

SPENGLER AND THE NEW PESSIMISM

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PESSIMISTS we have always had with us. It has been affirmed, indeed, that no intelligent and well-informed man can avoid a pessimistic philosophy or attitude. His pessimism, it is true, need not affect his politics, his social relations, his personal ethics. The cultivated pessimist is generally a Stoic and a Meliorist. He believes in the expediency of virtue, in the beauty of goodness and simplicity. He finds satisfaction in what is called altruism, since experience teaches him that the highest human pleasure is derived from ministering to the worthy pleasure of others—including strangers whose plight arouses his pity and sympathy.

But we are concerned here with the scientific and philosophical grounds or warrants for pessimism. In particular, we are concerned with what may be called Spenglerism, after the German scholar and prophet who in some remarkable works has confidently predicted the decline and fall of western civilization—and, by implication, of such Oriental civilizations as imitate and adopt the ways and institutions of the West—and the reversion of advanced societies to barbarism and some form of autocracy.

Spengler's fatalism and pessimism have been attributed to the post-war difficulties and soul-trying crises of the German republic. It has been pointed out that nowhere outside of Germany has Spengler found disciples and adherents. His is said to be the voice of a weary and disheartened people. But Spengler's views are not an aftermath of the war. It seems certain that had that catastrophic struggle never taken place, or had it ended in a victory for the central powers, Spengler would still have arrived at the depressing conclusions that are his. His philosophy, his social metaphysics, his reading of human history do not impress the unprejudiced reader as having been made to order.

But, be this as it may, his assertions and generalizations have to be considered without speculative references to their origin or genesis. The questions he raises are profound and far reaching, and the duty of critical thinkers is to determine how far he succeeds in proving his affirmations or in establishing, at least, presumptions in their favor.

We should be grateful to Spengler for the condensed summary of his formidable and erudite work, *The Decline of the West*. True, it will not satisfy the serious student, who demands evidence and demonstration, but Spengler does not despise the average reader of intelligence and cultivation, and seeks to reach and impress him. We have, therefore, the right to ask whether the recent small volume, entitled, *Man and Technics: A Contribution to a Philosophy of Life*, is impressive, persuasive, and at all sound.

Let me recall Spengler's basic contention. Our civilization, according to him, is sick unto death, and there is no possibility of curing it. The liberals, radicals, humanists, moralists, and reformers who endeavor to improve it by tinkering, or by revolutions, are all equally mistaken. The malady is insidious and fatal, although we can make the patient a little more comfortable, perhaps, for an hour or two by treating symptoms and dulling his sensations.

Now, what ails our civilization? Injustice, sin, lapses from avowed and attainable standards, conflict between theory and practice? Is there any hope for progress toward solidarity, fraternity, liberty, equity, and are we suffering from a sense of imperfection, unworthiness, treason to our own ideals? No, says Spengler. All this is puerile and illusory. Man has no sense of sin, despite the theologians, the most modern psychologists and the convictions of the average person. What we call remorse, uneasy conscience, regret, and shame, can be explained by false teaching. The natural man does not know or feel these things.

What is the natural man? Spengler answers, a beast of prey—solitary, crafty and cruel, "a foe to everyone, killing, hating, resolved to conquer or die." Man alone has evolved the Hand, the greatest of tools, and with this tool he has been able to create, perfect, and multiply machines and techniques. These remarkable inventions have served man well, but that stage of his history is drawing to a close. The machine is now turning against its creator. The machine is destroying "Faustian civilization," a civilization fatally divided against itself. The masses, inferior, full of envy and malice, suspicious and unwilling to be led, have learned from the few superior persons the arts of destruction. The masterful leaders, deprived of followers, are renouncing the machine. The purpose of technique was domination, but this has become impossible. The machine will disappear in the ruins of modern civilization.

Now, it would be easy to offer overwhelming evidence of the cruelty and savagery of man as he is after several thousand years of discipline and schooling. Certainly one cannot be very proud of man. His wars; his racial, religious, and class conflicts; his shortsightedness and levity; his superstitions and follies; his animal appetites and his criminal tendencies—all these lines of evidence make, in the thoughtful, for humility. But the indictment, terrible as it is, tells only one side of the story. It is true, but it is not the *whole* truth.

Man is cruel and selfish; but do these traits account for the family, the tribe, the state, the nation, the international organizations man has called into being? Man is selfish, yet his benevolence is a reality to be seen on every side. Man is solitary, in a sense, but he is also gregarious and social. He seeks the companionship of his fellows in a hundred ways, through clubs, lodges, churches, political parties, groups, unions, what not. Man fights, but he also coöperates. He kills, but he also saves. He has passions, but among them is the passion for truth, the passion for righteousness. He is vain and egotistical, but he goes to the stake for his ideas, and these ideas are often abstract and general. Can Spenglerism account for these amazing contrasts? No, it cannot. But it can belittle and disparage the better and softer side of human nature. Nietzsche did this with considerable temporary success. We have not forgotten his "blond beast," his contempt for the masses, his worship of force in the service of the aristocracy, his scorn for slave-morality and slave-religion. But Nietzsche was a poet, not a man of science, and the philosophical student of history cannot take his paradoxes very seriously.

Progress is a fact that cannot be denied or minimized. Inadequate as our civilization is, it is infinitely superior to any known past civilization. Compare the position of women, the treatment of children, the care of the insane, the administration of prisons, the character of punishment, the conditions of the landless workers, and a hundred other things, in our time and under our legal and ethical codes, with the corresponding positions and situations in any definite past era. Who, in the face of the improvements, can question the reality of progress—material, intellectual, and moral?

Furthermore, what are the most conspicuous and striking tendencies and trends of our present stage of civilization? In international relations we witness and take part in peace movements,

world parliaments, world tribunals, world campaigns against white slavery, the habit-forming drugs, peonage, dreaded diseases, and the like. The world is still an armed camp, but there are armament reduction and limitation treaties, war-renunciation pacts, arbitration and conciliation agencies, and these often succeed, directly or indirectly, in preventing or localizing brutal conflicts. True, governments not infrequently break their pledges and inflame the passions of their ignorant and deceived populations, but even such cynical or audacious and irresponsible governments often feel that they have to reckon with public opinion, and have to resort to sophistry and falsehood to justify their criminal conduct.

Our economic and political systems are very defective and unsatisfactory, but, after all, these systems are new, historically speaking, and subject to change. Indeed, they are undergoing radical changes and gradually correcting their faults. Capitalism has been challenged; old doctrinaire notions, like *laissez-faire* and rugged individualism, are being revised: laws are being adjusted to actual social conditions.

It is not easy to reconcile the "beast-of-prey" idea of man with the many reform movements of our time—with old-age pensions, employment insurance, protection of women and children, coöperative organizations, control of monopoly, regulation of public utilities, conservation movements, high and progressive taxation as a means of redistribution of wealth, labor, and radical reform movements. Spengler makes no attempt at such reconciliation.

He is sure, however, that the tensions and contradictions created by the machine and the machine civilization must, in the end, destroy the latter, and that humanity cannot escape its predestined doom. History, he asserts, is a succession of human tragedies, and the prospect of another and final tragedy need not startle us. But are these statements necessarily true?

Take the second first. Is history a record of failures and defeats, frustrations and reverses? What about science, the fine arts, philosophy? Are these human achievements in the realms of the spirit of little moment? What sort of tragedy is that which does not affect our best values, moral and esthetic?

Was the Renaissance a tragedy? Was the Reformation, or the discovery of America, or the French Revolution? There are tragic chapters in history, but there are also splendid and bright chapters. What reasons are there for despairing of the future for assuming

that Nature will defeat Culture? Is not culture a part of nature?

Let us glance at the tensions Spengler views with so much pessimism. There is, he says, tension between the leaders and the mass; tension between industrial processes and their results; tension between advanced nations and backward ones; tension between life and organization.

True, these tensions cause much strife and unrest, but it is wholly arbitrary to conclude that the problems creating the tensions are hopeless and insoluble. Masses do follow leaders, and leaders do serve and interpret popular aspirations and interests. Industrial processes are often contradicted by their results—witness technological unemployment—but the science of social engineering is seeking to remove those contradictions, and self-interest tends to reënforce the efforts of the engineers and technicians. Backward nations are catching up and profiting by the example of the advanced ones—witness Japan and Russia, which are Americanizing themselves and competing quite successfully with the advanced nations.

As to the tension between Life and Organization, Spengler is not the first keen thinker to call attention to a real and serious contradiction that requires study and reconciliation. Life is undoubtedly restricted, jeopardized and even imperilled by too much organization. The rigidity and spiritual poverty of institutionalism needs no emphasis in our day. But why should it be assumed that organization is necessarily fatal to spontaneity and elasticity, or to life? The problem is here, but why give it up as insoluble? Overorganization is bad, but so is underorganization, which is chaos and waste of human resources and values. A compromise should not be ruled out arbitrarily. There is such a thing as freedom under discipline. The arts, and especially music in its highest forms, illustrate that combination. The great composer—a Bach, a Beethoven—observes rules, yet is true to himself and able to express his deepest and subtlest thoughts. And, in the field of practical affairs, we have all types of associations and clubs in which the members feel quite free, despite the recognized necessity of constitutions and by-laws for the regulation of conduct within narrow specified limits.

We cannot but conclude that Spengler unconsciously exaggerates in one part of his argument while underestimating the powers and potentialities of the human mind in other parts.

Human achievements in science, art, and technology are so remarkable and so amazing that, to say the least, a presumption may be claimed in favor of the Meliorist, who believes that when we give as much anxious and systematic thought to social problems as we have given and continue to give to mathematical, physical, astronomical, and metaphysical problems, the tensions discussed by Spengler and others will be relieved, the present disorders and ills of the body politic and social will be cured, and the present obstacles to harmonious progress removed.

Civilization is sick, but not unto death. There are grounds for pessimism, no doubt, but the maladjustments of the world, its political and economic crises, do not furnish such grounds. Humanity has survived other periods of stress and storm. Mr. John Maynard Keynes has reminded us that one of these dark and critical periods lasted six hundred years! But after each such period, long or short, the advance was resumed and new conquests made by the human spirit. History, therefore, warrants hope, not despair.

The new pessimism is as unphilosophical as was the shallow optimism of the latter part of the eighteenth century and the middle of the nineteenth. The truly scientific point of view has no sympathy with either. It has not lost faith in reason or in humanity. It believes, and has plenty of evidence to support the belief, that further progress is possible and reasonably certain, and that life is worth living even today, to say nothing of the more abundant and nobler life that can be ours if we but will it and work for it under the guidance of disinterested thinkers and inspiring leaders.

It is gratifying to note that this is the point of view adopted by the so-called Hoover Commission on Social Trends in its several reports as well as in its admirable summary. Ours is a period of transition, of confusion, but also of changes unmistakably progressive and socially beneficial. The committee emphasizes the duty of deliberate, rational planning in economics and in politics, and of substituting coöperation for competition, method for blind guessing, a social ideal for a crude, destructive egoism. In this direction, in truth, lies moral and sound progress. Spengler's comments on the conclusions of the Social Trends Commission would be most instructive.