

# A note on changing concepts of history

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## A NOTE ON CHANGING CONCEPTS OF HISTORY

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Change, diversity, fluidity are concepts which have to do with the way people position themselves in space and time. To do so, parts of society tend to develop theories explaining how things came to be. These self-representations can be described as "historical images", and religion, mythology or (political) ideology are important factors in their formation.

When analyzing cultural and social processes we must realize that our own "perspective", our "historical image", which we often do not question because we interpret it as the one and only "unchangeable" reality, strongly influences our perception. It is especially important to be aware of this fact when dealing with "foreign", "other" cultures such as Japan. Instead of seeing these as temporally and spacially highly complex and changing social fluidums, we tend to impose our own images on them. In this way we reduce other cultures to lifeless objects. We then exploit them to reinforce our own "ideological" views which we all too often use to cement our own interests.

The aim of the essays in this publication is to try to question our own perspective and to present Japan as a living, changing, and immensely complex society. In this context the following short reflections concerning "historical images" may be helpful by throwing some light on culture-specific concepts of history. These reflections constitute the basic outline of a lecture series which is to be held in Zurich in 1998.<sup>1</sup>

When examining images, representations, ideology etc. we must pay attention to the clash of differing concepts of history, and of the cultures that produced them, especially when dealing with cultures far removed temporally or spacially from our own. The continuing process of globalization, and the plurality thus engendered, lead to increasing doubt concerning previously unquestioned categories of thought. For example, how does a world view based on natural sciences relate to the persistant

1 This lecture series is to be organized by Evelyn Schulz and Wolfgang Sonne (ETH, Institut für Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur) as an interdisciplinary project of the University of Zurich and the ETHZ (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich). A number of international experts will be invited to lecture on questions concerning historical concepts.

influence of religion? How does the idea of the progress of human rights relate to the notion of changing values in art and literature? How do the ruptures and changes in the perception and evaluation of art relate to the understanding of Western democracy, which is supposedly founded on unalterable values?

Encounters between Western societies, characterized by a belief in evolution and progress, and other cultural systems are known to be fraught with numerous problems. How did Japan for example deal with the idea of modernization, and how do traditional values and contemporary modern ideas coexist there today? How do views based on Marxist historical evolution in China mesh with Confucian philosophy? How does Islamic fundamentalism define the relationship between the judicial system, regarded as immutable, and the challenges of economic development? And finally, which role in Western thought is attributed to societies characterized by a different perception of history?

Our actions and values are often based on our view of the course of history. We either see history as a state of permanence, or as a string of small changes which add up to one all-encompassing development. In the post-modernist political discussion led by scholars such as Francis Fukuyama<sup>2</sup> the idea of global historical evolution was replaced by the new concept of an ahistorical final state, which, however, is hard to establish even in a society with a pluralistic democracy. In economics we find two juxtaposed concepts, one being the constant expansion of capitalism following stable principles, the other being an alternating reign of various economic systems. Religions at the same time have kept their strong influence even in the highly developed nations and have conquered new domains, even though they were expected to become superfluous in the course of time. In art and architecture the theory of "anything goes", as Paul Feyerabend expressed it<sup>3</sup>, is opposed to the still existing avantgarde dogma of contemporary society, which considers certain topics and tendencies to have become historically obsolete.

2 See Francis FUKUYAMA. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York, 1992.

3 "Anything goes" is a famous citation from Paul FEYERABEND's *Against Method. Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge* (1970). German translation: *Wider den Methodenzwang. Skizze einer anarchistischen Erkenntnistheorie* (Frankfurt/M., 1976).

According to Samuel Huntington, opposing cultural systems have taken the place of conflicting ideologies as the instigators of historical development.<sup>4</sup> Yet nobody knows how the fatal tendencies both of cultural imperialism as well as of cultural relativism might be controlled.

As noted, arguments of a historical nature are used to justify numerous decisions taken in many areas of human culture. In most cases these images have extensive implications and are rarely questioned as such. When planning the above-mentioned lecture series, six different hypothetical concepts of history were distinguished:

1) The concept that history is made up of events which cannot be placed in any kind of real order. Events in the world are only perceived in the sense of chaos, that is, as basically not following any pattern of cause and effect. This may have been the prehistorical perception of the world, or the image of history in times of hardship such as during a civil war. Perhaps this concept also derives from minds spoiled by the stable conditions of prosperous society?

2) The concept that history is rooted in invariable worldwide principles, such as expressed, for instance, by myths. This concept can be detected in ancient cultures such as Egypt or China. In the 19th century, the critical view of history as expressed by Nietzsche was based on a similar concept.

3) The concept of history as cyclic repetition. Such a concept is, for example, proposed by the Aristotelic view of types of government, it is expressed by the medieval metaphor of the wheel of fortune, and it was further developed by Giambattista Vico<sup>5</sup>. Also, it forms the basis for numerous non-European views of the universe.

4) The concept of history as a linear, continuous development with a beginning and an end. The Jewish-Christian and Islamic teachings follow this concept, as does German idealism, represented by Herder, Schelling and Hegel. Through Marx it became part of the modern discourse on history.

4 See HUNTINGTON, Samuel P. (1993): "The clash of civilizations?" In: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3, pp. 22-49 and his recent publication *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York, 1996.

5 See VICO's *Scienza nuova* (New Science), published in three versions, 1726, 1730 and 1744.

5) History seen from a dualistic point of view in which the present condition is compared to a past condition, interpreted as the “other”. This concept is typical of the Renaissance, when an idealized form of ancient Roman and Greek history was contrasted with the gothic Middle Ages. In our century avantgarde tendencies adopted this concept by selectively choosing events from the past and recombining them with the new influence of individualism. By denying any connection to the past, this past was instrumentalized as a necessary component of modernity.

6) The concept of history influenced by developments which significantly interrupt the flow of events at regular intervals. These fractures follow no apparent logic. This concept is represented by contemporary methods of historical analysis, and in the field of the philosophy of science it forms the basis of Thomas Kuhn’s theory of the changing paradigms<sup>6</sup>.

These six historical concepts as a rule coexist and are superimposed over and over again. One could say that different concepts may be applied to various areas of human culture: there are different concepts of time and progress for example in art and in science, in politics and in economics. We must not forget such considerations when we try to analyze processes in a non-European culture such as Japan. In which context can our observations be placed if we wish to avoid hastily assuming conditions of chaos, or producing a static, “exotic” image of Japan?<sup>7</sup>

6 See Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962).

7 For further reading in German we recommend two recent publications: Klaus E. MÜLLER and Jörn RÜSEN (Ed.). *Historische Sinnbildung. Problemstellungen, Zeitkonzepte, Wahrnehmungshorizonte, Darstellungsstrategien*. Reinbek, 1997; Wolfgang KÜTTLER, Jörn RÜSEN and Ernst SCHULIN (Ed.). *Geschichtsdiskurs, Bd. 4: Krisenbewußtsein, Katastrophenerfahrungen und Innovationen*. Frankfurt/M., 1997.