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THE CONCEPT OF THE DECLINE OF WESTERN CULTURE

Oswald Spengler and Owen Barfield – a Comparison

A comparison of Barfield with Spengler shows that the idea of the diametrical opposition of culture and science/technology in the early twentieth century resulted in an extreme cultural pessimism with some very serious effects. It led, for example, to the reductionist concept of man as an aggressive individual guided by his animal instincts. It also led to the predominance of the general Darwinian idea of the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest as the governing principles of all human activity. And finally it led to the emergence of fascism with its élitist and authoritarian politics of control and manipulation.

It has been Barfield's merit to have exposed the serious consequences of leaving the concept of an opposition of culture and science/technology unquestioned. Moreover, from the early 1920s he stressed the importance of developing an alternative view to counteract these consequences. His criticism and his striving for an approach which stresses dialogue instead of opposition are still of vital importance today as the assumed opposition between culture and science/technology has as yet not been resolved and even seems to deepen.

Eine Beschäftigung mit Barfield im Vergleich zu Spengler zeigt, wie sich Vorstellungen von einer grundsätzlichen Unvereinbarkeit von Kultur und Technik im frühen zwanzigsten Jahrhundert zu einem Kulturpessimismus verdichteten, mit äußerst ernsthaften Folgen: z.B Entstehung eines reduktionistischen Bildes vom Menschen als einem aggressiven, triebgesteuerten Wesen; ein Vorherrschen der darwinistischen Vorstellung von Leben als Kampf und vom Überleben des Stärkeren als Prinzip, das alles menschliche Handeln bestimmt und schließlich die Entstehung der politischen Richtung des Faschismus mit seiner elitären und autoritären Politik der Kontrolle und Manipulation.

Es ist Barfields Verdienst, auf die ernsten Konsequenzen hingewiesen zu haben, die sich ergeben, wenn das Konzept der Opposition von Kultur und Technik nicht hinterfragt wird. Barfield machte es sich ab den frühen zwanziger Jahren zur Lebensaufgabe, eine Alternative zu dieser vorherrschenden Denktradition zu entwickeln. Seine Kritik sowie seine Bemühungen um einen dialogischen Ansatz sind auch heute noch besonders aktuell, da der Zwiespalt zwischen Technik und Kultur noch immer nicht überwunden ist und sich sogar zu vertiefen scheint.

Introduction

If we look at the debate about the relationship between science and technology on the one hand and culture (meaning the arts, music, literature, philosophy and the humanities in general) on the other hand we can detect a long intellectual tradition going back well beyond the 19th century which regards these two areas as independent, mutually exclusive and incompatible entities. In the 19th century we may think of the influential cultural critic Matthew Arnold, for example, who contrasted culture with the scientific and technological developments of his time, declaring the two areas to be "at variance" with each other (Arnold 62–63). Nearly a whole century later we find the same spirit very much alive in another influential thinker, the scientifically trained novelist C. P. Snow. In his famous Rede Lecture delivered at Cambridge in 1959 he observed a deepening split between the "two cultures", the scientific field and that of the humanities, declaring them to be diametrically opposed to each other (Snow 11). When Snow picked the debate up again in 1963 he gave expression to the hope and the need that a new development might occur with the rise of a "third culture" which would prevent the split between the "two cultures" from deepening even further. Towards the end of the 20th century we might suspect the old debate to have come to its conclusion, especially with the publication of John Brockman's book in 1996 which bears the promising title *The Third Culture: Beyond the Scientific Revolution*. Brockman's vision, however, turns out not to fulfil Snow's hope, but to take Snow's original thesis to an even more extreme conclusion. For Brockman's "third culture" is a

culture which is dominated wholly by the sciences: "Unlike previous intellectual pursuits, the achievements of the [scientific] third culture are not the marginal disputes of a quarrelsome mandarin class: they will affect the lives of everybody on the planet" (Brockman 19). In other words, what the humanities have to offer, according to Brockman, is merely marginal and therefore largely irrelevant to modern life. Today it is the scientific "third culture" that creates real insights which shape and change the world. For this reason the new "third culture", in his view, is about to replace the traditionally literary intellectual culture of the humanities, making it ultimately redundant.

Since the 1990s the members of the German *Wissenschaftsrat* have made it their aim to challenge such views of the two apparently incompatible "cultures" and stress instead the need for a constructive dialogue between the two. This is the declared aim as formulated by representatives both of the humanities and the sciences in a publication by the *Wissenschaftsrat* of 1991 (Frühwald 10). It has been Owen Barfield's own lifelong aim to establish such a dialogue. Moreover, it is his merit to have alerted us to the consequences for modern society where this dialogue fails. Barfield's concerns go back to the early 1920s. During that period the view of the incompatibility of science and technology on the one hand and the culture of the arts and humanities on the other hand had turned into a deeply felt pessimism culminating in visions of disintegration and cultural decline. The most famous and perhaps most influential exponent of this view in the early twentieth century was Oswald Spengler. By placing Barfield side by side with this thinker we shall see how Barfield exposed the negative consequences of this view and how he arrived at his own very different critical position.

Oswald Spengler's decline theory

Spengler is heir to the scientific and technological scepticism which arose in the nineteenth century. One of the most important influences on Spengler's world view was that of Friedrich Nietzsche. In *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (1918–22), Spengler explains that it was Nietzsche (as well as Goethe) who inspired his book, but points

out that neither Nietzsche nor any of his contemporaries saw the real extent of the crisis that affected Western culture (37). Spengler believed he was able to explain more systematically than anyone before him that Western culture was doomed to come to an end. He had, as Johannes Hirschberger has pointed out, a biological view of history, and believed that a culture, like a living organism, grows and dies again: "Der allgemeine philosophische Untergrund der Spenglerschen Weltanschauung ist ein brutaler Biologismus. Das Leben, das die geschichtlichen Prozesse hervortreibt, ist nicht mehr wie bei Hegel die Idee oder bei Bergson ein 'élan vital', sondern eine Vitalität im Sinne von Brutalität" ["The general philosophical idea behind Spengler's Weltanschauung is a brutal biologism. Life as the underlying principle of the processes in history is not any more something like Hegel's idea or Bergson's 'élan vital' but a vitality that is more like sheer brute force."] (589).[1] In this view, the fall of Western culture (like the fall of other great cultures) is inevitable. What had for Nietzsche been signs of decline, were for Spengler symptoms of a definite collapse of culture. Such symptoms include growing urbanisation, mechanization and technical perfection, with the consequent alienation of man from nature. It is important to note that neither Spengler's view of the city nor his view of technology is consistently negative. Spengler certainly appreciates the cultural achievements which go hand in hand with the rise of the city, but "... auf der Höhe mancher Zivilisation, in deren großen Städten, erscheint endlich der Augenblick, wo technische Kritik es müde ist, dem Leben zu dienen, und sich zu seinem Tyrannen aufwirft" ["... eventually at the height of certain civilisations, in their big cities, the moment arrives when technical criticism ceases to serve life and becomes its tyrant"] (395). Here as elsewhere technology is clearly not seen as being originally bad or destructive. It is only when technology turns into a means in man's striving for power and control that it turns bad and destructive. Compare the following passages from *Untergang des Abendlandes*:

[1] All translations in square brackets are my own.

> Dann aber folgt zugleich mit dem Rationalismus die Erfindung der Dampfmaschine, die alles umstürzt und das Wirtschaftsbild total verwandelt. Bis dahin hatte die Natur Dienste geleistet, jetzt wird sie als Sklavin ins Joch gespannt. [...] Aber gerade damit ist der faustische Mensch zum Sklaven seiner Schöpfung geworden. Seine Zahl und die Anlage seiner Lebenshaltung werden durch die Maschine auf eine Bahn gedrängt, auf der es keinen Stillstand und keinen Schritt rückwärts gibt. (396–97)
> [Then followed, at the age of reason, the invention of the steam engine, which revolutionised everything and totally changed the economic situation. Up to then, nature had rendered services, now she is forced into slavery. [...] But precisely because of this, Faustian man has become the slave of his own creation. His ways and means of living are, through the machine, forced to follow a direction where there is no standstill and no way back.]

The price we pay for our ruthless pursuit of technical progress, in Spengler's view, is that a split occurs between man and nature which can eventually not be healed any more. Man becomes the "slave of his own creation" – slave to his own struggle for power and dominion.[2] For in this struggle, philosophy, the arts and with them human ideals, such as truth and justice, decline and in their decline herald the collapse of culture. In the end sheer brute force will reign:

> Es handelt sich in der Geschichte immer nur um das Leben und immer nur um das Leben, die Rasse, den Triumph des Willens zur Macht, und nicht um den Sieg von Wahrheiten, Empfindungen oder Geld. Die Weltgeschichte ist Weltgericht: sie hat immer dem stärkeren,

[2] Compare this with C. S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man* (1943): "It is the magician's bargain: give up our souls, get power in return. But once our souls, that is our selves, have been given up, the power thus conferred will not belong to us. We shall in fact be slaves and puppets of that to which we have given our souls" (43).

> volleren, seiner selbst gewisseren Leben Recht gegeben, Recht auf das Dasein, gleichviel ob es vor dem Wachsein recht war, und sie hat immer die Wahrheit und die Gerechtigkeit der Macht, der Rasse geopfert und die Menschen und Völker zum Tode verurteilt, denen die Wahrheit wichtiger war als Taten und Gerechtigkeit wesentlicher als Macht. (399)
> [The perpetual principle of history is only life, and always only life, the race, the triumph of the struggle for power, not the victory of truths, feelings or money. World history is world judgement: it has always favoured the continuation of the stronger, fuller, self-confident life form, irrespective of its real right to do so. And it has always sacrificed truth and justice to power and the race. And it has doomed to death those individuals and nations to whom the truth was more important than action, and justice more essential than power.]

Spengler envisages a world dominated by dictatorship and cruel wars – the end of Western culture, an end that can only be accepted, not escaped. Accordingly his book concludes with the following words: "Ducunt fata volentem, nolentem trahunt" ["The fates guide the willing, but drag along the unwilling"] (400).

Northrop Frye regards such assumptions about the split between technical progress and culture and the sense that technical progress leads to destruction, war and the inevitable decline of culture as only, "a partial insight with a 'seductive simplicity' which is altogether more plausible than the truth." He asks for a wider view which would include "a much larger 'truth' about our very complex situation" than the idea of decline suggests (24). Certainly, from Frye's distant perspective, a view such as Spengler's of the decline of Western civilisation must seem extreme. What Frye doesn't seem to take into account, however, is the actual experience of the Great War. For many of those who witnessed the atrocities of the war, which had become possible through the new technology, destruction or even organized mass destruction was not a mere myth, it was an actual ex-

perience and therefore felt to be a real threat to Western culture and civilisation. Spengler himself had completed *Untergang des Abendlandes* in 1913, before the outbreak of the war. But in the introduction of 1917 (p. ix) he commented that the events of the war had confirmed his views: "Die Ereignisse [des Krieges] haben vieles [der Einsichten in *Untergang des Abendlandes*] bestätigt und nichts widerlegt."

It is clear, then, that it would be rash to brush aside Spengler's view as an extreme view without any real foundation. What Spengler saw and experienced was the reality of twentieth century history, which, as no one will deny, was indeed bloody and very cruel. There is nothing extreme about a view that sees war and dictatorship not as progress, but as decline, a step back in the development of Western civilisation. But what does seem extreme is the unreflected view that such a decline is *inevitable*. Here Barfield's approach is important. It was very early in his career that he studied the assumptions about nature in general and human nature in particular on which that sense of inevitability is based. He then came to the conclusion that such assumptions mustn't remain unquestioned because of their unhealthy, if not destructive effect on society.

What, then, are the assumptions behind Spengler's world view? I have already pointed out that Spengler had a biological view of history, a view, like Nietzsche's, that was strongly influenced by Darwinian Theory. In this view the principle of history is not human ideas or ideals but "the struggle for existence" and "the survival of the fittest". As Paul Crook has shown, since the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) the view that ultimately man's conduct is guided not by reason, but by animal instinct was a widely spread view in Western thought. In this view war is condemned on a moral level, but accepted on the practical level as being an inevitable expression of a "pugnacious human nature"(Crook 1). This is what Crook terms "war biology", but he is also careful to point out that there were attempts to establish a "peace biology" or what he calls "elevationism" (ibid. 9ff.). On the whole one will have to count Barfield as an "elevationist". Although he shared with Spengler and other contemporaries a strong sense of crisis in contemporary life he never

actually submitted to Spengler's extreme pessimism and actually rejected the assumptions which in his view had created such pessimism in the first place. He rejected them, as I have already pointed out, because of their destructive consequences for modern society.

Barfield's view

While Barfield had obviously read Spengler's work and had acknowledged its profound and important influence on modern thought, he never, to my knowledge, gave it any detailed critical discussion. However, in spite of some remarkable parallels with Spengler, which he acknowledges in *Poetic Diction* (12–13, 111n., 133, 138, 207n). Barfield did actually reject what were Spengler's premises. This is seen, not in any critical discussion of Spengler himself, but in his discussion of Spengler's model, Friedrich Nietzsche. In an article dated 1924 concerned with "The Spiritual Basis of Fascism" he writes:

> [T]o understand Nietzsche properly, it is surely necessary to place him in his own intellectual setting of late nineteenth century thought. The idea of a struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest had bitten deeply enough into thousands of European minds, but deepest of all, perhaps into Nietzsche's, who followed the example of innumerable contemporaries in applying this theory – evolved to account for certain definite phenomena in Natural Science – to all sorts of spheres outside it, notably to the political, economic and spiritual activities of human beings. The more I read of and about Nietzsche, the more convinced do I become that that ghastly suspicion of all human activity being automatically predetermined by rigid, extra-human laws was gnawing at his intellectual and emotional vitals, much as it gnawed at the milder vitals of men like Arnold and Clough. In them it produced an incurable melancholy. In Nietzsche it produced, not tears, idle tears, but the strained fury of

> his paeans in praise of strength, will, self-assertion of any sort. ("Letter to the Editor", 9)

Barfield here criticises the uncritical application of a theory originally designed to account for certain biological processes to other spheres of life. In order to understand why Barfield is so critical of such extraneous application we need to remind ourselves of his principal criticism of an approach which divorces mind from matter and idea from reality, thereby creating a sense of reality which is independent of man as a thinker and knower. The consequence is what Barfield calls the loss of "all sense of the reality of ideas", a loss which turns man into a passive spectator of a world whose processes are felt to be governed by laws beyond his control ("Psychology and Reason", 610). Where such a view is allied to Darwinian Theory and applied to social and political processes, the effect is devastating. If reality is thought to be controlled by the law of a brutal "struggle of existence", then the world of ideas and ideals, in fact the whole world of culture must appear to be impotent and eventually, as Spengler had concluded, doomed to decline. This decline and the coming age of cruel wars and dictatorship was, in Spengler's view, as we have seen, inevitable because it was felt to be beyond human control.

Barfield, too, like Spengler, was concerned about dictatorship, but unlike Spengler he didn't see it as inevitable. Instead he analysed and challenged the assumptions which made it possible. In his discussion of contemporary politics Barfield tries to demonstrate that it is Darwinian Theory which forms the ideological backbone of the authoritarian politics of fascism. Earlier we saw that Barfield warns of the disastrous effect of applying Darwinian Theory uncritically, as he believed Nietzsche had done, to other spheres. The political effect of such extraneous application, according to Barfield, is this: Darwinian Theory is being abused to "justify an ideal that seeks to turn the many into a sort of power-fodder for assisting the spiritual development of the few" ("Letter to the Editor", 9, my italics). The phrase "spiritual development of the few" sounds perhaps a little vague, but I think it is clear what Barfield is getting at. With his observation that fascism endorses an "ideal" which "seeks to turn

the many into a sort of *power-fodder* for assisting the spiritual development of *the few*" (my italics), he recognizes two of the essential features of fascist ideology: its élitism and its authoritarianism. In other words, Barfield believes that the reductionist interpretation of human nature, based on Darwinian Theory, has stripped humanity of its essential freedom, and has thereby paved the way for a minority élite to assume power of control. Or to put it more clearly, Barfield suggests that the body of ideas based on Darwinian Theory has created a mental climate which has made the individual and society on the whole vulnerable to authoritarian control and manipulation.[3] When we read Barfield's remarks about fascism it is obvious that he is far from grasping the full significance of this very complex political movement. But such complete understanding was, of course, virtually impossible in 1924 when Barfield wrote this article and when fascism was still 'young' and its complex effects in the public sphere not yet fully visible. But even while Barfield could hardly grasp the full significance of fascism, he at least had a good grasp of some of the intellectual assumptions on which fascist ideology rested. It is on the basis of these insights that Barfield was able at once to recognize fascism as a threat to human freedom. This early diagnosis of the fundamental dangers of fascism remains in fact a remarkable achievement.

If we read Spengler from a Barfieldian perspective we are led to the conclusion that his unquestioned Darwinism both reflects and helps to create the mental climate which paved the way for the arrival of fascism. His ideology of a decline connected with the negative consequences of technology is oddly schizophrenic. While it inspires a sense of passivity and helplessness on the one hand, it generates a fascination with strength, power and control on the other hand. It has been said that Spengler is a bizarre example of how anxiety over the negative consequences of technology turns into the opposite: fascination with the sense of power created by technology (Radkau 111). For example, in the same chapter of *Untergang des*

[3] Cp. Sternhell, 344ff., and Crook, 7–8.

Abendlandes in which he criticizes the "Satanism of the machine" he speaks with full admiration of engineers as a small élite of a special race which is "hard as steel" (*Untergang* 397–98). Elsewhere he claims that technical invention is the result of man's predatory nature (*Mensch und Technik* 72). The idea of man as a predator is associated by Spengler with a positive sense of strength, perfection and nobility (*Jahre* 125). In the same book he expresses his fascination with the idea of a strong and powerful master race (ibid. 157). And throughout all of his books recurs his fascination with strong and powerful individuals as leaders in history. All of these examples, though not entirely congruent with fascist ideology, are yet remarkably similar to many of its essential ingredients.[4] As Radkau has pointed out, the compensation of a sense of weakness by an exaggerated desire for power and control, which appears to characterize Spengler's outlook, is a well-known psychological phenomenon (Radkau 111). Radkau's point is similar to the point which, we remember, Barfield had made in his analysis of the rise of fascism. It is the trap into which Spengler (and with him a whole nation) had stumbled as a result of an uncritical belief in the Darwinian struggle for existence as the governing principle of historical processes. Spengler had predicted the inevitable decline of Western culture, but he did not actually live to witness the catastrophe into which Germany and the rest of the world were plunged. He would probably have felt as he had done after World War I that the events have confirmed his view. However, in retrospect we cannot help thinking that in predicting that catastrophe and in firmly believing in his own prediction as something inevitable Oswald Spengler has actually had a part, even though a small and certainly involuntary part, in helping to conjure up that very catastrophe.

[4] It is interesting to note that in spite of these strong similarities with fascist ideology, Spengler, unlike Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt, never became a supporter of fascism. He refused active collaboration with the party even after he had met Hitler himself and declined an invitation by Joseph Goebbels to make a contribution to Nazi propaganda (cp. Goebbels's letter to Spengler and Spengler's answer in: Spengler, *Briefe* 709–710.). For a discussion of Spengler's reason for avoiding active involvement in Nazi politics, cp. Koktanek, introduction to Spengler's *Briefe* 16–18.

Conclusion

In conclusion we might say that Barfield's approach helps us to recognize a world view such as Spengler's as a dangerous and destructive view – dangerous and destructive if its assumptions remain unquestioned and left to shape and influence social and political developments. It is Barfield's merit to have inspired a careful study of such assumptions and how they influence and form the way we conduct our affairs. In this sense we might think of Barfield as a kind of inverted Karl Marx, I mean Marx's famous statement that "the social existence of men determines their consciousness" turned on its head. Barfield would probably not exactly claim the opposite that "consciousness determines social existence". But he would certainly claim and actually has claimed that the way we think is not just a simple reflection of the world, but influences and changes that world. In his book *History, Guilt and Habit* (1979), for example, he says: "When we study consciousness historically, contrasting perhaps what men perceive and think *now* with what they perceived and thought at some period in the past, when we study long-term *changes* in consciousness, we are studying changes in the world itself, and not simply changes in the brain" (8). It was in the 1920s, with books like *History in English Words* (1924) and *Poetic Diction* (1928) that he began to explore ideas about nature and reality not out of a simple intellectual curiosity about how they changed over time, but out of a deeply felt concern about how these changing ideas influenced our actions and thereby changed nature and reality themselves. This is what he came to call the study of the evolution of consciousness, a study which remained his concern throughout his life, culminating in his major work *Saving the Appearances* (1957).

Coming back to Barfield's study of the consequences of an uncritical extraneous application of Darwin's theory outside the strictly biological sphere, it is easy to see just how very important it is to study new scientific theories and discoveries carefully and to reflect critically on the assumptions based on these discoveries and to discuss their possible intellectual, social and political implications and consequences. I mentioned the Wissenschaftsrat at the begin-

ning of my paper. When it reflected on the task of the humanities in the 21st century it came to just this conclusion: that it is its primary task to study and discuss critically the assumptions which form and change our society. The way forward here is not the simple and perhaps more comfortable opposition between the sciences and the humanities maintained by such thinkers as the ones I discussed at the beginning, but a dialogue between these "two cultures" (Frühwald, 10–11). It's in his book *Worlds Apart* (1963) in which he envisages such a constructive dialogue between scientists of different fields and various representatives of the humanities which today the members of the Wissenschaftsrat have recommended for a healthy development of modern society. I suspect, Barfield, if he were alive today, would feel more than comfortable with this recommendation.

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