

The myth of certainty of decline: Gibbon and Spengler.

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Introduction: Is history cyclical?

The purpose of this paper is to recall the answers given in the past to two questions about the meaning of history.

1. Is history cyclical? and if so
2. Is there a human destiny to live in societies that ineluctably decline and disintegrate?

It was the fall of the of the Roman Empire in the West that brought into human societies the possibility of decadence and the story was elegantly told by Edward Gibbon.

The classic tale by Gibbon.

Borges wrote a prologue to Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: “If it is risky to consider any literary work as immortal this risk is enhanced if it is a history work written centuries after the events occurred. However, if we forget Coleridge’s bad humour and Sainte-Beuve incomprehension, there is a two hundred years critical consensus both in England and the continent to give the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the title of Classic, and we know that this qualification has the connotation of immortality”¹ Borges continues saying “Gibbon seems to abandon himself to the facts he describes and he reveals them with a divine unconsciousness that assimilates his words to blind destiny, to the appropriate path of history.”

¹ Borges’ Prologues for a Personal Library. Edward Gibbon: *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Jorge Luis Borges. Biblioteca Personal. (Prólogos) Alianza Editorial. Buenos Aires. 1988. P. 44.

This classical immortality of Gibbon's book is what makes its reading both pleasurable and terrifying, the idea that a great civilization existed and disintegrated and we can ponder looking at its ruins while feeling the symbols of the new civilization that replaced it. In Gibbon's case these were the hymns sang by friars in what was the temple of Jupiter. And with that image emerges the belief that it will or even should happen again.

It was at Rome, on the 15th of October, 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefooted friars were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind.

Since Gibbon the Decline of Rome was considered the inevitable outcome of all civilizations. ²

Plato's Timaeus.

Although cyclical theories of history existed before Gibbon, in Plato, Polibius, Gianbattista Vico, and also a terrifying description of the end times appears the Apocalypse, but he gave concrete vision of the decline of the Western society. An idea strongly described later in Karl Marx in historic materialism and Spengler's *The Decline of the West* and with less deterministic readings in Antonio Gramsci and Arnold Toynbee.

In the *Timaeus* Plato presents an elaborately wrought account of the formation of the universe. Plato is deeply impressed with the order

² Although Gibbon considers the Roman Empire to last till 1453, with the fall of Constantinople and not in the fall of the Empire in the west. Rome did not stay in power of invaders, Flavius Belisarius captured Naples and Rome in 536. In 537-538 he successfully defended Rome against the Goths and moved north to take Mediolanum –Milan – and the Ostrogoth capital of Ravenna in 540. Shortly before to the taking of Ravenna, the Ostrogoths offered to make Belisarius the western emperor. He declined and captured Ravenna for Justinian.

and beauty he observes in the universe, and his project in the dialogue is to explain that order and beauty. The universe, he proposes, is the product of rational, purposive, and beneficent agency. It is the handiwork of a divine Craftsman ("Demiurge," *dēmiourgos*, 28a6), who, imitating an unchanging and eternal model, imposes mathematical order on a preexistent chaos to generate the ordered universe (*kosmos*). The governing explanatory principle of the account is teleological: the universe as a whole as well as its various parts are so arranged as to produce a vast array of good effects. It strikes Plato strongly that this arrangement is not fortuitous, but the outcome of the deliberate intent of Intellect (*nous*), anthropomorphically represented by the figure of the Craftsman who plans and constructs a world that is as excellent as its nature permits it to be.³

*"...an image of eternity which is time, having an uniform motion according to number, parted into months and days and years, and also having greater divisions of past, present, and future. These all apply to becoming in time, and have no meaning in relation to the eternal nature, which ever is and never was or will be; for the unchangeable is never older or younger, and when we say that he 'was' or 'will be,' we are mistaken, for these words are applicable only to becoming, and not to true being; and equally wrong are we in saying that what has become IS become and that what becomes IS becoming, and that the non-existent IS non-existent...These are the forms of time which imitate eternity and move in a circle measured by number."*⁴

The myth of "eternal recurrence"

After Plato the Stoics interpreted time with the myth of eternal return where the world died and recreated incessantly. Under this view, the

³ Plato's *Timaeus* in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

⁴ Plato *TIMAEUS*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett.

world returned to its origin after a conflagration, where everything was on fire. Once burned, it was rebuilt so the same events materialized again.

In the "eternal return" as in a linear view of time, events follow rules of causation. There is a beginning and an end of time, which rebuilds itself to a commencement. However, unlike the cyclical view of time these cycles are not new combinations or other possibilities, but these events are repeated in the same order as they occurred, without any possibility of variation. The symbol of the Ouroboros, the snake or dragon devouring its own tail, is the alchemical symbol par excellence of eternal recurrence.

Sir Thomas Browne elegantly mentions it in his *The Garden of Cyrus: All things began in order, so shall they end, and so shall they begin again; according to the ordainer of order and mystical Mathematicks of the City of Heaven.*⁵

In Polybius and Giambattista Vico the idea of cycles is refined, returning forever to reach the perfect shape after many wrong steps.

The medieval vision of history was influenced by what in the eleventh century became the central theme of scholastic controversy: the problem of the universals. That is the question whether genera and species are absolute realities, hence established absolutes, or whether they are just names, in latin *nomina*, inferred and invented by the human mind. The essentialists that believed in universals, and the idea that a 'people', existed and could have a historic destiny. For the nominalists, 'people' or 'destiny' were simply words, definitions that could not be understood further than its given meaning. For nominalists only individual entities exist in reality. Their skepticism extended to all metaphysical speculation, and severed most sharply

⁵ The Garden of CYRUS. OR, The Quincunciall, Lozenge, or Network Plantations of the Ancients, Artificially, Naturally, Mystically Considered.

faith from logical thought. Therefore historic events were linear and no destiny could be found in them for a people or society. This brought the origins of modern science: the sole reality of individual, sensorily graspable entities, the method of abstraction, the rules of strict, material causality and experimented verification, explicitly formulated in the XII and XIII centuries created a reaction against the metaphysical visions of history.

Modern authors recreate the myth of the eternal recurrence. In his work *Die Wissenschaft fröhliche Nietzsche* argues that events are not only what repeats, but also the thoughts, feelings and ideas, again and again, in an infinite and relentless repetition.

From a different perspective the "eternal return" is, according to the theories of the religious historian Mircea Eliade, a belief, expressed (sometimes implicitly, but often explicitly) in religious behavior, in the ability to return to the mythical age, to become contemporary with the events described in one's myths.⁶

The discrepancy between supranatural determination of human life and human attempts at self-assertion becomes increasingly important to Greek tragic poetry, philosophy and history. Cyclic iteration appears inevitable; indeed it originates in the persistent guilt of human existence, which has to be continually redeemed by Nemesis. Which indicates the interest in Herodotus in the shift of fortune, the rise and fall of the mighty. But while tragedy shows the futility of human revolt against the will of the gods and the forces of destiny, the historians try to deduce rules of behavior from an apparently ineluctable course of happenings. The same Greek peculiarities are noticeable in Polybius (c. 200–c. 118 BC), who tries to create a philosophy of government through historic experience. He came to

⁶ *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971

Rome as a hostage and was deeply impressed by the vigor of Roman institutions.

Polybius The degeneration of constitutions.

An influential account of Rome as a mixed constitution, in this case combining the three classical regime forms of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, had already been given by the Greek historian Polybius, who referred to this as the distinction of powers. In Book VI of his Histories (6.4.6-11; cf. 6.3.5), the ancient Greek historian Polybius outlines three simple forms of constitution--each categorized according to the number of its ruling body: monarchy (rule by the one), aristocracy (rule by the few), and democracy (rule by the many). According to the historian, these three simple constitutions each degenerate, over time, into their respective corrupt forms (tyranny, oligarchy, and mob-rule) by a cycle of gradual decline which he calls anacyclosis or "political revolution". For monarchy, he claims, inevitably degrades into tyranny. Tyranny is then replaced by aristocracy, which in turn degrades into oligarchy. Oligarchy then is overthrown by democracy, which ultimately falls into its own corresponding distortion, mob-rule (or ochlocracy). In Polybius' analysis, the cycle then starts up again (monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy) since anarchy inevitably creates a void that some new demagogue will fill. The sliding from one form of constitution into another, is unavoidable because of the inherent weakness of each simple form of constitution. Polybius believes that Republican Rome has avoided this endless cycle by establishing a mixed constitution, a single state with elements of all three forms of government at once: monarchy (in the form of its elected executives, the consuls), aristocracy (as represented by the Senate), and democracy (in the form of the popular assemblies, such as the Comitia Centuriata). In a

mixed constitution, each of the three branches of government checks the strengths and balances the weaknesses of the other two. Since absolute rule rests in no single body but rather is shared among the three, the corrupting influence of unchecked power is abated and stasis is achieved.

Thomas Jefferson, a fervent supporter of mixed government, had numerous editions of Polybius' Histories in his personal library. James Madison also knew Polybius' work he quotes the historian in The Federalist Papers No. 63.

The Rotation of Politics

I will illustrate the truth of what I say. We cannot hold every absolute government to be a kingship, but only that which is accepted voluntarily, and is directed by an appeal to reason rather than to fear and force. Nor again is every oligarchy to be regarded as an aristocracy; the latter exists only where the power is wielded by the justest and wisest men selected on their merits. Similarly, it is not enough to constitute a democracy that the whole crowd of citizens should have the right to do whatever they wish or propose. But where reverence to the gods, succor of parents, respect to elders, obedience to laws, are traditional and habitual, in such communities, if the will of the majority prevail, we may speak of the form of government as a democracy. So then we enumerate six forms of government, —the three commonly spoken of which I have just mentioned, and three more allied forms, I mean despotism, oligarchy and mob-rule. The first of these arises without artificial aid and in the natural order of events. Next to this, and produced from it by the aid of art and adjustment, comes kingship; which degenerating into the evil form allied to it, by which I mean tyranny, both are once more destroyed and aristocracy produced. Again the latter being in the course of nature perverted to oligarchy, and the people passionately avenging the unjust acts of their rulers, democracy comes into existence; which again by its violence and

contempt of law becomes sheer mob-rule.¹ No clearer proof of the truth of what I say could be obtained than by a careful observation of the natural origin, genesis, and decadence of these several forms of government. For it is only by seeing distinctly how each of them is produced that a distinct view can also be obtained of its growth, zenith, and decadence, and the time, circumstance, and place in which each of these may be expected to recur. This method I have assumed to be especially applicable to the Roman constitution, because its origin and growth have from the first followed natural causes.

¹ Aristotle's classification is kingship, aristocracy, πολιτεία, democracy, oligarchy, tyranny (Pol. 4, 2). This was derived from Plato (Pol. 302, c.) who arranges the six (besides the ideal polity) in pairs, kingship, tyranny,—aristocracy, oligarchy,—democracy, good and bad. Plato has no distinct name, except δημοκρατία παράνομος, for the bad democracy which Polybius calls ὄχλοκρατία, "mob-rule." Polybius's arrangement is this— Kingship (arising from a natural despotism or monarchy) degenerates into Tyranny. Aristocracy degenerates into Oligarchy. Democracy degenerates into Mob-rule.⁷

Degeneration of Constitutions

But as soon as the people got leaders, they cooperated with them against the dynasty for the reasons I have mentioned; and then kingship and despotism were alike entirely abolished, and aristocracy once more began to revive and start afresh. For in their immediate gratitude to those who had deposed the despots, the people employed them as leaders, and entrusted their interests to them; who, looking upon this charge at first as a great privilege, made the public advantage their chief concern, and conducted all kinds of business, public or private, with diligence and caution. But when the sons of these men received the same position of authority from their fathers,—having had

⁷ Histories. Polybius. Evelyn S. Shuckburgh. translator. London, New York. Macmillan. 1889. Reprint Bloomington 1962.

no experience of misfortunes, and none at all of civil equality and freedom of speech, but having been bred up from the first under the shadow of their fathers' authority and lofty position,—some of them gave themselves up with passion to avarice and unscrupulous love of money, others to drinking and the boundless debaucheries which accompanies it, and others to the violation of women or the forcible appropriation of boys; and so they turned an aristocracy into an oligarchy.

Aristocracy degenerates into oligarchy

But it was not long before they roused in the minds of the people the same feelings as before; and their fall therefore was very like the disaster which befell the tyrants.

Histories. Polybius. Evelyn S. Shuckburgh. translator. London, New York. Macmillan. 1889. Reprint Bloomington 1962.

How Democracy Arises and Degenerates

For no sooner had the knowledge of the jealousy and hatred existing in the citizens against them emboldened someone to oppose the government by word or deed, than he was sure to find the whole people ready and prepared to take his side. Having then got rid of these rulers by assassination or exile, they do not venture to set up a king again, being still in terror of the injustice to which this led before; nor dare they intrust the common interests again to more than one, considering the recent example of their misconduct: and therefore, as the only sound hope left them is that which depends upon themselves, they are driven to take refuge in that; and so changed the constitution from an oligarchy to a democracy, and took upon themselves the superintendence and charge of the state. And as long as any survive who have had experience of oligarchical supremacy and domination, they regard their present constitution as a blessing, and hold equality and freedom as of the utmost value. But as soon as a new generation has arisen, and the

democracy has descended to their children's children, long association weakens their value for equality and freedom, and some seek to become more powerful than the ordinary citizens; and the most liable to this temptation are the rich.

Democracy degenerates into rule of corruption and violence, only to be stopped by a return to despotism.

So when they begin to be fond of office, and find themselves unable to obtain it by their own unassisted efforts and their own merits, they ruin their estates, while enticing and corrupting the common people in every possible way. By which means when, in their senseless mania for reputation, they have made the populace ready and greedy to receive bribes, the virtue of democracy is destroyed, and it is transformed into a government of violence and the strong hand. For the mob, habituated to feed at the expense of others, and to have its hopes of a livelihood in the property of its neighbours, as soon as it has got a leader sufficiently ambitious and daring, being excluded by poverty from the sweets of civil honours, produces a reign of mere violence. Then come tumultuous assemblies, massacres, banishments, redivisions of land; until, after losing all trace of civilisation, it has once more found a master and a despot.

This is the regular cycle of constitutional revolutions, and the natural order in which constitutions change, are transformed, and return again to their original stage. If a man have a clear grasp of these principles he may perhaps make a mistake as to the dates at which this or that will happen to a particular constitution; but he will rarely be entirely mistaken as to the stage of growth or decay at which it has arrived, or as to the point at which it will undergo some revolutionary change.

However, it is in the case of the Roman constitution that this method of inquiry will most fully teach us its formation, its growth, and zenith, as well as the changes awaiting it in the future; for this, if any constitution ever did, owed, as I said just now, its original foundation and growth to

*natural causes, and to natural causes will owe its decay. My subsequent narrative will be the best illustration of what I say.*⁸

Conclusion: Dangers Ahead for Rome

That to all things, then, which exist there is ordained decay and change I think requires no further arguments to show: for the inexorable course of nature is sufficient to convince us of it.

But in all polities we observe two sources of decay existing from natural causes, the one external, the other internal and self-produced. The external admits of no certain or fixed definition, but the internal follows a definite order. What kind of polity, then, comes naturally first, and what second, I have already stated in such a way, that those who are capable of taking in the whole drift of my argument can henceforth draw their own conclusions as to the future of the Roman polity. For it is quite clear, in my opinion. When a commonwealth, after warding off many great dangers, has arrived at a high pitch of prosperity and undisputed power, it is evident that, by the lengthened continuance of great wealth within it, the manner of life of its citizens will become more extravagant; and that the rivalry for office, and in other spheres of activity, will become fiercer than it ought to be. And as this state of things goes on more and more, the desire of office and the shame of losing reputation, as well as the ostentation and extravagance of living, will prove the beginning of a deterioration. And of this change the people will be credited with being the authors, when they become convinced that they are being cheated by some from avarice, and are puffed up with flattery by others from love of office. For when that comes about, in their passionate resentment and acting under the dictates of anger, they will refuse to obey any longer, or to be content with having equal powers with their leaders, but will demand to have all or far the greatest themselves. And when that comes to pass the

⁸ Histories. Polybius. Evelyn S. Shuckburgh. translator. London, New York. Macmillan. 1889. Reprint Bloomington 1962.

constitution will receive a new name, which sounds better than any other in the world, liberty or democracy; but, in fact, it will become that worst of all governments, mob-rule.

With this description of the formation, growth, zenith, and present state of the Roman polity, and having discussed also its difference, for better and worse, from other polities, I will now at length bring my essay on it to an end.⁹

Gianbattista Vico: Corsi e ricorsi.

In the Neapolitan philosopher Gianbattista Vico we find the first combination of a circular and a progressive concept of history, his book *Scienza Nuova* of 1725 starts a path that would lead to Toynbee in the XXth. Century. Since history itself, in Vico's view, is the manifestation of Providence in the world, the transition from one stage to the next and the steady ascendance of reason over imagination represent a gradual progress of civilization, a qualitative improvement from simpler to more complex forms of social organization.¹⁰ Vico characterizes this movement as a “necessity of nature” (“Idea of the Work,” §34, p.21) which means that, with the passage of time, human beings and societies tend increasingly towards realizing their full potential. From rude beginnings undirected passion is transformed into virtue, the bestial state of early society is subordinated to the rule of law, and philosophy replaces sentiments of religion. “Out of ferocity, avarice, and ambition, the three vices which run throughout the human race,” Vico says, “legislation creates the military, merchant,

⁹ *Histories*. Polybius. Evelyn S. Shuckburgh. translator. London, New York. Macmillan. 1889. Reprint Bloomington 1962.

¹⁰ *THE NEW SCIENCE OF GIAMBATTISTA VICO*. Translated from the third edition (1744) by THOMAS GODDARD BERGIN AND MAX HAROLD FISCH Cornell University Press ITHACA, NEW YORK, 1948.

and governing classes, and thus the strength, riches, and wisdom of commonwealths. Out of these three great vices, which could certainly destroy all mankind on the face of the earth, it makes civil happiness” (Element VII, §132, p.62). In addition, the transition from poetic to rational consciousness enables reflective individuals—the philosopher, that is, in the shape of Vico—to recover the body of universal history from the particularity of apparently random events. This is a fact attested to by the form and content of *The New Science* itself.

Although from a general point of view history reveals a progress of civilization through actualizing the potential of human nature, Vico also emphasizes the cyclical feature of historical development. Society progresses towards perfection, but without reaching it (thus history is “ideal”), interrupted as it is by a break or return (*ricorso*) to a relatively more primitive condition. Out of this reversal, history begins its course anew, albeit from the irreversibly higher point to which it has already attained. Vico observes that in the latter part of the age of men (manifest in the institutions and customs of medieval feudalism) the “barbarism” which marks the first stages of civil society returns as a “civil disease” to corrupt the body politic from within. This development is marked by the decline of popular commonwealths into bureaucratic monarchies, and, by the force of unrestrained passions, the return of corrupt manners which had characterized the earlier societies of gods and heroes. Out of this “second barbarism,” however, either through the appearance of wise legislators, the rise of the fittest, or a the last vestiges of civilization, society returns to the “primitive simplicity of the first world of peoples,” and individuals are again “religious, truthful, and faithful”.¹¹ From this begins a new *corso* which Vico saw manifest in his own time as the “second age of men” characterized by the “true” Christian religion and the monarchical government of seventeenth century Europe.

¹¹ (“Conclusion of the Work,” §1104–1106, pp.423–4)

1106 *But if the peoples are rotting in this last civil illness and cannot agree upon a monarch from within, and are not conquered and preserved by better nations from without, then providence for their extreme ill has its extreme remedy at hand. For such peoples, like so many beasts, have fallen into the custom of each man thinking only of his own private interests and have reached the extreme of delicacy, or better of pride, in which like wild animals they bristle and lash out at the slightest displeasure. Thus in the midst of their greatest festivities, though physically thronging together, they live like wild beasts in a deep solitude of spirit and will, scarcely any two being able to agree since each follows his own pleasure or caprice. By reason of all this, providence decrees that, through obstinate factions and desperate civil wars, they shall turn their cities into forests and the forests into dens and lairs of men. In this way, through long centuries of barbarism, rust will consume the misbegotten subtleties of malicious wits, that have turned them into beasts made more inhuman by the barbarism of reflection than the first men had been made by the barbarism of sense. For the latter displayed a generous savagery, against which one could defend oneself or take flight or be on one's guard; but the former, with a base savagery, under soft words and embraces, plots against the life and fortune of friends and intimates. Hence peoples who have reached this point of premeditated malice, when they receive this last remedy of providence and are thereby stunned and brutalized, are sensible no longer of comforts, delicacies, pleasures and pomp, but only of the sheer necessities of life. And the few survivors in the midst of an abundance of the things necessary for life naturally become well behaved and, returning to the primitive simplicity of the first world of peoples, are again religious, truthful and faithful. Thus providence brings back among them the piety, faith and truth which are the natural foundations of justice as well as the graces and beauties of the eternal order of God.* ¹²

¹² THE NEW SCIENCE OF GIAMBATTISTA VICO. Translated from the third edition (1744) by THOMAS GODDARD BERGIN AND MAX HAROLD FISCH Cornell

Gibbon. *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire; the greatest, perhaps, and most awful scene in the history of mankind.*

In Chapter XXXVIII Gibbon makes his general observation on the Fall of the Roman Empire of the West.

THE Greeks, after their country had been reduced into a province, imputed the triumphs of Rome, not to the merit, but to the FORTUNE, of the republic. The inconstant goddess who so blindly distributes and resumes her favours, had now consented (such was the language of envious flattery) to resign her wings, to descend from her globe, and to fix her firm and immutable throne on the banks of the Tiber. A wiser Greek, who has composed, with a philosophic spirit, the memorable history of his own times, deprived his countrymen of this vain and delusive comfort, by opening to their view the deep foundations of the greatness of Rome. (See the inestimable remains of the sixth book of Polybius, and many other parts of his general history, particularly a digression in the seventeenth book [1. xviii. c. 12-15], in which he compares the phalanx and the legion.) The fidelity of the citizens to each other and to the state was confirmed by the habits of education and the prejudices of religion. Honour, as well as virtue, was the principle of the republic; the ambitious citizens laboured to deserve the solemn glories of a triumph; and the ardour of the Roman youth was kindled into active emulation as often as they beheld the domestic images of their ancestors. (3) The temperate struggles of the patricians and plebeians had finally established the firm and equal balance of the constitution, which united the freedom of popular assemblies with the authority and wisdom of a senate and the executive powers of a regal magistrate. When the consul displayed the standard of the republic, each citizen

University Press ITHACA, NEW YORK, 1948.

bound himself, by the obligation of an oath, to draw his sword in the cause of his country till he had discharged the sacred duty by a military service of ten years. This wise institution continually poured into the field the rising generations of freemen and soldiers; and their numbers were reinforced by the warlike and populous states of Italy, who, after a brave resistance, had yielded to the valour and embraced the alliance of the Romans. The sage historian, who excited the virtue of the younger Scipio and beheld the ruin of Carthage, has accurately described their military system; their levies, arms, exercises, subordination, marches, encampments; and the invincible legion, superior in active strength to the Macedonian phalanx of Philip and Alexander. From these institutions of peace and war Polybius has deduced the spirit and success of a people incapable of fear and impatient of repose. The ambitious design of conquest, which might have been defeated by the seasonable conspiracy of mankind, was attempted and achieved; and the perpetual violation of justice was maintained by the political virtues of prudence and courage. The arms of the republic, sometimes vanquished in battle, always victorious in war, advanced with rapid steps to the Euphrates, the Danube, the Rhine, and the Ocean; and the images of gold, or silver, or brass, that might serve to represent the nations and their kings, were successively broken by the iron monarchy of Rome.

The rise of a city, which swelled into an empire, may deserve, as a singular prodigy, the reflection of a philosophic mind. But the decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest; and as soon as time or accident had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight. The story of its ruin is simple and obvious; and instead of inquiring why the Roman empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted so long. The victorious legions, who, in distant wars, acquired the vices of strangers and

mercenaries, first oppressed the freedom of the republic, and afterwards violated the majesty of the purple. The emperors, anxious for their personal safety and the public peace, were reduced to the base expedient of corrupting the discipline which rendered them alike formidable to their sovereign and to the enemy; the vigour of the military government was relaxed and finally dissolved by the partial institutions of Constantine; and the Roman world was overwhelmed by a deluge of barbarians.

The decay of Rome has been frequently ascribed to the translation of the seat of empire but this history has already shown that the powers of Government were divided rather than removed. The throne of Constantinople was erected in the East; while the West was still possessed by a series of emperors who held their residence in Italy, and claimed their equal inheritance of the legions and provinces. This dangerous novelty impaired the strength and fomented the vices of a double reign: the instruments of an oppressive and arbitrary system were multiplied; and a vain emulation of luxury, not of merit, was introduced and supported between the degenerate successors of Theodosius. Extreme distress, which unites the virtue of a free people, embitters the factions of a declining monarchy. The hostile favourites of Arcadius and Honorius betrayed the republic to its common enemies; and the Byzantine court beheld with indifference, perhaps with pleasure, the disgrace of Rome, the misfortunes of Italy, and the loss of the West. Under the succeeding reigns the alliance of the two empires was restored; but the aid of the Oriental Romans was tardy, doubtful, and ineffectual; and the national schism of the Greeks and Latins was enlarged by the perpetual difference of language and manners, of interests, and even of religion. Yet the salutary event approved in some measure the judgment of Constantine. During a long period of decay his impregnable city repelled the victorious armies of barbarians, protected the wealth of Asia, and commanded, both in peace and war, the important straits which connect the Euxine and Mediterranean seas.

The foundation of Constantinople more essentially contributed to the preservation of the East than to the ruin of the West.

As the happiness of a future life is the great object of religion, we may hear without surprise or scandal that the introduction, or at least the abuse of Christianity, had some influence on the decline and fall of the Roman empire. The clergy successfully preached the doctrines of patience and pusillanimity; the active virtues of society were discouraged; and the last remains of military spirit were buried in the cloister: a large portion of public and private wealth was consecrated to the specious demands of charity and devotion; and the soldiers' pay was lavished on the useless multitudes of both sexes who could only plead the merits of abstinence and chastity. Faith, zeal, curiosity, and more earthly passions of malice and ambition, kindled the flame of theological discord; the church, and even the state, were distracted by religious factions, whose conflicts were sometimes bloody and always implacable; the attention of the emperors was diverted from camps to synods; the Roman world was oppressed by a new species of tyranny; and the persecuted sects became the secret enemies of their country. Yet party-spirit, however pernicious or absurd, is a principle of union as well as of dissension. The bishops, from eighteen hundred pulpits, inculcated the duty of passive obedience to a lawful and orthodox sovereign; their frequent assemblies and perpetual correspondence maintained the communion of distant churches; and the benevolent temper of the Gospel was strengthened, though confirmed, by the spiritual alliance of the Catholics. The sacred indolence of the monks was devoutly embraced by a servile and effeminate age; but if superstition had not afforded a decent retreat, the same vices would have tempted the unworthy Romans to desert, from baser motives, the standard of the republic. Religious precepts are easily obeyed which indulge and sanctify the natural inclinations of their votaries; but the pure and genuine influence of Christianity may be traced in its beneficial, though imperfect, effects on the barbarian proselytes of the

North. If the decline of the Roman empire was hastened by the conversion of Constantine, his victorious religion broke the violence of the fall, and mollified the ferocious temper of the conquerors.

This awful revolution may be usefully applied to the instruction of the present age. It is the duty of a patriot to prefer and promote the exclusive interest and glory of his native country: but a philosopher may be permitted to enlarge his views, and to consider Europe as one great republic, whose various inhabitants have attained almost the same level of politeness and cultivation. The balance of power will continue to fluctuate, and the prosperity of our own or the neighbouring kingdoms may be alternately exalted or depressed; but these partial events cannot essentially injure our general state of happiness, the system of arts, and laws, and manners, which so advantageously distinguish, above the rest of mankind, the Europeans and their colonies. The savage nations of the globe are the common enemies of civilised society; and we may inquire, with anxious curiosity, whether Europe is still threatened with a repetition of those calamities which formerly oppressed the arms and institutions of Rome. Perhaps the same reflections will illustrate the fall of that mighty empire, and explain the probable causes of our actual security.

But Gibbon saw hope for the future:

Since the first discovery of the arts, war, commerce, and religious zeal have diffused among the savages of the Old and New World these inestimable gifts: they have been successively propagated; they can never be lost. We may therefore acquiesce in the pleasing conclusion that every age of the world has increased and still increases the real wealth, the happiness, the knowledge, and perhaps the virtue, of the human race.

The myth of the Third Rome.

Although the Roman civilization lasted from the mythical foundation by Romulus and Remus to 1453 with the fall of Constantinople, more than 25 centuries, the idea of sequel continued. Both in the East and in the West.

The idea of Moscow being the Third Rome was popular since the early Russian Tsars. Within decades after the Fall of Constantinople to Mehmed II of the Ottoman Empire on May 29, 1453, religious leaders were nominating Moscow as the "Third Rome," or new "New Rome." Stirrings of this sentiment began during the reign of Ivan III, Grand Duke of Moscow, who had married Sophia Paleologue. Sophia was a niece of Constantine XI, the last Eastern Roman Emperor, and Ivan could claim to be the heir of the fallen Eastern Roman Empire.

Since Roman princesses had married Tsars of Moscow, and, since Russia had become, with the fall of Byzantium, the most powerful Orthodox Christian state, the tsars were thought of as succeeding the Byzantine Emperor as the rightful ruler of the (Christian) world. The word "Tsar", like "Kaiser", is derived from the word "Caesar".

The Germanic-led Carolingian Empire has been claimed to have deliberately sought to revive the Roman Empire in the West. The Carolingian Empire transformed into the Holy Roman Empire, which was a predominantly German state that claimed to be a continuation of the Western Roman Empire. In Christmas 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne as Emperor. The Carolingian and the Holy Roman Empire lasted till 1806 when it was finally dismantled by Napoleon.

Marx the prophet.

In the twentieth century the debate on historicism had an important twist, and all philosophers of history and its critics, including Spengler, Toynbee or Popper, tried to find an answer to historical materialism.

In “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte)” written by Marx from December 1851 to March 1852 we find:

“Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. People make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language.

The change in the material conditions impose new forms of production that create the superstructure of a new society and establish the decay of the previous in an ineluctable revolution.

“At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production, or – what is but a legal expression for the same thing – with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters.

"No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. Therefore mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the tasks itself arises only when the material conditions of its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation."¹³

Oswald Spengler: Pessimism and decadence.

In the twentieth century the cyclical view of history had a renewal. This view that history is not a progress of mankind to ever higher levels of enlightenment; but rather the story of distinct civilizations, each with its own culture, that have emerged, developed, flowered, and then inevitably declined.

The two great exponents from the twentieth century of this view of history were Oswald Spengler, and Arnold J. Toynbee. It's important to note that these two men, in terms of their political views or their philosophical views, were totally opposite--they didn't see eye to eye on anything. But in terms of their view of how history unfolds, what drives history, they had views that were remarkably similar.

Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (*Der Untergang des Abendlandes*), was published in two parts in 1918 and in 1922. It had a very fortunate title and had an enormous following. In the prologue of the Spanish edition Ortega y Gasset compares Spengler's "philosophy of history" to the "Einstein physics"

¹³ Karl Marx. *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Preface. For Historical materialism and the inevitability of socialist revolution see See Karl Marx, *Das Capital* (1867); Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848); see also Marx's *View of Technology*, in Nathan Rosenberg, *Inside the Black Box: Technology and Economics* (1982).

John Dewey described him as a “learned German Mencken but with an obsession that he was born to write high tragedy instead of to be amused at the spectacle of human folly and stupidity.”¹⁴

Thomas Mann compared reading Spengler's book to reading Schopenhauer for the first time. Max Weber described Spengler as a "very ingenious and learned dilettante". Karl Popper with extraordinary vision described the thesis as "pointless". Ludwig Wittgenstein, however, shared Spengler's cultural pessimism.

His book was a success among intellectuals worldwide as it predicted the disintegration of European and American civilization after a violent "age of Caesarism", arguing by detailed analogies with other civilizations. Ernst Cassirer explained that at the end of the First World War, Spengler's very title was enough to inflame imaginations: *"At this time many, if not most of us, had realized that something was rotten in the state of our highly prized Western civilization. Spengler's book expressed in a sharp and trenchant way this general uneasiness."*

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In the prologue to the revised edition describes the book as an outlook on *history and the philosophy of destiny that which has at last taken shape in my hands I am able to regard and, proud to call a German philosophy.*

In the Preface TO THE FIRST EDITION his vision is more bellicose.

It became clear that these ideas must necessarily be brought forward at just this moment and in Germany, and, more, that the war itself was an

¹⁴ Instrument or Frankenstein. The Saturday review of Literature. New York March 12, 1932.

¹⁵ Ernst Cassirer, The Myth of the State (1946) p. 289

element in the premises from which the new picture of the world could be made precise.

In the American edition a paragraph is missing in the original preface of the first edition, but appears in the Spanish edition:

“I only have to express the wish that this book is not completely unworthy of the military efforts of Germany.” Munich December 1917.

The "Decline of the West" comprises nothing less than the problem of Civilization. We have before us one of the fundamental questions of all higher history. What is Civilization, understood as the organic-logical sequel, fulfillment and finale of a culture?

For every Culture has its own Civilization.

Money.

It was in the conception of money as an inorganic and abstract magnitude, entirely disconnected from the notion of the fruitful earth and the primitive values, that the Romans had the advantage of the Greeks. Thenceforward any high ideal of life becomes largely a question of money. Unlike the Greek stoicism of Chrysippus, the Roman stoicism of Cato and Seneca presupposes a private income; and, unlike that of the 18th Century, the social-ethical sentiment of the 20th, if it is to be realized at a higher level than that of professional (and lucrative) agitation, is a matter for millionaires. To the world-city belongs not a folk but a mass. Its uncomprehending hostility to all the traditions representative of the Culture (nobility, church, privileges, dynasties, convention in art and limits of knowledge in science),

Hence it was that the first to succumb to Christianity were the Romans who could not afford to be Stoics. P. 33.

What is the hallmark of a politic of Civilization to day, in contrast to a

politic of Culture yesterday? It is, for the Classical rhetoric, and for the Western journalism, both serving that abstract which represents the power of Civilization - money. It is the money-spirit which penetrates unremarked the historical forms of the people's existence, often without destroying or even in the least disturbing these forms.

Culture.

Spengler describes the cycle of each culture:

Here the Cultures, peoples, languages, truths, gods, landscapes bloom and age as the oaks and the stone-pines, the blossoms, twigs and leaves - but there is no ageing "Mankind." Each Culture has its own new possibilities of self-expression which arise, ripen, decay, and never return. There is not one sculpture, one painting, one mathematics, one physics, but many, each in its deepest essence different from the others, each limited in duration and self-contained, just as each species of plant has its peculiar blossom or fruit, its special type of growth and decline. These cultures, sublimated life-essences, grow with the same superb aimlessness as the flowers of the field. They belong, like the plants and the animals, to the living Nature of Goethe, and not to the dead Nature of Newton. P. 21

He does not value Roman power highly, on the contrary only in the weakness of its adversaries.

Considered in itself, the Roman world-dominion was a negative phenomenon, being the result not of a surplus of energy on the one side - that the Romans had never had since Zama - but of a deficiency of resistance on the other.

We must not be deluded by the appearance of brilliant military successes. With a few ill-trained, ill-led, and sullen legions, Lucullus and Pompey conquered whole realms. That the Romans did not conquer the world is certain; they merely took possession of a booty that lay

open to everyone. P. 36

Cecil Rhodes as the example.

I see in Cecil Rhodes the first man of a new age. his phrase "expansion is everything"... a statesman who was all-powerful yet stood in no definite relation to the State, his wars, his diplomatic deals, his road-systems, his syndicates, his armies, his conception of the "great duty to civilization" of the man of brain - all this, broad and imposing, is the prelude of a future which is still in store for us and with which the history of West-European mankind will be definitely closed.

He who does not understand that this outcome is obligatory and insusceptible of modification, that our choice is between willing this and willing nothing at all, between cleaving to this destiny or despairing of the future and of life itself; he who cannot feel that there is grandeur also in the realizations of powerful intelligences, in the energy and discipline of metal-hard natures, in battles fought with the coldest and most abstract means; he who is obsessed with the idealism of a provincial and would pursue the ways of life of past ages - must forgo all desire to comprehend history, to live through history or to make history. P. 38

The Imperium Romanum appears no longer as an isolated phenomenon, but as the normal product of a strict and energetic, megalopolitan, predominantly practical spirituality, as typical of a final and irreversible condition which has occurred often enough though it has only been identified as such in this instance....

The transitional Phase.

*That, as our own time represents a **transitional phase** which occurs with certainty under particular conditions, there are perfectly well-defined states (such as have occurred more than once in the history of*

the past) later than the present-day state of West Europe, and therefore that the future of the West is not a limitless tending upwards and onwards for all time towards our present ideals, but a single phenomenon of history, strictly limited and defined as to form and duration, which covers a few centuries and can be viewed and, in essentials, calculated from available precedents. P. 39

Makrokosmos

This is the idea of the Macrocosm actuality the sum total of all symbols in relation to one soul. From this property of being significant nothing is exempt. All that is, symbolizes. From the corporeal phenomena like visage, shape, mien (of individuals and classes and peoples alike), which have always been known to possess meaning, to the supposedly eternal and universally-valid forms of knowledge, mathematics and physics, everything speaks out of the essence of one and only one soul.

At the same time these individuals' worlds as lived and experienced by men of one Culture or spiritual community are interrelated, and on the greater or less degree of this interrelation depends the greater or less communicability of intuitions, sensations and thoughts from one to another - that is, the possibility of making intelligible what one has created in the style of one's own being, through expression-media such as language or art or religion, by means of word-sounds or formulae or signs that are themselves also symbols. The degree of interrelation between one's world and another's fixes the limit at which understanding becomes self-deception. Certainly it is only very imperfectly that we can understand the Indian or the Egyptian soul, as manifested in the men, customs, deities, root-words, ideas, buildings and acts of it. The Greeks, ahistoric as they were, could not even guess at the essence of alien spiritualities - witness the naivete with which they were wont to rediscover their own gods and Culture in those of

alien peoples. But in our own case too, the current translations of the of alien philosophers presuppose our proper world-feeling, which is that from which our ..equivalents" claim their significance, as the basis of an alien soul-expression. And similarly we elucidate the characters of early Egyptian and Chinese portraits with reference to our own life-experience. In both cases we deceive ourselves. That the artistic masterpieces of all Cultures are still living for us- ..immortal" as we say - is another such fancy, kept alive by the unanimity with which we understand the alien work in the proper sense. Of this tendency of ours the effect of the Laocoon group on Renaissance sculpture and that of Seneca on the Classicist drama of the French are examples. p. 165

Apollinian, Faustian and Magian Soul

Henceforth we shall designate the soul of the Classical Culture, which chose the sensuously-present individual body as the ideal type of the extended, by the name (familiarized by Nietzsche) of the Apollinian. In opposition to it we have the Faustian soul, whose prime-symbol is pure and limitless space, and whose "body" is the Western Culture that blossomed forth with the birth of the Romanesque style in the 10th .century in the Northern plain between the Elbe and the Tagus. The nude statue is Apollinian, the art of the fugue Faustian. Apollinian are: mechanical statics, the sensuous cult of the Olympian gods, the politically individual city-states of Greece, the doom of Edipus and the phallus-symbol. Faustian are: Galilean dynamics, Catholic and Protestant dogmatics, the great dynasties of the Baroque with their cabinet diplomacy, the destiny of Lear and the Madonna-ideal from Dante's Beatrice to the last line of Faust II. The painting that defines the individual body by contours is Apollinian, that which forms space by means of light and shade is Faustian - this is the difference between the fresco of Polygnotus and the oil painting of Rembrandt. The

Apollinian existence is that of the Greek who describes his ego as soma and who lacks all idea of an inner development and therefore all real history, inward and outward; the Faustian is an existence which is led with a deep consciousness and introspection of the ego, and a resolutely personal culture evidenced in memoirs, reflections, retrospects and prospects and conscience. And in the time of Augustus, in the countries between Nile _ and Tigris, Black Sea and South Arabia, there appears - aloof but able to speak to us through forms borrowed, adopted and inherited - the Magian soul of the Arabian Culture with its algebra, astrology and alchemy, its mosaics and arabesques, its caliphates and mosques, and the sacraments and scriptures of the Persian, Jewish, Christian, post-Classical" and Manichean religions. p. 181

Optimism is cowardice and the gray dawn of civilization.

In 1931, he published *Man and Technics*, which warned against the dangers of technology and industrialism to culture. This book contains the well-known Spengler quote "**Optimism is cowardice**".

His turgid description of decadence could be taken from a gothic novel: *At last, in the grey dawn of Civilization, the fire in the soul dies down. The dwindling powers rise to one more, half-successful, effort of creation, and produce the Classicism that is common to all dying Cultures. The soul thinks once again, and in Romanticism looks back piteously to its childhood; then finally, weary, reluctant, cold, it loses its desire to be, and, as in Imperial Rome, wishes itself out of the overlong daylight and back in the darkness of proto-mysticism, in the womb of the mother, in the grave.*

Antonio Gramsci

This Italian Marxist philosopher in his many *Quaderni dal carcere* written in his years in a fascist prison, is his book *Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di Benedetto Croce* criticizing the ineluctability of socialism in historic materialism.¹⁶

Gramsci believed that the paramount principle of the relations of production was a misinterpretation of Marxism. Both economic changes and cultural changes are expressions of a "basic historical process", and it is difficult to say which was the most important. The fatalistic belief, common among the labor movement in its early years of the inevitable triumph due to "historical laws", was the product of circumstances of an oppressed class restricted mainly to defensive action, and would be abandoned as a hindrance once the working class could take the lead. The 'philosophy of praxis' cannot rely on 'historical laws' invisible as agents of social change. History is defined by human praxis and therefore includes free will. However, the power of the will cannot achieve anything by itself in a given situation: when the consciousness of the working class reaches the level of development needed for the revolution, this historical circumstance could not be altered arbitrarily.

Even so the many possible developments that could take place cannot be predetermined by historical inevitability.

Toynbee the cycles of civilizations.

The widest answer to the intellectual challenges of historic materialism was the vast work by Arnold Toynbee "A Study of History" the 12-volume 7000 pages philosophy of history, which started publication in 1934 and finished in 1961. Although translated to

¹⁶ *Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di Benedetto Croce*, Einaudi, Torino 1948

several languages and widely quoted in his time, is now largely forgotten. He was also a pessimist on the western civilization. Toynbee thought that Western civilization might develop a 'Universal State' after its 'Time of Troubles', decay, and die.

Arnold Toynbee found himself in 1950 that people in Europe and America *were asking themselves questions that had been formulated for Western inquirers on the morrow of the First World War by Oswald Spengler, a pontifical-minded man of genius thinking and writing in the psychological milieu of a country which had then just suffered what, by the still moderate standards of the day, had been a shattering military defeat. Some thirty years after the publication of the first edition of Der Untergang des Abendlandes in A.D. 1919, a chorus of Western voices was echoing Spengler's prescient questionnaire. Are the great tribulations that we have suffered in, and the greater tribulations that we forebode, the products of 'laws', beyond our control, that turn out to be no 'laws of progress'? If such unpleasant laws are, in truth, in operation, do these govern the whole of Human Life, or are there some provinces or planes of Life in which Man is his own master—free, within those limits, to find remedies, through his own action, for evils that are of his own making? If human affairs should prove to be thus under dual control, then what affairs are under our own control and what are governed by 'Law'?*

The true law of Human Social Life, he laid down, was not a law of inevitable progress; it was a law of inevitable breakdown, disintegration, and dissolution—and this within a Time-span which was perhaps even more inflexibly uniform than the life-spans of living organisms. Happily, the adoption of Spengler's fateful questions did not commit his oracular response to his own shrewd inquiry; and, since in other contexts we have already exposed the fallacy of Spengler's confusion of societies with organisms and the groundlessness of his belief in the omnipotence of the savage goddess Necessity, we can

*regard the questions asked and answered by Spengler as being, pace Spengler, still open.*¹⁷

Toynbee found a cyclic rhythm in modern history. Alternating phases of war and peace were the political counterparts of alternating phases of economic prosperity and depression; and a confrontation of the political with the economic series of fluctuations in Modern Western history threw fresh light on those cycles with wave-lengths of about twenty-five years, and double cycles with wave-lengths of about half a century, for which the economic evidence was so inadequate that the more cautious economic investigators had returned verdicts of 'non-proven' on these longer cycles' claims to be economic realities. The political evidence bore out the view, entertained by judicious economic inquirers, that the apparitions of economic 'long waves' might not be hallucinations but might be economic reflections of political realities that had already been 'a going concern' in the Modern Western World for some three hundred years before the outbreak of the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain. In any case, whatever the political cycles' relations to the economic cycles might eventually prove to be, there were indications that the political cycles, like their economic counterparts, were changing in character in accordance with a secular trend.

These historic cycles by Toynbee were assimilated to the Kondrantieff economic cycles. In the first bout of Modern Western wars (1494-1559), the first of the regular cycles of war-and-peace in this series (1568-1672) During the second of these three regular cycles (1672-1792) During the third cycle (1792-1914). Thus, on the eve of the outbreak of World War I 1914-18 which was to open the fourth regular cycle in the series

¹⁷ Toynbee *Vol IX Law...*{p.235}

The structural novelty of the fourth cycle was the portentous one of capping one general war with another one of still greater severity, atrocity, and inconclusiveness, instead of following it up with a burst of milder, but nevertheless more conclusive, supplementary wars that, on the precedent of the uniform sequence of events in each of the preceding cycles, were to be expected as the sequel to a breathing-space. There was no such radical difference of structure between the three regular cycles and the overture. In the overture, as in the regular cycles, a breathing space after a general war had duly been followed by supplementary wars, which had duly been followed, in their turn, by a general peace. The difference in this case was merely a chronological one. The overture's duration of seventy-four years (1494-1568) had been not much longer than the maximum wave-length of a single 'Kondratieff cycle' on the economic plane of latter-day Western history, and not quite so long as the sum of a couple of minimum wave-lengths of the same economic 'long cycle', whereas the duration of the second and third regular cycles (1672-1792 and 1792-1914), running, as it had done, to 120 years in the one case and 122 years in the other, had been equal to the sum of a couple of maximum 'Kondratieff wave-lengths, while the first regular cycle (1568-1672), with its duration of 104 years, had been equal to the sum of a couple of 'Kondratieff cycles' of average length.

The sense of western decadence: the end of the American century.

The historic materialism and the idea that there was an inevitable future trend towards socialism and therefore the decadence of capitalism decisively influenced public opinion. Walter Lippmann (1889 -1974), was a scholarly writer as well as a leading journalist. As

many in his time he was worried by the challenges facing the modern Western democracies, from authoritarian regimes, specifically from the communist experiment. Lippmann gave particular attention to the role of public opinion in the making of foreign policy before, during and after the Second World War. In *The Public Philosophy* (1955) he diagnosed "a sickness of the Western liberal democracies." A deep social and political disorder with roots in moral confusion and decadence prevented the democracies from perceiving the seriousness of the external and internal threats to their continued existence and made them unable to act effectively against these threats. Western society was abandoning its "public philosophy," a term that is largely synonymous with what has here been called the classical and Judaeo-Christian traditions. Nowhere was the precariousness of democracy more evident than in the growing fickleness and superficiality of public opinion and in the increasing subjection of governments to that opinion. Politicians of genuine knowledge and foresight who warned of dangers were unwelcome and likely to be drowned out by the escapist rhetoric of self-serving demagogues. As was the case of Winston Churchill's repeated warnings regarding the nature and intentions of Hitler were long overpowered by soothing themes of accommodation or pacifism.

Curiously enough apparently many of the molders of public opinion, the 'conventional wisdom' of those decades, thought that capitalism could be a successful economic system, and would easily survive those challenges without the need to resort to political repression, violence or wars.

The poverty of historicism.

Karl Popper summarized the epistemological errors of historicism as a scientific method.¹⁸

Popper mentions Marx phrase: “When a society discovered the natural law that determines its own movement, even then it can neither overleap the natural phases of its evolution, nor shuffle them out of the world by a stroke of the pen. But this much it can do: it can shorten and lessen the birth-pangs.” This formulation, due to Marx, excellently represents the historicist position. Although it teaches neither inactivity nor real fatalism, historicism teaches the futility of any attempt to alter impending changes; a peculiar variety of fatalism, a fatalism in regard to the trends of history, as it were. Admittedly, the 'activist' exhortation “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways: the point, however is to *change it*”, may find much sympathy with historicists (seeing the 'world' means here the developing human society) because of its emphasis on change. But it is in conflict with the most significant doctrines of historicism. For as we now see, we may say: “The historicist can only *interpret* social development and aid it in various ways; his point, however, is that *nobody can change it*”¹⁹

Selective approaches fulfill functions in the study of history which are in some ways analogous to those of theories of science. It is therefore understandable that they have often been taken for theories. And indeed, those rare ideas inherent in these approaches which can be formulated in the form of testable hypotheses, whether singular or universal, may well be treated as scientific hypotheses. But as a rule, these historical 'approaches' or 'points of view' cannot be tested. They cannot be refuted, and apparent confirmation are therefore of no

¹⁸ Karl Raimund Popper. *The Poverty of Historicism* Routledge, 2002 (1957) it was dedicated to "In memory of the countless men and women of all creeds or nations or races who fell victims to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny"

¹⁹ Chapter 17: Interpreting vs Planning Social Change: Page 50

value, even if they are as numerous as the stars in the sky. We shall call such a selective point of view or focus of historical interest, if it cannot be formulated as a testable hypothesis, a historical interpretation.

Historicism mistakes these interpretations for theories. This is one of its cardinal errors. It is possible for example, to interpret 'history' as the history of class struggle, or of the struggle of races for supremacy, or as the history of religious ideas, or as the history of the struggle between the 'open' and the 'closed' society, or as the history of scientific and industrial progress. All these are more or less interesting points of view, and as such perfectly unobjectionable. But historicists do not present them as such; they do not see that there is necessarily a plurality of interpretations which are fundamentally on the same level of both, suggestiveness and arbitrariness (even though some of them may be distinguished by their fertility - a point of some importance). Instead, they present them as doctrines or theories, asserting that 'all history is the history of class struggle', etc. And if they actually find that their point of view is fertile, and that many facts can be ordered and interpreted in its light, then they mistake this for a confirmation, or even for a proof, of their doctrine."²⁰

"Historicism is a very old movement. Its oldest forms, such as the doctrines of the life cycles of cities and races, actually precede the primitive teleological view that there are hidden purposes behind the apparently blind decrees of fate. Although this divination of hidden purposes is far removed from the scientific way of thinking it has left unmistakable traces upon even the most modern historicist theories. Every version of historicism expresses the feeling of being swept into the future by irresistible forces.

Modern historicists, however, seem to be unaware of the antiquity of their doctrine. They believe - and what else could their deification of

²⁰ Popper p. 150

modernism permit? - that their own brand of historicism is the latest and boldest achievement of the human mind, an achievement so staggeringly novel that only a few people are sufficiently advanced to grasp it. They believe, indeed, that it is they who have discovered the problem of change - one of the oldest problems of speculative metaphysics. Contrasting their 'dynamic' thinking with the 'static' thinking of all previous generations, they believe that their own advance has been made possible by the fact that we are not 'living in a revolution' which has so much accelerated the speed of our development that social change can be now directly experienced within a single lifetime. This story is, of course, sheer mythology. Important revolutions have occurred before our time, and since the days of Heraclitus change has been discovered over and over again.²¹

“Not in our stars, But in ourselves”²²

In an often quoted phrase Gibbon defined *History is indeed little more than the register of crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind*. We may find a solution of our query. History is a discourse where the writer chooses events and interprets them; it cannot serve as an oracle of the future.

Oswald Spengler developed a cultural life cycle model around the notion that society is held together by a set of implicit assumptions that later generations challenge and either replace or destroy causing cultural renewal or decline. Arnold Toynbee developed the concept of challenge and response as an organizing principle for understanding human history. Karl Marx understood dialectic materialism to involve innovation leading to tension, contradiction, and revolution. Nikolai

²¹ Popper p. 159

²² "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings." Julius Caesar (I, ii, 140-141)

Kondratieff associated innovation with 50-year long cycles bringing prosperity, then recession, depression, and recovery.²³

Oswald Spengler perceived a cultural world order comprising of separate, self-contained civilizations pursuing independent histories rather than a universal history of human progress. Arnold Toynbee conceptualized a cultural world order comprising separate civilizations experiencing cycles of expansion and retraction, but one in which there was some scope for spiritual progress. The West, while not a universal civilization, was perceived as potentially providing a framework for a global, multicultural society. Perhaps the most prominent and contentious example of the recent revival of interest in culture's role in world order is Samuel Huntington's work on the "clash of civilizations." In this thesis, Huntington suggests that civilizational identity is becoming the organizing principle in the post Cold War world order. Although Huntington's argument is a controversial one which has been widely contested, it has provided something of a centrifugal point around which the arguments relating to culture and civilizations spun in the 1990s. The imagery and language employed in his discussion of "cultural clashes," fault lines and tectonic plates have powerfully entered into the vocabulary of contemporary academic and political commentary.

Without cycles or fixed destiny.

Harold Wilson recommended politicians "The main essentials of a successful prime minister are sleep and a sense of history." But, is there a sense of history? Or each generation invents a vision of the past as an accumulation of the descriptions of historians. History gives to a connection of events an actual specific coherence which turns it into a story. But such specific coherence is not given in itself; it is given by a perceiving and comprehending mind. It creates a concept a meaning. This transformation of events into concepts

²³ William R. Thompson, Long Waves, Technological Innovation, and Relative Decline, 44 Int'l Org. 201, 216-17 (1990)

distorts them; new incidents and occurrences are described by known categories which are not ready for the understanding of these new circumstances. It artificially gives coherence, order, unity to diverse happenings and phenomena, as grasped by a comprehending mind. When we say something has a meaning we want to indicate that it forms part of something larger, or superior to itself that it is a link within a comprehensive whole, a coherent order in which parts relate to each other. The idea of history would mean the existence of order in the world. This is a metaphysical delusion. There is no coherent whole in which human in which humans subordinate their single moves to one dominating idea or purpose. This view of history begins in the sphere of the supra individual, that is the universals: groups, institutions, and peoples, the idea of humanity, but also the destiny of a nation, or a race or a social class. Binds together a number of casually, loosely connected happenings into a story. This manipulation of events gives rise to cyclical theories, of historic destiny and of ineluctable decay and disintegration of civilizations.

Jacques-Benigne Bossuet published in 1681 his *Discours sur l'Histoire Universelle*, describing history as God's law. Fortune, or rather Chance, would be the mistress of human affairs; the existence of humanity would be only a bad dream, or phantasmagoria, whose changing face would be inadequate to mask a void of nothingness. We should be fretting ourselves in that void without reason and almost without cause, our very actions would be but phantoms, and the only result of so many efforts accumulated through so many thousands of years would be the conviction, every day more clear, of their uselessness, which would be another void of nothingness.

Medieval historians 'fell', according to Collingwood '*into the error of thinking that they could forecast the future*', and, '*in their anxiety to detect the general plan of History, and their belief that this plan was God's and not Man's, they tended to look for the essence of History*

*outside History itself, by looking away from Man's actions in order to detect the plan of God.*²⁴ Modern interpreters of the sense of history fall into the same mistake of their medieval ancestors, looking to detect a plan, this time not by an omnipotent and omniscient being but by a law of human nature.

All predictions of decadence have failed. Many of the views previously described of the decadence of modern society, reflected in popular non-fiction and fiction and even films resulted in failure. If humanity has a destiny it is not to us to know by making of generalizations from the past.

G. K. Chesterton criticizing both pessimist philosophers of history (such as Spengler) and their optimistic critics, wrote in 1920: *"The pessimists believe that the cosmos is a clock that is running down; the progressives believe it is a clock that they themselves are winding up. But I happen to believe that the world is what we choose to make it, and that we are what we choose to make ourselves; and that our renascence or our ruin will alike, ultimately and equally, testify with a trumpet to our liberty."*²⁵

²⁴ Collingwood, R. G.: *The Idea of History* (Oxford 1946, Clarendon Press), pp. 49 and 54.

²⁵ July 10, 1920 issue of *The Illustrated London News*,