

CULTURE VERSUS CIVILIZATION  
OSWALD SPENGLER'S AND BERTRAND RUSSELL'S  
SOCIAL PROGNOSIS

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**I**N his great work *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* Oswald Spengler, a German philosopher, lays a great deal of stress on the distinction that is to be made between the terms "culture"—which is hardly the equivalent of the term *Kultur* in the German language—and "civilization" which has the same meaning in all languages.

Culture, to Spengler, is the soul of a nation, civilization is its body. The fate of civilization, therefore, is the same as that of the body, namely death. The life of each and every civilization ends with the life of the nation in which a specific civilization found its expression. And the life, again, of each nation is like the life of the individual: it has its beginning and its end. A nation, like an individual, must die sooner or later, and with it dies its civilization. The culture of a nation, on the other hand, like the spiritual creation of the individual, lives forever, or will live at least as long as man lasts.

And just as the individual ceases to exist as a human being the moment his individuality is gone, the moment his spiritual strivings completely succumb to his bodily pleasures and desires; so, and more yet, does a nation lose its national existence, and is set on the verge of complete annihilation, the moment its civilization begins to reign supreme and overpower in every respect its culture. The height of civilization's growth in the nation is a positive indication of the fact that the nation approaches its end. The victory of civilization over culture is an unfailling symptom of approaching death.

All events and occurrences in Europe in the last decade or two testify to the fact that all phases of European life today are dominated by an all-pervading materialism. The human soul has become,

in every European country, large or small, the slave and the obedient servant of the machine—the beating heart of civilization.

Oswald Spengler, therefore, after a profound survey of the world's history in the light of Culture versus Civilization, came to the conclusion that the nations of Europe are doomed to destruction and annihilation.

It is of interest to note here that the first volume of *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* was completed before the beginning of the European war—the immediate, although from a philosophical point of view, merely an accidental cause of Europe's oncoming destruction.

Bertrand Russell arrives essentially at the same conclusion which Spengler came to a number of years ago, as can be seen from Russell's article, "Slavery and Self-Extermination," in *The Nation*, July 11, 1923, although Russell in his political analysis of European conditions, does not touch upon any philosophical distinctions and leaves aside all historic-philosophical conceptions.

One can, however, see at a glance that Russell's interpretation of European affairs results in a social prognosis that is similar to that of Spengler, because they have the same attitude regarding the significance and importance of culture in its relation to civilization.

Bertrand Russell dreads the idea of America's intervention in European affairs, even if he might be certain that such intervention, if it took place soon, would save Europe from destruction. And he dreads it, not because of any bad economic consequences, but because America's political and industrial assistance in disentangling European affairs, would, he thinks, tend to Americanize European culture. European culture would become industrialized and mechanized; or would, in the terminology of Spengler, become civilization rather than culture. It would suffer a complete process of evaporation.

"Industrial culture," says Russell, "has great defects which are not likely to be remedied except by contact with non-industrial communities or ideals."

If we substitute in this sentence the term "civilization" in place of "industrial culture" and insert an emphatic "*will not*" instead of the wavering expression "*which is not likely*," then the sentence will express a view which is identical in every respect with the view of Spengler.

The reason Spengler is more emphatic than Russell is that his attitude towards culture and civilization, which attitude has also fil-

tered through the soul of Russell, is the result of a clear and definite historico-philosophical conception which has become with Spengler a conviction, in the light of which he studies the past, reacts to the present, and sees the future.

True, Spengler does not believe that human actions, actions of beings through whom universal life and spirit has most intensely expressed itself, are regulated and controlled by the same laws that govern the lifeless and spiritless nature. He eliminates, so to speak, causality from the affairs of human life. It must, however, be remembered that he substitutes destiny in the place of causality. And each accident, therefore, may it be even as trivial as Napoleon's peach (see the above mentioned article of Russell), is, in its essence, when looked at from a historico-philosophical point of view, not only an important link in the chain of universal events, but it is also, in a sense, an expression of a universal will, an affirmation or a negation of a universal consciousness.

The direct and immediate cause of Napoleon's fall might, therefore, have been the peach that he ate after the battle of Dresden. But such an insignificant thing as a peach could have become the cause of such a significant an event as the fall of Napoleon, only because Napoleon's fall was the result of the strivings, efforts and accomplishments of a universal conscious will, or willing consciousness.

Napoleon's fall, like any other great event, even as great an event as the destruction or mutual extermination of Europe, and for that matter, also America, and even humanity, may be caused by the most trivial occurrence. But the possibility for the trivial accident to bring about a great and most significant event, lies in the fact that the latter is destined by a power that, when accepted, can give meaning to all the causes, but cannot be explained by any or all causes taken together.

Accepting, however, as we do, the distinction that Mr. Spengler draws between destiny and causality, one fails to see how it is possible for anybody to predict with positive certainty the future of a nation or of nations.

If we discard causality in the realm of life and spirit, we have absolutely no alternative but to accept the Bergsonian view of creative evolution. We must, with him, believe that while the entire past influences and guides the future, it does not by any means determine it. The future does not evolve from a past in whose womb everything that is to come at any time is potentially contained, but it is be-

ing incessantly created by the universal spirit, the conception of which involves and includes inexhaustible creation, as well as eternal existence.

All our studies of the past, therefore, do not justify our conclusion that as it has been in the past, so, it must be in the future. The fact, if it is a fact, that nations in the past, after they have reached a certain stage in their cultural development, have perished at a time when the monster Civilization was ready to devour every bit of culture that they possessed, cannot in the least serve as a guarantee, even for an hypothesis, that each and every nation must in time come to die, just as individuals do. Neither can this fact give any validity to the assumption that with this or these nations civilization has made such enormous strides of development, because the time has come for the nations to die.

In the light of Culture versus Civilization, we would rather reverse the statement and say, that those nations which have not succeeded in damming the tides of civilization and have allowed their souls to be killed and mutilated by everything that appeals to the beast in man—by everything that rejects the eternal values in favor of that which is ephemeral—those nations had a short life. And since we are certain that human life has no value and is of no significance unless men do attach great importance to eternal values and see a deep meaning in a life that is free and not imprisoned and enslaved and driven by the wheels and cogs of machines, we can make a positive forecast that any nation that will go as far in the growth and development of civilization as to let its machinery dethrone its spiritual values, will sooner or later cease to be a nation composed of human beings. Such a nation, it is safe to say, will rather become an aggregate of bodily-erect, and spiritually serpent-like, creeping and earth touching creatures, instead of a society of men. And an accident even less trivial than a peach may be enough to cause the extermination of such a human aggregate, although it may still bear the name of nation.

Civilization thus becomes with us a cause of national destruction, instead of, as with Spengler, a symptom. And since there is always a possibility for culture to overcome civilization, such destruction is not at all unavoidable. Where there is life there is hope; and still more hope is there where there is spirit. Life, and above all, spirit, in its innermost essence, due to its creative power, works by destiny and wisdom, and not by cause and effect. The slightest spiritual ef-

fort, therefore, the slightest real spiritual willing, planning and deciding, may create an entirely new chain of causes and effects that the human mind, especially in its offshoot known as logic, will formulate into new laws, and thus annul all previous determinations and pre-determinations.

Just because a peach may, when it is a question of human affairs, cause the fall of Napoleon, all predictions and forecasts of the future of national and individual existences are nothing but fantastic speculation, poetical creations, which play an important role as factors that stimulate and keep awake the human spirit; but they are of no more scientific value than is a poem or a novel.

And if a peach may cause the fall of Napoleon, how much more is it possible for a single determination of a single individual to cause the rise of a new movement that would save, for instance, Europe from Spengler's *Untergang* and Russell's *Extermination*. All this is possible because Europe's future is not *caused*, but is *destined*, and destiny knows of no pre-determination. All that destiny demands of us is not cold-blooded, scientific analysis, but warm-blooded convictions and actions in harmony with our convictions. And wisdom, real wisdom, is nothing but the expression and the reflection of our convictions, which are nourished by destiny.

And if our real wisdom demands that we should let ourselves rather be exterminated than to submit to a culture of industrialism, of our own or of a foreign importation, then let us not say, as Mr. Russell does, "but we are not wise." Nay, let us emphatically say, "We will be wise and act as wisdom demands. And action of this kind may bring about results and consequences that neither Mr. Spengler nor Mr. Russell can possibly foresee. Action of this kind may save Europe from the immediate danger of extermination and—who can tell? it may also save America from a far-off danger of annihilation as the result of the industrial culture or of the gigantic civilization which, as Mr. Russell puts it, "is gradually killing the joy of life, and will lead, by war, revolution or sterility, to race suicide."

Let us by all means be wise and let us immediately begin to act in the light of culture, instead of civilization; or in the light of spiritual culture, instead of that of industrial culture.

It behooves us to do all in our power to make the people realize the danger of materialism, mechanism and industrialism, which are all but so many different expressions of one and the same civilization. The time has come to make the people feel that the moment civiliza-



tion, and all the material comforts and satisfactions of bodily lusts that come with it, begins to lead and direct humanity, instead of being led, and controlled by it—at that moment civilization becomes a curse instead of a blessing.

There are already indications in philosophy and in art of the birth of this new conception of the simple, uncivilized, but cultured, life as being of much more everlasting value and of giving more joy and happiness than the complicated, civilized, but uncultured, life of present-day society. Why not introduce the new philosophical conception and the new artistic intuitions into sociology and begin thus to lay foundations for a new structure of society—a society that would start out with idealism instead of materialism, and would aim at freedom instead of slavery, at equal distribution rather than at unlimited acquisition, at spiritual depth rather than corporeal width; in short, at culture, instead of civilization.

If Mr. Russell can say, "I would rather see Europe composed of ignorant peasants than see its complete conquest by a mechanistic outlook," we can expect that a further step will be taken by those who will see still deeper into the two diametrically opposed terms—culture and civilization—and they will say, "We will rather see entire humanity composed of absolutely ignorant human beings, than the complete conquest of humanity by industrialism, materialism and other aspects of civilization."

And by thus gaining our soul, even at the expense of losing some sides, parts or aspects of the world, we will save ourselves and humanity from extermination and destruction.

Man can do nothing else and nothing better than to follow where destiny and wisdom lead. Only by following the footsteps of destiny and wisdom can we hope that *homo sapiens* will sooner or later get control over *homo faber*. And compared with this victory, all other victories, and for that matter all other failures, count for very little sociologically, philosophically and artistically.