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## World culture? Unfinished business in universal history

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### Abstract

*The following descriptions are intended to show how the history of mankind could be written at the end of the philosophy of history and universal philosophy. We will first encounter the difficulty of classifying world historiography: Jakob Burkhardt's "Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen" and A. Toynbee's "Gang der Weltgeschichte"*

*In the search for the great problems of humanity, we come across a profound existential-philosophical context. The legitimate questions about the signs of cultural exhaustion ultimately lead to the fundamental philosophical question of how a common world is possible at all. In order to arrive at this reason for the perception of the world, the aspects of universal historiography will be specified.*

### Introduction

A good century ago, Oswald Spengler's theses were launched into the world and went on to have an interesting career. "The Decline of the Occident", a massive draft of over a thousand pages that was also the last gasp of the philosophy of history, became a winged term that was soon to take on a life of its own<sup>1</sup>. The author was less interested in suggesting the imminent decline of an era than in attempting to expand the boundaries of possible history. It was

these barely concealed borrowings from metaphysical speculation that led critics such as Reinhart Koselleck to conclude that "biological historical metaphysics"<sup>2</sup> was being pursued here, which was far removed from all serious historiography.

This note is remarkable because it reveals a parallelism in thought that is difficult to articulate. If the philosopher of history Spengler was concerned with the "great features of world history", with the

<sup>1</sup> Oswald Spengler: The Decline of the Occident. Outlines of a Morphology of World History.

Düsseldorf: Albatros Verlag 2007, original edition Munich: C. H. Beck 1923

<sup>2</sup> Stephan-Ludwig Hoffmann: The Rift in Time. Koselleck's unwritten historiography. Berlin: Suhrkamp 2023, S. 120

attempt to grasp human history as "the epitome of immense courses of life"<sup>3</sup>, Koselleck, as is well known, devoted himself to historiography as a form of *historical ontology*. However, parallel movements of thought cannot be dismissed out of hand: Spengler sought the stages of the living that had to be traversed in culture as well as in individual lives; biographical archetypes of "birth, death, youth, old age, life span"<sup>4</sup>; existential categories that had a visible relationship to culture. Koselleck, on the other hand, was concerned with the powerful categories that could be united in a theory of historical knowledge. History has to do with different speeds, with continuities and crises, inhibitions and accelerations, spaces of action and legacies, with conscious and unconscious forms, of course also with enmity and division; in this respect always with the experience of violence suffered. However, this is not about fixed forms - and thus Koselleck's work actually distances itself from Spengler - but about an intertwining of "execution and withdrawal"<sup>5</sup>.

In another respect, however, the talk of decline must be analyzed here. A short-sighted diagnosis suggests that "something" has perished and made way for the new. However, this does not provide us with an insight that brings us closer to the characteristics of the modern age. For we cling to linguistic images that present loss and replacement, dwindling and new creation in extreme forms. The demise of the old world is only understood when we come to an understanding of the anthropological framework of a human world that confronts us with criteria of meaning in every area of society. Accordingly, nothing is finally "finished". Nothing can be grasped in absolute categories of loss and decline. The culture of modern times needs the supporting meaning of human creations that have grown historically; and this aspect alone requires us to keep our distance from the semantics of the absolute. Instead, we approach the matter of universal history by outlining shifts, transformations and breaks in time, which must be viewed in the closest context.

The question is what universal history intends and what it can achieve. The bird's flight of universal history (or with Jürgen Osterhammel: the "flight altitude of the eagle") makes the world clear and thus comprehensible. The far-reaching movement of thought covers centuries in which the great powers are in constant conflict. Empires arise and decline; as Oswald Spengler or A. Toynbee have shown, cultures can be viewed from a distance in their heyday and in their decline. However, we must also ask how the distance to the oldest cultures can be brought into relation with the closer cultural present and whether political aspects can also be dealt with in this context. Questions of current geopolitics would be of particular interest here.

How do we look at the history of mankind? Certainly not from a final position where there are no more interests to be found and no more "argumentum ad hominem" will catch on. The observer of the world is not a motionless mover. This is how the main problem of universal history can be identified: regardless of the methodological subtleties, the absolute impartiality of a science that places itself at the greatest distance from human culture

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<sup>3</sup> Spengler 2007, p. 3

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Reinhart Koselleck: In the run-up to a new historiography. In: New Political Literature 6, 1961, pp. 577-588, here p. 577, quoted from Hoffmann 2023, p. 120

appears questionable. This science is to be taken seriously in its intention when it seeks to recognize the central characteristics of cultures - and at the same time it is to be criticized when it "elevates" itself, as it were, above the situation of cultures. A project that cannot succeed categorically and forces us to adopt a different, alternative narrative position.

The following descriptions take up this situation and are intended to show how the history of mankind could be written at the end of the philosophy of history and universal philosophy. In doing so, we will first encounter the difficulty of classifying world historiography: for there is no straight line - for example, from Jakob Burckhardt's "Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen" to A. Toynbee's "Gang der Weltgeschichte" to contemporary universal and global history. Anyone who wants to look at the world in its course and identify reasons for the emergence and decline of a culture exposes himself to the accusation of looking at history from an ultimate point of view and presenting his judgments from a quasi-divine sphere (in order to serve his own, weakly concealed interests in reality). So much for the accusation, to which, however, we must counter that we can ask with good reason how we can describe and understand the world, and whether we can find an appropriate relationship to this reference to the world. We will see that every theoretical concept that claims to understand the historical world in a comprehensive sense is subject to a partisanship that is not reproachable, but rather points back to the scientific determinations themselves.

## 1. The view of universal history

The following remarks are to be understood as a contribution to universal historiography. They begin by superficially exploring the history of the development of universal history and point to central motifs that are highly relevant today.

One of the advantages of modern universal history is its skeptical attitude towards the grand narrative of European supremacy. Between 1837 and 1897, Arnold Toynbee located the conclusion of a development that spanned four centuries and was set in motion by Columbus' landfall and Vasco da Gama's discovery of the sea route to India. The traditional picture is of a triumphant advance of European culture; all non-Western countries, with the exception of Afghanistan and Abyssinia, had fallen under the rule of the West or had adopted the European model of rule. "Peter the Great had opened Russia to the West in 1694; Japan followed the same course in 1868 with the Meiji Revolution. And in 1897, six of the seven great powers of the time were Western states; the seventh, Russia, had become a great power by adopting the Western way of life to a considerable extent over the previous two centuries."<sup>6</sup>

What picture of history is being unfolded here? Until then, history obviously consisted of a chain of political events in which everything that proved to be significant for world history was due to the dominance of the West. From a historical-philosophical perspective, the world was in the Western sphere of vision; a development that was as complex as it was contradictory. The dissolution of the boundaries of economic power, the colonial and imperial legacies, the spread and totalization of the nation state - there were some reasons to assume that these were the characteristics of world history. It was a plausible view of the world that was understandable at a certain moment. Didn't

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<sup>6</sup> Arnold Toynbee: *Humanity and Mother Earth. The history of the great civilizations.* Düsseldorf: Claassen 1979, p. 9

everything point to a triumphant advance of the West, wasn't the world attuned to the supremacy of a model that had proven to be superior - in both a good and a bad sense?

Toynbee's view of universal history attempted to straighten out the picture where it had proved to be one-sided. World history is not to be equated with the completion of the European journey into history. From a universal historical perspective, cultures are at the center of a continuous development that can be described as a sequence of rise, flowering and development. From a distance, these cultures appear as distant entities with their own characteristic styles and features.

However, this is where the major differences between related historical thinkers become apparent. For Oswald Spengler, the controversial creator of the work "The Decline of the West"<sup>7</sup>, cultures did not appear in a continuum, but in the image of a continuous stream. How are these cultures to be imagined? According to Spengler, they are amorphous entities that are "embedded in individual zones of condensed interactions"<sup>8</sup>. The advanced civilizations are characterized by uniform styles; art, science, economy, technology and religion stand side by side on an equal footing. The totality of a culture determines the individual spheres and thus the author comes to the conclusion that occidental culture, for example, has the Faustian urge to overcome space. What connects the cultures is the way they develop. They go through phases of flourishing, the development of artistic, political and technical styles, right through to fatigue, for which signs of decadence can be found<sup>9</sup>. As is well known, it is the negative vision of cultural decline that has survived to this day as a convenient cipher in the concept of decline. Anyone who wants to stand out in terms of the diagnosis of the times falls back on the topos of impending decay. But such decay is a problem in terms of scientific theory. How can it be identified? Are there identifiable factors that were accepted by contemporaries or could be averted through appropriate behavior? Is the decline, which can be conjured up as an eternal, dark riddle with regard to ancient cultures, a reversible tendency or even a "fate"? Anyone who dares to venture too far with predictions at this point is leaving the common ground of scientific respectability; but this accusation alone does not settle the matter.

The observation of world history from the point of view of decline is ambivalent. In Oswald Spengler's work, the ambivalence of scientific theory is reflected in the fact that one tends to pursue art history, which divides the world into a universe of forms<sup>10</sup>. The decisive question arises with regard to the consciousness of our contemporaries. What drives people? Is it possible to assert a lack of will to survive, expressed in indifference and resignation, for which there are many forms of expression, including protest? Are the "tension forces" diminishing; how would we measure them if we were to refer to scientific accuracy? As we can see, these are temporally, socially and spatially extended conditions that do not provide an overall picture. Individual perspectives can be pushed

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<sup>7</sup> Spengler 2007

<sup>8</sup> Uwe Simson: Spengler? In: Karl Heinz Bohrer (ed.): No Will to Power. Decadence. Merkur, Issue 8/9, 61st Vol. 2007, pp. 731-742 S. 732

<sup>9</sup> See the articles in: Karl Heinz Bohrer (ed.): No will to power. Decadence. Merkur, Issue 8/9, 61st Vol. 2007

<sup>10</sup> Simson 2007, p. 735

into one another and condensed into a motif, but as soon as an overall picture is painted, the threshold to totalizing observation is crossed.

## 2. unfinished tasks of universal history

Despite all the problems, let us stick to the basic question. How is universal historiography possible today? How can it be conceived if it addresses the major issues between politics, religion, culture and the state? In the search for the great problems of humanity, we come across a profound existential-philosophical context. The legitimate questions about the signs of cultural exhaustion ultimately lead to the fundamental philosophical question of *how a common world is possible at all*. In order to arrive at this reason for the perception of the world, the aspects of universal historiography mentioned above must be specified.

What criteria can emphasize the theoretical capacity of universal history (which is not to be equated here with advanced global history)? The questions raised by various 20th century thinkers prove to be justified; the methodological aspects, on the other hand, need to be problematized to some extent. The most important aspects, however, require a thorough examination. Firstly, we must ask to what extent the focus on the great cultures of history obscures the perception of supposedly inferior, marginal cultures (2.1). Furthermore, we will see that the knowledge of the past of cultural forms does not correspond to an equally certain knowledge of the future of history. This is by no means trivial and only marginally speaks against the prognostic possibilities of scientific models. The question of the future is highly significant and is linked to specific positions that can be assigned to political philosophy. The question of a world state, for example, is not an object that can be explored solely with the knowledge of cultural research (2.2). However, the perhaps decisive criteria come into view when we ask about the fundamental determinants of the possibility of history in the sense of historiography. What are the conditions of historicity, if it is not only the brute force of man? The attitude of the older philosophy of history, which regarded history as a purely human work, must be taken up here under new auspices. Above all, the question of whether and how people are capable of a conscious perception of their historical position must be explicitly posed (2.3). The proposal here ultimately aims at an inter-existentially grounded theory of the social - the challenge posed by universal history can only be overcome if we think through the existential-political situation in depth.

### 2.1. The shadow of the great cultures

At a superficial glance, universal history appears to be an impossibility. Who could dare to present the totality of history in an overall view? Few have made this attempt, despite all the adversities and expected reproaches. Oswald Spengler had done the groundwork here; the historical world had been traced there as a spectrum of high and low, great and "primitive" cultures. In complex cultures, what appears significant to us as history, what is worth recording, emerges. We will see that this attitude of tying the concept of culture to the category of historical power is one of the unresolved problems of universal history.

Arnold Toynbee had spent decades diligently analyzing the "course of world history" in order to grasp the condition, emergence and

decline of the great cultures<sup>11</sup>. These cultures are not to be understood, as Spengler did, as passing through certain cycles of flourishing and decay, but are to be integrated into an evolutionary perspective. How they assert themselves in their environments is uncertain; not every culture is bound to its natural end. The decisive factor is how and whether cultures prove to be capable of learning and adapting and whether they can react appropriately to certain challenges.

In the cultures mentioned in "Mankind and Mother Earth", the ability to "make decisions and make and execute plans with which he (man, C. W.) can prevent nature from eliminating him, as it has eliminated other species that threatened or disturbed the biosphere as a whole" emerges.<sup>12</sup>

What sets humans apart from the inhabitants of the biosphere and distinguishes cultures is the fact that cultures develop a realm of the spirit that is immaterial and invisible. This world of the spirit is the other home, "which is no less an essential part of the whole of reality"; this "differs from the biosphere in that it is immaterial and infinite"<sup>13</sup>. But at what point in development do we even speak of great cultures? Toynbee's view is aimed at diverse social bodies, which are referred to in the original as "societies", "cultures" or "civilizations". These are characterized by a vital force (which suggests their proximity to vitalism); the decisive variables include the religious sphere of meaning, the political sphere of power and the economic sphere<sup>14</sup>. Cultures to which this signature is attributed are, for example, the Sumerian, Akkadian, ancient Syrian and Pharaonic-Egyptian, Hellenic, Indian and Chinese civilizations. These large units, which have inscribed themselves in history, are nevertheless contrasted with inferior or marginal cultures, which for certain reasons tended to atrophy and were thus unable to assert a place in history.

This point is highly sensitive. It has a long tradition, not only because of the boundaries that were drawn against the so-called "barbaric" in the earliest times. The idea that there are large, meaningful and therefore historically viable cultures is more difficult. The tradition of cultural historiography since the 18th century has been accused of being unscientific. The established historians' guild focused their thinking on the work of great statesmen, while universal history was based on far more vague concepts of *cultural morphology*. Cultural circles in a kind of natural history were already the focus of Vico or the Göttingen school around Schläzer; Frobenius, Wilhelm Wundt and Karl Lamprecht also searched for comparable variables, which they assumed to be in the *cultural soul* of a people.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Arnold Toynbee: *Der Gang der Weltgeschichte*, 2 volumes, Zurich: Europa Verlag 1949 and 1958; Ders.: *A study of history*, Volumes I-X, London: Oxford University Press 1934-1954

<sup>12</sup> Toynbee 1979, p. 26

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> These provisions place the work in the vicinity of related thinkers: in Michael Mann's work, for example, ideological, ecological, military and political resources can be identified in the history of power. Michael Mann: *History of power. From the beginnings to Greek antiquity*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus 1991

<sup>15</sup> Hasso Spode: Arnold J. Toynbee. In Gerd Jüttemann (ed.): *Psychology of History*. Lengerich: Pabst Science Publishers 2002, pp. 167-172

For Toynbee and Spengler, this search led to the distinction between high and primitive cultures. Spengler distinguished eight large organisms with specific lifestyles that seemed to be singular and untranslatable. They go through the perpetual cycle of rise, blossom and decline; however, there is no recognizable process of progress throughout history. Toynbee, on the other hand, sees in the work of the great cultures occasions for learning; whenever challenges are overcome and problems are recognized, decline can still be averted. These older motifs are not directly related to cultural history. What makes cultures great and significant? These questions are also at the heart of 20th century thinkers.

Karl Jaspers' philosophy of axial time should be included in this context<sup>16</sup>. The Axis Era is a concept with a deep past. It means that humanity experienced a historical upheaval of epochal proportions at the turn of the sixth century BC. This point in time divides the world into a before and an after; before the Axis period, people lived in a pre-conscious twilight sleep; with the turning point of the Axis period, they were awakened, as it were. People in the Axis period awoke from their mythical sleep and positioned themselves in relation to the whole, questioning and admiring. Karl Jaspers wrote in "On the Origin and Goal of History" of a moment of ignition that was to lay the foundation for all subsequent history. Philosophical and existential questions were asked at the same time in Israel, Greece, China and India. To speak of the Axis Era is to speak of a time of awakening that gripped all known cultures and that we still encounter today in the works of Zarathustra, Buddha, Confucius, the Jewish prophets and the Greek thinkers.

However, the underlying idea that these form a cross-cultural axis remains a reservation when it comes to assessing the greatness of a culture. Does a world culture include the culture that has inscribed itself in history and proven to be "historically powerful"? Or are we dealing here with a hegemony that establishes a "human cultural memory" that unintentionally blocks the view of other cultures?<sup>17</sup> At this point, a limitation becomes clear that extends to more recent concepts of "world historiography".

In this context, let us think of the idea of sociological neo-institutionalism: John W. Meyer's "world culture" is based on the idea of the unfolding occidental rationalism<sup>18</sup>. Western-style values shared worldwide have been "globalized". We thus live - not only in the West, but worldwide - in the awareness of a legitimacy with a clearly recognizable origin. The path to such a world culture leads via the "good institutions", via organization and statehood. There is no need to repeat the accusation at length here: this talk of world culture only makes sense in the context of an already homogenized world community. But the idea that Western principles permeate the world and that we think of modernity in terms of its European origins is something we are very far removed from today.

A "world culture in the making" thus encounters the logic of inclusion and exclusion and seems to find a limit in this. The usual form of socialization naturally requires the alternation of inclusion and exclusion. But perhaps the greatest misunderstanding results

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<sup>16</sup> Karl Jaspers: *On the Origin and Goal of History*. Munich/Zurich: Pieper 1949

<sup>17</sup> Jan Assmann: *Axis time. An Archaeology of Modernity*. Munich: C. H. Beck 2018

<sup>18</sup> John W. Meyer: *World Culture. How Western principles permeate the world*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2005

from the exaggeration of a great culture that excludes everything peripheral and inferior from within. Such an image: a great global culture that represents *the best of humanity* in a self-empowered and rational way, would merely conceal the error: that this greatness is unintentionally based on the exclusion of cultures that are not historically powerful.

If we keep this critical point in mind, we recognize a task that is difficult to think about and even more difficult to put into texts: the question of the outlines of a *world culture in the making*. No matter how high the scientific criteria are that we are dealing with here, the basic approach should be expressed in simple terms. A world culture is the intellectual task of our time, which confronts us with the greatest possible contradiction: we are at the height of scientific excellence and moral insight and yet we are, as it were, "on the brink of failure". Given this gap, what could a philosophy of world culture "achieve"? Where should it start, what could it meaningfully conceptualize?

It is essential to clear up any possible misunderstandings here. What a world culture is *not*, how it should not be understood:

- It would be misunderstood as a planetary unified culture and would result in an entity that is as grotesque as it is totalitarian. Although political dystopias are conceivable, it cannot be the claim to describe a global unity that could steer history in an all-encompassing way.
- The logical conclusion: if there is not one great, all-encompassing world culture, then "culture" exists exclusively in the plural, as an immeasurable diversity of cultural life forms. But this is where thinking about historicity itself begins, beyond the total. For how the many cultures in the past and present relate to each other, whether they merge or are in bitter opposition, is the real task of thought. Behind everything that is concealed in the cultural struggles, appropriations or fusions, there must at least be an idea of a comprehensive historicity. We must therefore hold on to the fundamental insight into *a history in itself*. We can familiarize ourselves with these thoughts if we start from the traditional meaning of a world culture. It generally refers to the entirety of cultural achievements in the history of mankind, everything that has proven to be worth preserving and is therefore to be valued as cultural heritage or cultural assets.
- However, this in turn addresses a complicated task that arises directly from the concept itself. Whether one admits it or not, the motive of recognition has an exclusionary function. This concerns the meaning of cultural heritage in particular. It is true that the "gain" is undeniable: today, for example, we speak of indigenous dignity and direct our gaze away from the center towards the overlooked or excluded cultures. But the interplay between recognition and misrecognition, forgetting and remembering remains.

## 2.2. Orientation towards a global state

Furthermore, universal history has an unclear relationship to the political sphere. This aspect also requires detailed discussion. It must be shown that historical and political aspects must be brought into a common context and that it is problematic to draw conclusions from cultural developments to political necessities. To put it more simply: even if cultures have proven to be capable of

learning and surviving, it is too easy to project domestic or local politics onto a world entity. A world state, as a thesis, is directly related to the contemporary context; world state concepts require a philosophical foundation that is not based solely on the criterion of adaptability.

Arnold Toynbee cultivated an open-ended view of the cultures of world history. Cultures are by no means entangled in a dark cycle of prosperity and decline from the outset, but can also free themselves from difficult historical situations in the long term. To do so, however, they must become aware of their situation, draw conclusions about their own preconditions and activate their ability to act.

In this context, Toynbee also spoke of "stagnant cultures" with a sideways glance. These included the Polynesians, the Inuit and the indigenous peoples of the North Polar region, who had to face extreme challenges in order to colonize entire deserts of sea or ice. Environmental and geographical conditions play a major role in the sense of geopolitical tradition; however, it was above all the capacity for resilience and innovation that gave rise to long-lasting cultures. The example of ancient Egyptian culture is a good model, for example, insofar as it reacted to the annual flooding of the Nile. Such cultures see environmental conditions as incentives; they repeatedly reach higher levels of development due to their technological innovation. This further development can also include the phenomenon of the emergence of a successor culture, just as the Western and Byzantine cultures are known to have emerged from the Roman-Hellenistic culture. Others, such as Chinese culture, on the other hand, have proven to be surprisingly tenacious and long-lived, which speaks above all for their ability to change and adapt.

A highly interesting thesis is raised in this context: Toynbee speaks of the necessary formation of a global political entity that, unlike individual cultures, could establish a new era of humanity. Toynbee was convinced that a world state was not only recognizable in its beginnings, but also indispensable in order to guarantee global peace in the long term. These reflections from 1974 are highly topical: as the current independent regional states would not be able to "preserve peace, nor protect the biosphere from human pollution", everything would speak for the formation of a political *ecumene*. This would have to take the form of a "global political organization" consisting of individual parts that resembled Neolithic village communities; clearly structured and capable of political action. Such a world culture in the sense of a world state would suit the individual: he feels addressed as a citizen of the world and yet remains at home in his local world. Their consent to a world state is voluntary - up to the *political* tipping point that is so difficult to assess. Since political unification "will obviously only be accepted reluctantly, it will probably be delayed until humanity has inflicted further catastrophes on itself, catastrophes of such magnitude that it will finally consent to global political unity as the lesser of two evils." <sup>19</sup>

A world state is not an entirely new idea; political philosophy has taken it up as a possibility at various times, but has mostly denied it. With good reasons, as we have known since Kant. But we are called upon to overcome this speculation in favor of more intensive reflection. Far from being overstretched, the formation of a global state unit with subsidiary and constitutional elements appears

<sup>19</sup> Toynbee 1979, p. 501 f.

necessary even under today's conditions. There are various reasons for this. The planetary world is to be understood as a limited living space. There is no community that exists without neighbors, no community without ties to related societies. Friendly and hostile relationships force us to act across borders, or at least to take a stand in the political sphere. This is where the philosophy of law and politics demands that these relationships, however hot or cold they are experienced, must be shaped by law<sup>20</sup>. In terms of normative demands from the highest theoretical perspective, universal history meets with the philosophy of a coming world republic.

But how should such a political vision be understood? This is by no means about the formation of a world state, which for Kant already represented more of a despotic vision of terror. A world republic, on the other hand, could, according to Otfried Höffe, for example, be understood as a moderate consequence of a universal precept of democracy. This commandment is, of course, controversial. It states, in dry words, that the assembly of individuals under a state is generally justifiable in order to end the war of *everyone against everyone else*. Individuals would thus be required a priori to abandon the state of nature and place themselves under the protective umbrella of a democratic constitutional state. What applies at national level also applies to international relations. Here, as there, there is no way around the consistent juridification of political relations.<sup>21</sup>

However, it is the philosophical phenomenon of coercion that causes difficulties. As we know, the moment of consent to a contract is nothing more than a philosophical idea. It summarizes reality in a meaningful act: as a "moment" of consent to a political relationship that is guided by reason, self-control and the willingness to compromise. But behind the idea lies the overwhelming complexity of a world community that we encounter in at least three dimensions: as a community of cooperation, a community of memory and a community of violence. In the latter dimension, however, the air becomes thin for philosophical deductions; and the many, confusing and seemingly increasingly intense lines of enmity do not dissolve by virtue of a treaty. Critics tend to see a different danger here, which, in the space of a few decades, turns the formation of a peace order into its opposite. The idea that a domestic threat could be redefined as a threat to world peace at the highest social level is incredibly explosive. The same could be said of the idea of a political world community that places itself under the compulsion of a global state due to a scientifically verifiable global threat; here too, contested rights are bent into a right of intervention. As a consequence, the principle of sovereignty threatens to be eliminated; and in such a negative vision - a global order of war and intervention - "civilians find

themselves as - rather disturbing - appendages of territories whose marked fields are to be bombed."<sup>22</sup>

### 2.3. The problem of contemporaneity

There is one final problem that is closely related to the aspects described above. It can be described as the problem of contemporaneity in times of global concern. In certain periods of history, people are faced with the question of the extent to which they can communicate about the conditions of their historicity.

Perhaps the most sensitive point of universal history concerns the planetary consciousness that is discussed in contemporary discourses. In a cultural-theoretical perspective, however, this possibility is by no means self-evident. Reinhart Koselleck's historiography provides the decisive conceptual impulses here. In principle, it can be argued that history is constituted through the experiences and expectations of people who act and suffer. However, it is equally clear that there were different forms of experience in historical times. Experienced time and historical consciousness are subject to constant change in cultural definitions. The older cultures lived as well or as badly as contemporary culture between their own spaces of experience and particular horizons of expectation. By virtue of these categories, past and present could be intertwined and historical time could be thematized<sup>23</sup>. The time of human history takes place between these polar variables and determines the historical sense of time of contemporaries in relation to their technical and cultural possibilities.

It is the technical, communicative and scientific transgressions that make the difference in this context. The divergence of the categories of experience and expectation is problematic. In the modern era, the two variables diverge; a tension arises that "provokes new solutions in different ways and in this respect drives historical time out of itself."<sup>24</sup>

"On the pulse of time" - this could be the title of the following publications, which deal with the consequences for our age. The

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<sup>22</sup> Ingeborg Maus: On the sovereignty of the people. Elements of a Theory of Democracy. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2011, p. 393

<sup>23</sup> In his search for a theory of historical knowledge, Koselleck came across formal determinations, axioms of finitude. Whenever we look at historical events, we are dealing with categories of domination and servitude, friendship and enmity, publicity and secrecy, inside and outside, above and below. These pairs of categories form an anthropology in the extreme that we cannot escape. In contrast to the optimistic social sciences and the speculative philosophy of history, but also to hermeneutics, historiography thus has the advantage of not creating any blind spots and not following any false teleology, but rather grasping history itself in its unavailable form.

Reinhart Koselleck: In the run-up to a new historiography. In: Neue Politische Literatur 6, 1961, pp. 577-588; Ders.: Vergangene Zukunft. On the Semantics of Historical Times. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1979; Ders.: Historik und Hermeneutik. In: Ders.: Zeitschichten. Studies in Historiography. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2000, pp. 97-118

Reinhart Koselleck: The Concept of conceptual History. Timing History, Spacing Concepts. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002a

<sup>24</sup> Koselleck, 1979, p. 352

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<sup>20</sup> Otfried Höffe: Globality instead of globalism. On a subsidiary and federal world republic. In: Matthias Lutz-Bachmann/James Bohman (eds.): Weltstaat oder Staatenwelt? For and against the idea of a world republic. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2002, pp. 8-32

<sup>21</sup> Matthias Lutz-Bachmann: World statehood and human rights after the end of the nation state. In: Hauke Brunkhorst/Wolfgang R. Köhler/ Matthias Lutz-Bachmann: Recht auf Menschenrechte. Human Rights, Democracy and International Politics. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1999, pp. 199-216

problems of climate research and universal history come together in one essential aspect: they outline a present in which the previous cultural possibilities are surpassed and are collected under the heading of a new era. The title of the Anthropocene has been agreed upon<sup>25</sup>; however, it is questionable to what extent an aggregated humanity will and can achieve a world-historical consciousness. For such a consciousness requires more than just a worried view of the future, more than just the fear that leads to global projects. Such a world consciousness requires a life-serving bond. Lucien Hölscher has compared it to a garden of time based on "a common concept of life, of real life."<sup>26</sup> Such a shared concept of shared life must be determined and explored narratively. It must be forward-looking and confront history as a universal reality; at the same time, it must be inward-looking in order to create an "open field" "in which interrelated stories can emerge."<sup>27</sup>

The demand that a narrative should highlight the context and not just the disparate is understandable. The skeptical voices, on the other hand, become louder and more insistent when it comes to the planetary future and the reality of the "Anthropocene". The historical time of humans and the time of geology cannot be adequately dovetailed; for various reasons, the "global historicity of climate change"<sup>28</sup> is questioned as a useful category. It is true that the climate discourses of the present provide an open stage on which human concerns and affects can be exhibited with all their effects, and in this respect one could speak of a passionate drama of earth history performed by the actors of the present with devotion, despair and hope. But this ultimately seems to distract from the fact that the time of geology cannot be brought into line with the time of man. Human affects, according to Dipesh Chakrabarty, are distanced from the scale of geological and evolutionary time. Most geological events have no entry into the human affect budget because we "have no noticeable emotions about the Great Oxygen Catastrophe 2.5 billion years ago - although human life would be unthinkable without it - or about the Ordovician mass extinction that took place more than 440 million years ago."<sup>29</sup>

The provisions of universal history are different. This cannot be compared with the standards of geological time, but is subject to its own standards. As we have seen, even the highest point of knowledge - which could be attributed to advanced cultural historiography - remains an empty concept if it is not linked to political and social standards. What applies to the anthropological foundations of climate history can also be applied to universal history: a narrative and intelligible quality is required that enables us to integrate the many data and facts into a coherent context. This does not mean in the simplest sense that the history of the great civilizations (as well as the history of climate) should be told *convincingly*. Rather, it means that we have to agree on the criteria of meaning that bring us closer to a life-serving relationship to the world in the past and present.

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<sup>25</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty: *The Climate of History in the Planetary Age*. Berlin: Suhrkamp 2022

<sup>26</sup> Lucian Hölscher: *Time Gardens. Historical Concepts in Modern Historiography*. In: *History and Theory* 53, No. 4, 2014, p. 591

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Chakrabarty 2022, p. 281

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

### 3. Outlook. From a borderline situation to a world culture on the rise

Jaspers wrote in the "Ciphers of Transcendence" that "historicity would be the "incomprehensible One", a kind of proper time beyond mere natural history<sup>30</sup>. The concept of the historical has a special place in Jasper's work. We can profitably develop this idea for the present perspective. What do we understand by human history in the broadest sense of the word? More than just the fact of the irretrievably past, more than just the analytically trained retrospective view of what has become. Rather, history is correctly understood as an expression of the unavailable conditions of meaning of our existence and is associated with the aspect of the negative, failure and incompleteness. Anthropological and political aspects must be considered together here.

The defining category of existential historicity is located in the context of phenomenology. In the background is the fact that we must trace all ethical, political and social determinations back to the comprehensive horizon of a primary world. This primary world is not already nature without man, but the equally original context of action and suffering of a genuinely human world. We must grasp the totality of the world, which can be traced back to nothing other than the fulfillments and sensory designs of human beings, as the inescapable reality of common life. Before we can ask about the reason for blindness and violence, about the "behind" of all political ideas and transgressions, we are *always already* moving in a *communicatively constituted primary world*. In the midst of this life-world totality, we design sensory concepts of the good life and bind our practice to the finite determinations of culture, science and civilization<sup>31</sup>. In this basic factual situation, from which we can never escape by virtue of intellectual effort, the question arises as to which practical sensory designs we create in cultural spheres and what kind of historicity opens up the space of human freedom for us.

For Jaspers, the question arose as to what history could be after the experience of axial time. Failure emerged as the primary insight, because the idea of empire unfolded in the worse sense of the word and the creative power of axial time faded. However, this poses challenges for the more recent philosophy of history when we ask about the value of remembrance and memory. In the following, we attempt to systematically grasp the significance of history.

- (1) In fact, the Axis period came to an end when the great empires developed further and corrupted axial thinking. A "global" development of great empires characterized the Han dynasty in China, the Sassanid empire of the Persians, the Diadochi empires in Hellas, the Roman and Byzantine empires. For Jaspers, these political phenomena not only revealed hegemonic encroachments, but also the burial of the culture of the Axis period. A well-founded skeptical diagnosis, but one that should also allow for a different interpretation. For the historical existence of an axis is also to be understood as a philological and existential-philosophical task. Without the canon from the spirit of the Axis period, we would

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<sup>30</sup> Karl Jaspers: *Chiffren der Transzendenz*, ed. by Hans Saner, Munich: Piper 1970, p. 16; the author owes this reference to the analyses of Jan Assmann: *Achsenzeit. An Archaeology of Modernity*. Munich: C. H. Beck 2018, p. 179 ff.

<sup>31</sup> Assmann 2018, p. 187

know nothing of these achievements; "if we had no knowledge of them, we would not read their texts, think in their categories or live in their religions"<sup>32</sup>. The archaeology of the present defines itself accordingly as the meaning-creating authority of the incessantly commenting work on the ancient legacies. Its efforts are rightly aimed at preserving cultural memory with its many shades.

- (2) However, this describes a motif that comes close to the approach presented here. Cultural memory can be understood as a movement of thinking and searching that links time and meaning in a unique way. History as memory is an expression of a particular culture. However, it is questionable to what extent we can assign a universal scope to this connection, which can be proven for all historical epochs. Is the concept of cultural memory not too broad to be able to redeem a claim to a common history? In order to answer this question, the nature of memory must be described in more detail. As we know, human memory is a dazzling phenomenon. We are able to "put away" or constructively process an extremely painful experience. Other memories "burrow" timelessly in our present practice without coming into the light of consciousness. Memories can come from far away; they are among the most unreliable things in a human world. "The majority of our memories," writes Aleida Assmann, "lie dormant within us, waiting to be awakened by an external occasion. Then these memories suddenly become conscious, gain a sensual presence once again and, under the right circumstances, can be put into words and become part of an available repertoire."<sup>33</sup>
- (3) These indications are sufficient to estimate the scope of cultural memory for a comprehensive cultural theory. Two levels must be considered in their contradictory nature. Memory achievements are unavailable to others; they revolve around an area that is entirely their own - this applies to the individual as well as to cultures. The lower layer is inaccessible, but its effect should not be underestimated; there are power relations here that cannot simply be deciphered "rationally". Trauma, pain and suffering, experiences of violence and shame remain under "lock and key" and unfold their effects in other ways. The language of psychoanalysis alone would be able to "uncover" these aspects without being able to get hold of them<sup>34</sup>. From this perspective, we would have to

say that memory is purely perspectival, bound to culture and time, unavailable and irreplaceable. However, with the help of recent memory theory, an area can be delimited in which the unspeakable is transferred into a communicative space of memory. For it is equally true that our collective and individual experiences can, in principle, be exchanged in interactions and encounters. Memories can be networked and connected and through these intersections something fundamentally new is formed in culture.

- (4) If we take the reflections of memory theory seriously, we are entering a new culture of shared memories. Such an "entry" is vague and indeterminate, it does not lend itself to historical-philosophical triumphs. The point is to see the signs of an emerging practice of remembrance that frees itself from the constrictions of the old. However, the contradictions are not resolved prematurely. As indicated, memories rummage in the realm of the preconscious, are unsteady and erratic and therefore not reliable. Only through narratives do the individual motifs gain a coherent structure, specific meaning and credibility. However, as we know, this is precisely where a difficult dynamic lies, as these narratives have been framed in a nation-state framework to this day, which many consider to be unassailable. The real task for cultural theory is therefore: how can the nation-state framework be abandoned without allowing the vital pathos to wither away; how can the seductive images of history be deconstructed without falling prey to new distortions?

In retrospect, it is easy to analyze the effects of the *narrative of the nation*. This was and is first and foremost about narrowing down a field of vision, not about merging the horizons of hermeneutics (H. G. Gadamer). What had proved to be a victory or defeat is remembered with all the stylistic devices of pathos. The great triumph or the selfless sacrifice for the whole - it is these motifs with the claim to identity formation that kept the collective national consciousness alive and kept it going with the greatest ceremonial effort.<sup>35</sup>

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Historical Consciousness. Memory, History, Identity 2. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1998a

<sup>35</sup> Only the turn towards the negative has changed this grammar of memory; whereby the negative is by no means to be attributed unilaterally to the discourse of guilt. Rather - and here we can first look at the Central European discourses - "new forms of collective memory are emerging that no longer fall into the patterns of retrospective heroization and the creation of meaning, but are geared towards the universal recognition of suffering and the therapeutic overcoming of paralysing after-effects."

Assmann, 2000, p. 23 Historically conscious cultures commemorate the events that remained as traumatic experiences for certain members; and gradually steps are taken in the direction of a cultural processing of the negative. Does this also change the tone and style of collective memoria? The commemoration of the victims and the coming to terms with historical injustice are progressing, but this does not mean that the various political cultures are completely submitting to a new grammar of universal recognition. The discourse on historical violations thus draws new lines of historical reason; this loses its ethnocentricity to the extent

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<sup>32</sup> Thomas Rentsch: How is a human world possible at all? Philosophical anthropology as a constitutional analysis of the human world. In: Christoph Demmerling/Gottfried Gabriel/Thomas Rentsch (eds.): Vernunft und Lebenspraxis. Philosophical Studies on the Conditions of a Rational Culture. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1995, pp. 192-215; Ders.: Die Konstitution der Moralität. Transcendental Anthropology and Practical Philosophy. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1999

<sup>33</sup> Aleida Assmann: Individual and collective memory - form, functions and media. In: Kurt Wettengl (ed.): The memory of art. History and Memory in Contemporary Art. Frankfurt am Main: Hatje Cantz Verlag 2000, pp. 21-29, here p. 21

<sup>34</sup> Jörn Rüsen/Jürgen Straub (eds.): Die dunkle Spur der Vergangenheit. Psychoanalytische Ansätze zur



Is this a first step, a first thought in the direction of a historically conscious world culture? At the very least, we recognize a new way of locating ourselves in the world, a different way of speaking to others and wanting to be addressed by others. A certain form of humility goes hand in hand with this new self-awareness. One's own culture is not elevated to a pedestal and not subjected to the compulsion of self-aggrandizement; in other words, historical consciousness undermines the logic of cultural unambiguity. The negative takes on a new significance because it contributes to leaving the path of normative self-aggrandizement. These are the first corrections to the self-image of historical cultures, a rejection of the hermetic "we" on the path from the origins to the present. The will to positivization distorted this ideal image, which - exemplary in the context of European self-confidence - imagined itself "as a peace order against the unrest of the world" or "as a stronghold of human rights and democracy against despotism and tyranny" .<sup>36</sup>

In contrast, the logic of *world culture is emerging* in the awareness of an existentially communicative constitution of common life. The older self-images are fading and making way for a new historical understanding. A world culture continues to have a sense for the fulfillment of the particular, but we can assert with good reason that all sensory designs can be tied back to the condition of the world totality, or in other words: to the basic features of the singular totality.

We can summarize the previous considerations as follows: what we want to understand here as the "actual" history can no longer be grasped with the means of the older universal historical categories. Culture is more and different than a constant confrontation of monologically walled-off totalities; history is something other than simple self-assertion against a world of enemies. Both titles are reminiscent of how history was conceived and made in the old narratives: as an existential and existentialist form of self-empowerment. In line with traditional Cartesian thinking, history as a struggle in existence was coherent and remained unchallenged. In contrast, the turn towards the insight into a priori inter-existentiality makes a categorical difference: the fundamental reason why we can understand ourselves as historical beings at all is not due to the moment of being thrown, but to the insight into the suspension common to all human beings. Cultures are exposed to each other by orienting themselves in the basic features of what has always been "a common life in a common world"<sup>37</sup> . Of course, this philosophical turn does not bring a new harmony into the world. The philosophy of history here is nothing more and nothing less: the condition of the possibility of a common moral practice. We can only speak of recognition, humanity and respect in such a world relationship because and in that we find ourselves in fragile, suffering-threatened and finite conditions. So what kind of historical self-reflection can we expect in the future?

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that it devotes itself to "experiences of horror within the framework of one's own history". Jörn Rüsen: Can yesterday be better? Berlin: Kadmos 2003, p. 99

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 101 f.

<sup>37</sup> Rentsch 1999, p. 193