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**THE WORLD AFTER MODERNITY****JOHN J. REILLY****INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR**

A persistent and highly influential image of the future appeared in the late nineteenth century. It occurred to a long list of people: I might mention Ernst von Lasaulx, Henry and Brooks Adams, Nikolai Danilevsky, Nikolai Berdyaev and Walter Schubart, and for that matter Albert Schweitzer and Jacob Burckhardt. They all shared the intuition that the Western world had entered a new "Hellenistic" age, and the twentieth century was going to see a recurrence of the less pleasant aspects of Hellenism.<sup>1</sup> These would include such things as demagogic tyrannies, annihilation warfare, and a relaxation of traditional restraints in art and personal life.

Nietzsche had said as much, too, and in fact anyone who entered the 20th century with this modest insight would have met with few surprises.<sup>2</sup> During the 20<sup>th</sup> century itself, the notion was worked up into great, formal models of history. This enterprise is sometimes called "macrohistory,"<sup>3</sup> unless it waxes very philosophical, in which case it is called "metahistory." Either way, the best-known example is still Oswald Spengler's "Decline of the West," the first of whose two volumes appeared just as the First World War ended. The biggest example, in fact the biggest book of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is Arnold Toynbee's 12-volume "Study of History," most of which was published in the 1930s and '50s. The aspect of the Hellenistic analogy that chiefly interested them, like us today, is the way the modern era can be expected to end.

To put it more crudely than most macrohistorians do, the idea is that, just as the Hellenistic phase of Classical culture ended in the Roman Empire, and just as the Warring States period in Chinese history ended in imperial unification under the Qin Dynasty, so the modern era of Western Civilization would end in a post-national universal state. For the sake of brevity, and because some of the authors we will consider do likewise, we will call this final phase of historical development simply "the Empire."

We are talking here about the evolution from Alexander to Caesar. Some macrohistorians expected Western modernity to last the same length of time, two-and-half or three centuries. We may note that macrohistorians generally equate Alexander and Napoleon, so, if you like, you can do the arithmetic to see where we are now.<sup>4</sup> If you really like these analogies, we may also note that the societies most often iden-

tified as universal states, Han China, the Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and New Kingdom Egypt, all lasted about 500 years after their founding by a Caesar-like figure.<sup>3</sup> So, now you know the future. Just try to look surprised when it happens.

Philosophical history of this type gives most historians fits, but it's inescapable. Northrop Frye was not a great fan of "The Decline of the West," at least on its merits, but he also said "we are all Spenglerians."<sup>6</sup> For instance, Spengler can be considered the father of multiculturalism. He treats the eight cultures whose life cycles he considers as all equivalent in some sense. Although he was developing ideas that had long been familiar from German historicism <sup>7</sup>, the fact is that he wrote the first history of the world that really was about the world, and not just a chronicle of the rise of the West.

Cyclical historical analogies affect statecraft. Henry Kissinger's undergraduate thesis at Harvard was on Spengler, and he never quite got over it.<sup>8</sup> Former President Bill Clinton's favorite teacher at Georgetown, at least by some accounts, was Carroll Quigley, a follower of Toynbee in the School of Foreign Service. The debates after the Cold War about globalization and American hegemony have, in effect, put the Empire front and center.

Perhaps the most topical model of international relations these days is Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations." He accepts the Hellenistic analogy as a matter of course, though with his own peculiar spin. He tells us:

"[T]he international system expanded beyond the West and became multicivilizational. Simultaneously, conflict among Western states – which had dominated that system for centuries – faded away. By the late twentieth century, the West has moved out of its 'warring state' phase of development as a civilization and toward its 'universal state' phase. At the end of [the 20<sup>th</sup>] century, this phase is still incomplete as the nation states of the West cohere into two semi-universal states in Europe and North America. These two entities and their constituent units are, however, bound together by an extraordinary complex network of formal and informal institutional ties. The universal states of previous civilizations are empires. Since democracy, however, is the political form of Western civilization, the emerging universal state of Western civilization is not an empire but rather a compound of federations, confederations, and international regimes and organizations."<sup>9</sup>

Among scholars interested in such things, Huntington is a little unusual in rejecting the idea of global civilization. Among people with

a basically cyclical approach to history, he is also, as we will see, unusual in assuming the continuing vitality of democracy. On the other hand, he is not at all unusual in considering that the Empire already exists to some extent. This is the thesis of the fashionable book, entitled "Empire," by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.

According to those authors, the Empire is Saint Augustine's City of God.<sup>10</sup> They themselves are Marxists who write impenetrable postmodern prose and who hope to replace the City of God with the City of Man, but their analysis is worth considering, to the extent they will permit themselves to be understood. Like its Roman predecessor, today's Empire seems to its subjects to be permanent, eternal, and necessary. It has no outside, at least in principle, and internally it distinguishes neither male nor female, Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free. It does not rest on conquest, but on consensus.

The Empire is the post-historical incarnation of eternal justice. It does not merely happen to exist, like a historically contingent state; rather, it must exist, at least as an ideal. It closes the gap that opened in the Renaissance between the ethical and the juridical. Its wars are just wars, police actions against opponents who cannot make a principled case against the Empire as such. No civil or military stresses remain that might threaten it. The Empire is always in a crisis, so its acts are emergency measures that trump the ordinary law of the sovereignties and corporations that comprise it.

The authors say the Empire is not really a state. It does indeed have state-like organs, such as the UN and the IMF, but it has no center. For that matter, it has no geography: the old divisions between First, Second and Third World have collapsed. The difference between France and India in the world system, for instance, has become a matter of degree rather than kind. The Empire does have a tripartite anatomy, in the sense of an executive, an aristocracy, and a people, like that which the second century B.C. historian Polybius ascribed to the late Roman Republic.

The Empire is imperial, not imperialist. Imperialism, in the authors' analysis, was simply the extension of European nationalism outside Europe. The Empire arose precisely because capitalism could not endure if the divisions between nations were not dissolved. The authors count the loss of national sovereignty, and even of national identity, as no great tragedy. Nations themselves, as well as the Peoples that comprised them, were largely confected for the benefit of early capitalist production.

A retired CIA analyst, Patrick E. Kennon, recently published a

witty apology for the Empire as an ideal, entitled "Tribe and Empire." He finds far deeper support for the Empire than does Samuel Huntington, who dismisses the actual membership of international society as a thin crust of what he calls "Davos People." According to Mr. Kennon:

"Now, as we enter the twenty-first century, the future of the nation-state is much in doubt...Indeed, tribalism has revived with a brutal savagery from Rwanda and Cambodia to the newly dissolved USSR and the newly unified Germany...At the same time, a kind of shadow empire...is being embraced by elites around the globe. UN bureaucrats and Greenpeace activists, Carlos the Jackal and Mother Theresa, Toyota and Amnesty International, the Cali drug cartel and the World Bank, people who worry about the dollar-yen ratio and people who worry about the ozone layer, all of these consciously or unconsciously look to empire for their profit or salvation. All of these have largely given up on the nation."<sup>11</sup>

Mr. Kennon attempts to account for globalization and its attendant anarchic backlash in terms of classical Social Contract theory (the very class of theory that Hardt and Negri say is the source of false consciousness in the world today). "Tribe and Empire" argues that the philosophers of the Enlightenment were too pessimistic in relegating international relations to the state of nature. According to Mr. Kennon, there is an ethical trajectory that leads away from the local and toward the universal, from the political and toward the administrative, from predation and toward commerce.

The pure forms of human life, the "tribe" and the "empire," correspond to "community" and "society," respectively. These dualities also correspond to life before and after the Social Contract. The contract turns mere homo sapiens into human beings. In the tribe, everyone is equal, every man is a warrior, and there is the war of all against all. In society, there are no enemies, only superiors and inferiors. Community is familiar and exclusive, governed by a traditional morality that is not subject to analysis. In society, there is ethics rather than morality, and right and wrong are subject to pragmatic reformulation. The most significant thing about ethics is that it is universal in principle: everyone, near and far, should ideally be treated according to the same rules. The political form that has substantially fulfilled this ideal is the "empire," something that has in fact existed at various times and places.

So far we have been talking about the Empire in terms of political theory, but that is not the only aspect of the Hellenistic analogy that

interests macrohistorians. They are concerned with the way that whole societies evolve, and this is one of the points about which they have received the most criticism. They tend to speak as if societies were organic wholes, with life cycles like living things. This analogy is no worse than any other, but it is difficult to defend in detail. Burckhardt, in fact, even though he saw parallels between his own late 19th century and late antiquity, specifically rejected the biological analogy.<sup>12</sup> We should note, though, that even those who used organic language most heavily were not necessarily relying on it.

Spengler himself is a good case in point. Though he spoke of the cultures he examined as living organisms, his philosophy was much more sophisticated. "The Decline of the West" is a profoundly Kantian book. In Spengler's view, the course of history is circumscribed by the limits to human understanding that Kant described. According to Spengler, just eight cultures in the history of the world have tested those limits, in the sense of trying to produce final answers to life's questions. Beginning from a unique religious base, each produced its own philosophy, family of arts, and a political style. Spengler said that even the natural science and mathematics of each were idiosyncratic. In any case, all these attempts to express universal truths are failures. Whatever meaning they have is internal to the societies that produce them, and the skepticism of the late culture realizes the fact. However, the attempts are not just failures; they are magnificent failures. The living cultures that Spengler describes die, but in the process produce fossils, canons of art and science and political forms. The period of fossilization, after the end of the culture proper, is what Spengler calls civilization, which he said began for the West at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The work of modernity, in Spengler's estimation, is the completion of the final forms.

The German title of Spengler's big book, "Der Untergang des Abendlandes," is not nearly so ominous as its English translation. Literally, it is closer to "The Sunset of the Evening Land." Spengler himself said that he might better have called the book the "The Completion of the West," or even "The Perfection of the West."<sup>13</sup>

All this suggests Francis Fukuyama was essentially correct in saying that the West has reached "the end of history"<sup>14</sup>; liberal democracy really is the end of Western political thought. It will never be superseded, and it will never cease to have some effect on the way government is conducted. However, that does not mean it may not someday be honored chiefly in the breach. Spengler wrote this eighty years ago, speak-

ing about a time that could still be a good century beyond us:

“Once the Imperial Age has arrived, there are no more political problems. People manage with the situation as it is and the powers that be. In the period of Contending States, torrents of blood had reddened the pavements of all world-cities, so that the great truths of Democracy might be turned into actualities, and for the winning of rights without which life seemed not worth the living. Now these rights are won, but the grandchildren cannot be moved, even by punishment, to make use of them. A hundred years more, and even the historians will no longer understand the old controversies.”<sup>15</sup>

In 1920, it was easy to imagine that some totalitarian system might conquer the world, but it took a measure of imagination to foresee a world in which democracy is simply forgotten. No imagination at all is necessary today, what with the low voter turnouts in the US and the emergence of post-democratic supranational entities like the European Union. The Empire means the end of democracy as anything but a venerable anachronism. Indeed, as Patrick Kennon would have it, it means the end of politics itself.

In his view, government by reliable routine has been the distinguishing feature of the Empire wherever it has existed. Politics went on, of course, in Antonine Rome or Ming China, but as self-contained court intrigues and bureaucratic squabbles. It was no longer in a position to derail the essential operation of the state. The same process in the West is far advanced, and maybe this is a good thing. The mandarins in Brussels are often crudely corrupt, and they don't respond to emergencies particularly well. They are, however, quite certain not to lead civilization over a cliff in pursuit of a manifest destiny, something that national societies have done in almost every century.

A recurrent theme in metahistory is that the economic Left always wins. William McNeill, another admirer of Toynbee, has made the observation that governance tends to expand to cover the size of the economy. (16) Where it doesn't, the result is piracy, and often barbarian powers that threaten civilization itself. The Empire, in the form of universal states, can and does facilitate economic activity through the rule of law, or at least through maintaining public order. On the other hand, it is also in a position to tax and regulate universally, which it does in the interests of income redistribution and the prevention of disruption from economic change. So, for example, the expansive, technologically innovative economy that appeared in China during the politically chaotic Sung and Yuan periods was brought to heel when order was

restored in the Ming period. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, China's manufacturing sector was still huge and sophisticated, but wholly subordinate to the imperial autocracy and gentry.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, the Cultural Left always loses. The arts under the Empire are well funded, technically proficient, and highly eclectic, but they are rarely new. The art of Old and Middle Kingdom Egypt, for instance, can usually be dated to within a generation, just as the periods of Western art can be easily distinguished from the Middle Ages on down. When you get to the New Kingdom, the age of the Empire, repetition predominates, except for freakish episodes like the Amarna period. The work that survives from the very end of Egyptian civilization is almost impossible to distinguish from that of the Old Kingdom 1500 years before. One might say that Egyptian history ended in a sort of permanent Gothic revival.<sup>18</sup>

The function of art organizations today is generally curatorial. With some notable exceptions, orchestras usually find themselves playing the familiar canon that runs from Bach to Brahms.<sup>19</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for the first time in the cultural history of the West, time began to no longer make a difference. Imagine two picture books, one of the famous New York Armory Exhibition of 1913 and the other of the Brooklyn Museum's "Sensation" exhibition of 1999. Now imagine switching the covers. The switched dates would still be plausible. The point is not that the work is bad; it's just that it isn't going anywhere.

What is true of art is also supposed to be true of science, but this question would take too long to explore. The notion is that some areas of rational inquiry can simply be finished. Classical Mathematics, to take the easiest example, was substantially completed in Hellenistic times by Euclidian geometry. It did not advance further, because that geometry answered the questions Classical culture asked. So, for that matter, did Ptolemy's astronomy and Aristotle's physics. Those who apply the analogy to the West note that physics entered the 20<sup>th</sup> century with quantum mechanics and relativity and spent the century merely elaborating them. A "theory of everything," which would combine the two, may be achieved in this century. If so, it would seem to meet the criteria for one of Spengler's magnificent fossils.<sup>20</sup>

The Empire is a theocracy. In general, macrohistorians have welcomed the prospect of religious revival. The chief example is Toynbee himself, who decided that history was really about the development of universal religions, and only incidentally about civilizations. His "Study of History" became remarkably evangelical in its later volumes.

Toynbee's reputation never recovered from the derisive, secularist critique that Hugh Trevor-Roper gave his work.<sup>21</sup> As we know, God severely punished Hugh Trevor-Roper for this through the Hitler Diaries fraud, but that's another story.<sup>22</sup> Samuel Huntington acknowledges the growing role of religion, though he seems less than pleased at the prospect, calling it "la revanche de Dieu." He speaks of "the end of the Westphalian order," referring to those aspects of the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 ensuring religion would be a domestic matter.

An influential argument supporting just this change has recently been offered by A.J. Conyers in his book, "The Long Truce: How Toleration Made the World Safe for Power and Profit."<sup>23</sup> Conyers says the kind of toleration that spread in the West after the wars of religion is actually something of a fraud. It is based on a nominalist metaphysics that brackets the truth claims of each confession as parochial eccentricities. Religious truth-claims must be tolerated for the sake of peace, but merit no deference from the wider world. Conyers says that toleration in the West before the wars of religion, where it existed, had a different basis. Traditionally, tolerance assumed the validity of truth claims, but took the platonic view that specific expressions of them could, at best, be expected to be incomplete. Now that the Westphalian truce is over, Conyers argues, this traditional approach to tolerance should supplant the disingenuous secularist one of the past few centuries.

Some suggestion of where it may lead is offered by Spengler's famous prophecy of the "the Second Religiousness." He tells us:

"But neither in the creations of this piety nor in the form of the Roman Imperium is there anything primary and spontaneous. Nothing is built up, no idea unfolds itself — it is only as if a mist cleared off the land and revealed the old forms, uncertainly at first, but presently with increasing distinctness. The material of the Second Religiousness is simply that of the first, genuine, young religiousness — only otherwise experienced and expressed. It starts with Rationalism's fading out in helplessness, then the forms of the Springtime become visible, and finally the whole world of the primitive religion, which had receded before the grand forms of the early faith, returns to the foreground, powerful in the guise of the popular syncretism that is to be found in every Culture at this phase."<sup>24</sup>

This brings us to the decline and fall of the Empire. Not all macro-historians say that the Empire is inherently mortal. Hardt and Negri say specifically that, whatever traditional Marxism might have predicted about the fate of the world capitalist system, the Empire has moved

beyond those vulnerabilities. The Empire actually thrives on crisis. It is eternal in principle. However, that does not mean that it cannot be overthrown through an act of will. They offer this comparison from a prior incarnation of the Empire:

“Allow us [an] analogy that refers to the birth of Christianity in Europe and its expansion during the decline of the Roman Empire. In this process an enormous potential of subjectivity was constructed and consolidated in terms of the prophecy of a world to come, a chil-  
iastic project. This new subjectivity offered an absolute alternative to the spirit of imperial right—a new ontological basis. From this perspective, Empire was accepted as the “maturity of the times” and the unity of the entire known civilization, but it was challenged in its totality by a completely different ethical and ontological axis. In the same way today, given that the limits and unresolvable problems of the new imperial right are fixed, theory and practice can go beyond them, finding once again an ontological basis of antagonism—within Empire, but also against and beyond Empire, at the same level of totality.”<sup>25</sup>

This would be more interesting if the two authors had not excluded religion as a future revolutionary force. One of their few substantive suggestions for undermining the Empire is an absolute freedom to travel and immigration. This also happens to be the only right that Patrick Kennon of the CIA says is essential for the integrity of the Empire. As the French say, *go figure*.

Spengler, too, was of the opinion that the Empire did not have to end. Fossils can last indefinitely. In his estimate, Classical civilization was destroyed by historical accident. There was no internal reason why it could not have gone on without collapse as he thought, wrongly, that China had done. Spengler in his later work suggested that the imperial phase of Western history was likely to end apocalyptically for the whole world, but that is a question specific to Spengler studies.<sup>26</sup>

Toynbee was of two minds about the future. He thought that either the winner of another world war would create a Western Universal State, or that an ecumenical society would arise peacefully. It would have western characteristics, and maybe a world government, but it would not be a Universal State in the traditional sense. For Toynbee the Universal State was a slow-motion catastrophe that was doomed from the start, even though, as he put it, its citizens “in defiance of apparently plain facts...are prone to regard it, not as a night’s shelter in the wilderness but as the Promised Land, the goal of human endeavors.”<sup>27</sup>

In his view, the Empire's internal proletariat deserts it in favor of a higher religion, in rather the way Hardt and Negri mention, while at the same time the outer barbarians become stronger and stronger. This view is not so different from Huntington's "Clash of Civilization" thesis, which interprets "the decline of the West" to mean the decline of the still-forming Western universal state relative to other civilized societies. The Empire we have been considering is an archetype. I mean this in a modest sense. It's an inevitable notion that anyone thinking about world history is going to have to confront, even if only to reject. Hardt and Negri do hit the nail on the head: the Empire does look like the City of God, although Toynbee may have been on to something when he cautioned that it is a counterfeit of the real thing. Obviously, there is no way to say today whether the Empire is going to stay in the platonic realm, or whether, as the macrohistorians speculate, it will become incarnate in the light of day. In any case, although the Empire may fall, it never goes away.

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### Notes

1. *Staring into Chaos: Explorations in the Decline of Western Civilization*, by B.G. Brander, (Spence Publishing Company, 1998), pp. 21-84.
2. E.g., *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (Vintage Books, 1974), p. 318 (sec. 362).
3. For an excessively postmodern take on the subject, see *Macrohistory and Macrohistorians*, Johan Galtung and Sohail Inayatullah (Praeger Publishers, 1997).
4. Readers who really, really like these analogies can see them worked out for the next seven centuries in a short book, also entitled *Spengler's Future*, at <http://pages.prodigy.net/aesir/speng.htm>.
5. Toynbee, more cautiously, notes a common rhythm in the decline of the Empire, rather than a strictly uniform duration. *A Study of History*, Arnold Toynbee: Somervell Abridgement Vols. I-VI

- (Oxford University Press, 1947), pp. 548-554.
6. On the influence of Spengler generally, see Neil McInnes, "The Great Domsayer: Oswald Spengler Reconsidered" (*The National Interest*, Summer 1997), pp. 45-76. Frye is quoted on page 68.
  7. *Prophet of Decline: Spengler on World History and Politics*, John Farrenkopf (Louisiana State University Press, 2001), pp. 77-90.
  8. McInnes, p. 69.
  9. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel P. Huntington (Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 53.
  10. *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 207, 394-396.
  11. *Tribe and Empire: An Essay on the Social Contract*, Patrick E. Kennon (Xlibris, 2000), p. 15.
  12. *Force and Freedom: Reflections on History*, Jacob Burckhardt, ed. by James Hastings Nichols (Pantheon Books, 1943).
  13. Farrenkopf, p. 167.
  14. "The End of History and the Last Man," Francis Fukuyama (The Free Press, 1992).
  15. *The Decline of the West*, Volume II, Oswald Spengler, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (Alfred A Knopf, 1928; German original 1922), p. 432.
  16. *The Human Condition: An Ecological and Historical View*, William McNeill (Princeton University Press, 1980).
  17. *China: A New History*, John King Fairbank (Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 161.
  18. *The Culture of Ancient Egypt*, John A. Wilson (University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 294-295.
  19. *Art Lessons: Learning from the Rise and Fall of Public Arts Funding*, Alice Goldfarb Marquis (Basic Books, 1995), p. 150.
  20. *The End of Science: Facing the Limits of Knowledge in the Twilight of the Scientific Age*, by John Horgan (Addison-Wesley, 1996).

21. *Arnold Toynbee: A Life*, William H. McNeill (Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 239.
22. *The Hitler Diaries: Fakes that Fooled the World*, Charles Hamilton (University Press of Kentucky, 1991).
23. *The Long Truce: How Toleration Made the World Safe for Power and Profit*. A.J. Conyers (Spence Publishing Company, 2001).
24. Spengler, p. 311.
25. Hardt & Negri, p. 21.
26. Farrenkopf, p. 214 et seq.
27. *A Study of History*, Arnold Toynbee: Somervell Abridgement Vols. VII-X (Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 4.