

The Decline of the West: Spengler in Today's World

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Timelessness of thought and vision in world politics is a rare mark of grandeur. Oswald Spengler's The Decline of the West, written a century ago, deserves this distinction as it reads like it was done yesterday.

The German historian-philosopher wrote in 1922 that the centuries old West-European-American civilization was in permanent and irretrievable decline in all manifestations of life including religion, art, politics, social life, economy and science. For him, the political, social and ideological dimensions of this decline were evident in the failings of the Western political class in both sides of the Atlantic. He saw politicians, mostly based in large cities, consumed by ideology and contempt towards silent majorities and described them as "a new sort of nomad, cohering unstably in fluid masses, the parasitical city dweller, traditionless, utterly matter-of-fact, religionless, clever, unfruitful, and deeply contemptuous of the countryman." Nowadays the Brussels-based European Union (EU) leadership, through their recurring disdain for nation sovereignty, fully befits this definition.

Spengler believed that decadence in politics means predominance of ideology over action. "Men of theory commit a huge mistake in believing that their place is at the head and not in the train of great events" he wrote, unaware about how true this is today as we just saw the fall of UK Prime Minister Truss who sacrificed economics in the altar of ideology. Dogma destroying social cohesion and prosperity is also present in the wrecking of Europe's manufacturing competitiveness as their politicians forcibly deny cheap Russian energy or when Lilliputian Lithuania picks a fight with China in defence of Taiwan's "sovereignty." On the face of these events the German thinker would have repeated his assertion that "the political doctrinaire ... always knows what should be done, and yet his activity, once it ceases to be limited to paper, is the least successful and therefore the least valuable in history."

When we listen to the German Minister of Economic Affairs Harbeck or his Foreign Affairs counterpart Baerbock lecturing on the primacy of the green agenda or on how Ukraine

military support needs to continue regardless of what voters think, we can't help remembering the writer's damning query: "[have they] any idea whatever of the actualities of world-politics, world-city problems, capitalism, the future of the state, the relation of technics to the course of civilization, Russia, Science?."

The "rules-based international order," that Western axiom born out of post-Cold War euphoria and used to justify US-led hegemonism, reminds us the writer's aphorism that "nothing is simpler than to make good poverty of ideas by founding a system". "Even a good idea has little value when enunciated by a solemn ass" comes to mind when we hear the European Commission President von der Leyen or the EU Foreign Affairs Head Borrell repeat the same mantra. "In politics, only its necessity to life decides the eminence of any doctrine," something that has been forgotten as Europe blindly follows the US in an economic war that is ruining the continent.

On the East-West confrontation, concerning China, Spengler highlighted Western politicians' traditional lack of understanding of the main drivers of Chinese thinking which have to do with a 4000-year view of history and of their place in the world, as compared to the Western narrow timeframe absorbed by events that took place since 1500. Western self-contained perception of history negates world's history, he says, adding that world-history, in the Western eyes, is our world picture and not all mankind's.

American exceptionalism, the dangerous notion that US values, political system and history destines it to play the world's leading role, was questioned when he pointed out that there are as many morals as there are Cultures, no more and no fewer, and that each Culture possesses its own standard, the validity of which begins and ends with it, a statement that explains the need for a multipolar world. As much as has become politically correct to criticize Nietzsche's ideas after his appropriation by Nazi ideology, Spengler affirmed that Nietzsche's basic concept of will of power is essential to Western civilization, and this is consistent with the Western belief on the superiority of its values and the need to impose them on other cultures. "Western mankind is under the influence of an immense optical illusion. Everyone demands something of the rest. We say "thou shalt" in the conviction that so-and-so in fact will, can and must be changed or fashioned or arranged conformably to the order, and our belief both in the efficacy of, and in our title to give, such orders is unshakable."

Money, politics and the press play an intimate role in Western civilization, declares Spengler. In politics, money "nurses" the democratic process particularly during elections, as is the recurring US case. The press serves him who owns it and it does not spread "free" opinion – it generates it. "What is truth? For the multitude, that which it continually reads and hears." On freedom of the press, we are reminded that it is permitted to everyone to say what he or she pleases, but the Press is free to take notice of what he or she says or not. The Press can condemn any "truth" to death simply by not undertaking its communication to the world – "a terrible censorship of silence which is all the more potent in that the masses of newspaper readers are absolutely unaware that it exists."

Striking parallels exist between today's poverty in US cities and his observation of Rome at the time of Crassus, who as a real-estate speculator also recalls Donald Trump. Rome people is portrayed as living "in appalling misery in the many-storied lodging-houses of dark suburbs", a misfortune directly linked to the consequences of Roman military expansionism and which suggests current conditions in Detroit, Cleveland or Newark.

The Decline of the West was first read as the epilogue of World War I, the war that ended all wars. Hopefully it will not be read in today's world as the introduction of a new calamity.

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