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Spengler's Prussian Socialism

Oswald Spengler (1880-1936) was one of the most significant thinkers of the Weimar Republic, Germany's first democracy. His work, notably the two-volume, 1,200-page *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (*Decline of the West*, 1918/22), had a profound influence on intellectual discourse in Germany and beyond.¹ Yet despite the esteem in which he was held by his contemporaries, his thought has been seriously under-researched. In English, only four major studies have appeared in the last 70 years.² This is all the more surprising in that the historical period in which he wrote has been extensively covered by both English- and German-language scholars and that some of the thinkers who drew critically on his ideas, such as Heidegger and Adorno, have become household names in Germany intellectual history.

The English-language studies of Spengler have either been biographical, or they have focused narrowly on *Decline of the West*. Accordingly, in popular consciousness Spengler has earned the moniker of the “prophet of decline”³ and has become synonymous with notions of crisis and disintegration, doom and gloom.

However, as the recent revival of interest in Spengler in German secondary literature has recognised, even a cursory look at Spengler's copious writings makes it clear how much more there is to Spengler than this sole work.⁴ Moreover, the very titles of some of Spengler's largely

¹ Cf. Zaur Gasimov and Carl Antonius Lemke Duque (eds.), *Oswald Spengler als europäisches Phänomen. Der Transfer der Kultur- und Geschichtsmorphologie im Europa der Zwischenkriegszeit 1919-1939* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013).

² H. Stuart Hughes, *Oswald Spengler: A Critical Estimate* (New York: Scribner, 1952); John F. Felleny, *Twilight of the Evening Lands: Oswald Spengler – a Half Century Later* (New York: Brookdale, 1972); Klaus P. Fischer, *History and Prophecy: Oswald Spengler and the Decline of the West* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989); John Farrenkopf, *Prophet of Decline: Spengler on World History and Politics* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

³ The title of perhaps the best-known study of Spengler in English (cf. John Farrenkopf, *Prophet of Decline*).

⁴ The following recent studies are worth mentioning: Mohler, Armin and Karlheinz Weissmann, *Die konservative Revolution in Deutschland 1918-1932. Ein Handbuch* (Graz: Ares, 2005); Sebastian Maaß, *Oswald Spengler. Eine politische Biographie* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2013); Martin Falck (ed.), *Zyklen und Cäsaren. Mosaiksteine einer Philosophie des Schicksals. Reden und Schriften Oswald Spenglers* (Kiel: Regin, 2013); Zaur Gasimov and Carl Antonius Lemke Duque (eds.), *Oswald Spengler als europäisches Phänomen*.

ignored writings, such as *Die Revolution ist nicht zu Ende* and *Neubau des deutschen Reiches* (*The Revolution is not Over* and *Building the German Empire Anew*, both 1924), indicate that his work actually contained *positive* proposals for the course of society and calls to political action. Accordingly, it is important to place Spengler's thought within the context of recent developments in Weimar historiography, which highlight the need to distinguish between *crisis* as a social condition and the *evocation of crisis* as a rhetorical device – as a way to disqualify the status quo and prepare the ground for something new.⁵

Spengler particularly foregrounds the struggle for a different social order in his overlooked pamphlet, *Preußentum und Sozialismus* (*Prussianism and Socialism*, 1919). The pamphlet serves as both a warning and an invocation: unless the German nation can come together as it purportedly did in the spirit of civil peace in the war effort of 1914, unless a genuine organic community [*Gemeinschaft*], beyond class and individualism, can be created in line with what Spengler deems the Prussian socialist spirit, then the German people will, he argues, be brought to its knees by the rule of “English” banks, profiteering and speculation.

The rallying cry for this Prussian socialism was heard across the political spectrum. For the conservative Ernst Jünger, the pamphlet forged “the first weapons [...] following the disarmament of Germany”⁶ and provided a springboard for the Conservative Revolution – the anti-democratic and anti-Communist political movement of the 1920s in which Jünger was also active. Following the pamphlet's publication, Spengler even became known as “the Karl Marx of the bourgeoisie”.⁷ The pamphlet was also absorbed by left-wing circles. Gustav Noske, the leading social democrat and Weimar's first Defence Minister, acknowledged that “Spengler's

⁵ Cf. Rüdinger Graf, *Die Zukunft der Weimarer Republik. Krisen und Zukunftsaneignungen in Deutschland 1918-1933* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2008), pp. 104-111.

⁶ Cf. Detlef Felken, *Oswald Spengler. Konservativer Denker zwischen Kaiserreich und Diktatur* (Munich: Beck, 1988), p. 114.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

Prussian socialism” ran in his blood⁸ as he mobilised military forces to crush the workers’ and soldiers’ councils across Germany.

Prussianism and Socialism was thus influential on both the left and the right. Yet how did it address the need for a German national resurgence? Through an analysis of the pamphlet, this essay will counter the dominant image of Spengler as a doomsayer with a despairing outlook by making the case that Spengler viewed the *decline* of Western society, for which he is accounting, not as an inexorable and irresistible process of disintegration, but as an open-ended development replete with both possibilities and pitfalls, depending on the concrete development of events at the time and the choices made by human agents. Further, this essay will argue that Spengler is no arch-conservative cultural critic lamenting the end of the white, Western European man’s influence on world history from an introspective and even racist perspective. Rather, *Prussianism and Socialism* should be viewed as a political intervention on the part of a thinker who poses challenging questions which remain relevant to twenty-first century life: not least because he draws on various liberal, socialist and nationalist discourses of modernity in order to develop his outlook.

The essay will also bring out the specificity of Spengler’s ideas and the distinctive position he occupies as a thinker of the Conservative Revolution in two ways. First, it will discuss some of the references to socialist thinkers in *Prussianism and Socialism*, such as the founding father of German socialism, Ferdinand Lassalle, the left-syndicalist Robert Michels and the German social-democratic deputy Paul Lensch. These references have hitherto received scant attention in the few German-language discussions of the pamphlet.⁹ Second, it will explore the

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁹ As far as I can gather, the important reference to Lassalle in *Prussianism and Socialism* has been completely overlooked in secondary literature. Only Adorno has discussed, albeit briefly, Michels’s influence on Spengler (cf. Adorno, ‘Spengler nach dem Untergang’, p. 117). Rolf Peter Sieferle justifiably devotes two of his five biographical

epistemological roots of Spengler's socialism and its links with his overall world view which, as we shall see, was based on a morphological, *longue durée* conception of human history as a cyclical, organically unfolding process.

Following a brief contextualisation and overview of *Prussianism and Socialism*, this essay will assess four aspects of Spengler's argument: how socialism fits into his view of historical change; how he views the relation between determinism and agency; how he understands political democracy; and how he weaves various socialist thinkers into his argument and what this incorporation reveals about his Prussian socialist project. In order to shed light on Spengler's motivations in penning *Prussianism and Socialism*, let us first turn to the socio-political context in which it was written.

Bavarian Disgust

Spengler had been engaged with the material for *Prussianism and Socialism* since 1913, initially digging it up again in September 1918 in the hope of publishing it under the title *Römer und Preußen (Romans and Prussians)*.¹⁰ As we shall see, this title alludes to one of the ideological cornerstones of the pamphlet – the duty of the Prussians to establish a global hegemonic power along the lines of Rome (the *Imperium Germanicum*).

The immediate backdrop to the pamphlet was Spengler's "disgust" at the "anarchistical radical 'mob'" during the revolution of November 1918 and the proclamation of the socialist

sketches of figures from the Conservative Revolution to Spengler and Lensch (cf. Rolf Peter Sieferle, *Die konservative Revolution. Fünf biographische Skizzen* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1995) but the possible cross-fertilisation of their ideas has not been investigated. Spengler also cultivated personal friendships with figures on the right wing of social democracy, such as the trade-union leader August Winning, who was inspired by Lensch's ideas. Given Spengler's personal and intellectual connections with German social democracy, the largest political party of his time, these links demand further research.

¹⁰ Felken, *Oswald Spengler*, p. 95.

republic in his native Bavaria in January 1919.¹¹ The revolutionary skirmishes landed on his very own doorstep, with the artillery fire in his resident Agnesstraße only ceasing on 4 May 1919. On 21 February 1919, one day after the assassination of the socialist leader Kurt Eisner, Spengler met with his friend August Albers, editor of the newly-established publishing house, C. H. Beck.¹² Spengler wanted to discuss publishing a text which would allow him to popularise his conviction that the liberal parliamentarism of Weimar would spell disaster for Germany if she wanted to re-emerge as a power on the world stage. As he puts it in *Prussianism and Socialism*, parliamentarism in Germany is either “nonsense or betrayal”.¹³ Felken notes that Spengler had consciously avoided any discussion of politics in the first volume of his *Decline of the West*, leaving this to the forthcoming second volume. Yet Spengler’s hand was forced by the speed of events. On occasion, certain sections of the pamphlet therefore read like a topical paraphrase and popularisation of *Decline of the West*.

Spengler’s decision to modify the title to *Prussianism and Socialism*, presumably in consultation with Albers, can be explained with reference to the revolutionary events of November 1918, with socialist terminology reflecting the spirit of the age, in which Germany was governed by an all-socialist provisional government made up of three representatives from the two largest parties of the time: the Majority Social Democrats (SPD) and the Independents (USPD).

For Spengler, socialism was “not the most profound, but the noisiest question of the time”.¹⁴ This quote summarises his core thesis that the noisy debates around socialism and

¹¹ Letter to Hans Klöres, 27 December 1918, cited in Arthur Helps (ed.), *Spengler Letters: 1913-1936* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), p. 71.

¹² Jürgen Naehrer, *Oswald Spengler* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1994) p. 84.

¹³ Oswald Spengler, *Preußentum und Sozialismus* (Munich: Beck, 1920), p. 54. All subsequent references to this text will be placed in parentheses in the main text.

¹⁴ Spengler, *Politische Schriften*, p. 15.

capitalism on the streets and assemblies of early Weimar were in fact a faint echo of a more profound antagonism: the struggle between the Prussians and the English in what he deems the “winter” of Western, or Faustian, civilisation. Before assessing what Spengler meant by such concepts, let us first take a closer look at the pamphlet and its structure.

Common Enemies

Prussianism and Socialism runs a fine line, reflecting Spengler’s adventurist political gamble in propounding a socialist politics defined by opposition to the common enemies of the working class and the aristocracy: Marxism and liberalism. For Spengler, eradicating the baleful influence of both is a necessary condition for the revitalisation of Germany following military defeat in World War I. Such a German renaissance necessitates the unification of what Spengler deems the two socialist parties in Germany: not, as desired by many, of the SPD and the USPD, but of social democracy as a whole and the Conservatives. The German elite has to recognise that it must overcome “every trace” of the “feudal-agrarian narrowness” which belongs to an earlier phase of Western history.¹⁵ Equally, it has to reject the values of liberalism and its attempts to plant parliamentarism in alien Prussian soil, where it would not, and could not, grow. In turn, the German working class (or at least the “respectable” section of it)¹⁶ needs to break with Marxism, which, like liberalism, is an alien and corrosive ideology. It is necessary, so Spengler, to “liberate” German socialism from Marxism.¹⁷ The central aim of the pamphlet, therefore, is to lay bare the *English* roots of both Marxism and liberalism and to conduct a struggle against the

¹⁵ Letter to Hans Klöres, 27 December 1918, cited in Arthur Helps (ed.), *Spengler Letters: 1913-1936* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), p. 71.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Spengler, *Politische Schriften* (Leipzig: Manuscriptum, 2009), p. 16.

insidious forces championing them within Germany, referred to by Spengler as the “invisible English army, which Napoleon had left behind on German soil after the Battle of Jena” (p. 7).

Spengler outlines his argument in four main chapters, each of which is further divided into numbered sections. The first chapter is entitled “The Revolution” (sections 1-7); it is followed by “Sozialismus as a Way of Life” (8-9); “Englishmen and Prussians” (10-18); “Marx” (19-21); and finally “The International” (22-24).

In the first section, Spengler emphasises that “the revolution” he has in mind begins not in 1918, but with the German war effort in 1914, with the country purportedly coming together in a heroic attempt to fight for the national interest. This narrative reflects a guiding trope of the Conservative Revolution, with Spengler echoing the stab-in-the-back myth [*Dolchstoßlegende*] popularised by the Prussian general Paul von Hindenburg. According to this view, the German army was on the brink of victory, only to be stabbed in the back by leftists and liberals on the home front. Indeed, for *Prussianism and Socialism*, the so-called German revolution of 1918 (“the most senseless act” in German history (p. 9)) is a sheer betrayal of the true civil-peace revolution of 1914, which assumed “legitimate and military forms” (p. 12). This betrayal of the German cause came in two acts: the June 1917 peace resolution agreed in the Reichstag and the abdication of the *Kaiser* in November 1918. Both represented desertion of military duty and a capitulation to England.

Spengler then proceeds to discuss “Socialism as a Way of Life”, which describes Prussian socialism as ingrained in the instinct and consciousness of the Prussians, who form a “race in the spiritual sense” (p. 22). A brief aside is necessary here, not least because of the controversy surrounding Spengler and racial theory in the context of the horror that would later be unleashed on Germany: however much Spengler’s Prussians and Englanders may be based on

caricatures or stereotypes, they are not biologically determined, but *metaphysical* categories, which are supposed to reflect the soul of certain peoples and epochs. This emphasis on the soul and living out one's destiny is integral to the German tradition of *philosophy of life* in which Spengler stands. Indeed, on several occasions, *Prussianism and Socialism* highlights how there are many *biological* Prussians who nonetheless entertained anti-Prussian, English ideals (such as one of the pamphlet's bogeymen, the German liberal "Michel" (p. 8).

Nonetheless, there is one passage in the pamphlet where Spengler talks of race as expressing itself in certain "bodily traits" (p. 29). Presumably this relates to the way which people walk, their facial expressions and so on. With the benefit of the doubt, perhaps this talk of bodily features is not a manifestation of Spengler's biological determinism but analogous to what, following Pierre Bourdieu, modern sociology deems *hexus*¹⁸ – the way in which habitual and typical conditions, particularly in the way individuals move, eat, talk and comport themselves express both individual choices and social norms or values.

Spengler then proceeds to what is by far the longest section of the pamphlet, "Prussians and Englishmen" Given the importance Spengler attributes to the conflict between these peoples, "Prussians and Englishmen" might have perhaps been a better title for the pamphlet as a whole, insofar as this title more accurately reflects what, for Spengler, was really at stake politically. For Spengler argues that World War I is but one manifestation of a historically rooted Anglo-German antagonism, a struggle between the two great Germanic peoples. Such antipathy will invariably lead to more fierce struggles between the modern English people, born in the seventeenth century, and the Prussian people, born in the eighteenth. The inevitability of such a conflict, and the impossibility of mediation or reconciliation between these peoples, is rooted in what Spengler, following Nietzsche, deems modern man's irrepressible *will to power*. This force is

¹⁸ Cf. Richard Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 74-84.

embodied in modern imperialism, first ushered in by seventeenth-century Spain, which aims to conquer the entire planet: “all must submit to our political, social, and economic ideal, or perish” (p. 24). The respective “soul” of these peoples derives from the fact that the former were “knightly” peoples and the latter “Vikings” (p. 61) – the Prussians feeling the great Germanic idea *above* them (the commitment to the community) and the English *within* them (a commitment to individual independence (p. 31)). This clash is therefore one between an English community of happiness and a Prussian community of duty; money versus rank; job versus occupation; free trade versus autarky; “the gentleman’s garb” versus the “uniform” (p. 37), art versus literature. “Every man for himself: that is English. Every man for every other man: that is Prussian” (*ibid.*).

In the short section on Marx that follows, Spengler contends that Marx’s thought conflates the struggle between these great peoples with the struggle between social classes. Marx’s approach is “purely English” (p. 71). Since Marx is unaware of the true antagonism of the epoch, he unconsciously takes as his point of departure the principles and concepts of *English* political economy in order to subject it to a critique. Spengler views this critique as a “splendid construction” (p. 69), but maintains that it is ignorant of the different cultural souls and dispositions of the various peoples. In Prussia, as opposed to England, for example, social position is informed not by wealth but by social rank. Following English political economy, Marx treats labour like any other commodity. However, this is at odds with the Prussian mentality, according to which work is not a mere object to be bought and sold, but a calling, as expressed in the German word *Beruf*.

It is for this reason that Spengler accuses Marx of being “a good materialist and a poor psychologist” (p. 69). For Spengler, Marx’s theory is English political economy turned on its

head – “the capitalism of the lower class” (p. 47) informed by a Viking-style envy of the propertied classes and their wealth, a system in which “class egoism is elevated to a principle” (p. 75). The working-class strike was “the classical feature” of Marx’s (English) “trader philosophy” (p. 77).

The pamphlet concludes with a section entitled “The International”, which highlights the illusion of a peaceful world order, as heralded by the outbreak of World War I. Spengler argues that further military conflicts are a given and sketches out a world in which it is inevitable that the entire world will be economically coordinated and administered. Yet will this world be run by Spengler’s dedicated, self-sacrificing, dutiful Prussian soldiers and bureaucrats or by ruthless, self-interested, exploitative English bankers and traders? These questions conclude the pamphlet, along with the warning that further military conflicts are on the immediate horizon: “a genuine International is only possible through the victory of the idea of one race over all others” (p. 84).

Socialist Morphology

Let us now locate Spengler’s views within his conception of historical development. The thesis underpinning Spengler’s Anglo-German antagonism is his morphological conception of history. This conception is central to *Decline of the West*, but is also a guiding thread in *Prussianism and Socialism*: unlike other varieties of socialism, which are often based on an understanding of economic development or ethical imperatives, Spengler’s socialism is metaphysically based in this overview of human history.

For Spengler, there are eight great or high “cultures” in the course of human society, the last of which is Faustian or Western society.¹⁹ These cultures develop independently from each other organically and are subject to the laws of organic matter in general: each culture will come

¹⁹ The following overview is based on Rolf Peter Sieferle, *Die konservative Revolution*, pp. 104-7.

into existence, blossom, decay and ultimately perish. In order to enunciate the cyclical, repetitive nature of this organic process, Spengler likens each stage of development to the four seasons with quintessential, distinctive characteristics: spring, defined by rural contemplation and reflection as opposed to urban action; summer, defined by scholarly output and philosophy; autumn, defined by the disintegration of the culture (or “race”) and the emergence of satire and scepticism; and winter, characterised by urbanism, mass poverty, politics and entertainment, epitomised by the historical figure of Caesar, whose modern incarnation, argues Spengler, lies in the future (Spengler was tempted to see Benito Mussolini as such a figure, but on occasion Adolf Hitler too).

Spengler thus views in history the existence of something along the lines of the synchronicity of the non-synchronous [*die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*], not in Ernst Bloch’s sense of simultaneously existing ages, ideals and outlooks in one epoch, but as two historical facts which, existing in completely different cultures or times, appear in exactly the same – relative – situation. In Spenglerian terms, Archimedes and Carl Friedrich Gauss, Polygnotus and Rembrandt, as well as Alexander the Great and Napoleon, are contemporaries, or homologous historical phenomena. The latter two figures ushered in the winter period of Ancient and Faustian culture respectively, or, as Spengler puts it, these cultures’ transition from *Kultur* to *Zivilisation*.

For Spengler, 1914 marked the arrival of the winter of Western civilisation, with all that this entailed in terms of modern-day Caesarism (which we shall discuss below), mass urban existence and military conflict. With the dawning of civilisation, countries like France, Spain and Italy – once bearers of a *culture* associated with spirit, conviviality and taste – had descended into insignificance, with England and Germany appearing centre stage.

The creation of an antagonism between English and German culture was no invention of Spengler's, but in the mould of the ideological mobilisation of the German people during the war, and the attempts on the part of philosophers such as Rudolf Eucken and Paul Natorp to create what Hermann Lübbe calls a "metaphysics of Germanness"²⁰. This attempt to formulate philosophically a unique German identity distinct from the other warring nations was also a guiding principle of the Conservative Revolution. Ernst Troeltsch, Johann Plenge and Werner Sombart were pioneering in this regard, with the latter publishing a 1915 treatise under the revealing title *Traders and Heroes (Händler und Helden*, the latter, of course, being the Germans).²¹ Troeltsch also distinguished, as does Spengler, between the individualism of the English gentlemen, French ideas of equality and German ideas of self-denying community. Plenge likewise viewed liberal traditions as a foreign infiltration [*Überfremdung*] of the German spirit.²² What distinguishes Spengler from these thinkers (Troeltsch, Sombart, Plenge and Natorp), however, is his integration of these metaphysical justifications of *Germanness*, via the concepts of civilisation and culture, into his overall cyclical view of history.

Spengler's deployment of the distinction between *culture* and *civilisation* was another trope in the competing political discourse on both sides of the trenches in World War I. Whereas French and British pro-war intellectuals claimed to be fighting for "civilisation", those in Germany inscribed on their banners the slogan of "culture".²³ For the Marxist philosopher Georg

²⁰ Hermann Lübbe, *Politische Philosophie in Deutschland* (Munich: dtv, 1974), p. 185. The intellectual role model in this respect was Johann Gottlieb Fichte, whose *Speeches to the German Nation* during the German Wars of Liberation were seen as exemplary for intellectuals serving the German war effort in 1914.

²¹ James Hawes's recent book *Englanders and Huns* outlines the development of this Anglo-German antagonism and draws on various press sources on both sides of the English channel to make his case: James Hawes, *Englanders and Huns: How Five Decades of Enmity Led to the First World War* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2014).

²² Quoted in Falck (ed.), *Zyklen und Cäsaren*, p. 79.

²³ Lübbe notes that, on occasion, Spengler even claimed that the Germans were fighting for "barbarism" so as to accentuate this antagonism (Lübbe, *Politische Philosophie*, p. 214). In philosophical terms, Lübbe (*ibid.*, p. 191) traces the *culture/civilisation* dichotomy back to Immanuel Kant, but argues that this distinction only became politicised in the early twentieth century, as part of what he describes as a "Fichte Renaissance" (*ibid.*, p. 199).

Lukács, “culture” had been a *leitmotif* in “reactionary Germany philosophy” for some time, with the ideological struggle against the democratisation of Germany taking place “under the banner of this antagonism, in which ‘civilisation’ is portrayed as everything that is bad under capitalism, particularly Western democracy, opposed to which stands the autochthonous, organic, genuinely German ‘culture’”.²⁴ Spengler’s understanding of *culture* is in line with his conception of socialism-as-form-of existence, a part of his overall cyclical historical model: his socialism is, to Faustian man, what Stoicism was to the Ancients or what Buddhism was to the Indic culture.²⁵

Yet is this understanding of the development of Prussian socialism not out of step with our earlier contention that Spengler was a political thinker who placed emphasis on human agency and the need for an active struggle against English ideas? Indeed, if socialism is in some way predetermined, why would he produce a pamphlet to try and alter the course of events?

Necessary and Fatal(ist)

The extent to which human actors are free to intervene in, shape or even undermine this progression of cycles has been a source of controversy in the reception of Spengler’s thought. One British reviewer of *Decline of the West*, for instance, described Spengler’s socialism as a “necessary and fatal symptom of our civilisation”, implying that, for Spengler, socialism is an inevitable, pre-determined social formation.²⁶ Martin Falck, by contrast, argues that while for Spengler the outlines of the *overall fate* of Western history had been sketched out, the German people in particular faced concrete choices as to what the final outcome of history would exactly look like.²⁷ Even though Falck adds the caveat that many of those influenced by Spengler’s

²⁴ Georg Lukács, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1954), p. 375.

²⁵ Falck (ed.), *Zyklen und Cäsaren*, p. 80.

²⁶ Cf. Zaur Gasimov and Carl Antonius Lemke Duque (eds.), *Oswald Spengler als europäisches Phänomen*, p. 160.

²⁷ Martin Falck (ed.), *Zyklen und Cäsaren*, p. 74.

Decline of the West consciously ignored or rejected Spengler's theory of history altogether,²⁸ his appreciation of the relation between determinism and agency in *Prussianism and Socialism* is well-founded. After all, *Prussianism and Socialism* is clear that Western man is faced with a number of political alternatives within the context of civilisation. Paraphrasing the famous dictum of one of the pamphlet's polemical targets, Karl Marx,²⁹ one might say that, for Spengler, men do not quite make their own history, but are nonetheless faced with several choices and ways of organising their lives against the backdrop of highly restrictive, pinched and prescribed circumstances which are certainly not of their own choosing.

Spengler's parallels between societies and human organisms can help explain the choices that he believes are open to Faustian man. An elderly man is unlikely to be able to run a marathon and will probably die if he simply sets off one morning. On the other hand, he might be able to go on regular walks or even jogs, and in so doing may actually prolong his life and make it more comfortable. Yet this presupposes at least *recognising* that he is an old man and that his exercise options are thus limited. Analogously, for *Prussianism and Socialism*, Germany did have the possibility of becoming a healthy and stable hegemonic world power. Yet this required insight into the nature of *Realpolitik* and harsh political facts, an insight which is the direct opposite of romanticism, idealism and theory.

The youth in particular are urged to take up this challenge of leading Germany forward. Spengler subsequently explained that for him "the young generation" was considered such "not in years" but in "power of judgement" and "responsibility": those who have neither will always be far too young for politics, he adds.³⁰ How, then, does Spengler understand the political

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

²⁹ Karl Marx, 'Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, Volume 8, (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1972)

³⁰ Spengler, *Politische Schriften*, p. 11.

choices open to humanity in the winter of civilisation? What is possible and what is not? Let us now move to discuss Spengler's understanding of democracy and dictatorship in *Prussianism and Socialism*.

Kaiser Bebel

One defining feature of Spengler's understanding of winter is the idea that Faustian man will face the prospect of Caesarism, a form of dictatorship that is homologous to the one to be found in the late Roman Empire. In order to make this case, the pamphlet develops a critique of representative democracy in general and liberal parliamentary democracy in particular, arguing that in the winter of Western civilisation both become a mere façade for the rule of entrenched plutocratic interests, which direct events from behind the scenes: "the relationship between party leaders and party, between party and masses, will be tougher, more transparent and more brazen" (p. 67). One way in which this tendency towards dictatorship manifests itself is the mass political press. For all its democratic pretensions, the modern press paves the way for future dictators: "still today you can find morons here and there who are enthused by the idea of the freedom of the press, but precisely through this freedom the coming Caesars of the world press have a free hand".³¹

Spengler argues that Caesarism is an unavoidable feature of modern political life. But this dictatorship can either be benign or malignant: the outcome will depend on the concrete choices of the German people. Will this Caesarist dictatorship be a "dictatorship of money or of organisation, the world as booty or as a state, wealth or authority, success or calling [*Beruf*]?" (p. 65).

³¹ Spengler, *Untergang des Abendlandes*, Vol. 2 (Munich, Beck, 1922), pp. 579-80.

Spengler's anti-Weimar politics come to the fore here, with republicanism in particular earning his scorn: "it is precisely the republican form of government that has nothing to do with socialism" (p. 13). His target appears to be Marxist social democracy, which was convinced that – through the organisation of the masses and through accountability, workers' wages for political representatives and so on – it could undermine the corrupting influence of wealth on party politics and transform democracy. Whereas the Marxist left, following Friedrich Engels, envisaged the democratic republic as the form of working-class rule,³² Spengler and his right-wing contemporaries viewed republicanism an alien political form that was the epitome of social and cultural decline and thus a cornerstone of *civilisation*.

How does Spengler try and make the case for his anti-republican alternative, a socialist monarchy? Following Robert Michels's work on the *iron law of oligarchy*, which propounds that in modern political life mass organisations such as the SPD have an inbuilt tendency towards moving away from democracy and embracing some of the oligarchical features Spengler discerns in Caesarism,³³ *Prussianism and Socialism* portrays the SPD, and its most important leader, August Bebel, as a genuinely *Prussian*, authoritarian institution that was in fact run in a Caesarist fashion. Bebel in particular comes in for much praise: had he not died in 1913, then he would have had no hesitation at all in re-affirming the party's true Prussian spirit of the civil peace of 4 August 1914 and ushering in a dictatorship that would violently impose its will on society. In a critique of the November Revolution that occasionally borders on the voluntaristic, Spengler is convinced that, under the Prussian Bebel, heads would have rolled under the rule of his "iron hand" (p. 8). After all, he asks, was it not Bismarck who had created Prussian socialism

³² Cf. Friedrich Engels, 'Zur Kritik des sozialdemokratischen Programmentwurfes' in Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, Vol. 22 (Dietz: Berlin, 1972), p. 235.

³³ Robert Michels, *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie. Untersuchungen über die oligarchischen Tendenzen des Gruppenlebens* (Leipzig: Werner Klinkhardt, 1911).

through worker-protection laws? And was the SPD not organised rather like a military machine under Bebel?

This particular view of SPD history and Bebel, who was popularly known as the *Shadow Kaiser*,³⁴ a fierce opponent of the monarchy and somebody always at pains to avoid conflict with England, is deeply problematic. Yet it is evidence both of Spengler's intellectual gymnastics and his knowledge of the SPD and its history. His narrative about the purportedly authoritarian SPD and Bebel also allows him to spin the political behaviour of the SPD during the November Revolution as a stab in the back from the invisible English forces within the country, as a case of "insubordination in the workers' party and simultaneously in the armed forces" (p. 46). The SPD's Prussian will to power under Bebel had become anglicised, degenerating from a philosophy of power into an obsession with penny-pinching, drab trade-union struggles.

Spengler's critique aims to show how things could have been, and still could be, very different. This is not the end of Spengler's discussion of German social democracy, however. There are a number of other references to socialist thinkers, to which we shall now turn in order to understand how his socialism differed from other thinkers of the Conservative Revolution who likewise championed a form of socialism.

Lassalle and Lensch

In order to boost his Prussian-socialist credentials, Spengler cites Ferdinand Lassalle's 1862 *What Next?* as an inspiration for an alliance between the German aristocracy and the working class, thereby creating further distance between his socialism and that of Marx, who was typically forthcoming in his criticisms of the remarkably contradictory Lassalle. Through his

³⁴ Cf. Wilhelm Harvey Maehl, *Shadow Emperor of the German Workers* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1980)

strict, dictatorial leadership of the Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiter Verein (ADAV), Lassalle contributed much to breaking the German working class from liberalism and to establishing an independent working-class party, as outlined in his famous *Open Letter* (1863), which made the case for the working class forming its own social institutions. Widely read and discussed, this open letter is considered to have created the basis of the ADAV. Simultaneously, however, Lassalle held a number of convictions which were inimical to the idea of the German working class pursuing its own political project, not least his views of the Prussian state and his flirtation with a possible alliance with Otto von Bismarck and the German *Junker* class against the bourgeoisie. In this limited sense, Lassalle can certainly be considered an intellectual forefather of Spengler.

Fascinatingly, not least when it comes to Spengler's relationship with social democracy, *Prussianism and Socialism* (p. 49) also references *Three Years of World Revolution*, a 1917 pamphlet written by the German SPD Reichstag deputy Paul Lensch.³⁵ Once a pupil of Rosa Luxemburg and a household name on the radical left wing of the SPD, in 1914 he and his allies in the *Die Glocke* group (*The Bell*, a publication established in 1915) came to the conclusion that World War I actually represented a revolutionary process, in which a German victory could break Britain's dominance of the world and thus open up a space for genuinely Marxist, German SPD-type organisations to develop, as opposed to the Labourite, trade-unionist organisations that dominated the British workers' movement. Indeed, as for so many different thinkers who influenced, and were influenced by, *the philosophical ideas of 1914*, Britain's alliance with

³⁵ Paul Lensch, *Drei Jahre Weltrevolution* (Berlin: Fischer, 1918).

Tsarism – the embodiment of political reaction – made Lensch and his comrades feel vindicated in their analysis.³⁶

Unlike Spengler, Lensch and his co-thinkers remained subjectively committed to the idea that they were engaged in further developing the politics of Marxism, but there is a remarkable overlap between Spengler’s and Lensch’s analysis of the role of England and the English workers’ movement, which were seen as embodying a variety of the English *trader philosophy* in its uninspired syndicalism. By contrast, both Lensch and Spengler saw the German SPD (particularly under August Bebel) as an organisation that fought for political power.

It is striking just how conversant Spengler was with the various competing discourses of his time. His understanding of, and engagement with, socialist ideas sets him apart from other post-World War I right-wing thinkers such as Paul Natorp and Johann Plenge. Natorp deemed World War I “the day of the Germans” and, similarly to Spengler, was convinced that the Germans had socialism in their blood.³⁷ Spengler, however, would have argued that Natorp had confused the loudest issue of the day with the most profound: Natorp, after all, was of the opinion that 1914 embodied the clash between the two systems of capitalism and socialism, not between the two bearers of the great Germanic idea.

Opportunist Socialism?

Is Spengler’s socialism not typical of the Young Conservative movement and its struggle against all notions of a democratically organised society? Indeed, in a 1932 foreword to a reprint of *Prussianism and Socialism*, Spengler downplays any understanding of socialism as an *economic* concept, stressing its metaphysical and spiritual dimension. He even underlines how his

³⁶ On Lensch, see for example, Ben Lewis, ‘The SPD Left’s Dirty Secret’, in *Weekly Worker*, No. 1016, 26 June 2014, pp. 10-11.

³⁷ Cf. Lübke, *Politische Philosophie*, p. 186-89.

socialism would not get rid of the market, as it presupposes “a private economy with its old-Germanic joy of power and booty”.³⁸ As such, Spengler’s anti-capitalist critique is one that boils down to an opposition to *finance* capital (which he scathingly deems a “parasitic form of property”),³⁹ not to the logic of capital accumulation in general.

Theodor W. Adorno sees much that is worthy in Spengler’s critique of democracy as an instrument of Caesarist control. Nonetheless, he calls into question Spengler’s socialism by highlighting the weaknesses in his understanding of political economy, accusing Spengler of being “helplessly dilettantish” in these matters.⁴⁰ Indeed, just how a state is to mediate between socio-economic interests when it is not directly accountable to the population is a central problem in Spengler’s political economy. For the same reason, even Ernst Niekisch, the enigmatic National Bolshevik thinker who sought to fuse German nationalism with revolutionary left-wing politics, was critical of Spengler’s social alternative. He viewed it as “the old authoritarian state [*Obrigkeitsstaat*] once again, which the worker has to obey blindly”.⁴¹

For Georg Lukács, the core of the project of the thinkers from the German *philosophy of life* tradition since Nietzsche, particularly Spengler, is actually the struggle *against* socialism.⁴² In left-wing circles, after all, Spengler’s name became an insult, with the Marxist Karl Kautsky

³⁸ Spengler, *Politische Schriften*, p. 9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴⁰ Adorno, ‘Spengler nach dem Untergang’, p. 125. More generally, there is a certain overlap between Adorno’s comments on the *culture industry* as a twentieth-century incarnation of Roman *panem et circences* and Spengler’s comments on civilisation. Adorno makes the interesting case that Spengler’s right-wing critique of modernity was able to grasp something about the “dual nature of the Enlightenment”, which liberal thought was unable to see (*ibid.*, pp. 123-24).

⁴¹ Niekisch, Ernst, *Gewagtes Leben: Begnungen und Begebnisse* (Cologne/Berlin: Kiepenhauer & Witsch, 1958), p. 135. On Niekisch, see Jürgen Rühle, ‘Hassliebe zu den niederen Dämonen: Ernst Niekisch und der Nationalbolschewismus’, in Rühle, *Literatur und Revolution – die Schriftsteller und der Kommunismus* (Berlin: Kiepenhauer & Witsch, 1960), pp. 192-206.

⁴² Lukács, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft*, p. 372.

referring to one political opponent, Emil Franz, as “a red Spengler”.⁴³ Lukács maintains that, since the Russian October Revolution of 1917, this ideological struggle on the part of the German imperialist bourgeoisie had entered a new stage, with Spengler’s philosophy showing how strong this turn away from programmes, reason and systematic thought had become. For Lukács, Spengler’s method amounts to little more than a degrading of age-old notions concerning the law-like emergence, blossoming and decline of cultures – found amongst thinkers as varied as Giambattista Vico and Hegel – into unfounded historical analogies, another manifestation of the destruction of reason, with a decadent ruling class and its ideologues plumbing new intellectual depths in the struggle against socialism.⁴⁴

In this sense, for all Spengler’s claims of being able to see more clearly than other thinkers as a result of his independence from party-political interests,⁴⁵ *Prussianism and Socialism* may be seen, in the words of one British Fabian socialist reviewer of Spengler, as amounting to “little more than echo[ing] the prejudices of his class and time”.⁴⁶ Spengler may thus have fallen into the trap of what he explicitly warns against in the introduction to *Prussianism and Socialism*: projecting onto socialism the fears and prejudices of his own environment and background. Ernst Stutz is quite correct to highlight the intimate relationship between Spengler’s conception of history and his political views: there is a clear connection between Spengler’s prognoses for the Western world and his understanding of Caesarist Rome. Nonetheless, Spengler’s eclectic incorporation of an array of socialist, statist and syndicalist schools of thought is indicative of a thinker who is engaged in a daring political wager

⁴³ Not all Marxist thinkers of the 1920s thought in such terms, however. Cf. A. Fankhauser, ‘Spengler und Marx’, *Rote Revue: Sozialistische Monatschrift*, 4.1 (1924-1925), pp. 29-35, which argues that Spengler’s thought owes much to Marx and that Spengler’s concept of “culture” is merely “class” in another, non-materialist form.

⁴⁴ Lukács, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft*, p. 373.

⁴⁵ Spengler, *Politische Schriften* (Leipzig: Manuscriptum, 2009), p. 14.

⁴⁶ Geoffrey Barraclough, ‘Culture and Civilisation’, *New Republic*, 181, 25 (1979), p. 28.

conditioned by his immediate surroundings in early Weimar Germany, where socialist organisations and ideas were so dominant that he felt compelled to develop a critique of Marxist socialism and thereby steer political events towards his own anti-democratic outlook. As we have seen, *Prussianism and Socialism* is by no means the intervention of an aristocrat who longingly harks back to pre-modern Germany from the comfort of his armchair. Nor is it, however, able to break with an aristocratic opposition to democracy and mass political life. Accordingly, Spengler's main target in *Prussianism and Socialism* is what he deems "thinking from below", the "apotheosis of herd sentiment".⁴⁷

However discredited Spengler's methodology may be, and wherever one may currently place Western civilisation, his concerns regarding the "winter" of the West remain part of the modern world in which basic democratic forms seem rather precarious, military conflicts are a stubborn feature of everyday life, an all-encompassing media machine increasingly sets the ideological agenda and the fate of entire countries hinges on developments in the financial markets. Humanity's inability to resolve the very socio-political dilemmas Spengler was able to pinpoint explains the enduring relevance of his ideas.

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⁴⁷ Oswald Spengler, *Jahre der Entscheidung* (Munich: Beck, 1933) [accessed at: <http://tinyurl.com/ppmbk43>], pp. 104-5.

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