

Joseph J. Spengler

(1902-1991)

Joseph John Spengler, who died on the 2nd of January, was an indefatigable and prolific scholar and a leading figure in the economics profession, being a former President of the *American Economic Association*. Spengler was interested primarily in history of economic thought, demography and economic development, and the author or co-author of 13 books and many economic, political and sociological articles. His papers are housed in the Duke University Library and the fact that Duke continues to remain an important centre for H.E.T studies almost certainly owes something to his influence and guidance.

A quick perusal of some of his published articles reveals the breadth of his scholarship in the history of economics. There are papers on Islamic Economic Thought, Hobbes, J.-B. Say, Plato, Herodotus, Aristotle, Cassel, Alberuni, Marshall, Malthus, and Cantillon (he notes that "if the multiple origin of political economy is ignored, Cantillon has a very good claim to having been the principal forerunner of both the classical and the neo-classical schools" *JPE* August 1954), to mention just a few of his subjects. Spengler was one of the first to direct attention to non-European economic thought in ancient and medieval cultures.

Other more general articles he wrote include "Creativity versus Cultural Drift", "Social Science and the Collectivization of *Hubris*", "Mercantilist and Physiocratic growth theory", "The Physiocrats and Say's Law of Markets", "Quantification in Economics", "Evolutionism in American Economics", and "Generalists versus Specialists in Social Science". These papers appear in a diverse collection of journals including *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, *American Economic Review*, *Social Science Quarterly*, *Political Science Quarterly*, *Journal of Economic History*, *HOPE*, *Southern Economic Journal*, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, *American Sociological Review*, *Journal of Politics*, *The Scientific Monthly*, *Journal of Political Economy*, and *The American Political Science Review*, again, just to mention a few.

Spengler was born in Piqua, Ohio, on November 19, 1902. A small-town boy, he worked on the local newspaper before going to college and receiving his B.A., M.A. and Ph.D in economics from Ohio State University. He joined the Duke University Economics faculty in 1932 (and captained the Duke softball team in the 1930s) and remained active for nearly fifty years. Spengler also taught at the Universities of Arizona, Chicago, Pittsburgh, North Carolina, Kyoto and Malaya. Although he officially retired in 1972, he continued to work on his research and maintained an office in the Perkins Library Building until 1982, when his Alzheimer's disease made it impossible for him to continue.

Barry Gordon has remarked on the high quality of Spengler's research on ancient

economic thought, with the last major book written by Spengler on this area when he was in his late 70s. In his review of Spengler's *Origins of Economic Thought and Justice* (1980), Gordon writes that "For scholars concerned with the form and substance of early economic thought this book is mandatory reading". The general theme of the work is the relationship between economics and ethics and this is examined from the ancients to as far as early twentieth century thought (*HOPE*, 14.2 1982 p.286).

Leonard Silk in "The Rich Legacy of an Economist" (*New York Times*, January 4, 1991) writes that Spengler saw economic science as stemming from two roots - one administrative, the other ethical. His great contribution was to trace these two sources through ancient times, cultures and religions, and to demonstrate how vital these two sources remain for the understanding and betterment of human existence.

Spengler was, and remained, an ardent lover of baseball and freedom - and a bitter enemy of umpires and of political and bureaucratic interferences in his own life or anyone else's. Yet he was a realist, and recognized the difficulty of resolving the clash between different views of what human beings are really like and what it takes to make them behave properly.

The fundamental clash, as he saw it, was between the philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke - the Hobbesian creed based on a perception of man as dominated by passions and in urgent need of being governed by the state versus the Lockean view based on a perception of man as rational, with little need of state control. Spengler, leaning strongly to the Lockean view, still recognized that it might be based on too benign and wishful a view of people and the degree of freedom they could be entrusted with. He was no ideologue of the market as the ideal allocator of goods and dispenser of justice. Though the market spurs and rewards efficiency and innovation, he held, it often neglects those aesthetic, intellectual or moral qualities essential to the good society. Further, it may despoil the earth's irreplaceable resources.

He is survived by his wife, Dot, and two sisters. She continues to oversee three acres of gardens with the most beautiful camelias in Durham. Joe Spengler will be missed as will the image of his chaotic, cluttered and seemingly disorganized room. A brave graduate student once sneaked in there and tidied it up, placing all his journals neatly and systematically in order on the shelves, only to find that on the next day Spengler had completely reverted his collection to its former chaotic state, admonishing the student that an empty desk was a sign of an empty mind.

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