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# THE FUTURE OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION IN THE CONTEXT OF OSWALD SPENGLER'S WORK

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## **Abstract**

This article thematically monitors two main areas. The first part is devoted to the analysis of the most famous work of Oswald Spengler – ‘The Decline of the West’. Attention is paid to the examination of the substance of culture and its life stages. The main emphasis is put on exploring its final stage when the culture dies and changes into civilization. These signs of culture decline are then applied in the second part, which deals with the examination of selected phenomena in the Western civilization.

*Keywords:* culture, West, migration, imperialism, decline

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## **1. Introduction**

Questions regarding future can be considered as a very important aspect that applies not only to individuals or nations but also entire civilizations. According to José Ortega y Gasset, future is the main and the primary body of human life. Life is an operation which is done in a forward direction. Future gives tension to our entity, forces us to discipline, makes us moralize. Without future, a human or a nation demoralizes, fails [1]. From my point of view, the same applies to the life of civilization. What is the future of the Western civilization? Does the Western civilization still have a future? Does it have its own vision that indicates its direction? Many theorists have been engaged in this question and many of them have seen the Western civilization as something that has already reached its peak and is in a period of a gradual decline.

## **2. The essence of culture and its development**

It has been nearly 100 years since the work of the German philosopher Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, was published. This publication recorded a great response and aroused several debates regarding the direction of the Western civilization. The work was published at the time when, due to influence of the First World War, a definite order in the world was collapsing and the new ‘patterns’ that could explain what is happening in these changing

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conditions, were being searched for. There is a number of weaknesses in the theory of Spengler and therefore, it cannot be considered to be exhaustive and 'true'. Nevertheless, even today we can find several moments that are really inspiring when examining current events in the Western civilization. Thus, a great part is devoted mainly to this thinker, with reference to current events in the Western civilization (especially in Western Europe and partially also in the USA).

O. Spengler presents his own conception of 'culture rotation' in *The Decline of the West*. He criticizes an approach to human history as a coherent entity and pays attention to several independent, unrepeatable and cyclic cultures. They have their terms of genesis, boom, decline and subsequent fall. These stages of culture existence could be likened to the stages of human life, namely childhood, youth, manhood and finally old age. The world history is therefore not a continuous process, but rather a series of independent cultures.

Every culture is a closed 'world', an 'atom' that does not receive the action of other 'atom' and does not even have a possibility to effect on another 'atom'. According to Spengler, various cultural 'exchanges' are just apparent and thus, it is impossible to refer to a succession of cultures, their interaction and heading to the specific final goal. *"There is no inevitable progress in the history – each historical period is an expression of the mystical and intangible soul of a ruling nation. A spirit of each culture is unrepeatable and nondelegable, none of these cultures takes up an extraordinary position: they act as separate worlds, they all have the same importance on the general map of history."* [2]

'Mankind' has no aim, no idea, no plan anymore. 'Mankind' is a zoological expression or an empty word. According to Spengler, the concept of 'mankind' is just an abstraction. There are just people, not a mankind. However, we are encountering a problem - what does it mean to be a human? If we talk about 'mankind' only as an abstraction or generic definition it means that each culture creates its own, unique and unrepeatable 'type' of a human.

Instead of linear understanding of general history, Spengler points to the drama of a multitude of powerful cultures, which blossom with primeval force from the lap of a maternal landscape to which each is strongly bound in the course of its existence; which impresses upon the matter of each its own form; from which each receives its own ideas, its own passions, its own life, will and feeling, its own death [3].

Each culture is an organism that differs from other cultures through the diversity of its expressions (updates). Despite this difference, according to Spengler, we can find a certain platform of culture that is present in the foundations of every culture. This platform, however, acts just as a 'formal' ideal ('shaped', morphological), not a contentual one.

In his work, he distinguishes the existence of eight cultures: Indian, Chinese, Babylonian, Egyptian, Classical (Greek), Magian (Persian-Arabian), Western and Russian. All of these eight cultures are equivalent and therefore it cannot be claimed that the Western culture, its aims and values are more sophisticated, higher or truer, they are simply different. No culture has thus a

privileged place among the others. A historical truth always exists only in relation to a particular culture and its consequential type of 'mankind'.

Western culture is thus only one of many, even though globalization may evoke an image that human affairs are evolving towards some kind of a generally true model. If there are, e.g. the same computers, gas stations, fast-food chains worldwide, why not to have the equal rights, values or political institutions? Since modernization is to a great extent spreading from the West, it may evoke an image whose values are universal and should be generally held at all times and for all.

According to Spengler, there are no eternal truths. Every philosophy is just an expression of its own time, there are no two historical periods possessing the same philosophic intentions. The same applies to the morale. Every culture has its own morale whose boundaries are not crossable. Whether the individual acts morally or immorally always results from the nature of culture. As stated by Spengler, there is no universal morale. A morale, like e.g. music, sculpture or painting-art, is a self-contained form-world expressing a life feeling. It is a datum, fundamentally unalterable, an inward necessity [3, p. 211]. For humans, culture is not only a presumption of their creative activity but in a sense, it is also a prison whose boundaries cannot be crossed. It relates to a relationship towards past cultures, as well as towards parallelly existing ones.

Under the influence of globalisation, the world is getting increasingly 'smaller' and 'united', which could evocate an idea that Spengler was wrong and yet, there are some universal principles that should be followed by the globalized world. What are these principles, though? Do they exist? We are living in the era of different religions and cultures which are getting into a closer contact. Europe, as well as the USA, are now facing a huge migration wave and as the result, the people of different cultures and religions come into contact. In this regard, we can ask the question to what extent the values of one religion (culture) are acceptable for other religions (cultures). To what extent are we able to understand the others and accept their diversity? Or, to what extent are we able to tolerate difference? As Jurová states, "*mutual recognition of dissent and diversity, difference of opinions is the evidence that toleration is extremely complicated virtue*" [4]. Within this context, it is important to avoid ethnocentrism, in other words, to avoid assessment and evaluation of phenomena of other cultures through the standards of ours. To what extent is it possible, though? If in the theory of cultural relativism we assume that cultures represent unique and unrepeatable sociocultural systems, it is not possible to misunderstand them - only from the context of their own values, standards, rules, ideas, etc. Such an attitude confirms Spengler's words.

What makes unity from culture is, according to Spengler, a certain way, a pattern, a paradigm or a fundament of problem solving. Everything what happened in history, i.e. a visible aspect of history, is the body and expression of 'a soul' of culture, its symbol. Various historical phenomena and events are therefore only symbols, 'emanation' of a certain type of soul. A real understanding of historical phenomena and events is possible only if we

understand them as symbols or forms that point to (link us) something deeper, to a certain spiritual (metaphysical) contents. All the historical forms of the specific culture are internally linked and thanks to a supreme (everything superior) primeval symbol they create a unified entity. Even though this primeval symbol is not directly evinced, it is present in all cultural expressions. It is a certain logo of the soul of culture. Indirectly, this primeval symbol is retrieved in all areas of culture, but it is most significantly expressed in art.

An ancient soul, which is called by Spengler Apollonian, finds its primeval symbol in understanding of an entity as precisely defined (bounded) and final space (area). It is characterized by fascination of aesthetic qualities of presence. The emphasis is put on nature, something physical, bounded, something that has 'boundaries' and these boundaries are 'visible' and sizeable. An ancient human is an entity located among other entities that are mutually arranged and form a harmonious unit. An ancient world (cosmos) is a system, an ordered unity with a defined place for a human.

A human is strongly bound with 'here and now', without any significant interest in the past and the future. Greek was a human who never came to be, however the one who was always there. This constancy of a human entity characteristic of the antique is also emphasized by R. Bultmann, who states that events encountered by humans cannot actually touch the ancient being, however can be a stimulus or material for his/her education in the time of independent being. Future cannot bring him/her anything essentially new, since he/she accomplishes his/her being, lives inside temporality [5].

As a primeval symbol of a magical soul we can consider a cave that represents closeness, boundedness not only in terms of space but also in terms of time. History has its beginning and it will end, as well. This 'marginal' limitation of history is not random, though. It is existing, intended. As there is a determined beginning and end of history, there is also an exactly eligible place for events between them, given from the 'beginning'. Everything has its precisely determined time. Likewise, every human life fills the place and time in history that had been already predestined.

All the important events that had occurred and shall occur are inscribed in the sacred texts. They are enormously important for a magical person, since they unhide an invisible substance of truth. In spite of the fact that people here are living mostly by presence, they perceive it as something sacred, magical or mystical. This sanctity (mystery) permeates the whole reality with a constant battle of light and darkness.

A Western soul finds its primeval symbol in the concept of space as something unbounded, not yet been concluded. It is a pure space without boundaries. Its presentation is Faust, a man constantly searching, dissatisfied, constantly heading to something and opened towards future. A human of the West is conscious of continual becoming (forming), the sight is headed to the past and to the future.

Western culture, according to O. Spengler, starts in about tenth century and is closely linked with the formation of Romanesque style. This primeval symbol of a borderless area found its most powerful expression mainly in Gothic architecture and then in Renaissance. As stated by Spengler, however, Renaissance was followed by Antique only pretentiously since cultural expressions of Renaissance and Antique 'are based on' completely different primeval symbols. Even classification of historic areas into Ancient history, the Middle Age and the Modern era is an untrustworthy and meaningless scheme that dominates in our view of history, but on the other hand, does not allow us to adequately appreciate and understand the real meaning of 'historical atoms', that are the cultures closed in themselves. Moreover, such a view of history gives us the idea of a linear course of history. At the same time, it gives us the idea of a qualitative change in terms of progress from lower forms to higher ones.

A culture is born in the moment when a great soul awakens out of the protospirituality of ever-childish humanity. It detaches itself as a form (shape) from a formless (unformed) and at the same time, it detaches from boundless and enduring and it becomes something bounded and mortal. There is a certain specific unity created that gradually begins to implement its possibilities. These possibilities are set at the beginning of each culture. According to Spengler, the fact that each culture originates in some time and at some place is to a great extent random and may be related to an event, for example. The very structure of culture and its development is not random, though. Even the decline of each culture is essential. Every culture 'lives' for about a thousand years and subsequently dies out. Forasmuch as the Western culture is at the end of this thousand-year-old period, it is in the stage of a gradual decline, as stated by Spengler.

Culture dies when it exhausts the full sum of its internal possibilities. It merges into civilization that is, according to Spengler, an inevitable destiny of every culture, its end. It is important to note here, that O. Spengler "*considered culture as a spiritual entity, civilization was just a set of technical skills, wisdom or even knowledge but basically just a matter of material*" [6]. Even though civilization can exist for several or more centuries, it is referred to just as 'soulless' passage that is devoid of creative power and spiritual meaning. Civilization does not create new forms anymore, it just reinterprets them. As an example of transition from culture to civilization, Spengler mentions Nietzsche's philosophy that proclaims 'reinterpretation of all values'. This transition begins in the West in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The signs of every civilization are, e.g. materialism, money reign, excessive rationalism, etc.

Religion is the essence of every culture (this idea was later on taken over by S.P. Huntington in his concept of civilizations clash). This religion affects every area of a human life. All living forms, art, doctrines, customs, all metaphysical and mathematical form-worlds, each ornament, every column, every poem and every idea are ultimately religious and must be so until the culture exists. Faith often even "overrules knowledge" [7, 8]. As the essence of

every culture is religion, so and consequently, the essence of every civilization is irreligion, atheism. [3, p. 218].

Other sign of civilization is the formation of major metropolitan cities (Babylon, Rome, London, New York) formed by a soulless mass. A visible sign of agony of the culture is the situation when money become the major political force, also influencing press or the way of parliamentary democracy functioning.

Imperialism is another significant sign of civilization. According to Spengler its cause is neither a will of an individual nor of certain social classes. This expansive tendency of civilization is *Fatum*, it is something demonic and terrifying that controls (enslaves) the human living in the era of a world city. *Fatum*, by its power, 'ties' a human to its service and forces a human to conquer and expand, does not matter whether he wants it or not, whether he knows about it or not [3, p. 52]. Whether or not we associate ourselves with Spengler's opinion on the origin of imperialism, the fact remains that imperialism has played an important role in the behaviour of several states in the European history since 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as in the history of the USA since the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, European countries were confident of their 'civilizing mission' and the role of the white man. *"They considered themselves to be members of 'higher nations' and felt entitled to rule over 'lower nations', so they referred to their 'civilizing mission'. Its aim and content was said to be a responsibility to lead nations of occupied territories to civilizing development so that in an opportune time they could control their own destiny."* [9] It is not easy to assess to what extent is this 'civilizing mission' reasonable and successful and it invokes more controversies. However, it is necessary to note that many problems Europe and the USA are facing, result from their imperialist policy of the last centuries.

*Fatum* (destiny) acts as a certain force that makes people act in a certain way. According to Spengler, *fatum* is reflected not only in the final stage of culture but can be also found throughout the whole existence of culture. Soul, as an idea of some existence (what is possible and what is to be updated) causes that the updating of these possibilities (i.e. life itself) must be understood as something inevitable, predestined. Thus, it is the destiny of every culture to gradually decline and die out.

### **3. The demographic development in Western civilization**

Besides the above mentioned expressions of transition from culture to civilization, demographic development is another often reported problem the West is facing. It is generally known that the birth rate of native peoples in this civilization is constantly declining. According to Spengler, transition from culture to civilization brings a significant decline in population. It is a period when people think over the reasons why to have children. 'The role' of a woman, being mainly of mother in culture, does not have such a great importance in civilization. As stated by O. Spengler, rather than having children, the women are facing their inner conflicts, marriage is a sophisticated 'business'

which is mainly about mutual understanding, the women belong only to themselves and are becoming infertile [3, p. 286]. At the same time, he points to similar development in the Alexandrian, Roman and all other 'civilizing' societies. As we have already mentioned, Spengler sees the transition from culture to civilization as something inevitable, fatal. This transition can be identified through different expressions, which also include the above mentioned 'civilizing infertility'.

In this context, I would like to point out to some consequences that can be concluded from Spengler's view of culture and civilization. According to Spengler, culture is something vivid, something that creates new forms. This vitality is expressed in everyday life by agreeing to life, life is a value that should be undoubted. As Pavlíková states, to have no aim, to seek nothing, means to feel and experience nothing, to have no values to free oneself from the absurdity of human existence and to help him develop his own self [10].

Culture, however, to survive and develop, needs its 'bearers'. A living culture is self-renewable and it stays alive by bringing new individuals and by the fact that these individuals (a certain society) keep this culture alive and develop it through their 'way of life'. Since civilization is death of culture, it is linked with the decline of population, as well. It does not mean though, that I separate culture and individual (society) from each other. By the facts mentioned, I want to point out that the condition of society is reflected in culture and at the same time, culture participates in the formation of society. Relation to life and 'an attitude' towards giving birth to children are thus certain identifiers of the conditions of society (culture).

Demographic problems of the West are perceived as one of many manifestations of crisis which a certain society faces. A similar opinion is shared by the American conservative thinker P. Buchanan: "*As well as the long-time population growth was a sign of healthy nations and rise of civilizations, the population decreasing was a sign of decline*" [11]. Future of the West thus depends on whether and how the West will be able to get out of this crisis.

A considerably pessimistic view of future of the Western civilization is presented by O. Funda who states 5 reasons why the Western civilization is heading to its fall.

1. *Civilization dies out when losing its vision.* It means that the prospect of the future, meeting a goal is indispensable for the life of civilization. According to him, the West lacks such a vision and it aims at consumption regardless of boundaries of the possible economic growth. What matters is 'here and now', to have the most – whether it is material goods or various pleasant experience.
2. *Civilization dies out when losing a certain unwritten consensus.* This consensus concerns what is allowed and what is not allowed. However, it is very 'wide' and therefore cannot be fit into various standards or declarations. It is a 'presumption' based on which I expect how would other people behave towards me and vice versa. It is a presumption, a belief that something what regulates relationships among people works.

3. *Civilization dies out when the costs needed for its operation exceed the volume of profit 'produced' by civilization.*
4. *Civilization dies out when mechanisms necessary for operation maintenance reached such a degree of complexity that they are not repairable during operation.* According to O. Funda, not primitive but complex civilizations had ever died out.
5. *Civilization dies out when it got tired, when it exhausted its spirit and enthusiasm and is in the destructive mood.* Civilization is in such a degree of break-up that there is no point of any positive effort as it is clear that it is unnecessary. Civilization got tired by its surfeit and becomes dull and bored [12].

Despite the fact that these signs of crisis concern the Western civilization, Funda points out that the fall of Western civilization will have a global impact in today's globalized world - "*which will result in extinction of the human on the planet Earth*" [12, p. 139]. Even though I do not have the same pessimistic view, it is apparent that the present time struggles with many problems (poverty, wars, AIDS, depletion of mineral resources, ecological disasters, corruption, disrespect for life, moral failures, ...) that concern not only the West but also the whole mankind. If we do not cope with these problems, there is a real threat of what is described by Funda and others.

Anyway, I will get back to examine 'the condition' of the Western civilization from a demographic point of view. Depopulation of the Western civilization is the subject of interest also presented by S.P. Huntington. At the same time, he calls attention to a precipitous increase of Islamic and 'African' civilization. This trend causes that the ratio of the Western population is gradually decreasing, compared with other civilizations. Based on the estimates from 1993, the ratio of population of the Western civilization globally was about 13%, the estimates for 2010 about 11.5% and for 2025 only about 10% [13]. In case these estimates were correct, it would mean a decline of 1% about every 10 years. We cannot predict its development in the future (due to unforeseen circumstances) but in case of on-going trend, the native population of the Western civilization is expected to die out by 2125. Even though these are just presumptions, they refer of a lot.

Another factor which influences the demographic structure of the Western civilization is a high rate of immigration that mainly concerns the USA and Western Europe. Despite a long-time experience of the USA with the influx of immigrants (who also participated in its origin), according to Huntington, a constant influx of new immigrants begins to be an issue that threatens the future of the USA. A huge influx of immigrants comes from Asia, Latin America and especially from Mexico. "*While Europe's immediate issue is Muslims, the USA deals with Mexicans.*" [13, p. 243] The fear of Mexicans is intensified by more factors, mainly their resistance to assimilation, as well as colonization of the south-western part of the USA which results in formation of a contiguous territory inhabited by this population which causes a gradual fall of American – Mexican cultural boarder.

Very interesting studies that may indicate a lot about the future of Europe can be found in Walter Laqueur's publication called *The Last Days of Europe* which is devoted to demographic development of 'the old continent' [14]. I will focus my attention mainly to countries which are the main final destinations for migrants. UN and EU prognoses point to a sharp decline in the population in most European countries. Out of 20 countries with the lowest birth rate worldwide, 18 were the European ones [11, p. 35].

The population of France in 2006 was about 60 million people, the prognosis for 2050 speaks about 55 million people and it is expected to have 43 million people by the end of this century. Trend in the United Kingdom is very similar. In 2006, there were about 60 million people living in the UK, according to the prognosis, it is expected to decline to 53 million people in 2050 and to 45 million people by the end of this century. As stated by W. Laqueur, the development in most countries is expected to be even worse. Regarding other selected countries, the numbers of population are indicated in millions, starting with year 2006, followed by 2050 and 2100: Germany – 82, 61, 32; Italy – 57, 37, 15; Spain – 39, 28, 12. However, these forecasts do not take the numbers of immigrants in the following decades into account [14, p. 22]. Even though these studies are not current, they still point to the trends in the Western civilization.

Similar studies can be found in P. Buchanan's work called *the Death of the West*. When comparing the population development of European countries, we can find some differences in the predictions for years 2050 and 2100 but these differences are not marked. Even though the above mentioned numbers are 'just' predictions, the current demographic situation in Europe determines its future development, though. As stated by W. Laqueur, a gradual population decline is expected worldwide, as well (provided that no extraordinary 'events' occur). According to the projections of UN stated in the document *World Population by 2300*, the world population will continue to grow by 2075 and then it is expected to decline slightly. Based on the above data, the world population is expected to reach 8.9 billion in 2050, 9.2 billion in 2075 and about 9 billion in 2100 [<http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/longrange2/WorldPop2300final.pdf>].

Migration plays a big role in the ethnic composition of Europe (the USA, as well – see above). Significant movements of population in Europe can be seen after World War II. They related with both, political causes (e.g. movements of Germans) as well as economic causes (need of new labour force, mainly in developed economies). To a great extent, this migration was taking place only within Europe. According to W. Laqueur, a massive influx of immigrants from non-European countries to Europe was associated with the fall of empires. Europe was loaded by a large number of people from India, Pakistan, Africa and Turkey. It was assumed that their stay is just temporary and they will return back to their countries after a while. It turned out that the majority of immigrants remained in Europe and they often called on their relatives.

A gradual influx of immigrants to Europe causes that the ratio of native inhabitants towards immigrants is gradually decreasing. This trend is visible in most developed European countries (e.g. France, Germany, Great Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands, as well as in Italy and Spain). It is mostly influenced by the immigrants from Muslim countries. Despite the fact that the immigrants have been entering Europe since the end of World War II, the year 2015 can be considered to be a turning point of immigration, as the numbers of immigrants were breaking all the previous records. Even if the number of new immigrants was drastically reduced, it is expected that the ratio between the native population and immigrants will still continue to decline, as the birth rate of Muslim population is higher, in comparison with native European population.

Today's Europe is currently (and it will be even more noticeable in the future) an area with inhabitants culturally belonging to different civilizations living next to each other. In this context, we often ask the question whether Europe will become Islamic. Despite the fact that no definite answer can be provided, it has been already clear that Islam is starting to be a very strong integral part of European culture.

There were about 20 million Muslims living in Europe in 2003 and their number has been doubled for the last 30 years (to 2013). It is quite difficult to come up with exact statistics regarding numbers of Muslims in Europe, since the population census in many countries did not include a column that would define a religion. According to US Migration Policy Institute, Muslims will form about 20% out of the total population of the 'old continent' by 2050 [15]. However, it is important to note that these predictions were stated two years ago and did not count on such massive influx of migrants to Europe as we are witnessing now. In spite of that, the Polish publicist M. Magierowski in 2013 assumed that higher natural growth of Muslim population and constant influx of immigrants will cause that as early as at the end of 21<sup>st</sup> century. Christians might not be the most numerous religious group in Europe anymore [15, p. 184].

#### **4. Conclusion**

The development of native Europeans' relationships (as well as the inhabitants of the USA) with immigrants will to the great extent depend on how the West will be able to deal with radicalism on both sides. However, this is not possible without a mutual political as well as moral dialogue [16], solution of international conflicts in the world and without reducing a societal tension. In this regard, Z. Bauman calls attention to the statement of the American political theorist Benjamin R. Barber: "*No American child may feel safe in its bed if in Karachi or Baghdad children won't feel safe in theirs. Europeans won't boast long of their freedoms in people in other parts of the world remained deprived and humiliated*" [17].

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