

# Spingler's Conception of the Decline of Civilizations

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## Abstract

**The idea of the decline of civilizations is one of the most important issues and topics that have occupied and greatly concerned the human mind in general and the Western mind in particular because the human being hardly thinks about his past and present without vehement aim to plan for the future. As such, the interest in the fate of each civilization and its future generates a permanent anxiety caused by the uncertainty of the future; therefore, what relates to the fate of each civilization and its future in light of the challenges it faces as well as what it generates of anxiety and confusion, occupies people's attention strongly because it forms a mixture of what they expected and what slipped their attention. Accordingly, reading history of each civilization reveals that the most ancient civilizations and the most powerful and great ones could not stand and were not destined to survive, but rather they all met the same inevitable fate that awaits them, which is perishing, as confirmed by the perception of the German thinker Oswald Spengler, who is one of the most prominent Western thinkers who scrutinized The issue of the decline of civilizations, as his theory reflected the fears that swept and haunted the peoples of Europe after World War I, after the West emerged economically and demographically devastated. The rapid spread of fascism and Nazism in Italy and Germany, accompanied by fear and anxiety about destiny and future, positioned West's thought on edge, which made Spengler's theory a turning point in European history in particular.**

**Keywords:** civilization, decline, West, destiny, perishing.

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## Introduction:

The study of the history and destiny of civilizations has attracted many historians, philosophers of history and scholars of civilization. Given that the idea of decline (death) is closely related to human beings, it was associated with the German thinker Oswald Spengler (Spengler) (1880-1936) with the history of civilizations and nations, yet it did not go beyond the context of human beings as part of civilization and its founders at the same time. His theory of the decline and decay of civilizations also represents one of the most important theories that appeared in modern Western philosophical thought, as he investigated the characteristics of each civilization, the factors that lead to their emergence and the reasons for their fall, especially through his work *The Decline of the West* (1923). In his book he shared his philosophy of history as a result of,

many believe, Germany's defeat in World War I. When he began writing the first volume of *The Decline of the West* (1918), he tried to focus on Germany as a nation in Europe, but the Agadir crisis in 1911 affected him greatly, which led him to expand his research circle, considering that the wars at the beginning of the twentieth century were signs of decline. Spengler's theory is based on the idea that history is composed of living organic components, which are naturally represented and manifested in civilizations (Turki, 2006, p. 117). Since all living beings perish after their growth and development in a stage of time; the civilization that these being established resembled in its cycle his life, so the history of each civilization is like the history of man or animal or plant alike. History, Spingler maintained, is not a mere sequence of events, but an organic mechanism that governs the initiation, prosperity, and decline of civilizations.

### **Characteristics of Civilization and The Organic Interpretation of History:**

Spengler considers civilizations, in a sense, analogous to humans because they are born, grow, mature and die. Humans are composed of biological cells, while civilizations are composed of humans who themselves die and are replaced by new generations. Just like the cells that change in our bodies every eight years, so do civilizations; they perish and are later replaced by others (Colin, 1959, p. 129). This perception of civilization is clearly shown in his book *The Decline of the West* (1923), in which he talked about the fate of Western civilization and predicted its inevitable fall. Spengler also considered at the same time that there is no continuity in history, thus refuting the theory of continuous progress in understanding the course of history, in terms of being a continuous advancement of the human mind to infinity, affirming that history is a theater for a large number of civilizations that are subject to decline, precisely as what happens to organic beings (Nazmi, n.d., p. 292).

Spengler also called for a Copernican revolution and reading of history, just as Copernicus revolutionized the Ptolemaic conception of the world, which showed that the earth is the center around which the planets revolve, so that Spengler tried to correct the illusions of European historians who imagined their civilization as a fixed center for other civilizations, meaning that Western Europe is the center of the world (Subhi, 1975, p. 247). Spengler (1923) believed that there may be civilizations that surpass Western civilization in terms of demography as well as in terms of its spiritual greatness and hence achievements.

Spengler tried to place historical thinking at a new horizon, the kind of which that does not limit itself to merely describing civilizations as a whole, but rather looks forward to predicting their course of development and their future destiny. He considered his book "*The Decline of the West*" (1923) as a new attempt to predict history, by determining the future destiny of the only culture in our time and on our planet, which is the highest stage of development: the Western European American civilization (Herman, 2000, p. 290). Therefore, Spengler starts from dividing world history into alternating civilizations, and each civilization represents an

independent unit for and by itself because each civilization expresses a certain spirit which differs radically from others, so each one has a characteristic that distinguishes it from others (Tahtah , 2000, p. 69). There exists no civilization that offers global and unifying principles, but rather each civilization has its own philosophy and perception, and each one has a limited lifespan and cycle that limits it from lasting long. Spengler does not believe in civilization's ability to revive its heritage, a belief he received severe criticism from his contemporary historians and philosophers. This implies that civilizations are independent each from the other, as each one forms an enclosed circle on itself, with no commonalities between it and other civilizations except for windows that allow interaction without damaging or even negotiating the essence and spirit of the other civilization (Nazmi , n.d., p. 294).

Therefore, if the demise of the individual is inevitable, so is it inevitable for every civilization to perish, and the world's history, in Spengler's view, is nothing but an account of the life of these civilizations. If concepts such as birth, youth and old age and death apply to every organic being, so it is for every civilization. In the context of describing each civilization, Spengler says: "Civilization is born at the moment when a great spirit awakens out of primordial proto-spirituality and detaches itself from it as an image detaches itself from what has no image, as finite emerges from infinite, it can also be seen that civilization is born and grows in an environmental order that can be precisely defined; civilization as a whole has its childhood and youth and maturity and old age. Civilizations die when its spirituality realizes and exhausts all its full possible potential in the form of peoples affiliated to it, languages, religions, arts, scientific discoveries and states" (Spengler, 1923, p. 12). The idea that Spengler is communicating is that the birthplace of civilization depends on the awakening of this great spirit/ soul which proves its existence in a certain environment through its creativity and achievements which allows it to confront all obstacles and difficulties. However, there is an inevitable stage that must be reached by civilization, it is reaching its inevitable destiny which is to collapse and decline and disappearance. perishing happens after, as aforesaid, exhausting all its creative potentialities and energies from arts and other areas of life.

Each civilization has its new potentials for self-expression. These potentials start up, mature then decompose and never return to its original state. In Spengler's view, there is no single sculpture, single drawing, one form of mathematics or of physics, but there are rather many forms that differs from the other in essence; And each one is limited by a certain period and self-sufficient; Just as it happens in different types of plants each one has a specific time to bloom and bear fruit; And a certain model for growth and perishing and decay (Colin, 1959, p. 141). Each civilization has its own unique style and mode of expression distinguished from the style of other civilizations, almost completely different. Such a style we can observe in various domains and aspects of life; We find it in art, religion, science, politics and social structure. Therefore, there is no such thing as general human civilization, but rather there are different civilizations that have their characteristics and specific ages, precisely as is the case for biological beings.

The birth of a new civilization vivifies, through the spirit and the religious idea it holds, the absolute chaos that was prevalent before it, the chaos, yields to the will and order of the principles of this civilization which stimulates a vivid creativity in various cultural fields, thus ensuring the continuity the vitality of this civilization. This religious idea or spirit of the rising civilization pertains creativity and continuity, allowing the inevitable movement through the phases of rising to stability, then old age and decline. Decline means the drainage and exhaustion of this Civilization's ability to produce more philosophical and creative ideas from the grounds upon which its source of creativity once rested, and it also means the debility to sustain order. (Al-Sharqawi , 1985 , p . 201). Spingler (1923) argued that each civilization has a history, and this history is the history of the primary self of the first people who embrace a world view that manifests itself in various aspects of life. Accordingly, there cannot be two identical civilizations in all respects, because each civilization embraces a culture and has an independent history in itself that is not affected by the history of any other civilization. The independent history/ world of view of each civilization contains an essence that renders it unique and thus cannot be influenced by other civilizations; there cannot be two identically shared world view, if there is, Spingler stated, it is only marginal and on false premise. It sometimes happens when two civilizations meet and one of them is stronger, but the other is more creative and more authentic or at least equal to it, the defeated one is forced to conform outwardly with the dominant civilization as long as it cannot express its pure nature. The surface reveals that the weaker civilization has been overcome or disappeared, while its latent world view shields itself behind the outer shell that was imposed on it in order to survive.

Based on that, Spengler believes in the uniqueness of each civilization, which entails that civilization's world view cannot be transferred from one nation to another because it perishes with the nation itself; The civilization of Greece died with Greece; Arab civilization diminished with the decline of the Arabs; Persian civilization had the same fate. Therefore, concepts such as civilizational inheritance or embracing the soul of another civilization, or continuing a civilization through another one ... are all expressions without meaning or value for Spengler (Said, 2003, p. 86). In addition, each civilization dies exactly as an individual dies, and when an individual dies others come after him and he disappears forever (Said, 2003, p. 86). By the same token, every civilization lives within a closed circle that does not affect or be affected by others; Especially with regard to the spiritual aspect. Spengler refuses categorically that the specific soul that gave birth to a civilization to be able to do the same for another civilization. This confirms the importance of the spiritual aspect for Spengler in forming civilization. In addition to that, Spengler also mentions that each civilization has elements specific to it and others alien to it, and that these elements are determined by the primary self of each civilization; Therefore, Spengler believes that it is impossible for an individual or individuals who belong to one of the civilizations to fully and accurately understand another civilization other than their own. This is because the alien elements belong to a different world view, which has a definite interpretation and a different perceptual framework to interpret the world (Spengler, 1923, p. 14). Spingler

went further into denying the possibility of understanding any human being for any other civilization he does not belong to; On the grounds that he is a stranger to this civilization; And therefore, it cannot be understood accurately.

### **Life-cycle of Civilizations and Their inevitable Fate:**

In order not to deviate from the organic conception of civilization, Spengler likened the phases that civilizations go through to the seasons of the year. Because each civilization has spring, summer, autumn and winter, each phase of each of the great ancient civilizations has characteristics that distinguishes it from others (Badawi, 1984, p. 11). After applying the specificity that characterizes the living being to civilization (in terms of growth, development and perishing) he also made an analogy between seasons (spring, autumn, winter and summer) and life-cycles of civilizations. Therefore, he did not go beyond the organic context of history.

#### **2.1. The distinctive characteristics of the phases of civilizations:**

From this standpoint, Spengler set for each cycle of civilization a set of characteristics that distinguishes it. The spring of civilization is represented in the period of heroism, that is, the life of myths and epic poetry as in the period of "Homer" for the Greeks. As for social life in this stage, it is a rural agricultural feudal life (Al-Nashar, 1998, p. 346). Thus, what distinguishes the spring period is the dominance of myths. As for life, it was a simple life limited to what is agricultural, while the dominant system was feudal where relationship conflict between the master and the slave ordered society. The role of the master lies in issuing orders, while the task of the slave depends on serving the land for a meager wage.

The summer of civilization is the third stage in which ambitious leaderships with creativity and civilizational achievement are embodied. During this stage «cities and political organization appear and it is at the same time a revolution against mythology where intelligence appears that pushes religion back and presents a scientific form of awareness» (Al-Nashar, 1998, p. 346), here we find that what distinguishes this stage from stages Civilization is development and prosperity in various fields and sciences, and the emergence of cities and thus the emergence of urban life versus rural life that was prevalent before. The existence of the city necessarily necessitates the existence of a political system that regulates its affairs and laws enacted by politicians which serve as a translation of human made laws.

As for autumn of civilization, it represents the stage of full maturity for spiritual and cultural ideals of the civilization. It also expresses the continuous progress of civilization. This stage also includes «the period of growing cities and widespread trade and central properties, the dissolution of religion and poverty of inner life, rationality and enlightenment also characterize the autumn of civilizations. » (Al-Nashar, 1998, p. 347). This stage expresses the first signs of aging and exhaustion, it is a period of doubt and loss of the spiritual aspects, which paves the way

to the material perception of the world. Materialism redefines and the prevailing value system in the name of enlightenment, i.e., the sovereignty of reason in this stage and faith in its ability to achieve progress. Religion serves a marginal role, unlike at the period of rise.

The last stage of the stages of civilization as described by "Spengler" is the winter stage. It represents the last phase where every civilization reaches after it loses its creative spirit and its life comes to an end. So, "the withering of artistic creativity, the death of religion, the emergence of doubt and worship of science by the degree of benefit from science, and the emergence of wars for the political reasons" (Al-Nashar, 1998, p. 347) is one of the most prominent features of this stage.

We also find in the final phase of each civilization what Spengler called "revisited religiosity", which means returning to a somewhat altered form of religious feelings that were prevalent in prosperous days. This period is followed by another period of commitment and blind fanaticism for piety. Trying to impose its religion on others through politics; This is what proves, in Spengler's view, the close and profound connection between religious readiness and innateness and the existential necessity for it (religion). The stages that civilization goes through are expressed by Spengler as «culture always springs from religious creative practices; Every great culture has strong roots in religion that arises from rural sophisticatedness, and moves to cities in a form of art and culture to meet its demise with a material tendency » (De Bois, 1961, p. 60); That is, culture meets its fate to decline in world cities after turning into a material direction. Every civilization, including Western civilization, achieves a certain culture; every civilization, as is the case for organic beings, breathes, flourishes and collapses. Moreover, every culture has its own potential for self-expression that emerges out of its spirit, matures and dissolves; And never return (Herman, 2000, p. 291).

When a given civilization becomes unable to produce and create ideas and solutions out of its generative spirit, after its powers are shattered, its entity petrified and no longer able to rise above what it reached, It leaves behind it a the essence of its onset which springs from its unique view of the world/soul. As a result, urban life loses contact and communications with its -once source-of-creativity; artistic and philosophical innovation disappear then there remain none except perishing (Al-Sharqawi, 1985, p. 201); However, according to Spengler, the city remains able to survive for a long time and other centuries just as the tree that has lost its sap for years, and its branches have become prey to the worms, which is a sign of old age or, in Spingler's terms, its autumn. A civilization at this stage has lost the desire to exist and has no reason d'être. (Saib, 2007, p.120). It can remain standing and survive even if it is in the stage of decay which must eventually and necessarily be followed by complete annihilation.

It follows from that that men becomes, in the view of "Spengler", incapable of changing the course of his destiny. According to human experience, the future of a people seems possible

to anticipate from the moment they embrace a certain world view because the development from life in the suburb to the city always goes according to a certain process inevitable to all civilizations. It has a spring period that creates a new religion, and a new concept and perception of the world. Then a quiet summer period characterized by philosophical and mathematical concepts. Then an autumn period in which culture and rationality mature. Finally, a winter period in which pure mechanism prevails and artistic and philosophical innovation disappears, and non-religious tendencies dominate where the moral and spiritual aspects are absent and fall into materialism. Civilization reaches deterioration and demise, for the city is the final phase before it inevitably perishes.

Spengler (1923) launches a fierce criticism against city life, for in it "the whole existence becomes wooden, as the vital sap dries up. Material luxury, numerical abundance define life; conscience dissolves and greatness is measured length and width and valued by possession and property. As far as the inhabitants of cities are concerned, they do not represent a nation, but rather they represent rubble of masses that interact with each other as a result of materialistic interest that have no connection whatsoever to sentiment or conscience" (Spengler - The Decline of the West Vol. 1 -, p. 15).

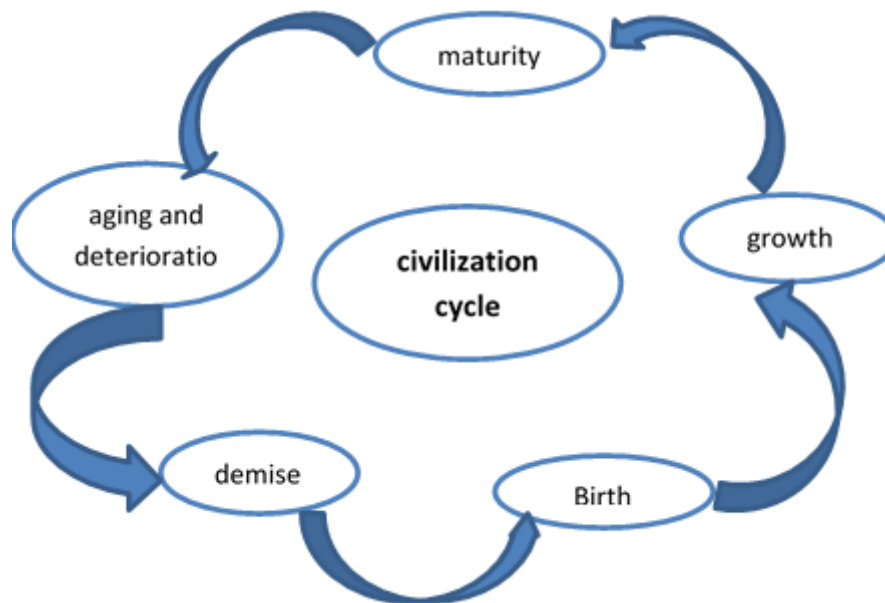
#### **Western civilization and the age of decline:**

Thus, Spengler looked at Western civilization as being in an age of deterioration and decay. and that it had reached the stage of demise because it has lost its vitality, after it immersed itself in material pleasures and intellectual luxury. Such a stage can only be followed by, as history has shown, by nothing but decay and corruption. The West is inevitably going to perish, collapse and fall into dismay. The Western civilization - as Spengler sees it - is now in its final phase, and it is inevitably heading towards decay, which is the inevitable fate that cannot be avoided or escaped, and the West must face this inevitable fate.

For this reason, Spengler asserts that Western civilization is in a stage of sunset and decline, and it is now deteriorating, and has gone through most of the stages of its life and has nothing left but decline. as the end of Western civilization is inevitable, and there is no doubt about it. Its inevitable fate is decay and destruction, it is expected in the foreseeable future according to human experience and the courses of ancient great civilizations. Death is the inevitable end (Mounis, 1978, p. 359).

We recall here that Spengler, in his contemplation of world history, accounted for the existence of eight major and principal civilizations: Egyptian civilization, Babylonian civilization, Indian civilization, Chinese civilization, ancient civilization (Greek-Roman), Arab civilization, Mexican civilization, Western civilization (European-American) (Badawi, 1984, p. 13). Therefore, the west is now - as Spengler sees it - in the last stages of decay, and we must believe

in this and there is no possibility of a new religion or philosophy emerging, because the soil of the West has been exhausted metaphysically. He stressed that «doubt is the only way that opens new horizons of thought and it must be focused on the decay of the West» (Colin, 1959, p. 14). The spirit that once gave rise to Western civilization has disappeared; Perhaps it's because of the city. The last has attracted intense economic and political activity. City life today wrestles with its inevitable fate, it went through emergence to prosperity and it is to be followed by fall. Thus, the collapse of Western civilization in Spengler's view is a historical inevitability that cannot be escaped.



. Diagram 1: The civilizational cycle according to the organic conception from Spengler's perspective

Source: Prepared by researcher

### Conclusion:

This was Oswald Spengler's conception of the theory of collapse of civilizations, which was supported by many Western thinkers, such as Toynbee and Sorokin and others. However, they strongly criticized Spengler's pessimistic view on the issue of decline and decay. For instance, Toynbee (1934) considered through his work *A Study of History* that civilizations can renew their vitality and rise after their fall when they reach the last stage of their cycle which is perishing after being able to face the challenges that made it go to a circle of disintegration. In addition to Toynbee, Ibn Khaldun considered that the fall of any civilization is a natural phenomenon, civilizations reach old age. Naturally, every civilization lifecycle cycle begins with Bedouinism, then urbanization then luxury then decay and decline and so on. The same process, Ibn Khaldoun maintained, is undertaken by peoples. They advance over time through phases, as has been previously demonstrated, to meet their destiny waiting for them which is perishing and



disappearing. Nevertheless, every civilization in its last stages can start a new life cycle based on the ruins of its collapsed heritage. It can go through the same stages all over again that it went through and so on. We find the same conception with American sociologist Sorokin (1941) when he considered that every civilization reaches a state of frailty and weakness; It can renew itself and never die. This can be achieved way by returning to spiritual, and intellectual, and religious values that can restore its energy and vitality.

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