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Escaping the Metaphysics of Fate/Fact. Comparing Spengler and Adorno

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Abstract. *The Decline of the West* belongs to that group of controversial books that have been more attacked than actually and properly read. Today, in deference to the myth of de-ideologisation, that polemical charge has diminished considerably. Nevertheless, Spengler is still topical, especially following the recent political and economic-health crises that evoke the «spectre of decline». From a critical perspective, Adorno was the first to acknowledge Spengler's topicality and superiority to numerous liberal-progressive opponents. For its part, this current essay, via an ancipital impulse to critique and salvation, aims at exploring Spengler's idea of fatal/factual decline by unmasking its aporias and ambiguities through comparing it to Adorno's «silent and questioning utopia», dialectically preserved «in the image of decadence». Through this close comparison and the development of Adorno's critique, the paper urges to unveil, on the one hand, the “true” – negative – aspects of Spengler's legacy and, on the other hand, the «forces», hidden from his «attentive gaze», that are «set free in decay». Ultimately, in the no man's land between decline and utopia, Spengler and Adorno meet and their legacies intertwine.

Keywords: Nature, History, Necessity, Fate, Domination, Decline, Utopia.

For Livia

1. SPENGLER TODAY: CRITIQUE AND SALVATION

The Decline of the West belongs to that group of “numinous” books that are as «familiar» as they are «not cognitively understood»¹. While overexposure is without exception the elective mask of ignorance, the degree of appreciation of such books is different. For some of them, the quotation has the magical power to ennoble, while for others, such as Oswald Spengler's *magnum opus*, its mention is in itself disqualifying. The stone of scandal, capable of

¹ Hegel (1807): 35, rightly pointed out that «quite generally, the familiar, just because it is familiar, is not cognitively understood».

sowing harmony among the work's numerous critics, is the morphological-biological conception of history, built on the basis equating *Kultur* with the living organism. Hence the intention to provide a historical prognosis of the ineluctable – insofar as it conforms to a supposedly necessary law of nature, i.e. fate – collapse of Western civilisation. In order to fulfil this task, however, Spengler must resort to the “fatal” naturalisation of history, in which his peculiar metaphysics of fate/fact is substantiated.

This is why, alongside its extraordinary popularity beyond a narrow circle of specialists, Spengler's “fatalistic” *Weltanschauung* aroused, since its first appearance in Europe, an avalanche of anathemas, more often than not failing to meet their target despite being hurled by some of the most remarkable thinkers of the time. Examples include the hasty attacks of Benedetto Croce (1920 and 1989), Robert Musil (1921) and Ernst Cassirer (1946), the nevertheless valid Marxist assaults by Ernst Bloch (1922 and 1935) and György Lukács (1954), as well as the aporetic critique by Thomas Mann (1924), who is equally ensnared in the scheme of «the false dichotomy *Kultur/Zivilisation*», upon which the work of his polemical idol is based (Bruzzone [2020]: 115-124). For this reason, Theodor W. Adorno, in an acute critical-apologetic essay on Spengler (in which the first aspect is most predominant), can rightly declare that the latter, almost forgotten in spite of his initial fame, «found hardly an adversary who was his equal: his oblivion is the product of evasion» (Adorno [1938/1950]: 48). As will be seen in the course of this paper, Spengler certainly found this adversary in Adorno himself. Being able to cope with, and even to overcome, Spengler's capacity for critical analysis, Adorno nullifies the topicality of his own statement.

Today, in deference to the deceptive myth of de-ideologisation, the polemical charge against Spengler has diminished considerably. Nonetheless, the messenger of decay is still relevant, especially following the recent, devastating, political and economic-health crises that evoke the «spectre of decline» (Kracauer [1921]: 706). Actually,

rethinking Spengler's philosophy with its aporias and ambiguities, as well as on the ground of the comparison with Adorno's dialectical-utopian perspective, means thinking critically about the present in the light of the past in order to open up the horizon of a possible, different future. Therefore, also in this essay, as in general in metaphysics, critique and salvation are intertwined in the name of solidarity with what falls (see Adorno [1998]: 19, 34-35, 42, 81-82, 140, 155; Adorno [1966]: 400). Developing Adorno's meaningful critique of Spengler proves all the more useful as, on the one hand, it makes it possible to grasp the “best” of his thought (i.e. his negative legacy), that is what his acute critical faculties were able to discern and “prophesy” about domination; while, on the other hand, having circumscribed the limits of his philosophy (namely in the fact that the very prevalence of domination obscured his vision with respect to all those tendencies that go beyond it), the development of Adorno's critique allows to question what emerges – which it does negatively – from what Spengler did not consider because he could not, and did not intend to, do so (see Adorno [1938-1950]: 57, 71). Ultimately, Spengler experienced and represented emblematically the *dialectic of domination*, since this latter is both what enlightened and blinded him (see below, § 4).

2. LAW AS FATE: SPENGLER'S HYPOSTATISING DIALECTICS

The Decline of the West ends with an emblematic quotation from Seneca, who translated verses from the Stoic Cleanthes which champion the unconditional acceptance of destiny: «Ducunt fata volentem, nolentem trahunt» [Fate guides the willing, but drags the unwilling]². For Spengler, the only alternative is between «doing the necessary or doing nothing» (Spengler [1918-1922]: 1195), namely between adapting sponta-

² More precisely, Seneca (65 AD): 107, 11, 5, wrote: «Ducunt volentem fata, trahunt nolentem». Cleanthes' famous prayer to Zeus can be found in Arnim (1905): I, 527.

neously to necessity or being dragged, powerless, by necessity's relentless course. Whichever way one "decides", destiny will be fulfilled equally and regardless of the will of individuals, with or without their help since, unlike these transient and relative wills, destiny is eternal and absolute. Ultimately, acquiescence is the only real possibility for man, i.e. his very impossibility. This is Spengler's response to the vexed question of freedom, which he also understood and resolved in terms of a dutiful «recognition of necessity» (see Engels [1877-1878]: 106; see also Hegel [1830³]: I, § 147 (*Zusatz*), 288-292, 290).

Spengler's «physiognomic thought», as Adorno correctly notes, «is chained to the totalitarian character of the categories». More precisely, «the insistence on the universal dependence of individual moments on the whole» – peculiar to the conceptual yearning for total subsumption – «is so abstract in its breadth that it tends to obscure the concrete and sharply differentiated moments of dependency which are decisive in human lives» (Adorno [1938-1950]: 59). Thanks to the cold disregard of the individual moment – its aspirations and sufferings – the appalling «historyless stage» of *Zivilisation* (the subject of the second volume of the *Decline*), as the twilight phase of an exhausted *Kultur* nearing its end, is «depicted by Spengler with horrified delight» (Ibid.: 61). But, above all, with the absolutely fatalistic planning even of the case – a real «tyranny of categories» (Ibid.: 58) –, he annihilates the very possibility of novelty and diversity, namely the only forms of resistance to the overwhelming power of the *status quo*.

After an initial fascination with *The Decline of the West*³, Thomas Mann, for his part, just as polemically treats the «indifference towards the human factor» as the distinctive feature of this philosophy of resignation from such a «defeatist of humanity»:

Spengler [...] is a fatalist. But his fatalism, summed up in the sentence: «We must want the necessary or

nothing at all», is far from having a tragic-heroic character [...]. Rather, its character is that of a malign apodicticity, of a hostility towards the future that masquerades as scientific inexorability. It is not amor fati. With «love», then, it has nothing to do – and this is precisely its most repulsive side. [...] Now, this presumption and this indifference towards the human factor are Spengler's characteristic. (Mann [1924]: 174)

Mann, like Adorno later, attacks Spengler's «hyena prophethood» (*Ibidem*), i.e. his complicity with destiny as an anti-human function: «if there is something even more gruesome than destiny, this is the man who bears it without lifting a finger» (Ibid.: 176). Indeed, it is precisely and only this cynical connivance that makes humanity regress «to the zoological stage, to a cosmic factor without history» (Ibid.: 178). Yet, in hindsight, the recourse to a supposedly necessary law, intrinsic to history-nature, sounds like an alibi for those who, like Spengler, promote regression and then justify it by tying it to that same ruthless biological legality, (in)appropriately raised to the rank of an evil *deus ex machina*. Against Spengler's benevolent acceptance of the inexorable law of necessity, it must be claimed that this law exists only in the head of those who, unable to imagine freedom, as well as to think dialectically about the relationship between universal and particular, want to impose it on others in order to be able to pass off the precipitate of their own *subjective impotence* as a *priori objective omnipotence*.

Hence Spengler's unconditional surrender to *historical naturalness*, which he perceives and presents as a biology elevated to the status of metaphysics, of which there is nothing left but to become willing supporters. And hence also the *historical relativism* of Spengler. Only the biological ages with their symptoms – understood as an immutable factor and a general scheme of the cyclical conception of history – unite civilisations that are otherwise very different from each other, even in their birth, growth and death. The various *Weltanschauungen* unfolding in history are *absolute* in the particular context of a specific civilisation, while they are *relative* in the universal histor-

³ See Mann (1979): 271-279, 281, 283 (Journal entries of Summer 1919).

ical course in which all civilisations arise and disappear like organisms. The accidents (civilisations) change, but the substance (the biological cycle) remains as an implacable destiny.

According to György Lukács, the historicisation of nature is the main road «through which Spengler comes to establish the uncontested lordship of historical relativism», namely of «an increasingly bold and unbridled mysticism» (Lukács [1954]: 406). However, his purpose is not only to historicise nature in order to «subordinate it to historical relativism» in the name of irrationalism and in contempt of scientific objectivity (Ibid.: 406-407). Furthermore, the «prophet of decline» (Groh [1988²]: 366, 373; and Farrenkopf [2001]) also implements a naturalisation of history in order to bind it inextricably to natural absolutism – that is the only way to make ends meet of his catastrophic prognoses, which can now be “scientifically demonstrated”. By virtue of this double-edged operation, the *relativism of history* is intertwined with the *absolutism of nature*, and the result is an undifferentiated amalgam in which there is no room for freedom. Historical relativism is the means and the mask of natural absolutism, which promotes the *causality of nature* as the irrevocable *destiny of history*, and, at the same time, transforms *historical disorder* into the ineluctable *natural order*, i.e. the primary object of science.

By means of the production of insuperable necessity via a pseudo-dialectic of relativism and absolutism, historicisation and naturalisation, Spengler put the «eternal return of the same» of his great inspiration, Nietzsche – of whom, for Thomas Mann, he is the «cunning monkey» (Mann [1961]: 201-202, 202, letter to Ida Boy-Ed, 5.12.1922) and the «detestable parodist» (Mann [1961]: 320-321, 321, letter to Hermann Graf Keyserling, 30.07.1932)⁴ –, to the various closed and discontinuous cycles of civilisation into which the historical course has been relativistically shattered.

⁴ *Mutatis mutandis*, Adorno (1938-1950): 69, also reads some of «the most brutal passages» in Spengler’s *magnum opus* as «an unintended parody of Nietzsche».

Each cycle expresses the specific soul that informs it and with which it identifies: hence the different sciences, arts, mathematics (see Spengler [1918-1922]: 71-124), conceptions of the world, etc. But relativisation is the secret agent working tirelessly for the absolutisation of reality, which must be accepted with “heroic” *amor fati* – namely necessity raised to the heights of virtue. Indeed, the eternal, identical pattern of development and decline – presented as an inescapable and unavoidable law – of the individual (*ergo* relative) civilisations-organisms is even more absolute, to the extent that each of them, however different from the others, is an expression of the natural ever self-same that transcends and substantiates it. In other words, those civilisations are an expression of the one and only ruthless law of history, atomised just to be multiplied to the *n*th degree and, thus, always made to produce the same result: «The perpetual reproduction of man’s guilt towards man» (Adorno [1938-1950]: 68), i.e. of the pattern of fighting and suppressing each other in an incessant struggle for domination. This is, according to Spengler, the absolutely valid operating system for reading and interpreting historical facts. And it is so insofar as it appeals to the ineluctable destiny of life-history-nature, understood, beyond Hegel – therefore definitively, not just temporarily –, as an immense and necessary «slaughterhouse» (Hegel [1917-1920]: I, 58; see below, § 3).

On this basis, Adorno asserts that, in Spengler, «Hegel’s theory that what is real is rational degenerates to a caricature» (Adorno [1938-1950]: 62)⁵. This statement is valid as long as, *in accordance* with Hegel’s theoretical *desideratum* (the equation of rationality and reality; see Hegel [1821]: 24), biological destiny is understood as the degeneration of the course of the world effectively innervated by reason, of which reality is no other than the necessary deployment. But if one does not

⁵ As we have seen above (text and footnote 4) with regard to Thomas Mann’s critique of Spengler’s «hyena prophethood» (Mann [1924]: 174), Adorno conceives the latter as «a caricature» of Hegel and «an unintended parody of Nietzsche».

believe in this postulate – namely if one declares *against* Hegel that «the whole is the untrue»⁶ – and offers to the prophet of decay «the experience of the historical dialectic»⁷, then one should also see in Spengler’s bowing before an irrational totality the implicit disclosure of universal falseness. Paradoxically, Spengler’s *truth* coincides, indeed, with his *particular falseness*, which emblematically reflects and unmasks the universal falseness of that same reality, which he attempts to mould and reconfigure in an amateurish way in the individual details, i.e. the primary object of his sometimes-reckless analogies. Yet this paradox alone, overlooked by Adorno, is precisely what he truly means with «the experience of the historical dialectic».

In contrast, the *falseness* of Spengler is produced by his *particular truth*, which conceals the universal falseness, otherwise revealed by his particular falseness. This is, instead, what I stigmatise as Spengler’s pseudo-dialectics, which is reminiscent of the Kantian «Logik des Scheins», as the art of pretence. Such a “dialectics” fulfils the task of favouring the final victory of the thesis that is a priori intended to prevail and to be proved, which is thus the *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem* of the entire Spenglerian procedure. There are three circular levels of intensity in which Spengler’s hypostatising dialectics, reflecting his own cyclic theory of history, takes place simultaneously and in alternating current in the whole *Decline of the West*.

The first level is that of the subtle, *partial* pseudo-dialectic between relativism and absolutism, historicisation and naturalisation. The second term of the two conceptual pairs is the one actually promoted by Spengler, although he makes the former appear dominant. The latter, indeed, is just

a temporary means for the realisation of the pole that opposes it, with which it is artificially maintained in an asymmetrical, instrumental relationship. Far from being completely eliminated, as happens in the “classical” perfect pseudo-dialectics (in which the removal of the “stumbling” factor is, in fact, complete), the first term is subordinate to the second, which introjects it. While the hypostatisation of the element predestined to survive is total, such is not the elimination of the antithetical one, whose unfinished annihilation, equally predetermined, thus serves to disguise a triumph that was carefully premeditated and then passed off as destiny.

The second level is that of the *complete* pseudo-dialectic, which concerns the relationship between freedom and necessity, singularity and concept. Here, the first instance is entirely suppressed and the second is hypostatized via this abolition. What remains is, therefore, necessity alone, the ontological invariant of life-history-nature and, *ipso facto*, the central category of Spengler’s morphological system. In the third and last level, we have the dialectic between causality and destiny, closely linked to that between freedom and necessity, singularity and concept. In this case, there is an *extreme* pseudo-dialectic, which hides the real identity of its terms, causality and destiny, as well as their full dissolution in the absolute necessity that synthesises and informs them. Properly speaking, this is not even dialectics, since it only includes the synthesis operated by a further third metaphysical element, which subsumes and embodies to the utmost degree the other two elements in false antithesis. This is also the reason why necessity – i.e. law as fate, or life as a metaphysical entity – has the first and last word in Spengler’s (deterministic) universe.

However, «there is no doubt that his philosophy does violence to the world» – Adorno pertinently argues – «but it is the same violence that it endures daily in reality» (Adorno [1938-1950]: 61) and by reality itself. Spengler’s adaptation to irrational reality reproduces and reveals its violent mechanism on a metaphysical plane. With respect to the critique of society, the greatest merit

⁶ While Hegel (1807): 24, asserted: «Das Wahre ist das Ganze», Adorno (1951): aph. 29, 55, states the opposite: «Das Ganze ist das Unwahre».

⁷ Adorno (1938-1950): 55, who also argues that, by virtue of this «historical dialectic» (yet never named in the *Decline*, as well as in other works), Spengler «shows himself to be superior to» Machiavelli, «the proto-bourgeois philosopher of the state».

of Spengler's philosophical-historical morphology is «directing attention towards the “system” in the individual, even where it assumes a semblance of freedom which conceals just the universal dependency» (Ibid.: 59). Unlike many others, he «sees something of the dual character [i.e. the dialectic] of Enlightenment in the era of universal domination» (Ibid.: 52). It is thus correct to concede that Spengler, by seeing in the ostentatious and advertised freedom the cover image of a lack of freedom⁸, «belongs to those theoreticians of extreme reaction whose critique of liberalism proved itself superior in many respects to the progressive one» (Ibid.: 63; see also Adorno [1955]: 140-148). This is where, indeed, the polemical impetus of many of Spengler's “liberal-progressive” critics breaks down (see below, § 4). And in spite of his superficial opponents – moved by a pedantic, scientific spirit and/or blinded by the resentment of the haughty professor towards the outsider enjoying public success –, reality, in Spengler, far from being distorted or transfigured in a decisive way, is, on the contrary, sanctified and maintained exactly as it is in its negative absoluteness.

The conservative character of Spengler's assent to this *total* reality is also evident when he tries to discipline it into a theory that exclusively forces its individual *disjecta membra* who remain, however compelled, the faithful mirror of the cruel universal. Hence the mixture, well grasped by Adorno, of *metaphysics* and *positivism*: on the one hand, Spengler thinks, indeed, of himself as a metaphysician (and he is such), but, on the other hand, he also proudly and rightly presents himself as a stone-cold «man of facts» (Adorno [1938-1950]: 65). In other words, what is violated, in Spengler's philosophy, is not the reality of facts (magnified by him), but rather humanity (never considered by him), which must resign itself to living in that very same reality positively elevated to absolute *fate/fact*: the unescapable life. Nothing, for Spen-

gler, is imaginable beyond being so and not otherwise, beyond the datum as a fact raised to a high pitch, or irrevocable fate. Therefore, ultimately, it is more “convenient” to bow spontaneously before the *totem-totum*⁹ of *esse uti est*, understood as an inescapable, *ergo* metaphysical, biological destiny (see below, § 4).

3. STRUGGLE AND DECLINE: SPENGLER'S OUTCOME

All this means, indeed, overturning Adorno's judgment and conceiving the Hegelian doctrine of the rationality of reality as the comforting caricature (*ante litteram*) of the uncanny Spengler's theory of the irrationality prevailing in history as a «slaughterhouse». The process is dialectically symmetric. Reflecting, from antithetical points of view, the same necessity that animates them identically and with an outcome equally guaranteed, although diametrically opposed (respectively, optimism and pessimism, in contempt of realism), both doctrines, Hegel's and Spengler's, are, in the end, the mirror of each other.

More precisely, in Hegel, necessity takes the form of an immanent teleological process which, as an expression of the «cunning of reason» (Hegel [1917-1920]: I, 83), would redeem the dramatic course of world history. In Spengler what instead remains is the blind vital compulsion “in itself and for itself”, as an emanation of the *dementia of reason*, without any rational teleology that can soothe the pain of humanity by explaining it sensibly or overcoming it on the level of thought. Thus, in Hegel, necessity is bearable insofar as it would represent and protect the fulfilment of a happy fate for humanity (often not for the individual). In Spengler, on the contrary, that very necessity becomes asphyxiating, since it coincides with an inauspicious destiny in its untranscendable metaphysical immanence, lacking in purpose and also indifferent to the acting and suffering of humanity as well as of individuals.

⁸ See Spengler (1918-1922): 615-616, 678, 942, 986, 1061-1064, 1125-1126, 1137-1142, 1193-1195. And Spengler (1933): 78, asserts: «Liberty has always been the liberty of those who wish to obtain the power, not to abolish it».

⁹ On the «totem/totum», see Adorno (1966): 370, and Adorno (1998): 291.

Teleology, which Hegel bans from the philosophy of nature (see Hegel [1830³]: II, § 245, 13-14), returns definitively in the philosophy of spirit and becomes theodicy: the justification and direction of all that exists in the light of revelation and the immanent realisation of Spirit in world history. Reason-Idea overcomes the alienation of nature, integrating it within itself. In other words, by spiritualising it, reason revives that «gigantic corpse» (Ibid.: II, § 241 (*Zusatz*), 360-367, 365) which is nature. Therefore «history» is «the unfolding of God's nature [*Natur*] in a determined particular element» (Hegel [1917-1920]: I, 24). In the end, as in the beginning, «a divine will dominates mightily in the world» (Ibid.: I, 8) and, *eo ipso*, cancels the scandal of pain: the torment of the negative. This is why Hegel can profess that «the great content of world history is rational and must be rational» (*Ibidem*), just as rational is reality itself (Hegel [1821]: 24).

Sub specie temporis or from a partial point of view, history undeniably takes the form of a «slaughterhouse»; but this form, as a product of a particular perspective (namely that of the suffering individuals), is deceptive and fails to grasp the intrinsic rationality of history/reality. Indeed, *sub specie aeternitatis* or from the «totality of all points of view» (*scil.* that of the triumphant Spirit; Hegel [1917-1920]: I, 9), it becomes intelligible that history, now «conceptually understood» in its rational «necessity» (Hegel [1830³]: I, § 147 (*Zusatz*), 288-292, 290), is oriented and informed by a positive final goal (τέλος), with which it coincides. If the negative is, in fact, the functional dialectical obstacle to the final blaze of the positive, the fleeting cruel *Sein* (συμβεβηχός) is suppressed by the permanent good *Sein* (οὐσία), which degrades it to the status of mere appearance (*Schein*). Since the domination of the negative is only provisional (unreal, relative: *Schein*), while that of the positive is definitive (real, absolute: *Sein*), «philosophy of history acquires the meaning of a theodicy» (Ibid.: I, § 147 (*Zusatz*), 290). And this theodicy is obtained, eventually, via a recourse to the device of the dialectic of tragedy, which dismantles the

«tragic as dialectics»¹⁰ by relativising the negative to an ephemeral moment – *essential* in its having-to-be there, yet *accidental* in the transience of its being there – of the implementation of the positive, made absolute and tempered by the struggle with the limited negative.

In Spengler, on the contrary, there is no happy ending or, properly speaking, an end: hence the tragic, always repeating nature of his circular philosophy, in which the pain of mankind remains unredeemed by virtue of the elevation of tragedy to an unsurpassable horizon: that of the pseudo-dialectics. Here, every genuine dialectic, as well as every chance to break out from the vicious eternal recurrence of the violence/domination of life-history-nature, is indeed obliterated. Furthermore, suffering – the «origin» and «goal»¹¹ of world history – is “justified” through the appeal to an absurd, inescapable destiny: the natural one. As the foundation and emanation of the «sleep of reason», it is the alpha and omega, the meaningless sense of the whole eternal historical-biological vicissitude: «Every high civilisation is a tragedy; the history of mankind as a whole is tragic» (Spengler [1931]: 75), because «struggle (*Kampf*) is the *original fact* of life, is life itself» (Spengler [1933]: 14), and because, as we know, tragedy eliminates dialectics and, with it, the very possibility of change. It is precisely in the conflict, the tragic raised to an insuperable circular dialectic, that Spengler sees the essence of the «Faustian man», for whom «life means struggling, overcoming, winning through» (Spengler [1918-1922]: 436). Nevertheless, he rightly reproaches – and therein lies his great topicality – the hypocrisy of the nineteenth century (which is the same as today) for having «merely put [the struggle] into mechanical-utilitarian form» (Ibid.: 437). This signifies that conflict, by no means eliminated, is rather transferred, disguised as economic competition.

¹⁰ Szondi (1993): 113-115, 113, letter to Fritz Arnold, 13.12.1960. See also Szondi (1961): 173, 196, 199, 213.

¹¹ See Kraus (1919²): 69, who wrote the renowned verse «Ursprung ist das Ziel».

In particular, Spengler denounces, in a similar way to Engels¹², the fierce competition of the commodity economy aimed at subordinating everything (including politics) to its lust for profit. For both thinkers, economics is indeed nothing but a pharisaic perpetuation, softened in manner but not in substance, of the ineradicable natural unrest (see Spengler [1918-1922]: 986; and Spengler [1933]: 28-30), which Spengler magnifies, however, in its most “virile” form: the open *bellum*, harbinger of greatness. «War is the creator of all great things. All that is meaningful in the stream of life has emerged through victory and defeat» (Spengler [1918-1922]: 1007). Blinded by the fata morgana of Nietzsche’s «*gefährlich leben* (to live dangerously)» (Nietzsche [1882]: aph. 283, 526-527), Spengler does not realise that the extreme competitive spirit of Western civilisation is, dialectically, the cause of both its triumph and its defeat. Precisely the disaster of the First World War, as a vain showdown between identical imperialisms under different banners, offers irrefutable proof of the «decline of the West», struck to death by its stolid rapacious instinct.

What matters to Spengler is to point out that «history is something that takes no notice whatever of our expectations» (Spengler [1931]: 6). «History recks nothing of human logic» (Spengler [1933]: 13), just like «the logic of destiny has never taken human wishes into account» (Ibid.: VII; see also 4). History coincides, therefore, with the blind *force of things*, which breaks and reifies men. Like «the primordial world of animals» (Adorno [1970]: 181), the historical universe is the realm of unleashed terror, perpetuated courtesy of the inextinguishable «beast-of-prey nature of man» (Spengler [1931]: 72). Hence the relentless struggle of its voracious inhabitants, living expressions of the “beast-of-prey ethics”, con-

ceived as an ontological invariant of (natural and social) history (see below, § 4). Unlike the herbivore that unconsciously *undergoes* its fate, man, as a conscious «beast of prey», *is* that very same fate (see Spengler [1931]: 14-22). The struggle is the «grand meaning that ennobles life, the *amor fati* of Nietzsche» (Ibid.: 22). Indeed, as we have seen, «the struggle, which is a necessity of nature» (Spengler [1933]: 132), «is life itself» (Ibid.: 14): *ipso facto*, man fulfils his terrifying “beast-of-prey destiny”, which he cannot escape and with which he identifies¹³. Thus, Spengler can again conclude that «human history is war history» (Ibid.: 7), «then as now» (Spengler [1931]: 53).

History, like life, is a perennial disaster, without meaning or redemption. Both, history and life, stride on «from catastrophe to catastrophe» (Ibid.: 28), merging into a single natural entity, in an indissoluble union under the sign of «the eternity of annihilation» (Adorno [1966]: 354). Indeed, if war is the «form» (Spengler [1933]: 24) of the total natural horizon – or, more briefly, if «life *is* war» (Ibid.: 163) – then also «peace» will be nothing but «the continuation of war with different means» (Ibid.: 24)¹⁴. In other words: «War is the primary politics (*Urpolitik*) of *everything* that lives, and so much so that in the deeps battle and life are one, and being (*Sein*) and will-to-battle expire together» (Spengler [1918-1922]: 1109). Therefore, war is nothing but the most evident declination of the universal, vitalistic, metaphysical struggle (the *bellum omnium contra omnes*) at the particular level of the pseudo-meaning of history. Shortly, war is identical to life in its blind self-reproduction through «creative destruction» (Schumpeter [1942]: 81-86).

An eloquent passage at end of *The Decline of the West* clarifies even better Spengler’s conception of history:

¹² See Engels (1844): 499-524, especially 504: «The law of the strong hand, the open highway robbery of the Middle Ages, became humanised when it passed over into trade [...], into the mercantile system. [...] Such is the humanity of trade. And this hypocritical way of misusing morality for immoral purposes is the pride of the free-trade system».

¹³ On the psychoanalytical mechanism of identification of the powerless victim with the omnipotent executioner, see Freud (1936): 125-129. See also below, § 4.

¹⁴ Here Spengler echoes a famous passage from Clausewitz (1832): XII and 19: «War is the continuation of policy with other means».

Ever in history it is life and life only – race-quality, the triumph of the will to power – and not the victory of truths, discoveries, or money that signifies. World history is the world court¹⁵, and it has ever decided in favour of the stronger, fuller, and more self-assured life – decreed to it, namely, the right to exist, regardless of whether its right would hold before a tribunal of waking-consciousness. Always it has sacrificed truth and justice to might and race, and passed doom of death upon men and peoples in whom truth was more than deeds, and justice than power. (Spengler [1918-1922]: 1194)

On the basis of such a positivistic Darwinism, Spengler infers, emphasising it, the pan-tragedy of life-history-nature, which is driven by an ineluctable, catastrophic fate. Hence, he sees only one “chance” for humanity: embracing with «brave pessimism» this «tragic view of life» (Spengler [1933]: 13), on the altar of which everything is sacrificed. Just as “freedom” coincides with «the recognition of necessity», so the “victory” over destiny equals, for Spengler, its acceptance, that is, the glorification of one’s own defeat at its hands. Devastated by the force of things, human beings act and suffer the tragedy of that very irresistible dynamic sadomasochistically, reproducing it permanently with no possibility of redemption. Humanity thus becomes agent and (in)sane bearer of the inhumanity of the natural course, just as the pompous metaphysics of «souldom» (*Seelentum*), magnified in the *Decline*, degenerates into a plant state, the “plantdom” (*Pflanzentum*).

And yet Spengler is firmly convinced that, only by swimming along with this ominous current, one can aspire to «make history», but without ever being able to avoid shipwreck, which is the necessary outcome of life *tout court*:

The man who is incapable of experiencing or enduring tragedy can never be a figure of world significance. He cannot make history unless he experiences as it really is – tragic, permeated by destiny, and in

consequence meaningless, aimless, and unmoral in the eyes of the worshippers of utility. (Spengler [1933]: 13; see also Spengler [1918-1922]: 53)

Unable and indifferent to think rigorously «the dialectic of concept and singularity» (Adorno [1938-1950]: 58), Spengler officiates the sacrifice of convenience – while skilfully concealing it with the hypostatising dialectic of relativism and absolutism – of the particular to the universal, of history to nature, of man to biological destiny. Thus, the whole natural vicissitude takes the form of a colossal «charnel-house of long-dead interiorities» (Lukács [1916-1920]: 55), always returning to itself, but in various changing forms. «If, as Hegel argues, the whole is what is true» – Adorno claims for his part – «then it is so only if the force of the whole is absorbed into the knowledge of the particular» (Adorno [1938-1950]: 59), avoiding, *eo ipso*, to smash it to pieces. And, again, only if the fragment resonates, in turn, with the whole, informing it of its own irreducible singularity.

Yet «the concept of fate, which subjects man to blind domination, reflects the domination exercised by men» (Ibid.: 68), without solution of continuity, in every historical-natural cycle. This is, for Spengler, the totality of history as an insurmountable second nature. Ultimately, Adorno asserts, «the metaphysics of the soul assists his positivism by hypostasizing the principle of relentlessly self-perpetuating domination as something eternal and inexorable» (Ibid.: 69), namely as an indisputable fate/fact. Hence Spengler’s hatred of materialism, which «is not sufficiently positivistic for him and would like the world to be other than it is» (Ibid.: 65). And hence also the destruction of the very same thought of the alternative in the name of the myth of the incontrovertible datum/fact: «Those who hold power in the totalitarian states, those who despise their own lies hate the truth and cannot rest until there is no one left who dares to dream» (Ibid.: 61) the possibility of a different state of affairs.

The unsurpassable cyclical naturalism, ontologically inherent in the vortex of history, reveals the intimate kinship between the world of men

¹⁵ Schiller (1786): 68, uses for the first time the expression: «Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht». See also Hegel (1821): § 340, 503.

and the world of beasts: committing evil so as not to have to suffer it, being executioners so as not to be victims. «Human history, progressive natural domination, continues the unconscious one of nature, of devouring and being devoured» (Adorno [1966]: 348-349). Until the decline inexorably arrives to put an end to a cycle – followed, equally mercilessly, by the fatal dawn of a new cycle, different in its manifestations, but always identical in substance to all the others that have preceded it. The details and accidents (men, cultures, civilisations) change and are destined to disappear almost without a trace; the totality, on the other hand, animated by the evil essence of domination, is as immutable and eternal as the mortal wound it inflicts to humanity.

This is, for Spengler, the invariable dimension of world-nature history, the object of his metaphysics of fate/fact and subject to the force of things.

4. UTOPIA AND DECAY: ADORNO'S PERSPECTIVE

Even if under the spell of his peculiar metaphysics of fate/fact, Spengler shows indeed an extraordinary capacity for critical analysis, which represents his greatest relevance today and his “true” – negative – legacy. With his usual taste for paradox, Adorno grasps this ambiguity, when he states that Spengler is «clever enough not to be clever» (Adorno [1938-1950]: 60). This signifies that Spengler's ability to detect the anti-democratic tendencies in democracies (or «the potentialities of domination»; *Ibid.*: 57) is, dialectically, the result of his «affinity with the ideal of domination» (*Ibidem*) as well as of the fact he does not have to reckon with the self-deceptions of bourgeois ideology, which deludes itself into claiming to represent the realisation of ideas that are, on the contrary, only the appearance of truth.

In addition to what we have already seen, Spengler highlights the uncanny *reversal of society in nature* (see Spengler [1931]: 55-56), by means of the «beast-of-prey nature of man» (or the «logic

of domination», in Adorno's words), who becomes both the victim and executioner. Therefore, for Spengler, any rebellion of mankind against the nature that lives within it and is stronger than it is doomed to failure:

This is the beginning of man's tragedy – for nature is the stronger of the two. Man remains dependent on nature, which, in spite of everything, embraces him within itself, as its creature. All the great civilisations are defeats. [...] The fight against nature is hopeless and yet it will be fought out to the bitter end. (Ibid.: 35-36)

Man's struggle against nature is, more precisely, man's schizophrenic struggle against himself, since hard-fought nature is nothing more than the external, immediately perceptible form of the rapacious human nature. Nonetheless, Spengler, on the one hand, seems to ignore the effects of this man-nature struggle (see also above, § 3) and, on the other hand, he does not realise that his own conception is an effect, almost an offshoot, of this very same conflict. Adorno, for his part, exploits this lack of awareness as a critical pick-lock to dismantle Spengler's philosophical conception: «Nature, with which men have had to struggle in history, is pushed aside by Spengler's philosophy with a sovereign gesture. In return, history itself is transformed into a second nature, as blind, dead-end, and fateful as only plant life can be» (Adorno [1938-1950]: 67).

Spengler is so busy naturalising history that he «does not grasp the degree to which historical fatality, which absorbs all his attention, results from the need to confront and transform nature. He sees history aesthetically» (*Ibid.*: 65-66). On the contrary,

What can be called human freedom constitutes itself solely in man's efforts to break the bondage of nature. If this is ignored, if the world is treated as a mere manifestation of the pure essence of man, freedom becomes lost in the exclusively human character of history. Freedom develops only through the resistance of the existent; if freedom is posited as absolute and souldom (Seelentum) is raised to a governing princi-

ple (zum herrschenden Prinzip), that principle itself falls prey to the merely existent (dem bloßen Dasein). (Ibid.: 67)

Due to his metaphysical positivism, Spengler does not go so far as to foresee that the possible total defeat of nature at the hands of man (today an extremely real risk) would represent the annihilation of the victor and the “revenge” of the collapsing defeated foe. The paradoxical victory in defeat of those who triumph by losing reveals the chiasmus of domination, that Spengler overlooks: by dominating, humanity is dominated (the domination of men by other men), while nature dominates (reproducing itself in society), via its own domination.

Nevertheless, according to Adorno, «Spengler’s specific prognoses are [...] astonishing. First, a *military prediction*» (Ibid.: 53; see also Spengler [1918-1922]: 1097-1099), the result of the fact that, unlike many other conservative or even reactionary intellectuals, blinded by a *Kriegsbegeisterung* and a romantic vision of war completely detached from reality (see Bruzzone [2020]: 106-168), Spengler treasures the gruesome experience of the First World War:

The mere existence of these [professional] armies [of voluntary and enthusiastic soldiers, that will replace the huge standing armies] is no substitute for war [as it was, according to Spengler and all European governments, in the nineteenth century]. They are there for war and they want war. In two generations their will is going to be stronger than that of all those who want peace. (Spengler [1918-1922]: 1098)

Spengler thus foreshadows the Second World War, as an imminent, schizophrenic clash of civilisations. And he even prophesies that those «catastrophes of blood and terror» (Ibid.: 1099), caused by the belligerent states, will be followed by «a *time without history* in a demonic way» (Adorno [1938-1950]: 53): the so called «end of history» (Fukuyama [1989] and [1992]). Relentless economic competition replaces war, of which it is the continuation with the *same* means, as much as society is the continuation of nature with the same

means, namely a second nature. The inexorable vortex of domination – the ontological invariant of life – condemns, indeed, history, society and culture to a «static state» – a reified state of nature –, which, for its part, «compels the incessant and deadly repetition of what has already been accepted» (Adorno [1938-1950]: 54). So, the messenger of decadence is among the first to show how history itself, like the species and the civilisations that alternate in its course, becomes liable to extinction.

At the same time, Spengler predicts «a *change in the essence of the political party*», and «emphasises the mechanisms which allow the party system to turn into dictatorship»; so «the principle of democracy develops into its opposite through the rule of the party (Ibid.: 54-55). Following Max Weber’s insight, Spengler sees the transformation taking place in the parties of the masses which are completely informed and directed by the economy, raised to the status of an irresistible force of nature. Parties thus become instruments of enrichment, as well as mere “followers” of a «cæsaristic» dictator or of some minorities equally dictatorial (see Spengler [1918-1922]: 1125-1126).

Spengler senses that *politics will disappear* in general indifference: «All great political questions are solved, as they are solved sooner or later in every *Zivilisation*: inasmuch as questions are no longer felt as questions and are not asked» (Ibid.: 615-616). According to him, «among the gravest signs of decay [...] is the fact that, in the course of the nineteenth century, economics came to be considered more important than politics» (Spengler [1933]: 28). Spengler also goes so far as to foresee that, in the age of the decline of metaphysics – which «has exhausted its possibilities» as well as the civilisation that gave birth to it and has been informed by it –, economics will turn into metaphysics, assuming (at first) «a social-ethical and social-economic character» (Spengler [1918-1922]: 471). Yet, today, economics can proudly present itself in the pure and exclusively economic form, which no longer tolerates anything ethical, except the mask – the simulacrum – of ethics, that allows it to better perpetrate infamy. Society,

meanwhile, has been confined to the evanescent, but functional, dimension of the social network.

If, however, Spengler thinks, on the one hand, that humanity is eventually destined to live in an apolitical and ahistorical world, he conceives, on the other hand, the inevitable clash between economics and politics as still open (see *Ibid.*: 986). The “fatal” antagonism between the Political and the Economic – i.e. between «cæsarism», that is the extreme reaction of politics in the final phase of *Zivilisation*, and the «dictatorship of money», which reifies everything – represents «the decisive battle of history» (*Ibid.*: 1193) and for history itself: namely a *Kulturkampf*. At stake here is, indeed, the only possibility of revoking the supremacy of economics (see *Ibidem*), which annihilates history and aims at subordinating everything to its unrelenting lust for profit. Cæsarism, as a phenomenon and *Weltanschauung*, is invoked, illusorily, by Spengler to resolve the crisis of politics and history (hence the dreadful apolitical and ahistorical nature of *Zivilisation*). As a product and embodiment of this very crisis, cæsarism epitomises, for Spengler, the last chance to open a new political and historical horizon (*Ibid.*: 1194-1195)¹⁶.

Furthermore, he prophesies the *advent of post-truth*, as a mere personal possession of “truth”, devoid of any objective value, *ergo* no longer potentially subversive. Everyone has their own truth and claims it with pride, because there seems to be no longer any truth or anything that aspires to be such. Spengler grasps the relativism of “post-truth” for what it really is: an invitation to stop once and for all to seek truth, only so as to accept and endure what power, through the media, decrees as truth, namely the tautological proclamation and reproduction of itself. In Spengler’s words:

What is truth? For the multitude, that which it continually reads and hears. A poor wretch may settle somewhere and collect grounds on which to deter-

mine “the truth” but what he obtains is just his truth. The other, the public truth of the moment, which alone matters for effects and successes in the fact-world [Tatsachenwelt], is today a product of the press. What the press wills, is true. Its commanders evoke, transform, interchange truths. (Ibid.: 1139)

In the end, as Adorno points out (see Adorno [1938-1950]: 50), Spengler unveils the *bad essence of free time*, which is entirely managed and manipulated by the mass-media (the press, cinema, etc.). Before Adorno’s famous critique, Spengler stigmatises the *Kulturindustrie* (see Horkheimer, Adorno [1947]: 141-191) as a form of narcotisation of the masses, subjected in their free time to the very productive process that makes them insubstantial as human beings (see Adorno [1938-1950]: 50-51): «Intellectual tension knows only one form of recreation, that which is specific to the metropolis, namely, the release of tension in the form of relaxation, “distraction”» (Spengler [1918-1922]: 678). In Adorno’s more radical perspective: «The original affinity between business and entertainment reveals itself in the meaning of entertainment itself: as society’s apologia. To be entertained means to be in agreement» (Adorno, Horkheimer [1947]: 166-167).

Unlike his liberal-progressive opponents (see above, § 2), Spengler understands that weapons of mass *distraction* are even more effective than weapons of mass *destruction*: «The quantity of organised amusement is converted into the quality of organised cruelty» (Horkheimer, Adorno [1947]: 160). This is why the system’s media-recreational machinery, with its «intellectual artillery» (i.e. pounding propaganda), grants its free-slaves fun, a false freedom of thought (Spengler [1918-1922]: 1138, 1141) and of the press (*Ibid.*: 1061-1064, 1137-1140), which is nothing but a surrogate for the liberty that has been actually obliterated. Yet this amusing surrogate is able to disguise domination as democratisation, and to make the masses accept the most ruthless lack of freedom as the utmost liberty. Whoever, like Spengler, is not blind to the «monstrous drama» (*Ibid.*: 1138) of the complete domination over the masses through the press and

¹⁶ The opening of a new historical and political horizon is precisely the task that Spengler undertakes in *Jahre der Entscheidung* (1933).

propaganda (Ibid.: 1140-1141)¹⁷, is fully aware of the necessity to «demand not freedom *for* the press, but freedom *from* the press» (Ibid.: 1140). Indeed – and also this remark is absolutely topical:

There is no more appalling caricature of freedom of thought. Formerly no one was allowed to think freely; now it is permitted, but no one is capable of it any more. Now people want to think only what they are supposed to want to think, and this they consider freedom. (Ibid.: 1141)

Nevertheless, Spengler's analysis detects and blames the effects rather than the cause of the problem. In other words, while Spengler is not blind to the mechanism of domination, he is instead blinded by domination itself: hence the ambiguity underlined above (see also § 1). Nietzsche's famous aphorism on monsters and the abyss finds its culminating example in Spengler: «If thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee» (Nietzsche [1886]: aph. 146, 98). The very *prevalence of domination* – Spengler's greatest flaw – obscures his vision with respect to all those tendencies that go beyond it. This is why «his sympathies are with the rulers [...], his entire image of history is measured by the ideal of domination» (Adorno [1938-1950]: 57). So «the full force of Spengler's scorn is directed not at the manipulators but at their victims, at those who fall prey to the “civilising” industry of an advertising culture» (Ibid.: 51). And, moreover, «Spengler's prediction that the power to think will die out culminates in a taboo on thought which he attempts to justify on the basis of the inexorable course of history» (Ibid.: 56)¹⁸.

This is what Adorno stigmatises as «the *death of spirit*» and sees as «the Archimedean point of

Spengler's scheme» (Ibid.: 56-57). Namely, this is the exact point at which metaphysics breaks the appearance of positivism and reverses it into an *oxymoronic metaphysical positivism*, where fact is elevated to destiny (see above, § 2). Spengler himself reveals paradigmatically this essential turning point in his philosophy: «Life is bound only to facts, consists only of facts, and tends only to facts. Truths are entities of thought, and their validity must be sought within the “realm of thoughts”. [...] Where reality begins, the realm of thoughts ends» (Spengler [1921]: 70). As Spengler reasserts, if «*for life there are no truths, but only facts*» (Ibid.: 73), and if the latter are, *eo ipso*, «*more important than truths*» (Ibid.: 67), then facts become metaphysical entities like life itself. Therefore, «despite his belief in facts and his relativistic scepticism, Spengler introduces a metaphysical principle» – life – «as the ultimate explanation of the historical dynamic» (Adorno [1938-1950]: 65). Hence the fatal/factual combination of metaphysics (life) and positivism (the “fatal facts”, determined by life) in the name of «a latent philosophy of identity» (*Ibidem*) – precisely the identity of life and facts. Indeed, the magnified life – i.e. the hardest fact, or the “realm of facts” – is nature itself, that is the only reality ever self-same. Before this ominous fate all that remains is to bow spontaneously, as Spengler repeats throughout *The Decline of the West*.

Against Spengler's metaphysics of fate/fact, it is necessary to produce

Perspectives [...] which set the world beside itself, alienated from itself, revealing its cracks and fissures, as needy and distorted as it will one day lay there in the messianic light. To win such perspectives without caprice or violence, wholly by the feel for objects, this alone is what thinking is all about. (Adorno [1951]: aph. 153, 283)

These perspectives are nothing but «the forces», hidden from Spengler's «attentive gaze» as obscured by the preponderance of domination, that are «set free in decay» (Adorno [1938-1950]: 71). Namely the forces of the vanquished, who are relentlessly wasted by life-history-nature and disowned by «Spengler's hunter's eye» (*Ibidem*):

¹⁷ Adorno (1938/1950): 52, rightly claims that «Spengler prophesied Goebbels».

¹⁸ And, indeed, this «taboo on thought» – or even *Denkverbot* – is exactly Spengler's *desideratum*: «If the influence of this book leads men of the new generation to turn from poetry to technology, from painting to the merchant marine, from epistemology to politics, they are doing what I desire. One could wish nothing better for them» (Spengler [1918-1922]: 57).

The powerless, who at Spengler's command are to be thrown aside and annihilated by history, are the negative embodiment within the negativity of this civilisation of everything which promises, however feebly, to break the dictatorship of civilisation and put an end to the horror of pre-history. In their protest lies the only hope that fate and power will not have the last word. (Ibidem)

After all, it is still a question of moving, as Marx proclaimed, from pre-history (natural history) to history (fully human), founding a civilisation suitable for *all* men. And precisely this transition is «the utopia that, silent and questioning, is contained in the image of» every «declining civilisation» (*Ibidem*). But such a utopia demands refusing to react to historical disappointment via a recourse to the convenient idea of fatal/factual decline¹⁹, which is nothing but the stigma of a “consoling” metaphysical impossibility aimed, then as now, at justifying an escape in the face of the imperative duty to think and act for the best in the context of the worse. Ultimately, in the no man's land between decline and utopia, Spengler and Adorno meet and their legacies intertwine: in the forces preserved and released in decay. Only by means of those forces it is possible to not get lost in the darkness that follows sunset and to prepare for the dawn of something truly different from everything that has been.

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¹⁹ See Cioran (1957): 1519-1559, who has dealt properly with the idea of decadence as an elective asylum for those who are defeated by history.

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