

Spengler's Prussian Socialism

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Oswald Spengler (1880–1936) was one of the most significant thinkers of the Weimar Republic, Germany's first democracy. His work, notably the two-volume, 1200-page *Der Untergang des Abendlandes (Decline of the West, 1918/22)*, had a profound influence on the intellectual discourses of the time in Germany and beyond.¹ Yet, despite the high esteem in which he was held by his contemporaries, his thought has been seriously under-researched. In English, only four major studies have appeared in the last 70 years.² This is all the more surprising in that the historical period in which he wrote has been extensively covered by both English- and German-language scholars and that some of the thinkers who drew critically on his ideas, such as Heidegger and Adorno, have become household names in German intellectual history.

Introduction

The English-language studies of Oswald Spengler (1880–1936) have either been biographical, or they have focused narrowly on *Decline of the West*. Accordingly, in popular consciousness, Spengler has earned the moniker of the 'prophet of decline',³ the title of perhaps the best-known study of Spengler in English, and has become synonymous with notions of crisis and disintegration, doom and gloom.

However, as the recent revival of interest in Spengler in German secondary literature has recognized, even a cursory look at Spengler's copious writings makes it clear how much more there is to Spengler than this sole work.⁴ Moreover, the very titles of some of Spengler's largely ignored writings, such as *Die Revolution ist nicht zu Ende* and *Neubau des deutschen Reiches (The Revolution is not Over and Building the German Empire Anew, both 1924)*, indicate that his work actually contained *positive* proposals for the course of society and calls to political action. Accordingly, it is important to place Spengler's thought within the context of recent developments in Weimar historiography, which highlight the need to distinguish between crisis as a social condition and the evocation of crisis as a rhetorical device – as a way to disqualify the status quo and prepare the ground for something new.⁵

Spengler particularly foregrounds the struggle for a different social order in his overlooked pamphlet, *Preußentum und Sozialismus (Prussianism and Socialism, 1919)*. The pamphlet serves as both a warning and an invocation: unless the German nation

can come together as it purportedly did in the spirit of civil peace in the war effort of 1914, unless a genuine organic community (*Gemeinschaft*), beyond class and individualism, can be created in line with what Spengler deems the Prussian socialist spirit, then the German people will, he argues, be brought to its knees by the rule of 'English' banks, profiteering and speculation.

The rallying cry for this Prussian socialism was heard across the political spectrum. For the conservative Ernst Jünger, the pamphlet forged 'the first weapons [...] following the disarmament of Germany'⁶ and provided a springboard for the Conservative Revolution – the anti-democratic and anti-Communist political movement of the 1920s in which Jünger was also active. Following the pamphlet's publication, Spengler even became known as 'the Karl Marx of the bourgeoisie' (Ref. 6, p. 111). The pamphlet was also absorbed by left-wing circles. Gustav Noske, the leading social democrat and Weimar's first Defence Minister, acknowledged that 'Spengler's Prussian socialism' ran in his blood (Ref. 6, p. 94) as he mobilized military forces to crush the workers' and soldiers' councils across Germany.

Prussianism and Socialism was thus influential on both the left and the right. Yet, how did it address the need for a German national resurgence? Through an analysis of the pamphlet, this article will counter the dominant image of Spengler as a doomsayer with a despairing outlook by making the case that Spengler viewed the decline of Western society, for which he is accounting, not as an inexorable and irresistible process of disintegration, but as an open-ended development replete with both possibilities and pitfalls, depending on the concrete development of events at the time and the choices made by human agents. Further, this article will argue that, at least in 1919, Spengler is not an arch-conservative cultural critic lamenting the end of the white, Western European man's influence on world history from an introspective and even racist perspective. Rather, *Prussianism and Socialism* should be viewed as a political intervention on the part of a thinker who poses challenging questions that remain relevant to twenty-first century life, not least because he draws on various liberal, socialist and nationalist discourses of modernity in order to develop his outlook.

The essay will also bring out the specificity of Spengler's ideas and the distinctive position he occupies as a thinker of the Conservative Revolution in two ways. First, some of the references to socialist thinkers in *Prussianism and Socialism*, such as the founding father of German socialism, Ferdinand Lassalle, the left-syndicalist Robert Michels and the German social-democratic deputy, Paul Lensch, will be discussed. In fact, these references have hitherto received scant attention in the few German-language discussions of the pamphlet. Further, as far as I can gather, the important reference to Lassalle in *Prussianism and Socialism* has been completely overlooked in secondary literature. Only Adorno has discussed, albeit briefly, Michels's influence on Spengler.⁷ Rolf Peter Sieferle justifiably devotes two of his five biographical sketches of figures from the Conservative Revolution to Spengler and Lensch,⁸ but the possible cross-fertilization of their ideas has not been investigated. Spengler also cultivated personal friendships with figures on the right-wing of social democracy, such as the trade-union leader August Winning, who was inspired by Lensch's ideas. Given Spengler's personal and intellectual connections with German social

democracy, the largest political party of his time, these links demand further research. Second, this study will explore the epistemological roots of Spengler's socialism and its links with his overall world view which, as shall be seen, was based on a morphological, *longue durée*, conception of human history as a cyclical, organically unfolding process.

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

Bavarian Disgust

Spengler had been engaged with the material for *Prussianism and Socialism* since 1913, initially digging it up again in September 1918 in the hope of publishing it under the title *Römer und Preußen (Romans and Prussians)* (Ref. 6, p. 95). As will be demonstrated, this title alludes to one of the ideological cornerstones of the pamphlet – the duty of the Prussians to establish a global hegemonic power along the lines of Rome (the *Imperium Germanicum*).

The immediate backdrop to the pamphlet was Spengler's 'disgust' at the 'anarchistical radical "mob"' during the revolution of November 1918 and the proclamation of the socialist republic in his native Bavaria in January 1919.⁹ The revolutionary skirmishes landed on his very own doorstep, with the artillery fire in his resident Agnesstraße, only ceasing on 4 May 1919. On 21 February 1919, one day after the assassination of the socialist leader Kurt Eisner, Spengler met with his friend August Albers, editor of the newly-established publishing house, C.H. Beck.¹⁰ Spengler wanted to discuss publishing a text that would allow him to popularize his conviction that the liberal parliamentarism of Weimar would spell disaster for Germany if it wanted to re-emerge as a power on the world stage. As he puts it in *Prussianism and Socialism*, parliamentarism in Germany was either 'nonsense or betrayal'.¹¹ Felken notes that Spengler had consciously avoided any discussion of politics in the first volume of his *Decline of the West*, leaving this to the forthcoming second volume. Yet Spengler's hand was forced by the speed of events. On occasion, certain sections of the pamphlet, therefore, read like a topical paraphrase and popularization of *Decline of the West*.

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

For Spengler, socialism was ‘not the most profound, but the noisiest question of the time’.¹² This quote summarizes his core thesis that the noisy debates around socialism and capitalism on the streets and assemblies of early Weimar were in fact a faint echo of a more profound antagonism: the struggle between the Prussians and the English in what he deems the ‘winter’ of Western, or Faustian, civilisation. Before assessing what Spengler meant by such concepts, a closer look at the pamphlet and its structure will be offered.

Common Enemies

Prussianism and Socialism runs a fine line, reflecting Spengler’s adventurist political gamble in propounding a socialist politics, defined by opposition to the common enemies of the working class and the aristocracy: Marxism and liberalism. For Spengler, eradicating the baleful influence of both is a necessary condition for the revitalization of Germany following military defeat in the First World War. Such a German renaissance necessitates the unification of what Spengler deems the two socialist parties in Germany: not, as desired by many, of the SPD and the USPD, but of social democracy as a whole and the Conservatives. The German elite has to recognize that it must overcome ‘every trace’ of the ‘feudal-agrarian narrowness’ which belongs to an earlier phase of Western history (Ref. 9). Equally, it has to reject the values of liberalism and its attempts to plant parliamentarism in alien Prussian soil, where it would not, and could not, grow. In turn, the German working class (or at least its ‘respectable’ section) (Ref. 9) needs to break with Marxism, which, like liberalism, is an alien and corrosive ideology. It is necessary, according to Spengler, to ‘liberate’ German socialism from Marxism (Ref. 11, p. 16). The central aim of the pamphlet, therefore, is to lay bare the English roots of both Marxism and liberalism and to conduct a struggle against the insidious forces championing them within Germany, referred to by Spengler as the ‘invisible English army, which Napoleon had left behind on German soil after the Battle of Jena’ (Ref. 11, p. 7).

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

In the first section, Spengler emphasizes that ‘the revolution’ he has in mind begins not in 1918, but with the German war effort in 1914, with the country purportedly coming together in a heroic attempt to fight for the national interest. This narrative reflects a guiding trope of the Conservative Revolution, with Spengler echoing the stab-in-the-back myth (*Dolchstoßlegende*) popularized by the Prussian general Paul von Hindenburg. According to this view, the German army was on the brink of victory, only to be stabbed in the back by leftists and liberals on the home front. Indeed, for *Prussianism and Socialism*, the so-called German revolution of 1918 (‘the most senseless act’ in German history (Ref. 11, p. 9) is a sheer betrayal of the true civil-peace revolution of 1914, which assumed ‘legitimate and military forms’ (p. 12). This betrayal of the German cause came in two acts: the June 1917 peace resolution

agreed in the Reichstag and the abdication of the Kaiser in November 1918. Both represented desertion of military duty and a capitulation to England.

Spengler then proceeds to discuss 'Socialism as a Way of Life', which describes Prussian socialism as ingrained in the instinct and consciousness of the Prussians, who form a 'race in the spiritual sense' (Ref. 11, p. 22). A brief aside is necessary here, because of the controversy surrounding Spengler and racial theory in the context of the horror that would later be unleashed on Germany. However much Spengler's Prussians and Englanders may be based on caricatures or stereotypes, they are not biologically determined, but metaphysical categories, which are supposed to reflect the soul of certain peoples and epochs. This emphasis on the soul and living out one's destiny is integral to the German tradition of philosophy of life on which Spengler stands. Indeed, on several occasions, *Prussianism and Socialism* highlights how there are many biological Prussians who nonetheless entertained anti-Prussian, English ideals (such as one of the pamphlet's bogeymen, the German liberal 'Michel' (Ref. 11, p. 8).

Nonetheless, there is one passage in the pamphlet where Spengler talks of race as expressing itself in certain 'bodily traits' (Ref. 11, p. 29). Presumably this relates to the way in which people walk, their facial expressions and so on. With the benefit of doubt, perhaps this talk of bodily features is not a manifestation of Spengler's biological determinism but it may be analogous to what, following Pierre Bourdieu, modern sociology deems as *hexus*¹³ – the way in which habitual and typical conditions, particularly in the way individuals move, eat, talk and behave express both individual choices and social norms or values. This conception of race comes in marked contrast to Spengler's later deployment of the term in his *Jahre der Entscheidung* (*Years of Decision*, 1933). In this text, he argues that there is an antagonism between 'die Farbigen' ('coloured' peoples, which include nations as diverse as Russia and India) and the 'white' world order.

Spengler, then, proceeds to what is by far the longest section of the pamphlet, entitled 'Prussians and Englishmen'. Given the importance Spengler attributes to the conflict between these peoples, 'Prussians and Englishmen' might have perhaps been a better title for the pamphlet as a whole, insofar as this title more accurately reflects what, for Spengler, was really at stake, politically speaking. For Spengler argues that the First World War is but one manifestation of a historically rooted Anglo-German antagonism, a struggle between the two great Germanic peoples. Such antipathy will invariably lead to ever-fiercer struggles between the modern English people, born in the seventeenth century, and the Prussian people, born in the eighteenth. The inevitability of such a conflict, and the impossibility of mediation or reconciliation between these peoples, is rooted in what Spengler, following Nietzsche, considers to be modern man's irrepressible will to power. This force is embodied in modern imperialism, first ushered in by seventeenth-century Spain, which aims to conquer the entire planet: 'all must submit to our political, social, and economic ideal, or perish' (Ref. 11, p. 24). The respective 'soul' of these peoples derives from the fact that the former were 'knightly' peoples and the latter 'Vikings' (p. 61) – the Prussians feeling the great Germanic idea *above* them (the commitment to the community) and the

English within them (a commitment to individual independence (p. 31)). This clash is therefore one between an English community of happiness and a Prussian community of duty; money versus rank; job versus occupation; free trade versus autarky; ‘the gentleman’s garb’ versus the ‘uniform’ (p. 37), as well as art versus literature: ‘Every man for himself: that is English. Every man for every other man: that is Prussian’ (p. 37).

In the short section on Marx that follows, Spengler contends that Marx’s thought conflates the struggle between these great peoples with the struggle between social classes. Marx’s approach is ‘purely English’ (Ref. 11, p. 71). Since Marx is unaware of the true antagonism of the epoch, he unconsciously takes as his point of departure the principles and concepts of English political economy in order to subject it to a critique. Spengler views this critique as a ‘splendid construction’ (p. 69), but maintains that this is ignorant of the different cultural souls and dispositions of the various peoples. In Prussia, as opposed to England, for example, social position is informed not by wealth but by social rank. Following English political economy, Marx treats labour like any other commodity. However, this is at odds with the Prussian mentality, according to which work is not a mere object to be bought and sold, but a calling, as expressed in the German word *Beruf*.

It is for this reason that Spengler accuses Marx of being ‘a good materialist and a poor psychologist’ (Ref. 11, p. 69). For Spengler, Marx’s theory is English political economy turned on its head – ‘the capitalism of the lower class’ (p. 47) informed by a Viking-style envy of the propertied classes and their wealth, a system in which ‘class egoism is elevated to a principle’ (p. 75). The working-class strike was ‘the classical feature’ of Marx’s (English) ‘trader philosophy’ (p. 77).

The pamphlet concludes with a section entitled ‘The International’, which highlights the illusion of a peaceful world order, as heralded by the outbreak of the First World War. Spengler argues that further military conflicts are a given and sketches out a world in which it is inevitable that the entire world will be economically coordinated and administered. Yet will this world be run by Spengler’s dedicated, self-sacrificing, dutiful Prussian soldiers and bureaucrats or by ruthless, self-interested, exploitative English bankers and traders? These questions conclude the pamphlet, along with the warning that further military conflicts are on the immediate horizon: ‘a genuine International is only possible through the victory of the idea of one race over all others’ (Ref. 11, p. 84).

Socialist Morphology

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

For Spengler, there are eight great or high 'cultures' in the course of human society, the last of which is Faustian or Western society.¹⁴ These cultures develop independently from each other organically and are subject to the laws of organic matter in general: each culture will come into existence, blossom, decay and ultimately perish. In order to enunciate the cyclical, repetitive nature of this organic process, Spengler links each stage of development to the four seasons with quintessential, distinctive characteristics: spring, defined by rural contemplation and reflection as opposed to urban action; summer, defined by scholarly output and philosophy; autumn, defined by the disintegration of the culture (or 'race') and the emergence of satire and scepticism; and winter, characterized by urbanism, mass poverty, politics and entertainment, epitomized by the historical figure of Caesar, whose modern incarnation, as Spengler argues, lies in the future (Spengler was tempted to see Benito Mussolini as such a figure, but was slightly more ambivalent towards Adolf Hitler and National Socialism).

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

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

The creation of an antagonism between the English and German culture was not an invention of Spengler, but it followed the mould of the ideological mobilization of the German people during the war, and the attempts on the part of such philosophers as Rudolf Eucken and Paul Natorp to create what Hermann Lübke calls a 'metaphysics of Germanness'.¹⁵ This attempt to formulate philosophically a unique German identity as distinct from the other warring nations was also a guiding principle of the Conservative Revolution. Ernst Troeltsch, Johann Plenge and Werner Sombart were pioneering in this regard, with the latter publishing a 1915 treatise under the revealing title *Traders and Heroes (Händler und Helden*, the latter, of course, being the German versions).¹⁶ Troeltsch also distinguished, as does Spengler, between the individualism of the English gentlemen, the French ideas of equality and the German notions of self-denying community. Plenge, likewise, viewed liberal traditions as a foreign infiltration (*Überfremdung*) of the German spirit.¹⁷ What distinguishes Spengler from these thinkers (Troeltsch, Sombart, Plenge and Natorp),

however, is his integration of these metaphysical justifications of *Germanness*, via the concepts of civilization and culture, into his overall cyclical view of history.

Spengler's deployment of the distinction between culture and civilization was another trope in the competing political discourse on both sides of the trenches in the First World War. Whereas French and British pro-war intellectuals claimed to be fighting for 'civilization', those in Germany inscribed on their banners the slogan of 'culture'. In fact, Lübbe notes that, on one occasion, Spengler even claimed that the Germans were fighting for 'barbarism' so as to accentuate this antagonism (Ref. 15, p. 214). In philosophical terms, Lübbe (Ref. 15, p. 191) traces the culture/civilization dichotomy back to Immanuel Kant, but argues that this distinction only became politicized in the early twentieth century, as part of what he describes as a 'Fichte Renaissance' (p. 199).

For the Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács, 'culture' had been a *leitmotif* in 'reactionary Germany philosophy' for some time, with the ideological struggle against the democratization of Germany taking place under the banner of this antagonism, in which 'civilization' is portrayed as everything that is bad under capitalism, particularly Western democracy, opposed to which stands the autochthonous, organic, genuinely German 'culture'.¹⁸ Spengler's understanding of culture is, thus, in line with his conception of socialism-as-form-of existence, a part of his overall cyclical historical model: his socialism is, to Faustian man, what Stoicism was to the Ancients or what Buddhism was to the Indic culture (Ref. 17, p. 80).

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

Necessary and Fatal(ist)

The extent to which human actors are free to intervene in, shape or even undermine this progression of cycles has been a source of controversy in the reception of Spengler's thought. One British reviewer of *Decline of the West*, for instance, described Spengler's socialism as a 'necessary and fatal symptom of our civilisation', implying that, for Spengler, socialism is an inevitable, pre-determined social formation (Ref. 1, p. 160). Martin Falck, by contrast, argues that while for Spengler the outlines of the overall fate of Western history had been sketched out, the German people in particular faced concrete choices as to what the final outcome of history would exactly look like (Ref. 17, p. 74). Even though Falck adds the caveat that many of those influenced by Spengler's *Decline of the West* consciously ignored or rejected Spengler's theory of history altogether (Ref. 17, p. 88), his appreciation of the relation between determinism and agency in *Prussianism and Socialism* is well-founded. After all, *Prussianism and Socialism* is clear that Western man is faced with a number of political alternatives within the context of civilization. Paraphrasing the famous dictum of one of the pamphlet's polemical targets, Karl Marx,¹⁹ one might say that, for Spengler, men do

not quite make their own history, but are nonetheless faced with several choices and ways of organizing their lives against the backdrop of highly restrictive, pinched and prescribed circumstances which are certainly not of their own choosing.

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

The youth in particular are urged to take up this challenge of leading Germany forward. Spengler subsequently explained that for him 'the young generation' was considered such 'not in years' but in 'power of judgement' and 'responsibility': those who have neither will always be far too young for politics, he adds (Ref. 12, p. 11). How, then, does Spengler understand the political choices that are left open to humanity in the winter of civilisation? What is possible and what is not? Spengler's understanding of democracy and dictatorship in *Prussianism and Socialism* needs to be further explained to answer this question.

Kaiser Bebel

One defining feature of Spengler's understanding of winter is the idea that Faustian man will face the prospect of Caesarism, a form of dictatorship that is homologous to the one to be found in the late Roman Empire. In order to make this case, the pamphlet develops a critique of representative democracy in general and liberal parliamentary democracy in particular, arguing that in the winter of Western civilization both become a mere façade for the rule of entrenched plutocratic interests, which direct events from behind the scenes: 'the relationship between party leaders and party, between party and masses, will be tougher, more transparent and more brazen' (Ref. 11, p. 67). One way in which this tendency towards dictatorship manifests itself is the mass political press. For all its democratic pretensions, the modern press paves the way for future dictators: 'still today you can find morons here and there who are enthused by the idea of the freedom of the press, but precisely through this freedom the coming Caesars of the world press have a free hand'.²⁰

Spengler argues that Caesarism is an unavoidable feature of modern political life. But this dictatorship can either be benign or malignant: the outcome will depend on the concrete choices of the German people. Will this Caesarist dictatorship be a 'dictatorship of money or of organisation, the world as booty or as a state, wealth or authority, success or calling [*Beruf*]?' (Ref. 11, p. 65). Spengler's anti-Weimar politics come to the fore here, with republicanism in particular earning his scorn: 'it is precisely the republican form of government that has nothing to do with socialism' (p. 13).

His target appears to be Marxist social democracy, which was convinced that – through the organization of the masses and through accountability, workers' wages for political representatives and so on – it could undermine the corrupting influence of wealth on party politics and transform democracy. Whereas the Marxist left, following Friedrich Engels, envisaged the democratic republic as the form of working-class rule,²¹ Spengler and his right-wing contemporaries viewed republicanism as an alien political form that was the epitome of social and cultural decline and, thus, a cornerstone of *civilization*.

Hence, how does Spengler try to make the case for his anti-republican alternative, a socialist monarchy? Following Robert Michels's work on the iron law of oligarchy, which propounds that in modern political life mass organizations such as the SPD have an inbuilt tendency towards moving away from democracy and embracing some of the oligarchical features Spengler discerns in Caesarism,²² *Prussianism and Socialism* portrays the SPD, and its most important leader, August Bebel, as a genuinely *Prussian*, authoritarian institution that was in fact run in a Caesarist fashion. Bebel in particular comes in for much praise: had he not died in 1913, then he would have had no hesitation at all in re-affirming the party's true Prussian spirit of the civil peace of 4 August 1914 and ushering in a dictatorship that would violently impose its will on society. In a critique of the November Revolution that occasionally borders on the voluntaristic, Spengler is convinced that, under the Prussian Bebel, heads would have rolled under the rule of his 'iron hand' (Ref. 11, p. 8). After all, he asks, was it not Bismarck who had created Prussian socialism through worker-protection laws? And was not the SPD organized as a military machine under Bebel?

This particular view of SPD history and Bebel, who was popularly known as the *Shadow Kaiser*,²³ a fierce opponent of the monarchy and somebody always at pains to avoid conflict with England, is deeply problematic. Yet this issue evinces both Spengler's intellectual gymnastics and his knowledge of the SPD and its history. His narrative about the purportedly authoritarian SPD and Bebel also allows him to spin the political behaviour of the SPD during the November Revolution as a stab in the back from the invisible English forces within the country, as a case of 'insubordination in the workers' party and simultaneously in the armed forces' (Ref. 11, p. 46). The SPD's Prussian will to power under Bebel had become anglicized, degenerating from a philosophy of power into an obsession with penny-pinching, drab trade-union struggles.

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

Lassalle and Lensch

In order to boost his Prussian-socialist credentials, Spengler cites Ferdinand Lassalle's 1862 *What Next?* as an inspiration for an alliance between the German

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

Fascinatingly, not least when it comes to Spengler's relationship with social democracy, *Prussianism and Socialism* (Ref. 11, p. 49) also references *Three Years of World Revolution*, a 1917 pamphlet written by the German SPD Reichstag deputy Paul Lensch.²⁴ Once a pupil of Rosa Luxemburg and a household name on the radical left wing of the SPD, in 1914 he and his allies in the *Die Glocke* group (*The Bell*, a publication established in 1915) came to the conclusion that the First World War actually represented a revolutionary process, in which a German victory could break Britain's dominance of the world and, thus, open up a space for genuinely Marxist, German SPD-type organisations to develop. This was opposed to the Labourite, trade-unionist organizations that dominated the British workers' movement. Indeed, as for so many different thinkers who influenced, and were influenced by, the philosophical ideas of 1914, Britain's alliance with Tsarism – the embodiment of political reaction – made Lensch and his comrades feel vindicated in their analysis.²⁵

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

Moreover, it is striking just how conversant Spengler was with the various competing discourses of his time. His understanding of, and engagement with, socialist ideas sets him apart from other post-First World War right-wing thinkers such as Paul Natorp and Johann Plenge. Natorp deemed the First World War 'the day of the Germans' and, similarly to Spengler, was convinced that the Germans had socialism in their blood (Ref. 15, pp. 186–189). Spengler, however, would have argued that Natorp had confused the loudest issue of the day with the most profound: Natorp, after all, was of the opinion that 1914 embodied the clash between the two systems of capitalism and socialism, not between the two bearers of the great Germanic idea.

Opportunist Socialism?

The next question would be: is Spengler's socialism not typical of the Young Conservative movement and its struggle against all notions of a democratically organized society? Indeed, in a 1932 foreword to a reprint of *Prussianism and Socialism*, Spengler downplays any understanding of socialism as an economic concept, stressing its metaphysical and spiritual dimension. He even underlines how his socialism would not get rid of the market, as it presupposes 'a private economy with its old-Germanic joy of power and booty' (Ref. 12, p. 9). As such, Spengler's anti-capitalist critique is one that boils down to an opposition to finance capital, which he scathingly deems a 'parasitic form of property' (p. 12), and not to the logic of capital accumulation in general.

Theodor W. Adorno sees much that is worthy in Spengler's critique of democracy as an instrument of Caesarist control. Nonetheless, he calls into question Spengler's socialism by highlighting the weaknesses in his understanding of political economy, accusing Spengler of being 'helplessly dilettantish' in these matters (Ref. 7, p. 125). Indeed, just how a state is to mediate between socio-economic interests when it is not directly accountable to the population is a central problem in Spengler's political economy. For the same reason, even Ernst Niekisch, the enigmatic National Bolshevik thinker who sought to fuse German nationalism with revolutionary left-wing politics, was critical of Spengler's social alternative. He viewed it as 'the old authoritarian state [*Obrigkeitsstaat*] once again, which the worker has to obey blindly' (Ref. 7, pp. 123–124). More generally, there is a certain overlap between Adorno's comments on the culture industry as a twentieth-century incarnation of Roman panem et circences and Spengler's comments on civilization. Adorno makes the interesting case that Spengler's right-wing critique of modernity was able to grasp something about the 'dual nature of the Enlightenment', which liberal thought was unable to see (Ref. 7, pp. 123–24).

For Georg Lukács, the core of the project of the thinkers from the German *philosophy of life* tradition since Nietzsche, particularly Spengler, is actually the struggle *against* socialism (Ref. 18, p. 372). In left-wing circles, after all, Spengler's name became an insult, with the Marxist Karl Kautsky referring to one political opponent, Emil Franz, as 'a red Spengler'.²⁶ Lukács maintains that, since the Russian October Revolution of 1917, this ideological struggle on the part of the German imperialist bourgeoisie had entered a new stage, with Spengler's philosophy showing how strong this turn away from programmes, reason and systematic thought had become. For Lukács, Spengler's method amounts to little more than a degrading of age-old notions concerning the law-like emergence, blossoming and decline of cultures – found amongst thinkers as varied as Giambattista Vico and Hegel – into unfounded historical analogies, another manifestation of the destruction of reason, with a decadent ruling class and its ideologues plumbing new intellectual depths in the struggle against socialism (Ref. 18, p. 373).

In this sense, for all Spengler's claims of being able to see more clearly than other thinkers as a result of his independence from party-political interests (Ref. 12, p. 14),

Prussianism and Socialism may be seen, in the words of one British Fabian socialist reviewer of Spengler, as amounting to 'little more than echo[ing] the prejudices of his class and time'.²⁷ Spengler may thus have fallen into the trap of what he explicitly warns against in the introduction to *Prussianism and Socialism*: projecting onto socialism the fears and prejudices of his own environment and background. Ernst Stutz is quite correct to highlight the intimate relationship between Spengler's conception of history and his political views, since there is a clear connection between Spengler's prognoses for the Western world and his understanding of Caesarist Rome. Nonetheless, Spengler's eclectic incorporation of an array of socialist, statist and syndicalist schools of thought is indicative of a thinker who is engaged in a daring political wager conditioned by his immediate surroundings in early Weimar Germany, where socialist organizations and ideas were so dominant that he felt compelled to develop a critique of Marxist socialism and thereby steer political events towards his own anti-democratic outlook. As we have seen, *Prussianism and Socialism* is by no means the intervention of an aristocrat who longingly harks back to pre-modern Germany from the comfort of his armchair. Nor is it, however, able to break with an aristocratic opposition to democracy and mass political life. Accordingly, Spengler's main target in *Prussianism and Socialism* is what he deems 'thinking from below', the 'apotheosis of herd sentiment'.²⁸

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

References and Notes

1. See Z. Gasimov and C.A. Lemke Duque (Eds) (2013) *Oswald Spengler als europäisches Phänomen. Der Transfer der Kultur- und Geschichtsmorphologie im Europa der Zwischenkriegszeit 1919-1939* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht).
2. See H.S. Hughes (1952) *Oswald Spengler: A Critical Estimate* (New York: Scribner); J.F. Felleny (1972) *Twilight of the Evening Lands: Oswald Spengler – a Half Century Later* (New York: Brookdale); K.P. Fischer (1989) *History and Prophecy: Oswald Spengler and the Decline of the West* (New York: Peter Lang).
3. J. Farrenkopf (2001) *Prophet of Decline Spengler on World History and Politics* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press).
4. The following recent studies are worth mentioning: M. Armin and K. Weissmann (2005) *Die konservative Revolution in Deutschland 1918-1932. Ein Handbuch* (Graz: Ares), S. Maaß (2013) *Oswald Spengler. Eine politische Biographie* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot); M. Falck (Ed.) (2013) *Zyklen und Cäsaren. Mosaiksteine einer Philosophie des Schicksals. Reden und Schriften Oswald Spenglers* (Kiel: Regin).

5. R. Graf (2008) *Die Zukunft der Weimarer Republik. Krisen und Zukunftsaussagen in Deutschland 1918-1933* (Munich: Oldenbourg), pp. 104–111.
6. D. Felken (1988) *Oswald Spengler. Konservativer Denker zwischen Kaiserreich und Diktatur* (Munich: C.H. Beck), p. 114.
7. T. Adorno (1950) 'Spengler nach dem Untergang', *Der Monat*, **20**, pp. 115–128, p. 117. And see also P. Lensch (1915) *Das englische Weltreich*, Mächte des Weltkrieges, Fünftes Heft (Berlin: Buchhandlung Vorwärts Paul Singer); P. Lensch (1915) *Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie und der Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Buchhandlung Vorwärts Paul Singer).
8. R.P. Sieferle (1995) *Die konservative Revolution. Fünf biographische Skizzen* (Frankfurt: Fischer).
9. Letter to H. Klöres, 27 December 1918, cited in A. Helps (Ed.) (1966) *Spengler Letters: 1913-1936* (London: George Allen & Unwin), p. 71.
10. J. Naeher (1994) *Oswald Spengler* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt), p. 84.
11. O. Spengler (1920) *Preußentum und Sozialismus* (Munich: Beck), p. 54. All subsequent references to this text will be placed in parentheses in the main text.
12. O. Spengler (2009) *Politische Schriften* (Leipzig: Manuscriptum), p. 15.
13. R. Jenkins (1992) *Pierre Bourdieu* (London: Routledge), pp. 74–84.
14. R.P. Sieferle (1995) *Die konservative Revolution* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag), pp. 104–107.
15. H. Lübke (1974) *Politische Philosophie in Deutschland* (Munich: dtv), p. 185. The intellectual role model in this respect was Johann Gottlieb Fichte, whose *Speeches to the German Nation* during the German Wars of Liberation were seen as exemplary for intellectuals serving the German war effort in 1914.
16. See J. Hawes's recent book *Englanders and Huns*, which outlines the development of this Anglo-German antagonism and draws on various press sources on both sides of the English channel to make his case. J. Hawes (2014) *Englanders and Huns: How Five Decades of Enmity Led to the First World War* (London: Simon and Schuster).
17. Quoted in M. Falck (Ed.) (2013) *Zyklen und Cäsaren. Mosaiksteine einer Philosophie des Schicksals. Reden und Schriften Oswald Spenglers* (Kiel: Regim Verlag), p. 79.
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26. Not all Marxist thinkers of the 1920s thought in such terms, however, for more information see: A. Fankhauser (1924–1925) Spengler und Marx. *Rote Revue: Sozialistische Monatsschrift*, **4**(1), pp. 29–35.

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