

Foreword

Stumbling over *The Decline of the West*

Since the original appearance of Spengler's portentous work, the scholarly world... has been embarrassed to know what to do about it. Although based on an impressive amount of reading, The Decline of the West is obviously not a respectable performance from the standpoint of scholarship. It is too metaphysical, too dogmatic — in all respects, too extreme. Yet there it sits — a massive stumbling-block in the path of true knowledge.¹

The received view of Oswald Spengler goes something like this: the first volume of *The Decline of the West* was published in 1918 and, despite its imposing size and often dense contents, quickly became a bestseller in Germany. The book tapped into the public mood of despondency and crisis that followed the country's loss in the First World War and the subsequent economic crisis. A second, less well-received, volume followed in 1922. Both works were critically mauled by the academic world at the time, and Spengler's work has been generally ignored in the intervening years.

Spengler's work, on this account, appears as a blip in intellectual history. Either viewed as appearing without intellectual 'parents', some sort of *sui generis* anomaly, or alternatively as the child of too many fathers — a derivative mishmash of philosophical currents then prominent in the *Zeitgeist*. In any case, his work does not appear to be of any particular significance, being either too idiosyncratic, or else too generic, to be of any real interest. In the latter case its limited utility is held to lie in its role as a cultural token indicative of the intellectual flavour of the Weimar period, rather than due to any intrinsic value. And in addition to being without parents, it is also viewed as being without children, in that there was no school of self-declared 'Spenglerians' that sprang up around Spengler. And also in that, being either a fleeting aberration or derivative *mélange*, it was assumed that Spengler's work could have had no significant influence on the patterns of thought of his contemporaries, or of subsequent generations.

And so, Spengler takes his place in the marginalia of the academy, a thinker of whom many have heard, typically as a minor representative of the bygone grand narrative style of historiography. But a thinker that no one needs to read any longer given that what little there was to be said about his work has already been said. And yet this sort of narrative overlooks the fact that research on Spengler's writings, and their influence, has never ceased. Indeed, recent years have seen a flurry of engagement with Spengler and his intellectual legacy. Jeffrey Herf's (1984) *Reactionary Modernism* recast Spengler as part of a group of innovative reactionary thinkers struggling to grasp the central role of technology in modernity, and Michael Zimmerman's Herf-inspired (1990) *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity* emphasised the importance of Spengler's philosophy in the development of Heidegger's technological

¹ H. Stuart Hughes, *Oswald Spengler: A Critical Estimate* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), 1.

critique.² Domenico Conte's (1997) *Oswald Spengler* and John Farrenkopf's penetrating (2001) *Prophet of Decline* drew the world's attention to the existence of a later-phase of Spengler's philosophy and, in Farrenkopf's case, its contemporary political relevance.³ The collection of papers in (2013) *Oswald Spengler als europäisches Phänomen* and in (2014) *Spengler ohne Ende* clearly demonstrated the extent of Spengler's impact on the international scene.⁴ And Alexander Demandt's (2017) *Untergang Des Abendlandes: Studien Zu Oswald Spengler*, David Engels's (2021) *Oswald Spengler: Werk, Deutung, Rezeption*, Ben Lewis's (2022) *Oswald Spengler and the Politics of Decline*, and the collections of papers in (2018) *Oswald Spenglers Kulturmorphologie* and (2018) *Der Lange Schatten Oswald Spenglers* provided abundant evidence that there was still much to be explored and extracted from Spengler's philosophical and historical writings.⁵ The recent founding of the Oswald Spengler Society, and its biennial conference, further testifies to the enduring interest in Spengler's ideas.

At the heart of Spengler's work lies a Heraclitean view of existence as necessarily agonistic. One in which all cultures are born dying, their finite lifespan committed to continuous expression and reproduction of their unique cultural symbol. A symbol which, no matter how glorious or monumental the accomplishments of that culture, cannot be transmitted and is destined to die with the culture that spawned it. Spengler's world is a world in which inter-cultural exchange is an impossibility and in which one culture must dominate the other or else perish. And even within a culture conflict persists as successive generations struggle to secure the supremacy of their new mode of symbolic expression over the old. For Spengler all is strife and all is flux. Any stability is more apparent than real, and the only certainty that of death. Spengler's account offers a direct challenge to progressivist and utopian interpretations of human history, a tragic vision of human existence supported by a panoramic grasp of world history that many of his contemporaries found hard to accept but impossible to ignore.

This 2-volume special issue of the *Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence* continues this ongoing reassessment of Spengler's thought and its influence, and in so doing continues the process of undermining the academic shibboleth that Spengler's thought is a dead letter. The papers in this first volume explore Spengler's international influence, both upon his contemporaries, and in the present day. They trace the way in which his doctrine of strife was absorbed, reinterpreted and critiqued by each thinker discussed. Each paper, in its own way, subverts the popular image of Spengler as an intellectual crank, a historiographical Nostradamus, or producer of doom-laden cultural maledictions. Though not all the thinkers discussed here agreed with Spengler, what is significant is that even those who rejected his vision still felt sufficiently challenged by his work that they had to engage with it.

² Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, culture and politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Michael E. Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

³ Domenico Conte, *Oswald Spengler: Eine Einführung* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag GmbH, 2004); John Farrenkopf, *Prophet of Decline: Spengler on World History and Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

⁴ Zaur Gasimov & Carl Antonius Lemke Duque ed., *Oswald Spengler als europäisches Phänomen* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013); Gilbert Merlio & Daniel Meyer ed., *Spengler ohne Ende: Ein Rezeptionsphänomen im internationalen Kontext* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014).

⁵ Alexander Demandt, *Untergang Des Abendlandes: Studien Zu Oswald Spengler* (Bohlaus Verlag, 2017); David Engels, *Oswald Spengler: Werk, Deutung, Rezeption* (Kohlhammer, 2021); Ben Lewis, *Oswald Spengler and the Politics of Decline* (Berghahn, 2022); Fink, Sebastian & Robert Rollinger ed., *Oswald Spenglers Kulturmorphologie* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2018); David Engels, Max Otte and Michael Thöndl ed., *Der Lange Schatten Oswald Spenglers* (Manuscriptum, 2018).

Stephen Clark, in the first paper in this collection, takes issue with the standard pessimistic interpretation of Spengler's *The Decline of the West*. Such an interpretation presents Spengler's masterwork as a jeremiad which characterises the current stage of Western culture as the enervated last days of a dying culture. Its capacity for creativity and purpose lies long behind it, and ahead only spiritual bankruptcy and violent dissipation. To interpret *The Decline* in this way, Clark points out, is to severely misread Spengler's analysis of the demise of the West and its intent. On Clark's account, Spengler maintained that great cultural works were still possible, provided that these works are in tune with the possibilities of the times. Seen in this light, Spengler's efforts in *The Decline* were designed to redirect the energies of the denizens of Western civilisation towards these remaining possibilities, namely engineering and statecraft, and away from the urge to rehash the achievements of earlier ages. Rather than being a lament for a dying culture then, Spengler's purpose appears as a more liberatory one intended to free the last of the West from the dead hand of its past.

Clark also notes that for Spengler it is not the case that Western culture is the only culture. And consequently, even if Western culture has reached the terminal point of its cultural lifecycle, this represents the death of *its* culture, rather than all culture. And even now there may be a new culture in the offing, ready to begin its own arc of cultural development and achievement. Clark examines Spengler's account of the hazy days of a pre-cultural phase in human history, and then draws upon science fiction to imaginatively outline the post-cultural/pre-cultural phase that might follow the death of Western civilisation. In so doing, Clark introduces the notion of a Hestian culture, a new culture-organism that espouses a common mode of life that is inwardly centred, as symbolised by the sun and the hearth, and that has abandoned the Faustian urge to grasp the infinite.

The paper by David Engels in this collection also has a literary theme. Engels uses Spengler's analysis of the symptoms of civilisational decline as a means by which to explore a recent work by the noted German author, Monika Maron. Engels argues that in her 2020 novel *Artur Lanz* Maron makes a self-conscious use of Spengler's analysis in order to structure her own exploration of the contemporary crisis of Western masculinity. Maron's novel considers the social phenomenon of 'post-heroism.' This is the pervasive sense that the age in which 'great deeds' were possible has passed away coupled with a perverse pride in the collective feeling that the willingness to sacrifice oneself for the values of one's culture is somehow gauche and passé. Whilst the former sense of irrevocable decline, the intuition that the glory days of a culture are long past, is for Spengler a typical feature of a culture in its terminal phase, Maron's exploration of what one might consider the normative aspect of contemporary post-heroism constitutes a novel application of Spenglerian thought. Whilst previous cultures in decline felt the sense of ebbing vitality and attributed it to their own ageing, Western civilisation, faced with the same phenomenon but committed to the ideal of its eternal youth, transforms its own spiritual *akrasia* into a virtue to be celebrated. Engel's analysis of Maron not only testifies to the enduring influence of Spengler's cultural criticism, it also provides an important contribution to the analysis of Maron's work.

Philips's paper also explores the intellectual influence of Spengler's thought. In this case the influence of Spengler's philosophy of history on the work of the British fascist philosopher, Alexander Raven Thomson. Philips traces Spengler's enduring influence on Thomson's philosophy throughout his works from 1932 onwards, such as the commitment to the existence of discoverable laws of history and of cultural cycles. Philips also draws attention to the extent to which Thomson, in his (1932) *Civilization as Divine Superman*, emphasises the moral obligation laid upon the denizens of a moribund civilization to usher in the birth of a new civilization-superman by actively destroying the remnants of the old. Philips also notes the inherent contradictions that developed within this work as the quasi-determinist Spenglerian commitment to super-individual cultural destiny collided with the

voluntarist fascist commitment to individual will and struggle. And Philips suggests that this contradiction motivated, at least in part, the further reformulation of Spenglerian thought in Thomson's later philosophy of history in order to bring it into closer alignment with his fascist inclinations. Taking issue with Spengler's biological understanding of cultures as organisms with life-cycles, Thomson's later philosophy holds that it is possible to renew a culture without needing to pass through the intervening stages of decline and rebirth. And that civilizational-decline is a pathological and contingent state of affairs, as opposed to an inevitable part of the cultural life-cycle, and thus can be cured. Thomson's later philosophy expresses the very Faustian belief that, through the exercise of human will, the laws of history themselves can be overcome. Philips's paper provides an insightful overview of the work of an overlooked philosopher of history and further evidence of Spengler's influence on British far-right thought in the 20th Century.

Gosselink's paper considers Spengler's work in relation to the cultural criticism of the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga. Gosselink traces the development of Huizinga's cultural views, from his initial encounters with Spengler's work to his later writings, and suggests that the works of Spengler and Huizinga bear a closer kinship than has hitherto been appreciated. In his critical review of *The Decline* (1921) Huizinga takes issue with what he viewed as Spengler's romantic despair over the fate of Western culture. However, as Gosselink demonstrates, in the 1930s Huizinga's thought began to take on a more critical, less optimistic, character. This is instanced in his (1935) *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* in which he begins to describe Western culture as suffering from puerilism, a biologicistic diagnosis that echoes Spengler's account of the inevitable decay of a culture-organism at the end of its life-cycle. Though Huizinga persisted in expressing that there was still hope for Western culture, Gosselink notes, his later work came under criticism for expressing the pessimistic cultural vitalism for which he had earlier criticised Spengler.

Roy's paper traces the sustained interest of the sociologist and social philosopher, Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy, in Spengler's work. He does so by way of a detailed reconstruction of the numerous instances in Rosenstock-Huussy's writings in which he engaged, directly and indirectly, with Spengler's *The Decline*. For Rosenstock-Huussy, Roy argues, Spengler represented an 'intimate enemy,' a pagan foil whose world history threatened and provoked Rosenstock-Huussy's own redemptive Judeo-Christian narrative. Rosenstock-Huussy, on Roy's account, saw Spengler as recycling classical sceptical thought under the guise of modern scientific detachment in order to bring about the closure of Western history. This Spenglerian notion of the hermeneutic enclosure of each culture-organism, his infamous cultural isolation hypothesis, conflicted directly with Rosenstock-Huussy's conviction that the best of each previous age could be recovered and revived in the progressive continuum of Christian time. In this sense, for Rosenstock-Huussy, Spengler's commitment to the idea of autochthonous, self-contained culture-monads does violence to the immortality and infinite 'time-space' opened up to humanity in the universal history of the Christian era.

The last paper in this volume, by Hidde van der Wall, traces the influence of Spengler's philosophy of history on the historiographical writings of the Filipino writer, Nick Joaquin. On van der Wall's account, Joaquin drew strongly upon Spengler's morphology in order to navigate the dichotomous accounts then current of the formation of Philippine national identity, which traced the culture's origins to either pre-colonial times or as a product of the 19th century class struggle against colonial occupation. Joaquin, in contrast to these vehemently anti-colonial accounts, posited the formation of Filipino Faustian soul, a unique hybrid cultural formation that arose from the confrontation of the indigenous Filipino culture with the European culture of the Spanish colonisers. Indeed, van der Wall argues, for Joaquin the very idea of Filipino nationalism was itself a product of the Faustian culture introduced by colonisation. And for Joaquin, this Faustian soul, once formed through the embrace and

mastery of colonial technical capacities, could not be altered by nativist revivalism, and embedded Christianity at the roots of Filipino culture. In contrast to the desire to link Filipino national identity to a 'pure' indigenous culture, somehow uncontaminated by the influence of the colonizer, Joaquin celebrates the hybrid nature of the Filipino Faustian soul. Whilst it might, in the eyes of some, be a mongrel culture, it is for Joaquin a vigorous, confident and adaptive one for all that. Joaquin, van der Wall notes, does however appear to reject Spengler's argument that the inevitable fate of all cultures is civilisation and death, opting instead in true Faustian fashion to view the expression of the Filipino national soul as an inevitable teleological process of self-formation.

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