization of nearby space objects as an imperative of economic and cultural development – in the service of optimism. With that, the pessimistic mysticism and solipsism of Gumplowicz,33 Spengler, and Trump will be finished once and for all.34

The irony should be evident that Dr. Tarpley’s sense of the USA’s global ‘mission’, culminating in the colonisation of space, is Faustian.

One ‘race scientist’ (to use Dr. Tarpley’s term) who does provide a cogent description of Spengler’s actual views in a chapter dedicated to race theorists, is Oxford University biologist Dr. John R. Baker. Dr. Baker adhered to a genetic view of race that was at odds with Spengler’s but his description of Spengler’s views is objective and insightful, and not prejudiced by assumptions. In the chapter ‘From Kossinna to Hitler’, Baker dismisses the contention that the German philologist and archaeologist Gustaf Kossinna (1858–1931) was a significant influence on National Socialist race theory, before proceeding to Spengler.35 Of Spengler, Baker states that he was ‘in intellect and erudition … greatly superior to most of those who have been regarded – rightly or wrongly – as the precursors of Nazism.’36 Baker outlines Spengler’s morphology of cultures, and does so with admirable cogency. He states that while critics were quick to point out inaccuracies in Spengler’s lengthy tome, ‘it was not found so easy to challenge the main conceptions’ of this ‘absorbing book’, ‘which retains much of its interest and value today.’ For Baker, the most important question is what Spengler meant by Volk. Baker retains the use of Volk, regarding English terms such as ‘nation,’ ‘people,’ ‘folk’ and ‘race’ as inadequate. He cites Spengler that Völker ‘are neither linguistic nor political nor zoological, but on the contrary spiritual units.’ Quoting Spengler, Volk is defined as ‘a society of men that feels itself to be a unit.’ As a biologist possessing what Spengler might describe as an ‘English’ outlook, Baker quotes what he regards as a ‘remarkable statement’ for Spengler’s claim that it is, in Baker’s words, ‘the action of a group of men that turns into a Volk.’ Of this, Baker quotes Spengler as stating that ‘[t]he great events of history were in fact not carried out by Völkern; on the contrary, the great events first produced the Völker.’ Quoting from The Decline of The West, ‘to make Spengler’s outlook on the ethnic problem perfectly clear’, 37 Baker cites Spengler’s rejection of ‘bodily inheritance.’ Volk is not held together by bodily inheritance, which might change. The decisive factor is that ‘their soul lasts.’ ‘It cannot be often enough repeated that this physiological origin exists only for science and never for Volk consciousness, and that no Volk has advanced itself for this ideal of ‘pure blood.’ Belonging to a race is nothing material, but something cosmic and ordained. The felt harmony of a destiny.’38

Spengler, Epigenetics and the Idea of ‘Race’ – Part 2

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The study of epigenetics, far from demonstrating the non-existence of race as liberal academics would like to believe it does, might in fact explain the mysteries of ethnicity itself.

3. Epigenetics

Despite Baker’s admiration for Spengler’s intellect and erudition, he is ‘eliminated at once’, along with Nietzsche, ‘as irrelevant to the ethnic problem’, as he ‘makes it abundantly clear that the Volk was not an ethnic taxon.’1 Baker’s purpose in writing Race was to define and classify races or what he called ‘ethnic taxa’ in a biological way. Spengler would have rejected such categorizing as an expression of the English materialistic Zeitgeist of weighing and measuring all things. For Darwinian scientists such as Baker, Spengler’s definition of a ‘race’ was ‘remarkable’, to use Baker’s word, insofar as it seemed odd.

Liberals are obliged to recognize differences in ‘race’ because of the adverse medical impact in trying to ignore them.

How is it possible that there can be any inheritance of characteristics acquired from collective experiences (history) within a given landscape that go to form a ‘race’, as Spengler defined it? How is it that, as quoted by Baker, according to Spengler, ‘great events first produced the Volker’? Is this nothing more than the debunked theories of Lamarck and Lysenko, and a resort to the supposedly disproven study of Boas on skull measurements? How can any such concept as a Zeitgeist or a Volkgeist (suggesting ‘spirits’) be anything but the romanticism of the German Idealists such as Goethe and Herder? As we have seen, Goethe was one of two (the other being Nietzsche) to whom Spengler paid special tribute for their influence on his thinking. Interestingly, Nietzsche was a precursor of epigenetics, writing in 1886:

That which his ancestors most liked to do and most constantly did cannot be erased from a man’s soul. … It is quite impossible that a man should not have in his body the qualities and preferences of his parents and forefathers, whatever appearances may say to the contrary. This constitutes the problem of race. …2

To understand one another it is not sufficient to employ the same words; we have also to employ the same words to designate the same species of inner experiences, we must ultimately have our experience in common. That is why the members of one people understand one another better than do members of differing peoples even when they use the same language; or rather when human beings have lived together for a long time under similar conditions (of climate, soil, danger, needs, work) there arises from this a group who ‘understand one another’, a people. In every soul in this group an equivalent number of frequently recurring experiences has gained the upper hand over those which come more rarely: it is on the basis of these that people understand one another, quickly and ever more quickly … it is on the basis of this quick understanding that they unite together, closely and ever more closely.3

While there has been confusion in the popular press, which take it as a revival of Lysenko and Lamarck,4 epigenetics does not replace Mendelian inheritance. The concept was explained in a paper published in 1956 by Waddington on an example of the inheritance of an acquired characteristic.5 Dr. Chris Faulk writes: ‘Epigenetics means that the environment can impact your physical characteristics, your phenotype, and potentially even be passed on to your offspring’.6

Not all heritability is genetic, and humans, like all animals, have the ability to adapt to the environment. One of the main mechanisms for altering gene expression is through epigenetics, literally ‘above the genome’. Epigenetics has been in the news lately for its potential impacts on human health, and has even been touted as requiring a complete overhaul of the modern synthesis of evolutionary theory. The basic premise of epigenetics is that chemical marks (DNA methylation, histone modifications, and bound non-coding RNAs) can result in gene expression changes and can be passed down through cell division without changes in a cell’s DNA. If these changes are passed down through the generations, they are considered non-Mendelian, since they do not follow the law of genetic segregation. Practically, epigenetics means that the environment can impact your physical characteristics, your phenotype, and potentially even be passed on to your offspring.7

Liberal academics claim that epigenetics shows that race is a social construct that can be disposed of, yet they are profoundly uncomfortable with it. They contort to make epigenetics fit their ideologies. For example, while stating that ‘race is a social construct’ a team of biologists nonetheless also stated that ‘racial and ethnic categories also reflect the shared experiences’.8 ‘Shared experiences’ are history and culture, the very elements that Spengler stated form a ‘race’. Liberals are obliged to recognize differences in ‘race’ because of the adverse medical impact in trying to ignore them. Certain traits acquired from the environment including those to which pregnant women are subjected, generation after generation, are inherited as acquired characteristics. These become race characteristics for good or ill, physiologically, psychologically, morally, spiritually, and culturally. The Galanter study comments:

[W]e find that CpG9 sites known to be influenced by social and environmental exposures are also differentially methylated between ethnic subgroups. These findings called attention to a more complete understanding of the effect of social and environmental variables on methylation in the context of race and ethnicity to fully understanding this complex process.10

Scientists are obliged to face such realities:

The future of medicine, Dr. Burchard11 argued, carefully considers genetic ancestry, race, ethnicity and culture all at the same time. He published research back in 2011 showing how far the medical research establishment is from factoring in the nuances of race and ethnicity. That 2011 research showed that 94 percent of study participants in modern genetic studies are white, Dr. Buchard said. ‘We study whites a lot, and then we try to generalize that to Sri Lankans, blacks, Asians, and other racial groups. That’s not just socially unjust, it’s bad science and bad medicine.’12

What is of concern to liberal-activist academics is that the concept of genetically fixed races that has been consigned to near-oblivion among respectable academia, might be replaced by the concept of epigenetically formed races. This is environmentalism, but not of the type that accommodates Marxist or liberal ideologies. Becky Mansfield, Associate Professor of Geography at Ohio State University, sees epigenetics as an exciting new science that can be both ‘anti-racist’, but also used as a new theory of race-formation. She claims that ‘racism forms race’ epigenetically. That is to say, the liberals again try to reduce any conception of ‘race’ to being nothing other than a social construct contrived by a white patriarchal conspiracy as a means of exploiting some mysteriously invented population cluster that have arbitrarily been designated racially. However, the liberals are in a quandary. Mansfield for example is bothered by the predicament that focusing on dietary and hence medical problems among the Afro-American population perpetuates ‘race’ as a ‘social construct.’

What I will show is that, far from making race meaningless, epigenetic biopolitics marks a transformation and even intensification of racialization. To the extent that biology is mutable, then evidence that childbearing women of color fail to properly manage their individual and collective bodies doubly proves that race exists, and exists on the body. … Whereas race may have started as a fiction – a social construction – through epigenetic biopolitics it is made quite material, not just in phenomenological embodiment, but in the molecular-environmental development of individuals.13

Professor Mansfield is concerned that studies and warnings about poor diet among Afro-American mothers might result in perpetuating racial stereotypes, which epigenetically become real; yet the option is to ignore these problems to the detriment of public health. That is a predicament for those who deny that ‘race’ has any meaning other than as a socio-political method of exploitation.

Epigenetics might explain the hitherto mysterious mechanism by which a ‘race soul’ might be formed and inherited.

Additionally, and of even more relevance to the Spenglerian approach to race-formation, behavioural epigenetics studies the way experiences (and hence history) can be epigenetically passed on, becoming a collective acquired characteristic; that is, a race-trait, an archetype and a culture. This branch began when Moshe Szyf, molecular biologist and geneticist, and Michael Meaney, neurobiologist, both with McGill University, Montreal, hypothesized whether severe stressors could epigenetically cause neuron changes in the brain.14 Dan Hurley of Discover magazine writes of this:

According to the new insights of behavioral epigenetics, traumatic experiences in our past, or in our recent ancestors’ past, leave molecular scars adhering to our DNA. Jews whose great-grandparents were chased from their Russian shtetls; Chinese whose grandparents lived through the ravages of the Cultural Revolution; young immigrants from Africa whose parents survived massacres; adults of every ethnicity who grew up with alcoholic or abusive parents – all carry with them more than just memories.15

In regard to the epigenetic impact on the Jewish race memory, a recent genetic study of thirty-two Jewish men and women who had experienced trauma during World War II, and of their children, compared with Jewish families who had lived outside of Europe during the war, concluded that there is ‘an association of preconception parental trauma with epigenetic alterations that is evident in both exposed parent and offspring, providing potential insight into how severe psychophysiological trauma can have intergenerational effects’.16

4. Conclusions

The same principles of epigenetics are applicable to all races, or ethne, as responses to challenges and other shared experiences, whose impact is often reinforced by myths, legends, ritual and customs. Indeed that is the purpose of legends, myths and the religious forms they take. It is the meaning of history and the definition of ‘culture’. The steppes shaped the Russian psyche, the seas the English. Spengler explained race-formation by such concepts. Epigenetics might explain the hitherto mysterious mechanism by which a ‘race soul’ – or Jung’s collective unconscious if one prefers – might be formed and inherited.