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R. G. COLLINGWOOD’S CRITIQUE OF SPENGLER’S THEORY OF HISTORICAL CYCLE

Abstract¹

In his 1927 review to Oswald Spengler’s book, *The Decline of the West*, Collingwood formulates several accusations against Spengler erroneous way of understanding history. Among these, Collingwood reproaches on Spengler’s philosophy of history not having got the correct orientation, as he reduces history to a plurality of different cultures, each with its own specific essence. It is a good point. My aim is to show how Spengler’s theory of historical cycles is part of a larger obsession with universal history. History is but the development of successive phases that have neither a progressive nor a descendant sense

Keywords: Oswald Spengler, historical cycles, historical knowledge, historical evidence, historical interpretation

There are two different ways of conceiving history. Both perspectives are equally valid. On the one hand, as a whole, history can be pictured as a continuous process by which different stages develop from one another and succeed one another. Each of these stages offers solutions to problems that were raised during previous stages. Within this context, the goal of the historian is to discover such problems, as well as the solutions that were given to such problems in the past. Both the problems and the solutions that Collingwood has in mind are life situations which people confronted with in the past, and which historical circumstances have shaped as such.

On the other hand, historical episodes can be considered each apart, as a separate, individual whole in itself. In this case, the second perspective of the historical cycles is adopted. Once we get acquainted and familiarize with a certain historical epoch, and we become capable of completely and deeply understanding the problems of that particular age, as well as the motives of the historical agents who acted in certain ways in those times, we

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also become able to cut a slice of actual life out of the historical scenery, by extracting the respective episode and separating it from the rest. The cyclic perspective on history is presupposed by historical knowledge and it is also a limit to this knowledge unless we become aware of the fact that this way of conceiving history should pass for a dynamical perspective, that is to say we should understand that as historical knowledge advances, the cyclical perspective modifies, too.

In 1927 Collingwood signed a review to Oswald Spengler's book, *The Decline of the West*. The name of the review was: "Oswald Spengler and the Theory of Historical Cycles". In this text, Collingwood appreciates Spengler for his great erudition and for the sharpness of his mind, underlining the seriousness both of the book and of the theme it talks of. Meanwhile his praises, Collingwood severely, lucidly and deeply motivated criticizes the principles and conceptions that Spengler states in his book.

One of the main reproaches that Collingwood imputes on Spengler's theory refers to the fact that he auto isolated himself of the previous conceptions and authors of the past which in fact made the development of the enquiry on the historical cycles possible. In this way, Spengler pretty much awarely and still carelessly disregards how Hegel one century ahead of him, and Vico, two centuries ahead of him, thematized the issue of the historical cycles. And what is even more important than these, the two antecessors of Spengler understood things that he neglected to see. Among those omitted things is the fact that the dualism between culture and barbarism (culturelessness) should be eliminated since culture never appears out of a state of culturelessness, but barbarism contains the seeds of culture within itself.

Spengler's theory of historical cycles is morphology of culture. His main conception affirms that every culture follows a cycle of development similar to organic evolution (birth, growing up, death). Each culture follows during its evolution four successive stages which Spengler describes by analogy to the four seasons: spring (birth and childhood), summer (youth), autumn (mature age) and winter (old age and death). Spring or the morning of a certain culture is a preeminently mythological stage, while summer marks the appearing of a scientific consciousness. Autumn represents the stage of introspection (rationalism, illumminism), while winter means the decaying of a culture in favour of its civilization, the replacement of spiritual activities with technical and pragmatic preoccupations. Each historical cycle reiterates each of these four stages in its own development. It's about a structural homology and not the fact that a certain event could

ever occur twice in the same way. Spengler identified eight cultures with their own specific “style” or “soul”: Egyptian culture, classical culture (Roman-Greek), Babylonian culture, Indian culture, Arabian culture, and Western culture (Faustical), each of them going through an identical cycle of life of several hundreds of years. As a result, history is but the general biography of all these cultures which are like organisms.

Despite his great erudition and his sharp mind, Spengler definitely lacks both philosophical insight and an historical sense. As for the first reproach, Collingwood identified in Spengler’s book several paragraphs where he commits unpardonable errors when referring to Plato, to the stoics or to the moderns. Then Spengler commits logical errors by choosing to sacrifice truth for his method. His main error consists in trying to identify one single essence specific of each culture, which in the end will characterize that particular culture, by reducing in fact every culture to one single trait. Out of this unique characteristic everything that to be said of a culture could be deduced. No doubt, finding out fundamental or definitory traits for a particular culture cannot be a mistake in itself. Only the way how it is done by eliminating all other important characteristics in favour of only one is wrong. Spengler has an erroneous way of understanding the term “characteristic”. Any characteristic presupposes an opposite trait, which by its being recessive can make its presence felt from the background. But Spengler disregards this fact when he considers that it is possible for a culture to be characterized by just one single trait.

The same error reappears only in another shape when Spengler speaks of the way how cultures relate to one another. Although he admits the fact that there are elements from one culture within another culture, such as the fact that Greek mathematics can be found in a different form within Modern mathematics, Spengler still considers that any culture fundamentally differs from any other culture, because it is based on its own distinct essence. In his view, cultures are closed, restrained by their fundamental dominant characteristic. This perspective leads to a systemic and atomistic perspective on culture. Different cultures are similar to a plurality of distinct worlds which succeed one another in time. By adopting an atomistic perspective on cultures, Spengler neglects the main issue of history, that is following how different cultures interrelates to one another, and he leaves only the comparing of different cultures to history, depriving it of its main problem. This is the principal weakness of Spengler’s system and not a merit, as he would have thought. Collingwood makes sure to having revealed this to us. In Collingwood’s opinion, Spengler lacks the

sense of history, the historical sense². No one can get a historical sense by becoming an erudite. Although preoccupied with the distinction between nature and culture in his morphology of culture, Spengler isn't by any means different from the scientist whose object of study is morphologic anatomy, because his task is but the comparative anatomy of historical stages.

The goal of the historian should be that of discovering facts that took place as such. Instead, Spengler goes from the presupposition that what happened is already known; therefore all that is left for the historical morphologist is the activity of comparing the structure of some historical events to the structure of other historical events, of different historical ages. If the data recorded in historical documents about historical events are considered as they are found in those records, the only activity that is left for the historian is to make generalizations about those data, by organizing it and including it into classes and patterns. In this way, history degenerates into historiography.

If Spengler had had a historical sense, he would have understood that history means reconstructing past thinking, starting from the evidence offered to us by historical past. The atomist perspective on history that Spengler favours comports disastrous consequences for history as a science: the possibility of understanding cultures others than ours is denied and this is similar to denying the science of history. Moreover, history as science is possible on condition that we abolish the idea of atomic cultures, the fact that their plurality converges into a unity (present culture), also the fact that there are elements of anterior cultures within our own culture.

Unlike Spengler, Collingwood considered that historical future cannot be predicted. This pretense of Spengler's is concordant to his general perspective on history. In fact, we can talk about history only because there is present evidence of the past. By interpreting this evidence we can know what people were, did and thought before us. But since there is no such present evidence of future, historically speaking future cannot be predicted.

If we wanted to synthesize Collingwood's reproaches to Spengler's philosophy of history, we would name the following: 1. Spengler's philosophy of history hasn't got the correct orientation, as he reduces history to a plurality of different cultures, each with its own specific essence, and there is no relation between the essences of the different

² R. G. Collingwood, "The Philosophy of History", in *Essays in the Philosophy of History*, edited with an introduction by William Debbins, University of Texas Press, 1965, p. 67.

cultures; 2. Spengler's philosophy of history can be shaken to its foundations, as its objective of predicting the future is impossible to attain; 3. Spengler's philosophy of history is in no benefit of very valid arguments as it cannot prevent possible objections to it; 4. It denies facts by committing the methodological mistake of explaining every historical event through the fundamental idea or the essential characteristic that is considered representative for the culture that the event belongs to.

If we were to accept that there is an idea which defines the essence of a culture, we should admit, like Collingwood and unlike Spengler, that this essential trait is not static but dynamic. The task and activity of the historian is to recreate this idea in his own mind, by discovering how it evolved, the stages through which it developed and what it has become (*what developed, through what phases, into what*). The fact that history evolves in cycles doesn't contradict but presupposes the view that these cycles are relative to different perspectives, as it is the perspective that the historian imposes at a certain time on the events that he studies. In fact, "the cycle is the historian's field of vision at a given moment"³.

Actually, Collingwood's theory of history, of the historical knowledge of the past can be interpreted as a correction of Spengler's views by paying tribute to both Hegel and Vico. To Collingwood there cannot be such a thing as a universal history, which only passes through different phases or stages. Marx's historical materialism (the theory of the economic historical phases), Comte's theory of the theological, metaphysical and positive stages, Spencer's theory of a general evolution from the uniform and homogeneous to the diversified and heterogeneous, or Spengler's succession of cultures, are all equally generated by some wrong orientation of the historical thinking towards considering that there may be a universal history that we somehow need to explain in its changes. *The history of everything is the history of nothing* is the final anathema that this kind of thinking is destined to. History is a particular enterprise; it is the *history of something, something definite and particular*⁴.

Vico was in Collingwood's opinion the first to expose a valid methodology for the historian to use⁵. Collingwood strongly believes that

³ R. G. Collingwood, "Oswald Spengler and the Theory of Historical Cycles", in *Essays in the Philosophy of History*, edited with an introduction by William Debbins, University of Texas Press, 1965, p. 75.

⁴ R. G. Collingwood, "The Philosophy of History", ed. cit., p. 130.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 127-128.

we owe our fundamental conceptions for how to properly come to master the knowledge of the past to Vico's way of inquiring into the history of remote antiquity. Until Vico the principle of authority of written materials was important and it raised no shadow of doubt. But what Collingwood intends to show is that history cannot be known unless the power of authority had been abolished. The historian takes as his own instruments the documents of the past, the sources, the data, the evidence and he has to interpret this evidence, by trying to reach to the particular thinking and manners of the age that produced it. In history there is no ready-made knowledge that the historian gets access to, but his knowledge of the past is only his interpretation of the past, starting from present evidence of the past.

There can be nothing more absurd than Spengler's pretense of defining each culture in its succession by a definite characteristic that we should find out. The past no longer exists and it is not something that the historian must or can discover. The past as such is completely unknown. The past is only created by means of evidence and by an effort of inferential historical thinking and interpretation.

As long as everything has a past, history as the study of the past, is a general and universal character of everything, and this makes a philosophy (study of general and universal character of the world, of the world as a whole) of history possible⁶. As a whole, history is but a permanent succession, a continuous development of different phases; a succession of problems that each phase manages to solve in its own way. It is not a succession of different answers given to the same question, but as solutions change, questions vary, too from one phase to the other. The idea of history would be that a new set of problems and solutions presuppose having already solved the old problems of the anterior phase, as a solution to one problem gives birth to the next one and so on.

The study of history is a study of ways of life and ways of thinking, mentalities, manners, habits. History is the study of the human mind and the practices it entails. It is a fact that no one can dismiss that there are changes in men's beliefs, evaluations, criteria of evaluation, laws, justifications, criteria of proper legitimation and legitimation, wants and feelings, criteria of what is desirable and what is emotional etc. The human world is a continuously changing whole of practices and fundamentals for the respective practices and history is the study of the human world and the human actions that constitute it. The past actions give us answers to questions about men of

⁶ *Ibidem.*

past and their decisions and choices. History also helps us understand how men have become how they are today and the changes that their consciousnesses have undertaken so far

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