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WORLD HISTORY, TO GO

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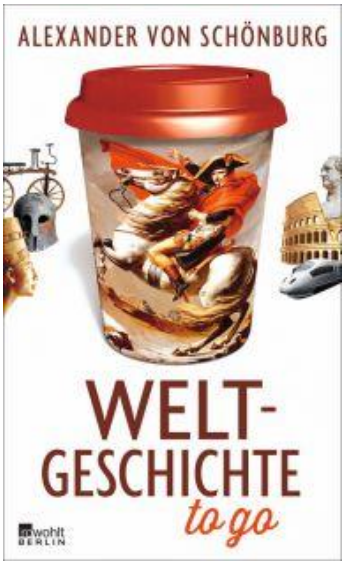

Impossible, you might think. Compressing the entire history of the world into 280 pages? Can't be done. But there's one person who can. Alexander von Schönburg manages this feat so deftly and with such elegance that readers of this book run the risk of becoming addicted to history.
The author takes us on a spellbinding journey through the most important stages in human history, from Babylon to Berlin and New York. He depicts the greatest heroes and the biggest villains, points out the greatest works of art and explains a range of discoveries and ideas, from the hand axe to the selfie stick. He starts out by rattling through the first two million years of human existence in only ten pages, pushed onward by the question: how did a comparatively insignificant species of ape with a position in the food chain somewhere between sheep and lions manage to subjugate an entire planet?
With its many surprising insights illuminating the temporal undergrowth of countless millennia, its incisive anecdotes and telling portraits of leading historical figures (what connects Vladimir Putin and Charlemagne?) as well as a panoply of interesting historical facts, this book is more than just a great read. It's a literary experience. And to be honest, anything Schönburg passes over in this book you probably wouldn't have missed, anyway …

ALEXANDER VON SCHÖNBURG was born in 1969. He worked on the staff of the *FAZ* newspaper and was editor-in-chief of *Park Avenue*. Since 2009 he has been part of the BILD *Bildzeitung*'s managing editorial team. He has written many bestselling books, including *The Art of Stylish Poverty* (2005), *Everything You've Always Wanted to Know About Royals But Were Afraid to Ask* (2008) and *The Art of Smalltalk* (2015). Alexander von Schönburg lives with his family in Berlin.

- **The espresso of history books: strong, rich and stimulating. Everything you need to know about world history by bestselling author Alexander von Schönburg!**
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- **The author's previous works are bestsellers; rights were sold to 12 countries.**

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World History, To Go

English excerpt

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Translated by Angus Baigent

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THANK YOU

Instead Of A Preface
A Warning

It's only ten in the morning, and on the terrace of our hotel room it's already thirty degrees in the shade. I'm sitting having breakfast with my children. Right in front of us is the Acropolis, the most famous urban fortification in the world. In the middle is the Parthenon, a temple to the goddess Athena built by the inhabitants of this city in gratitude for her standing by them against the mighty Persians, who at that time were the ancient world's equivalent of a nuclear power. The Persian king thought that he could use his well-equipped super-army to swat Athens like a troublesome insect. But then came Marathon and Salamis, two miraculous victories that were each about as likely as Germany losing 7-1 to Liechtenstein. The course of history was changed. With its adventurous and both physically and mentally alert population, this little backwater became a Mediterranean superpower and continues to influence our actions to this day.

My wife left the terrace a while ago. She has no intention of joining the family trip to the ancient sites in this sweltering heat, of being force-marched by me through the Agora, ancient Athens' central meeting point. She is also justifiably angry at me. Last night I let a friend, the foreign correspondent Paul Ronzheimer, kidnap and force me to join him on a tour of Athens' nightlife. Meanwhile, our children, in the manner of rock stars, tried very hard to destroy our hotel room. My children are teenagers who are currently more interested in the breakfast buffet than the world's most imposing ruins. Our youngest has loaded a plate with scrambled egg and bacon, accompanied by a tonne of white bread. This amount of calories would have easily fed three dozen Spartans for a whole week. My daughter has been trying to access the hotel's WiFi for the last hour. She is highly cultured. She is trying to do this to prove to the digital world that she was here. Instagram profiles have a little flag on a world map so that people can see where you were when you uploaded your pictures. A flag pinned to Athens, a photo of the white Parthenon floating in a swimming pool blue sky, shot with Hipstamatic, John S lens, the Ina's 1969 film always looks good.

Why am I inflicting this on them? Wouldn't it be better to just take the panorama photo and walk through the Plaka shopping district, slurping an ice cream? What does that civilisation, whose ruins lie before us, have to do with us? And, come to think of it, why do

we humans think we're so important? Why do we keep telling each other stories about our past?

Wouldn't it be wiser to just stay in the present? What good does all this peering into the past do? There's only one answer to these questions: We have nothing else. The present is not physically verifiable. Everything we see is in the past. I see the glass next to me fractions of a second late, delayed by the amount of time the picture of it has taken to reach my retina. If we look at the night sky with the naked eye, we can see around six thousand stars. All the light we can see from them might be hitting the earth then and there, but is actually very old. The further away the light source is, the older the light. The oldest light is 13 billion years old and began its journey at the moment of the Big Bang, travelling at the speed of light.

There was a time when this interest in ourselves was more than understandable. A comparatively short time ago, people believed that our planet was the centre of the universe. There's a stone not far from here, in Delphi. It used to mark the centre of the world. Today we know that we aren't even at the centre of our little solar system, and that like many other solar systems find ourselves at the periphery – on the unremarkable outskirts – of our galaxy. One galaxy among many billions. Space means that planet Earth has all the importance of a bacteria on a bogey in the nose of a flea sitting on a hair on the tail of one of thousands of elephants running around on the wide plains of Africa. Isn't it ridiculous that such an insignificant lifeform spends its time writing down who fought with and was ruled by whom? If our planet vanished tomorrow, its disappearance would go unnoticed in the vastness of space. Our spiral galaxy, the one we call the Milky Way, would, like all the other galaxies, carry on quietly turning regardless. Or is that nonsense? Does the universe perhaps only exist because the light falls on it because of us, because we see it, perceive it? If there's no one there to perceive something, has it even existed?

But let's just for a moment accept that our own planet is pretty special and interesting. That does not mean that suddenly all the attention should automatically focus on Homo sapiens sapiens, who in point of fact arrived late at the party. History books often contain the phrase, "And then came humans." As though creation, or, depending on your point of view, evolution, is complete. As though we are the crowning glory of a plan for the world, a plan which has designated us as the world's rulers.

This book is about this strange species we call humans, which in the blink of an eye – almost in the moment of its own creation – subjugated the entire planet. To understand our

strange species, it's well worth becoming acquainted with the early Homo sapiens. For one simple reason: We are those early humans. We've been around for so many hundreds of thousands of years that the last few thousand years of human culture have hardly had the chance to change us significantly. We haven't yet had much of a chance to adapt to the changes we have wrought. For at least 150,000 years we have existed exactly as we are now. We are the same as our ancestors who lived back then, both in terms of physical appearance and our cognitive powers. They were, in fact, probably a bit more intelligent than us because they had to store and interpret in their brain thousands of bits of information on which their lives depended. We, on the other hand, often get bored and look at our smartphones to check the weather forecast or play Candy Crush. About 12,000 years ago we stopped drifting around as hunters and gatherers. It was only during this relatively short time span that we started building things, harvesting, applying for passports, getting mortgages and making appointments. The humans of today, so eager to be seen as "modern", only have to conduct one simple test to experience just how little they differ from those early humans who lived in caves and hunted woolly mammoths. Just take a bath. When the water in the bathtub cools, we get goose bumps. Our ancestors had more body hair than we do. When they got cold, the goose bumps helped their furry hair to stand on end. The air was trapped between the hairs and helped them feel warmer.

If you don't have a bathtub, just walk past a table with lots of food standing on it. Since finding out that most of my ancestors had to expend a lot of effort to collect and hunt their food, it's easy for me to understand why I can't seem to pass by any reasonably presentable breakfast buffet. I wasn't hungry just now, I never get hungry in the mornings. But for hundreds of thousands of years every bit of nutrition was a triumph for me, creating a maelstrom of neuronal euphoria in my brain. Just now at breakfast, I simply had to load my plate up to the brim because somewhere deep down inside I suspected that this will probably be my last chance to eat for a very long time.

To be interested in history means to be interested in one's self. We study history for one reason: to study ourselves. We will see that there are good reasons to tell history from the perspective of our species and before the backdrop of the culture that history has created.

I'll skip over the first few million years of our history (long before the bathtub and the hotel buffet) and concentrate on the last few millennia, from about 10,000 BC, or around the time we began settling down into locally fixed communities. In doing that – and this is to be

understood as a warning – I also make a value judgement. From the perspective of classic historical scholarship, the so-called agricultural revolution began around 12,000 years ago. It laid the foundation for the rise of humankind and was the genesis of what we call civilisation. Starting to recount history from the moment people began imposing their will on nature might be the standard approach. But before we follow it we need to be clear that it's based on quite a bold claim. This is that history is only worth examining when humans are not natural beings but civilised ones, when they see themselves no longer as a part of nature but as its conquerors. We could just as well restrict ourselves entirely to the first 150,000 years of human history, arguing that this is its longest and by far most successful epoch. One would then mention the last 12,000 years (the time after the agricultural revolution) as a kind of sad postscript to history proper, the phase when we exploited and destroyed the natural world that had amply provided for us for thousands of generations. Although I won't be doing that here, I believe that it's only fair to point out that if I concentrate on the epoch in our history after we became sedentary and founded civilisations, this itself already implies a value judgement. Equally, it is a value judgement to talk about "our" world and "our" environment. I use these terms, as we all do, to signify that we do not see ourselves as part of nature, but as beings separate from nature, if not its rulers.

By the way, there is also a banal and practical reason why history books tend to deal only with the last 12,000 years or so, the period following the agricultural revolution: it's easier. Everything that is temporally and geographically nearer to us is easier to examine and is more likely to allow us to gather specific knowledge about it. It's also more difficult to find out about what went on before we became sedentary because we have no written records available. Hunters and gatherers were quite a lazy bunch when it came to writing things down; writing was a modern invention dreamt up by urban dwellers.

But another reason why it's rewarding to find out more about the last 12,000 years is that it's a pretty remarkable success story. We've made some extremely quick, long strides. We originally occupied a place in the food chain somewhere between sheep and lion. Today we tweet from space, build miniature brains using neurons to test medicines on, manipulate our genes and work on developing super-intelligence. When we talk about world history, we look back on 4.5 billion years. The first great apes that used tools lived roughly 3 million years ago. Humans looking identical to us first appeared around 150,000 years ago, yet thinking, planning humans have been around for only about 70,000 years, at most. 70,000

years of human history are, in the context of a world that's 4.5 billion years old, not even a fraction of a blink of an eye. If the history of the world was a film lasting one hundred minutes, then the time between when we started splitting stones and when we invented Nato and Google and built robots and self-driving cars would last merely a split second. However, a lot has happened during this short period that we find very interesting.

Yet here my special qualities as a dilettante come into play. I'm a journalist, which makes me the opposite of an expert. For the reader of this book, that's a huge advantage. If you want to see where it can lead to if you think about things too deeply, go and read some Nietzsche. If you know too much, understand too much, see too many connections and have too much information it can only lead to complete confusion. My (given the amount of material available totally insane) project to discuss all of human history can only work if I am brave enough to leave some gaps, let a few of the details fall under the table and focus purely on what's important. Or what I believe to be so, at any rate. And only if you, the reader, accept these simplifications of the amateur historian will you be able to have even a chance of maintaining an overall view. The great journalist and cultural philosopher Egon Friedell formulated a profound defence of dilettantism that I draw on here. When Friedell was accused of the D-word, he wasn't insulted. On the contrary. Friedrich Torberg recounts that Friedell's work as a playwright was once savaged by a Viennese reviewer thus: "We never want to see this drunken dilettante from Munich here in Vienna ever again!" Friedell wrote back to the editors with words to this effect: "I do not deny sometimes feeling very drawn towards alcohol. Neither can I detect anything negative in the word dilettante, as this describes someone who loves what he does. But you will hear from my lawyers regarding the attribute 'from Munich'!" As Friedell once explained in a letter to Max Reinhardt, "Any human activity only possesses a true life force if performed by a dilettante. Only the dilettante, who is justifiably called a lover and an amateur, has a truly human relationship to his objects."

Simplification is the only viable way of recounting history. History as a field of research requires us, when practised as a science, to impose order. Ordering necessarily means to categorise things, to interpret them, ascribe meaning and construct contexts after the event. A scientific approach means nothing other than the attempt to introduce order. The alternative is a great jumble of confusing, unconnected data and information. Even just trying to list who ruled where quickly gets stuck in a swamp of arbitrary categories and ways of

ordering. The great financial mathematician Nassim Nicholas Taleb, whose work *The Black Swan* is one of today's most influential books, called the human compulsion to order things "Platonicity". But this sorting of things, the creating of connections, is what makes us thinking beings. Thinking means creating connections in your brain. The more ordered and less random the connections between data are, the more vivid are the patterns they form. This makes them easier to store in your memory, retell and write down in a book. Taleb maintains that we need the tangible, the explicit, that which grabs our attention, the enthralling, the romantic. We just weren't made to deal in abstracts. The only problem is that we're making a false assumption. We can only ever order things in retrospect. We look back and say this or that had to turn out in a certain way. The French Revolution or the First World War had to happen because this or that happened... The only problem is that while it was happening, no one saw what would develop as a result. After 9/11, everyone was suddenly able to explain the phenomenon of Islamic terrorism. But asked on the 10th of September, hardly anyone would have been able to. This also means, incidentally, that we don't have the slightest clue how future generations will judge us.

History is not a science that records objective facts. Sometimes myths crystallise more truths than files and folders crammed with facts. Perhaps stories like the one about Adam and Eve, which is about how humans revolt against a pre-ordained order of things, or the Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic which describes people attempting to overcome death, the least gracious natural law of all, are the truest stories we have. Maybe the scientific accuracy of historiography isn't as important as its therapeutic effects. Maybe we just tell stories – and histories – to make ourselves feel better. As keenly aware as we are of our own temporal nature, perhaps they offer us a sense of permanence.

The theatre was invented here, in Athens. Its inventors had a clearly defined aim: to give us a way of examining ourselves, to see our desires and darker sides mirrored before us. But at a safe distance, in a staged self-therapy session.

Another reason history can't be a science is that it all depends on who says what and where. We think in narratives. The thing about history is that it's primarily about telling a story. That's why in this book I feel justified in often referring to myths and narratives which condense history in its scientific sense. If in a few years a Congolese living in Kinshasa – one of the world's fastest growing cities – decides to write a history of the world, or if a Buddhist had written one five hundred years ago on the edge of the Himalayas in the Kingdom of

Mustang, they would both be different to mine, written as it is by a well-fed white European in Athens on a laptop. But I have no perspective outside of my own. In this sense, I use the word "European", even though I know that it's misleading. Europe is not a continent but an idea curated by the people who live here for over two thousand years. Geologically, we are merely a craggy little outcrop of the huge continental plate we call Asia. But the people from this wee corner of the world have indelibly changed the lives of just about everyone else living elsewhere on this planet. That's why it's not only understandable but, from a modern perspective, necessary that I recount history from a European perspective. Or, to use the words of the Mexican film-maker Alejandro González Iñárritu, "This is about the way the white man has dealt with those of other skin colours, with nature, animals and life itself." What about the other mega-civilisations? Why did the Chinese discover Australia but never think about conquering it? Why did the Europeans discover America and not the other way around? Why did the Mayans not venture to Europe, or even South America? These are questions we will have to grapple with.

How am I going to approach this? What can you, the reader, expect? The philosopher Karl Jaspers, who did not often simplify things, divided human history into four periods. Humans have, he wrote, created new foundations on four occasions. The first period begins with the appearance of language and tools. Then comes Phase Two, where humans eschew hunting and gathering for things like planting seeds, harvesting them and building enormous empires. For Phase Three, the thousand years preceding the birth of Christ, he invented a nice phrase: "The Axial Age". This is the period where we mentally try to reach for the stars, start philosophising, create frameworks of ideas, and establish world religions. The fourth phase is our current epoch, the technical-scientific age. Like all systems of categorising things, it's completely absurd. Yet also very helpful. I'll largely be sticking to Jaspers' categories, while taking our human sense for form a step further. At the end of each chapter I'll add "Top 10" lists that condense the content for that chapter. Beat that, Jaspers!

After a quick summary for those readers in a terrible hurry, the ten main chapters all look at the whole of world history but each from a different perspective. Following a chapter listing the most important events in human history comes another which describes history from the perspective of the rise of the great cities. This is followed by a chapter about history's heroes, one about big ideas, one about works of art and one about the most innovative inventions. To add a bit of spice, I've included a chapter about the greatest villains

and a chapter about the greatest words. As uncomfortable as the topic is, I'm afraid we must close the book by talking about the end of the world. But to stop you getting too depressed, I've also saved up a couple of surprising insights into some historical correlations and contexts.

This book omits many names, events and dates; it is not a compendium of world history. It certainly does not focus on giving the dates of battles and revolutions or the names of individual rulers. I seriously doubt whether people are even that interested in how the Athenians lived in 400 BC or what vexed the Romans in 10 AD. What is interesting about history is the questions that arise for us when we examine ancient Athens, and what the answers to the questions asked by the people living at the time mean to us living today. According to Thucydides, history is nothing but a philosophy lesson using examples. So please expect examples from history that are relevant to us today rather than an encyclopaedia or textbook.

Chapter One

A NUTSHELL
4.5 billion years in fast motion

This part of the story, namely what came "before", is quickly told: No one knows. But we do have a good idea what happened around 13 billion years ago. A cosmos of minimal size exploded with maximum energy and the heavenly bodies thus flung apart disperse like a balloon that's being blown up. Space, light and time come into being. No one knows why that happened. But we can use the distance of the stars, which are still receding at explosive speeds, to determine that it happened and measure when.

Let's skip past this slightly unsettling issue of the Big Bang as well as the (very) long story of how the Earth formed. With the cosmos flying apart, gravity caused balls of gas and stars to form. Our Sun, a tiny fixed star, was born around 5.5 billion years ago. Our planet, the Earth, which loyally circles the Sun, is only around 1 billion years younger and is for most of that time a pretty inhospitable place. Things smoulder and bubble away for about 4 billion years. For most of Earth's history, or around 3.5 billion years, our planet is a primordial soup featuring a few algae. It doesn't bear thinking about what the evening news would have consisted of for those 3.5 billion years.

Then 500 million years ago, something strange happened: Life. The so-called Cambrian Explosion. Measured on the time scales we're looking at here, in a flash we see the appearance of land-based plants, animals living in shells, the first fish, amphibians, insects and then reptiles and birds. Things are suddenly growing, creeping, crawling, shuffling and scurrying about all over the place in wondrous and magnificent diversity. Then come a few asteroid or comet impacts, and some animals and plants die out, making way for others.

Let's press fast forward. The next 497 million years are a bit tedious. Then 3 million years ago, things get interesting because one certain life form starts behaving weirdly. Some kinds of monkeys, which like all monkeys are descended from an insect-eating shrew, begin doing strange things. They walk upright, which means their hands are free. Several kinds of great ape appear. In the same way that there are different sorts of dogs and birds, for at least 2 million years there were several different types of animal belonging to the genus Homo. The Neanderthals developed in Europe and Western Asia. Asia also saw the appearance of Homo

soloensis and the little Homo floresiensis, which found its way into popular culture as the "Hobbit" and only died out around 12,000 years ago.

Technological developments between 3 million and 70,000 years ago, however, are startlingly rare. After the first hand axes, the next few millions of years failed to produce a Hand Axe 2.0. Not the merest sign of a Steve Jobs to be seen. A lot later, around the aforementioned date of 70,000 BC, one of the great apes is catapulted forwards by a new connection in its brain. One of Homo sapiens' evolutionary disabilities – it led to premature births – seems to have promoted its communicative talents. Instead of just collecting stone tools that were lying around, we suddenly see something akin to fully fledged tool workshops. Our organisational and technological abilities explode. We talk, paint, play, plan and trade. We become thinking humans. The so-called cognitive revolution begins. It arrives at a time when there were only very few of us. Around 70,000 years ago, several natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions lead to the number of humans falling to just under ten thousand. Firstly, that means that we came within a hair's breadth of becoming extinct ourselves. And secondly, we are all very closely related. Genetically, the Queen, "El Chapo" and Elvis Presley are all close family to every reader of this book.

Then 12,000 years ago we make perhaps the most fateful step of all: We settle down. We no longer only hunt and gather, we also sow, harvest and dwell. This phase probably saw significant conflict between the traditional, nomadic cultures and the sedentary ones. The sedentary cultures won out because they managed to store larger amounts of food, which meant that they were able to store more energy. This, however, also forced them to keep producing more and more to feed the growing population. It was a point of no return. Once you've settled, there's no way back.

Now things move so quickly it's hard to keep up. Ownership brings counting and writing. Life spent settled in one location gives a sense of a homeland that needs to be defended. We now need strategic planning. And there's a lot to think about, acquire and watch over. Walls, sentries and weapons are needed for security and defence. Chieftains need to be selected that can organise our defence. Food stores are needed for the growing population. Successful provision of food becomes dependent on the weather. Rulers turn up who take away the surpluses produced by the ones doing the farming. Priests come along who believe they can prevent the next drought. The development of metallurgy accelerates the division of labour, creating social strata that in turn need organising. We found cities,

wage wars, build nations and vast empires, aqueducts, cogged wheels, central heating, microwave ovens, public limited companies, smartphones and heart pacemakers.

From the time of the agricultural revolution it's traditional to begin listing the various superpowers. Writers normally begin with the Sumerians and Assyrians, then talk about the fabled Babylon (spicing it up with a few dirty bits about things like sacred prostitution), and describe the repeated waves of migration during which tribes from the steppes of Asia and eastern Central Europe push southwards, driving other tribes before them. They then move on to the Persians, the Egyptians, switch across to China and then the Indus River until finally getting to the Greeks and the Romans. All in all, it's quite a ride. But all that really happens is that in one corner of our planet one tribe of nomads conquers the other, and one civilisation the next. Rather than focussing on all that conflict, it's more interesting to reflect on the staggering speed in which completely isolated cultures finally become a networked world. In 13th century Mesopotamia, a ruler could justifiably call himself "King of the Four Corners of the World". He didn't know that there was a king of China, too. And neither had an inkling as to the existence of the Mayas. They might as well have lived on different planets.

In the 4th century BC Alexander the Great founded cities throughout the Mediterranean region up to the Indus River. Around the time Jesus was born, many civilisations around the world had made contact with one another. Nero sent expeditions to the source of the Nile, Christ's disciple Thomas preached on the banks of the Indus. Then a wave of Arab conquests rolled across the Mediterranean world and Islam created a multicultural world empire. At the end of the first millennium AD, Christians, Jews, Vikings and the Chinese were all engaged in intercontinental trade.

After the Crusades, the world in the 12th and 13th centuries networks had already sprung up to the extent that the Pope wrote letters to the Mongols in China to ask for help against the Muslims. Translations of ancient Greek texts streamed from Arabia to Western Europe. Universities were by now connected internationally; binding international legal standards and cities of world trade were established. The term "anti-globalisation activist" is one of the most idiotic phrases around. You might as well refer to an "anti-plant growth activist". The process of creating networks we call globalisation has been pushing inexorably forward at an increasingly rapid pace for over 2000 years. Many texts written by the political theorist Carl Schmitt are controversial, and rightly so. But one tiny little book he wrote is incontrovertibly a work of genius. He wrote *Land and Sea* for his daughter Anima during the

Second World War. In it, he tries to explain the world. Schmitt describes human history as the history of spatial overcoming. The most momentous "spatial revolution", as he calls it, was taking to the seas, along the coast at first, and then out into the unknown. He describes how Vikings, whalers and pirates were the first to venture out into the open sea. Using the routes these seafarers scouted out, nation states then conquered the oceans during the 15th and 16th centuries, which were marked by scientific and military advances. It is the age in which America was conquered, world trade established and global empires founded. A quotation attributed to the explorer Sir Walter Raleigh turns out to be true: "For whosoever commands the sea commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world, and consequently the world itself." Schmitt's categories of various spatial revolutions was a clever idea because he was the first to describe the phenomenon of globalisation. England became the dominant maritime power and with the invention of machines also rose to become the world's leading power in terms of machinery. The first powerful steam engine stood in 1770 in England, as did the first weaving machine in 1786. It was in England that a steam locomotive made its first journey in 1804 and by 1825, the first (English) men and women were being transported by rail. By the mid-19th century, Great Britain was a global empire almost untouchable in its superiority. Before he became British prime minister, Disraeli wrote a novel in 1847 called *Tancred, or The New Crusade*. In it, he fantasised about the Queen of England moving the seat of her empire from London to Delhi. British companies like the East India Company were even more powerful than Google is today, commanding their own armies and deciding whether to make war or peace. At the cusp of the 20th century, America is starting to replace its former British colonial masters as the dominant world power.

The invention between 1835 and 1910 of the telegraph, radio and telephone overcomes, to apply Schmitt's ideas, additional spatial borders. The first underwater cables between Europe and America are laid in 1850. Siemens build electric generators in 1866 and in 1903 the Wright brothers perform the first powered flight. Combat aircraft are first produced in 1913, and less than ten years later the aircraft manufacturer Junkers builds passenger planes in large numbers in Dessau. In 1931, Pan Am begins operating the first long-distance routes (from Miami to Buenos Aires). 1969 sees the ultimate collapse of spatial borders with the first transmission of data between two connected computers. And the moon landings. These days you don't have to launch a ship or get on a plane to affect some far

corner of the world, or even to control a satellite in space. All that's required is a mouse click. The whole world has become one. There were times when in each river valley, each tribe had its own cult. People all over the world had different ways of counting, building and burying their dead. Today we have world religions. Strictly speaking, this category also includes secular promises of deliverance like democratic liberalism. When we need to, we all use the same counting system and live in almost identical houses.

There is no part of the world left untouched by this communal, globalised reality. What drove this building of networks? Firstly, it was trade. And conquests. And religion. The moment one tribe started being bothered about whether the neighbouring tribe believed the same things or not added new spice, a new piquancy to history. This begins around the start of the first millennium BC. In Europe, we see the rise of another turbocharger for network-building: science. The early conquering powers such as the Persians or Mongols also greedily imbibed new peoples and tribes. But only to hoard new riches. They also had astronomers and mathematicians. What always set modern European conquerors apart from Asian cultures was the ability to put one thing to use for something else. Science was put in the service of trade and warfare. Trade was put into the service of religion, and the other way around. The Christian mariners of the 16th and 17th centuries were not only pursuing financial and imperialist interests. They were also following scientific and religious ones. Conquests were military campaigns as much as they were expeditions and religious missions. There were almost always scientists and clergy aboard.

When paired with the combined power of science and trade, the Christian desire to spread salvation created the conditions for a perfect storm of global conquest. Arguing about which of these was the key factor would be a waste of time. Was it trade, religion or science? It was crucial that they were interwoven and worked in concert. The dynamic this launched was tremendous, bringing about Europe's expansion to America, the invention of the observatory and the globe, the creation of passably accurate maps of the world, postal services, portable clocks, clocks mounted in church towers, the printing press and gunpowder. Explosive weapons turned war into a machine, and soldiers into human materiel. The printing press also resulted in detonations, namely explosions of ideas. The use of letters that could be placed individually rendered the godly, devotional practice of copying old texts by hand obsolete. The possible combinations of words and sentences were now just as infinite and generally accessible as the theses and antitheses expressed through them.

The age of mass media was dawning, as was the age of capitalism. In the period in which thoughts became free through the invention of the printing press, men named Luther and Calvin devised theories to explain the world that were destined to realign it. They preached that wealth was not automatically shameful, that this whole thing with the camel and the eye of the needle was open to interpretation. They said that wealth could also be seen as a sign of divine favour. A class arose which continually tried to use its financial successes to assuage its fears of ending up in Hell. Protestants invested their wealth in their companies as a way of showing their closeness to God instead of squandering it on themselves. This led to the creation of enormous financial empires. But capitalism also got the party started in Catholic regions and those areas where one was more amenable to having a bit of fun. The production of luxury goods became an important economic factor and was fostered by the rise of new classes of craftspeople, specialists and experts. They slowly supplanted the old elites, who in turn were increasingly left behind and were eventually forced to borrow from the newly-monied social climbers. The class of commercial citizens finally took over power during the French Revolution in 1789. At this point, uprisings by exploited workers were still a long way down the line. That only happened a hundred years later when it emerged that the new ruling class had been slightly too drastic in capitalising on its freedoms.*

* For more details, please see the work of Mr Charles Dickens.

The key driving force behind capitalism – and with it the creation of global networks – was the banking and lending system as it arose in Europe. It was no longer only the land owners – those in possession of large amounts of capital to use as security for loans – who were able to borrow money. Those who owned no land at all, who instead worked harder and had good ideas, could borrow, too. Another factor also supported European capitalism. There had, of course, also been rich people, craftsmen and traders in the Middle and Far East. But it was the Europeans who were forced early on into developing a form of legal certainty. I say forced because in Europe many different groups, ethnicities and nations were all crowded into a relatively small space and had to get along with one another. There was more space for Asian cultures to grow, and they met and clashed less often; power was wielded by the mightiest ruler. Property was never completely protected from being accessed arbitrarily. Europeans, however, were forced to adopt a different tradition; even rulers sometimes had to defer to the authority of the church, and the other way around. Various powers, the most important of which were the secular and religious forces, were in a constant state of struggle

with one another. This made it necessary to adopt a legal system that would become increasingly sophisticated. As far back as the 13th century, European traders enjoyed special legally protected privileges. There were rights of escort, customs and tariff laws and market supervision to ensure the legality and honesty of transactions. This fostered the creation of market towns and trading houses. Today we still prefer to invest in Switzerland than in Iraq, China or Russia because we know that a dictatorship offers protection to neither its people nor to property. Rich Russians, Chinese and Arabs, on the other hand, prefer to deposit their cash somewhere near Lake Geneva or build large houses on London's Bishop Avenue instead of investing it in factories at home.

This European machinery of change has, since its expansion to America, not only turned the world into a global village in the sense that every airport, hotel, supermarket looks almost identical regardless of where it is. We have also grown together. And we have multiplied, proliferated. When Christ was born, there were as few as 300 million humans. At the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution in 1700, there were only around double that number. By 1900 the population of the world had doubled again to 1.6 billion. Between 1970 and 2016, it doubled once more from 3.7 to 7.4 billion. If our medical advances continue at the current pace, things will literally become a close thing. After all, everyone wants food, TVs and air conditioning, and needs energy. Our planet, however, has already become a hybrid between a rubbish tip and a shopping centre. Resources like drinking water have already become scarce in many parts of the world. To quote Karl Jaspers, "This leap of humanity resulting from history can be seen as a calamity [...]. Everything that history produces ends up destroying humanity. History is a process of destruction in the guise of what may seem a grand fireworks display."

But there are rays of light in the darkness. Life expectancy worldwide is higher than ever, we eliminate diseases, child mortality is lower than it's ever been. Judging by, say, the number of calories eaten by each inhabitant of this planet, the world's population is better off today than 2000, 1000 or even 100 years ago. 800 million people live in extreme poverty, meaning that they live on less than $1.25 per day. But that number is half what it was in 1990. In the same time span, the working middle class has tripled in size. The main reason for this is the economic ascendency of China and India. And we're better behaved now than we used to be. 1000 years ago, it was totally normal for one tribe to attack and massacre the other. If 500 years ago genocide was committed somewhere in the world, we never found out

about it. Today, if a dictator commits crimes against humanity the entire evening is filled with reports about it on TV and he's hauled in front of the International Court of Justice in The Hague. In 18th century England it was still possible to end up on the gallows for pickpocketing. If you were travelling around Goethe's Weimar in a postal coach gazing absent-mindedly out of the window, you might see a few corpses dangling about of people who had been hanged. 100 years ago, it was still normal that one country invaded another. Today that results in an international crisis. The numbers of people who are victims of war is lower than ever before. We can sleep peacefully at night without fear of being attacked by the neighbouring village. At least, that's true for our part of the world, an area where people are fleeing to in search of safety. Compared to past eras, the current period sees large portions of the globe living in peace and freedom from violence in a way hitherto unprecedented.

As far as progress goes, there are, broadly speaking, two theories. One is that up to now humans could always rely on their ingenuity, and always react to threatening situations with ingenious innovations. There's no reason to think that this will change for future crises. If things get a bit cramped on Earth, who knows, maybe we'll start a colony on Mars or elsewhere. The other theory is that progress leads directly to self-destruction. Some people refer to the Turkey Theory, so named for the American tradition of eating a huge turkey at Thanksgiving with one's family. The turkey believes it's leading a wonderful life because it is fed every day; it thinks that people are only interested in its wellbeing. Its level of optimism increases with the number of times it's fed. And it feels safest on the day of Thanksgiving...

"I have never been in any accident of any sort worth speaking about. I have seen but one vessel in distress in all my years at sea. I never saw a wreck and have never been wrecked, nor was I ever in any predicament that threatened to end in disaster of any sort."
John Edward Smith, Captain of the "Titanic"