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BOOK REVIEWS**John Farrenkopf. *Prophet of Decline: Spengler on World History and Politics*. Louisiana University Press, 2001**

The first volume of Oswald Spengler's great comparative study of history, *The Decline of the West*, was published in 1918, just as his native Germany lost the First World War. Spengler (1880-1936) has been with us ever since, though often only in caricature. Sometimes his name stands for little more than the sentiment of "historical pessimism," or for the proposition that "history repeats itself." After the Cold War, discussions about the "clash of civilizations" and hegemonic diplomacy raised issues that Spengler had first broached 80 years before. The time has come for Spengler's work to be critically reintroduced to a 21st-century audience.

John Farrenkopf, an independent scholar who has labored in the Spengler Archive in Munich, here provides a guide to the current state of Spengler studies, particularly in Germany, as well as provocative conclusions based on his own archival work. "Prophet of Decline" answers many common questions about Spengler's politics. The most interesting part of the book, however, is the thesis that Spengler expanded his ideas after "The Decline of the West" into what is really a second, largely unpublished theory of history. The book even has a picture of the notoriously shiny-pated Spengler with hair. Revisionism can go too far.

Since the last quarter of the 19th century, many people have suggested that the modern era of the West bore significant similarities to the Hellenistic era and the late Roman Republic, a period running roughly from the death of Alexander the Great (330 B.C.) to the assassination of Julius Caesar (44 B.C.) Spengler elaborated this idea in two ways. First, he attempted to work out the analogy systematically. Other writers had noted parallels in the exacerbation of Great Power rivalries. Spengler went beyond that, arguing for parallels in the exhaustion of artistic styles, the domination of both periods by a few great cities, and even claiming that science and mathematics approached final formulations in similar ways in antiquity and modernity. Far more originally, he tried to identify similar patterns of development in seven other "High Cultures." Thus, not just the Greco-Roman World, but Egypt, ancient China, India and other societies had also experienced "modern eras" of two or three centuries. Each had also had its own peculiar "age of faith" (the pyra-

mids, in Spengler's terminology, were "contemporary" with the Gothic cathedrals of Europe) and its cultural climax in a "Baroque."

Despite the many specific examples the "Decline" employs, the logic of the work is not empirical but metaphysical. It accepts Nietzsche's rejection of Kant's historical optimism, but embraces the limits set by traditional German idealism on the power of pure reason. The story of the High Cultures, in fact, is the tale of societies that seek to transcend the power of human understanding and fail. One may not like this kind of reasoning, but the fact remains that Spengler was the first philosopher of world history to really try to write about the world, rather than just dismiss the other great civilizations as a mere prologue to Western history.

Farrenkopf gives us a summary of the enormous critical reaction to *The Decline of the West*. The critiques often said that Spengler's analogies were factually wrong, or claimed that Spengler's analogies were so obvious as not to need saying; a few critics said both in the same review. What really exasperated his critics from the first, however, was the fact that Spengler's "morphology" of the history of High Cultures had obvious implications for the future of the West. If the analogy from other "modernities" held, then, probably around the end of the 21st century, the West should collapse into a universal empire, with a culture that would ultimately become as stiff and curatorial as Egypt's during the New Kingdom. In the meanwhile, money and democracy would increasingly hollow out the traditional forms of society, until both collapsed in the face of mere power politics. Wars would reach a climax of technical sophistication and speed, even as nations disintegrated internally. This was a gospel of bad news, but Spengler used the worldwide notoriety of "The Decline of the West" to become its prophet. From the start, his success was mixed.

Spengler conceived the idea for *The Decline of the West* during the Agadir Crisis of 1911, when he realized that a general European war was inevitable. As he put it, the West was entering a period of two centuries of wars for world power, like that between the Battles of Cannae (216 B.C.) and Actium (31 B.C.). Because Germany appeared as a nation state late in Western history, just as Rome did in the Classical world, and because it was an economically dynamic power at the periphery of the ancient core of its wider culture, just as Rome had been relative to Greece, Spengler assumed that Germany would play a role in late Western history like that of Rome in late antiquity. That is, it would overcome the other Great Powers, establish hegemony over Europe, and

go on to create an "imperium mundi," a universal empire that might, ephemerally, encompass the whole planet.

Spengler was a man of wide education, with a PhD in philosophy, though his day job had been teaching mathematics in a secondary school. He had quit some years before 1914 to pursue his adequate inheritance from his mother. Unfortunately, his property was largely in American stocks, the income from which became inaccessible during the First World War. He spent the war freezing in a Munich garret, working on the "Decline" and hoping his medical exemption from military service held up. Despite his threadbare circumstances, he took time out to compose a "memorial" for the Kaiser, explaining how best to navigate the difficult years that would follow a German victory.

Examining this unfinished and happily unposted document, Farrenkopf reports that Spengler was then instrumentally friendly to democracy. Spengler suggested that support for the monarchy would be strengthened if the bourgeoisie and working classes were given real responsibility, which would have required a more democratic franchise than the class-weighted voting system of Prussia. It would also have required giving the Reichstag far more power than it had under Bismarck's constitution. Spengler came close to suggesting that the German government needed fewer monocle-wearing Junkers and more businessmen and labor leaders. Only thus could Germany achieve the degree of national cohesion necessary to carry out the foreign policy tasks that history had set for it.

The Decline of the West is not a political tract, or even a mirror of princes, but a densely philosophical work. Nonetheless, even Spengler's philosophical detachment was disturbed by the loss of the world war. Spengler accepted the "stab in the back" theory for the catastrophe: Germany was not defeated on the field, but betrayed by subversives and ideologues. He soured on democracy. In the years between the end of the war and the stabilization of the Weimar economy in 1924, he became involved in the plots among right-wing aristocratic circles to overthrow the fledgling government and establish an authoritarian regime.

Farrenkopf relates that Spengler even spoke with army chief General Hans von Seeckt about becoming the minister of culture or education in such a government. (The general ultimately stayed loyal to the Weimar regime.) Spengler was peripherally involved with a prospective monarchist coup in Bavaria that was short-circuited by Hitler's own Beer Hall Putsch. Still, in those years Spengler did not

spend all his time making a fool of himself, but elaborated a political philosophy that goes beyond the ideas he expressed in the *Decline*.

The chief published presentation of this development is *Prussianism and Socialism* (1919), a short work in which Spengler tried to sketch a final philosophy of governance for the West. There were two options in competition for this role, he suggested. One was the “knightly” tradition, embodied in Prussia, of care for all and the will to plan for even the distant future. The other was the “Viking” tradition of the Anglo-American world. The Viking tradition could operate globally more easily than its competitor, but it was almost purely commercial. Its fate was therefore tied to that of financial capitalism, which Spengler believed to be an extreme and ephemeral characteristic of the modern era. What Germany needed to do, according to Spengler, was to rescue socialism from class warfare in general and Marxism in particular. The socialism of the future (“Ethical Socialism” was his term for it) would not be an economic theory, but a system of morality for the conduct of public affairs. To use a formula Spengler did not use, it would be the “chivalry” of the post-democratic elites of the coming centuries.

Farrenkopf makes some defense of Spengler’s ideas about economics. The turn-of-the-millennium euphoria about a world of free-trade liberal capitalism (the “Viking” option) might not survive another systemic crisis, he reminds us. Additionally, one can say that Spengler’s presentation of economic history as a branch of culture, subject to styles and “periods,” is a refreshingly novel view of the subject. Even granting both points, I would suggest that Spengler’s rather mercantilist preferences illustrate his limitations. Spengler spent his public career emphasizing the cultural unity of the West and the inevitability of the end of national sovereignty.

Despite this, he seems never to have seen an international institution that he liked, either public ones like the League of Nations or private ones like the global, banking houses. It is as if he imagined that the *imperium mundi* of which he dreamed would have no institutional predecessors. Far more interesting than his politics, however, were the historical and philosophical concerns to which Spengler turned his attention after it became clear that the Weimar Republic would be around for a few more years.

Readers of *The Decline of the West* are often struck by the questions it does not answer. It does not explain how the group of “High Cultures” arose or what they have to do with each other. Quite the opposite: Spengler’s method in his great book is perfect cultural relativism. Each

High Culture is equivalent to all the rest. The peculiar ways of looking at the world that each culture develops is true for itself, but fundamentally incomprehensible for the people of the other cultures. While the High Cultures may borrow techniques from each other, they borrow nothing essential, and even what they borrow they put to uses peculiarly their own. (Spengler's best argument for this is mathematics, where he shows how the West put Classical geometry and Magian algebra to uses that were different in kind from those of the societies that invented them.) Historical meaning, in fact, occurs only within each High Culture; there is no truth for mankind as a whole.

In a scattering of unpublished notes, a few essays and one small book (*Man and Technics*, 1931) Spengler modified much of this relativism, or at least created a larger context for it. He became deeply interested in the origin of civilized life. Cultures with civilizations (following an old tradition, Spengler reserved the term "Civilization" for the late phase of a High Culture) have existed for only a small fraction of the time that man has existed zoologically. Spengler at last pursued the possibility that all the High Cultures might be part of a larger story.

His researches persuaded him that man as we know him is quite young, on the order of 100,000 years. Spengler discerns four ages in the past, roughly the Paleolithic (the bulk of human history), Neolithic, precivilization (after the last ice age ended about 10,000 B.C.) and the time of the High Cultures, which began in the Near East about 3,000 B.C. This looks like a pattern of accelerated development, but Spengler goes farther even than that. Sounding more than a little like Arnold Toynbee, he says that the members of the class of High Cultures fall into generations, related by the widespread primitive societies from which they developed. The latter High Cultures are more powerful and profound than the earlier ones, with the West reaching a maximum. Indeed, he says that the final phase of the West opens a fifth and final age of the whole human story. By its end, the physical environment of the earth could be seriously disrupted. Human populations could fall back to the sparse numbers of precivilization. The species could even become extinct.

As Farrenkopf points out, what we see here is Spengler moving from qualified pessimism to full apocalyptic. In these fragments and short works, Spengler is reminiscent of Henry and Brooks Adams, or for that matter a negative image of Teilhard de Chardin. He sounds most of all like H.G. Wells in his last published work, *Mind at the End of Its Tether* (1945). Spengler never worked these new ideas into a coherent

system, as he had hoped. (For one thing, he suffered a minor stroke in 1927, which made it difficult for him to concentrate on large projects.) He claimed repeatedly that he never changed his ideas about the pattern of historical development within each of the High Cultures. On the other hand, in his notes, he started to call them "End Cultures," so there was at least a change in emphasis.

In *The Decline*, he had voiced an idea not uncommon around 1900, that Russia was a vital but still fundamentally primitive culture that would eventually supersede the West. While he never entirely took back the prediction that Russia would someday add a ninth High Culture to his historical eight, in *Man and Technics*, this becomes a "maybe." He calls the prospective Russian Culture a mere straggler. What clearly interests him far more is the dramatic vision of the High Cultures as a series of ever-greater failures, with the coming end of the West the greatest catastrophe of all.

This vision of ultimate doom, however, still left the question of how to manage the more immediate decline. As Farrenkopf points out, the destiny of the West as a High Culture is not purely pessimistic. As the era of Civilization advances, the West could be expected to produce a "final" version of science, of mathematics, of politics, of ethics, even a measure of universal peace in the *imperium mundi*. Spengler himself at one point suggested that he was really talking about the "Vollendung" of the West, its "fulfillment" or "perfection." (*The Perfection of the West*; now there's a title for you.) However, his advice about how to approach the terminal state was relentlessly anti-idealistic. The goal would not be achieved by nations and individuals cooperating to establish theoretically correct solutions, but through the unprincipled pursuit of national and individual self-interest.

The term for this attitude in the theory of international relations is "realism," and in fact Spengler's continuing currency rests on the relevance of his ideas to the anti-Wilsonian school of foreign policy. Indeed, one might call Spengler's theory of foreign affairs Social Darwinist, were it not for one thing; Spengler did not believe in Darwin. Part of Spengler's teaching certification required writing a thesis on evolutionary theory, so he was current with the biology of his day. He did not doubt that evolution had occurred, but he was inclined to doubt that it was a teleology of survival. Rather, it was an entelechy of creatures becoming more and more themselves. Thus, man could not make peace with nature by adapting his understanding to it. Man was what he was. As in the drama of the tragic character-flaw, man's story could only

be the playing out of the consequences of his nature over time.

As Farrenkopf tells us, this is a far more fundamental objection to political realism than any posed by Wilsonian idealism. Realism and idealism presuppose there is a right answer; they differ only on how the world works. Spengler's apocalyptic realism, in contrast, suggests that, ultimately, there is no right answer. In the end, he counsels a historically informed Stoicism. This is not without practical merit, as we see in his last major work, "The Hour of Decision" (1933) and in his opposition to the Nazis.

Spengler's cranky anti-Nazism may have saved his ideas for serious consideration by future generations, but only barely. During the 1920s, Spengler had continued to hope for an authoritarian, perhaps monarchist successor to the Weimar Republic. He made clear his contempt for the Nazis' demagoguery and mysticism. Spengler had complicated ideas about the relationship of the Jews to the West, but he did not think that the Jews were the cause of Germany's problems and he had little patience for anyone who claimed they were. Nonetheless, in the final crisis of the Republic, Spengler voted for Hitler twice, with the cryptic explanation that "one must support the Movement."

If Spengler had shared the expectation on the Right that a government of old-line conservatives could restrain Hitler in office, he was quickly disappointed. In fact, he took the rather dangerous course of snubbing invitations from Propaganda Minister Goebbels himself, refusing to attend Nazi-sponsored events or to contribute his writings to Nazi publications. Still, his international reputation was such that he was able to publish "The Hour of Decision" in 1933, one of the few works critical of the regime that appeared during the Nazi period. Spengler's sudden death in 1936 may have saved him from arrest or exile.

Spengler being Spengler, "The Hour of Decision" was not a plea for parliamentary democracy and international understanding. Rather, he wanted to know why there were still all those marches and banners, even after the party had come to power. Did those people know what "government" meant? This book was not the occasion when Spengler made his famous anti-Hitler quip, "What Germany needs is a hero, not a heroic tenor," but the implication is there. Chiefly, though, he complained that Germany had no foreign policy and no military to speak of, this at a time that he characterized as the most fateful in all Western history. Clearly, Spengler said, a second world war was in the offing, one in which Germany faced not just a loss of status, but extinction.

Farrenkopf points out something that had escaped my notice, the extent to which "The Hour of Decision" anticipates the Cold War. Spengler understood the Bolshevik government of Russia to be alien to Russia. He thought it was destined to be overthrown, without much fuss, at no very distant date. However, he also suggested that, in the meantime, the anti-Western regime could use Bolshevism to organize the non-white world (a group among which he included the Russians themselves) against the West. At times, he seems to forget his nationalist realism and urge a united Western front against "Asia."

Spengler's advice here could have saved a world of trouble. He implicitly criticizes the Nazi regime again by advocating a purely defensive posture toward the East. We know from his letters and notes that he thought the idea of seeking "Lebensraum" in Russia was nonsense. In *The Hour of Decision*, he emphasized that an invasion of Russia for purely strategic purposes was also unworkable; it would be simply a "thrust into empty space" that would not destroy Russia.

Quite aside from its relevance to the Cold War, Spengler's analysis does look a great deal like the "clash of civilizations" approach that carried favor among the foreign-policy realists of the 1990s. The chief point of difference is Spengler's assertion that old, fossilized civilizations could act only negatively. They could combat Western influence, but they could not become world powers. In contrast, the more recent realists seem to assume that anything is possible for any civilization, given the right circumstances. As Farrenkopf points out, it is still not completely clear who is right about this. Islam is a swamp, and India is a narrowly regional power. Even China could blow up from attempting to modernize. This is not to suggest that Spengler's prescience was ever better than uneven. *The Hour of Decision* contains the memorable prophecy that the United States could break up under stress of the economic collapse of the Great Depression. One successor state might well be a Bolshevik regime in the industrial Midwest, with its capital at Chicago. (Why Chicago? Was Spengler a fan of Bertolt Brecht?)

Regarding the United States, Farrenkopf notes that Spengler never treats it systematically. Sometimes, it is just a peripheral region of the English sphere, of no significance to the fate of the West. Sometimes, particularly in his earlier work, the US is a contender for the possible founder of the *imperium mundi*. Farrenkopf goes so far as to suggest that the United States actually did create the Western *imperium mundi* in 1945, 150 years ahead of schedule. Farrenkopf tries to fit the anomaly into Spengler's system by invoking Spengler's late idea of histori-

cal “acceleration.” This really doesn’t work. The temporal quantum in the life of Spengler’s High Cultures is the generation, a measure that changes little over time. In any case, there is really nothing to explain. If you must look for an analogy, the situation of Rome after the end of the Second Punic War was not so different from that of the United States after the Second World War. Anyone who wants to see this idea worked out intelligently should read Amaury de Riencourt’s *The Coming Caesars* (1957).

Probably, though, it is better not to look for a close analogy. Spengler’s belief that all international systems collapse into universal states has merit. So do his ideas about cultural “completion.” So, more tentatively, does his time scale. Beyond that, the logic of his system does not make many specific predictions. Indeed, if we take seriously Spengler’s protestations about the uniqueness of historical phenomena, we are required to resist the temptation to predict the future from analogy (something that, according to Farrenkopf, Spengler himself belatedly appreciated). Spengler’s model would be consistent with a wide range of futures, from a distended Hohenzollern Empire to Toynbee’s ecumenical society.

Farrenkopf observes that, as time went on, Spengler became less and less concerned with the prospect of universal empire and more worried about German national survival. *The Hour of Decision* is chiefly concerned about staving off mere chaos, another post-Cold War theme that Spengler anticipated. The path to the future that seemed so clear to Spengler when he was freezing in his Munich garret became obscure when he was a respected authority. Perhaps what we have here is not a growth of pessimism, but of a sense of responsibility.

——— John J. Reilly