



Oswald Spengler

Repairing the World at its Source

March 20, 2018 | Volume 11 | Issue 18
Louis René Beres

In the Introduction to his eccentric but still magisterial *The Decline of the West* (1918), Oswald Spengler acknowledges the inspirational "philosophy of Goethe." More precisely, he thanks this most seminal of classical thinkers for what today would be called his "existentialism." This deeply expressed gratitude references above all Goethe's undimmed awareness that humanity must make *its own* future.

Always.

Indispensably, we are reminded here that humankind "makes itself." But how shall we now best "operationalize" this core understanding in the coming months and years? Can we in any way improve our fragile planet's dwindling chances for both security and prosperity?

The question is by no means posed as a narrowly partisan query. The most promising answers should have nothing to do with any particular political party or ideology. Instead, these responses must be shaped by a determinedly *analytic* effort. Moreover, in view of the ultimate interrelatedness of all world politics, this observation is relevant everywhere, in all countries, wherever national leaders might also search for apt remedies to war, terror, and broad civilizational decline.

Ultimately, this means a greater and more open commitment to certain subtle but still critical intersections of science and philosophy. An antecedent question also surfaces. How does any nation empower reason over "wizardry" when there is no recognizable public interest in (or reward for) scientific dialectic and truth? How shall we then proceed to "repair" the world, an especially pressing question in light of a currently retrograde and deformed US leadership?

One promising answer may begin with an ancient fable: "The fox knows many things," said the Greek poet Archilochus, "but the hedgehog knows one big thing."

When negotiating the treacherous landscapes of world politics, in seeking more promising outcomes (e.g., in North Korea, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, etc.), generality must take precedence over particulars. But this obligation to see "one big thing" is not altogether obvious. Still, in any science of policy, foreign or domestic, generality-based knowledge represents the irreducible core of all serious learning and meaning.

To garner marketable attention, which is usually a blatantly transparent matter of raw commerce, our current news chooses to focus on various tantalizing but shallowly contextualized specifics. What finally matters most, however, is something far more complex, far more synergistic. This "something" is a consciously cultivated capacity for the systematic identification of recurring policy issues and problems. In the end, without fail, science must invariably center itself on the continuous discovery of pertinent regularities. Without such a focus, there is only history.

Therein lies a key problem in opposing the manifestly injurious "Trump effect." Inevitably, the flesh-and-blood facts concerning war, revolution, riots, despotism, terrorism, and genocide are more engagingly captivating to ordinary citizens than suitably abstract theories. Yet, the real point of systematically locating specific facts must always be a plausible and tangible improvement of the "human condition." In turn, any such search for civilizational betterment must then be contingent on even deeper forms of generalized human behavior and individual personal awareness. It is only by exploring the mass of individual cases in world politics as closely intersecting parts of a much larger class of cases, that our national leaders can ever hope to learn something meaningfully predictive. While seemingly counter-intuitive, it is only by deliberately seeking widely general explanations that we can ever hope to "repair the world."[1] Only by means of such a search can we ever hope for a more genuinely cosmopolitan future.

It is only by exploring the mass of individual cases in world politics as closely intersecting parts of a much larger class of cases, that our national leaders can ever hope to learn something meaningfully predictive.

Today's global harms and instabilities, whether still simmering, or already explosive, are still best understood as "symptoms" of a more ubiquitous and consuming worldwide fragility. Accordingly, it is unhelpful to our leaders that these symptoms should ever be regarded as merely isolated, discrete, or in some way unique. What

are the fundamental or basic contours of such an unrelenting general fragility? Can we ever really figure them out? Should we even try?

One reasonable answer concerns the seemingly irremediable incapacity of human beings to find recoverable meaning and identity somewhere *within themselves.* Typically, in a chaotic[2] world politics, it is something other than one's own irreducible Self (the state, the movement, the class, the faith, etc.) that is held reverentially as “sacred.” In consequence, our entire species (not just the United States) remains stubbornly determined to demarcate preferentially between “us” and “them,” and then, always, to sustain a rigidly segmented “tribal” universe. But without locating meaning and identity within themselves as individual persons, human life everywhere becomes a *vita minima*, an inherently corrupted existence that is grievously emptied of all once-indispensable possibilities.

There is more. In our perpetually fractionated universe, one where becoming an individual is hindered by starkly demeaning entertainments and ritualized formalizations of anti-reason, “non-members” are conveniently designated as extraneous. The potentially fatal end point of this twisted logic must surely be one form or another of “tribal” extermination. It is this very same lethal inclination that spawned both world wars and the Holocaust. That is saying a great deal about tribalization in world politics. Need anything more be said?



Protesting communal violence in India

Nevertheless, without a clear and persisting sense of an outsider, of an enemy, of a suitably despised “*other*,” whole societies would have felt insufferably lost in the “chaotic” world. Drawing their necessary self-worth from membership in the state or the faith or the race—from what Freud, following Nietzsche's “herd,” had called the “*horde*”—such dehumanized humans could never have reasonably hoped to satisfy even the most elementary requirements of world peace and human coexistence.

More precisely, in this connection, any long hoped for visions of “world government” or “world order” never stood a serious chance as long as individual humans continued to insist upon the absolute primacy of “membership.” In principle, of course, it would seem evident that any such insistence might still be satisfied by some negotiable transfer of individual human loyalties to still wider circles of political authority. In fact, however, there is precious little or no tangible evidence that human beings can ever discover enough satisfying exclusivity in somehow claiming membership as “citizens of the world.”

Hence, “America First” and equivalently corrosive slogans elsewhere.

Truly key questions about Iraq, Syria, Iran, Yemen, Afghanistan, etc., have absolutely nothing to do with counter-insurgency operations, or with prospectively expanding American “boots on the ground.” These are merely crude tactical considerations; in the language of science and philosophy they are only *epiphenomenal*. Accordingly, until the deeply underlying axes of conflict between human “tribes” are finally understood, all of our current and future war policies will remain largely beside the point.

Violence is never the same as power. If this point is not understood soon, we will suffer even greater losses in certain expanding war zones, and without any meaningful recompense.

All things considered, hope exists, to be sure, but now it must sing softly, in a tentative undertone. We must all first learn to pay more rapt attention to deeply personal feelings of empathy, anxiety, restlessness, and desperation. While private human feelings still remain unacknowledged as formidable hidden elements of a

wider and safer world politics, they are largely determinative for international relations. Instead of embarrassingly retrograde affirmations of a Darwinian zero-sum orientation to world affairs, we must now learn to understand that the manifest "whole" of global civilization can never be any greater than the aggregate sum total of its human "parts." In the end, what Freud had prescribed for all human societies—a prescription necessarily prior to creating any more helpfully humane world order—was a "spontaneous sympathy," a palpably "feeling response" of one human soul for another.

While private human feelings still remain unacknowledged as formidable hidden elements of a wider and safer world politics, they are largely determinative for international relations.

To survive together, which is the only truly durable form of human survival, the fragmented residents of this planet must finally learn to discover an authentic and genuinely stable human existence—above all, one that is detached from all traditionally concocted and ultimately deadly "tribal" distinctions. This demands an altogether fresh awareness of global interdependence and human "oneness." It is only in the vital expressions of a thoroughly re-awakened human spirit that Americans can ever learn to recognize what is most important for national and global survival; that is, that private agony is ultimately more predictive than macro-economics.

Beware, warned the poet Bertolt Brecht: "The man who laughs has simply not yet heard the horrible news."

To usefully improve our future foreign policies, to avoid our recurring global misfortunes, indeed, to merely survive the Trump Era, America (but not only America) must learn to look much more insightfully *behind the news*. In so doing, we could finally acknowledge that the root explanations for war, riots, revolution, despotism, terrorism, and genocide are never discoverable in plainly parasitic political institutions, or, as corollary, in thoroughly barren political ideologies. Instead, these core explanations lie more or less hidden, dormant, but still promisingly latent, in the timeless personal cries of individuals. Only when we can meet these critically underlying human needs can we ever hope to improve the world system as a whole.

“In the end,” reminds Goethe, “we still depend upon creatures of our own making.”



'Goethe' (Andy Warhol, 1982)

Notes

1. In Hebrew or specifically Jewish learning, *Tikkun Olam.*

2. Whether described in the Old Testament or in other sources of ancient Western thought, chaos is as much a source of human betterment as of declension. In essence, it is that which prepares the world for all things, both sacred and profane. Further, as its conspicuous etymology reveals, chaos represents the yawning gulf or gap wherein nothing is as yet, but also where all civilizational opportunity must inevitably originate. Appropriately, the great German poet Hölderlin observed: "There is a desert sacred and chaotic which stands at the roots of the things and which prepares all things." Even in the pagan ancient world, the Greeks thought of such a desert as *logos,* which indicates to us that it was presumed to be anything but starkly random or without any conceivable merit.

Tags

nationalism

identity

cosmopolitanism



Louis René Beres is Emeritus Professor of Political Science and International Law at Purdue University.

View PDF