Spengler Today

By T. W. Adorno

It has been suggested that the history of philosophy does not consist so much in having its problems solved as it does in having them forgotten by the intellectual movements they have themselves set in motion. Oswald Spengler's doctrine has been forgotten, and with the speed that he himself ascribed to world history when he said that it was fast developing the momentum of a catastrophe. After an initial popular success German public opinion very quickly turned against the book. Official philosophers reproached it for superficiality, the specific official sciences branded it incompetent and charlatan, and, during the hustle and bustle of the period of German inflation and stabilization, the thesis of the Decline of the West[1] was none too popular. In the meantime, Spengler had laid himself open to such an extent in a number of smaller studies arrogant in tone and full of cheap antitheses that a negative attitude to him was made easy for those who wanted to go on as they were. When in 1922 the second volume of the main work appeared, it fell far short of attracting the attention that had been given to the first, though the second was actually the volume that concretely developed the thesis of the decline. Laymen who read Spengler as they had read Nietzsche and Schopenhauer before him had become estranged from philosophy. The professional philosophers soon clung to Heidegger who gave their listlessness a more sterling and more elevated expression, ennobling death (which Spengler had decreed somewhat naturalistically) and promising to change the thought of it into an academic panacea. Spengler had had his trouble for nothing. His little book on man and technics was not allowed to be in the same class as the smart philosophical anthropologies of the same time. Hardly any notice was taken of his relations with National Socialism, his controversy with Hitler, or his death. In Germany today he is pronounced a grumbler and reactionary in the manipulated, National Socialist sense of this word. Abroad, he is regarded as one of the ideological accomplices of the new barbarism, a representative of the most brutal type of Prussian imperialism.

[1]We refer to the translation by Charles Francis Atkinson, Vol. 1, New York 1926; Vol. 2, New York 1928.

But in spite of all this, there is good reason once again to ask whether Spengler's teaching is true or false. It would be conceding too much to him to look to world history, which stepped over him on its way to the New Order of the time, for the final judgment upon the value of his ideas. There is, however, even less occasion to do this, for the course of world history has itself vindicated his immediate prognoses to an extent that would be astonishing if these prognoses were remembered. The forgotten Spengler takes his revenge by threatening to be right. His oblivion bears witness to an intellectual impotence comparable to the political impotence of the Weimar Republic in the face of Hitler. Spengler hardly found an adversary who was his equal, and forgetting him has worked as an evasion. One has only to read Manfred Schroeter's book, *Der Streit um Spengler,* with its complete survey of the literature up to 1922, to become aware of how completely the German mind failed against an opponent to whom all the substantial power of the German philosophy of history seemed to have passed. Pedantic punctiliousness in the concrete, wordy conformist optimism in the idea, and, often enough, an involuntary concession of weakness in the assurance that after all things are not yet so bad with our culture, or in the sophistic trick of undermining Spengler's relativistic position by exaggerating his own relativism—this is all that German philosophy and science could bring to bear against a man who rebuked them as a sergeant-major would dress down a rookie. Behind their consequential helplessness one could almost suspect the presence of a secret impulse to obey the sergeant-major in the end.

It becomes the more urgent to take a stand against this philosophy. Let us try, therefore, first to see the force of Spengler by comparing some of his theses with our own situation; then, to search out the sources of power that give such a force to his philosophy, the theoretical and empirical shortcomings of which are so plainly evident; and let us finally ask, without being assured of a positive answer beforehand, what considerations might possibly be able to hold their ground against Spengler without a false posture of strength and without the bad conscience of official optimism.

In order to demonstrate Spengler's force we shall at first not discuss his general historico-philosophical concept of the plant-like growth and decay of culture, but the way he directed this philosophy of history to the imminent phase of history before us, which he termed Caesarism, in analogy with the Roman Empire period. His most characteristic predictions pertain to questions of mass domination, such as propaganda, mass culture, forms of political manipulation, particularly to certain tendencies inherent in democracy that

threaten to make it turn into dictatorship. In comparison with these elements, specifically economic predictions play but a minor role, in accordance with Spengler's general view that economy is not a basic social reality but rather an "expression" of particular "souldoms." The question of monopoly is not raised, although Spengler is acutely aware of the cultural consequences of the centralization of power. Yet, his insight reaches far enough to disclose certain noteworthy economic phenomena, such as the decline of money economy.

A few trains of thought which relate to civilization in the era of Caesarism have been selected from his second volume. We begin with some quotations on the "physiognomics" of the modern metropolis. Spengler says of the houses of the big city: "They are, generally speaking, no longer houses in which Vesta and Janus, Lares and Penates, have any sort of footing, but mere premises which have been fashioned, not by blood but by requirements, not by feeling but by the spirit of commercial enterprise. So long as the hearth has a pious meaning as the actual and genuine centre of a family, the old relation to the land is not wholly extinct. But when that, too, follows the rest into oblivion, and the mass of tenants and bed-occupiers in the sea of houses leads a vagrant existence from shelter to shelter like the hunters and pastors of the "pre"-time, then the intellectual nomad is completely developed. This city is a world, is the world. Only as a whole, as a human dwelling-place, has it meaning, the houses being merely the stones of which it is assembled."[1] The image of the latter day city-dweller as a second nomad deserves special emphasis. It expresses not only fear and estrangement but the dawning "history-less" character of a situation in which men experience themselves only as objects of opaque processes and in which, between sudden shock and sudden oblivion, they are no longer capable of any continuous sense of time. Spengler clearly sees the interconnection between pauperization and the new type of man that has fully revealed himself in the totalitarian outbreaks: "But always the splendid mass-cities harbour lamentable poverty and degraded habits, and the attics and mansards, the cellars and back courts are breeding a new type of raw man."[2] He knows little about the basic conditions responsible for this poverty. But he sees the more clearly the frame of mind gripping the masses outside the actual process of production, matters usually referred to under the head of "leisure time." "Tension,

[1] II, p. 100.
[2] II, 102.

when it has become intellectual, knows no form of recreation but that which is specific to the world-city—namely, détente, relaxation, distraction. Genuine play, joie de vivre, pleasure, inebriation, are products of the cosmic beat and as such no longer comprehensible in their essence. But the relief of hard, intensive brain-work by its opposite—conscious and practised fooling—of intellectual tension by the bodily tension of sport, of bodily tension by the sensual straining after 'pleasure' and the spiritual straining after the 'excitements' of betting and competitions, of the pure logic of the day's work by a consciously enjoyed mysticism—all this is common to the world-cities of all the Civilizations."[1] Spengler built this idea into the thesis that "art itself becomes a sport."[2] He knew neither Jazz nor Quiz, but if one were to summarize the most conspicuous trends of our present mass culture, one could not find a more pregnant category than that of sport, the hurdling of rhythmical obstacles, and contest or competition either among the performers or between production and audience. The full force of Spengler's contempt is hurled at the victims of the advertising culture of our epoch. The "residue is the Fellah type."[3]

Spengler describes this Fellah type more concretely as resulting from an expropriation of human consciousness through the centralized means of public communication. He still conceives of it in terms of money power, though he foresees the end of monetary economy. According to him, mind, in the sense of limitless autonomy, can exist only in relation to the abstract medium of money. However this may be, his description is fully correct as regards conditions under the totalitarian regime, which has declared an ideological war against both money and mind. One could say that Spengler became aware of traits in the press that were fully developed only later, when the radio came on the scene, just as he raised objections against democracy that attained their full weight only when dictatorship established itself. "Democracy has by its newspaper completely expelled the book from the mental life of the people. The book-world, with its profusion of standpoints that compelled thought to select and criticize, is now a real possession only for a few. The people reads the *one paper*, 'its' paper, which forces itself through the front doors by millions daily, spellbinds the intellect from morning to night, drives the book into oblivion by its more engaging layout, and if one or another specimen of a book does emerge into

[1] II, 103.
[2] I, 35.
[3] II, 105.

visibility, forestalls and eliminates its possible effects by 'reviewing' it."[1] Spengler has a sense of the dual character of enlightenment in the era of universal domination. "With the political press is bound up the need of universal school-education, which in the classical world was completely lacking. In this demand there is an element—quite unconscious—of desiring to shepherd the masses, as the object of party politics, into the newspaper's power area. The idealist of the early democracy regarded popular education, without arrière pensée, as enlightenment pure and simple, and even today one finds here and there weak heads that become enthusiastic on the Freedom of the Press—but it is precisely this that smooths the path for the coming caesars of the world-press. Those who have learnt to read succumb to their power, and the visionary self-determination of Late democracy issues in a thorough-going determination of the people by the powers whom the printed word obeys."[2] The things Spengler ascribes to the modest press magnates of the first world war have blossomed into the technique of manipulated pogroms and spontaneous popular demonstrations. "Without the reader's observing it, the paper, and himself with it, changes masters"[3]—this has literally come true under the Third Reich. Spengler calls it the "style of the twentieth century. Today, a democrat of the old school would demand, not freedom for the press, but freedom from the press; but meantime the leaders have changed themselves into parvenus who have to secure their postion (position em. TWA) vis-à-vis the masses."[4] He prophesies Goebbels: "No tamer has his animals more under his power. Unleash the people as reader-mass and it will storm through the streets and hurl itself upon the target indicated, terrifying and breaking windows; a hint to the press-staff and it will become quiet and go home. The press today is an army with carefully organized arms and branches, with journalists as officers, and readers as soldiers. But here, as in every army, the soldier obeys blindly, and war-aims and operation-plans change without his knowledge. The reader neither knows, nor is allowed to know, the purposes for which he is used, nor even the role that he is to play. A more appalling caricature of freedom of thought cannot be imagined. Formerly a man did not dare to think freely. Now he dares, but cannot; his will to think is only a willingness to think to order, and this is what he feels as his liberty."[5]

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[1] II, 461.
[2] II, 462.
[3] II, 462.
[4] II, 462.
[5] II, 462 f.

The specifically political prognoses are no less astonishing. First of all a military prediction, which, incidentally, may have been influenced by certain experiences of the German army command during the first world war, experiences that have been put into practice in the meantime. Spengler regards the "democratic" principle of universal military service as obsolete, together with the tactical means derived from it. "The place of the permanent armies as we know them will gradually be taken by professional forces of volunteer war-keen soldiers; and from millions we shall revert to hundreds of thousands. But ipso facto this second century will be one of *actually* Contending States. These armies are not substitutes for war"—as was the case, according to Spengler, during the nineteenth century—"they are for war and they want war. Within two generations it will be they whose will prevails over that of all the comfortables put together. In these wars of theirs for the heritage of the whole world, continents will be staked, India, China, South Africa, Russia, Islam called out, new technics and tactics played and counterplayed. The great cosmopolitan foci of power will dispose at their pleasure of smaller states —their territory, their economy and their men alike—all that is now merely province, passive object, means to end, and its destinies are without importance to the great march of things. We ourselves, in a very few years, have learnt to take little or no notice of events that before the War would have horrified the world."[1] But the era to which Spengler refers as that of contending states is followed, according to him, by a period that is "historyless" in a most sinister sense. This paradoxical prognosis is clearly paralleled by the tendency of present economy to eliminate the market and the dynamics of competition. This tendency is directed towards static conditions which no longer know of crises in the strictly economic sense of the term. The labor of others is appropriated, without any intermediary processes, by those in command of the means of production, and the life of those who do the work is maintained planfully from above.[2] What Spengler correctly prophesies for the small states as political units also begins to materialize among men themselves in the large states and particularly among the inhabitants of the powerful totalitarian ones. Here, men have become mere objects. That is why history appears to be extinguished. Whatever happens, happens to them, not, strictly speaking, through them. Even the greatest strategic exploits and triumphal marches retain a touch of illusion and are not quite real. The events take place between the oligarchs and their specialists in murder. They are not engendered by the inherent

[1] II, 429.

[2] cf. F. Pollock, "State Capitalism", in this issue.

dynamics of society but rather subject the latter to an administration which sometimes goes so far as to imply annihilation. Night-bomber attacks on cities which are left practically defenseless even if they put up some sort of defense—this is the sort of history that has been established today. Hitler's edifices in Nürnberg, forsaken as they are on days other than party congresses, have something Egyptian about them which ought to have delighted Spengler. They are like the monuments of a foreign conqueror, strangely isolated in the subjugated country. Even Hitler's voice, sounding as if it came from an ivory tower, has the ring of this isolation.

As objects of political forces men will lose their political will and spontaneity. "Once the Imperial Age has arrived, there are no more political problems. People manage with the situation as it is and the powers that be. In the Period of Contending States, torrents of blood had reddened the pavements of all world-cities, so that the great truths of Democracy might be turned into actualities, and for the winning of rights without which life seemed not worth the living. Now these rights are won, but the grandchildren cannot be moved even by punishment, to make use of them."[1] Spengler's prediction of an essential change within the structure of political parties has been corroborated to the letter by National Socialism: the party has become a mere "following." His "physiognomics" of the party are extraordinarily impressive, visualizing the kinship between the party system and middle class liberalism. "A noble party in a parliament is inwardly just as spurious as a proletarian. Only the bourgeoisie is in its natural place there."[2] He stresses the inherent mechanisms which tend to make the party system turn into dictatorship. Such considerations have from the beginning been familiar ones to the "cyclical" philosophies of history. Macchiavelli in particular developed the idea that the corruption of democratic institutions will in the long run engender dictatorship again and again. But Spengler, who in a certain sense revives at the end of an epoch the position Macchiavelli held at the beginning of that epoch, shows himself superior to this early political philosopher in that he has had experience of the dialectics of history, though he never calls it by name. To him, the principle of democracy develops itself into its opposite by force of its own implications. "The period of real party government covers scarcely two centuries, and in our case is, since the World War, well on the decline. That the entire mass of the electorate, actuated by a common impulse, should send up men

[1] II, 432.
[2] II, 450.

who are capable of managing their affairs—which is the naive assumption in all constitutions—is a possibility only in the first rush, and presupposes that not even the rudiments of organization by definite groups exist. So it was in France 1789 and (in Germany TWA) in 1848. An assembly has only to be, and tactical units will form at once within it, whose cohesion depends upon the will to maintain the dominant position once won, and which, so far from regarding themselves as the mouthpieces of their constituents, set about making all the expedients of agitation amenable to their influence and usable for their purposes. A tendency that has organized itself in the people has already ipso facto become the tool of the organization and continues steadily along the same path until the organization also becomes in turn the tool of the leader. The will-to-power is stronger than any theory. In the beginning the leading and the apparatus come into existence for the sake of the program. Then they are held on to defensively by their incumbents for the sake of power and booty—as is already universally the case today, for thousands in every country live on the party and the offices and functions that it distributes. Lastly the program vanishes from memory, and the organization works for its own sake alone."[1] Pointing to Germany he foresees the years of minority governments that helped Hitler into power: "The German Constitution of 1919—standing by virtue of its date on the verge of the decline of democracy—most naively admits a dictature of the party machines, which have attracted all rights into themselves and are seriously responsible to no one. The notorious system of proportional election and the Reichsliste secures their self-recruitment. In place of the 'people's' rights, which were axiomated in the Frankfurt Constitution of 1848, there is now only the right of parties, which, harmless as it sounds, really nurses within itself a Caesarism of the organizations. It must be allowed, however, that in this respect it is the most advanced of all the constitutions. Its issue is visible already. A few quite small alterations and it confers unrestricted power upon individuals."[2] Spengler speaks of the manner in which the course of history makes men forget the idea and reality of their own freedom. "The power that these abstract ideas"—embodied, according to Spengler, in the Contrat Social and the Communist Manifesto—"possess, however, scarcely extends in time beyond the two centuries that belong to party politics, and their end comes not from refutation, but from boredom—which has killed Rousseau long since and will shortly kill Marx. Men finally give up, not this or that theory, but the be-

[1] II, 452.

[2] II, 457, note 2.

lief in theory of any kind and with it the sentimental optimism of an eighteenth century that imagined that unsatisfactory actualities could be improved by the application of concepts."[1] "For us, too,—let there be no mistake about it—the age of theory is drawing to its end."[2] His prediction that the power to think will die terminates in a taboo on thinking which he attempts to justify on the basis of the inexorable course of history.

This touches upon the Archimedean point of Spengler's scheme. His historico-philosophical assertion that the mind (Geist) is dying away, and the anti-intellectual consequences deriving from the assertion, do not relate merely to the "civilization" phase of history but are basic elements of Spengler's estimate of Man. "Truths exist for the mind, facts only in relation to life. Historical treatment—in my terminology physiognomic tact—is decided by the blood, the gift of judging men broadened out into past and future, the innate flair for persons and situations, for the event, for that which had to be, must have been. It does not consist in bare scientific criticism and knowing of data."[3] The decisive factor here is the gift of judging men, for which the German text has one precise term: *Menschenkenntnis*. We find implicit the Macchiavellian assumption of an unchangeable human nature. One has only to recognize human nature as base once and for all in order to be able to dispose of it once and for all in the expectation that it will ever be the same. The gift of judging men in this sense amounts to contempt for men: they are like that. The guiding interest of this view is domination, and all of Spengler's categories are shaped to fit this concept. No matter what period he deals with, all his sympathy lies with those who rule. The disillusioned philosopher of history, when he discusses the intelligence and the iron will of modern industrial leaders, is apt to flounder like one of the pacifists for whom he professes such stubborn contempt. Kinship with the ideal of domination permits Spengler the deepest insight whenever the potentialities of this ideal are in question and blinds him with hatred as soon as he encounters impulses that go beyond the relationships of domination prevailing in history up to now. The German systems of idealism tended to make fetishes of prodigious universal concepts and, unmoved, to sacrifice human existence to them in their theories. This tendency —which Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Marx attacked in Hegel— Spengler enhances to the point of taking undisguised joy in human sacrifice. Where Hegel's philosophy of history speaks in stark

[1] II, 454.
[2] II, 454.
[3] II, 47.

sorrow of "the slaughter-bench of history," Spengler sees nothing but facts; facts, indeed, which according to our temperament and mood we might deplore, but which we should best not trouble about if we are compliant with historic necessity and if our physiognomics take the side of the stronger batallions. "Spengler"—says James Shotwell in his remarkable review—"is interested in the great and tragic drama which he depicts and wastes little idle sympathy upon the victims of the recurring night."[1]

Jumping about among cultures as if they were multicolored stones and operating, quite disinterestedly, with Fate, Cosmos, blood, and mind, the vastness of Spengler's conception itself expresses the motif of domination. He who unhesitatingly strips all phenomena down to the formula that "all this has happened before" thereby practices a tyranny of categories all too closely akin to the political tyranny over which Spengler enthuses so much. He juggles history in the columns of his five thousand year plan the way Hitler shunts minorities from one country to another. At the end there is no remainder. Everything fits, and every resistance offered by the concrete is liquidated. However inadequate may have been the criticism raised against Spengler by the individual cultural sciences, they demonstrated a good instinct on one point. The mirage of Spengler's historical *Grossraumwirtschaft* can be escaped only by the unique elements whose stubbornness defies dictatorial pigeonholing. Spengler, by virtue of his perspective and the sweep of his categories, might be superior to those restricted individual sciences. But he is also inferior to them by virtue of this very same sweep which he achieves by never honestly carrying through the analysis of the interrelationship of concept and detail, preferring to evade it by a conceptual structure that utilizes the "fact" ideologically in order to crush the thought, without ever casting more than a first coordinating glance at the actual fact. There is an element here of the spurious and pompous that is not unlike the Wilhelmian *Siegesallee.* Only when actuality itself changes into a *Siegesallee* does it take on the form Spengler wishes to attribute to it. The superstition that the greatness of a philosophy is a function of its grandiose aspects is a bad idealistic heritage, equivalent to the belief that the quality of a picture depends upon the sublimeness of its subject matter. Great themes do not guarantee greatness of insight. If, as Hegel insists, the whole is the truth, it is the truth only if the power of the whole enters completely into the cognition of the particular. Nothing of this can be found in Spengler. The particular never reveals any-

[1] From *Essays in Intellectual History*, New York and London 1929, p. 62.

thing to him that he would not have been aware of beforehand through the tables of his comparative survey of cultural morphology. He boasts about the physiognomic character of his method. Actually his "physiognomics" are bound up with the pretention to totality inherent in his categories. Everything individual, no matter how remote it may be, becomes to him a cipher of the big, the culture. The world is conceived as being so completely governed by the classification into cultures that nothing is left that would not readily yield to the greatness of the categories and even essentially coincide with them.[1] This contains an element of truth in so far as each historical society up to now tends to crystallize a "totality" which does not allow any freedom of the individual item. Totality may be characterized as the logical form of oppressive society. Spengler's physiognomics have the merit of directing attention towards the "culture" expressed by the individual even where the latter assumes an air of freedom behind which universal dependence is hidden. But this merit is more than counterbalanced. His insistence on the universal dependence of the individual items upon the whole, upon the totality of the culture which they are supposed to express, makes the concrete dependencies which determine the life of men disappear in the broad generalizations of them. Hence Spengler plays up physiognomics against causality. His physiognomics equally dwell upon the passive mass reactions and the concentration of power producing them without stressing their causal interconnection and, perhaps, interaction. If this causal interconnection is dropped, it becomes possible for Spengler to level relationships of social power and dependence down to Destiny and to the quasi-biological hour of the cultural soul. He succeeds in metaphysically burdening the impotent mass-man with the ignominy historically thrust upon him by the Caesars. The physiognomic glance loses itself by coordinating the phenomena with a few headlines functioning as the invariants of his "system." Instead of plunging into the expressive character of the phenomena, he swiftly sells under shrill advertising slogans the phenomena he has uncharitably raked together. For purposes of sale, he rummages through the individual sciences on a grand scale. If one were to characterize Spengler himself in the form-language of the civilization he denounces, one would have to compare the *Decline of the West* to a department store in which the intellectual agent offers for sale dried literary scraps which he has bought up cheaply from the bankrupt estate of culture. Spengler reveals the embittered resentment of a German

[1] cf. Karl Joel, "Die Philosophie in Spenglers 'Untergang des Abendlandes'" in *Logos*, Vol. IX, p. 140.

middle class scholar who finally wants to make capital of the treasure of his learning and to invest it in the most promising branch of business, that is, in heavy industry. His proclamation of the collapse of culture is wishful thinking. The mind hopes to be pardoned by taking the side of its sworn enemy, power, and by self-denunciation trains itself to provide anti-ideological ideologies. Spengler fulfills Lessing's aphorism about the man who was prudent enough not to be prudent. His insight into the helplessness of liberal intellectuals under the shadow of rising totalitarian power makes him desert them. The introduction to the *Decline of the West* contains a passage that has become famous: "I can only hope that men of the new generation may be moved by this book to devote themselves to technics instead of lyrics, the sea instead of the paint-brush, and politics instead of epistemology. Better they could not do."[1] One might easily imagine the personages to whom this was spoken—with a respectful side glance. Spengler concurs with their opinion that it is high time to bring the young folks once and for all to their senses. He begs for the favor of the same leaders who later became the sponsors of *Realpolitik*. Yet *Realpolitik* does not suffice to explain his wrath against paintings, poems and philosophy. This wrath betrays a deep sense of the "historyless" stage that Spengler depicted with horrified gratification. Where there are no longer "political problems" in the traditional sense, and perhaps not even irrational "economy," culture might cease to be the harmless façade which Spengler moves to demolish, unless its decline can be secured in time. Culture may then explode the contradictions that have apparently been overcome by the regimentation of economic life. Even now the officially promoted culture of Fascist countries provokes the laughter and scepticism of those who are forced to swallow it. The whole opposition against totalitarianism finds its refuge in books, in churches, and in the theater plays of the classics which are tolerated because they are so classical and which cease to be classical when they are tolerated. Spengler's verdict strikes indiscriminately at official culture and its non-conformist opposite. The moving pictures and expressionism are brought together by the same death sentence. The undifferentiated verdict fits in perfectly with the frame of mind of the wardens of National Socialist culture. They scorn their own ideologies as lies, they hate truth and can sleep quietly only when no one dares to dream any longer.

[1] I, 41.—It may be noted that Guillaume Appolinaire wrote in France *Le poète assassiné* elaborating precisely the same thesis by means of the surrealist shock. It may be safely assumed that the German nationalist and the radical French avantgarde writer did not know of each other. Both insist that they drafted their books before the world war.

The special cultural sciences, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon countries, usually visualize Spengler as a metaphysician who is ready to assault reality with the arbitrariness of his conceptual constructions. Next to the idealists, who feel that Spengler has disavowed progress in the consciousness of freedom, the positivists are Spengler's most irritated opponents. There is no doubt that his philosophy does violence to the world, but this is the same violence the world must daily suffer in reality. Formerly, history refused to unfold itself according to the Hegelian scheme. It now appears to be the more willing to freeze according to the Spenglerian one. Whether a philosophy is metaphysical or positivist cannot be decided immediately. Often enough, metaphysicians are only more far-sighted or less intimidated positivists. Is Spengler at all the metaphysician that he and his enemies like to consider him? He certainly is, as long as one remains on a formalistic level. His concepts outweigh the empirical exactitude of his data, their "verification" is difficult or impossible, and the epistemological tools of his method stem from a somewhat rough and primitive irrationalism. If, however, one goes by the substance of these concepts, one always meets positivist desiderata, above all the cult of the "fact." Spengler does not allow any occasion to pass without slandering the transcendent character of truth and without glorifying that which is thus and so and no other way, that which only has to be registered and accepted. "But in the historical world there are no ideals, but only facts—no truths, but only facts. There is no reason, no honesty, no equity, no final aim, but only facts, and anyone who does not realize this should write books on politics—let him not try to make politics."[1] Essentially critical insight into the impotence of truth in previous history, insight into the predominant power that the mere existent has over all attempts on the part of consciousness to break through the circle of mere existence—this degenerates in Spengler into a justification of the mere existent itself. The fact that something which has power and succeeds might yet be wrong—this is an idea utterly inconceivable to Spengler. Or rather, it is an idea that he spasmodically forbids himself and others. He is seized by rage whenever he comes across the voice of the powerless, and yet he has nothing to offer against that voice except the statement that it is powerless once and for all. Hegel's doctrine that the actual is rational becomes a mere caricature. Spengler maintains the Hegelian mood that the actual is pregnant with meaning and rigor and he holds on to Hegel's irony against the reformer of the world *(Weltverbesserer)*, but at the same time his thinking in naked categories of domination robs

[1] II, 368.

reality of the claim to sense and reasonableness on which alone the Hegelian mood is based. Reasonableness and unreasonableness of history are the same to Spengler, pure domination, and fact is wherever the principle of domination manifests itself. He incessantly imitates Nietzsche's domineering tone, though he never absolves himself, as Nietzsche did, from conformity with the world as it is. Nietzsche says at one point that Kant used the means of science to defend the common man's prejudices against science. Something very similar applies to Spengler. With the tools of metaphysics he has defended from the critical opposition of metaphysics the positivist cult of facts, their pliancy to the "given." A second Comte, he made positivism into a metaphysics of its own, submissiveness toward existing fact into an *amor fati*, swimming with the stream into "cosmic tact," and the abnegation of truth into truth itself. From this derives his force.

Spengler stands, together with Klages, Moeller van den Bruck, and also Jünger and Steding, among those theoreticians of extreme reaction whose criticism of liberalism proved superior in many respects to that which came from the left wing. It would be worth while to study the causes of this superiority. It is probably due to a different attitude towards the complex of "ideology." The adherents of dialectical materialism viewed the liberal ideology which they criticized largely as a false promise. They did not challenge the ideas of humanity, liberty, justice as such, but merely denied the claim of our society to represent the realization of these ideas. Though they treated the ideologies as illusions, they still found them illusions of truth itself. This lent a conciliatory splendor, if not to the existent, at least to its "objective tendencies." Their doctrine of the increase of societal antagonisms, or their statements about the potential relapse into barbarism, were hardly taken seriously. Ideologies were unmasked as apologetic concealments. Yet they were rarely conceived as powerful instruments functioning in order to change liberal competitive society into a system of immediate oppression. Thus the question of how the existent can possibly be changed by those who are its very victims, psychologically mutilated by its impact, has very rarely been put except by dialecticians of the Hegelian tradition, such as Georg von Lukàcs. Concepts such as those of the masses or of culture were largely exempt from dialectical criticism. No one cared much about how they were involved within the total process of our society. There was no realization that the masses in the specific sense of the term are not merely the majority of exploited toilers but that their characteristics as "masses" are themselves due to the present phase of class society. Nor was

there acknowledgment of the extent to which culture is changing into a regulative system of class domination. Above all the leftist critics failed to notice that the "ideas" themselves, in their abstract form, are not merely images of the truth that will later materialize, but that they are ailing themselves, afflicted with the same injustice under which they are conceived and bound up with the world against which they are set. On the right, one could the more easily see through the ideologies the more disinterested one was in the truth these ideologies contained, in however false a form. All the reactionary critics follow Nietzsche inasmuch as they regard liberty, humanity, and justice as nothing but a swindle devised by the weak as a protection against the strong. As advocates of the strong they can very easily point to the contradiction between those ideas—ailing as they necessarily are—and reality. Their critique of ideologies is a comfortable one. It consists mainly in shifting from the insight into a bad reality to an insight into bad ideas, the latter supposedly proved because those ideas have not become reality. The momentum inherent in this cheap criticism is due to its firm bond of understanding with the powers that be. Spengler and his equals are less the prophets of the course of the world spirit than its devoted agents. The very form of prognosis practised by Spengler implies an administrative deployment of men which puts them out of action. The theories against which he rages do not, strictly speaking, prophesy at all. To them history is not an eternal interplay of political "power relations"; they seek to put a rational end to this selfsame blind interplay of powers. They expect everything of men and their action, but do not arrange and classify them and figure out what will happen. The latter attitude is an index of the very reification of men which they strive to overcome, and Spengler emphasizes this attitude. He insists that what matters to the true historian is to reckon to the largest extent with unknown quantities. But one cannot reckon with the unknown of humanity. History is no equation. It is no analytic judgment at all. To conceive it as such excludes a priori the potentiality of Novelty, around which the whole of dialectical materialism is centered. Conversely, Spengler's prediction of history ever repeating itself reminds us of the myths of Tantalus and Sisyphus and the oracular responses that always presage evil. He is a fortune teller rather than a prophet. In his gigantic and destructive soothsaying the petty bourgeois celebrates his intellectual triumph. The morphology of world history serves the same needs as graphology in Klages' denunciation of consciousness. The malicious desire of the petty bourgeois to read the future out of handwriting, out of the past, or out of the cards implies the same thing that

Spengler rancorously blames the victims for: the renunciation of conscious self-determination. Spengler identifies himself with power, but his theory betrays the impotence of this identification by its soothsaying attitude. He is as sure of his case as the hangman after the judges have spoken their verdict. The historico-philosophical world formula immortalizes his own impotence no less than that of the others.

This characterization of Spengler's way of thinking may allow of some more fundamental critical considerations. We have endeavored to elaborate the positivist features of his metaphysics, his resignation to that which is what it is and no more, his elimination of the category of potentiality, and his hatred of any thinking that takes the possible seriously as against the actual. On one decisive point, however, Spengler suspended his positivism—so much so that some of his theological reviewers felt entitled to claim him an ally. This point occurs when he speaks of the moving power within history which he views as the "*Seelentum*" (souldom), the enigmatic yet thoroughly internal quality of a special type of man that, quite irrationally, enters history at times. Incidentally, Spengler sometimes calls this quality "race," though his concept of race has nothing to do with that of the National Socialists; one does not belong to a race, he once declared, one has race. Despite all his stress on "facts" and all his skeptical relativism, Spengler hypostatizes the doctrine of cultural souls as a metaphysical principle that serves as the ultimate explanation of the historical dynamic. He often asserts that it is closely related to the concept of entelechy of Leibniz and Goethe, "*geprägte Form, die lebend sich entwickelt.*" This metaphysics of a collective soul which, like a plant, unfolds and dies off makes Spengler a neighbor of the *Lebensphilosophen,* Nietzsche, Simmel and particularly Bergson whom he stigmatizes most ruthlessly. It is easy to see why the talk about soul and life fits Spengler the tactician. It enables him to call materialism shallow when actually he objects to it only because it is not positivist enough for him, the materialists wanting the world to be different from what it is. Yet the metaphysics of souldom has more than merely tactical import within Spengler's doctrine. One might call it a hidden philosophy of identity. With a little exaggeration one might also say that to Spengler world history becomes a history of "style." He considers the historical experiences of mankind to be as much the product of men's inner selves as works of art. The man of facts in this case fails to recognize the part played throughout history by material needs. The relation between man and nature, which engenders the tendency of man to dominate nature, repro-

duces itself in man's domination of other men. This is hardly realized in the *Decline of the West.* Spengler does not see to what degree the historical fate glorified by his approach results from human interaction with nature. The image of history becomes completely esthetic to him. Economy is a "form-world" precisely like art; a sphere that is the pure expression of the specific soul of a culture, essentially independent of the desiderata involved in the reproduction of material life. It is not an accident that Spengler becomes helplessly dilettantish whenever he touches upon economic problems. He discusses the omnipotence of money in the manner of a sectarian agitator denouncing the world-conspiracy of the bankers. He fails to appreciate that the means of exchange never determine the underlying structure of an economy, and is so fascinated by the façade of money, by what he calls its "symbolic power," that he mistakes the symbol for the substance itself. He does not balk at statements such as that the object of the workers' movement "is not to overcome the money-values, but to possess them."[1] As categories, slave economy, industrial proletariat, and machine technics are to him not fundamentally different from plastic arts, musical polyphony or infinitesimal calculus. Economic realities dissolve into mere marks of an internal entity. While the cross-connections thus created between the categories of reality and symbolism often shed a surprising light upon the unity of historical epochs, they lead to complete misstatements about everything that does not originate freely and autonomously from the power of human expression. What cannot be reduced, as a symbol, to sovereign human nature survives in Spengler only in vague references to cosmic interconnections.

Thus, the determinism of Spengler's conception of history appears to yield a second realm of freedom. But it only appears to do so. A most paradoxical constellation arises: everything external becomes an image of the internal, and no actual process occurs between subject and object in Spengler's philosophy of history. His world appears to grow organically out of the substance of the soul, like a plant from a seed. By being reduced to the essence of the soul, history gains an unbroken organic aspect, closed within itself. In this way, however, it becomes even more deterministic. Karl Joel declares in his article in the Spengler issue of *Logos* that it is "the whole illness of this significant book that it has forgotten man with his productivity and liberty. In spite of all interiorization he de-humanizes history and makes it rattle off as a sequence

[1] II, 506.

of typical natural processes. In spite of all animation *(Durchseelung)* he makes history into something bodily *(verleiblicht)* by aiming at its 'morphology' or 'physiognomics' and thus at a comparison of its external appearances, its forms of expression, the particular features of its phenomena."[1] History, however, is de-humanized not "in spite of all interiorization" but by means of it. Spengler's philosophy disdainfully thrusts aside the nature with which men have to struggle in history. Instead of this struggle, history itself becomes a second nature as blind and fated as vegetable life. What we may call the freedom of man consists only in the human attempts to break the rule imposed by nature. If that is ignored and the historical world is made a mere product of human essence, freedom will be lost in the resulting all-humanity *(Allmenschlichkeit)* of history. Freedom develops only through the natural world's resistance to man. Freedom postulates the existence of something non-identical. As soon as it is made absolute and its essence, the soul, is elevated into the governing principle of the whole world, this selfsame principle falls victim to mere existence. The idealist arrogance of Spengler's conception of history and the degradation of man implied in it are actually one and the same thing. Culture is not, as with Spengler, the life of self-developing collective souls but rather the struggle of men for the conditions of their perpetuation. Culture thus contains an element of resistance to blind necessity: the will for self-determination through Reason. Spengler severs culture from mankind's desire to survive. Culture becomes for him a play of the soul with itself. Resistance is eliminated. Thus his very idealism becomes subservient to his philosophy of power. Culture fits snugly into the realm of blind domination. The self-sufficient process that originates from mere inwardness and terminates in mere inwardness becomes Destiny, and history decomposes into that aimless up and down of cultures, that timelessness which Spengler blames upon the late civilizations and which actually constitute the nucleus of his own world-plan. Pure soul and pure domination coincide, as the Spenglerian soul violently and mercilessly dominates its own bearers. Real history is ideologically transfigured into a history of the soul only in order that the resisting, rebellious features of man, their consciousness, might be the more completely subordinated to blind necessity. Spengler once more reveals the affinity between absolute idealism—his doctrine of the soul points back to Schelling—and demonic mythology. His penchant for mythological ways of thinking can be grasped at certain extreme points. The regular time-intervals in different cul-

[1]Karl Joel, loc. cit., *ibid.*

tures, the periodicity of events of a certain meaning "is yet another hint that the Cosmic flowings in the form of human lives upon the surface of a minor star are not self-contained and independent, but stand in deep harmony with the unending movedness of the universe. In a small but noteworthy book, R. Mewes, *Die Kriegs- und Geistesperioden im Völkerleben und Verkündung des nächsten Weltkrieges* (1896), the relation of those war-periods with weather-periods, sun-spot cycles, and certain conjunctures of the planets is established, and a great war foretold accordingly for the period 1910-20. But these and numerous similar connections that come within the reach of our senses . . . veil a secret that we have to respect."[1] With all his ridicule of civilized mystics, Spengler, by such formulations, comes very close to astrological superstition. Thus ends the glorification of the soul.

The recurrence of the ever identical pattern, however, in which such a doctrine of fate terminates, is nothing but the perpetual reproduction of man's offense against man. The concept of fate that subjects men to blind domination reflects the domination exercised by men themselves. Whenever Spengler speaks of fate he is dealing with the subjugation of one group of men by another. The metaphysics of the soul supplements his positivism in order to hypostatize as eternal and inescapable the principle of a relentless self-perpetuating rule. Actually, however, the inescapability of fate is defined through domination and injustice. Spengler brings in justice as the bad counter-concept to fate, the sublime in history. In one of the most brutal passages of his work he complains that "the world-feeling of race; the political (and therefore national) instinct for fact ('my country, right or wrong!'); the resolve to be the subject and not the object of evolution (for one or the other it has to be)—in a word, the will-to-power—has to retreat and make room for a tendency of which the standard-bearers are most often men without original impulse, but all the more set upon their logic; men at home in a world of truths, ideals, and Utopias; bookmen who believe that they can replace the actual by the logical, the might of facts by an abstract justice, Destiny by Reason. It begins with the everlastingly fearful who withdraw themselves out of actuality into cells and study-chambers and spiritual communities, and proclaim the nullity of the world's doings, and it ends in every Culture with the apostles of world-peace. Every people has such (historically speaking) waste-products. Even their heads constitute physiognomically a group by themselves. In the 'history of intellect' they

[1] II, 392, note 1.

stand high—and many illustrious names are numbered amongst them—but regarded from the point of view of actual history, they are inefficients."[1] After this, opposition to Spengler would mean historically overcoming the "point of view of actual history"; it would mean realizing what is historically possible, what Spengler calls impossible only because it has not yet been realized. In sober terms and yet with the deepest understanding James Shotwell's review gets to the hub of this question: "Winter followed Autumn in the past because life was repetitive and was passed within limited areas of self-contained economy. Intercourse between societies was more predatory than stimulative because mankind had not yet discovered the means to maintain culture without an unjust dependence upon those who had no share in its material blessings. From the savage raid and slavery down to the industrial problems of today, the recurring civilizations have been largely built upon false economic forces, backed up by equally false moral and religious casuistry. The civilizations that have come and gone have been inherently lacking in equilibrium because they have built upon the injustice of exploitation. There is no reason to suppose that modern civilization must inevitably repeat this cataclysmatic rhythm."[2] This insight is capable of shattering Spengler's whole concept of history. If the fall of antiquity were dictated by the autonomous necessity of life and by the expression of its "soul," then indeed it takes on the aspect of fatality and by the analogy this aspect carries over to the present situation. If, however, as implied by Shotwell's statement, the fall of antiquity can be understood by its unproductive system of latifundia and the slave economy related to it, the fatality can be mastered if men succeed in overcoming such and similar structures of domination. In such a case, Spengler's universal structure reveals itself as a false analogy drawn from a bad solitary happening—solitary in spite of its threatening recurrence.

This, however, involves more than a belief in continuous progress and the survival of culture. Spengler has stressed the raw nature of culture, and with an emphasis which ought once and for all to shake naive confidence in its conciliatory effect. More strikingly than almost anyone else, he has demonstrated how this rawness of culture again and again drives it toward decay and how, as form and order, culture is affiliated with that blind domination which, through permanent crises, is always prone to annihilate itself and its victims. The essence of culture bears the mark of Death—denying this would be weak and sentimental, given Spengler's theory

[1] II, 186.

[2] loc. cit. p. 66f.

which has spilled as much of the secrets of culture as Hitler has of those of propaganda. There is no chance of evading the magic circle of Spengler's morphology by defaming barbarism and relying upon the healthiness of culture. Any such straightforward optimism is proscribed by the present situation. Instead, we should become aware of the element of barbarism inherent in culture itself. Only those considerations that challenge the idea of culture no less than they challenge the reality of barbarism have a chance to survive Spengler's verdict. The plant-like culture-soul, the vital "being in form," the unconscious world of symbols, the expressive power of which intoxicates him—all these marks of triumphant life are messengers of doom wherever they actually manifest themselves. For they all bear witness to the coercion and sacrifice which culture lays upon man. To trust them and to deny impending doom means only to be entangled the more deeply within their deadly jungle.

Spengler has the prying glance of the hunter who strides mercilessly through the cities of mankind as if they were the wilderness they actually are. But one thing has escaped his glance: the forces set free by decay. "How does everything that is to be appear so ill" *("Wie scheint doch alles Werdende so krank")*—this sentence of the poet Georg Trakl transcends Spengler's landscape. There is a passage in the first volume of the *Decline of the West* that has been omitted in the English translation. It refers to Nietzsche. "He used the word decadence. In this book, the term Decline of the West means the same thing, only more comprehensive, broadened from the case before us today into a general historical type of epoch, and looked at from the bird's-eye view of a philosophy of Becoming."[1] In the world of violence and oppressive life, this decadence is the refuge of a better potentiality by virtue of the fact that it refuses obedience to this life, its culture, its rawness and sublimity. Those, according to Spengler, whom history is going to thrust aside and annihilate personify negatively within the negativity of this culture that which promises, however weakly, to break the spell of culture and to make an end to the horror of pre-history. Their protest is our only hope that destiny and force shall not have the last word. That which stands against the decline of the west is not the surviving culture but the Utopia that is silently embodied in the image of decline.

[1] 4th edition, Munich 1919, I, p. 394.