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## REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS GLOBALES

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# The State of the World Today and Considering its Future Viewed from a Global Historical Perspective\*

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the state of the world and its possible future seen from a global socio-ecological point of view. All our global changes can be described as processes that take place within the biosphere, the thin outer layer of Earth. Departing from William H. McNeill's book *The Pursuit of Power* of 1982 it is argued that all human processes are driven by this pursuit, even though not all humans are pursuing power all the time. This is demonstrated by discussing two current violent conflicts: Palestine/Israel and Ukraine. Subsequently, major global trends are discussed, followed by an analysis of what the future may bring. Even though many specific processes can be forecast with some degree of reliability, the future as a whole is inherently unpredictable because there are too many interactions, many resulting from chance effects, while others are small yet with potentially large effects that may or may not happen. By further developing our theoretical model of society using the sociology of Norbert Elias as a starting point, it may be possible to formulate a general paradigm of human behavior for the humanities and the social sciences, in doing so seeking to produce more reliable knowledge of ourselves and our history as inhabitants of planet Earth.

**Keywords:** Biosphere; State of the world; Pursuit of power; Palestine/Israel; Ukraine; Major global trends; Unpredictability of the Future; Sociology Norbert Elias.

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## La situación actual del mundo y consideraciones sobre su futuro visto desde una perspectiva histórica global

**Resumen:** Este artículo analiza la situación actual del mundo presente y su posible futuro desde una perspectiva socioecológica global. Todos nuestros cambios globales pueden ser descritos como procesos que tienen lugar dentro de la biosfera, la fina capa exterior de nuestro planeta. Partiendo del libro de William H. McNeill *The Pursuit of Power* publicado en 1982, se argumenta que todos los procesos humanos están impulsados por una búsqueda de poder, aunque no todos los humanos lo persigan permanentemente. Esto se demuestra al discutir dos conflictos violentos actuales: Palestina/Israel y Ucrania. Tras éstos, se analizan las principales tendencias globales, seguidas de una interpretación de lo que el futuro podría deparar. Aunque muchos procesos específicos pueden ser pronosticados con cierto grado de fiabilidad, el futuro en su conjunto es inherentemente impredecible debido a la cantidad de interacciones, muchas de ellas derivadas de efectos aleatorios, mientras que otras presentan efectos potencialmente grandes que pueden o no ocurrir. Al desarrollar aún más nuestro modelo teórico de la sociedad utilizando la sociología de Norbert Elias como punto de partida, podría ser posible formular un paradigma general del comportamiento humano para las humanidades y las ciencias sociales, buscando de este modo generar un conocimiento más fiable de nosotros mismos y nuestra historia como habitantes del planeta Tierra.

**Palabras clave:** Biosfera; Estado del Mundo; Búsqueda del poder; Palestina/Israel; Ucrania; Grandes Tendencias Globales; Imprevisibilidad del Futuro; Sociología Norbert Elias.

### What is this article about?

As its title implies, in this article the following questions are considered:

1. What is the state of the world today?
2. What can we expect in the future viewed from a global historical perspective?

What is the issue in a nutshell? Our common cosmic home, the biosphere, is the thin layer covering the outer Earth. If our planet were the size of an apple, this layer would be thinner than its skin. Below it, regular human life is impossible, while as soon as we ascend some five kilometers, 3.5 miles, above sea level it no longer possible either. This thin layer between the inner Earth below and space above us is all there is for human survival and prosperity in the known universe. If you want to take a look yourself at this situation from a distance almost in real time<sup>1</sup>. Today, it is not yet well known how our biosphere works. This is first of all the result of academic specialization which rewards specialized studies, while the production of general interdisciplinary overviews is rarely rewarded, if at all. Yet to understand how the biosphere works, we urgently need a combination of both interdisciplinary overviews and specialized knowledge.

Why would we need to know that? The famous dictum from already four centuries ago by the English philosopher of science Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626) that «nature is only to be commanded by obeying her» also applies to the biosphere, a theoretical concept that was still unknown in his time. We can only hope to successfully manage the biosphere by taking into account (obeying) how it works. And to know that, we need to understand how the biosphere has worked during its entire history up until today, including human influences. This is the subject of my book of 2022 *How the Biosphere Works: Fresh Views Discovered While Growing Peppers*.

However urgent this theme may be, in this article it will not further be explored. Here, the biosphere only provides the context of our focus on humanity's history, present, and possible future. Yet it is of great importance to keep in mind that humanity's situation today is the result of four billion years of biospheric evolution. Our current situation must, therefore, be understood by considering the human past and present as an integral part of the biosphere's history. This includes the humbling fact that even by the most generous estimate of the duration of human history, some seven million years, it comprises only about 0.17 percent of the biosphere's history.

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<sup>1</sup> If you want to take a look yourself at this situation from a distance almost in real time, you may want to visit the website: <https://epic.gsfc.nasa.gov/>

Viewed from this perspective, human history is a biospheric anomaly. It can be summarized by saying that while some seven million years ago our predecessors had no other options for their survival than adapting to the biospheric conditions they found themselves in, step by step humanity learned to influence it according to their needs and wishes. This long process has exhibited a few clear spurts, most notably the domestication of fire; the invention of agriculture and animal husbandry; the industrial revolution; and now the information revolution. All of them are ongoing processes.

Already before the emergence of agriculture some 12,000 years ago, humans had been reshaping the biosphere by using fire, for a period possibly as long as 1.5 million years, while the use of tools had already emerged millions of years previously. Yet working the land and keeping animals with all the associated needs and wishes introduced a great many further large changes to our cosmic home. These include: the population growth of humans and their domesticated plants and animals with all their effects; the improvement of human skills of many kinds; the emergence of states starting some 6000 years ago with everything that this entailed; the social-ecological interconnection of all the continents into one single human web after Columbus and his shipmates had stepped ashore on a Caribbean island in October of 1492; the industrial revolution initially driven by coal-fueled steam engines and all that came with it; and, currently, the information revolution, again with a great many social and ecological effects. Those major processes have reshaped both humanity and the biosphere into the socio-ecological situation we find ourselves in today, which many people appear to think is normal. Yet from a larger historical point of view, with the exception of large meteorite impacts, ice ages, and the like, our current situation is as abnormal as it has ever been in the history of both humanity and the biosphere.

Today, eight billion people have longer life expectancies as well as greater material needs and wishes than ever before in human history. New migration waves, larger than ever before, flow along the gradient from experienced or expected poverty and violence to expected well-being. While the Earth is not getting any bigger, many natural resources needed to sustain all those human needs and desires are dwindling, which stimulates an increasing competition to obtain all those things. To be sure, many of those processes are not new. They have happened during all of human history to a larger or lesser extent as soon as resources of whatever kind were perceived to become scarce. Yet today, our globalized human community appears to be facing a novel and much larger phase in that process. How can we analyze this situation in a hopefully satisfactory theoretical way?

### *The Pursuit of Power* by William H. McNeill

In his book of 1982 *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000*, the Canadian born US world historian William H. McNeill (1917-2016) offered a large-scale historical overview of the actions of «men who, by specializing in violence, are able to secure a living without themselves producing the food and other commodities they consume» (1982, p.vii). At the beginning of his analysis, McNeill pointed out that ever since bronze weapons came to be used, an alliance had emerged between warriors and the producers of those weapons. Because they were made of copper and tin, rarely found close to each other, this required mining as well as transportation networks to bring the two together and forge those weapons (1982, p.1-2). The author saw that as the first beginning of what would become, much later in time, the industrialization of warfare and the emergence of a military-industrial complex, as the US president Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890-1969) called it in his Farewell Address on January 17, 1961<sup>2</sup>.

**Figure 1:** William H. McNeill in his study at home in Colebrook, Connecticut, in October of 2005.



Source: Photo by the author.

According to William McNeill, after the first states had emerged, for most of the time up to the present day Chinese and other Asian governments had

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<sup>2</sup> For US President Eisenhower's Farewell Address, see: <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/president-dwight-d-eisenhowers-farewell-address>

sought to dominate the mercantile, the industrious, and, more recently, the industrial elites [and now the information elites].<sup>3</sup> In Europe, by contrast, starting from about 1000 CE an alliance between mercantile elites including money lenders and the military, both rather diverse, began to take shape, while governments became increasingly dependent on both. This «military commercial complex» as McNeill called it (1982, p.117) emerged in the 1400s in Italian city states as well as in urbanizing areas of northwestern Europe, most notably perhaps Flanders. Because this coalition was so effective for gaining power, within a few centuries it had become prominent in many parts of Europe. And because this military-commercial complex facilitated and stimulated commercial expansion and political conquest more than any other military form of organization, over the course of time the people involved became dominant worldwide, for better or worse. This is not to say that more traditional models of conquest disappeared, as the expansion of Islam and the establishment of the overseas Spanish and Portuguese empires showed. But seen from a worldwide perspective, within societies in which first mercantile, subsequently industrial, and, today, information elites began to dominate governments, over the past centuries the pursuit of power worldwide using all available means has become successful and conspicuous to an extent never seen before in human history.

Warfare is never an entirely individual affair. It requires cooperation. And the more advanced warfare became, the greater was the cooperation that it required. Yet obviously, warfare always also involves competition between and among groups of people. The growing interconnectedness of people over the course of time increased both the scale and size of warfare, all the way up to the two world wars in the twentieth century. As part of that, the invention and proliferation of nuclear weapons led to the threat of a mutually-assured global destruction. So far, this situation has curbed the emergence of new world wars. However, the political and military competition for power and influence keeps continuing. This observation ends my very short summary of *The Pursuit of Power*. But furthermore, I would add, over the past fifty years or so the rapidly advancing knowledge of genetic manipulation has been used, among other things, to explore the possibilities of winning a future world war with biological means by seeking to develop harmful microorganisms that will kill or disable the perceived enemy while protecting with vaccines the societies perceived as their own or their allies.

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<sup>3</sup> When *The Pursuit of Power* was published in 1982, the information revolution was still in its infancy. As a result, it did not appear in that book.

To be sure, the emphasis in this article for understanding our current global situation on William McNeill's analysis as explained in his book *The Pursuit of Power* does not mean that all the analyses presented in that book are still deemed correct. Recent scholarship may have cast doubt on some, perhaps many, of McNeill's detailed arguments, while certain weaknesses and omissions are also detectable. What matters here is that the central argument of that book still appears valid.

Furthermore, people have been pursuing power not only in military affairs but also in many other areas of life according to their talents and the social opportunities as they occurred or were created. And the successful pursuit of power has always led to an unequal distribution of power, wealth, and poverty. This does not mean that all people have been pursuing power all the time. But whatever we may aspire, all of us find ourselves living in human societies within which many people pursue power. As a result, all of us have to find ways of dealing with that situation, including pursuing power to advance other approaches to living together.

Would an emerging global awareness fostered by spaceflight and the resulting images at a distance of the entire Earth showing that humanity finds itself on the outer edge of a small globe with limited resources traveling through an otherwise inhospitable universe put a break on such developments, in doing so leading to more effective global cooperation? One may hope so, but the current global situation offers little encouragement for such views. To explore that, let us take a look at two current major global flashpoints: first the conflict in the area known as Palestine/Israel, to be followed by examining the current war in Ukraine. Both conflicts are analyzed from a global long-term historical perspective. These case studies were previously published as weblogs on [www.bighistory.info](http://www.bighistory.info), and appear here in slightly improved form (Spier 2022 & 2023).

### **Peace on the land bridge connecting Africa with Eurasia?**

The geographic area currently contested by Israelis and Palestinians forms the land bridge between the two large continents known as Africa and Eurasia. This geological constellation emerged many millions of years ago as a result of the process of plate tectonics, as part of which the continents keep moving around the globe while changing in shape.

By the time the first humans emerged in Africa some seven million years ago this land bridge had already taken shape. Yet it was only some 1.8 million years ago that representatives of *Homo erectus* began to move out of that continent into the wider world. While doing so, some of those early humans would have walked across the land bridge into Eurasia. As part of that early



migration, the first clear evidence of the presence of *Homo erectus* in the Jordan Valley dates back to about 1.5 million years ago (cf. Belmaker et al., 2002). At least ever since that time, people have moved back and forth across that land bridge or stayed there. Presumably, this would have led to rivalry and fighting to control that area, which, consequently, would have been a daily reality in that portion of the world since that time. To be sure, after moving by boat along the coast became a reality from times unknown but perhaps as early as 130,000 years ago, if not earlier, that route became an alternative to overland migration<sup>4</sup>. By doing so, those intrepid seafarers could avoid ecological and human hurdles on land. But quite possibly they might have had to deal with human predators on the water. Whatever may have been the case, walking across the land bridge and settling there never appears to have stopped.

The emergence of the first large states on both sides of that land bridge some 6000 to 5000 years ago, Egypt to the west and Mesopotamia to the east, introduced a new social dynamic. At certain times Pharaoh and his people dominated the land bridge, while at other times the powerful neighbors to the east took their place. Only when those two early superpowers balanced each other, which never lasted for a long time, local and regional peoples were able to found their own little states on the land bridge. As part of those efforts a unique religious claim was formulated on this area, most notably Jerusalem, which was, and is, strategically situated on a hilltop overseeing (and thus dominating) the major road connecting the Mediterranean coast to the city of Jericho in the Jordan valley and beyond, in doing so connecting Africa to Eurasia overland. Ever since that time, this transcendental religious claim has stimulated powerful motivations for claiming ownership of, and control over, the land bridge.

However, because the balance of power between and among the contemporary superpowers kept changing, those small local and regional states never lasted long. Furthermore, in and around that area new states emerged, first to the north and east of the land bridge, and later also overseas. Over the course of time this has led to the occupation of that coveted area by one powerful state after the other. In this process also the emerging European powers in antiquity began to play a role. Following the Greek conquest led by Alexander of Macedonia, Hellenistic states emerged surrounding the land bridge seeking to dominate it. The rise of the Roman empire added a further powerful dimension to this dynamic. That contemporary globalizing situation led, among

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4 The earliest stone tools found on Crete date back to some 130,000 years ago, in doing so offering clear evidence of humans being able to navigate boats of whatever kind in the Mediterranean across a considerable distance by happenstance or otherwise (cf. Howitt-Marshall & Runnels 2016).

other things, to the emergence of a novel world religion, Christianity, again with a unique religious claim on considerable portions of the land bridge, most notably in and around Jerusalem. Ever since that time, the peoples living on the land bridge have experienced influences by larger and smaller states from different areas over increasingly larger distances, while many people of different kinds migrated in and out of the land bridge, forced or otherwise, resulting in continuous population changes. Around 800 CE, on both sides of the land bridge a novel complex of states emerged as part of this process that had embraced another universal religion, Islam, again with an important religious claim on the land bridge, most notably Jerusalem.

The subsequent influences on that contested area resulting from the European Crusades and the Ottoman empire were followed by the actions of the novel emerging powers of European origin: first France, followed by Great Britain; and subsequently the United States of America as well as the Soviet Union (now the Russian Federation); while also the earlier major players Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Turkey, Mesopotamia, and Iran are again playing such roles.

As so often, this has gone hand-in-hand with considerable population changes, most notably the influx of Jewish Zionist migrants during the twentieth century and their subsequent foundation of the state of Israel in 1948, which was almost immediately recognized by both the United States and the Soviet Union. This process has led to the partial emigration, forced or otherwise, by Palestinians who already lived there. As just mentioned, also the current state of Israel could only emerge and continue to exist thanks to the consent and support of the major contemporary superpowers, not least because this situation splits the Moslem world into two geographic portions, which makes them easier to control, while many minor powers either support the state of Israel; criticize it; threaten it; or seek to keep neutral, depending on the relations of power and dependency those states find themselves in and the choices they make within that context. Furthermore, the powerful Jewish lobby in the United States has strongly been influencing the choices its government makes, especially regarding Israel/Palestina. Also, that is not an entirely new development. In the first half of the twentieth century, a similar powerful Jewish lobby in Great Britain, which was then administering the land bridge, had succeeded in convincing its government to support creating a national Jewish home in Palestine, most notably through the so-called Balfour Declaration of 1917 in exchange for financial support needed for the war effort<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> For the Balfour Declaration, see: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Balfour-Declaration> (last accessed January 24, 2025).

In the currently globalized world, the land bridge has become socially connected to all states and peoples on the planet. And thanks to today's fast, efficient, and cheap means of communication, everywhere on Earth people are informed about this situation, while many of them have opinions about this conflict. Nowhere else on our planet does such a geographic situation exist with the resulting long history of power politics and unique religious claims. Given this long history of rivalry and conflict, it would be a major miracle if a lasting and just peace as experienced by all people involved could be established in this area. But perhaps for the first time in human history, our current globalized world offers, in principle, the opportunity to shape such a peace effectively.

To do so, a more detached knowledge of the situation, a greater empathic understanding of each other's perceptions and interests, as well as a willingness to compromise with painful results for all involved, all appear to be essential for achieving a lasting peace. Yet that pain of compromise may be considerably less than the pain resulting from continuing the conflict for an unknown period of time with all the inevitable dead, wounded, and material destruction as well as other forms of suffering that we are witnessing today.

Will humanity be able to rise to this challenge, by understanding that we share one single planet with limited resources, and that our longer-term survival in reasonable well-being will depend on a much greater collaboration than witnessed today? Or will humanity continue to pursue the old established pattern of pursuing power while legitimizing their positions and actions by their religious, moral, and ethical claims? The latter appears to be the case right now, even though in large portions of the world there are people who feel that countries supporting, or at least tolerating, the current Israeli violence against Palestinians, many of them unarmed civilians, as well as against many aid workers and journalists, can no longer be viewed as civilized. Yet those people in other parts of the world lack the power to change that situation. This applies not only to the conflict on the land bridge connecting Africa with Eurasia, but also to other current major violent conflicts, most notably perhaps the war in Ukraine, which will be discussed next.

### **Why is there currently a war in Ukraine?**

To answer this question, again a general historical perspective is needed. In the second half of the nineteenth century, as part of the industrialization process in full swing there was a wave of globalization. This included a worldwide search by all leading industrial nations for both the natural resources to make their products and global markets to sell them. This generated a great deal of wealth among the new elites that were leading those efforts. The promotion

of free trade as well as the wave of large and prestigious world fairs held in the major industrializing countries was very much part of this trend. During those luxurious flamboyant meetings, wealthy people from many nations met and exchanged views, while the breathtaking pavilions showcased the latest industrial technology, including many of its products, while national pride and military prowess were not absent.

All of that became possible thanks to novel technologies such as steam engines, steam trains and steamships, the telegraph, and, subsequently, the application of electricity in an increasing variety of ways. This had lowered the price of production, transport, and communication while speeding it up, in doing so also making travel to those global exhibitions affordable for the new elites. Starting in the 1890s, however, this ebullient period was followed by an increasing wave of economic protection through tariffs and other forms of taxation. This resulted from the fact that industrial newcomers were increasingly challenging the established pioneers. In the subsequent two world wars it was decided who would become the dominant industrial powers in the decades that followed.

While after 1945 more newcomers around the world began to engage in industrial production with all the consequences that this entailed, in the 1960s a new wave of technical innovation emerged, namely the current information revolution by using computers. Its novel technologies invented and promoted by emerging new elites again began to change human lives incisively. And much like industrialization before, the information revolution first led to a wave of globalization, which was followed by economic protection in the form of tariffs, taxes, and sanctions, because the emerging newcomers were increasingly challenging the pioneers. As a result of all those changes as well as because human numbers and their material expectations have grown enormously, the global competition among the powers big and small for access to natural resources, many of them dwindling, is becoming more intense.

Much like during the period before World War I, this competition among especially the big powers is currently leading humanity into World War III, if it cannot be prevented. In the beginning of the new millennium this war was started with global cyber attacks, made possible by the contemporary emergence of the internet. In this global competition, anybody anywhere on the planet can participate by possessing a computer with access to the internet, ranging from solitary youngsters to sophisticated state organizations. And since around 2014, the increasing global economic protection such as tariffs and sanctions have also become weapons within this growing worldwide conflict, especially again among the big powers.

As part of that struggle, starting in the 1990s after the fall of communism in central and eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States began using the NATO alliance as part of their efforts to dominate as many governments as possible worldwide while also seeking to gain favorable access to their natural resources. This includes Ukraine, most notably its large and fertile agricultural land as well as its considerable natural reserves in the form of coal, oil and natural gas, iron, manganese, uranium, graphite, titanium, mercury, potash salt, and gold.<sup>6</sup> But most of all, perhaps, Ukraine's proximity to the Russian Federation makes it an excellent springboard for NATO to exert pressure on that large country, among other things by possibly placing nuclear missiles near Ukraine's northeastern border that in less than ten minutes could wreak havoc within the Russian Federation including its capital city of Moscow. All of this is part of what the US government as well as many other influential US players define as the «Global Power Competition,» in which the US must remain dominant. For instance, in the beginning of 2025 a US government website unequivocally stated:

Our Goal: «Inform, improve, and transform workforce members and organizations with acquisition [of] pertinent resources that provide a competitive, global, military acquisition advantage»<sup>7</sup>.

To be sure, also other major powers such as China, India, the Russian Federation, Brazil, and others are participating in this worldwide power struggle, each of them in their own ways. As part of those developments, whatever cause and effect may have been, over the past decades three major transnational power constellations have been emerging: the United States and its allies; the European Union, formally independent, yet to a large extent allied with the USA; and the BRICS countries, which jointly seek to pursue their own power politics. All the remaining countries are determining their positions mostly, if not entirely, depending on the national and international relations of power and interdependency as they understand them and the interests they are pursuing. As part of that process, also other transnational power constellations, such as the so-called Anglophone «Five Eyes» countries, may currently be strengthening their ties.

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6 See: <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-are-the-major-natural-resources-of-ukraine.html> (last accessed: January 11, 2025).

7 See: <https://www.dau.edu/great-power-competition> (last accessed January 4, 2025), where it is also stated: «Great Power Competition is the contest between the United States and its adversaries to shape security architectures, as well as norms and practices worldwide, including trade and investment regimes and the development and regulation of new technological infrastructures. These frictions will play out over decades, not only in national capitals and countries, but also in outer space, and cyberspace».

Returning to Ukraine, NATO's expansion to the east together with the US government's intention of dominating the rest of the world led to increasing concerns within the Russian Federation, not least because it controls a large territory full of coveted natural resources, which is, however, thinly populated, and therefore difficult to defend.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, from around 2004 both the eastward NATO expansion and the growing US military presence worldwide stimulated the Russian government to engage in a policy of seeking to strengthen its sovereignty and national identity, including a decreasing dependence on foreign specialists and global financial arrangements dominated by Western countries, while increasingly enforcing internal cohesion as well as the building up of its military resources. This is typically what countries do that find themselves under increasing outside pressure.

At the same time, the struggle for the Russian Federation to reorganize themselves into a modern democratic state without further disintegration after the collapse of the Soviet Union already offered a major challenge, without being infiltrated by Western powers,<sup>9</sup> while the living standards of most of its citizens had plunged. Furthermore, many natural resources formerly owned by the Soviet state had passed into the hands of a small group of the so-called oligarchs, while corruption was a daily experience for many, if not most Russian

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8 During my visits to the Russian Federation on invitation by prominent scholars: in 2004 to Moscow and Belgorod; in 2005 to Moscow and Dubna; 2009 to Moscow; and 2012 again to Moscow, my Russian colleagues as well as many other people that I spoke with emphasized that many Russians really wanted to be part of Europe and collaborate with the other European nations because they were also Europeans. As part of that trend, already in 1999 the Russian Academy of Sciences published the last portion of my book *The Structure of Big History* (1996) translated into Russian in their journal *Общественные Науки И Современность* (Social Sciences and Modernity), while the Russian Ministry of Education subsequently published several big history articles of mine in English in their official organ *ФИЛОСОФСКИЕ НАУКИ* (Philosophical Sciences), (Spier 2005 a&b, 2006). Also in 2005, the Russian English-language journal *Social Evolution & History* published another big history article of mine (Spier 2005c). All of this happened at a time when it was hard to find established English-language scholarly journals willing to publish such writings. Yet after their initial enthusiasm, over the course of time many Russians began to feel increasingly disillusioned especially by the NATO countries, which they saw as rejecting their open Russian arms while increasingly threatening them. This was most notably caused by NATO's expansion to the east, even though in 1990 the US secretary of state James Baker had firmly pledged the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev that if the Soviets allowed Germany to reunite, NATO would not move one inch to the east. Furthermore, in 1999 when NATO bombed Yugoslavia, especially Serbia, this was felt by many Russians as a slap in the face of the Russian Federation and its people, because Russia has a long history of good relations with Serbia (cf. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russia-Serbia\\_relations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russia-Serbia_relations), last accessed January 22, 2025). For many Russians, that NATO bombing campaign signaled the first big turning point for the worse in their relationship with the NATO countries, or so I was told many times. In addition, they felt increasingly threatened by the US worldwide military presence, some of it approaching their borders.

9 I was informed by a Russian scholar who had been high up in the Soviet bureaucracy that one of the first tasks Vladimir Putin had to face in the year 2000 after he had become president of the Russian Federation was to get rid of the many foreign agents that had infiltrated the Russian government and its bureaucracy during the reign of his predecessor Boris Yeltsin. President Putin's earlier experience as a Soviet secret service agent made him well qualified to do so, which was possibly one of the reasons why president Yeltsin chose Putin as his favorite candidate to succeed him.

citizens. At the same time, the Soviet policy of decentralizing its production led to enormous logistical problems after its breakdown, because, for instance, important factories producing tractors and airplanes as well as its major space port Baikonur, not even mentioning natural resources of many kinds, were suddenly located beyond its borders in different countries, some of which not necessarily on friendly terms with the new Russian Federation. In addition, the Russian government needed to repay its considerable state debt while seeking to accumulate new reserves in gold and foreign currency. And all of that was happening while the worldwide information revolution was in full swing with all its consequences, in which the Russian Federation did not find itself exactly in a leading position. Clearly, at the beginning of the new millennium the Russian government led by president Vladimir Putin was facing formidable challenges.

Returning to the situation in February of 2022: at that time, from the Russian government's point of view a red line was crossed by the NATO countries as a result of that organization's continuing expansion to the east that the Russian government understood as an existential threat. Starting in the fall of 2021, if not earlier, they made this unequivocally clear to the rest of the world. But after all those urgent messages were ignored by the NATO countries, the Russian government started the war in Ukraine, with its apparent aim to establish a Russian-friendly government in that country, in doing so seeking to prevent a larger bloodshed in the future, according to president Putin in his official televised speech on February 24, 2022.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the NATO countries were increasingly driving the Russian bear into a corner, up to the point that it began to hit back militarily before it had to face a much larger military confrontation, or so its government feared.

Another major reason for the Russian government to start this war was that ever since 2014 after the non-democratic transition of power within Ukraine, its new government had begun to shoot at the inhabitants of the eastern portion of that country to subdue them by force because a substantial number of them did not accept that new political situation. Those insurgents were mostly, if not entirely, Russian speakers, many of whom felt related to Russian citizens

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10 For president Vladimir Putin's speeches of February 21, 2022 (which offered his last very strong warning) and February 24, 2022 (which announced the war), see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Address\\_concerning\\_the\\_events\\_in\\_Ukraine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Address_concerning_the_events_in_Ukraine) and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On\\_conducting\\_a\\_special\\_military\\_operation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_conducting_a_special_military_operation) (last accessed: December 21, 2024).

across the border and vice versa.<sup>11</sup> In consequence, many of them did not accept a new Ukraine government that was tending towards the European Union and NATO. The Russian Federation militarily supported those insurgents while making attempts to peacefully resolve that conflict, most notably through the Minsk Agreements. But those treaties were mostly ignored, if not sabotaged, by Ukraine, the USA and major European players. To be sure, for all parties involved more likely than not the presence of the copious natural resources in Ukraine will also have been a factor of importance in that conflict<sup>12</sup>.

From a US government's point of view, keeping the war in Ukraine going at considerable financial cost (much of which went to their own defense industry) but at little or no personal cost to themselves weakened both Ukraine and the Russian Federation, which made it easier to dominate both, if indeed possible, while also gaining access to Ukraine's considerable resources. In doing so, the US government engaged in a policy seen there as «brinkmanship:» providing as much support as possible to Ukraine to weaken the Russian Federation, but not so much that it would lead to a nuclear exchange that might unleash a very destructive World War III.

Whether the US government and their political allies will indeed be able to control that process remains questionable, given that, so far, this war has witnessed one escalation after the other. However, the current change of executive power within the USA, now Donald J. Trump has been installed as its 47<sup>th</sup> president, might alter this dynamic, not least because he and his supporters appear to think that both the financial and the human costs involved are too high to keep pursuing that confrontation, while other US imperial projects, most notably president Trump's proposals to add Greenland to the USA and regain control over the Panama Canal, may be deemed to offer a better return on investment. At the time of writing, it remains uncertain what will happen.

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11 While visiting the southern Russian city of Belgorod in 2004 on invitation by influential Russian scholars to deliver a keynote speech on big history at Belgorod State University, all the local people with whom I spoke emphasized that they had great relations with the Russian-speaking population across the border in eastern Ukraine. I often heard sentences such as: 'Yes, now there is a border between us and Ukraine. But in fact, we are one big family, we keep maintaining very close and friendly relations.' This was ten years before the non-democratic change of power in Ukraine in 2014.

12 The annexation of the Crimea by the Russian Federation was primarily motivated, or so it seems to me, by the Russian government's wish not to lose their major military bases there. In addition, according to the referendum held in 2014 the overwhelming majority of its people, mostly Russian speakers, wished to join the Russian Federation. Due to Russian pressure, however, this referendum may well not have been reliable. Several subsequent, more or less independent, polls, however, including some by various US institutions, all confirmed that indeed a substantial majority existed in the Crimea holding this view, see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2014\\_Crimean\\_status\\_referendum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2014_Crimean_status_referendum) (last accessed January 24, 2025). By contrast, the Encyclopedia Britannica does not mention those subsequent polls: <https://www.britannica.com/event/2022-Russian-invasion-of-Ukraine> (last accessed January 24, 2025).



But surely, all those developments form part of the reemerging global struggle among the superpowers and their allies, some of them established, some newly emerging, while others are losing power.

In the current Eurasian confrontation NATO is seeking to legitimize its expansion policies and actions by claiming to support freedom and democracy, much like how, in the days of European colonialism, those governments claimed to bring civilization to the heathen and backward barbarians. In both cases, the access to and extraction of valuable resources from those areas was –and is– far less mentioned, if at all, while it was (and is) extremely important for maintaining and, if possible, expanding, European –and now also US– power around the world.

Within this context, it seems relevant to understand a certain aspect of the Russian psyche, in which the term *katastroph* plays an important role. As I learned during my four visits between 2004 and 2012 to that large country, many of its people tended to see history as a series of inevitable catastrophes from which one needs to recover time and again. As part of that, the two catastrophic European invasions of their territory –the first by Napoleon and his troops and the second by Hitler and his army– were viewed as prime examples of Western European aggression. The current situation is seen, therefore, by many Russians as the third major wave of European (and now also US) aggression against them, a new *katastroph*. And as soon as they think they might lose that war, they may decide to start a major nuclear *katastroph*.

The next violent phase will, therefore, if it cannot be prevented, be extremely violent and destructive. Especially if nuclear weapons are going to be used on a large scale, this will produce a global devastation that none of us would like to experience. In consequence, as I see it, all of us must make the largest possible effort to avoid such a catastrophe by settling our conflicts peacefully, with mutual respect and understanding, now and in the future, with the aim to preserve human life on Earth for ourselves and for the future generations in the best possible way. In doing so, or so it seems to me, we must keep our eyes on this ball, this beautiful but limited globe, our one and only home in the cosmos. But will we do so, or will other short-term interests prevail?

### **What about the present and the future seen from a global point of view?**

Because in the past a great many aspects have influenced the course of human history, it appears reasonable to assume that most, if not all of those aspects will continue to shape our future, while novel aspects may also emerge. Some of those aspects occur naturally, while many others result from human action, most notably the pursuit of power over people and the rest of nature includ-

ing its planned and unplanned consequences. The following survey offers my best attempt at producing a short overview of those major aspects.

First and foremost, as it has done in the past the ever-changing geographic shape and ecological nature of Earth's landmasses and seas will continue to be important for shaping the future in many different ways. This includes our planet's enormous ecological variety from the poles to the equator. At part of that, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, storms, floods, droughts, fires, and the like, will continue to influence human history, the effects of many of which are today strengthened by human-induced climate change as well as by the varied and often intensive human use of the landscape. Over the course of time, humans have been able to adapt to, and, more recently, increasingly reshape, important portions of those landmasses and seas, including homogenizing their ecological composition by transporting, planned or unintentionally, plants, animals and microorganisms to many areas all around the globe where they can profitably be grown or survive by themselves.

It is impossible to provide a detailed overview here. But clearly, our global, regional, and local histories all become better understandable by looking at all those aspects both from above (the big picture) as well as from below (the details). The history of the land bridge connecting Africa with Eurasia outlined above offers such an example. As another example: when oceanic voyages from Europe to the Americas and back became feasible, this turned the inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula who had pioneered that technology from people living on the edge of the Eurasian-African world into occupying the newly-emerging hinge between that enormous landmass and the Americas with all the advantages that this entailed. And because at that time the peoples on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean found themselves in different stages of cultural and epidemiological development, this frontier situation, as McNeill called it, allowed the Iberians to conquer large portions of the Americas and reap enormous economic benefit from it.<sup>13</sup> Other Europeans soon followed in their wake, leading to a further conquest of the Americas.

As part of that, for the first time in human history the *peninsulares* began to systematically connect the world across all the oceans both economically and politically: across the Atlantic Ocean, the Indian Ocean, and, a little later, also across the Pacific Ocean. Globally spreading humans, plants, animals, and microorganisms led to the ecological restructuring of the entire world, as the ecological historian Alfred Crosby (1931-2018), a student of William

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13 This «hinge» situation bears considerable similarity to the position of the city of Venice connecting Europe to Asia as described by William McNeill in his book of 1974: *Venice: The Hinge of Europe, 1080-1797*.

McNeill's, emphasized in his writings (Crosby 1972-2006). Especially the unequal worldwide spread of infectious human diseases greatly facilitated the Iberian pursuit of power over people and the rest of nature in the Americas. William McNeill's pioneering study *Plagues and Peoples* originally published in 1976 is still very relevant in this respect. More in general: as long as can be ascertained both on the continents and the seas the competition among states, among groups of states, as well as among a great variety of groups of people has taken place.

As mentioned above, competition always also entails forms of cooperation, in which, almost needless to say, the pursuit of power plays a major role (cf. Spier 2023, p.255-76). Within this context, the influence of elites already mentioned above needs some more attention, most notably their activities in seeking to influence state governments at all levels, democratic or otherwise. Seen from an historical perspective, ever since the emergence of the first states some 6000 years ago their elites have always had a major interest in, and grip on, managing those states. This also applies to today's democratic states. Already in the ancient Greek democracy of Athens, for instance, only the male elite able to fight and pay for their armor had voting rights, while all the rest did not. This social situation was not very different in the emerging sixteenth century European democratic states such as the Seven United Provinces and Great Britain, and later also in the United States of America after its independence had been declared in 1776.

Yet as a result of social changes over the course of time including population growth, increasing urbanization, expanding trade, and increasing skills of many kinds, the balances of power and dependency within and among those states kept changing, while starting from the late eighteenth century the industrial revolution also had an increasing impact on social life. All of this led to a slow but steady expansion of voting rights within European and American states until reaching universal suffrage. As a result, both the traditional and the newly-emerging elites began to lose formal political power to the masses. But in many cases, if not all, those old and new elites wanted to keep their influence on state affairs. Consequently, many of them looked for other means to do so, in hidden or more open ways. Today, those struggles are taking place in all democracies with universal suffrage, in forms and ways that depend on the particular situations and the choices such elites make within those situations. Furthermore, many of today's elites are also seeking to influence, if not govern, global affairs in various ways hidden or more openly. The annual World Economic Forum meeting in Davos, Switzerland, offers a clear example of this almost endless theme. It is not clear how effective such meetings are for exercis-

ing power. But there can be no doubt that in those places the pursuit of power plays a major role. By itself this is not a new development, although the means to do so have expanded enormously. It seems reasonable to forecast that such processes will keep happening in any foreseeable future.

All of that has to be financed, so, inevitably, there are always people paying those bills, usually to a large extent the less powerful and less well-endowed portion of humanity. In addition, in the twentieth century as part of the further developing global financial network, a world reserve currency, the US dollar, emerged and continues to exist. This has enabled the country that holds this privilege to finance its projected power to a greater extent, at least for the time being, than would have been possible otherwise. This country has, therefore, a vested interest in maintaining this situation, which it does by projecting its political, economic, cultural, and military power. Other actors, both nations and private persons, have been challenging this situation, including by using the emerging crypto currencies. Also in this case the pursuit of power can be witnessed in full bloom, which is not expected to end soon.

Regarding military technology –William McNeill’s central theme in *The Pursuit of Power*–, currently the growing importance of ever longer-distance warfare can be witnessed in the form of a proliferation and rapid development of many types of drones and guided missiles, both of which pressure military forces worldwide to reconsider their strategies and tactics. And currently, also robots of various kinds powered by artificial intelligence are further altering the balances of power and interdependency on the battlefield and beyond. This does not mean that older forms of military technology are suddenly obsolescent. That depends on the situation. Furthermore, in addition to the growing utilization of militarized information technology, the threat of the use of chemical, nuclear, and biological weapons, in various combinations with other forms of military technology, can be foreseen while those weapons are further being developed.

As part of all of this, the importance must be emphasized of the great many selection processes undertaken by humans that have been taking place: of themselves, as well as of plants, animals, microorganisms, and also of many aspects of the non-living world, planned and unplanned, whatever humans decided they wanted or not. All those endeavors involve the pursuit of power. In addition to the great many social and ecological selection processes planned by humans, there are untold numbers of such unplanned selection processes. The current state of Israel may offer an example. While many peaceful and tolerant people appear to be seeking to leave that country, if they have not yet already done so, while similar-minded people may decide not to go and live

there, more aggressive potential citizens, by contrast, seek to migrate to that area, in doing so reinforcing the current polarized situation.<sup>14</sup>

This is only one of the many different types of human selection processes that have taken place during human history, as many scholars have noted, perhaps starting with the English sociologist and philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). It is impossible to provide an overview here or start further elaborating this rich and important theme. But while studying human history, its present, and also our possible future, the large variety of human selection processes needs to be kept in mind all the time, while we should not lose from sight either the great many natural selection processes first outlined by Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913). In fact, Herbert Spencer was inspired to think of social selection after reading Darwin's famous book *On the Origin of Species* (1859).

All those selection processes can be expected to continue in whatever forms in any foreseeable future as long as humans are around. Today, perhaps the most influential conscious selection process undertaken by humans is the genetic modification of plants, animals, and microorganisms, in doing so creating a relatively small selection of plant seeds as well as forms of animal procreation that are increasingly controlled by a few multinational companies. In doing so, those companies are seeking to replace a far more diverse agricultural repertoire in the hands of small farmers all over the world that had been built up and maintained by them and their ancestors for thousands of years.

Many other types of technological advances will influence our future, currently most notably perhaps information technology: the replacing of human brains by computers, including the current wave of artificial intelligence that today is producing phenomenal social changes for better or worse within a very short period of time, while the promise of quantum computer may soon cause another large wave of social and ecological changes. Almost needless to say, all this information technology offers new chances to those who are pursuing power, which is leading, among other things, to an increasing lack of privacy, even within our homes, because mobile phones, TV sets, cars, refrigerators, and even vacuum cleaners may now be spying on us: in fact every device that has a sensor and is connected to an electronic network. This is part of the increasing electronic inter-connectivity of ever more inhabitants of planet Earth. This process began in the nineteenth century with the telegraph, and is now mostly

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14 While noting but not systematically elaborating social selection processes such as the one mentioned here, the great German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) spoke of *Wahlverwantschaft*, 'elective affinity' (1978, p.341, see also: Howe 1978).

done with the aid of radio, television, cellphone towers, glass fiber cables, and satellite connections. This also facilitates the internationalization of criminal activities of many kinds. More in general, the increasing electrification helps to transport and store this energy in standardized forms over distances large and small for powering ever more things, from factories and large train locomotives to the smallest gadgets, while it also makes possible the information revolution, including concentrating ever more functions into one single device, most notably perhaps today's cellphones, tablets, and personal computers.

At the same time, the industrialization process keeps influencing ever more areas on Earth. The fabrication of industrial products keeps moving to where it can be done in the cheapest and politically safest ways, while long-distance transport costs still do not matter too much as long as this can be done with the aid of large container ships, while for products with more added value per weight air transport is profitably used. The areas that lose industrial production have the choice to either face poverty and out-migration or to seek moving toward producing goods with a higher added value including services of many kinds, many of which are not bound to a specific geographical location thanks to the continuously evolving information technology.

Other rapidly evolving technologies with major expected effects in the future include: nano technology; medicine and improved hygiene, including the increasing availability of clean fresh water in many places, depending on the location, even though many people are still not enjoying such benefits; the construction of ever more capable robots utilized in a rapidly increasing variety of ways; and, as part of the current energy transition, the construction of rapidly growing numbers of solar panels and windmills to convert solar energy (and its derivative wind energy) into electricity; and also further nuclear technology developments, both fission and fusion reactors. All of this involves the pursuit of power over people as well as over the rest of nature, at least in the short term.

Yet some of those human efforts may produce the opposite effect, namely the lack or possibly even complete disappearance of power over people and over the rest of nature. For today, bio-technological research includes the synthesis of microorganisms aimed to kill human adversaries as well as trying to make «mirror image» microorganisms to which current life might not have any resistance. The escape from human control by such novel organisms could result in the demographic collapse of untold numbers of species including humans, and, in consequence, in enormous changes within Earth's biosphere (cf. Service 2024).

Furthermore, today as many as 350,000 different human-made chemicals are being diffused within the biosphere, intentionally or not (cf. Persson et al. 2022). Many of them may have unknown, but potentially adverse, effects for human well-being, while they are currently entering our bodies in one way or the other. The wide-spread dumping on agricultural land during the past decades of poisonous PFAS chemicals in sewage sludge used as fertilizer can serve as an example of what is a much larger issue.<sup>15</sup> Also, a great many substances mined by humans and subsequently used by them, as well as side effects of mining such as contaminated water supplies, are being spread within the biosphere. The mining of phosphate as fertilizer offers an example of what is again a far wider issue. Also, this trend is unlikely to end soon.

As part of those developments, a great many social changes are currently taking place, all with expected effects in the future. This includes the increasing wealth in many portions of the world, although often very unequally distributed. While globally speaking large numbers of people are still poor, in many places the standard of living has been rising to an extent never seen before in human history. In many states this is leading to changing demographics, including the decrease of fertility and a changing ethnic composition, however defined, which comes as a result of the continuing migration worldwide along the gradient from poverty and violence to perceived wealth and well-being. This is currently resulting in growing efforts in the receiving countries to regulate such migration, which represents another form of the pursuit of power. Furthermore, changing family structures worldwide are taking place toward nuclear families, or less, with fewer children, if any, as well as far less infancy mortality and increasing longevity. The expected population decline in wealthy countries is currently increasingly compensated by immigration from poorer regions. Yet simultaneously, people and families are more mobile than ever before, exhibiting a greater cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, including more international relations, family based or otherwise, than ever before in human history. At the same time, cultures worldwide are becoming more similar while many small languages and other local customs tend to disappear as long as they are not turned into tourist attractions. This is part and parcel of the ever-growing tourist industry facilitated by the current relatively low transportation costs by car, bus, train, and plane. All these developments are likely to continue in the foreseeable future.

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15 The Seattle Times, December 27, 2024 (copied from the New York Times): <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/the-epa-promotes-a-toxic-fertilizer-whose-risks-it-knew-about-decades-ago/> .

All those human activities are producing increasing biospheric effects that are different from those effectuated by any other animals. As mentioned earlier, this may have begun with the domestication of fire. While human influences within the biosphere have been growing since that time, they are now accelerating.<sup>16</sup> The best-known example today is probably climate change as a result of human action that is warming up the biosphere worldwide. But also the release of countless human-made materials, large and small, within the biosphere is having large effects, often poorly understood if not entirely unknown, while simply by our sheer numbers and ambitions we are changing the face of the Earth into ever more ways that had not existed previously.

The increasingly intensive exploitation of marine species in the seas and oceans has been leading to the diminishing, if not outright disappearance, of those desired species, while fundamentally changing the balances of power and dependency among the remaining species. A similar process had previously taken place on land over the past 10,000 years or so, now in its final phase, namely the ongoing deforestation of lands for agricultural use, while many agricultural lands are currently being degraded by erosion or completely disappear as a result of urbanization. That development, in its turn, is part of the so-called rural-urban transition, the process in which growing numbers of people live in cities, today fifty percent or more, while abandoning the countryside. This transition has been caused, and made possible, by the industrial revolution, allowing cities to grow while keeping them supplied with people's needs, among other things, by the industrialization of agriculture and animal husbandry, as a result of which far fewer people are needed for rural production. And because in mountainous areas it is difficult, if not impossible, to mechanize agriculture, such areas are being depopulated worldwide because they cannot compete economically with more efficient industrial agriculture on flatter and sufficiently fertile lands. None of those processes is likely to change soon. And, as Armando Menéndez Viso commented, many of the processes mentioned above are currently leading to growing uncertainties and fear in many societies, resulting in increasing social and political polarization.

Adding to all of this, as historians know full well, is the reliability, or the lack of it, of academically-based images of human social life and its past. In all likelihood such situations have existed as long as humans have been telling such stories. As a result, even today «we do not really understand our-

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16 For summaries of those processes, see for instance: John R. McNeill (2011, 2016), Spier (2011, 2022).



selves,» as the German sociologist Norbert Elias (1897-1990) used to say in the 1970s. According to him, the central task of sociologists was to improve that knowledge (Elias 1975). His theoretical solution of analyzing human societies as networks of interdependent people, with their mutual relations conceptualized as balances of power and influence including the resulting dynamics, worked well during my Peru research between 1984 and 1997, or so I think (Spier 1994, 1995). And even though this theoretical approach often implicitly underlies the work of many historians to a greater or lesser extent, they rarely use it explicitly and systematically, while even less exploring its further possibilities and limitations, if at all.<sup>17</sup> As a result, Elias's process model of societies has not yet been elaborated to the extent of making it sufficiently useful for general application to all human societies during all of their history (cf. Spier 1998, 2023). But with some more distance in the analysis and further theoretical work, Elias's model of societies could become the first shared social scientific paradigm in the sense of US philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn (1922-1996) that will be inter-culturally accepted worldwide (cf. Kuhn 1970).

**Figure 2:** Norbert Elias delivering the final keynote speech on June 26, 1987, at the International Conference on Religious Regimes and State Formation at the Free University Amsterdam, The Netherlands.



Source: Photo by the author.

17 In this respect, the work of William McNeill and his son John R. McNeill offers a case in point. While a theoretical model along the lines of Norbert Elias was implicitly used by both William and John McNeill in their writings including *The Pursuit of Power*, it became more explicit in their analyses after they became familiar with the great sociologist's work in the 1980s. See, for instance: J.R. McNeill & W.H. McNeill (2003), J.R. McNeill (2024).

In other words, up until today our current social sciences including the study of history have often not yet provided sufficiently reliable and generally accepted models of human societies and their past that are of a similarly high standard and quality as those that have been formulated and accepted within the natural sciences (cf. Elias, 1978). Given the limited funding worldwide for efforts aimed at improving that situation, however urgent this may be deemed, apparently such research is not yet seen as a priority within academia and beyond. And because of the dominance of specialization within academia worldwide, similar academic problems exist with regard to producing interdisciplinary models of reality, such as a model of how the biosphere works. This situation allows enormous leeway to a large variety of actors for offering a great many representations of reality and its past that are not sufficiently underpinned by the best possible science, while many of those actors, if not all, are pursuing power by doing so. Such struggles are currently being waged in most, if not all, societies worldwide.

Surely, there are many more aspects that are important for considering the present and the future, many of them known, while others may be unknown to me. And equally surely, all the themes mentioned above deserve far more elaboration. But, if possible at all, producing a more complete overview would require many decades of further study, as well as many more pages than this article can contain.

Yet regardless of all those deficiencies, all the aspects mentioned in this article conform to the general pattern that William McNeill sketched in *The Pursuit of Power*, all the result of humans being social animals. As the great world historian formulated it (1982, p.5):

Yet it seems correct to say that, regardless of the ends to which resources were put, large-scale public action in antiquity was always achieved by means of command. The ruler or his agent and subordinate issued an order and others obeyed. Human beings are probably fundamentally attuned to this mode of management by childhood experience, since parents routinely issue commands and instructions which children are expected (and often compelled) to obey. Parents know more and are physically stronger than children; ancient kings also knew more because of superior access to information relayed up and down the administrative hierarchy; and with the help of professionalized soldiery, they were also stronger than their subjects. Sometimes they were also [portrayed as] living gods, with access to still another form of power.

Within the large range between enforced command and voluntary cooperation, such social mechanisms keep operating within most, if not all societies, ranging from small families to the current worldwide competition and collaboration between and among nations and groups of nations. More likely than not, this social mechanism of following leaders is at least to some extent biologically ingrained. Human sociality has a long evolutionary history that goes back many millions of years, all the way back from long before the dinosaurs went extinct 66 million years ago. Such an old evolutionary trait cannot be expected to end anytime soon. But thanks to our learned behavior, our culture, humans are more flexible than all other animals. Perhaps the growing awareness that humanity is living on the thin outer edge of a small but beautiful planet with limited resources may help to change the pursuit of power for achieving short-term benefits into the pursuit of fostering longer-term views of cooperation that may be beneficial for human survival. As formulated in my book *Big History and the Future of Humanity* (2010, p.204):

Would we be able to generate such a long-term cultural vision among sufficiently large numbers of people in a situation where there is usually a premium on short-term results, both in the economy and in politics? In other words, would we be able to tame both our biological instincts and social arrangements with the aid of culture?

Would a further emergence of a single global identity as citizens of planet Earth make possible less violence while fostering greater cooperation? Much depends on the conclusions that people are drawing from this planetary situation. If the conclusion is reached by powerful elites that because of the limited nature of the biosphere we'd better grab as much as possible while we can, while others will not be able to sufficiently check such behavior, the pursuit of power will continue relentlessly, with much more human suffering to be expected. If the conclusion will be that we'd better cooperate as much as possible to ensure the best possible existence on this planet for as many people as possible, a more peaceful future could emerge. Sadly, the current situation points to the first option. But it cannot be excluded that the second option will prevail over the course of time, especially now the unprecedented worldwide electronic social media offer possibilities for shaping unprecedented global alliances that stimulate, and perhaps enforce, a greater peace on Earth.

### **The fundamental unpredictability of the future**

Whatever exactly will happen, it appears to be a fairly obvious forecast that in any foreseeable future the relations of human power and dependency will

keep changing, while many people will keep pursuing power in many different ways, some of which, perhaps many of them, may be unpredictable today. That alone makes predicting the future fundamentally impossible. To be sure, for many aspects mentioned above it is possible to foresee certain trends with some degree of confidence. For instance, while engaged in «genetic engineering» in the 1970s, many biochemists involved in that research, including me, foresaw many of the developments within that field that later occurred. The same may apply to experts within many, if not most, other fields of human endeavor.

Yet seen from a sociological point of view, none of those fields are isolated from one another. To the contrary, they are continuously interacting in ways that are not fully controlled by anybody or any group of people. This makes the human process as a whole fundamentally unpredictable. In other words, all those partial processes form part of the global human network of power and dependency within which all participants are pursuing their particular aims and wishes. While on smaller social scales most notably controlled processes such as our daily routines, and, for instance, the production of cars, may often happen more or less as planned if we do our work well –although often with unplanned side effects–, the resulting global social process as a whole is unplanned, not controlled by any group of people.

The future is also fundamentally unpredictable because too many aspects are not well known, if at all, while small causes can have large effects, if they occur. This includes novel infectious diseases; nuclear wars; large meteorite strikes; explosions on the sun's surface that may upset, if not destroy, many of our electronic devices on which we are increasingly becoming dependent; or similar small causes with large negative effects on our electronic dependence.

Furthermore, there are a great many chance effects in every aspect of life, in fact in the entire universe, that influence the course of history large and small, as the US geologist Walter Alvarez (1940- ) emphasized in his book *A Most Improbable Journey: A Big History of Our Planet and Ourselves* (2016). As a result, even though we may be able to forecast with a reasonable chance of some reliability the near future of certain aspects of human reality, it is fundamentally impossible to forecast the future of humanity as a whole. But surely, as long as our species will exist, human action will continue to influence the biosphere of which we are an inextricable part, resulting in a great many effects, many of which are unplanned while quite a few are perhaps not yet even known.

Today, the wealthiest person on the globe is pursuing his dream of sending people to the planet Mars to make life multi-planetary, also in an attempt to continue human life on that planet in case we make Earth unlivable as a result

of our actions. In other words, he wants humans to create a biosphere on the red planet. Although sending people to Mars is technically feasible, for many reasons their continued survival on the surface of that celestial body is problematic at best, not least because the unceasing bombardment of its surface by cosmic rays virtually unimpeded by the red planet's thin atmosphere will make most, if not all, life impossible on any longer term. And that is only the beginning of an almost endless series of hurdles that need to be overcome for creating a sufficiently good Martian biosphere that will facilitate a longer-term human survival in reasonable well-being, including the well-being of their possible future Martian offspring, if indeed the intrepid explorers will succeed in surviving that long. How anyone could think even for a minute that the Martian human colonizers will be able to create a good biosphere for longer-term human survival and well-being on such a bad planet, while at the same time our species may be severely damaging its survival chances within the biosphere of what looks like an, in principle, perfectly good planet, is a mystery to me.

### **Conclusions**

Most, if not all the current human processes summarized above are the result of humans pursuing power over other people and over the rest of nature. All those processes are interrelated and at least partially influenced by chance effects. While there are now about eight billion humans, all of them with their own plans, wishes, and needs, no one, or no single group of people, can possibly steer the course of history in its entirety. Consequently, even though some, perhaps many, separate processes may be forecast with a larger or lesser degree of precision, the future as a whole is inherently unpredictable. But at smaller scales the future may be more predictable, which allows humans to make plans for the future and see results that reasonably match their expectations, depending on the situation.

While changes in the balances of power and dependency connecting all people living on this planet will continue to change, it is impossible to predict how that will happen in any detail. Furthermore, as a result of humanity pursuing power in a great many ways by using its unmatched cultural abilities and skills, our species has been changing the biosphere in unprecedented ways for better or worse like no other species had done previously in the biosphere's history. For the same reasons, the future of the biosphere is also unpredictable. Yet it appears likely that great risks are looming in the future that are threatening the longer-term survival of humanity on Earth in reasonable well-being. Humanity might, therefore, be well advised to pay more systematic attention to analyzing

all those interconnected processes and the resulting dynamics with the aim to make the best possible plans for improving our common human existence while fully realizing that we cannot completely control what the future will look like. But by addressing the greatest dangers that humanity will face in the nearby future as far as we can judge today, collectively we might be able to make the future a little more secure, and, in consequence, hopefully more pleasant, for those who will come after us.

Around 500 BCE, the ancient Ionian Greek philosopher Heraclitus used to say that nothing will stay the same,<sup>18</sup> except, one may wonder, the human pursuit of power over other humans and over the rest of nature as long as our species has existed. Yet this unprecedented human capacity may now lead us into potentially unsurmountable problems. Can this instinct sufficiently be tamed, one may wonder, and, if so, how, and to what extent? Would doing so promote a longer-term existence of humanity on this planet in reasonably well-being? Those appear to be the big, as yet unanswered, questions that humanity faces while contemplating its past, present, and future.

As a final comment, I would like to invite all serious scholars to engage in this conversation about how to view the current state of the world and what we may expect for the future. The academic enterprise is a collective enterprise, and our common goal should be the pursuit of the best possible knowledge, not the pursuit of power. One single person, including myself, cannot possibly know everything. I therefore very much hope that further contributions will greatly enhance our general knowledge about this most important subject.

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18 According to the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, «Heraclitus, I believe, says that all things pass and nothing stays, and comparing existing things to the flow of a river, he says you could not step twice into the same river. (Plato Cratylus 402a = A6)» (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus/> , accessed: November 13, 2024).

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