

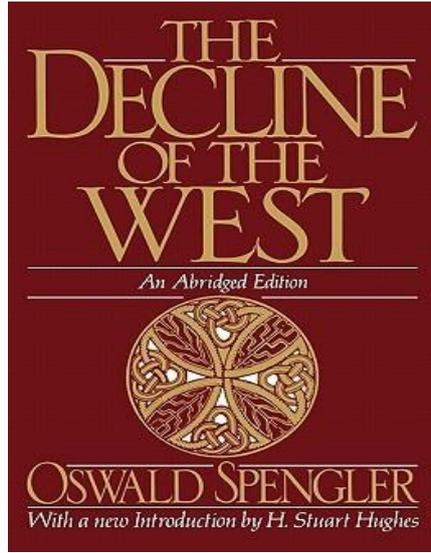


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### THE DECLINE OF WEST: AN ANALYSIS OF OSWALD SPENGLER'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY, CIVILIZATION AND CULTURE

### BATININ ÇÖKÜŞÜ: OSWALD SPENGLER'İN TARİH, UYGARLIK VE KÜLTÜR FELSEFESİNE ÜZERİNE BİR DEĞERLENDİRME

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In July, 1918, when the German armies were on the point of collapse, a book appeared called *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, by someone called Oswald Spengler. (N. Fyre, 1974: p.1) Shortly before the end of the First World War, the work *The Decline of the West* was an immediate and unprecedented success since it offered a rational explanation for the great European disaster, explaining it as part of an inevitable world historic process. The critics that book brought to Western understanding of Euro-centric worldview, influenced many historians and political scientists like Arnold Tonybee and it made a deep impact into the 20th century thinking. (Aksakal, 2010: p.1) The basic idea and essential components of *The Decline of the West* are not difficult to delineate. Simply, Spengler offers “physiognomic approach” which explains that looking things directly in the face, intuitively, rather than scientifically since the real meaning of things is obscured by a mask of scientific-mechanistic facts. Utilizing his “physiognomic approach”, Spengler asserts his ability to decipher the riddle of the history as he states at the beginning of the introduction of *The Decline of the West*. He claims that his rather unsystematic way of approaching the investigation would lead to more intuitive and vital understanding. As he cites in the introduction to *the Decline of the West*: “My writing is intuitive and depictive through and through, written in a language which seeks to present objects and relations illustratively instead of offering an army of ranked concepts.” Although critics maintain this technique makes the fragmentary and uneven in nature,

Spengler felt the aphoristic style, which he adopted from the philosopher Fredric Nietzsche, was the most powerful way to reach organic ideas that could not be systematically analyzed. (Stockhon, 1934: P.7) Besides, in the preface to *The Decline of the West*, Spengler acknowledges the debt he owes to Goethe and Nietzsche as he states; “and now, finally, I feel urge to name once more those to whom I owe practically, everything. Goethe gave me method, Nietzsche the questioning faculty.” (Splenger, 1991: p.6)

Heretofore history, notably Western history had been viewed as a linear progression from lower to higher and it also viewed as developing progressively, such as Greek Roman Mediaeval Renaissance or Ancient Modern, at this point, to draw an attention, Spengler rejected the “linear” view of history in favor of, the “cyclical” and he insisted that the concept of “linear” progression is the production of Western man's ego since the cyclical movements of history can't belong to mere nations, races and events but it can refer to “high cultures.” Moreover, Spengler asserts that recorded history demonstrates eight high cultures have been existed, they are; the Indian, the Egyptian, the Chinese, the Babylonian, the Mexican, (Mayan-Aztec) the Arabian, (Magian) the Classical (Greece and Rome) and the European Western and also each high culture has a distinguishing feature known as “Prime Symbol.” For instance, “Faustian Soul” is the prime symbol of Western culture. Spengler uses the term “Faustian” interchangeably since he sees as the essence of Western Civilization the desire for the infinity and boundlessness that is personified in Goethe's Faust. (Stockhon, 1934: p.12) The concept of “prime symbol” influences the culture, demonstrating itself in science, art, techniques and politics. For example, the tragic symbol “Faustian Soul,” explaining the upward reaching for nothing less than infinite and it is illustrated by Gothic architecture since the vertical lines of Gothic cathedrals seem like “ceilinglessness.”

Moreover, Spengler claims that high cultures are 'living things,' organic in nature and must pass through the stages of birth, development, fulfillment, decay and death. As Northrop Fyre explains the concept of “living things” in his article; 'Everything that is alive shows an organic rhythm moving through stages of birth, growth, maturing, decline and eventual death. (Splenger,1991: p.3) Except for, Western culture, the previous cultures have passed these distinct stages and the phase of fulfillment which is called the culture phase by Spengler points that high culture which is between culture and civilization phase is on the brink of the decline or decay. Consequently, the last phase of organic development is civilization. With the growth of the great “mega polis,” drastic social upheavals increase and the dwellers of the materialistic mass lose their humanity and they turn to be “fellaheen” (a peasant or agricultural laborers in an Arab country such as Syria or Egypt) in the dying out of a culture. Thus, the civilization phase concludes with Age of Caesarism in which great powers are in the control of the great men. Inevitably, the civilization phase turns to be Imperialistic phase and the victims of civilized society gradually complete its last phase of “death” in the organic development.

Briefly, human history is the cyclical record of the rise and fall of the unrelated high cultures and these cultures are organic in nature and like all organisms must pass through the phases of birth and death. Though separate entities in themselves, all high cultures experience parallel development and phases, it is possible to find their corresponding events and phases in the others. That is, Napoleon who was the pioneer in the civilization phase of the Western finds his counterpart in Alexander of Macedon in the classical. Furthermore, For Spengler, approximately, every culture's life-span can be seen to last a thousand years. For instance, the Classical existed from 900 BC to 100 AD, the Arabian was from 100 BC to 900 AD and the Western from 1000 AD to 2000 AD so in the light of the past experiences of the cyclic history, is it possible to predict the decline and fall of the West? Spengler's magnum opus *The Decline of the West* which was written down by the candlelight shortly before the end of the First World War demonstrates an approaching cataclysm for Europe.

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