

Is a global identity possible?
The relevance of big history to self-
other relations.

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Is a global identity possible? The relevance of big history to self-other relations.

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Introduction

Is a global ethico-political identity possible? For instance, some of the so-called political realists believe that a shared political identity is possible only if it implies different outsiders, understood largely in negative evaluative terms, sometimes as mere enemies. From this point of view, a global identity is possible only to the extent that there are outsiders to the humankind as a whole. Hence, in the 1980s, Ronald Reagan discussed with Mikhail Gorbachev the possibility of hostile extra-terrestrials, also as a plausible source for a shared global identity. These imaginary re-visions and discussions were part and parcel of the process that led to the end of the Cold War.

However, no extra-terrestrials have turned up and the problem of particularistic and often parochial identities persists also in the 21st century. According to many versions of the hermeneutics of suspicion, hierarchies and violence stem ultimately from metaphysical systems that imply the definition of others as lower beings and/or enemies. Several post-structuralists and other critical theorists believe, furthermore, that there is no position outside metaphysics in this sense. Hierarchies and violence are therefore almost inevitable; and no truly cosmopolitan identity is really possible.

I argue that the standard identity-assumption appears increasingly narrow in the light of recent advancements in the sciences and global history. A unified theory of temporal emergence and increasing complexity through different layers of the universe locates human geo-history as an important but small and vulnerable part of a much wider whole. To what extent is big history relevant to our understandings of possible self-other relations? I examine three options. Firstly, as indicated also by Reagan, otherness can indeed be placed outside the human species and planet Earth. The cosmological viewpoint provides an important source – even a foundation – for global identity but it is not a sufficient solution to the problem of identity.

Secondly, otherness can also be located either in our own past or, alternatively, in our contemporary being, when seen from a point of view of a possible future position in world history. As any process of identity-construction is temporal, this constitutes a fruitful perspective, but does not address all the main problems or tackle the onto-logical underpinnings of the standard identity-theories.

There is thus, thirdly, a need to rethink the basic onto-logic of identity from a perspective that is compatible with big history. Utilizing the concept of horizon of moral

identification, a few Derridean ideas, and dialectical critical realist ontology, I conclude by outlining a cosmic, temporal, relational and ethical conception of global cosmopolitical identity that is based on both positive and negative elements.

Voices of scepticism 1: political realism

Since its emergence after the failed liberal revolutions of 1848, political realism has been a conservative reaction to the liberal cosmopolitanism of Enlightenment philosophies, most notably to Immanuel Kant. The foremost point of “realism” in the 20th century sense has been to challenge the belief in cosmopolitan progress towards a league of nations, world community, or world state.¹ Richard Gilpin (1984, 290) summarizes the idea that human species must remain divided into separate groups:

Homo sapiens is a tribal species, and loyalty to the tribe for most of us ranks above all loyalties other than that of the family. In the modern world, we have given the name “nationstate” to these competing tribes and the name “nationalism” to this form of loyalty.²

Methodologically, the belief in the tribalist propensity is time and again based on mere arm-chair philosophy. However, neo-realists may – and sometimes also do – turn to experimental social psychology and particularly to socio-biology to find hard science evidence for their views. Socio-biology contends that genes play a central role in human behaviour. Human behaviour is seen as an effort to preserve ones genes in the population; human beings are thus no different from ants or bees.

The most famous socio-biologist is probably E.O.Wilson (the classic articulation being Wilson 1975). His usual strategy for arriving at socio-biological “laws” is to start with the model of social organization developed in connection with his study of insect societies and to generalize to a model for the social organization displayed by all social species. Such analogies and generalizations are likely to be rather unreliable even in those cases where they are based on apparently similar features in an insect and in a geo-historical human society because (i) they ignore the fact that human societies change and vary much more than would be possible if the bulk of constitutive societal information was genetic – as is evident from ants and bees, the relevant pools of genes and biological species change extremely slowly, taking a very large number of generations to take any effect; and (ii) because they ignore the possibility that similar consequences may be the result of very different – meaningful cultural – causes. (See Harré 1979, 11-15; Horan 1986).

¹ My discussion of the identity-assumptions of political realism owes much to an August 2007 e-mail exchange with Stefano Guzzini.

² Gilpin of course downplays the vast differences between tribes and modern nation-states in order to stress the idea of perennial laws and conditions of politics. Nation-states are much bigger and more abstract, impersonal, complex and bureaucratic forms of collectivity than tribes. In many ways, as political communities, nation-states are closer to a would-be world state than tribes.

If the only way to rescue the necessity of particular group loyalties and identities was this kind of biological reductionism (i.e. the assumption that that ants and humans are no different in their capacity to communicate and learn), then political realism would rest on a fairly weak ground. However, although Gilpin and a few other neo-realists may occasionally give the impression that the tribalist propensity is inscribed in the (possibly genetic) essence of homo sapiens as a species being, several political realists confine tribalism to a social-psychological propensity to a widespread preference for particular groups and for defining identity in particularistic terms.

Indeed, the point of many classical political realists such as E.H.Carr, Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr has been merely to redefine the project of cosmopolitanism in a more cautionary and, sometimes, skeptical way. For Carr, for example, the cosmopolitan world community based on the recognition of equality and rule of law would be the global utopia. “Political science must be based on a recognition of the interdependence of theory and practice, which can be attained only through a combination of utopia and reality” (Carr 1964, 13). Thus Carr was advocating the idea of open-ended peaceful changes to replace various utopian proposals for liberal harmonious order, which he also argued to be ideological.

In Reinhold Niebuhr’s *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, the “children of light” are democrats and cosmopolitans. It is evident that Niebuhr does not accept the ideas of the children of darkness and, ultimately sides with the children of light. However, he also criticizes most of the concrete manifestations of prevailing utopian idealism and their overtly optimistic conceptions of human nature. Thus Niebuhr’s (1944, 168) key argument – in the context of world politics – was that “...the transition from a particular to a universal community is a more difficult step than is usually assumed”. Some hope and appreciation of change can well be, and often is, justified:

Pure idealists underestimate the perennial power of particular and parochial loyalties, operating as a counter force against the achievement of a wider community. But the realists are usually so impressed by the power of these perennial forces that they fail to recognize the novel and unique elements in a revolutionary world situation. (Ibid., 176)

Likewise, Morgenthau’s *Political Among Nations* is effectively an argument for a world state and a guidebook for diplomacy during the (long) period of transition. At the same time, however, Morgenthau joined Carr and Niebuhr in articulating a passionate critique of false universalisms:

Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe. As it distinguishes between truth and opinion, so it distinguishes between truth and idolatry. All nations are tempted – and few have been able to resist the temptation for long – to clothe their own particular aspirations and actions in the moral purposes of the universe. To know that nations are subject to the moral law is one thing, while to pretend to know with certainty what is good and evil in the relations among nations is quite another. There is a world of difference between the belief that all nations stand

under the judgment of God, inscrutable to the human mind, and the blasphemous conviction that God is always on one's side and that what one wills oneself cannot fail to be willed by God also. (Morgenthau 1961, 11)

In the sense of Carr, Niebuhr and Morgenthau, the case for political realism rests on the expectation that it will take a long time to establish a cosmopolitan world community. This stems not only from the effects of historical realities but also from the contemporary tendency to rely on one-sided and false utopias that generate further conflicts and violence. Moreover, as long as the world community does not yet exist, everyone has to continue coping with the contemporary realities, involving particularistic power politics, the best they can. Sceptical political realists in this sense can push the cosmopolitan identity to a far away future. This is particularly so if no clear mechanism can be established via which the currently powerful social-psychological forces could be rapidly overcome. As Morgenthau (1961, 539) concluded – originally in 1948 – a major transformation and “the world state is unattainable [...] in the world in our time”.

For Morgenthau, although a cosmopolitan world community – and a world state – is inevitable in the long run, meanwhile the classical practices of diplomacy, balance-of-power and so on are the chief tools available for preserving at least some order and, to an extent as well, peace. This kind of political realism implies that the reasons for scepticism are only temporal. In the future, things may be different: there may be no reason for “realist” scepticism anymore (although Niebuhrian warnings about over-optimism would remain relevant in a system of global democracy as the subtitle indicates: “A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense”).

Voices of scepticism 2: post-structuralism

An even more cautious form of scepticism about the possibility of a global identity stems from the post-structuralist line of reasoning. Ferdinand de Saussure (1986/1916) seemed to suggest that linguistic signs are arbitrary and that within systems of language, there are only differences, that is, negative elements. “A language is a system in which all elements fit together, and in which the value of any one element depends on the simultaneous coexistence of all others” (ibid., 113). “The content of a word is not determined in the final analysis not by what it contains but by what exists outside of it”, that is, by other elements of a system (ibid., 114). Content and “value” are essentially connected, and values always involve:

- (1) something different which can be exchanged for the item whose item is under consideration, and
- (2) similar things which can be compared with the item whose value is under consideration.

For Saussure, however, linguistics is only one science among others, and he, eventually also assumed the Lockean theory of a “speech circle” according to which the (ultimately shared) concepts are in the heads of actors as a kind of mental images (see Harland

1987). It was Jacques Derrida who radicalized – by drawing also on Nietzsche, Kirkegaard and Heidegger and their “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Dreyfus 1991) – Saussurean linguistics into an immanent criticism of Western metaphysics as a whole. Derrida treats the principle of difference “as constitutive not only of modes of signification but of existence in general” (Giddens 1987a, 82).

The assumptions that there is no language-independent thinking or meanings, and no language-independent way of postulating the identity of beings, together with the radicalized Saussurean principles, have far-reaching implications. It gives rise to the suspicion that our language, our culture, our system of thinking, is tied to the history of Western metaphysics that is desperately trying to hide the arbitrary nature of sign by constructing structured, foundationalist wholes (Derrida 1988, 28).

What are these metaphysical systems trying to hide? Besides the arbitrary nature of the sign, they are also trying to hide the relational, difference-based origin of meanings. Consequently, in the Western systems of thinking, the differences are not seen as mere differences. Instead, a construction of a certain kind of otherness is effected. In particular, the others are typically constituted as lower beings and/or enemies.

According to Derrida’s version of the hermeneutics of suspicion, both hierarchies and violence stem from the modern, Western metaphysical systems. Yet there is no position totally outside of metaphysics. (Cf. Bernstein 1991) One consequence of this is that theoretically, ethically and politically, universal identities are impossible. It is not possible simply to deconstruct the whole of Western metaphysics and then end up with something entirely beyond difference and otherness. At best, the existing systems can be only deconstructed, step by step. This may lead to a more cosmopolitan direction, but the end-state can never be reached.

However, a question emerges: In the long run, can there remain anything outside of deconstruction? The later Derrida (1994) explicated that justice, conceived both in terms of a respect for otherness and a possible future (global) democracy, where differences, even if always in the process of becoming, are just let-to-be as recognized differences, cannot be deconstructed. But given Derrida’s metaphysical assumptions, why would this highly specific notion of justice remain immune to the ever sceptical rhetorical operations of deconstruction (cf. Patomäki 2007a)?

The assumption that an external other – often understood as an enemy – is necessary for an identity can thus be (i) an empirical generalization, (ii) a claim about human nature, or (iii) a theoretical assumption that our social existence is essentially dependent on relational systems of language. Positivists have criticized the latter two ideas as non-falsifiable and thus pseudo-scientific. This criticism carries some weight particularly with regard to the notion of “human nature”. The argument of post-structuralists is in some ways more subtle and also more ambivalent. However, in the end its validity comes down to a very simple issue: Can we refer to something external to any particular language, system of signs, or discourse or can we not? If we cannot, everything can be reduced to language and its analysis. If we can refer to realities outside language, then the identity of being cannot be reduced to mere differences within a language.

More or less positivist thinkers such as Frege have often thought that a pointing finger, for instance, links words and the world in a particularly unambiguous and striking way. However, the variety of entities capable of being the reference point for acts of simple ostensive demonstrative reference shows that this relation is not a simple one to one relation, with one metaphysical category for each mode of demonstrative reference. If reference by demonstrative pointing is to work, we must know not only what pointing means but what aspect of the spatio-temporal object is being referred to and how we are supposed to observe it. Thus, to be successful, the act of reference must simultaneously invoke or construct meaningful sense-relations, which typically belong to the shared background of actors.

Demonstrative pointing cannot define meanings; rather meanings organize demonstrative pointings, since the meaning of the term must be already known when, by simple demonstration, we have indicated an instance which has satisfied the recognitive criterion. Hence, it is not possible to distinguish between sense and reference as Frege does, at the epistemological level. So post-structuralists do have a point. However, as Giddens (1979, 37) has argued, Derrida seems to choose to ignore “that even to mention the identity of a code presumes that some component of a reference”, namely that which designates the elements of the code as belonging together, for instance ‘vocalizations’, ‘marks’, ‘inscriptions’ etc. There are reasons for Derrida’s choice, but it is not without unwelcome and far-reaching consequences. One of them is the denial that beings and thus identities include also positive and non-discursive elements (also social beings are embodied: our bodies follow the laws of physics and presuppose complex biological systems). For this reason alone, I think it is fair to point out the possible incoherencies in Derrida’s own practices of writing.

What is needed is an independent and ontological notion of being to which we can refer; and a related concept of referential detachment. (See Harré 1970, 69-70, 179; and Sayer 1984, 55). Following Roy Bhaskar (1994, 51-53), by referential detachment I mean the detachment of the act of reference from that to which it refers. Referential detachment is implicit in all language-use and conceptualized practices, such as playing football. It is impossible to play football if one cannot, practically, make a distinction between the act of reference (saying “take the ball forward”) from that to which it refers (the ball, directions in the football field defined in terms of goals etc). Furthermore, as Bhaskar (*ibid.*, 257) argues, the act of reference “establishes at once its [own] existential intransitivity and the possibility of another reference to it, a condition of any intelligible discourse at all”. Thus we can and must be able to refer also to acts of references, for instance, when we ask for explications in order to understand that act in the first place, or when we question its background assumptions.

Language is not only about negative differences but also about something real and positive. Through language we can talk about real beings with causal powers – including, of course, our human bodies, meaningful social actions, social practices and language as this layer of reality is causally efficacious as well. We make all the time references to the differentiated, structured and layered reality, and act within the natural and social world, as tiny parts of much wider wholes.

However, there are no, nor can be, any political identity that consists only of positive elements. Any identity involves implicit and explicit differences to others, whoever they are and where-ever they may be. As Bhaskar (1993, 46) argues:

Negativity is constitutively essential to positivity, but the converse does not follow. [...] Of course [...], beings exist. But by transcendental argument, non-being is constitutively essential to being. Non-being [absences, level-specific voids etc.] is a condition of possibility of being.

Negativity plays out also at other levels of identity, including pragmatics and politics. Although identities include also positive elements, and although the ego/alter-relationship can be constituted in many ways, a degree of othering is inevitable also in dialectical critical realism. From this perspective, the sceptical arguments against cosmopolitan identities are not metaphysical truths but fallible claims referring to a changing world. But as negativity must remain essential, they should be taken seriously.

Cosmic pluralism: the identity of human beings living on planet Earth

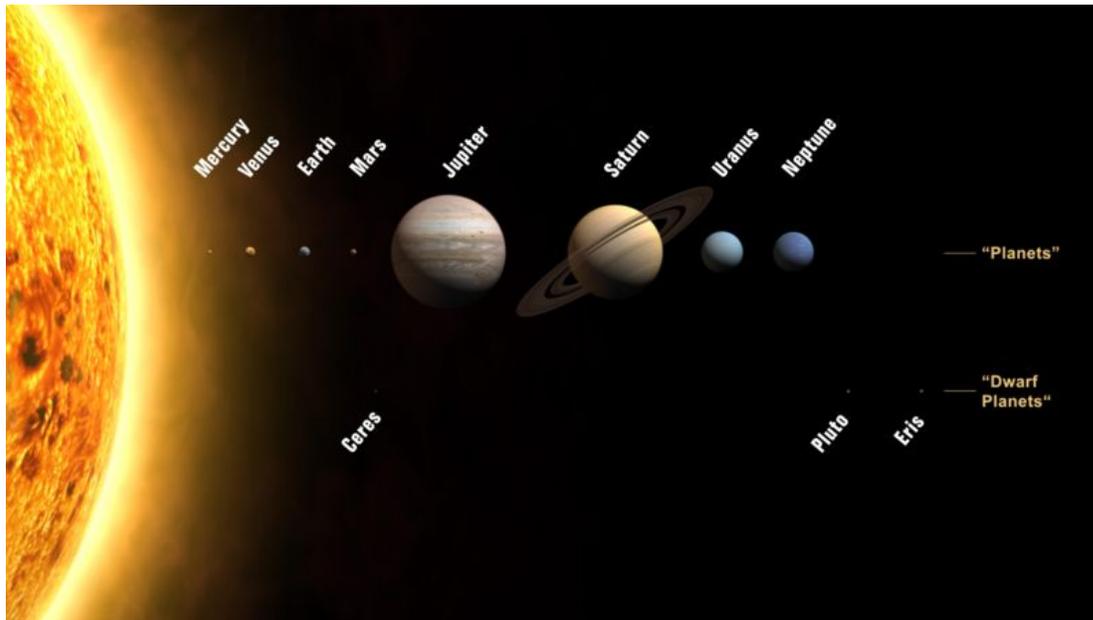
Parochialism stems from the inability to see one's self, understandings and surroundings in a wider context. It is thus no coincidence that Kant the cosmopolitan was also a cosmologist who wrote on the sciences throughout his life. In his *Universal Natural History and Theory of Heaven* (1755), Kant explains how one can explain the formation of the solar system from an initial state, in which matter is dispersed like a cloud, solely by means of the interaction of attractive and repulsive forces. Kant's view is accepted by today's astronomy. Kant is also well known for being one of the first to develop the concept of a galaxy. Drawing on earlier work by Thomas Wright, he speculated that the galaxy might be a rotating body of a huge number of stars, held together by gravitational forces akin to the solar system but on much larger scales.

Cosmopolitanism is not only tied to the idea of order in nature (which is the original meaning of the Greek word *cosmos*) but also to this kind of a very wide cosmic perspective on one's identity and place. Near Kant's tomb in Kaliningrad is the following inscription in German and Russian, taken from the "Conclusion" of his *Critique of Practical Reason*: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me". In the *Critique* itself, Kant explains further that neither of these things is beyond his horizon. On the contrary: "I see them before me and connect them directly with the consciousness of my existence". He also talks about "universal and necessary connections" to both. (Kant 1952/1788, 360-361)

A sufficiently wide temporal and spatial perspective allows us to see at once the limitations of both political realist socio-biology (biological reductionism) and post-structuralism (linguistic reductionism). Ants and bees do not have science or technologies. An attempt to develop human sciences on an analogy to ants and bees and similar non-learning creatures generates a contradiction in terms. Insects do not learn and

insect-societies do not change (in our historical time-scale). But from a scientific point of view, it is also evident that humans share the evolutionary history and most of genes with ants and bees and other complex living organisms. Language and our capacity to learn have gradually emerged over a very long period of time on the surface of a particular planet in a particular solar system located in a particular galaxy consisting of at least two hundred billion solar systems. As biological evolution has risen from cosmic evolution, ultimately we have all emerged from stardust.

Figure 1: Planets are small compared to stars, thus difficult to find



From: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:NewSolarSystem2.jpg>

From this point of view, attempts to reduce beings to language appear utterly implausible and geo-historically false. Language has emerged from biological and ecological processes that have taken over three and a half thousand million years to produce us and our languages, not the other way round. Cosmic, biological and cultural evolutions give an entirely different perspective on the question of identity. As the popular astrophysician Carl Sagan pointed out (also) in his TV-series *Cosmos*³, it is possible to define our shared identity as humans and earthlings in the context of a cosmic setting. Sagan did not want to rush to answers but formulate a question:

³ The series was first broadcast by the Public Broadcasting Service in 1980, and was the most widely watched series in the history of American public television until 1990's and is still the most widely watched PBS series in the world. It won an Emmy and a Peabody Award and has since been broadcast in more than 60 countries and seen by over 600 million people. The DVD-version, with scientific up-dates, is from 2000. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cosmos:_A_Personal_Voyage.

The nature of life on Earth and the quest for life elsewhere are two sides of the same question. The search for who we are. (Sagan 2000a)

Astrobiology – one of the rapidly growing areas of the early 21st century science – has made it increasingly clear that the theory of evolution and biology as a discipline are based on the study of one case only (see Jakosky 2006). Life sciences cannot make universal claims in the same way as physics and chemistry can because very little is known of the conditions of life elsewhere. The laws of physics apply everywhere but many of the biological and ecological mechanisms we know may be particular and specific to the planet Earth. Technical means to study other planets and solar systems have been gradually emerging and evolving in the late 20th century and early 21st century, but thus far only some parts of our solar system have really been explored in any detail. In July 2007, Enceladus, a moon of Saturn, was confirmed to have extra-terrestrial liquid water. By August 2007, some 239 extra-solar planets have been discovered to orbit around nearby stars, most with masses comparable to or larger than Jupiter's.

The problem of possible life elsewhere has been around for some time. Now, I would like to suggest that the idea of cosmic pluralism has been intimately tied to the history and development of cosmopolitanism. All the major Eurasian civilizations of the past 3000 years have produced at least some speculations about cosmic pluralism. The belief in extra-terrestrial life may have been present in ancient Assyria, Egypt, Arabia, China, Babylon, India and Sumer, although in these societies, the notion of alien life is difficult to distinguish from that of their particular gods, demons, and such. The best-known example of the idea of cosmic pluralism – at least within Eurocentric historiographies – is the case of early ancient Greek philosophy. Following Thales and Anaximander, the Greek atomists took up the idea, arguing that an infinite universe ought to have an infinity of populated worlds. They derived the concept of other worlds from the basic physical principles. For Epicurus, the entire visible universe was composed of one *kosmos*. However, the infinite number of atoms could not have been used in our finite world. So an infinite number of other worlds must exist beyond our senses. The Roman poet Lucretius (99-55 BC) spread these ideas – importantly, he also talked about “illimitable space in every direction – across the Roman Empire. (See Dick 1998, 7-8)

It seems to me that the Chinese astronomy, until the time of the late Ming Dynasty, cultivated similar ideas (for a summary, see Needham 2004, 24-30).⁴ At any rate, Chinese astronomy was much more modern in its conception of space and distances than the geocentric system of Ptolemy, while at least as accurate in its predictions of the movements of celestial bodies (important for navigation etc). However, also Ptolemy presented a useful tool for astronomical calculations in his *Handy Tables*, which tabulated all the data needed to compute the positions of the Sun, Moon and planets, the rising and setting of the stars, and eclipses of the Sun and Moon. The combination of its pragmatic usefulness and theological correctness resulted in a huge success. Thereafter the false geo-centrism of Ptolemy – derived also from Aristotle – dominated the Christian and Islamic worlds and shaped Indian thinking until the 17th century

⁴ However, thus far I have not been able to find confirmation about the position of the Chinese astronomers and philosophers on the question of other worlds.

Copernican scientific revolution in Europe (the only revolution in the Kuhnian sense of paradigm-change that has ever taken place).

It seems likely that the idea of cosmic pluralism encouraged tolerant cosmopolitanism already in the ancient agrarian empires of Eurasia such as Rome, China, and parts of India, as well as in religions such as Buddhism. The large empires were self-centric, but within their own sphere, they often represented limited cosmopolitanism. Later, a new and more explicit form of cosmic pluralism emerged in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. The best known early-modern proponent of cosmic pluralism was Giordano Bruno, who argued in the 16th century for an infinite universe in which every star is surrounded by its own solar system. In 1600, he was burnt at the stake as a heretic by the Roman Inquisition. However, as Europe was divided into separate churches and separate states, the Catholic Church could not stop new ideas from spreading. Movable type printing and paper-production – both Chinese inventions – facilitated the rise of modern science.

The attitude towards science was nearly reversed already in the late 17th century Holland. Christiaan Huygens (1629 – 1695) ended his celebrated career as a modern astronomer, mathematician and physicist by writing *Cosmotheoros. The celestial worlds discover'd: or, conjectures concerning the inhabitants, plants and productions of the worlds in the planets*. In this book Huygens imagined a universe brimming with life both within our solar system as well as elsewhere. *Cosmotheoros* was published posthumously in Latin soon after his death. Translations appeared in English (1698), in Dutch (1699), in French (1702), German (1703), Russian (1717) and in Swedish (1774). This work and others in its vain paved the way for Kant's mid-18th century astronomical speculations.

What exactly is the connection between cosmic pluralism and ethico-political cosmopolitanism on the planet Earth – apart from the shared concept of *kosmos*? One connection is obviously the cosmic scale that puts the drama of life and human history on this small, vulnerable planet to a very wide perspective. In a sense this is an optical effect: the longer the distance, the smaller the within-the-humanity differences appear.

The second connection has to do with widening the sphere within which the basic moral principles apply. Morality has to do with the capacity to generalize normative claims in an acceptable way and, most importantly to see things from the point of view of others as well. Thus Morgenthau's (1961, 561-4) fundamental rules of diplomacy are essentially principles of cosmopolitan morality, albeit confined to the sphere of diplomacy and international relations. "Diplomacy must look at the political scene from the point of view of other nations." "Nations must be willing to compromise on all issues that are not vital to them." Morgenthau's rules constitute a limited vision as they allow only for nations and diplomats and for no other identities or actors; however, they concretize well the fundamental principles of morality. A cosmic perspective may be unnecessary for a cosmopolitan morality, as the example of Morgenthau in some ways may demonstrate (although the planetary dangers posed by nuclear weapons were a major concern and an argument for a world state for him). The point is, however, that a planetary perspective clearly facilitates and encourages the adoption of such a moral viewpoint. Moral consciousness in turn is directly connected to identity-formation.

Thirdly, cosmic pluralism can contribute to extending the variety of living beings with which we can identify. Carl Sagan (2000b) talks about the extension of our “identification horizon”, the category of beings to whom we are willing to apply the basic moral principles:

If we survive these perilous times, it is clear that even an identification with all of mankind is not the ultimate desirable identification. [...] It is important that we extend our identification horizons, not just down to the simplest and most humble forms of life that may inhabit, with us, our vast galaxy of stars. (Ibid., 7-8)

Sagan’s point is important and his moral vision astounding in its comprehensiveness. Nevertheless, even with a cosmic distance to human differences, and even with a very wide identification horizon, the problems of false universalisms and human othering persist. Although the sceptical arguments against cosmopolitan identities are not metaphysical truths, they continue to carry weight in the world in which we are living and, moreover, they may also have existentially necessary elements (in the sense that beings are relational and presuppose negativity and differences). So the adoption of the perspective of cosmic pluralism is not enough. The problems and underpinnings of the identity-theories have to be tackled also directly and, as it were, at a down-to-earth level.

The temporal aspect of a possible solution: negative otherness in one’s own past

Although othering may in some sense be inevitable, the most relevant identity-constituting others need not be those contemporary humans on the planet Earth who are in some regards different from us, whoever we are. Otherness can also be located either in our own past or, alternatively, in our contemporary being, when seen from a point of view of a possible future position in world history. In other words, what we are can be defined in terms of critical distance from what we once used to be. And what we may become – and would like to become – can be defined in terms of critical distance from what we are now. Critical distance from one’s own past entails the possibility of normative improvement and ethico-political learning and development over time.

Two 20th century examples illustrate how one’s own past could take part in constituting one’s present or future identity: (i) the case of post-1945 Germany and (ii) the case of truth and reconciliation commissions that have worked in various late-20th century post-conflict situations. First, Germany. In the Nuremberg trials it was concluded that Nazi-Germany had committed crimes against humanity. Attempts to come to terms with one’s own past have not only been constitutive of German identity ever since, but has also led to an overall moral development in Germany. Harold Marcuse (1999) argues, using Jürgen Habermas’ categories, that “the identity of (West) German society has developed from a pre-conventional form in the Nazi and immediate postwar years, to a conventional stage in the 1960s, and is now, in the 1990s, showing many post-conventional traits”.

Nazism rose from the muddy and bloody trenches of the First World War. Generally, wars tend to cause unlearning and moral regression. While the Nazi-era meant moral

regression back to an egocentrism and overtly physical and behaviouristic pre-conventional stage, post-conventional morality attempts to define good and bad according to principles whose validity transcends the groups which hold the principles. In the post-conventional stage, systems of norms lose their quasi-natural validity and require justification from a universalistic, yet reflexive points of view. This development has implied cosmopolitanisation of German citizenry (cf. Beck et.al. 2003).

Also the late 20th century truth commissions have generally been created after a military dictatorship or a civil war (see Hayner 2001). The point of truth commissions has been to establish some kind of basis for democracy and justice as well as to enable moral learning and building a basis for we-feeling across a divided community. Particularly in South Africa, the idea has also been to let the truth come out into the public sphere by letting diverse people tell their stories about past suffering. However, often there is no well-defined mechanism to determine what the truth is in the case of contradictory accounts. Although in most cases truth commissions have been established as a substitute for judicial trials, for instance the Argentinean truth commission of the 1980s was complemented by opening criminal trials against past human rights violators.

The success of truth and reconciliation commissions to achieve moral learning has been at best only partial (for a somewhat more positive account, see Brahm 2007). In some contrast to the case of post-1945 Germany, the aim has been less to come to terms with one's own collective past than to create a public sphere within which past and perhaps also present grievances can come to the attention of everyone concerned. Although this procedure may enable the adoption of a post-conventional moral perspective to the conflict in question, in practice this tends to be difficult, particularly if actors make loaded charges against each other. Moreover, frequently at least some accusations and charges make sense and could lead to formal prosecutions as well. If no trials take place, this may actually feed further feelings of bitterness and injustice.

A key to a successful overcoming of violent antagonisms seems to lie in collective learning via collective self-criticism. If one looks deep enough, the history of every group, every class and every country is filled with episodes that not only could but also should have been otherwise.⁵ In that sense it is always possible to locate negative otherness in our own past – and from a universalist perspective, one knows that this applies to everyone.

An even more important possibility is locating otherness in our contemporary being and identity, when seen from a point of view of a possible future position in world history.

⁵ For instance, as being a Finn is a constitutive layer of my identity, it could perhaps be argued that my cosmopolitan orientation owes something (i) to the recognition of the horrors of the Finnish civil war in 1918 in which both sides committed unnecessary and unjustifiable acts of violence, and (ii) to the recognition of the role of Finland as an ally of Nazi-Germany in the Operation Barbarossa in 1941. The latter was legitimized also in terms of creating a Greater Finland by an eastwards expansion (most people tend to remember only the Winter War of 1939-40 when the Soviet Union attacked Finland; however, with territorial concessions and exchange that war could perhaps been avoided as well).

Alexander Wendt (2003) has formulated a similar idea in the context of making an argument for “the inevitability of a world state”:

[...A] world state could compensate for the absence of spatial differentiation between its present and its past [...]. The past here is anarchy, with all its unpleasantness. In Hegelian terms we could say that ‘history’ becomes the Other in terms of which the global self is defined. Of course this Other does not have a subjectivity of its own, and so cannot literally recognize the world state. But a functional equivalent to recognition can be achieved by an act of temporal self-differentiation. (Ibid., 527)

For Wendt the temporal self-differentiation would occur in the future when the world state is established. However, the idea of temporal self-differentiation and otherness can be made concrete already now by imagining for instance a future historian or sociologist looking back. This device has been successfully utilized in some science fiction writings (e.g. Brunner 1971; Wagar 1999). The act of imagining a future historian generates far-reaching questions about his or her identity, about our identity, and about the truth of his or her historical stories and explanations. Who is she? What kind of a historical story and explanation can be argued to be true and relevant? What is the appropriate spatio-temporal framework for writing world history? How will she view ourselves?

As pointed out above, many versions of political realism recognize that the reasons for scepticism about a world community are only temporal. At some point in the future, things may be different: there may be no reason for “realist” scepticism anymore. After that point, whenever it may come, our future historian would be likely to identify with the planetary political community, looking at the past from a global vantage point. A leap ahead into the future seems thus to suggest a standpoint of global history. This is a not a new idea. In the context of advocating future world unity, H.G. Wells developed the idea of a universal history soon after the First World War. In his extraordinary two-volume *Outline of History*, Wells argued for the importance of shared historical ideas:

The need for a common knowledge of the general facts of human history throughout the world has become very evident during the tragic happenings of the last few years. Swifter means of communication have brought all men closer to one another for good or for evil. War becomes a universal disaster, blind and monstrously destructive; it bombs the baby in the cradle and sinks the foodships that cater for the non-combatant and the neutral. There can be no peace now, we realize, but a common peace in the world; no prosperity but a general prosperity. But *there can be no common peace and prosperity without common historical ideas*. Without such ideas to hold them together in harmonious co-operation, with nothing but narrow, selfish, and conflicting nationalist traditions, races and peoples are bound to drift toward conflict and destruction. This truth, which was apparent to that great philosopher Kant a century or more ago – it is the gist of his tract upon universal peace – is now plain to the man in the street. A sense of history as the common adventure of all mankind is necessary for peace [...]. (Wells 1920, v-vi; italics in the original)

It is of course no coincidence that Wells framed his world history in cosmic terms, starting his story by outlining the origins of our solar system and explaining the huge distances in space. In book I of the first volume, Wells narrates the origins of the planet Earth before moving gradually to the history of humankind in book II. There had been universal histories – presentations of the history of mankind as a whole, as a coherent unit – before Wells, but most of them have told the story in Eurocentric terms, often assuming or suggesting that a particular (Christian or) Western society is the end-point of world history. In contrast, Wells framed his world history in cosmic terms and imagined a future world society, indeed a world state, thus providing an entirely new vantage point. Wells' angle remained unique for most of the century, until the 1980s.

Since the late 1980s, a systematic critique of Eurocentrism has emerged. The colonizers' model of the world – Eurocentrism – is based on a simple and yet false assumption: all important concepts, practices, technologies and capacities have come from Europe or from Europeanised parts of the world. Originating in Europe, the central concepts, practices, technologies and capacities have subsequently diffused to the rest of the world. Thus, world history is represented as the history of how the central dynamics of cultural evolution moved gradually from Mesopotamia westwards via Greece and Rome towards North-West Europe and, later, towards the United States of America. The achievements of great Eurasian civilizations of Arabia, Persia, India, China and Japan have thus been largely neglected and the parallel developments in the Americas, Pacific and Africa mostly ignored. (Blaut 1993; Blaut 2000)

The critics of Eurocentrism have argued plausibly that this is a biased and one-sided account of the common adventure of all mankind (Amin 1989; Frank 1998; Hobson 2004; Needham 2004; Pomeranz 2000). The Greco-Roman civilization was not unique – the Han Dynasty China and parts of India went through very similar developments – and after the collapse of the Western part of the Roman Empire the areas north of Mediterranean constituted an outlying part of Eurasia for more than a millennium. Until the 16th and 17th centuries, most important concepts, practices, technologies and capacities actually originated in China, India and Arabia and were slowly diffused to Europe. And as I have argued elsewhere (Patomäki 2007b), it is also possible to write counterfactual scenarios about how the Industrial Revolution could have taken place elsewhere in the Eurasian continent, most plausibly in East Asia (particularly China), with far-reaching world-historical consequences.

The starting point of non-Eurocentric and post-Wellsian big history is that human societies remain part of nature, “properly at home in the universe despite our extraordinary powers, unique self-consciousness, and inexhaustible capacity for collective learning” (McNeill 2005, xvii). McNeill argues further that as natural sciences have been historicized at many levels, it is now the task of historians – and social scientists – to generalise boldly enough to connect their area of study with the history of cosmos, solar system and life. In his programmatic statements in the second volume of the new *Journal of World History*, David Christian (1991) phrased the task also in terms of scale of space and time:

What is the scale on which history should be studied? The establishment of the *Journal of World History* already implies a radical answer to that question: in geographical terms, the appropriate scale may be the whole of the world. In this paper, I will defend an equally radical answer to the temporal aspect of the same question: what is the time scale on which history should be studied? I will argue that the appropriate time scale for the study of history may be the whole of time. In other words, historians should be prepared to explore the past on many different time scales up to that of the universe itself – a scale of between 10 and 20 billion years. This is what I mean by “big history.” (ibid., 223)

David Christian’s (2005) *Maps of Time. An Introduction to Big History* is a unified story of developments of the whole universe from the Big Bang about 13 thousand million years ago through the present into its distant future. The story of big history is about the emergence of new layers of qualitatively distinct beings and development of increasing complexity – against the background of the second law of thermodynamics that tends to work against complexity (see also Kauffman 1995; and Wheeler 2006). From this perspective, it is evident that life emerged from cosmic evolution (although we do not yet know the details how) and humanity from biological evolution (this part is better known). Despite the cosmic setting and very long time horizon, the main focus of *Maps of Time* is on the scales of time within which meaningful human history has taken place in our particular remote part of a particular galaxy called the Milky Way.

Human cultural evolution has been radically faster than even the latest phases of biological evolution, and it has been accelerating. During the most recent Ice Age – that lasted for about 90,000 years – gradual developments started to take place. The “revolution of Upper Paleolithic” some 50,000 years ago was followed by “the Neolithic agricultural revolution” about 10,000–12,000 years ago, after the end of the Ice Age. The first state-formations and systems of writing and mathematics emerged roughly 5,000–6,000 years ago (the same developments were subsequently repeated quite independently in different parts of the world). Thus began the world history of agrarian states and empires; of division of labour and taxation; of religions and new levels of abstraction; of wars and power struggles; of slavery and violence; and of increasingly rapid cultural evolution. Within Eurasia, a world economy of regular trade networks has existed for at least 2,000 years. During this era, many innovations have spread swiftly across different parts of Eurasia, opening up new possibilities to build upon previous innovations and practices. Eventually, this resulted in the Industrial Revolution.

The fact that industrialization first emerged in Europe was a mere coincidence, a historical possibility that could easily have been otherwise (Patomäki 2007b). The accidents and non-teleological successions that made Europe the locus of the Industrial Revolution should soften the will and identity of those who imagine that there was something essential about being European that led to these developments. However, by also acknowledging the trans-historical essence of the human condition in the industrial era we can recognize others from different parts of the world as equal yet different partners in the global learning process, in the common adventure of humankind.

The so called modern time has in fact been the most dramatic era in the common adventure of all humankind thus far. The Eurocentric waves of globalization – starting with the imperial reintegration of the American continent with Europe and continuing with the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century waves of imperial expansion – have intensified the new global coming together of humanity, even if often under violent, oppressive and tragic circumstances. The Industrial Revolution led to a rapid global population growth from one to six billion people. Simultaneously, it also complicated and obscured the relationship between resources and control over land.

The 19th century was exceptional because for the first time in centuries there were long periods of negative peace in Europe (outside Europe the situation was different, not least because of European expansion and competition elsewhere). A few occasional wars notwithstanding, the European heartland was not anymore plagued with recurrent warfare. The contrast to the inter-dynastic era of 1689-1815, characterized by nearly constant warfare both in Europe and European colonies, was evident (see Hamilton and Herwig 2003, 2-10). The core of the industrialising world economy seemed to have become relatively peaceful. Many liberals also anticipated the end of the colonial era, and since Napoleon imperialism had been a bad word. Although in industrial capitalism there are also mechanisms and processes that tend to generate analogical outcomes (see Patomäki 2007c), including imperial projects, competition and wars, these remained unrecognized by numerous Europeans. Moreover, industrialisation created also new forces of destruction. The North-American civil war of 1861-5 and the Franco-German war of 1870-71 were the first modern industrial wars (for a discussion of the industrialisation of war in the 19th and early 20th century, see Giddens 1987b, 222-232).

In 1914, the War came as an immense surprise to most Europeans, even though there had been writers and intellectuals anticipating a major war – but only very few of them warning that it would be unprecedented in destructiveness and likely to spread to imperial peripheries (see Clarke 1966, 68-9). Moreover, after the outbreak of the war, the prevalent expectation remained that the war will be soon over. This error and miscalculation made, in part, some of the decisions for beginning or joining the war easier. (Stevenson 2004, 8) Thus the 20th century, “the age of extremes” (Hobsbawm 1994), began with a largely unanticipated massive catastrophe, which recurred in 1937-1945. Furthermore, the Russian revolution would have been unlikely to occur without the War (and German support for the Bolsheviks). Thus, also the Cold War was a co-product of the War and its aftermath. It was at this time that humanity reached the technological capacity to destroy itself and large parts of the ecological systems of the planet.

In a Wellsian manner, big history is necessarily oriented also towards the future, anticipating the possibility of collective learning, global security community and much better governance of common global processes and problems. This would amount to the unification of humanity, although Christian, for instance, remains agnostic about the possibility of a world state. Also, those explicitly in favour of a world state stress that in terms of institutions, the future world state may be very different from the current territorial states and their institutions (see Wendt 2003, 506; Partington 2003, 101-148).

The point is that big history frames world history in cosmic terms and imagines a future world community that may eventually assume also the form of a world state, thus providing a new vantage point for writing world history and viewing us. From that globalist point of view, what we are now – whoever we may in point of fact be in terms of our relational geo-historical identity – constitutes a form of possibly negative otherness that will be otherwise some time in the future, conceivably for good reasons.

Redefining self-other relations: ego and alter within a shared world history

Big history may provide an overall framework for thinking about who we are, but it cannot – and ought not try to – abolish cultural and historical differences. There is a need to rethink the basic onto-logic of identity from a perspective that is compatible with both the critics of false universalisms and big history. Ontologically, as the world is differentiated, structured and layered, and since it is the condition of being that there are absences, level-specific voids, differences, contrasts etc, there must always be certain exclusion relations also within humanity. Causality and temporality are irreversible, and in any spatio-temporal location, most beings are absent, even when we take into consideration the possibility that past and outside can also be and often are present.

Also at the level of syntagmatic competencies – that make speech and action possible – there are often wide differences in the grids, measures, matrixes and relations of exclusion that constitute ego/alter-relations. Even within the vastness of the long-term global matrix of big history, these smaller-scale differences are significant to our lives.

It is worth emphasising, first, that big history is critical of Eurocentrism, Sinocentrism or whatever centrism. Like many forms of political realism, it refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe. Big history is also at least partially compatible with the Derridean notion of justice, understood in terms of a respect for otherness and a possible future global democracy, where differences, even if always in the process of becoming, are at least in some important ways recognized as differences that should be let to develop on their own terms. Pluralism can best facilitate collective learning and open-ended cultural evolution.

In terms of time and space, the global grid and matrix of big history corresponds to the emergent forms of time and space evident in many social practices. Social practices do change and may give rise to emergent spatio-temporalities. Long-distance calls or computerised systems of information flows have disembedded, at least in a sense, space from time. Immediate contacts have become possible over long distances. This applies also to transportation: it is possible to fly to almost any corner of the planet in 24 hours. A truly global multinational enterprise or NGO presupposes the disembedding of space from place and relies in its practices on the capability of disembedding space from time.

In the early 21st century, global togetherness in this sense is possible only to the wealthiest part of humanity. Therefore concrete attempts to build global security community and democracy should be based on an explanatory analysis of the (re)production of causally efficacious relational practices and structures of the global

political economy. Adequate explanations may also provide emancipatory knowledge and practical wisdom for actors, generating power to transform social structures and make them more empowering in the future.

However, togetherness not only creates new points of contact but may also engender new points of conflict. At this point it is useful to turn to Tzvetan Todorov's (1984) three axes of ego/alter-relations. The first is the epistemological axis. Ego can either know or be ignorant of alter's history, identity and values. Knowledge or ignorance of the other can also have more fundamental epistemological roots – from many epistemic standpoints, differences are difficult to see. Answers to the question “how can and should we acquire knowledge?” enable and constrain visions and knowledge of the others. Of course, there can be no absolute knowledge but an endless gradation of the lower or higher states of knowledge. Nonetheless, big history seems to mean better knowledge of non-Europeans; it also gives grounds for refashioning systems of education along non-Eurocentric and globalist lines. Thus, at least in the epistemic and epistemological axis, it is apparent that big history implies improvement in self-other relations.

Nonetheless, the axiological axis, the basis for value judgements, is partly independent of knowledge. The other can be seen as good or bad or neither (something else). How and on what basis this judgement is made varies significantly. Todorov (1984, 185) discusses judgements of otherness and their grounds in the context of the 16th century Spanish debates about Americas. “Las Casas knows the Indians less well than Cortés, and he loves them more [...]”. Thus better knowledge does not necessarily imply more favourable judgements. Even more drastically than empirical descriptions, a judgement on the ontological status, particularly if conceived in terms of the “Great Chain of Being”, has axiological consequences. Thus, morally and politically it is critical whether the other is judged to be an equal or a “lower” being. Modern progressive time – and the idea of stages of development – has often defined the status of self (advanced) and others (inferior). This is ethico-politically as consequential as a set of standards based for instance on imperial or religious civilization.

Although advanced in some fields, mostly the American “Indian” civilizations of the 15th century were quite similar to the ancient Eurasian civilizations of 3000-1000 BC. In that sense, the Spanish colonizers met their own past in the Americas. In this situation, Sepulveda saw a clear hierarchy of beings, justifying slavery, whereas Las Casas argued that the Indians have rights because they are in some ways actually, and in other ways potentially, Christian, i.e. ultimately the same as us.

Is it possible to overcome the problematic the Spaniards faced in the 16th century? I think a potential solution lies in the concept of a identification horizon, combined with a quasi-Derridean notion of justice. With a sufficiently wide horizon of moral identification, Las Casas could have made an alternative argument in favour of the Indians. First, he could have argued that the 16th century Indians share the core humanity with the Eurasians, although their development had been slower and to some extent different for path-dependent reasons (among other things, the people living in the American continent lacked big mammals and were isolated from the Old World networks of communication and trade). Secondly, Las Casas could have pointed out that the Indians were not only

backward but their civilizations involved also characteristics that the Old World had either forgotten or had never developed, i.e. learning from the others remained possible.

Las Casas could have maintained, thirdly, that notwithstanding the backwardness of the local state-formations, the land in the Americas belonged to the Indians. As Kant the cosmopolitan later formulated the idea (see Muthu 2003, 172-209), the native people were obliged only to follow the principle of hospitality towards the Europeans; and this is all the Europeans could have legitimately expected from them. From the point of view of a sufficiently wide horizon of moral identification, why should temporally backward and different humans be deprived of their geo-historical entitlements (even when there is no private ownership)? Fourthly, Las Casas could have argued for some time, i.e. for letting the Indian societies develop gradually on their own terms. Over time, the Indians would have joined the rest of humanity anyway; and it is also likely that some of them would have turned to the Europeans, also in order to get support against their local oppressors and exploiters (violence, human sacrifice and slavery was common). Unfortunately, the real tragedy is that any contact with any Eurasians would have exposed the American Indians to the diseases of the Old World and thus led inescapably to a massive catastrophe (vaccination against smallpox was invented in 1796).

Todorov's third axis, the praxiological axis, has to do with rapprochement with or distancing from other's real or imagined identity and values in practical terms. Neutrality or indifference is a possibility and this implies the capacity to take distance metaphorically and sometimes also literally. In the absence of distance-taking in this sense, Todorov (*ibid.*, 185) claims that there are only two possibilities: either the ego embraces the other's identity and values and identifies; or the ego identifies the other with himself. These options imply either submission to the other or the other's submission to oneself. Todorov fails to give practical room to the idea that their identities can be co-constitutive but not exhausted by their mutual relations; or to the possibility that interaction between ego and alter may also transform both.

Nevertheless, later in the book Todorov writes (*ibid.*, 249), albeit somewhat hesitantly, that "we want equality without its compelling us to accept identity; but also difference without its degenerating into superiority/inferiority". This opens up further possibilities but nonetheless ignores temporality and the idea of being as becoming. Any geo-historical ego and alter are best seen as moments in the common adventure and cultural evolution of all humankind. Thus the category of a co-constitutive and mutually transformative relationship between ego and alter should be included in the possibilities, and its centrality stressed, although also a co-constitutive and mutually transformative relationship may involve letting many differences just be.

Sooner or later, however, both the identities of ego and alter will be transformed and become, hopefully, more global. Unless we succeed in destroying ourselves, we have every reason to hope and believe that in the coming centuries ever more comprehensive perspectives will open up for the humankind, that is, for us.

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