

Poland and Spain in Late Modern and Contemporary Civilisation and Culture

Edited by
Małgorzata Mizerska-Wrotkowska
José Luis Orella Martínez

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Preface

Preface

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Summary

Arnold Toynbee was a distinguished historian, who analysed historical processes by focusing on the deeper social and political phenomena that condition the growth or decline of a given civilization. The goal of this chapter is to study his concept of disintegration of civilisations, and to find out whether the nature of the European crises at the beginning of the twenty-first century is similar to Toynbee's vision. The chapter will place special emphasis on the issues of culture, historical tradition and common values, in short, on ideas that are supposed to shape the common identities and the feeling of European community. The chapter will open with a discussion of Toynbee's theory of universal state, and with analysing the similarities between Toynbee's vision and the European Union.

Introduction

The main goal of Arnold Toynbee's monumental oeuvre was an attempt to analyse the rise and fall of human civilizations. His classic work can be a source of inspiration for scholars of European crises that begun with the outbreak of the financial and economic crisis of 2008. Toynbee's vision of civilisation is inherently pessimistic. He argues that for every civilization, the upward movement of growth and expansion must at some point reach its apex, and then inevitably the process of disintegration must begin. A collapse of any given civilization is therefore inevitable. In his argument, Toynbee references Oswald Spengler's noted study *The Decline of the West* (1917). Like Spengler, Toynbee saw the Western (European and American) civilization as a *sui generis* living organism, which goes

through the stages of growing up, maturation, aging and finally death. Both Toynbee and Spengler focused on the study of various systemic phenomena. In comparison with Spengler, however, Toynbee saw the disintegration processes as more structured. In his opinion, disintegration processes occur in a long historical horizon, but become exacerbated in times of crisis. The attempt to identify the symptoms of civilizational decline is arguably Toynbee's greatest achievement (Toynbee 1972). According to his theory, the final step before a civilization reaches its apex is the attempt to create a universal state. This step is motivated by the desire to overcome internal tensions and disintegration tendencies and to prevent the ruling elites from losing power. But in essence, the universal state is the final stage before the inevitable downward slope. What makes the current situation in Europe startlingly similar to Toynbee's vision is, of course, the existence of the European Union, which shares many features of Toynbee's universal state.

But in spite of this constation, it is difficult to predict whether, according to Toynbee's theory, the European civilization is destined for inevitable collapse. Critics of the Western civilization eschew the predictions of total collapse and prefer to talk about transitional periods when the old order dies, and the accompanying turmoil can in fact be treated as the birthing pangs of the new system (Gramsci 1971). Within this paradigm, it could be argued that the European Union as an integration project has reached its end, or at least has exhausted its current possibilities for further growth (Tsoukalis 2016: 150, 175, 206). Toynbee's philosophy of history aptly describes the most important factors and phenomena that mark the process of disintegration and decline. As such, Toynbee's work can be a useful inspiration for formulating the assumptions for the theory of regional disintegration, whose application might go beyond explaining the present situation in Europe (Grosse 2017). What is crucial in Toynbee's vision is that disintegration does not seem to depend on the crises themselves and on their frequency, but rather on the deeper social and political phenomena that prevent the growth or even the continued existence of a given civilization. The purpose of this chapter is to describe these disintegration phenomena, as well as to reflect on their possible occurrence during the European crises at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In my argument, I will place particular emphasis on issues related to culture, historical tradition and values that shape the common European identity and a sense of community at the European level. Before I move to the discussion of these issues, I would like to briefly dis-

cuss Toynbee's vision of creation of the universal state and show how his theory is relevant for the analysis of the European Union.

Toynbee's vision of the universal state

According to Toynbee (1972: 288-318), one of the most important features of the universal state is the expansion of the communication network. In the case of the European Union, the cohesion policy can surely be seen in this light. Furthermore, the universal states tend to have more than one official language, although one of them will usually occupy a privileged position. In the European Union, it is of course English that has become the veritable *lingua franca*. The universal state also has one or several political-administrative centres: in the EU, the obvious centre of power is Brussels, but to a lesser extent also Strasbourg. Lastly, the universal state actively expands its administrative staff and civil service, and examples of such actions can also be found in the EU in the shape of the growing corps of Brussels officials and the recently created European External Action Service. The universal state also guarantees peace. This is also the case in Europe, which, since the end of the Second World War, has enjoyed a period of calm, now called by historians "The Long Peace"¹. Such a long period of stability was virtually unprecedented in European history, though admittedly the armies of various European states has participated in a range of minor conflicts (and there were also some military operations undertaken by the joint EU forces.) But all in all, it can be said that the universal state favours economic growth and peaceful conflict resolution over militarism and aggression.

The creation of the universal state can be compared to attempt to build a state organism, a unified political structure that would bridge over existing divisions. The area of such a state corresponds to the maximum sphere of influence of a given civilization. In the case of the European civilization, its core was formed in Western Europe and initially, since 1957, it has been limited to the European Communities countries. Later, the European Union was expanded to include Central Europe. Such a territorial expansion is a characteristic feature of Toynbee's universal state, whose aim is always to extend the sphere of influence of its institutions, laws and values. Toynbee further argues that a defining characteristic of the universal state is its desire for territorial expansion and the ambi-

¹ The only armed conflict in Europe after World War Two were the Yugoslav Wars 1991-2001.

tion to spread and promote its ideals and values, which it endeavours to present as binding and universal also to the external environment. In the case of the EU, scholars often talk about its “normative power.” The term is meant to signify that the EU’s international influence is primarily based on the impact of its norms and values, and not on economic or military pressure (Manners 2002).

It could also be argued however that the desire to spread one’s values is a manifestation of exaggerated ambitions which can never be fulfilled, and thus accelerate civilizational decline. They can be seen as an example of hubris, an excessive and unrealistic ambition or overconfidence, which is not matched to one’s capabilities or potential. It is not a coincidence that proponents of European integration see the EU as a project of continuous development, whose forward march can never be stopped. Thus envisaged, the European integration would be ever-increasing and would not allow for the possibility of descending into disintegration. The recent crises show that these ambitions are divorced from reality. The crises naturally prevent further expansion, and can even lead to internal collapse. The most important example of such hubris in the case of the EU was the introduction of single currency, a decision which was not supported by appropriate institutional action. The euro was conceived as a project that would not only cement the internal market, but also compete with the US dollar as an international currency, providing Europe with economic and geopolitical leverage on the global arena. The introduction of the euro was also meant to pave the way for a closer political union and prepare the ground for a future European federation. It turned out, however, that the monetary union was not adequately institutionalized and thus was unprepared to cope with a major crisis, which led the euro project to the verge of bankruptcy in 2012. What is more, a number of significant problems which became manifest during the crisis still remain unresolved (Zimmermann 2016). Another proof of the fact that Europe’s expansionist ambitions outstrip its institutional capacity is the EU Eastern enlargement (Münchau 2015: 9, Tsoukalis 2016: 148). According to scholars, the most significant problem related to the enlargement was the insufficient level of organizational preparation, and in particular, the fact that the EU refrained from introducing bold reforms that would streamline the mechanisms of governance and increase the EU funding. Similarly, the EU Neighbourhood Policy, whose aim it was to build friendly relations with neighbour countries of the EU (and to diffuse the European values to the countries located beyond the EU cur-

rent borders) was conducted in an tentative and halting manner, without adequate funding or ambitious geopolitical strategy. In fact, the manner in which the policy was pursued, contributed to crises in the neighbouring countries, e.g. to the Ukrainian crisis (started in 2014), the wave of destabilisation in North Africa following the so-called Arab Spring (2010-2014) and to the migration crisis, which occurred as an aftermath of the Arab Spring. In fact, it could be argued that the EU's ambitions to promote European regulations and institutions can be hypocritical, especially when the norms and values promoted are treated in an instrumental way (Hansen 2015). Viewed from this perspective, integration is an illusion, or even a utopia, which by its very definition is disconnected from the harsh reality. Significantly, Toynbee perceives the universal state in an exactly the same way (1972: 266).

On the other hand, the above-described phenomena are not only manifestations of hubris, but also of universalism. The European values and law were intended not only to integrate the community from within, but also to be spread outside the EU, as a model for other countries and cultures. By the same token, the universal state opens its door wide to the outside world, becoming a home for all: for the diverse peoples that live in its vast territory and for newcomers from beyond its borders (Toynbee 1972: 267). In the case of the EU, the normative basis of the community are the universal human rights, and the fact that the EU upholds these rights became the motivation for welcoming immigrants from outside Europe.

The universal state can be seen as an answer to crisis and turmoil, whose occurrence in the past were clear signs that a given civilization is on a road to destruction. The attempt to create the universal state is a solution promoted by the elites, who would otherwise have to deal with loss of power and international stature (Toynbee 1972: 255-276). The above view on European integration is proposed Alan Milward (1992), according to whom the process was seen as a cure by the elites in national states, exhausted by wars and anxious about facing economic challenges that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century. It seems that the creation of the European Communities was in a large measure a response to the terrors of the First and Second World Wars, which can be considered as the cataclysmic events that brought the European civilization to the brink of destruction. According to Fernand Braudel, the cornerstone of European civilization is the concept of the nation state, which is the most important manifestation of its political order. Two main tendencies related to the nation states were

observable through European history: the first were the attempts to maximize power by the major European states, which in some historical periods were endeavouring to establish local hegemony. Germany was the country who most frequently made such bids for continental hegemony: it was big enough to harbour such aspirations and at the same time too small to accomplish them with any degree of permanence (Simms 2013). According to Braudel, the second characteristic feature of European civilization was the tendency of European countries to thwart and suppress the country making a bid for hegemony (1994: 416-421). This tendency to block others can also be referred to as the pursuit of “balance of power”.

Braudel further shows that the previous periodic peaceful attempts to unite the continent have always been tentative and unsuccessful. The success of European integration in the second half of the twentieth century was assured thanks to the influence of an external power, namely of the United States (Braudel 1994: 422), whose position in Europe became dominant as a result of its crucial involvement in the two world wars. An additional stimulus was the existence of an external threat posed by the Eastern Bloc and the USSR². Thus, the Cold War world order served as an inducement for European integration. However, the end of the Cold War (1989-1990) brought certain hitherto-latent particular interests to the surface. All the biggest European powers started to vie for the top position, while at the same time they tried to thwart and block their rivals’ ambitions. The EU framework not only proved inefficient to neutralize such attempts, but in fact it became instrumental in the power game. During the recent crisis, many social groups voiced their protests against the undemocratic power of Brussels, as well as against the growing hegemony of Berlin in the EU or alternatively, against “the new concert of powers,” i.e. the Franco-German domination in European politics (Grosse 2016b). If the project of universal European state was envisaged as a safeguard against nationalisms and a safety valve that would help contain the rivalry between the major states, the end of this project can mark the resurgence of all these tendencies. Chancellor Angela Merkel (2010) went on record as a vocal supporter of the “Union method,” which, as she argued, would give control over the European policy to the Member States (and thereby would curb the role of supranational institutions such as the Commission or the European Parliament.) According to the experts, the currently observable increase of the intergovernmental factor in European politics is a result of the euro area

² The USSR: the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

crisis (Fabbrini 2015ab; Schmidt 2015: 91, 111; Brunnermeier et al. 2016; Fasone 2014).

In his analysis, Toynbee points to yet another problem of the universal state (1972: 199-201). Each historical universal state that he examines attempted to create a universal moral authority that was supposed to bind the state together, and at the same time to act as the final moral instance, capable of being the supreme arbiter in internal disputes. One example of such arbiter was the Papacy in the Holy Roman Empire. Tensions mounted when the moral authority was trying to become a political actor who either aspired to supreme political power within the universal state or became a pawn in the power game among other actors. Such a situation accelerated the occurrence of internal divisions and could trigger or exacerbate disintegration tendencies. A similar situation is observable also in modern Europe. Up to a point, the institution acting as the supreme arbiter in the disputes between Member States was the European Commission, but during the recent crises it has become increasingly politicized (Grosse 2016a). According to the President of the Commission, politicization of the Commission was supposed to improve its effectiveness during the crisis, and help it to respond more flexibly to the changing political situation (EUobserver 2014). In practice, however, it led to the Commission's decisions being viewed as arbitrary, which undermined its authority as an impartial institution guided solely by the law. In this way, the Commission also lost its autonomy from the most powerful states, and even took sides in debates occurring between them. This in turn led to the resurrection of the intergovernmentalism, that is, to the increasing influence of the national governments in the EU policy-making, as well as to the larger countries' attempts to pursue "might makes right" agendas at the expense of the smaller or peripheral states. In this way, the Commission's actions have inadvertently led to the revival of historical tensions and rivalries in Europe. And it was precisely these tensions, such as national particularisms, jockeying for position and the attempts to thwart one's opponents and maintain the balance of power that, in the course of the twentieth century, had twice led the European civilization to the brink of annihilation.

The creativity deficit

According to Toynbee, one of the most important symptoms of disintegration of a given civilization is the intellectual decline of the elites mani-

fested primarily by the dearth creativity (Toynbee 1972: 141, 161-166). In spite of the obvious signs of disintegration, there is often an accompanying sense of complacency. It leads to the stasis of the existing institutions that fail to respond to the changing circumstances and new challenges. The elites' reactionary efforts to preserve the *status quo* (or to bring back "the good old days") are generally unsuccessful. The dwindling creativity is an especially dangerous trait in an expanding universal state, which by definition needs to cope with the challenges of growth (Toynbee 1972: 170). Toynbee coins the term "nemesis of creativity," and sees the intellectual crisis of the elites as inevitable. Inadequate management and dearth of institutional creativity must necessarily lead to problems that deepen disintegration.

The phenomena described by Toynbee were observable during the recent European crises, especially during the eurozone crisis. Experts often accuse the European policy-makers of insufficient vision and creativity and blame them for their excessive reliance on existing solutions and on tried-and-tested patterns of behaviour, especially those inspired by the German philosophy of ordoliberalism (Matthijs 2016). Because of this trait, the proposed solutions to the crisis primarily consisted of forcibly introducing fiscal savings in the countries that were the most heavily affected by the crisis. It was a very problematic method to implement, which proved to have staggering social and political costs. It was also inefficient in addressing the fundamental problems of the single currency system. Other commentators add that (again in line with Toynbee's vision) the aim of the anti-crisis policy was to safeguard the *status quo*, i.e. to stabilize the financial markets, failing to address the existing trade imbalances (Bieling et al. 2016). The existing state of affairs was mainly favourable for Germany, who not only has the largest economy in the region, but also has a pronounced surplus in trade relations with other Member States, especially the least competitive ones from Southern Europe. As a result of the anti-crisis measures, the deep economic imbalance in the EU has not changed. The anti-crisis solutions were only aimed to reduce some countries' debt levels and to restore their financial stability (and incidentally, they have also failed in both these respects). According to Lawrence Summers (2016: 2-9), the root of the problem in Europe, as well as in the whole of the West, is a decline in investment and productivity, which leads to a decrease in internal demand, low growth and, in the long-term, dwindling employment. Summers' calls this tendency "the secular stagnation." In such a situation, increase of fiscal savings cannot be a sufficient solution.

According to economists from crisis-stricken countries, growth cannot be kickstarted solely through monetary policy interventions (Flanders 2017: 9). The passivity and lack of vision of the EU elites brought about social unrest and a range of related political problems.

The problems of particularism and individualism

Toynbee argues that increasing individualization and increasing neglect of both the community and the common good are important symptoms of disintegration. Another symptom is what he calls “the schism of the soul” i.e. growing pessimism and apathy, observable both on the social plane (where it is manifested as lack of faith in the universal state) and on the individual plane, where it translates into a sense of failure and resentment (Toynbee 1972: 241-254).

The processes described by Toynbee are certainly observable in contemporary Europe. The recent crises not only lowered the quality of life of European societies, but also brought with them a growing sense of uncertainty and disappointment. According to recent research data, the income of almost 70% of households in twenty-five developed Western countries (most of them EU members) in 2014 was the same or lower as in 2005 (McKinsey & Company 2016). In Italy, for example, nearly all households (the exact percentage is 97%) reported income stagnation or decrease. Significantly, before the crisis, only 2% of households had reported income that was the same or lower as in the previous year. Additionally, the rate of youth unemployment in the euro area stayed at a very high level during the recession³. It is no wonder that the troubled economic situation inspires pessimism and lowers individual expectations, especially among the younger generation.

Experts analysing the eurozone crisis point to the domination of national particular interests over concern for the common good, which leads to fears for the long-term prosperity of the monetary union (Falkner 2016). This is particularly true for the German decision-makers who have been known to shift the costs of macroeconomic adjustments to the peripheral countries of the eurozone. Such a decision was not only a heavy burden for these countries, but also brought about an economic slowdown in Germany itself (Matthijs 2016: 378, 384-387). This creates a phenomenon

³ According to Eurostat data, the rate of youth unemployment since the beginning of the crisis has risen to over 20%. The percentage of unemployed youth in the EU in 2016 was over 21%. Cf. <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/euro-area/unemployment-rate> [access: 29.12.2016].

that I would like to call the “asymmetry of rationality,” in which the rationality and interests of the dominant political actors prevail over the rationality of stable long-term growth of the euro area (Grosse 2016c).

Researchers also point out that during the prolonged crisis, and especially in the context of ineffectiveness of European institutions, European societies increasingly looked for protection and guidance to their own governments and turned towards national political communities. This, in turn, strengthened the national democratic structures, which became an instrument by which the citizens could influence the policy-makers to pursue a policies consistent with voters’ expectations (Zimmermann 2016). If such expectations were not fulfilled by the governments of the day, which favoured integration, the voters were willing to give their support to less experienced Eurosceptic politicians. This in turn exacerbate the political disputes and strengthened the disintegration tendencies. The literature on the subject explains why so many anti-system movements in Europe, even when initially they express pro-European sentiments, often turn towards nationalism (Arrighi et al. 1989: 27-31). The primary reason is simply the fact that national identities are always stronger and more deeply-rooted than European or cosmopolitan identifications. Secondly, and paradoxically, the anti-system rebels need the state apparatus to effectively implement their demands. The anti-system movements of today, which are vocal in their condemnation of “the establishment” of the integrating Europe, see the voters’ patriotism and democratic values of their respective countries as a fundamental mechanism for fulfilling the political will of the people (Grosse 2015).

The phenomena described above fostered national identities and weakened the already tenuous common European identity. According to sociological research, the sense of European community has always been relatively weak. Less than 3% of the EU population chose “European” as their primary identity in 2005, with most of the population seeing their “European identity” as supplementary to their primary national identity. During the crisis period after 2008, this attachment towards national identity has deepened even further. The European identity weakened, especially among these respondents who had previously treated their European identity as supplementary. At the same time, the number of solely national identifications (i.e. respondents who indicated that they do not perceive “European” as an element of their identity) has increased markedly. In the whole EU, the percentage of people who identify solely with their national identity was close to 50% already in 2010 (Polyakova,