

## ✧ Introduction ✧

# The World as Concept and Object of Knowledge

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At the present moment we are experiencing an extremely prolific and intense discourse on globalization, in terms of processes, movements, and frictions. At the same time, we seem to have only a rather vague idea of the place, or rather the site or the scene, where these processes and movements unfold: *the world*. In contrast to the process of globalization, which seems to be just as open-ended as history itself, the world is limited and absolute. But where are the limits and what do they mean? What can we say about them? The paradoxes brought out by globalization are not, at least not only, products of the digital revolution, not even of modernity, but reveal a whole set of possible emergence histories, genealogies, crisscrossing back in time, often very far back. Nevertheless, the histories of globalization are almost by necessity histories of the present, exposing hidden, older, and often forgotten layers of meaning in the utopian or dystopian discourses on our common global future. How, then, by means of what concepts, representations, tools, technologies, and practices, does the world emerge, or rather is the world brought into being as an object of human experience and activity, and, furthermore, how do these concepts, representations, and so forth deal with the paradoxes and challenges of limited space and unlimited time as well as with the multitude of contrasting genealogies?

One of the briefest, but by no means the worst, definitions of the concept of globalization has been proposed by Manfred Steger: in attempting to “compress” his preliminary results “into a single sentence,” he defines globalization as “the expansion and intensification of social relations and consciousness across world-time and world-space.”<sup>1</sup> A closer look at the definition, however, shows how it takes a key element for granted. Preoccupied with the processes and relations that unfold within “world time” and “world space,” Steger never asks the question that in the end seems to be the most striking one: what is

<sup>1</sup>“CONCEPTUALIZING THE WORLD: An Exploration across Disciplines”

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meant by “world-time” or “world-space,” or, even more fundamentally, what is meant by “world”?

“Globalization” stems from the verb “to globalize,” which seems to presuppose an object, something or someone who globalizes and someone or something that is to be globalized. It is implicitly understood that numerous phenomena are being globalized—such as politics, commerce, and culture, just to mention the major spheres—but globalization is more commonly referred to without any object, as a historical process and movement that consists of everything and everyone. According to Reinhart Koselleck, one of the seminal figures within conceptual history, such as it is practiced today, the phrase has become a *Kollektivsingular*, collective singular,<sup>2</sup> that is, a concept that is only found in the singular form but that nonetheless does not refer to a single, unambiguous subject or object. No matter how much we speak of globalization, it remains unclear who or what is globalizing or being globalized. There are many similar words, such as “progress,” “development,” and “history,” that share the trait of referring to an inexorable and linear development, but whose ultimate end is highly unclear—whether it is lasting peace, freedom and democracy, or catastrophe and ruin.

Should we still wish to inquire into what is being globalized, there is certainly no doubt that language itself has been globalized, and even in a quite literal sense, in that ever more compound words are formed by means of “world” or “global”: world citizen, world literature, world heritage, world order, global community, global warming, global health, global justice, and so forth. New such words are constantly being coined, as ever more disciplines, discourses, and epistemological genres seek to explore what is commonly referred to as the “global.” Precisely because “globalization” is a collective singular, it can in theory refer to an infinite number of phenomena and objects—that is, the very phenomena and objects that are identified by the new “global” and “world” concepts.

Our discussion so far suggests that we are on the trail of a paradox of sorts. Even as the discussion of globalization becomes ever more widespread in academia, politics, and the newspapers; even as the concept is being expanded to encompass ever new processes, developments, and trends; even as ever new “global” words and concepts are doing the rounds; even as the discourse of globalization is expanding in all these ways, it becomes ever less clear what is the actual site (in both a spatial and a temporal sense) for all these processes and trends, what is the actual scope, the semantic circumference of all these concepts—in short, what “the world” is.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, as this volume is meant to illustrate, “world” is an important concept, maybe even more important now than ever. Using it, we venture to express or understand something about a totality that historically has been crucial in humankind’s attempts to see itself from the outside. These

attempts—to make ourselves the object of large-scale knowledge and to keep various forms of knowledge together—are becoming increasingly frequent and, indeed, increasingly necessary, as we speak.

This is a book about the world and about its histories of emergence. Paradoxically, it sets out to defend the world, to insist on an importance that may well seem obvious at this point in time, when globalization and discourses on the global seem to be present everywhere. We want to ask where this everywhere *is*, and where it has been, and to point to the necessity of exploring the obvious answer: all over the world. It is such a simple answer, and yet profoundly vague, because it presupposes so many histories and so many different pasts. This haziness is our point of departure. Rather than leaving the world to the present, as this vague and somewhat naïve idea of the sum of all space, we want to study its rich actuality and its potential both for exploration of the past and for understanding the possibilities of the future.

We want to do this in specific ways. There may, as we will suggest in this introduction, be a big history to be told about the emergence, disappearance, and re-emergence of the world, but the world, studied historically, has always been in a state of emergence: the study of its reproductions shows how it has constantly been produced, and the study of the very concept of the world teaches us that it has been and is conceptualized, made conceivable and real, as an object of knowledge. This ongoing process, in different historical manifestations, is our topic, and it is a topic that calls for particular angles and methodologies. We have not wanted to present anthropologies of the world or world views; on the other hand, we do not want to confine us to specific ways of constructing the world, or worlds, or to devote our studies to particular institutions, and our ambition is not to develop systematical analyses of how discourses circulate. In short, the common ground for the studies collected here is not cultural history, history of science, or even history of knowledge, but a broad conceptual history, dealing on the one hand with the history of the concept of the world, and on the other with histories of how the world is conceived as an object of knowledge.

In practice, the distinctions between these historiographical traditions are, of course, difficult to draw. As a whole, though, this book is a work of conceptual history with excursions into a wide range of historical terrains and practices. Its chapters fall into five sections, each revolving around a form of conceptual practice: naming, ordering, timing, mapping, and making. They develop different aspects of the history of concepts and conceptualization. The first deals with the concept of the world in the strong sense, explicitly grounded in conceptual history; the second is concerned with the conceptualization through classifications, systems, and codes; the third and the fourth develop the temporal and spatial dimensions of conceptualization; and the

fifth and final section presents studies of conceptualization of the world that are explicit and expressive acts of production.

We begin our introduction with a brief historiographical outline of the concept of the world and with a discussion of “concept” and “metaphor” as analytical, perhaps competing tools. We then move on to an exemplification of the conceptualization of the world as an object of knowledge—in this case in the form of cartography. In the continuation of the maps’ character of being a view from both within the world and from nowhere, we move on to a discussion of the idea of the world as an object that can be envisaged and eventually seen from the outside. The two last sections of the introduction suggest a story of the decline and re-emergence of the world as a central, productive concept with a critical potential yet to be fully realized.

## The World as Concept—or Metaphor

One of the most sustained attempts to write a history—a social and cultural history, not a purely linguistic or etymological one—about the concept of the “world” was made by the German theologian Hermann Braun in the seventh volume of the lexicon for political language in Germany, *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, in which he contributed a sixty-page entry. Braun opens his history with a few Greek terms, such as *kosmos*, *aion*, and *seculum*, and follows their migrations into Latin, before focusing more intently on the German word *Welt*. However, the writing of conceptual history is something other than conducting etymological studies. Rather than phonetic laws, prefixes, and suffixes, conceptual history pertains to meanings and usage. The precondition for writing the history of “the world” is that we are able to demarcate a field of meaning or area of usage—that is, certain frameworks that help ensure that we are in fact studying the history of the given concept and not merely a disjointed collection of random usages with no inner coherence.

It seems nearly impossible to arrive at a single, unambiguous definition of what we mean by “world.” Astronomers will operate with one definition, philosophers another—as will stockbrokers, politicians, athletes, immigrants, and televangelists. Isn’t it more or less so that “the world” entirely lacks a conceptual core that can be traced throughout history? In many cases we do not even know whether we are talking about time or space: is the world a globe with a 40,000-kilometer circumference, or is it the number of years, centuries, and millennia that this globe has existed and will continue to exist? “The world” or “the way of the world”? Furthermore, it seems tricky enough to clarify what the concept means today, without inquiring into what it meant two thousand years ago and investigating the conceptual changes it has undergone since.

There is no doubt that “the world” as a concept pushes the methods of conceptual history to the extreme, much as “history,” “politics,” and “culture” do—only even further, as Braun points out, since “the world” includes and incorporates all of these other concepts. This does not mean that “the world” differs in essence from these other basic concepts. In his introduction to *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, Koselleck points out that what differentiates a concept from a word is precisely that the concept cannot be made unambiguous.<sup>4</sup> Both words and concepts are at the outset ambiguous when we encounter them in current situations or historical sources. However, the words can be made unambiguous by referring to their given context and by clarifying who, what, where, and when; the same cannot be done with concepts. For concepts, in Koselleck’s sense of the word, collect, aggregate, and integrate a variety of meanings that often stem from widely differing fields, within widely differing terminologies—it is this very variety of meaning that defines them as concepts. In this sense, “the world” encompasses for instance astrophysical meanings (Earth as a planet in the Milky Way, the third such planet from the Sun, the only one that seems to have signs of intelligent life, and so forth) and political meanings (the world as a system of states that are connected to one another through trade and diplomacy). For a long time “the world” was primarily a religious concept, one that derived its meanings and usages in contrast to “the afterlife,” “the kingdom of God,” or “heaven.” Traces of these meanings remain in the concept of “the worldly,” which is also referred to as “the temporal,” as a reminder that time itself—transience—was a characteristic of this world.

This brings us to a key element in conceptual history and to a basic premise for this book: concepts are not merely an assembly of contemporary experiences and meanings; past meanings—ones that have become obsolete, been replaced by other concepts, or belong to world views or conceptualizations that we no longer recognize as our own—have also been deposited in concepts and their current usage. Inherent in every concept are several temporal and semantic layers of varying duration.<sup>5</sup> One example would be our current skepticism of notions of “progress” and “development.” Many of the results of what we for a long time referred to as “progress,” such as industrialization, technological innovation, and the exploitation of natural resources, have turned out to be more a two-edged sword in regard to the climate, the global distribution of wealth, and peaceful coexistence. Without being overly pessimistic, it is possible to assume that historical development is neither linear nor teleological, yet many current concepts of the world base themselves on such a notion of straightforward progress. One example might be “world history.” This hardly ever refers to the history of the world per se, but is the history of a shared process that the different parts of the world enter upon at different points in time. As such, it might seem as though the concept of the world is

still imbued with a specific philosophy of history, in the guise of meanings and experiences that originated with Christian eschatology as well as with Enlightenment notions of progress<sup>6</sup>—not overtly and explicitly, but as more or less concealed layers of meaning and time that affect our understanding and use of the concept, even though we are not always aware of this. It is a task of conceptual history to uncover such layers of meaning, so that, as Koselleck puts it, “historical clarification” can lead to “political clarity.”<sup>7</sup>

However, there is also another way of tackling this problem. It was precisely the chaotic diversity of meanings and usages that led Hans Blumenberg, another German philosopher and historian, to contend that there quite simply is no concept of the world—or, to rephrase his statement, that the world cannot be conceptualized. The concept itself exists, of course, but it is without empirical substance and does not correspond to a specific, human experience. “We have no conception of the totality of being [*Totalität des Seins*],” Blumenberg writes, “but we still use ‘the world’ as the subject in sentences, just as we do it with ‘history.’”<sup>8</sup>

If it is not a concept, then what is “the world”? According to Blumenberg, attempts to describe the world, to describe the very totality of all being, can never result in a concept. Rather, what we end up with will take the shape of a *metaphor*. But this should not be perceived as a negative and unsatisfactory state of affairs; on the contrary, it is metaphors that give structure to the world and open it up for cognition. In his essay on metaphorology (that is, an investigation of metaphors in their historical context and development), Blumenberg discusses two metaphors for the world: *terra incognita* and the incomplete world. When these metaphors appear during the seventeenth century, both are symptomatic of a new and different relationship to the world. Instead of the world being closed, familiar, and complete, the great explorations and the Copernican Revolution made the world open, unfamiliar, and incomplete, something humankind itself can explore and ultimately complete through its combined abilities, curiosity, and scientific and technological innovations.<sup>9</sup>

For Blumenberg, metaphors for the world are what he calls “absolute metaphors,” that is, metaphors that cannot be converted to concepts without losing an essential part of their meaning—they are “absolute metaphors for the totality of all being that never is given and that can never be concretized.”<sup>10</sup> Blumenberg seems keen on avoiding the very concept of the world—that is, to speak of the world as though it were a concept—even though he himself doubts that this is possible: “Even though I am inclined to believe that we should in the future entirely avoid creating and using statements regarding ‘the world,’ I doubt whether such an injunction would ever succeed.”<sup>11</sup>

In contrast, in this introduction we will argue that rejecting the concept of the world would entail a significant semantic loss—the loss of an opportunity

to cast a critical eye on the discourse of globalization. Discussions about globalization further precisely the dream of the incomplete, the as yet undiscovered and unexploited, that was launched with the metaphors *terra incognita* and the incomplete world. The question is whether the semantics continues to be in step with the reality it has been assigned to describe and the intentions it has been assigned to fulfill.

## The World as Object of Knowledge

To write the history of the concept of the world, we have to accept that concepts cannot be given a single, unambiguous definition. They are accumulations, aggregates of experiences both past and present, that affect how the concept is used and understood. It is an approach that contains many possibilities, but also certain limitations, at least if we assume that what we are investigating is the world as an object of knowledge—how have people from different eras gone about acquiring knowledge about the world, and to what ends have they used such knowledge? Of course, it is difficult to draw a clear distinction between these two approaches—the world as a concept or a metaphor and the world as an object of knowledge—as they mutually presuppose each other: any knowledge about the world presupposes a concept of the world, and any concept of the world presupposes that the concept refers to something. It is nonetheless possible to say something about the preconditions for representing the world at various points in time, and to show what people have specifically defined as “the world” when this world has been presented to them. An interesting case for discussing the differences and overlaps between conceptualizations and epistemologies are the world maps.<sup>12</sup>

The best preserved of all the world maps prior to the Age of Discovery still hangs where it was created to be hung, in Hereford Cathedral near the English border with Wales.<sup>13</sup> The large, nearly oval map measures 158 x 133 cm and is made of calfskin, probably from a calf that was fattened up with choice fodder for the very purpose of becoming large and developing a particularly soft and exquisite hide. Already from birth this calf was raised to become an image of the world, something it became around the year 1300.

Upon first glance, the map in Hereford Cathedral seems confusing, and the world is hard to recognize for those of us who are accustomed to today’s maps and satellite images. The map displays large landmasses centered around an ocean that is replete with islands and images. The ocean reaches its estuary at the bottom of the map, where there is a tiny opening between the landmasses. On either side of this estuary is a narrow, irregular stripe of ocean that encompasses the entire map; this ocean is full of islands, of which the most conspicuous are an archipelago at the bottom left and a circular island at the very top,

featuring two miniscule people depicted above a shape that resembles a large, sprawling K. Brief texts and depictions of humans, animals, and buildings have been written and drawn everywhere. Examinations have shown that the map was originally in color and with gilt details, though by now the colors have long since faded; the ocean remains blue, however, and a large, red shape is prominent in the upper right. This is the world, as made clear by the Latin designation for this type of map: *mappa mundi*, a map of the world.

As is frequently the case with ancient maps, we must focus on the Hereford map's center in order to understand what sort of world it represents. The center here is a beautiful, ornate crucifix inside a circle—Jerusalem, the center of Christianity. When we realize this, the geography becomes comprehensible. East is up, west is down: the estuary is the Strait of Gibraltar, the outlet of the Mediterranean Sea. The Nile Delta is recognizable, as are also the British Isles, the archipelago at the bottom left. The large, red shape represents the Red Sea, and we can also make out Scandinavia, decorated with a tiny man on skis, no less.

However, much about the map continues to be alien in another and more profound sense than merely the inexact geography. The circular island at the top is the Garden of Eden, with Adam and Eve. The sprawling K is the common source of the four great rivers of the world: the Phison, the Gehon, the Tigris, and the Euphrates. Eden thereby lies in the very east, where the sun rises. It is also this cardinal point that is closest to the divine, as still testified in modern languages: the Far East is traditionally called—though now with negative connotations—the *Orient*, derived from the Latin word for east, *oriens* (lit. “rising”); turning toward the east, toward the sunrise and the divine, was thus an act of *orientating* oneself. Above Eden and beyond the east on the map we see Christ judging the living and the dead. In the bottom left corner of the edge of the map we see an unusual interpretation of a well-known biblical passage, Luke 2:1 (“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed”), with the distinctive element being that the emperor is depicted as sending forth cartographers. The scene thereby becomes an image of the very knowledge the map presents and of the religious import of this knowledge: it is true, factual knowledge about the world, and the map-making is fundamentally the same as the imperial gathering of knowledge that served as the backdrop for the birth of Christ. The Hereford map provides its viewers a glimpse of the divine.

This makes the map comprehensible as a religious, Christian map of the world, one that displays a world that is defined through its metaphysical coherence. This concept of the world is in other words a concept of order. The map simultaneously reflects another part of this prehistory, namely a concept of something spatial. The Hereford map combines these two aspects of the concept of the world: the Christian world order is allowed to form the



space. The parts of the spatial world that are important in the Bible—that is, Israel and the rest of the Middle East from Egypt to Babylon—are according to our more purely geographical objectives greatly blown out of proportion. Their size corresponds to their religious magnitude, thereby also providing ample room for a myriad of miniature scenes from biblical history, such as the Crucifixion, the Tower of Babel, Noah’s Ark, and a long, meandering line that represents the Jews’ forty-year wander in the desert.

However, the world of the Hereford map is more than that. In addition to the biblical illustrations, there are a host of other miniature images, of mermaids, skiers, rhinoceroses, headless men and cannibals; there is the Labyrinth of Crete and the Pillars of Hercules; there are ships, churches, universities, and mythical rulers. The world is a *heterotopia*, a place where several different times and phenomena from different epistemological systems coexist simultaneously—at least for the viewer.<sup>14</sup> The world is—to use modern, anachronistic concepts—anthropology, history, institutions, and politics, in addition to geography and nature. In other words, orientating oneself in this world also entails orientating oneself among the contrasting concepts of the world, which are all discussed in this book. This world resides not least in the tension between the religious, Christian world and that which merely belongs to the material world, which might even be deceptive and dangerous—the *secular*. The world is the coexistence of transcendent order and temporal multitude, thus mirroring St. Augustine’s vision of the eternal City of God immanent in the lives of men.

What the map nevertheless evinces is that the various elements of the world largely have their designated place. Even a heterotopia has its distribution, its system. This system is made apparent not least by the distance from each element to the religion’s focal point, Jerusalem. The further away on the map from this focal point, the more prominent is the world’s secularity. In this manner the entire world is incorporated in a religious world order that has fixed, everlasting places for all creatures and phenomena. At the same time, it is crucial to understand how the Hereford map contains a myriad of differences, of differing understandings of what “the world” as a concept means, even within a map with a label (*mappa mundi*) that clearly indicates that this is the world. In reality, the various concepts of the world exist not only simultaneously, but also within the same physical representations of the world. Also time is multifaceted, but it can be held together through such a representation, on a map in a cathedral in England.

Most people today would consider geography to be a separate discipline, as an impartial way of representing the world, even though there may still be disagreements concerning how to create the most correct world map. The Hereford map is comprehensible from this “purely” geographical basis, as long as we learn to understand the idea behind these unfamiliar proportions.

One element in particular, however, is conspicuous in its absence from the map: America.

The Europeans discovered America, the “New World,” approximately two hundred years after the Hereford map was affixed to the cathedral wall. The discovery resulted of course in an overabundance of new knowledge about the world: about nature, about new dangers and new flora and fauna that could be eaten (or that most certainly should not be eaten), about what could be smoked or drunk, about foreign peoples and possible routes of passage. At the same time, this surfeit of knowledge also led to a crisis of confidence in the idea of the world as a hierarchical order and a religious entity. So much of what had been discovered did *not* have a designated place in the world order, and all this additional knowledge threatened to undermine the entire system, the entire world order.

The world eventually proved fully able to contain all knowledge, and to embrace the spatio-temporal division that followed the European discovery of America—the New World and the Old—but the incorporation, and the subsequent sense of completion of the world as an object of knowledge, was perceived not just as progress. The *Fool’s Cap Map* of the world, made around 1590, chillingly reflects the inherent ambivalence of contemporary cartography: the new abundance of geographical knowledge filled the spaces for time and metaphysics. The globe had never been so flat.

This map presents a state-of-the-art world map with a highly detailed American west coast and a vast *terra australis nondum cognita*, “southern land not yet known.” Not yet—but soon. The most striking feature of the map, though, is the fact that it is the face of a jester. The world face is framed by the bell-tipped cap of the jester, who also holds a distinctive staff. Above the head, the image is strewn with quotes and sayings on vanity, folly, and madness, under the image’s grim heading *Nosce te ipsum*, “Know thyself.” All the other sentences state that there is nothing to know, everything is illusion and oblivion. It is still a world, one world, but its melancholic insistence on its own loss of meaning and coherence seems to prefigure a later loss of the sense of the world itself.

## The World from Outside

The Age of Discovery vastly expanded the world as an object of knowledge. Even though this expansion could bring with it a certain precariousness of the world, as in the *Fool’s Cap Map*, the world remained one and the same. This, however, was about to change. In his *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes*, originally published in French in 1686 and immediately translated into both German and English,<sup>15</sup> Bernard de Fontenelle claimed that not one single world

<sup>15</sup>“CONCEPTUALIZING THE WORLD: An Exploration across Disciplines”

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existed, but many—indeed, an infinite number of worlds. During a series of conversations, a philosopher and a French noblewoman discuss Copernican cosmology. In place of divine order, harmony, and celestial music, Fontenelle presents a purely mechanical universe on the basis of Cartesian physics. The universe consists of numerous whirlwinds, what Fontenelle terms *tourbillons*; in the center of each one is a star, which planets orbit. But also the planets have their own whirlwinds, something that explains why they in turn have moons orbiting themselves. Already in the title Fontenelle completes his radical conceptual innovation when he refers not to “one world,” but to a plurality of worlds. And a world, as quickly becomes evident, is a planet that is populated. It is logically inconceivable, Fontenelle argues, that our planet is the only one that is inhabited. Where other planets exist, there must also be—in line with the tenet of the “infinite plurality of nature,” as Fontenelle phrases it<sup>16</sup>—other worlds, other creatures, and other societies. Fontenelle is by no means the first person to propose the idea that there might be life on other planets; on the contrary, this idea has accompanied cosmological speculation ever since the ancient Greeks. However, Fontenelle is the first to achieve such a dissemination throughout the entirety of the European Enlightenment. By means of his work, the world gains an *exterior*, in both an anthropological and a cosmological sense: both our world and its human inhabitants are dislodged from the center of the universe, and characterized by a liminal existence, on the boundary between ourselves and something else. Hence, to be understood it must be seen in its proper context.

One of the earliest and most coherent expositions of this decentralizing movement, both in an epistemological and an anthropological sense, was put forth by the German theologian, philosopher, and author Johann Gottfried Herder, who opened his magnum opus *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, 1784–91, with the following statement: “Our philosophy for the history of man, if it is to be worthy of such a name, must start from the heavens.” At first glance this idea might seem familiar, but when Herder switches the perspective from the Earth to the heavens, it is not God’s omniscience he has in mind. In the opening chapter, which is headed “Our Earth is a star among stars,” he declares that “our abode, the Earth, is nothing by virtue of itself, but derives its nature and form, its ability to organize and preserve its creatures, from those powers that extend throughout the entire universe.” This means that “we cannot view it by itself in isolation, but only within the choir of worlds of which it is a part.”<sup>17</sup>

The idea that an exposition of human history and development cannot begin with humankind and its world but must start off with something that is greater and that encompasses it, something that makes both the Earth and human beings one of several, one of many, is a radical notion even today—or perhaps more correctly, not least today, when new ventures into “deep

history” and other large-scale works on global history reinforce the anthropocentrism they set out to criticize. A line may be drawn from Fontenelle’s dialogues on the plurality of worlds through Herder’s philosophy of history and onward to Alexander von Humboldt, the German explorer, naturalist, and anthropologist, who traveled around Latin America between 1799 and 1804, exploring, surveying, analyzing, describing. His dream was to describe the entire world, a “physical description of the world,” as he called it. Toward the end of the 1830s he finally found the time to write such a description. After three decades of traveling and studying geology, botany, physics, chemistry, mineralogy, zoology, astronomy, oceanography, ethnology, and demography, Humboldt certainly did not lack source material; the challenge was rather to create a synthesis, to assemble these diverse pieces in a larger unity, which with some verity might be called the world. Humboldt ultimately opted for a different concept as the title of his work, which was published in five volumes between 1845 and 1862, namely the Greek word *Kosmos*, one of the forerunners of the concept of “the world” and which originally meant “ornament” or “jewelry.” But how would Humboldt be able to fashion his chaotic material into a piece of jewelry—what sort of perspective should he assume, what should be his own position? It was impossible to observe the entire world from Berlin—that much was apparent to him. He chose to make the same movement as Fontenelle and Herder before him by using the power of his imagination to, as it were, blast off into the universe:

We begin in the depths of space, among the most remote nebulae, before gradually descending through the layers of stars that belong to our solar system, to the Earth’s sphere, surrounded by air and ocean, its form, temperature, and magnetic tension, and to its abundance of life that unfolds on its surface, stimulated by the light.<sup>18</sup>

Humboldt also explains why he makes this movement of an imaginary descent from the outer confines of the universe and down to Earth. It is thereby no longer “human interests” that forms the basis; on the contrary, the world appears as “part of a whole and is subordinate to this.” Only in this manner is it possible to achieve a perspective that is—and here he almost sounds like Nietzsche—“general,” “grand and free,” and “uninfluenced by motives such as closeness and comfortable sympathy.”<sup>19</sup>

In one respect it is a journey into space that Humboldt undertakes, out into the universe and back again—only this journey is neither a physical and technological reality nor a fictional narrative, but a philosophical leap, a movement of the mind, in order to escape both anthropocentrism and terra-centrism. A mere hundred or so years later, however, the journey did indeed become technological reality. If we take a century’s worth of technological development for granted, there is a more or less straight line from Humboldt

to the Apollo 8 spaceflight in 1968, more precisely the moment, broadcast live on television, when the astronauts saw the Earth emerge above the surface of the Moon, as a tiny, blue orb. The view from the Moon toward “the blue planet” was immortalized by astronaut William Anders; the picture he snapped was a global sensation and has subsequently been hailed as one of the most important photographs of all time. It was suddenly possible to gaze upon the world in its entirety—not as something immense and overwhelming, but as a tiny, almost fragile blue orb, one of the Lord’s marbles, as it were. Perhaps we might say that the world was thereby subject to a perspective that was precisely typified by “closeness” and “comfortable sympathy,” that negates the intellectual distance, the contextualizing gaze, the external perspective that Humboldt wished to achieve. On the other hand, the picture gave rise to a sense of the Earth’s vulnerability, which precisely cast doubt on “human interests” as the basis for making the world an object of knowledge.

Today we can repeat this movement—the one that Humboldt enacted through the power of imagination and the written word, and that Apollo 8 carried out with rocket science on a live broadcast—simply by opening Google Earth. Only time will tell in what ways this, too, will change our concepts of the world.

## The World that Disappeared

While Fontenelle clearly resonated with the zeitgeist of his era with his dialogues about “the plurality of worlds,” Humboldt is already a rare bird, as Braun also notes. The idea that it should be possible to provide a complete “description of the world,” which encompasses cosmology, anthropology, and as good as every conceivable natural science, has had to concede defeat to specialization and the partitioning of scientific knowledge into separate disciplines. Already when the final German translation of Fontenelle was published in 1780, the philosophical and literarily speculative dialogues had become a scientific work in a much more modern sense, with extensive, complex footnotes that were atypical for dialogues, containing for example updated measurements of interplanetary distances and planetary rotation periods, calculated by one of Europe’s most respected astronomers at the time, Johann Elert Bode from the Royal Academy of Sciences in Berlin. The 1780 German edition was also furnished with new illustrations, with diagrammatic illustrations featuring arrows, numbers, and measurements replacing the original’s pictures of amiable marquises strolling among Rococo interiors and almost op art-like representations of a universe full of whirlwinds.<sup>20</sup>

This is of course what is often referred to as scientific progress, but it is precisely this specialization that leads to the disappearance of the world. For

Fontenelle, Herder, and Humboldt, cosmology and anthropology are closely intertwined, to the extent that a statement about the world is also a statement about humankind. It is perhaps only when this close connection between cosmology and anthropology disappears that we realize how important it has been. In this sense, everything that is currently said and written about climate change, emissions, and overconsumption of resources seems to suffer from the lack of a concept of the world that can emphasize and preserve the connection between cosmology (as represented by ecology) and anthropology, or if you will, between the human world and the physical world.

Further developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries might perhaps be described as the world disappearing into time, into progress, and—in a certain sense—into history, and thereby to a certain extent becoming removed from the heterogeneous and pluralistic space where Fontenelle allocated it. This conceptual transformation can for instance be illustrated by all the new concepts that emerge—such as “global transportation,” “global market,” “global audience,” “world trade,” and “world literature”—that testify to an entirely different world view and to entirely new global conditions than were to be found in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. More than anything else, it is striking how much these are *our* concepts, concepts we still use and understand, unlike many of the key concepts from the seventeenth century, such as “world apple” or “world architect.” This is in fact one of Koselleck’s most important and controversial points: it is precisely during this period between 1750 and 1850, which he refers to as *die Sattelzeit* (roughly “the saddle era”), that our concepts take shape.<sup>21</sup> But the new concepts differentiate themselves from the older ones in that they do not describe more or less static spaces—they are rather concepts of movement, or more precisely concepts of circulation and communication. In that sense they embody the formation of an entirely new semantic framework associated with the concept of the world: the world is no longer something that is more or less given in the form of a religious or cosmologically defined space, but something that is created through human activity: commerce, travel, and other forms of communication and distribution. To all human activity are attached expectations, aspirations, plans, and ambitions, something that in turn infuses concepts with a forward-looking, prognostic, and in some instances almost utopian meaning. What Koselleck calls the “temporalization” of concepts then takes place, something that entails a break with the past and an advance into something new and superior. If we return to the present, it is easy to see the concept of globalization as the latest addition to this series of concepts—a concept of movement and communication, that points toward a future that is utopian for some and dystopian for others.

But when “the world” becomes synonymous with human activity, communication, circulation, and commerce—a goal that humankind is striving

to achieve—then a certain set of meanings and epistemological strategies inevitably goes missing, namely everything that pertains to the world as a limited and separate space, that pertains to finitude, scarcity, liminality, and dependence. Or to phrase it another way: the world, such as it took shape for Fontenelle, Herder, and Humboldt, or such as it appeared from the Moon on the picture taken by the Apollo 8 astronaut, disappears as a concept, as a semantic resource we can use to understand ourselves and our own situation. The problems that stem from this semantic loss manifest themselves daily in the media and in political and scientific communication. The evidence suggests that the strongly temporalized, forward-looking concept of globalization, that is, the idea that the world will become one—one market, one state—no longer packs the same punch, or if it does, only in its most dystopian variant, as a catastrophe scenario. It is conceivable that we are in the midst of a new conceptual transformation, not unlike the one that transpired in the Koselleckian *Sattelzeit*. But this time it is temporalization and the belief in progress that are at their journey's end. In order to understand and change our own situation, we need another concept of the world, one that instead of temporal infinity articulates a limited, scarce, and threatened cosmological and anthropological space—a space with an exterior. It is our hope that this book can contribute to the production of new and other concepts.

## The Return of the World

In March 1991 US president George H. W. Bush delivered a speech to Congress following the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait and the end of the Gulf War. In a speech in which the phrase “the world” recurred almost sentence for sentence, Bush declared that the victory of the US-led coalition forces was the beginning of a “new world order.” Endorsing Winston Churchill’s vision from almost fifty years before, he hailed the defeat of Saddam Hussein as a decisive step in creating a world where the UN’s goals could be achieved, a world in which “freedom and respect for human rights find a home among all nations.”<sup>22</sup> In the wake of the September 11 attacks a decade later, however, this vision of a new world order appeared to be completely out of touch with reality. Suddenly the world was partitioned in other ways, with new theaters of war and new frontlines, and with a “world order” that none had envisioned only a few years beforehand.

Environmental movements had at this point used the “blue planet” image for decades. In the 1970s and 1980s, the image of the lonely planet adorned the covers of scores, perhaps hundreds, of books on pollution, the threat of nuclear war, and preservation. It signified the planetary dimension of the dangers that loomed large in the future. The conceptualizations of the world

that have taken place within the various environmental discourses seem to have become more and more explicit, and the historical awareness of their participants both deeper and more ambivalent. Dipesh Chakrabarty's recent work on historiography and the climate crisis reflects this in an open, almost hesitant manner in its attempts to distinguish and bring together a historical, local guilt, the necessity of a Western *mea culpa* with a responsibility for the future that has to be grounded in a reconceptualization of the world.<sup>23</sup>

As these examples suggest, the world's conceptual "disappearance" has been accompanied by an intense use of that very concept in the political and military discourse, a discourse that has moved as swiftly as the discourse of globalization—and at the same time it is as though the concept of the world has increasingly diminished in substance, even while discussions about the world expand and are transformed ever more swiftly. The question that is thereby raised regards what would be the point, or the potential, in using the concept of "the world" and insisting on this concept having a specific meaning?

One important way to approach this question would be by way of the already discussed notion of exteriority—arguing that the world has an exterior, that our world is merely one of many voices in a choir, only one of many worlds and perhaps even ephemeral. Observing the Earth from outside, Humboldt insists on conceiving of "world" as a totality, with an outside, thus anticipating present debates on climate and environment; on the other hand, Humboldt's important and unsettling notion of solidarity is not limited to our own planet or our own race. The concept of the world can be an opportunity to turn the more recent concept of globalization against itself, to give it an exterior—not least because the concept of the world is so ancient and has so many historical layers of meaning.

If there is a manifest critical potential in the capacity of the concept of "world" to formulate ideas of exteriority, is it then also conceivable that there will be a similar potential in insisting that the world, as a totality, also has an interior? The models are there, in the history we have sketched above, in the world map of the Middle Ages, which so manifestly was based on the idea that the world is created through its essence: the world as a religious order. But could it be an order of a different kind? Who remains on the outside, who is not included, and who is assumed to be strong or weak in contexts where "the world" is conveyed or staged? Are there nonetheless patterns and structures in the use of the concept, even though these are not explicit? A fundamental tenet of Marxism is that capitalism strives toward the global, that the owning class will develop toward becoming a global bourgeoisie. Opposition to capitalism therefore requires a notion of the world as a place of resistance, as a foundation for a different political future. It is striking how the discourse of globalization has focused on domination and ownership as the genuinely



global phenomena. A challenge will be to use the concept of the world to articulate ideas about politics and about opposition.

To study how we conceptualize the world, in the past or in the present, can—that is at least the claim of this book—help us express what the world is, as a political, social, and ecological reality in current debates on globalization and a new world order. To articulate and approach the so-called “global challenges,” a recent concept coined within the EU and UN systems, including for example poverty, climate change, warfare, and the supply of food and energy, we require a concept of the world that goes beyond the narrowly political, economic, and even anthropological, opening up toward a broader, more comprehensive, and more complex reality—understanding the world from the outside in.

## Structure of the Book

One of the basic claims of this book is that the history and the historicity of the world is and has always been a basic element of its conceptualization. The act of “naming” the world is therefore rarely—if ever—a point of pure origin, but an event among many as well as an ongoing process, constantly rekindling earlier conceptualizations. As a methodological approach, this is a basic element of the methodology of conceptual history, as demonstrated by Ivo Spira in the opening chapter of the book’s first section, on naming. The other chapters provide specific case studies, each showing how the study of specific historical and social practices of naming can follow different paths. Nora Eggen presents a close reading of how the world is conceptualized in Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī’s *Mishkāt al-anwār* (c. 1100) on the basis of earlier Arabic lexicography, zooming in on one specific aspect of one text. In contrast, but in very different ways, Oddbjørn Leirvik and Falko Schmieder explore how concepts of the world are produced and transformed in discourses on conscience and ecology, investigating the world’s embeddedness in other histories. Erik Tängerstad’s chapter on “the Third World” joins conceptual history with a history of political ideas and shifts the attention toward the strategies of conceptualization, while Claudia Lenz’s interest lies in the didactics of conceptualization. Taking Hannah Arendt as her starting point, Lenz studies conceptualization as action with an international teachers’ workshop as a case. With her chapter, this book is provided with a guide to a small-scale, ethically grounded practice of the world.

The chapters in the following section, on the ordering of the world, deal with what is already a condition for the practice of “naming,” namely that the world has an order, or rather that it can be ordered. The world can be named because there is a something to name, a structured unit, but the questions

over the nature, scope, and stability of such orders are dense and complex and invite the open, multidisciplinary reflections demonstrated in the following. Chenxi Tang's chapter highlights the narrative dimension of world order in Hugo Grotius's *De iure belli ad pacis*, a founding text in the history of international law. Grotius argues that the world envisaged by traditional natural law, where humankind shared the resources of nature without any governing authority, was receding as the concepts of property and the state emerged and rose to dominate. This implied a transformation of the *ius gentium* from "law of all peoples" to "law between states," a transformation that in turn heralded a world order in perpetual change and renewal. This instability of the world may seem to be both order and its possible opposite, a flux, a world where the question of order is open and acute. This section's two final chapters, by Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos and Sanja Perovic, both use Niklas Luhmann as a starting point for discussions of how notions of a world order rub against the idea of globalization. Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos does this in a reflection on the concepts of worlding and *Weltgesellschaft* as means to study how a self-observing world system expands and contracts, Perovic in a historical study of the idea of a global convergence of communication. Whereas our present discourse on globalization tends to presume convergence, Pierre Bayle and later Enlightenment thinkers concerned themselves with how the spread of knowledge could spread divergence rather than convergence—an insight that retains its critical-historical potential.

These three chapters frame a trio of case studies. First, Desmond McNeill takes hold of "capital," analyzing how a concept historically deployed to expand economic thinking and to make economic forces more comprehensible has achieved the opposite: the global expansion of an economistic world view and the abstraction of economy. Malcolm Langford examines the intrinsic ideas of the world in human rights, and argues that these rights can be seen as both myth and politics, the two corresponding with pessimistic and optimistic views of the world. Finally, Lars Kirkhusmo Pharo provides a study of the democratic philosophy and political system of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, universal in its thinking—and established well ahead of corresponding European or colonial democracies.

Just as the ordering of the world seems to be implied in its naming, the next practice, timing, comes across as aspect and expansion of ordering. Any attempt to conceptualize the world as a system of distances, proximities, and communication will also be a reflection on time, which can take almost any number of forms. Progress, backwardness, memory, and longing are but a few of the concepts that have given structure and meaning to the world. In this way, the chapters in this section expand on the preceding discussions of the ordering of the world, the emphasis now to a slightly greater degree on the temporality of space rather than the spatiality of time.

Olivier Remaud's chapter explores one aspect of the relationship between space and time through the study of exile and nostalgia: exile is governed by the feeling of nostalgia, and the exiled individual remains enclosed in his former values and remains at a certain cosmopolitan distance from his present surroundings. A particular, if ephemeral experience of belonging to the world is thus stretched out in time, between the no longer and the not yet. The topic of heritage, and world heritage in particular, could be regarded as the opposite movement, where the past becomes present and the individual, physical place is transformed into what is in principle a global space. Stefan Willer opens—and ends—his chapter with a discussion of the terms “world” and “heritage,” highlighting the tensions between the two in the heritage discourse that frames his case study of the “Frontiers of the Roman Empire.” In his reading of two Danish-Norwegian texts on the Lisbon earthquake in 1755, Kyrre Kverndokk finds very different conceptualizations of the time of the world. Inspired by Reinhart Koselleck, Kverndokk sees the two texts articulating complementary spaces of experience, horizons of expectation, and modes of explanation—all relating to the interpretation of the earthquake as a world event. Finally, Tore Rem takes issue with the underlying presumptions about the world that can be found in major studies of world literature. Using the early English-language reception of Ibsen as his case, he argues for a more system-like model of the world and for a replacement of a simple center/periphery model with multi-centered perspective. To Rem, this facilitates a more nuanced analysis of the particular historicities and temporality of the various contexts, and he rounds off with a reflection on Ibsen's strategic exile—returning, so to speak, to Remaud's opening motif, now devoid of all nostalgia.

Mapping may seem a very particular kind of practice, compared to the apparently more general “naming,” “ordering,” and “timing,” even when understood as literally as in the chapters in this section. The fact that all its chapters to a large degree focus on premodern European history suggests this even further, but their discussions of what mapping means and entails and of how mapping is an act of conceptualization make them expansions of the preceding topics as much as examples.

Alfred Hiatt examines medieval perceptions of the globe and takes issue with the Heideggerian idea that the ability to see the world from outside is distinctly modern. Taking as a premise that there is no one medieval world view, Hiatt explores how the globe gave a distinct and familiar shape to a range of discussions about the nature of world. The literal study of the medieval globe thus becomes an archway to understanding how the world as a whole—a globe—could be object already to its premodern subjects, its medieval inhabitants. In sharp contrast to Hiatt, Jeppe Strandsbjerg dismisses the idea of a medieval global space, arguing instead that this space needs to be seen as both political and constructed. He then presents a Latour-inspired historical

overview of how this “assemblage” of global space is carried out through the treaties of Tordesillas and Saragossa, enabling rather than awaiting European expansion and governance.

Between these two chapters, Erling Sandmo and Karl G. Johansson present mapping as a field of converging knowledges. In Sandmo’s chapter the shift from the medieval *mappaemundi* tradition to the Ptolemaic renaissance raises the question of what happens to the temporal aspect of the maps once the projection of “pure” space seems to become the main task of mapping. Using Olaus Magnus’s *Carta marina* as his case study, Sandmo discusses how the far North is depicted as a region where different temporalities converge and reveal themselves as world histories. Johansson shares the interest in how the periphery is seen as full of magic and dangers, but his case is older—and concerned with greater distance: the accounts of *Vínland* in Icelandic sagas. He reads this material in light of existing traditions of knowledge and against what could be understood as both religious and geographical horizons of expectation and shows how discovery was a long-drawn negotiation between old knowledge and new experience.

The last chapter, by Richard Yeo, discusses early modern mappings of the totality of knowledge, conceived by Francis Bacon as “the intellectual globe.” As the ideal of universal learning gives way to that of specialist, disciplinary knowledge, knowledge is transformed into a world to be mapped to the benefit of all. Today, we may be losing sight of this world as the single individual is once again alone in the archive.

The final section of the book is about making the world, in the sense of unification, completion, or the opposite movement, dispersion. Kari van Dijk’s chapter reflects on the relationship between the almost ahistorical conceptualization of the world as a sphere on the one hand and the historicity of the idea of the world as a whole on the other. Departing from Peter Sloterdijk’s work on spheres and globes, van Dijk argues for a concept of the world as a whole never shared by all, despite the fundamental human desire to conceptualize it as a unit.

To Helge Jordheim, the globe takes the apparently immediate form of the *Erdball*, the physical object of the “earth ball.” A study of the reception and the translation history of Fontenelle’s *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (Conversations on the plurality of worlds) (1686), this chapter investigates how the plural form decentered the world and stripped it of religious meanings and contexts by making it relative to other planets and their inhabitants. The translations and following revisions of the work sparked a series of debates, political, scientific, and philosophical.

The book ends with two chapters about the poles, conceived as the furthest ends of the world. Siv Berg explores how polar expeditions were prefigured in nineteenth-century fiction—and later staged themselves with appeal to the

romantic imagination and to popular mythology. Espen Ytreberg expands the topic of the staging of polar exploration in his study of the mediation of Roald Amundsen's conquest of the South Pole.

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**Erling Sandmo** is Professor of History at the University of Oslo and head of the Norwegian National Library's center for historical cartography. He has published on several aspects of early modern culture, in particular violence, music, and knowledge. His latest books are *Tid for historie: en bok om historiske spørsmål* [Time for History: A Book on Historical Questions] (Universitetsforlaget, 2015) and *Uhyrlig: Sjømonstre i kart og litteratur 1491–1895* [Monstrous: Sea Monsters in Maps and Literature 1491–1895] (The Norwegian National Library, 2017, English and German translations forthcoming).

## NOTES

1. Manfred B. Steger, *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2009), 15.
2. Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik historischer Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main, 1979), 50. Koselleck's most important essays, originally published between 1970 and 2005, have been collected in three volumes: *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik historischer Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main, 1979), translated by Keith Tribe as *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge, MA, 1985); *Zeitschichten: Studien zur Historik* (Frankfurt am Main, 2000); and *Begriffsgeschichten: Studien zur Semantik und Pragmatik der politischen und sozialen Sprache* (Frankfurt am Main, 2006). Several key essays have been translated by Todd Samuel Presner, Kerstin Behnke, and Jobst Welge as *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (Stanford, CA, 2002).
3. One of those who have actually discussed this is the sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre, for instance in *The Production of Space*, originally published in French (Paris, 1974) and translated into English (Oxford, 1991), and the essay collection *State, Space, World* (Minneapolis, 2009), which contains translations of several essays from the 1970s and 1980s.

4. Reinhart Koselleck, "Einleitung," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck (Stuttgart, 1972), xxii.
5. See, for example, Reinhart Koselleck, "Zeitschichten," in Koselleck, *Zeitschichten*, 19–26.
6. This connection between Christian eschatology and modern progressivism is the topic of Karl Löwith's classic *Meaning in History: The Theological Implication of Philosophy of History* (Chicago, [1949] 1957).
7. Koselleck, "Einleitung," xix.
8. Hans Blumenberg, "Beobachtungen an Metaphern," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 15 (1971): 169.
9. Hans Blumenberg, "Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 6 (1960): 59–68.
10. *Ibid.*, 65.
11. Hans Blumenberg, *Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main, 2007), 38.
12. For an exposition of the history of European maps of the world until the discovery of America, see Evelyn Edson, *The World Map, 1300–1492: The Persistence of Tradition and Transformation* (Baltimore, MD, 2007). For studies of early modern cartography, see for example Jürg Glauser and Christian Kiening, eds, *Text, Bild, Karte: Kartographien der Vormoderne* (Freiburg, 2007); Alfred Hiatt, *Terra Incognita: Mapping the Antipodes before 1600* (London, 2008); and Ute Schneider, *Macht der Karten* (Darmstadt, 2004).
13. The most comprehensive study of the Hereford map is Scott D. Westrem, *The Hereford Map: A Transcription and Translation of the Legends with Commentary* (Turnhout, 2001). See also P. D. A. Harvei, *The Hereford World Map: Medieval World Maps and Their Context* (London, 2006).
14. The classic discussion of the concept "heterotopia" is Michel Foucault's "Different Spaces," originally published in 1967. See Michel Foucault, "Different Spaces," in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, vol. 2, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1998), 175–85.
15. Bernard de Fontenelle, *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (Paris, 1686). For other editions and translations see the chapter by Jordheim in this volume.
16. *Ibid.*, 62.
17. Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (Frankfurt am Main, 1989), 21.
18. Alexander von Humboldt, *Kosmos*, ed. Hanno Beck (Stuttgart, 1978), 48.
19. *Ibid.*, 52.
20. Bernard de Fontenelle, *Dialogen über die Mehrheit der Welten: Mit Anmerkungen und Kupfertafeln von Johann Elert Bode, Astronom der königl. Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* (Berlin, 1780).
21. Koselleck, "Einleitung," xv.
22. George Bush, *Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Cessation of the Persian Gulf Conflict*, 16 March 1991. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=19364>, accessed 24 August 2018.

23. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 197–222.

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