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Max Weber and Oswald Spengler were colorful contemporaries who shared a flair for encyclopedic scholarship, a fascination for world history, an abiding interest in the distinctive nature of Western civilization, and a passion for realpolitik. Although both of these preeminent figures in the comparative study of civilizations advanced challenging theories of the origins of modern capitalism, only Weber's is familiar to generations of social scientists. His treatise on the role of Protestantism in the emergence of capitalism precipitated one of the great intellectual controversies of the twentieth century. Spengler's chef d'oeuvre, The Decline of the West, whose concluding chapter was devoted to economic questions, "shaped the intellectual discourse of the twenties [in Germany] like no other work." Indeed, the sensational appearance of the first volume on the eve of Germany's shocking military collapse and the fall of the Hohenzollern monarchy, led shortly before Weber's death to a dramatic public debate in Munich between him and Spengler, whom Weber regarded in the words of his wife, Marianne, as "a very brilliant and scholarly dilettante." In this article, the theories of the origins, spirit, and development of capitalism of the two thinkers will be compared and contrasted.

Despite the yawning gulf which separates the conclusions reached by them on many historical questions, both Weber and Spengler believed that penetrating insight into historical phenomena required an ambitious, comparative treatment of the civilizations of world history. As Jürgen Kocka observed, Weber carried out a program of "social and universal-historical oriented comparative historical research." The fact that capitalism has only spontaneously and indigenously emerged in the modern West makes their comparative-civilizational perspective of particular interest.

In his approach to the study of economic phenomena, Speng-
ler was influenced by the Historical movement in German political economy, of which Weber was a guiding light in its final phase. The Historical movement consciously diverged from British political economy, stressing the necessity of examining economic activity within the larger context of the historical development of cultures and civilizations. Since both Weber and Spengler considered capitalism to be an epochal development in world history, indeed, Weber characterized it as "the most fateful force in our modern life," it is necessary to first discuss important aspects of their respective philosophies of history in order to place their conflicting analyses of capitalism in the proper context. Weber certainly did not regard himself as a philosopher of history; in his critique of nineteenth-century economic stage theories and historical materialism he denied the possibility of valid, world-historical philosophical systems. Yet, one should not overlook the fact that it is not possible for any thinker to investigate and reflect upon the events and cultural phenomena of world history without at the same time making use of an implicit or explicit philosophy of history. Thus, Wolfgang Mommsen notes that Weber's work contains "numerous starting-points" for a "theory of universal history." Despite the fact that Weber never developed and systematically elaborated a philosophy of world history as his counterpart Spengler did in *The Decline of the West*, one can extract the basic elements of Weber's philosophy of universal history from the corpus of his writings. First we shall inquire into Spengler's philosophy of world history as unveiled in his major work, the first volume of which Georg Simmel is reputed to have said, contained the "most significant historical philosophy since Hegel," before turning to that adumbrated by Weber.

*The Decline of the West* presents a philosophical survey of world history from the emergence of advanced civilizations around 3500 B.C. to the first two decades of the twentieth century. Spengler identifies eight civilizations, or in his terminology cultures, which form the real theater of action in world history—Western, Graeco-Roman, Indian, Babylonian, Chinese, Egyptian, Arabian, and Mexican. His focus is clearly fixed upon the West European-American and Graeco-Roman worlds; the remaining civilizations, with the exception of the Arabian, are subjected to an examination in some cases somewhat brief, in others cursory. Each civilization is
endowed with a spirit or “soul;” all cultural expression of this ethos is symbolic. The Faustian spirit, the West European cultural “soul,” which suddenly emerged at the onset of the Gothic age around 1000 A.D., is profoundly historical in outlook. Like the mythical Faust of Goethe’s masterpiece, bearers of the Western ethos view external reality dynamically—they strive to totally expropriate nature and completely reshape the world. Spengler stresses, as does Weber, the universal significance of Western civilization in modern times. Since 1500 A.D., for the first time in human history, West European-American civilization, in sharp contrast to all other civilizations, has transformed the entire surface of the earth into the theater of an interconnected human history.

The prominent idealistic elements in Spengler’s philosophy of history are enlisted in his positivistic project of the comparative study of civilizations in order to determine what amount to “laws” of cultural and historical dynamics and to facilitate historical prediction. All of these eight civilizations experience history in a cyclical fashion metaphorically comparable to the organic cycles found in living forms. Each civilization undergoes a process of birth, adolescence, maturity, and decline. Although animated by their unique leitmotifs, civilizations pass through analogous phases during their development. Thus, one can supposedly anticipate the major historical trends in the future of the West by reference to the instructive examples provided by the life-cycles of former civilizations. Spengler designates the phase during which a civilization grows and displays vitality as the initial period of “culture” (Kultur), in contrast to the subsequent period of civilization (Civilisation), during which the first signs of decline manifest themselves. While the period of cyclically developing, creative culture lasts approximately a thousand years, the concluding stage of civilization varies in duration, stretching from centuries to millennia.

Spengler’s outlook of cultural despair and his thesis of civilizational cycles culminating in urban decadence is foreshadowed in Tönnies’ “foundational work of German sociology of the year 1887, Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft. According to Spengler, a key paradigm of world history, which is successively repeated in different styles by the eight civilizations he identifies, is the cyclical evolution from market-places, to modestly-sized Kulturstädte ("cul-
tural cities"), to the dominant world-city, terminating in megalopolitan decay. In the classical world, the cyclical sequence is represented by a marketplace of Homeric Greece, Kulturstäde like Periclean Athens, megalopolitan Rome; in the modern West, a marketplace of Gothic Europe, Kulturstäde like Renaissance Florence, megalopolitan Berlin or New York.

The first three and a half decades of Spengler's life coincided with the heyday of European imperialism. He propounds a primarily cultural interpretation of imperialism as opposed to the more conventionally bourgeois or Marxian economic ones of his contemporaries Hobson, Hilferding, Lenin, and Luxembourg. Imperialism intensifies during the phase of Zivilisation in each cultural cycle, as the "civilized peoples" of the center seek to exploit more and more the "barbarians" of the periphery. The correlate to imperialism is materialism: both the imperialism of the Pax Romana and the Pax Americana serve to facilitate the "bread and circuses", the materialistic and hedonistic lifestyles of the megalopolises and the civilized "provinces." However, the imperialistic subjugation of their peripheries by the civilizations of the past, which obviously was far less extensive than that undertaken by the modern West, elicited the increasingly stubborn and ultimately successful resistance of the "barbarians" inhabiting the periphery. The affluence and peace in which dominant civilizations in world history have luxuriated proved to be transitory. They have inevitably succumbed to the internal corrosion of societal sterility, i.e., quasi-pacifism, the breakdown of family structure, and the decline in the birth rate, in combination with the external danger of the revolt of the periphery. Spengler, more so than Weber, was interested in the perennial question of civilizational decadence, which had deeply interested Polybius, Ibn Khaldun, Montesquieu, Gibbon, Vollgraff, Lasaulx, Burckhardt, and Brooks and Henry Adams. Unlike Weber and Toynbee, he saw modern Western civilization as being unable to avoid the fate of civilizational decadence which had befallen all the civilizations of the past.

Spengler argues that the evolution of industrial civilization and its uneven global penetration create merely the illusion that history is linear-progressive and that mankind shares a collective destiny. "The civilization, which today has seized hold of the entire surface of the earth, is not a third era, but a necessary stage exclusively of Western culture, which distinguishes itself from ev-
The boundless energy of the modern Western imperialistic drive has compelled the entire non-Western world to adopt its civilizational forms and experience history in its style.

Spengler analyzes the different styles of the civilizations of world history in order to determine their underlying ethos. Weber and Spengler both entertain sharply conflicting conceptions of the spirit suffusing Western civilization. A buoyant confidence in progress dominated the intellectual landscape of the West in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, being expressed in diverse fashion by such luminaries in historical thought as Condorcet, Turgot, Hegel, Ranke, Comte, Macaulay, Bancroft, and Marx. Weber, despite being an heir of the Enlightenment, certainly did not share, with his fin de siècle Nietzschean and Neo-Kantian scepticism, the optimism about the course of modern history which Condorcet, Comte, and Marx exuded. Yet Weber readily accepted the corollary to this Enlightenment optimism about progress, namely, that world history was characterized by a remarkable advancement in rationality. He championed the debatable thesis that the distinguishing and most significant feature of Western civilization was its success in creating profoundly rational civilizational forms.

On his way home after his public debate with Spengler in the Munich Rathaus in February 1920, Weber acknowledged to a student accompanying him along the Ludwigstrasse, the importance of Nietzsche to understanding the modern world. "The world, in which we ourselves intellectually exist, is to a large extent a world bearing the stamp of Marx and Nietzsche." Although Weber greatly admired Nietzsche and was significantly influenced by him, he did not draw upon his legacy as extensively as did Spengler. Spengler, as Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's heir in German cultural pessimism, advanced a powerful counterposition to Weber's thesis that Western Europe had brought forth the highest civilizational forms of rationality. For the hallmark of West European culture was its blind, irrational urge to give expression to unparalleled dynamism, transformative power, and expansive energy in ultimately dangerous forms. The West is animated by a spirit of profound irrationality, despite the brilliance, superficial veneer of rationality, and seeming superiority of its civilization.

Analysis of the great religions of world history has been of im-
portance to comparative civilizational studies. Spengler's interest in the comparative study of the great religions of world history, while considerable, was not as great as that of Weber, who made it a focus of his empirical efforts in the final decade and a half of his life. Weber analyzed the great religions in order to ascertain what stimulatory or retardant effect they have purportedly exerted upon the development of rationalized economic activity. Spengler also awarded religion an important place in his historical cosmos; he considered it to be a fundamental expression of the ethos of a civilization in its phase of Kultur.

Weber adheres to the traditional position which holds that the modern West has been significantly influenced by the cultural legacy of Greece and Rome. Spengler, on the other hand, iconoclastically denies that the influences exerted by the ancient Mediterranean world upon West European-American civilization had a profound impact upon its key features of cultural development. Antiquity had only superficially affected the external cultural features of the evolution of the revolutionary new ethos immanent in Western man since the onset of the Gothic age. He maintains that the Gothic religion, or alternatively, Germanic-Catholic Christianity, forms the wellspring of West European-American civilization and is unprecedented in world history. Its spiritual ethos has continued to inform Western cultural development irrespective of the further evolution of the Christian religion since 1000 A.D. and the spread of irreligiosity in the West in recent centuries.

Appropriating Nietzsche's famous teaching of the will to power, Spengler argues that the newly-born Faustian "soul," in stark contrast to the spirit of all other cultures, is driven by overpowering, goal-oriented energies, by the will to power.

Life means for [Western man] struggling, overcoming, winning out. The struggle for existence as the ideal form of existence already belongs to the Gothic era and forms clearly enough the basis of its architecture. The nineteenth century has given it merely a mechanical-utilitarian rendering.27

West European culture is "energetic, imperativistic, and dynamic,"28 distinguished by historical personalities without parallel in world history.29 An "irrepressible life force" pulsates throughout its history.30 Spengler's thesis of holistic cultural development is
foreshadowed in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* of Hegel, who influenced his ideas on world history and civilizational development. The overflowing energy of the Occident holistically expresses itself in all aspects of its cultural and historical development—soaring Gothic cathedrals, energetic symphonic music, perspective oil painting, double-entry bookkeeping, differential calculus, cannon, the irresistible expansionism of the Vikings, the conquistadores, and the British empire builders.

While Weber, in his approach to comparative civilizational studies, relied in large part upon a contrastive examination of the ethos of world religions in order to place into sharp focus the uniqueness of the West, Spengler draws upon wide-ranging aesthetic reflection. As William Dray observed, “Spengler’s theory [of history] is by far the most aesthetic of the great speculative systems.” Weber, in assessing many of the same singular cultural achievements of the West which attract the critical aesthetic faculties of Spengler, finds not manifestations of a Faustian, dynamic will to spatial transcendence as is the case with Spengler, but an unrivaled aptitude for rationalization. Thus, from the Weberian perspective, “rational” harmonic music, the “rational” use of the Gothic vault, the “rational” utilization of linear and spatial perspective in painting, are all outstanding examples of profound rationalization in cultural forms. For Spengler, the Gothic cathedral captures the spirit of a revolutionary new, psychological orientation to the world. “The interior of a cathedral draws upward and into the distance with primeval power.” For Spengler as opposed to Weber, Western music is only superficially a “rational” cultural product, as it responds to powerful, irrational longings. The finest musical compositions of the Occident from Bach to Brahms and Bruckner “constantly awaken” a “primeval feeling of resolution, salvation, of the dispersion of the soul in infinity, a liberation from all material heaviness.”

Spengler, like Marx and Weber, is enthralled by the dynamism of the modern West. The question emerges as to what constitutes its source, which finds its first major cultural expression for Spengler in Gothic Christianity. He maintains that all the civilizations that have ever existed have been profoundly shaped by the characteristics of the particular geographical area in which they have arisen.
Here there is a mother-landscape behind all expression-forms, and just as the city, as temple and pyramid and cathedral must fulfill their history where their idea originated, so too the great religion of every Springtime is bound by all roots of its being to the land over which its world-image rises.

Before turning to Spengler's ideas on capitalism, some further preliminary remarks on his approach to the study of economic phenomena are in order. Unlike Weber, who was called to a university chair in Nationalökonomie at Freiburg early in his career, his formal education in economics was limited. However, one does not know to what degree this largely autodidactic intellectual compensated for this by his own reading in the field. Spengler did attend a regular series of lectures in economics at the University of Berlin. Interestingly, he is believed to have also sat in on lectures in Munich by the distinguished German political economist Lujo Brentano, one of the leaders for a time of the Younger Historical School in German political economy, which had come to the forefront in the 1870’s. As a young student Spengler may have been influenced in the development of his own political economic ideas by Brentano’s critical position towards British classical economic theory, founded by Adam Smith, enriched by the contributions of Malthus, Ricardo, and James Mill, and brought to its final synthesis by his son John Stuart Mill. Spengler shares the main ethical and methodological objections to British classical theory raised by mainstream, German political economists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Tomas Riha notes in his illuminating study, German Political Economy: The History of an Alternative Economics, both German economists and social scientists, with their firm attachment to an organic conception of society, were very critical of the classical school’s promotion of the material interests of the individual, the abstract homo oeconomicus, as the basis of economic activity and its concomitant alleged neglect of ethical considerations in economic life. The methodological criticism directed against classical theory, which Spengler prominently incorporates in the opening pages of the concluding chapter of The Decline of the West, entitled, “The Form-World of Economic Life,” denounced its abstractness and ahistorical character and the associated claim of universal validity. This criticism of British classical theory had been voiced by Brentano, whose
objections were representative of many figures in German political economy. In the second volume of *The Decline of the West* Spengler utilizes quotations from the first two volumes of Werner Sombart's magnum opus, *Der moderne Kapitalismus*, one of the most important contributions to German political economy in the early twentieth century. Sombart was a guiding light, along with his colleague Weber and Spiethoff of the Youngest Historical School, which brought to a conclusion the Historical movement in German political economy. The Youngest Historical School sought to illuminate the peculiar characteristics of modern capitalist society, interpreting it as being a special "epoch," "historical individual," or "style" in the process of the development of Western civilization. Sombart was deeply interested in delineating the unique spirits or states of mind active in historical cultures, envisioning these spirits as being at the root of diverse economic systems in different epochs. As we will presently see, Spengler advances an extreme but nonetheless provocative theory of the relationships between the cultural forms of a civilization and its economic life.

Spengler, like the leading German speculative philosophers of history before him, Herder, Hegel, and Marx, and like Weber also, the supreme historical sociologist, wholeheartedly embraces the historicist axiom that the study of history offered the approach par excellence to the understanding of man as both a social and political being. Spengler rejects the Anglo-Saxon approach to the study of economic phenomena, which seeks to derive universally valid laws of economic interaction through the application of deductive reasoning, because he considers this to be an ahistorical approach. Economic forms are historical phenomena, and Spengler believes they must be appreciated by reference to the underlying cultural ethos that purportedly informs all historical manifestations of a given civilization. Consequently, every civilization possesses its own economic style. Capitalism is "the objectification of something entirely spiritual, the translation of an idea in a living, historical form." Modern capitalism in the West is the mechanistic, materialistic, and utilitarian expression during the phase of *Zivilisation* of the extraordinarily dynamic spirit of West European culture earlier strikingly embodied in Germanic-Catholic Christianity during the Gothic age.
According to Spengler’s comparative approach, the analogue of the modern economic system of the West with its unique industrial technology is the extensive Roman slave economy. In the modern world, the imitation and diffusion of modern science and technology and Western economic ideas and processes in the non-Western world does not constitute a response to powerful psychological needs as it was for Westerners, who indigenously and spontaneously developed them. For Spengler, it is merely an act of imitation engendered by imperialistic penetration of the periphery and power-political competition.

As opposed to Weber, who champions the idea that the ethical precepts of Catholicism were antagonistic to the emergence of a capitalistic spirit, Spengler considers the fundament of Germanic-Catholic Christianity to be indispensable to the rise of capitalism centuries later. Central to the dynamism of modern capitalism, with its unleashing of tremendous, entrepreneurial energies and its facilitation of the comprehensive, scientific-technological manipulation and exploitation of the natural world, is the novel conceptualization of the soul introduced by Gothic Christianity. For Faustian Christianity, whether in the form of Catholicism or in Protestantism, the decisive point is that the soul is esteemed as an immortal source of radiant energy. The chief preoccupation of Faustian Christianity is the “continued existence of the soul as a pure center of force for all eternity.” This religious conception captures the extraordinary individualism, dynamism, transformative energies, and expansive power unique to the West.

As implied in the preceding analysis, Spengler advances an iconoclastic interpretation of the historical continuity of the Christian faith. He maintains that there are two, distinctly different, historical varieties of Christianity in the Western world—in his distinctive terminology, the Magian and the Faustian. Faustian Christianity refers to the entirety of Christian, religious expression subsequent to the sudden emergence of Gothic Christianity in approximately 1000 A.D. Since early or Magian Christianity, having been transplanted in the Occidental world during the Roman Imperial era, is one of the many religious expressions of the cultural spirit of Magian or Arabian civilization, as opposed to that of Western Europe, it is a virtually completely different religion, despite the extensive borrowing of external religious forms by Gothic Chris-
Christianity from early Christianity. The conceptualization of the soul, the nature of immortality, and the ethos of early Christianity and Faustian Christianity are completely different. Not the comparatively passive, fraternal Magian spirit of early Christianity, but the individualistic and dynamic ethos of Gothic Christianity suffuses West European-American civilization.

The eight civilizations in Spengler's typology all undergo a grand, economic developmental cycle. Each cycle commences with the dominance of peasant agriculture, which is superseded in turn by a growing conflict between town and country, which finally culminates in the formation of a dominant, imperialism economic system with its center of gravity in a few, select world cities. These megalopolises exercise their hegemony through financial means.

But the economic life, just like the social, forms a pyramid. In the rustic substratum a completely primitive condition maintains itself almost unaffected by the culture. The late urban economy, already the activity of a resolute minority, looks down with steady contempt upon the early agricultural economy... Finally the world city brings in a civilized world economy, which radiates from the extremely elitist circles of a few focal points, subjecting the rest to itself as a provincial economy.

Spengler, as a systematic philosopher of world history, does not succeed in his attempt to convince the reader of The Decline of the West that the various civilizations experience a grand, economic cycle adhering to a uniform pattern. On the one hand, he argues that civilizations succumb to sterility and petrifaction and that there exists a tendency for the increasingly complex and refined, economic interaction of a late civilization to lapse into stagnation. Yet this idea conflicts with his more interesting thesis that this kind of economic interaction is inherently unstable.

... The quantity of work of all cultures grows by an enormous amount, and so there develops at the beginning of every civilization an intensity of economic life which is excessive in its tension and constantly in danger and nowhere can be maintained for a long time.

The passage above contains a provocative argument and a profound one, when specifically applied to the future evolution of the modern international economic system, whose feverish pace of global financial and economic interaction could culminate in an awful breakdown. But it is a dubious description of the eco-
nomic systems of the civilizations of ancient China, India, and Byzantium, with their demonstrated capacity to continue functioning, in spite of their stagnation.

Despite this important ambiguity, which Spengler didn’t attempt to resolve, he leaves little doubt in the mind of his readership that he anticipates that the modern international economic system will eventually dramatically collapse. The meteoric rise of the global economy since the beginning of the industrial revolution is characterized by him as being “fantastical,” “dangerous,” and “almost desperate.” These words were published, it should be remembered, almost a decade before the onset of the greatest crisis to rock modern capitalism, the Great Depression. Spengler, like Weber, made Marx’s historical philosophy the target of his pen. The eventual collapse of the international capitalistic system, as expected by Spengler, is to be understood in a completely different sense than was meant by Marx. Marx fully expected that modern industrial civilization would remain intact after international capitalism had been undermined by structural economic and profound, political crises. Rational rearrangement of the relations of production during the dictatorship of the proletariat would effectively resolve the problems of recurrent economic crises and the inequitable distribution of goods and services which had plagued capitalism. Spengler, on the other hand, anticipated that the eventual collapse of capitalism would interact with the irresistible revolt of the non-Western world against the economic and political hegemony of the West to produce anarchic conditions contributing to the end of modern civilization. Weber, by contrast, did not envision the non-Western world mounting a grave threat to the political and economic hegemony of the West. After completing The Decline of the West, Spengler went on to predict the catastrophic undermining of the very foundation of the Western economies due to the progressive loss of their international economic competitiveness. This stunning decline in competitiveness was to result from the eventual stagnation of the Western technological and scientific niveau (caused largely by an increasing disinterest among the younger generation and its turning to new life-styles), much lower wage-scales in the non-Western world and a strong work ethic, and the disastrous proliferation of technology by the West in the non-Western world (“the betrayal of technics”).

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After completing the second volume of *The Decline of the West* in 1922, Spengler increasingly and ultimately virtually exclusively focused his attention upon the study of primitive history. In an age when the allied fields of archaeology, prehistory, and ethnology witnessed some of their greatest discoveries, his investigation of prehistory stimulated him to transform the philosophy of world history he first presented in *The Decline of the West*. It was his enormous and unrealizable ambition to produce a tome on metaphysical questions relating to the human experience of world history and to compose a major work on prehistory and early civilization.

One of the products of Spengler’s efforts to give shape to his new vision of world history was the short treatise, *Man and Technics*, published in 1931. For both Spengler and Weber, one attribute which sets modern Western civilization apart from earlier ones is “rational” science and technology. In *Man and Technics*, Spengler continues his reflections upon the unique technological and scientific spirit of the West which he began in *The Decline of the West*. He contemplates the significance of man’s relationship to nature. Man in the Promethean struggle against nature is distinguished by the ability to create his own technology. For Spengler, the soul of man is that of an upstart, a revolutionary against the world of nature.

Artificial, contrary to nature is every human work from the lighting of fire to the achievements, that we in high cultures designate as actual, artificial ones. The right of creation is torn from nature.

World history is the history of the tragic and hopeless struggle between man and nature which will be waged to its bitter end. The struggle between man and nature in successive civilizations forms a central theme of world history; it achieves a fateful intensity in West European-American civilization. The roots of our modern industrial life lay embedded in the spiritual fundament of West European culture. Spengler claims to have uncovered the “religious origin” of Western technical thought in the meditations of early Gothic monks, who in their prayers and fastings wrung God’s secrets from Him.
One was tired of contenting oneself with the service of plants, animals, and slaves, and stealing from nature its resources—metals, stones, wood, fibrous materials, its water in canals and wells—to conquer its resistance through ship transport, roads, bridges, tunnels and dams. No more was she to be plundered in her materials, but her energy itself put into harness, performing slave labor, in order to multiply the strength of man. This monstrous idea, so foreign to other cultures, is as old as Faustian culture. Already in the tenth century we encounter technical constructions of a totally new kind. Already Roger Bacon and Albertus Magnus have speculated about steam engines, steamships, and airplanes. And many pondered the idea of perpetual motion in their monastery cells.66

Spengler advances an ecological and climatic argument to account for the development in Western civilization of the spirit of modern science and technology, the sine qua non of modern capitalism.

The Nordic landscape had forged the breed of man in it through the harshness of the conditions of life, the coldness, the constant adversity, into a tough race, with an intellect sharpened to the most extreme degree, with the cold fervor of an irrepressible passion for struggling, daring, driving forward.67

A rudimentary consciousness of the deleterious impact of industrial civilization upon the environment appeared among some intellectuals in Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.68 Weber, like Marx, in his evaluation of the significance of modern industrial civilization, perceives no alarming, ecological effects stemming from it. While Weber extols the quintessential rationality of Western science and technology and benignly views man as controlling nature, Spengler christens man "the inventive beast of prey," who "plunders" and "poisons" nature through modern scientific and technological processes.59

While world history constitutes in part for Weber, the development of progressively sophisticated techniques for the control of nature, world history becomes for Spengler in his late work60 a record of man's tragic and ultimately disastrous effort to gain the upper hand over the natural world.

Recent Spengler scholarship has brought to light the fact that he transformed his philosophy of world history after completing the revision of the first volume of The Decline of the West in 1923.61 He went on to develop a fascinating, apocalyptic vision of the entire process of civilizational development. Spengler abandoned in his
late work his original conceptualization of the consequences of the decline of Western civilization as set forth in his chef d'oeuvre. There he had predicted that world history would simply witness the birth of a new, robust culture, namely that of Russia, after recording the decline of Western civilization. Although Spengler does not retract his view that each civilization is a unique, macrohistorical phenomenon, in his late work he advanced the thesis that the civilizations of world history combine to form an interconnected, spiralling process marked by increasing human creativity and tragedy. In his late work Spengler provocatively compares the sweep of world history since the beginning of a preparatory phase to the rise of advanced civilization with an avalanche driven towards a cataclysmic end point. "It drives something, that began around 5000 B.C., towards the end like an avalanche." The tempo of world history accelerates and "assumes tragic dimensions," "the rolling stone approaches in tearing leaps the abyss." The three prehistoric stages and the fourth stage of civilizational history in Spengler's periodization of world history in his late work reach a dramatic finale in modern times. "We stand today at the climax, there, where the fifth act begins. The final decisions will be reached. The tragedy comes to a close." The probable destruction of advanced civilization is envisioned by him as being the consequence of the terrible process by which the modern West, the most dynamic civilization that has ever existed, will perish. Weber's thought lacks anything comparable at all to the arresting, Spenglerian idea of a catastrophic climax to the entire process of advanced civilizational development. Moreover, while historical pessimists including Vollgraff, Lasaulx, Gobineau, Burckhardt, and Brooks and Henry Adams analyzed the crisis of the modern West in the more conventional categories of civilizational decline, decadence, sterility, and exhaustion, Spengler became the first historical pessimist of the modern West to conceive of world history in truly apocalyptic terms.

Now let us direct our attention to Weber's philosophy of history and summarize its main elements. For him, the guiding principle in evaluating phenomena in world history is to what degree they represent an advancement of rationalization. The Weberian concept of rationalism refers to the development and utilization of methods, techniques, and systemized approaches for the ac-
complishment of subjectively determined goals. Rationalization is manifested in all the facets of the civilizations of world history, in science, art, politics, and economic life. "Hence rationalizations have existed in the various areas of life in a most varied manner in all cultural regions (Kulturkreise)." Weber maintains that the West is unique among all the civilizations of world history in its capacity for bringing forth highly advanced and distinctive forms of rationalization. The comprehensive process of rationalization which the West has undergone has left its stamp upon all areas of civilizational expression—religion, economics, politics, law, technology, science, and art.

While for Weber, the development of diverse, civilizational forms of rationalism serves as the leitmotif of world history, in Spengler’s late work, irrationalism is the overriding theme of world history. "The tragedy of human will [constitutes] the imperative of [man’s] entire existence until the end." Spengler, one can speculate, would agree with Weber’s characterization of the Occidental variant of rationalism as being “peculiar” and “different” from that of earlier civilizations. However, the key difference between the positions of Weber and Spengler is that the latter considers the rationalism of the West to be primarily the means for the rich and varied expression of an underlying, irrational cultural ethos of extreme and ultimately self-destructive dynamism. From a Spenglerian perspective, because the creative, life-giving source of the quintessential rationalism of the West is profound irrationality and daemonic will power, the Occidental “superrationality” Weber prizes, is in the final analysis, superficial in nature.

In contrast to Spengler’s enthusiasm for an approach to history sui generis combining aesthetic insight and intuition, Weber embraces the position that the occurrence of significant, historical phenomena is to be explained through a tripartite, methodological strategy, one quite congenial to orthodox, social scientific inquiry. He makes use of verstehen, seeking to understand history through the eyes of its human participants; reference to multiple causes; and the heuristic device of the ideal type. Thus, with respect to modern capitalism, Weber views its emergence not as the result of the deterministic process of the unfolding of a unique cultural spirit as is the case with Spengler, but as the product of the interaction of various historical causes, both material and ideal.
In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* Weber made an initial and impressive attempt to illuminate the decisive factors in the historical process through which advanced forms of economic rationalism evolved in modern Western civilization. First published as a two-part article in 1904-5, it was the most famous as well as the most controversial of his works. In this seminal study of the role of religious ideas in the emergence of the ethos of capitalism, he disputes Marx's historical-materialist explanation for the development of capitalism. In contrast to the socialist theorist, who conceptualized religion and other socially significant ideas as merely superstructural expressions of class-based relations centered upon a specific economic base, Weber maintains that ideas are, in and of themselves, important agents of historical change.

Weber advances the controversial proposition that "capitalism" has existed in earlier civilizations, albeit in a quantitatively far more restricted and thus qualitatively different manner. He maintains that the key, strictly economic characteristics of an economy organized under modern capitalistic lines are the rational utilization of capital in a permanent enterprise and the rational capitalistic organization of labor. Thus, the thrust of Weber's inquiry is to ascertain what historical forces have stimulated the rise of the bourgeois mentality which has created such advanced forms of economic rationalism.

Weber contrasts the modern capitalist West with other societies which are locked in a state of "economic traditionalism." He argues that the process by which a society undergoes the pivotal transition from precapitalism to modern capitalism is not primarily a function of primitive accumulation, as Marx theorized, but of the evolution by individuals of revolutionary new attitudes towards economic activity. According to Weber, Catholicism acted to reinforce the economic traditionalism of feudal Europe, frustrating the emergence of an ethos conducive to modern capitalism through the stigmatization of activity oriented towards acquisition for its own sake.

Spengler considers the rise of Gothic Christianity around 1000 A.D. to be the profound metamorphosis of Christianity in Western Europe. For Weber as for Hegel, the Protestant Reformation forms the decisive break. According to Weber's perspective, the Protestant Reformation, particularly in the form of Calvinism,
Baptist movement, and certain Puritan sects, played a decisive role in liberating individuals from economic traditionalism in the Western world. The crucial feature of Protestantism which facilitated the channeling of human energies into the rationally organized pursuit of material gain was that of the calling.

Spengler views the great religions of the world as being essentially separate cultural forces, each one incapable of demystifying reality in an enduring fashion in the face of inevitable secularization, the ongoing metamorphosis of ideas, and the relentless process of civilizational decline. Weber, in contrast to Spengler, maintains that Judaism and Christianity represent stages in what he characterizes as the great historic process in the "rationalization of the world" and the "elimination of magic as a means to salvation." This process in world history originated with the old Hebrew religion, gained momentum under the influence of Hellenistic scientific thought, suffered a reversal with the advent of Catholicism, only to finally achieve a dramatic breakthrough with the emergence of Puritanism. One of the main problems with Weber's analysis, is that he regards the appearance and consequences of the decisive ingredient in the emergence of modern capitalism, namely Protestantism, as being basically an accidental occurrence.

And we will therefore have to be prepared to accept that the cultural consequences of the Reformation were to a great extent—perhaps, in fact, predominantly so for our special standpoint—unforeseen and nothing short of unwished-for results of the labor of the reformers.

The appealing logic of Marx's and Spengler's approach, despite the antagonism between their historical philosophies, is that the emergence of the capitalist era, the most revolutionary epoch in the development of productive forces in all of world history, is interpreted as being an integral part of a grand, historical process.

Although The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism remained a fragmentary work, Weber proceeded after its publication to expand and enrich his analysis of modern capitalism. His famous essay served as the point of departure for a comprehensive but unfinished comparative study of the ethos of the great religions of the world in order to elucidate their ramifications for economic development. The fruits of this effort were published after
Weber's death under the title, *Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religions*. Weber's posthumously completed works entitled *Economy and Society* and *General Economic History*, the latter treatise being a transcription of lecture notes, are of special interest to students of his ideas on capitalism.

According to Weber, the separation of production from the household, the development of politically autonomous cities in Europe, and the rise of the modern Western state helped to facilitate the emergence of modern capitalism. He also considers it to be the historical product of a series of important advances in the development of rationalized, economic techniques which had been catalyzed into a tremendous force by the capitalist spirit unleashed by Protestantism. In *General Economic History*, he identifies the following characteristics of modern capitalism: "rational capital accounting" (the most general precondition); "the appropriation of all physical means of production as disposable property of autonomous private enterprises;" "freedom of the market;" rational technology; "rational, i.e., calculable law;" "free labor;" and stock ownership in enterprises. Spengler interprets many of these same breakthroughs to be, not progressive steps in the facilitation of highly rational, economic activity, but interrelated manifestations of the underlying and irrational ethos of individualism and dynamism unique to Western civilization.

The striking divergence in the assessment by Weber and Spengler of the historical spirit of capitalism, Weberian superrationalism as opposed to Spenglerian, irrational dynamism, is illustrated by considering their interpretation of two major developments in modern capitalism, rational capital accounting and the autonomous private enterprise. For Weber, modern accounting practices mean the more exact calculation of profit and loss and the rational systemization of business activities. For Spengler, double-entry bookkeeping is a uniquely dynamic, Faustian form of "thinking in money." From his perspective of cultural holism, "Double-entry bookkeeping is a pure, spatial analysis of values relating to a system of coordinates in which 'the firm' is the origin." For Weber, the development of the permanent business enterprise, which rationally utilizes capital, means the creation of an economic entity with the capacity to dramatically increase productivity. For Spengler, the Western firm represents a "center of force conceived of being completely impersonal and incorporeal which radiates
its effects in all directions into infinity. Indeed, this characterization seems apt when applied to contemporary multinational corporations, some of which have a GNP larger than the sovereign state of Switzerland.

Weber, as well as Marx, regarded capitalism as being highly rational in the sense that this economic system has made possible a copious production of goods and services. For Weber, the superproduction of goods and services is a function of what he identifies as the distinguishing features of capitalism: the rational use of capital in a permanent enterprise and the formation of a labor market composed of formally free labor. Spengler entertains a significantly different view as to the distinguishing feature of modern economic activity, namely, the capacity to stimulate the development, application, and proliferation of machinery and scientific principles to production processes. That he places emphasis on industry as opposed to the nature of labor inputs and the sophisticated role of capital is not of minor importance. As an anti-modernist thinker, Spengler argues that Western industrialism is profoundly irrational, indeed "satanic." It assails, conquers and poisons its environment, ultimately providing the instruments for the destruction of modern civilization in the approaching catastrophic phase of world history he foresees. However, for Weber as well as for Marx, the interaction between man and nature transpiring in modern industrial and technological processes is regarded as being eminently rational.

Spengler grasped the extremely dangerous quality of humankind's extraordinarily sophisticated, yet ultimately irrational and brutal mastery of the environment. In 1931, he wrote,

The mechanization of the world has entered into a stage of most dangerous, excessive tension. The face of the earth with its plants, animals and men has been altered. In a few decades most of the great forests have disappeared, have been transformed into newspaper and consequently climatic changes have occurred, which threaten the agriculture of entire populations; countless species like the buffalo have been completely or almost completely wiped out, entire races of men like the North American Indians and the Australian aborigines have been brought virtually to a state of extinction.

Spengler's thesis of the irrationality and the destructiveness of the interaction between man and nature in modern industrial
civilization has anticipated by decades today's acute concern with the mounting, global ecological crisis. Multifarious ecological problems—the preservation of biological diversity, acid rain, the death of forests in Europe, desertification, the greenhouse effect, damage to the ozone layer, and the dilemmas of safely disposing of toxic chemical and nuclear wastes, all raise the question of whether the industrial revolution has a profoundly dark and irrational side to it. Leading figures in the German tradition of historical philosophy, who emphasized in varying fashion the rationality of modern Western civilization—Kant, Hegel, Ranke, Marx, and Weber—failed to sense the tremendously destructive effects of humankind's reshaping of the environment in the modern age which preoccupies intellectuals today.

Capitalism is also implicitly rational from the Weberian perspective because of its purported relative stability, despite the intensity of economic competition and imperialistic rivalries. Spengler is more concerned about the substantial, negative effects of speculative activity since the onset of the industrial revolution than is Weber. Spengler perceives speculative activity as being a central feature of the later stages of every civilization. Under modern capitalism, banks and stock exchanges represent not Weberian "rational" institutions, but institutionalized expressions of aggressive and dangerous dynamism.

Only high finance is completely free, totally intangible. Since 1789, the banks, and with them the stock exchanges have developed themselves upon the credit needs of an industry growing ever more enormous, as a power on their own account and they will to be (as money does in all civilizations), the only power.83

While Spengler's philosophy of world history is future-oriented, indeed, in the opening lines of The Decline of the West he audaciously claimed to be able to "predetermine" history, Weber certainly did not shy away from speculating about the future of Western civilization, which deeply concerned him. As Wolfgang Mommsen notes, "the future of Occidental culture stood in the center of his universal-historical interest."84 Weber, like Spengler, drew parallels between the course of history in antiquity and that of the modern West. As Weber observed, "we have had in antiquity... a cultural development (Kulturentwicklung), which, no matter how
one values it, is by all means comparable in many ways to the cultural development of the present.\textsuperscript{85} While Spengler envisions the collapse of modern capitalism, Weber is merely worried about the possibility of the eventual stagnation of modern capitalist, economic activity. Weber explicitly rejects the Marxian thesis that capitalism would enter into a catastrophic phase. In a lecture on socialism, he argued that the cartellization of business firms eliminates the disruptive effect of ruthless competition and that large banks are able to regulate the availability of credit to moderate speculative activity.\textsuperscript{86} Weber, convinced that the most profound tendency of the contemporary Western world was towards a comprehensive bureaucratization of public activities, fears that a hypertrophy of bureaucratization would stifle economic competition and contribute to a "slow down in the tempo of technological-economic 'progress'"—together, the driving forces of capitalism. Weber draws upon his study of Roman civilization in order to formulate an historical analogy, one he considered to be pertinent not only to Wilhelmine Germany but to the modern capitalist West in general.

The paralysis of private economic initiative through bureaucracy is not limited to antiquity. Every bureaucracy has the tendency, by virtue of its expansion, to achieve the same effect.\textsuperscript{88}

The triumph of bureaucracy in the modern West would result in a thoroughly administered society. A bureaucratically-run state would preside over a stagnant economy, a historical situation foreshadowed according to Weber in the civilizations of ancient China, Ptolemaic Egypt, the later Roman Empire, and Byzantium.\textsuperscript{89}

In the following passage from *General Economic History*, written over two decades later, Weber, despite his worries about the potential, negative, economic effects of the secular trend of the growth of bureaucracy in modern history, clearly expresses his relative confidence in the longevity of Western capitalism.\textsuperscript{90} Advancing the controversial argument, that the vitality of modern capitalism is to a significant degree dependent upon the competition of nation states in the realm of power politics, Weber concludes.

Therefore it is the closed national state which guarantees to capitalism its chances for a continued existence; as long as the nation state does not give way to a world empire so too will capitalism endure.\textsuperscript{91}
Weber demonstrates here the traditional antagonism of German historicism, prominent earlier in Herder and Ranke and later in Meinecke, to the elimination of European political independence and national cultural individuality by the formation of a modern world empire. While Ranke feared that a modern European version of the Roman Empire would be destructive to cultural vigor, Weber, in a materialistic age, worried about it sapping economic vitality. However, the experience of the thirties, a period of tense, great power rivalry and the historical record since 1945 as well rebut Weber's conclusion. In the thirties, the “closure” of the nation state vis-à-vis the increasingly economically interdependent international system through competitive devaluations and the imposition of trade restrictions contributed to the contraction of international trade and the exacerbation of economic depression. In the post-World War II era, American neo-imperialistic primacy occasioned the most dramatic expansion of prosperity in world history, despite the increasing severity of the North-South gap. Moreover, the partial transcendence of the very “closed national state” which Weber praised as essential to the dynamism of capitalism, through the process of economic integration within the supernational framework of the European Community, has made the impressive economic growth of the post-World War II era in Europe possible. Finally, in the 1990's, prosperity in the advanced industrialized countries is threatened by the possibility of the breakdown of the international free trade regime underwritten by the Pax Americana and the resultant disastrous outbreak of protectionism and economic nationalism.

One must underscore that Weber's celebration of the tremendous advancement of rationalization in Western civilization is not rooted in a shallow optimism. He wrestled with the question of the fate of Western man under the conditions of modernity and the answer he came up with is not a pleasant one. There is a pronounced cultural pessimistic side to Weber, although it is significantly more mild than the acute one Spengler epitomizes in his late work. The great historical process of “the elimination of magic as a means to salvation” culminates in a “godless and prophetless” age dominated by capitalistic and bureaucratic rationality, in which Western man suffers the loss of meaning in life. Weber deeply feared the ineluctable constriction of the field of play avail-
able to individuals for the exercise of political and economic freedom, spontaneity, creativity, and artistic and personal cultivation in Western civilization in the twentieth century. Specifically with respect to modern economic man, Weber agrees with Marx that capitalism is irrational in that it causes alienation. Modern capitalism imprisons human beings in a “steel-hard casing” (stahlhartes Gehäuse) converting the free individual into an excessively specialized, depersonalized, and oppressively routinized person.

As reflection upon Spengler’s work from a contemporary perspective suggests, the advancing trend of “superficial,” quintessential rationalism in Western civilization, as evidenced in capitalism by the introduction of robotics in industrial production and computerized information management, coexists uneasily with alarming symptoms of unstable dynamism. The inadequacy of international, macro-economic, policy coordination in the contemporary, interdependent world economy; the world debt crisis; the proliferation of subsidies and non-tariff barriers to international trade; volatile exchange rates; massive shifts in speculative funds; and instability in global stock markets since Black Monday in October 1987 call into question the idea that capitalism on a global scale is as rational as Weber steadfastly maintained.

At this juncture in history, it is impossible to determine if Spengler’s forecast of the eventual collapse of capitalism and the catastrophic demise of modern civilization will prove to be correct or alternatively, if Weber’s belief in the more or less indefinite existence of capitalism, despite its purportedly strong tendency towards eventual stagnation under the weight of increasing bureaucratization, and his faith in the rationalism of modern civilization, is justified. Do the breakdown of the Bretton Woods monetary system in 1971, the inflation of the seventies and the deflation of the eighties, the explosion of the U.S. national debt, the extraordinary trade imbalances of the U.S. in the eighties, the onset of the global debt crisis since 1982, instability in global stock markets on Black Monday in October 1987 and during the recent Persian Gulf crisis, the erosion of the GATT regime, and the onset of global recession in 1990, foreshadow the eventual breakdown of the post-World War II international capitalist order?

Spengler’s imaginative effort to illuminate the spirit, origins and evolution of capitalism, through his distinctive kind of compara-
tive civilizational inquiry, despite its undeniably speculative quality, is challenging. His perspective affords a significant, alternative interpretation of capitalism to the comparative-civilizational approach championed by Weber. This author finds Spengler’s thesis that capitalism originated in an irrational spirit of irrepressible dynamism, transformative power, and expansive energies and not out of an ethos of advanced rationality and that this ethos is rooted in the cultural idiosyncrasies of Western civilization to be a thought-provoking counterargument to the one advanced by Weber. The idea that the essential product of capitalism, modern industrial civilization, is ultimately ecologically incompatible with the natural world, is an arresting one which has gained appreciably in plausibility since Spengler iconoclastically adumbrated it in the early twentieth century. His intriguing argument, that the extraordinary dynamism of modern economic activity, which Marx so stirringly celebrated in *The Communist Manifesto,* is inherently unstable, dangerous, and unsustainable represents an important counterposition to the cool optimism common to Weber and neoclassical economics and the utopianism of Marx. Spengler’s deeply pessimistic thesis is eminently plausible as the expansive economic energy of the Pax Americana has abated and the stability of the international capitalist order has been seriously undermined since 1971. Only the passage of time will resolve the question whether modern capitalism will either retain its robustness of the post-World War II era, persist for a very long time under conditions of stagnation as Weber expected, or ultimately collapse in Spenglerian, apocalyptic fashion.

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NOTES

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2. Hagen Schulze, Weimar, Deutschland 1917-1933 (Berlin: Severin & Siedler, 1982), p. 137. All the translations from German into English in this article including the quotations from the works of Spengler and Weber are the author’s.


12. As Weber observed, “precisely upon the soil of the Occident, and only here, cultural phenomena appear, which however, (as we like at least to think) lie in a line of development of universal significance and value.” Weber, Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie, vol. I., p. 1.


15. Ibid., p. 143.


18. Ibid., p. 147.

19. Ibid., p. 143.


22. Spengler hypothesized that the Western world would see either New York or Berlin emerge as the dominant world city of the twentieth century. Spengler, Der Untergang des Abendlandes, vol. I, p. 43.

23. The emergence of the Pax Americana in 1945 is arguably largely consistent with Spengler's philosophy of world history, although he didn't forecast it. He did predict that the late nineteenth-century, competitive system of great powers would give way to a Western world empire dominated by one state. Spengler erred in believing, until Germany's shocking defeat in 1918, that she would succeed in forging the crowning imperial form of the West. Yet he toyed a few years later with the idea that the U.S. might attain global primacy. Thus, in the second volume of The Decline of the West he observed, the "rise of New York to a world city through the War of Secession of 1861-1865 is perhaps the most momentous event of the preceding century." Spengler, Der Untergang des Abendlandes, vol. II, p. 117.

24. Ibid., p. 43.


28. Ibid., p. 444.

29. Ibid., pp. 442-43.

30. Ibid., p. 443.

31. Hegel argued that each particular national spirit "expresses concretely all sides of its consciousness and aspiration, its entire reality. Its religion, its political constitution, its customs, its legal system, its morality, also its science, art and technical skills, all bear its stamp." Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Werke, vol. XII., Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte [1840] (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), p. 87.


34. Ibid.


37. Spengler, Der Untergang des Abendlandes, vol. II., pp. 583-84.
39. Ibid., pp. 102ff.
40. Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, vol. II., p. 593.
41. Ibid., p. 59.
42. Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, vol. I., p. 447.
43. Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, vol. II., p. 68.
44. Ibid., pp. 284-88.
45. Ibid., p. 594.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid., p. 583.
50. Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, vol. II., p. 3.
51. Spengler, *Der Mensch und die Technik*, p. 17.
52. Ibid., pp. 22 and 39.
53. Ibid., p. 24.
54. Ibid., pp. 24-25.
57. Ibid., p. 44.
59. Spengler, *Der Mensch und die Technik*, pp. 18, 48, and 55.
60. The term “late work” (Spätwerk) in this article refers to the published and unpublished material of a historical-philosophical nature taken as a whole which Spengler produced subsequent to the completion of the composition and revision of *The Decline of the West* in 1923.
64. Spengler, Der Mensch und die Technik, p. 27.
65. Ibid., p. 52.
67. Ibid.
68. Spengler, Frühzeit der Weltgeschichte, No. 132, p. 480.
73. "The question of the motive forces in the expansion of modern capitalism is not first and foremost a question of the origin of the funds available for capitalistic purposes, but, above all, of the development of the capitalistic spirit." Ibid., p. 53.
74. Ibid., p. 59.
75. Ibid., p. 114.
76. Ibid., pp. 94-95.
77. Ibid., p. 82. Emphasis of the original retained.
80. Ibid., p. 616.
81. Ibid., p. 625.
82. Spengler, Der Mensch und die Technik, pp. 54-55.
90. Julian Freund observes that "Weber regarded capitalism as an economic system which would long continue, in different forms, to direct world economy. Capitalism as Weber saw it, is a system which cannot be destroyed by a revolution, however radical, since some aspects of it correspond to the needs of economic rationalization, and will continue to influence the new social structures which men may establish." Julian Freund, The Sociology of Max Weber (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), p. 149.


