

# UNIVERSAL HISTORY BEYOND ETHNOCENTRISM - PROBLEMS AND CHANCES

## HISTÓRIA UNIVERSAL PARA ALÉM DO ETNOCENTRISMO - PROBLEMAS E POSSIBILIDADES

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**Resumo:** O artigo começa com uma breve visão geral sobre a ideia ocidental de história universal desde o início da era moderna. Esta visão geral termina com uma crítica a essa ideia moderna ser etnocêntrica. A segunda parte descreve o que é o etnocentrismo: uma avaliação assimétrica, uma perspectiva monocêntrica e uma teleologia orientada para a origem na formação de significado sobre o passado como história. A terceira parte discute a possibilidade de superar essa lógica do etnocentrismo e chegar a uma avaliação equilibrada, a uma perspectiva policêntrica e a uma reconstrução orientada para o futuro. No final, foram apresentadas seis consequências para evitar e superar o etnocentrismo na conceituação da história universal.

**Palavras-chave:** História universal;  
Etnocentrismo; Perspectiva policêntrica

**Abstract:** The paper starts with a short overview about the Western idea of universal history since the beginning of the modern era. This overview ends with a critique of this modern idea is being ethnocentric. The second part describes what ethnocentrism is about: an asymmetrical evaluation, a monocentric perspective and an origin-oriented teleology in forming meaning about the past as history. The third part discusses the possibility of overcoming this logic of ethnocentrism and to reach a balanced evaluation, to polycentric perspective and a future oriented reconstruction. At the end six consequences for avoiding and overcoming ethnocentrism in conceptualizing universal history were presented.

**Keywords:** Universal history; Ethnocentrism;  
Polycentric perspective.

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*History writing is the most difficult business. ... Lavish praise might not be appropriate, and (on the other side) does exceeding blame not incur resentments from the netherworld? If right gets wrong, and true gets false, then I'm afraid that man-made catastrophes and Heaven's punishment cannot be evaded.*

Da-yi lüe-xu<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Global history today

The title of universal history presupposes a Eurocentric mould, if not a Eurocentric logic of global history today. Nobody can deny that such a form exists. A simple glance at the tradition of global or universal history can teach us the following finding: In the field of Western historical discourse the global and universal perspective of history has very often been shaped by ideas of relevance in history, which stem from the specific historical experience and understanding of Western intellectuals.

When modern historical thinking started at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, it reflected an enormous growth of knowledge about cultural difference in space and time. So History owes its modern form to a discourse on its philosophical foundations and the development of methodical strategies of historical research in different academic discourses. Philosophy of history and the emerging academic discipline of historical studies and related discourse in the other humanities took over the task of bringing order into the knowledge of the variety and multitude of human life forms and knowledge. Such an order included basic assumptions of the cultural nature of humanity and its historical dimension. These assumptions were deeply influenced by those values and norms of human life which were relevant for the self-understanding and self-awareness of the Western intellectuals at that time.

This impact of specific concepts of what was important in and for history went along with the further development of historical studies and the social sciences. So, this specific

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in: SI-XIAO JI, Zheng (ed.). *Chen Fu-kang*. Shanghai: Shang-hai gu-ji, 1991, p. 191 (translated by Achim Mittag).

form of global or universal history, which was moulded by this impact can be called Eurocentric. This concept is still powerful and prevailing. Let me give you a speaking example for the power of Eurocentric traditions in universal history of today. In the year 2000 the world historians Congress in Oslo discussed as one of its “major themes” “Perspectives on Global History: Concepts and Methodology”. The opening paper by Patrick Karl O'Brian gave a short summary of the history of global historical thinking and a more detailed overview of its recent development. In the historical part he did not mention a single non-Western historian. Not a word about Sima Qian or Ibn Khaldun, just to name two great non-Western historians who substantially contributed to the idea of global history. In the presentation of the academic discourse on global history in the last decades O'Brian mainly referred to Western scholars and gave a nice reverence to the others: “Syntheses from China, Japan, India, Africa and the near East would be a welcome and salutary correction to what is a plural but nevertheless Western perspective.”

It is evident why this way of doing global history has been radically criticized as an ideological means of Western cultural supremacy, or even as a suppression of other traditions and ideas of global history. The intellectual movements of subaltern history and post-colonialism may serve here as examples for this criticism. Accordingly, a growing interest and emphasis on “indigenous” concepts of history can be observed - not only in history, but in all branches of the humanities and social sciences as well.

Should everybody be happy now about this enlargement of perspectives? I don't think so, since there is a shadow on it: Eurocentrism may eventually vanish, but it has been replaced by a more or less hidden non-Western ethnocentrism. We should not forget and overlook that all historical narratives have a perspective, and that these perspectives are rooted in the cultural procedures of identity formation. So, e.g., we will find a very good deal of Sino-centrism in the Chinese historical discourse. Nothing is more natural than the refusal of a historical perspective shaped by somebody from another cultural context and a replacement by a perspective fitting into one's own tradition and bringing the peculiarity of historical experience in one's own country into the historical discourse. But how is this handled as an alternative to Eurocentrism? Very often only another ‘-centrism’, namely that of one's own culture is applied.

I think we can't just simply replace, substitute or complement the one-sidedness of a Western perspective by establishing another one, namely a non-Western one-sidedness. We would not solve our problem but enlarge and deepen it. Our problem should be more than only the problem of Eurocentrism. Instead the underlying and more fundamental problem of ethnocentrism in historical thinking in general should be tackled, (a case study

of which could and should include an analysis and criticism of Eurocentrism).

So I would like to discuss the question of what ethnocentrism is about.

## 2. Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism<sup>3</sup> is a simple mode of orientation. It puts the experience of the human past into a perspective which fulfils basic needs of cultural orientation, especially that of identity formation. Within this perspective the past gets its specific meaning as history, and by this history people are given an image of themselves, which they need in order to come to terms with themselves and the others with whom they have to come to terms. Such an image is necessary because it furnishes a liveable idea of oneself and the otherness of the others vis-à-vis the temporal changes in practical life. History presents identity by using a specific logic of making sense of the past.<sup>4</sup> This logic demands a certain interrelationship between past and present with an outlook on the future. In respect to the past, history has to privilege and emphasize those events in the life of one's own people which support and confirm a positive self image. This image creates a mentally powerful self-relationship in the form of recognition of oneself. This self-confirmation enables the people to keep their place in the relationship to the others and strangers, to inspire their activities, to stimulate them by a vivid presentation of the rules they feel committed to and to confirm their validity. Very often these privileged events in the past are the foundations of the community. That is the reason why the Americans have their public holiday on the 4th of July, the day of the declaration of independence (1776) and the French celebrate the 14th of July, commemorating the storming of the Bastille, the most symbolic event of the French Revolution (1789).

In respect to the issue of global or universal history it is important to look carefully at these privileged events in the past, which have historically constituted the self-image of a people. Their historical importance is not limited to the people they address, but it goes beyond the limits of their specific life form. They have been commemorated as a universal

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<sup>3</sup> See RÜSEN, Jörn. Tradition and Identity: Theoretical Reflections and the European Example. *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies*, vol. 1, n. 2, pp. 135-158, dec. 2004; RÜSEN, Jörn. How to Overcome Ethnocentrism: Approaches to a Culture of Recognition by History in the 21st Century. *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies*, vol. 1, n. 1, pp. 59-74, jun. 2004; also in RÜSEN, Jörn. How to Overcome Ethnocentrism: Approaches to a Culture of Recognition by History in the 21st Century. *History and Theory* 43. Theme Issue "Historians and Ethics", pp. 118-129, 2004.

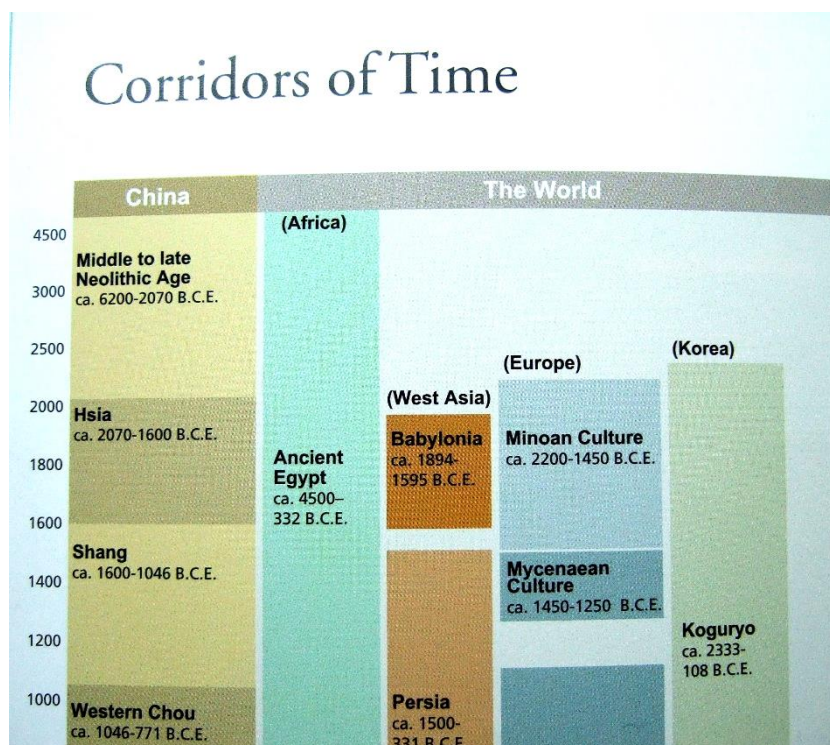
<sup>4</sup> See RÜSEN, Jörn. *Evidence and experience. A theory of Historical studies*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2017.

breakthrough, which is relevant for the rest of the world as well. The best example is the origin of modern democracy in the American and French revolution. These revolutions constituted the modern national identity of the American and the French people, but they have been commemorated as events relevant for all human beings since for the first time in history they brought about a constitutional form of political domination based on human and civil rights. The reference of these constitutions to humans in general has installed a universalistic element into their historical feature. We all know that a process of universalising this specific form of political domination has taken place. And there is an ongoing discussion about the universal validity of the idea of human and civil rights beyond the horizon of Western traditions.

Another example for the universalistic importance of special historical events in one's own history is the search for origins or beginnings of achievements, which are relevant for one's own people as well as for everybody. Very often we find the attitude of emphasising the fact that one's own people ("we") brought about certain inventions, which afterwards have spread all over the world. This attitude of ascribing origins of universally received achievements in human life can go so far as to even ascribe to one's own people the invention of culture, to which everybody is still committed today. By this ascription one's own people becomes representative for humankind and thus moves into the centre of universal history.

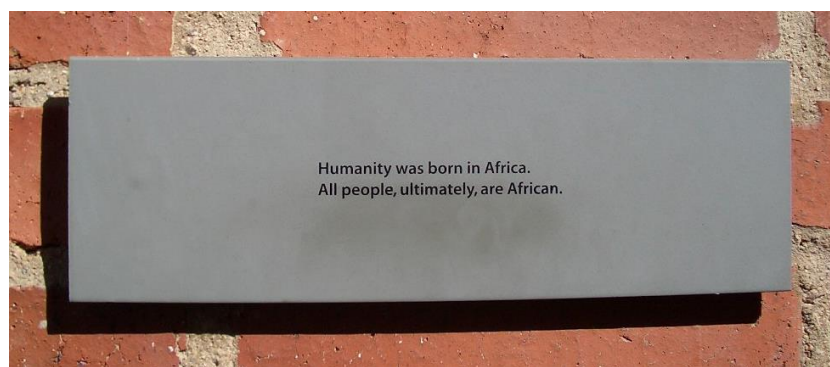
I can present you an interesting (excuse me: non-Western) example: the presentation of universal history in the Palace Museum in Taipei: in its introductory section the arriving visitor is shown "corridors of time", where the Chinese history is shown in the context of a universal chronology. The way it is assembled reveals clearly to the eyes of the visitors that it was China which started the cultural evolution of humankind and that the others ("the world") came later. Other much earlier cultures like the pre-bronze ones in the Near East are simply omitted.





(Palace Museum Taipei, 2009)

Another illustrative example stems from South Africa. I want to show you a small plate, placed directly behind the entrance of the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg in South Africa. It tells the visitors a simple message - based on the fact that humankind -as a biological species- originated in East Africa – that “humanity was born Africa” and therefore “all people, ultimately, are African”.



(Apartheid-museum, Johannesburg)

I think these examples may serve to illustrate that a universalistic transcendence of special historical events is not a specific attribute of Western historical thinking. It can be

found in most - if not all - other civilizations as well.<sup>5</sup> The same universalizing evaluation of elements of one's own specific culture to an importance for humankind in general has taken place with Confucianism. Many East Asian intellectuals have believed that the Confucian origin of East Asian culture has a universalistic importance.<sup>6</sup> This meets the inbuilt universalistic elements of Confucianism, its humanistic ethics and its concept of Ren (humaneness).<sup>7</sup> But nevertheless, it is peculiar, even unique in comparison to Christian universalism or other ideas of humankind. If this universalism is reduced to a national ideology it acquires a powerful mental strength of exclusion, of fencing off the others.<sup>8</sup>

But I would like to come back to the logic of ethnocentrism. Its value-guided relationship to the past leads to a history which the people accept as their own. But this ownership includes a more or less clear discrimination of all the other people who don't share this privileged past. This history is centred around a set of values and norms, of which the people believe that it is historically incorporated in their specific life form. 'Ethnos' is a metaphor of this incorporation. It can be a community defined by kinship - this is the anthropological meaning of "ethnic", - but it can be a nation, a region, a religion, a culture or civilization, or any other form of social community that people identify with. In the light of this selfness otherness appears as a lack of such a set of norms and values, or even as its contrary. Otherness is the shadow, thrown by the enlightened feature of the achievements of one's own people. It is very important to note that this shadow stems from those parts of one's own life form which can't be integrated into the affirmative image of oneself. It is a projection. Thus, otherness and its negative aspects are indeed an integral part of oneself and receive their threatening power from the efforts to suppress or get rid of them. The most prominent example of this ethnocentric discrimination between self- and otherness is the distinction between civilization and barbarism. We can find it all over the world at any time.

This inequality realized in the normative form of inequity is one of the essentials of ethnocentrism. It goes along with two other essentials, which define a) the temporal and b)

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<sup>5</sup> ANTWEILER, Christoph. *Was ist den Menschen gemeinsam? Über Kultur und Kulturen*. 2nd ed. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2009, presents ethnocentrism as anthropologically universal (p. 188sq.); ANTWEILER, Christoph. *Our Common Denominator*. Human Universals Revisited. New York, Oxford: Berghahn, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> A remarkable example is the work of Tu Weiming.

<sup>7</sup> See HUANG, Chun-Chieh. *Humanism in East Asian Confucian Context*. Being Human Caught in the Web of Cultures – Humanism in the Age of Globalization, vol. 11. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Two examples in the field of historical thinking: HUANG, Chun-Chieh. The defining character of Chinese historical thinking. *History and Theory* 46, 2, pp. 180-188, 2007; SATO, Masayuki. The archetype of history in the Confucian ecumene. *History and Theory* 46, pp. 218-232, 2007; cf. RÜSEN, Jörn. *Western Historical Thinking*. An Intercultural Debate. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002; Chinese translation: RÜSEN, Jörn. *Kua wen hua de zheng lun: dong xi fang ming jia lun xi fang shi xiang*. Jinan: Shan-dong University Press, 2009.

the spatial form of this inequality.

a) The temporal aspect very often appears as a long-lasting continuity of the life form of one's own community, constituted by a remarkable and very important origin or foundation. Here is an Indian example for this ethnocentrism by continuity: "... Indian philosophy started some time around 2000 B.C. and has lasted up to the present day, whereas the writer on Greek philosophy starts usually with Thales of the seventh century B.C. and ends with the Alexandrians of the third century A. D. ... While Indian thought has had as continuity of about 4000 years ... Greek thought had a continuity of only about a thousand years."<sup>9</sup> In an ideal-typological abstraction we can characterize the logic of ethnocentric formation of meaning in respect to the temporal dimension of human life as an *origin-oriented teleology*. That is the reason why in the traditional Western idea of universal history the ancient Greeks and Romans and the life of Jesus Christ have played the role of an everlasting tradition and a commitment for understanding what humankind is about. It were these roots which constituted the Western understanding of humanity as a certain constitutive ability for rational argumentation, for the ruling of politics by law, and a certain subjectivity of humans in their relationship to the order of the world. Similar committing origins can be formed in many other cultures from mythical thinking till today.

b) The spatial aspect puts the development of one's own people into the midst or the centre of the empirical dimension of history. The centre of one's own life form is at the same time the centre of the world. The others live at the margins. The spatial logic of ethnocentrism is *monocentric*. Such centres can be found all over the world – visible and invisible. An invisible example is the word for China “zhong guo” (country of the middle), and a visible Chinese example is the temple of heaven near Beijing where the centre of the world is physically marked.

So, we have seen a threefold logic of ethnocentrism: 1) its asymmetrical evaluation, 2) its monolithic continuity, 3) its monocentric place in the world. This logic seems to be natural. It may have its roots in the biology of the human species, but it is a thoroughly cultural phenomenon, fundamentally shaping the human efforts to come to terms with themselves and their world by giving them sense and meaning.

Why is this quasi-natural strategy of ethnocentric sense generation so problematic? Why is it a danger, although it appears as a natural factor in the cultural life of all peoples in the world? The answer is simple: since all social communities more or less follow this logic,

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<sup>9</sup> RAJU, P.T. The concept of man in Indian Thought. In: RADHAKRISHNAN, S.; RAJU, P.T. (Eds.). *The concept of man. A study in comparative philosophy*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960, pp. 206-305, cit. p. 206.



they lead to tensions or clashes if put into an interrelationship. They fundamentally devalue the others in order to create a positive self image. The term of “clash of civilizations” can be applied here. It came up in public use as a political term. Here it received a lot of criticism.<sup>10</sup> But I think it can acquire an analytically useful meaning if it is used on the deep level of cultural orientation in practical life to characterize the consequences of ethnocentrism for the formation of the interrelationship between self and others

## 2.1 Overcoming the ethnocentric clash of civilizations?

Historical experience speaks a loud voice of the fatal potential of ethnocentrism. National conflicts were heated up by the mental power of collective identity; it was this power which had given political conflicts a murderous radicality far beyond a simple conflict of interests. In World-War I e.g. the Germans and the French fought against each other in the name of humankind and humanity and accused the enemy of being the contrary.

Today these European long-lasting national conflicts full of blood and horror are over in the unifying Europe. The hereditary enemies Germany and France have become good neighbours. But besides this island of pacified ethnocentrism its conflict-generating power is still working as we can easily discover all over the world. Therefore, we should ask for our chances of overcoming, or at least domesticating it as it has been possible in Europe.

I will not overstress the European example but tackle the logical elements of ethnocentrism.

I would like to start with the issue of an unequal and inequitable evaluation of historical experience. There are two possibilities of overcoming it: a) by the principle of equality and b) by the ability of realizing the shadow within one's own history.

The *idea of the equality* is an achievement of modernity in conceptualizing the basic principles of human self-understanding. In the field of historical thinking, it has led to a hermeneutic approach to cultural difference. This approach guided historical thinking by the rule that one has to understand different life forms in space and time by referring to their self-understanding. A prominent intellectual example of the time when modern historical thinking came into being is Herder's philosophy of history.<sup>11</sup> Here every culture is seen as a unique manifestation of humanity; it has its dignity within itself. For Herder (1744-1803)

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<sup>10</sup> HUNTINGTON, Samuel P. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

<sup>11</sup> HERDER, Johann Gottlieb. *Reflexions on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*. Transl. F.E. Manuel. London, 1986.

the unity of humankind can only be conceptualized by a fundamental reference to the diversity of cultures and their inbuilt historicity.

Only under the presupposition of this general idea of equality a new approach to cultural difference is possible: the approach of *mutual recognition* of differences. (I can't go into the details of this idea, but I should mention that it certainly includes mutual as well as self-criticism, of course.) On the level of philosophy of history, I can present a striking example of pluralizing universal history: It is the paradigm of axial time. It definitely refutes the tendency of universalizing and historicizing the paradigm of one's own life form as that of humankind – the most prominent example is Hegel's philosophy of history. Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) developed a pluralistic approach to universal history with his idea of axial time.<sup>12</sup> In the framework of this pluralism different ideas of humankind can be interrelated so that the aspect of humanity may serve as a means of an intercultural discourse.

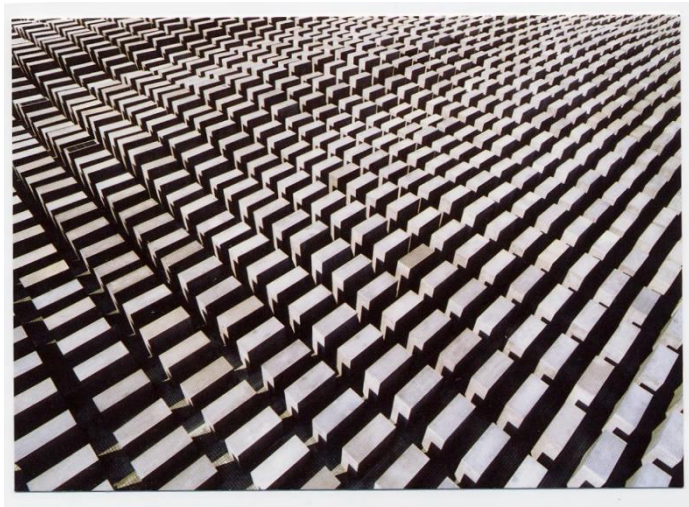
There is another strategy of overcoming ethnocentrism as well. It is the hard work in the field of historical culture to integrate negative elements into one's own history. It is the painful process of remoulding the self-image by accepting flaws and faults in one's own historical perspective. This will, of course, lead to a growing ambivalence and heterogeneity in the realm of historical identity. The grey and black shadows in one's own history have to be integrated into the colours of one's own picture. When looking into the mirror of history now we will look at another picture. This has the potential of opening the historians' eyes as well as those of their audiences and addressees to a new awareness of otherness and strangeness. With this new awareness an intellectual and emotional path to recognition of differences can be entered.

I can present you a very good example for the efforts to gain such an integration of negative historical experiences into the image of oneself. It is the German historical culture after the end of World War II and the role the Holocaust plays in it.<sup>13</sup> The Germans have struggled hard to cope with the atrocities in World II and in the Holocaust. Germany is the only nation which erected a monument for their victims: The Holocaust memorial was erected in the direct vicinity of the Reichstag, their political representation, the parliament in Berlin and in the historical centre of their capital.

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<sup>12</sup> JASPERS, Karl: *The Origin and Goal of History*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976. This concept has been further developed by Shmuel Eisenstadt and others. See EISENSTADT, Shmuel Noah (Ed.). *The Origins and diversity of axial age civilizations*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986. ARNASON, Johann P. *The Axial Age and its Interpreters. Reopening a Debate*. In: ARNASON, Johann P.; EISENSTADT, Shmuel N.; WITTRÖCK, Björn (Eds.). *Axial Civilisations and World History*. Leiden: Brill, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> See RÜSEN, Jörn. *Holocaust-Memory and German Identity*. In: RÜSEN, Jörn. *History: Narration – Interpretation – Orientation*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2005, pp.189-204.



(Monument of the Destruction of the European Jews in Berlin; Postcard 2005)

This introduction of ambivalence and heterogeneity into the historical image of identity has not remained unique as a German specialty, instead it has also acquired a European dimension in the meantime.<sup>14</sup>

What about the ethnocentric logic of forming historical meaning by an origin-oriented teleology? I want to address this as a very specific issue of meta-history. I can't go into the details but will only indicate another logic which avoids the one-sidedness and limitations of the traditional idea of an unbroken continuity of the essentials of one's own life form. This alternative is the *logic of a future-oriented reconstruction*. This logic allows a broader perspective of historical experience and a more critical evaluation of traditions (including, of course, their ethnocentric exclusiveness). The stimulus of historical thinking should be an idea of a non-ethnocentric interrelationship between different life forms and their traditions. Starting from this idea, the historical look back at the past may open up new dimensions of historical experience. They can be understood as chances and obstacles to bring about such a future.

The problem of a monocentric spatial perspective, marginalizing the others and the strangers, can be rather easily solved: It is the *pluralism* of traditions and developments in conceptualizing humankind as a historical category which leads to a polycentric organization of space in history. This *polycentrism* can cause a new problem, namely that of relativism. But this loss of truth claims can be avoided, if the multitude of historical spaces becomes integrated into an idea of historized humankind, which understands the

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<sup>14</sup> See KARLSSON, Klas-Göran; ZANDER, Ulf (Eds.): *Echoes of the Holocaust*. Historical cultures in contemporary Europe. Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2003; KARLSSON, Klas-Göran; ZANDER, Ulf (Eds). *Holocaust Heritage. Inquiries into European Historical Culture*. Malmö: Sekel, 2004.

universality or globality of humankind as already manifest in the diversity of cultures and developments. Here we can refer to Herder, who at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has already opened our eyes for this concept in the philosophical discourse on history. Here lies the starting point of modern historical thinking.

What does this mean for our understanding of global history?

I would like to draw six consequences out of my argumentation.

1. First of all: in conceptualizing global or universal history a *meta-historical reflection* of the underlying logic is necessary. If not the ethnocentric shaping of universal history might remain and prevail un-noticed, even and especially in the case when Eurocentric tendencies are criticised (and secretly substituted by other ethnocentrisms).
2. The global or universal dimension of historical experience and interpretation should be constructed according to the idea of the *unity of humankind*. It can only sufficiently be perceived and understood in and by the diversities of cultures and their temporal changes.
3. Concerning the approach to historical experience only those events and occurrences of the past should be considered which are not only relevant for one's own people but for all other peoples as well. This requires a *meta-historical idea of humankind* as a basic element of present-day cultural orientation. Here is the place to find transculturally valid points of view.
4. But what about cultural difference? In order to combine a global or universal dimension with that of the peculiarity of human life forms one has to look for *cultural universals within the different life forms*. A prominent role should be played by the *idea of humankind within the multitude of cultural orientations* in the past together with the *awareness and understanding of difference*, otherness and strangeness.
5. This does not mean that the traditionally pre-given ideas of humankind can be simply kept up and further developed. On the contrary: they should be critically interpreted in respect to their inbuilt ethnocentric exclusiveness. And this interpretation itself should be guided by a different idea of humankind. It is the future-oriented idea of an *inclusive universalism of humankind*, into which the traditional exclusive ones could and had to be transformed.
6. By these conceptual and methodological strategies historical studies can only critically overcome Eurocentrism. It has to overcome all of the other ethnocentrisms as well, which are lurking around the corner as alternatives to Eurocentrism.

If we can realize these new approaches to a universal history, we would be endowed with a gain in historical culture and its intercultural dimension.

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