

THE NEW RELEVANCE OF OSWALD SPENGLER

Prophet of Decline:

Spengler on World History and Politics

John Farrenkopf

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Reviewed by Jerry Woodruff

With the victory of the democracies and their communist allies over fascist Europe in 1945, Oswald Spengler's view of history quickly fell into obscurity. Though it once enjoyed intellectual respectability and even popularity throughout the Western world, the rulers of neither the capitalist democracies nor the totalitarian communist states had much use for a philosophy of history that denied the unlimited progress of man. After all, the progressive march of mankind into a future of Enlightenment and prosperity was (and remains) the central tenet—and propaganda—of both universalist ideologies.

But today, despite being shunned for decades by Western intellectuals, Spengler is more relevant than ever. The crises he warned us about—the threat of cheap labor competition from non-Western regions and the decline in population among Western countries, to name but two—are now openly discussed. Although Western elites still pretend their populations are ascending toward a global commercial paradise, some dissident thinking has recently erupted, echoing what democracy's progressive academics like to call Spengler's "pessimism." Patrick Buchanan's best-selling *The Death of the West*, for example, is a strikingly faithful recapitulation of Spengler's warnings in *The Hour of Decision*. Published in English in 1934, Spengler's book warned that the Western peoples, far from achieving materialistic bliss in some global multicultural shopping mall of the future, face potential catastrophe from left-wing revolutionaries within the culture who would ally with a hostile non-white world without. As Buchanan illustrates with considerable detail in *Death of the West*, that dangerous alliance of the left with anti-Western non-white populations has already happened.

Western elites are unable to see the crisis. With their belief in a linear, progressive history of mankind and a sentimental attachment to egalitarianism, they believe mankind consists of zoological units interchangeable from one culture to another. For them, historic events are ever-advancing stages that ultimately lead everyone on earth to liberal democratic capitalism (or a Marxist-socialist utopia, depending on which side of the intra-universalist debate you're on).

Few, if any, thinkers besides Spengler provide the kind of comprehensive world-historical perspective that confronts and challenges this utopian linear-progressive ideology, placing the crisis of the West into an intelligible framework. For the last fifty years or so, Spengler remained daunting to non-specialists, his works often hard to find, and his view of history obscured by time and the absence of fair-minded discussion.

But now, thanks to John Farrenkopf, there is available in English—and in paperback—what is undeniably the most lucid, thorough, and fair-minded overview of Spengler ever published. *Prophet of Decline: Spengler on World History and Politics* is based not only on Spengler's published works but includes insights gleaned from the Spengler Archive in the Bavarian State Library in Munich, which reportedly includes documents, photographs, newspaper articles, private correspondence, and interview transcripts about Spengler, as well as much of the philosopher's own notes and memos and manuscript fragments, including an unpublished autobiographical sketch.

Although he adopts the vocabulary of Spengler's critics, Farrenkopf is open-minded; he asserts that "historical pessimism cannot be ignored in our crisis-ridden age," and adds that Spengler "enhances our knowledge and self-consciousness as individuals and societies awash on the tidal flows of historical time." Much to his credit, Farrenkopf agrees that many of the attacks on Spengler have been politically motivated. "[O]ne cannot avoid the impression that the intensity and emotionalism of much of the criticism reflects antagonism toward Spengler's anti-Weimar neoconservatism and historical pessimism," he writes.

One polemical writer for the Internet version of a popular conservative magazine recently tried to discredit Spengler by suggesting he was a "racist" who "worried that the introduction of nonwhites and their culture into Western civilization was a cancer." But Spengler was not a biological racist and never made any such remark. In fact, he persistently denied the role of race in culture-building and even foolishly cited work by socialist anthropologist Franz Boas to bolster the unscientific assertion that the physical environment can affect the shape of men's skulls.

As a conservative nationalist (pre-National Socialist), Spengler ardently hoped that Germany would emerge as the hegemonic national power within the broader Euro-American Western culture, leading the culture to fulfill what he saw as its ultimate destiny the way Rome became the dominant power in the classical world. As a result, many postwar liberal-democratic intellectuals preferred to see Spengler's philosophy of history as little more than an academic attempt to justify German expansionism.

But Spengler was much more than a German nationalist, and his hopes for his own homeland are not effective arguments against him. Spengler's virtues—and they are many—reside in his discernment of broad similarities in the course of the rise and fall of several great “high cultures,” the contours of which he was able to integrate into a brilliantly creative and formal philosophical structure that makes the linear-progressive view of history look hopelessly naive.

One of the leading exponents of the linear view, which unfortunately dominates the outlook of Western elites today, is Francis Fukuyama, a former chief of the State Department's office of planning. In his celebrated and influential 1992 book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Fukuyama articulates and formalizes the progressive-universalist scheme, which consists of combining an abridged Hegelian philosophy of history with a faith in the belief that mankind consists of one universal nature, the needs and aspirations of which can be satisfied with a single political-economic culture to which all men (consciously or not) aspire.

In his chapter entitled, “The Worldwide Liberal Revolution,” Fukuyama presents a chart that shows that in 1790 there were only three liberal democracies: the United States, Switzerland, and France. But in 1990, there were sixty-one liberal democracies, including the countries of Botswana, Papua New Guinea, Mauritius, India, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, among others. Fukuyama asserts that this is part of his evidence for the progress of mankind:

The success of democracy in a wide variety of places and among many different peoples would suggest that the principles of liberty and equality on which they are based are not accidents or the results of ethnocentric prejudice, but are in fact discoveries about the nature of man as man, whose truth does not diminish but grows more evident as one's point of view becomes more cosmopolitan.

For self-congratulating progressives, the societies they rule from their cosmopolitan perches turn out to be the pinnacles of human achievement, the sort of societies toward which history has been marching all along and which every other man on earth wants to mimic. And when the whole world comes under the rule of progressives enforcing the ideas of universal equality and liberty at the top of history's pyramid, then we will have reached an important end, argues Fukuyama:

And if we are now at a point where we cannot imagine a world substantially different from our own, in which there is no apparent or obvious way in which the future will represent a fundamental improvement over our current order, then we must also take into consideration the possibility that History itself might be at an end.

To the progressive, history ends when the future brings no more improvement, or improvement is no longer possible—or even imaginable. The possibility of a worsening or a failure or deterioration is merely “pessimism” and not thinkable—therefore inadmissible.

Our linear-minded elites cannot help but see the growth of Third World populations and their migrations to the West as progress. It shows mankind's yearnings for liberty and equality, they believe. The more who yearn, the more progress is made. The transfer of industry and technology (regarded by progressives as the inventions of "mankind," rather than particular groups of men) from the West to the non-West is also progress, for the whole of "mankind" yearns to live like Fukuyama and his colleagues. That more Third Worlders do live that way—by coming to the West, for example—is even more evidence that we are closer to the End of History and thus achieving greater and greater progress, which in turn reinforces and confirms the belief among elites that they have been right all along.

For Spengler, how statesmen and elites view history is crucial to how they act on the world stage. As Farrenkopf writes,

Spengler's contribution to the philosophy of statecraft consists of his argument that politically realistic policies in the twentieth century and beyond can only be formulated in conformance with a profound sense of what is conditioned by unfolding, grand historical trends.... For Spengler, the study of the life cycles of past civilizations enriches statecraft because it illuminates the ineluctable trends of the future.

In Spengler's view, there is no universal history of "mankind" in any meaningful sense. Mankind is a zoological concept, not an historical reality. There is history only for particular groups of men living in particular places at particular times in particular cultures. *They* have history, and they differ from each other; universal mankind, which does not differ, does not have history.

At the same time, he dismisses as primitive and analytically useless the division of history into the linear scheme of ancient, medieval, and modern (and now additionally, "postindustrial" or "postmodern"). World history is the product of the birth, growth, maturity, decay, and death of great cultures. Each of those cultures are the products of particular men in specific times with particular outlooks expressed in each separate culture through architecture, art, music, philosophy, and other cultural manifestations.

To Spengler, the great mechanical and technological advances the world now enjoys are the products not of mankind ("mankind," he writes, "has never discovered anything whatever"), but are uniquely the expressions of Western—in his terminology, "Faustian"—culture. This technology comes from the West's internal dynamism, a unique expression of its cultural essence that differentiates it from the other high cultures, empowering its dramatic military, political, and economic expansion across the globe as no other culture before it.

Spengler foresaw and warned, however, that a "treason to technics" would threaten the Faustian West, a treason stemming from a spreading weariness among elites in the cosmopolitan centers of the culture. That treason is the transfer of technical power and knowledge to the non-white world. In *Man and Technics*, he wrote a blunt and eloquent description of the treason, justifying here a lengthy quotation:

The immense superiority that Western Europe and North America enjoyed in the second half of the nineteenth century, in power of every kind—economic, and political, military and financial—was based on an uncontested monopoly of industry.... We were in sole possession... of the methods and the trained intellects required for its utilization. It is this that constitutes the basis of the luxurious living of the white worker—whose income, in comparison with that of the “native” [in the colonized world] is princely—a circumstance that Marxism has turned to dishonest account.... It is being revenged on us today.... The high level of wages of the white worker, which is today a peril to his very life, rests upon the monopoly that the leaders of industry have created about him.

And then, at the close of the last century, the blind will to power began to make its decisive mistakes. Instead of keeping strictly to itself the technical knowledge that constituted their greatest asset, the “white” peoples complacently offered it to all the world, in every Hochschule, orally and on paper, and the astonished homage of Indians and Japanese delighted them. The famous “dissemination of industry” set in, motivated by the idea of getting bigger profits by bringing production into the marketing area. And so, in place of the export of finished products exclusively, they began an export of secrets, processes, methods, engineers, and organizers.... The unassailable privileges of the white races have been thrown away, squandered, betrayed.

This, Spengler warned, was the beginning of a catastrophe for the West. The center of gravity of production is steadily shifting away.... It is no mere crisis, but the beginning of a catastrophe.... For the colored races... [machine technics] is but a weapon in their fight against the Faustian civilization, a weapon like a tree from the woods that one uses as house-timber, but discards as soon as it has served its purpose. This machine technics will end with the Faustian civilization and one day will lie in fragments, forgotten — our railways and steamships as dead as the Roman roads and the Chinese wall, our giant cities and skyscrapers in ruins like old Memphis and Babylon.

Here, then, is Spengler’s “pessimism.” But anyone who has visited the urban ghost town of non-white Detroit with its boarded-up buildings, abandoned skyscrapers, and trash-strewn empty streets cannot help but wonder: Can the non-white populations that are expected to be a majority of the U.S. population by 2050 sustain the West? If so, in what sense will they be “Westerners”? The civilizations of Egypt and Rome are dead; why should the West escape their fate?

Refreshingly, Farrenkopf takes Spengler’s arguments seriously, as he should, including this one.

Spengler’s political economy of the decline of the West is a significant and hitherto unappreciated implicit critique of the premises of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism rests upon the debatable assumption that the universal embrace of free market policies and the implementation of such measures as trade liberalization, privatization, and fiscal austerity will help promote enduring economic stability. Spengler boldly argues that the global economy will eventually collapse as part of the grand process of civilizational decline.

Farrenkopf argues that Spengler's view of history underwent a significant shift of thinking in later life. He refers to Spengler's "second view," his "new view," and the "late Spengler," which Farrenkopf says emerges mostly from the unpublished documents in the archive in Munich. Perhaps the most significant part of the "transformed" view includes revising the notion that Western technology dies with, and is unique to, the West. Farrenkopf agrees it is plausible that the technological inventions of the West, erupting from Western man's struggle to overcome nature, "could only be conceivably created by such a culture" as the dynamic Faustian. But he maintains that Spengler in later years "conceives man's struggle with the natural environment, from his earliest origins to the modern age, as forming an integrated process in which man attempts to reshape nature through the refinement of his technics."

Farrenkopf thereby implies—but notably does not drive home the point—that Spengler began to adopt universalist views of human history. That would be quite a reversal, indeed. No doubt Spengler's views did evolve over time; after all, *The Decline of the West* was published while he was a relatively young man—in his thirties. He died of a heart attack at the age of fifty-six. But Spengler's central idea is the distinctiveness and separateness of the high cultures, each with its own special character or "soul," and life span. In Spengler's philosophy, Faustian man's high technology is essential to himself and a necessarily unique expression of his culture—an inner necessity not shared by the other high cultures. That man in general—mankind, if you will—might exhibit similar traits across cultures, such as tool-making in the development of agriculture, for example, is no contradiction, no transformation of the ideas expressed in *Decline of the West*.

Whatever his later views, Spengler's published works are a valuable and realistic antidote to the rosy linear-progressive ideology of Fukuyama and the academic elites whose thinking dominates and directs the policies of the nations of the West. While Spengler's brilliant and profound view of history is kept relevant by the very events it surveys, *Prophet of Decline* is an important contribution to keeping Spengler's philosophy of history in front of new audiences.

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