

## ARNOLD TOYNBEE AND THE PROBLEMS OF TODAY

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It is one of the greatest possible privileges for a speaker to give a surprise address under nothing but a formal title. In this lecture, gratefully overwhelmed by an award that is much too big for someone who is anything but a “typical” global historian and who represents no particular tendency or school, I am going to take Arnold Toynbee as my guide.

The same role might have been played by several others on the list of illustrious recipients of the Toynbee Prize: by Sir Christopher Bayly in whose memory I had the sad privilege to speak in Cambridge last June; by Dipesh Chakrabarty whose turn to issues of climate change will become even more urgent and important in the future; by Ralf Dahrendorf whose books have had an enormous impact on me since my first encounter with them in 1968 and whose lectures I followed at the London School of Economics in 1977; or by Raymond Aron who was one of the most astute observers of the twentieth century. Aron, perhaps even more so than the other scholars and intellectuals mentioned, was a truly universal mind — in the universe of universalisms the very opposite of Toynbee, though there were certain proximities in their respective comments on the age they lived in.

I will be playing, if you will forgive this conceit, Dante to Toynbee’s Virgil leading the way. Rather than confront you head-on with my own ideas about what global history is or ought to be, I will let my thoughts pass through the prism of the work of a master, a master remote and strange enough not to keep me in intellectual bondage. In other words: not *my* master.

My chosen title is “Arnold Toynbee and the Problems of Today.” It echoes one of the greatest, though nowadays almost entirely unknown, essays ever written in German by an economist and sociologist. In 1926, Joseph Alois Schumpeter published a long article entitled “Gustav von Schmoller und die Probleme von heute,” in which he paid tribute to the influential *Nationalökonom* and economic historian. Proceeding from his homage, he then used motives from

<sup>1</sup> This lecture was given in grateful acknowledgement of the Toynbee Prize awarded during the same ceremony by the president of Toynbee Prize Foundation, Professor Dominic Sachsenmaier. The Toynbee Prize was established to recognize social scientists for significant academic and public contributions to humanity. Currently, it is awarded every other year for work that makes a significant contribution to the study of global history. The Toynbee Prize Foundation was established in 1987.

2 Joseph Alois Schumpeter, "Gustav von Schmoller und die Probleme von heute," in id., *Dogmenhistorische und biographische Aufsätze*, ed. Erich Schneider (Tübingen, 1954), 148-99; my own affinity to Schumpeter dates back to work on him at the German Historical Institute London in the 1980s: Jürgen Osterhammel, "Varieties of Social Economics: Joseph A. Schumpeter und Max Weber", in *Max Weber and His Contemporaries*, ed. Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Jürgen Osterhammel (London, 1987), 106-20.

3 The standard biography, stronger on Toynbee's life than on his work, is William H. McNeill, *Arnold J. Toynbee: A Life* (New York / Oxford, 1989). A thorough and comprehensive examination of Toynbee's *œuvre* has never been attempted. A special aspect is covered by an international relations scholar: Kenneth W. Thompson, *Toynbee's Philosophy of World History and Politics* (Baton Rouge/London, 1985). The most insightful discussions are to be found in older literature: Gerhard Masur, "Arnold Toynbees Philosophie der Geschichte," in id., *Geschehen und Geschichte: Aufsätze und Vorträge zur europäischen Geistesgeschichte* (Berlin, 1971), 173-89; Jürgen von Kempster, "Stilisierte Geschichte," in id., *Bruchungen: Kritische Versuche zur Philosophie der Gegenwart* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1964), 7-39. See also the minutes of a debate that brought together a stellar cast of luminaries: *L'histoire et ses interprétations: entretiens autour de Arnold Toynbee; 10-19 juillet 1958*, ed. Raymond Aron (Paris / Den Haag, 1961). Still of some value: *Toynbee and History: Critical Essays and Reviews*, ed. Ashley Montagu (Boston, 1956); Peter Hablützel, *Bürgerliches Krisenbewusstsein und historische Perspektive. Zur Dialektik von »*

Schmoller's work to shed light on a contemporary scene that had changed dramatically since the time of Schmoller, who had died during World War I.<sup>2</sup>

## I. Arnold Toynbee in Context

The Toynbee Foundation is no Toynbee Society. It is not devoted to celebrating the memory of the great man. Most of you probably don't care very much for Toynbee. It may therefore be appropriate to remind us of who Arnold Toynbee was and what he stood for.<sup>3</sup>

In the late 1960s, Toynbee, born in 1889 — like Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, Charlie Chaplin, and Adolf Hitler — was a world-famous public intellectual and widely hailed as the greatest historian alive, especially in the United States. A few British and Dutch critics were decidedly of the opposite opinion and accused Toynbee of sloppy work and megalomania.<sup>4</sup> His main claim to fame was the completion, in 1961, of his twelve-volume *A Study of History*, altogether more than 7,000 pages.<sup>5</sup> However, being incredibly erudite and having the stamina for a multi-volume work that carried a nineteenth-century work ethic over into a more hectic and nervous age is probably not enough for immortality.

Bulk is one of the more vulgar attributes of scholarly production. Outside Germany, where until recently quite a few professorial careers have been capped by massive trilogies (or worse), the reading public has lost patience with shelf-bending monuments. The only weighty work that still enjoys an undiminished and well-deserved reputation is Joseph Needham's *Science and Civilisation in China*, a series of such powerful momentum and potential that it keeps propagating, sustained by the Needham Research Institute at Cambridge, long after the principal author's death in 1995.<sup>6</sup>

» Geschichtsbild und politischer Erfahrung bei Arnold Joseph Toynbee (Ph.D. diss. Zurich, 1980); Manfred Henningsen, *Menschenbild und Geschichte. Untersuchungen zu Arnold Joseph Toynbees "A Study of History"* (Munich, 1967); Raoul A. Bauer, *De historisch-filosofische betekenis van Arnold J. Toynbee's "A Study of History": een onderzoek naar zijn empirisme* (Ph.D. diss., Utrecht, 1982).

4 A notoriously vicious attack was launched in several articles by the Oxford historian Hugh Trevor-Roper (later Lord Dacre), a quintessentially establishment figure. See esp. Hugh Trevor-Roper, "Arnold Toynbee's Millennium," in id., *Men and Events: Historical Essays* (New York, 1957), 299-324. A more sober assessment came, for example, from the Dutch historian Pieter Geyl. The

intricate bibliography of criticism of Toynbee cannot be detailed here.

5 Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 12 vols. (London, 1934-61). An indispensable instrument for working on Toynbee is S. Fiona Morton, *A Bibliography of Arnold J. Toynbee* (Oxford, 1980).

6 Joseph Needham, et al., *Science and Civilisation in China* (Cambridge, 1954-).

It may, incidentally, be taken as a discouragement from such excessive onslaughts on readers' precious energy and time that some of the greatest minds of the past hardly ever finished a proper monograph. Leibniz, Max Weber, Wittgenstein or Isaiah Berlin belong to this distinguished category, and quite a few historiographical masterpieces — not just Theodor Mommsen's history of imperial Rome — have never been committed to paper.

Toynbee's merits as a world historian cannot be seen in isolation from his global celebrity. Yet, the one does not explain the other. Many world historians languished in obscurity, and books of the very first order have failed to reach a wider audience. Conversely, a behemoth work (of a similar size as Toynbee's twelve volumes) like Will and Ariel Durant's *The Story of Civilization*, published between 1935 and 1975, was a great favorite with the public.<sup>7</sup> The Durants were free-lance authors with a liberal and quasi-Enlightenment message. Their well-documented volumes sold much better than Toynbee's, one reason being that the authors possessed an ability that Toynbee also had, though he did not make much use of it in *A Study of History*: the ability to write well and to tell nicely crafted stories. The Durants' ten fat volumes, a kind of history of Europe projected onto a global canvas, have never been considered first-rate historical writing, although their impact on audiences in many countries must have been immense. One looks in vain for them in the historiographical literature.

A third example complicates the picture: the youthful work of another great humanistic scholar and Toynbee's peer in many respects, Ernst Gombrich's *A Little History of the World* (first published in German in 1935, and in the current American edition with Yale University Press comprising 280 pages — four per cent of Toynbee's work in terms of pages, much less in terms of words), remains an unfading classic.<sup>8</sup> Originally written for children, it has in no way damaged Gombrich's reputation as one of the leading art historians of the twentieth century.

What explains Arnold Toynbee's unique status as the only world historian other than Fernand Braudel among the recognized giants of twentieth-century historiography? The contrast to Fernand Braudel is revealing.<sup>9</sup> Braudel (who died in 1985, exactly ten years after Toynbee) shared with Toynbee a dislike of narrative history and the history of political events. They both pursued a certain theoretical ambition.

7 Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, 11 vols. (New York, 1935-75), vols. 7 to 11 co-authored by Ariel Durant.

8 Ernst Gombrich, *Weltgeschichte von der Urzeit bis zur Gegenwart* (Vienna, 1935); later editions as *Weltgeschichte für junge Leser* (most recently: Cologne, 2009); shortly before his death in 2001, Sir Ernst H. Gombrich revised his old manuscript: *A Little History of the World* (New Haven, CT, 2005).

9 An excellent introduction to Fernand Braudel as a world historian is Lutz Raphael, "The Idea and Practice of World Historiography in France: The *Annales* Legacy," in *Writing World History 1800-2000*, ed. Benedikt Stuchtey, Eckhardt Fuchs (Oxford, 2003), 155-71.

Toynbee devised a scheme for understanding world history as such, which he decided to begin with the Sumerian Empire. Braudel was much more cautious. Apart from his semi-popular book *Grammaire des civilisations* (1963),<sup>10</sup> he limited himself to three or four centuries.

Just like Toynbee, who began as a specialist on ancient and modern Greece and who ended his career with a scholarly work on Hannibal and his legacy,<sup>11</sup> Braudel started out as a historian of the Mediterranean. The second edition (1966) of his book on the Mediterranean World in the sixteenth century arguably remains his greatest work.<sup>12</sup> Braudel reached out to the world rather late, only with his trilogy *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme (XV<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, published in its entirety in 1979 when the author was 77.<sup>13</sup> At age 84 he modestly returned to French history with yet another three-volume work.<sup>14</sup> Whereas Toynbee offered a key to almost all history, Braudel's theoretical contribution was much more modest and focused: Firstly, *La Méditerranée* provided a model of how to analyze a large geographical space where several civilizations coexisted and interacted. Models are always easier to apply and to adapt than theorems and even general laws. This explains why a Braudelian perspective was highly influential and could easily be modified for the study of other seascapes and, in general, vast spaces all over the world. Toynbee never had this kind of impact on concrete research. He had followers but few disciples. There seems to have been not a single first-rate monograph in Toynbee's footsteps — compared to K. N. Chaudhuri, Denys Lombard, and many others making creative use of Braudel's suggestions.<sup>15</sup>

Secondly, Braudel was influential with two other simple yet strong models that are basically useful distinctions rather than elaborate theories: first, the differentiation between three layers or orders of time with their specific paces, and secondly, a model of ranges of action and experience upwards from everyday life to the great “wheels” moving the world economy. Thus Braudel, who never forced detail under the yoke of dogmatic schemes (as Toynbee was sometimes tempted to do), was aware of the local-global problem and developed a sense of “glocalization” long before that term existed.

Thirdly, Braudel in his ripe old age struck up a mutually beneficial collaboration with a rising star of sociology: Immanuel Wallerstein, who was Braudel's junior by twenty-eight years. Wallerstein's first (and foundational) volume of *The Modern World-System* appeared in 1974.<sup>16</sup> It had taken on board ideas that Braudel had developed in a

10 Fernand Braudel, *Grammaire des civilisations* (Paris, 1963); translated by Richard Mayne as *A History of Civilizations* (New York, 1993).

11 Arnold J. Toynbee, *Hannibal's Legacy*, 2 vols. (London, 1965).

12 Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1966).

13 Fernand Braudel, *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1979).

14 Fernand Braudel, *L'Identité de la France: Les hommes et les choses*, 2 vols. in 3 parts (Paris, 1986).

15 K. N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilization of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge, 1990); Denys Lombard, *Le carrefour javanais: Essai d'histoire globale*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1990).

16 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1974).

kind of pilot volume to his later trilogy of 1979: *Civilisation matérielle et capitalisme*, published in 1967. Braudel in turn referred to Wallerstein in his trilogy. The dialogue between the two continued until the French master's death and deserves further study.

The comparative point to make is that Toynbee, too, had a theoretical bend of mind, but, despite his insatiable appetite and capacity for reading, failed to team up with the social sciences. Admittedly, that would have been more difficult in the Britain of the 1920s, the time when Toynbee developed the basic ideas of his great enterprise.<sup>17</sup> British sociology was backward compared to the European continent, and even geography (so important for Braudel) was of limited use. Even so, Toynbee's lack of interest in authors from neighboring disciplines (apart from archaeology and religious studies) is astonishing.

I see him as a very good historical sociologist who had the misfortune to fall under the spell of Oswald Spengler, a philosophical mediocrity with high pretensions and a patchy knowledge of history.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, Spengler remains the most frequently cited German writer on history, especially abroad. Nowadays his celebrated pessimism makes him attractive to the gloomy worldview of Trumpism. Until his last recorded interviews, Toynbee expressed his admiration for Spengler's vision of rising and dying civilizations. While criticizing the Munich prophet's biologicistic language and disagreeing with his right-wing political views, Toynbee remained loyal to Spengler's idealistic *Geschichtsphilosophie* that inhabited an intellectual island remote from the exciting sociology, ethnology, and economics all around it. This identification with a particular kind of philosophical speculation about the past (and the future) isolated Toynbee from the social sciences and deprived him of vital intellectual input. It also fed his self-identification as a philosopher, which became stronger over the decades.

The mature Braudel remained a historian with far-reaching interests beyond the confines of his own discipline, powerful as an academic mandarin and one of the heads of the *Annales* school — as a member of the Académie Française firmly entrenched at the pinnacle of French culture, in short: a multiply embedded scholar.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, during the last two or three decades of his life, Arnold Toynbee presented a highly paradoxical picture.

He was widely revered, even hyped, as the world's foremost historian. Yet, few of his colleagues agreed with that assessment. He was

17 McNeill, *Toynbee*, chapter 5.

18 Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*, 2 vols. (Vienna, 1918; Munich, 1922). An English translation was published in 1926. Still good on Spengler: Detlef Felken, *Oswald Spengler: Konservativer Denker zwischen Kaiserreich und Diktatur* (Munich, 1988); see also John Farrenkopf, *Prophet of Decline: Spengler on World History and Politics* (Baton Rouge/London, 2001).

19 Lutz Raphael, *Die Erben von Bloch und Febvre. "Annales"-Geschichtsschreibung und "nouvelle histoire" in Frankreich 1945-1980* (Stuttgart, 1994).

certainly not a historian's historian. At the same time, only a handful of his admirers are likely to have penetrated the dense prose of his principal achievement — volumes one to six of *A Study of History*, published between 1934 and 1939. He was famous for the wrong reasons.

Whereas Braudel was a man of the cultural establishment, Toynbee half endured, half cultivated the role of an outsider, compared, for example, to a quintessential insider like George Macaulay Trevelyan, the best-selling doyen of British historical studies in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> Toynbee was never appointed to a major chair in the British university system (the Stevenson Chair at the LSE of 1948 was more or less a formality) or a leading position at an Oxbridge college. He taught very little and had hardly any influence on academic students. He was never awarded a knighthood, as his contemporary Lewis Namier was, or a life peerage like the cultural historian Kenneth Clark, also a Toynbee Prize winner.

Still, his views were solicited worldwide, and he commented on any topic under the sun. I still treasure a clipping of an interview on the Biafra crisis that he gave to *Der Spiegel*, Germany's leading political magazine, in August 1968. In statements like these, he neither spoke as a world historian nor as a philosopher of history but rather with the undefined authority of a universally competent sage. We young students did not care for him. Our long path toward world history or global history did not begin with studying Toynbee. We read Karl Marx, the philosophers of the Frankfurt School, American civil rights activists, Frantz Fanon, Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, U.S. critics of the war in Vietnam, and the early *dependencia* theorists.<sup>21</sup> That was my generation's earliest exposure to political globality. Here we face Toynbee's last paradox: He was omnipresent in the media, but not many people listened to him anymore.

20 David Cannadine, *G. M. Trevelyan: A Life in History* (London, 1992).

21 The atmosphere of the time is captured very well in Ulrich Raulff, *Wiedersehen mit den Siebzigern: Die wilden Jahre des Lesens* (Stuttgart, 2014).

22 Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*. Abridgement by D.C. Somervell, complete edition in one volume (London, 1960). The two original volumes appeared in 1947 and 1956.

## II. Toynbee's Fragile Success

So what accounts for Toynbee's success? First of all, Mr. Somervell. A two-volume abridgement of *A Study of History*, cleverly done by the English schoolmaster David Churchill Somervell on his own initiative was the true key to Toynbee's worldwide fame.<sup>22</sup> This slimmed-down, though still door-stopping version sold very well, was translated into many languages (whereas there seems to have been not a single complete translation of all twelve volumes), and has remained in print ever since the publication of the first volume in 1946. Still, one of those Toynbeean paradoxes prevails.

Even Somervell's space-and-time-saving digest is a difficult book — “putdownable” for those who believe world history should be enjoyable reading. Earning the eternal gratitude of the serious reader, Somervell — no doubt with the author's consent — preserved the original structure of the work. What he discarded were volumes ten to twelve and four thousand pages of material from the other volumes. A brief glance at the intricate table of contents reveals that this is not a narrative world history from Sumer to Harry Truman's America. The book is arranged systematically in a way requiring careful study and puzzling the unprepared reader. It is hard to imagine what to expect behind chapter headings such as “The Stimulus of Hard Countries” or “The Mechanicalness of Mimesis.”<sup>23</sup> This enigmatic attraction, as we might call it, must have drawn a certain type of adventurous reader right into a book that presents itself as some kind of enchanted garden with mysteries behind every bush.

Why such a complex theoretical work became a bestseller among the less adventurous as well is not difficult to explain. Somervell's resistance to popularization put the abridgement in a relation to the original like that of a bottle of brandy to a cellar full of good white wine. In other words, you get the same value at a fraction of the cost and effort. Whether read or resting untouched on the shelf: the high-proof digest preserves the mystique of the original. This also implies the advice to the Toynbee novice to tackle Somervell with a good conscience. His one thousand pages are indeed the essence of Toynbee's work. From here, it is absolutely no problem to turn to the full version and go deeper into any matter of personal interest. Inversely however, the success achieved by the good history master at Tonbridge School casts a shadow on Toynbee's own skills as a writer of history and theory. Imagine anyone condensing Edward Gibbon or Marc Bloch, Chris Bayly or Natalie Zemon Davis! So much for the size and oversize of books and, by the way, for the supreme artistry that makes Gibbon's more than three thousand pages a perennial pleasure to read.

My second argument also has a general core. It raises a question that can (and should) be directed at any kind of history writing, the question of its location in its own time, its place in life (*Sitz im Leben*). Historical research and writing does not only evolve within autonomous academic institutions. It responds to contextual demands and ideally addresses an audience outside academia. Reading Hervé Inglebert's new history of world histories — I am referring to his magnificent book *Le monde, l'histoire: Essai sur les histoires universelles* (2014)<sup>24</sup> — one

23 The best idea of the overall structure of *A Study of History*, with all the chapter headings, can be obtained from the detailed table of contents in Somervell's abridgement (the one-volume edition of 1960).

24 Hervé Inglebert, *Le monde, l'histoire: Essai sur les histoires universelles* (Paris, 2014).

contemplates the problem (not thoroughly discussed by Inglebert himself) of the social and cultural circumstances under which the “globalification” of historical writing (a generic term I suggest for “global turns” in various discourses) is likely to occur.<sup>25</sup>

It would be a naive mistake to think that global history simply reflects globalization in the real world. When, where, and why did waves of historiographical globalification emerge, and how did they ebb away and vanish? Why that first golden age of European world history writing from Voltaire to Hegel? Why the great revival of the 1990s of which we still form a part?

One should not hope for any general rules, but a few observations concerning Toynbee are possible. Toynbee started to work on *A Study of History* in 1921, and he completed the series after his work was interrupted by the Second World War. He was a post-catastrophic writer twice over, responding to the two most devastating disasters in modern world history. The two historical situations differed. After 1918 two sentiments were characteristic for intellectuals in Western Europe. The first was the impression of a general decline of Europe *vis-à-vis* other parts of the world. Oswald Spengler was only the most melodramatic representative of that view, but no one drew the consequence of a rejection of Eurocentrism more radically than Toynbee, and he did it in a remarkably tough-minded mood and without the lamentations of the Spengler camp.

The other attitude was a widespread disillusion with technical progress that, after all, had led to industrial warfare of unprecedented destructiveness. Other writers, Heidegger for example, threw themselves into extended critiques of instrumental reason. Toynbee, by contrast, simply marginalized what Marx had called “the means of production” in his conception of history. His vision of history revolved around growth without progress. Technical, political, and moral progress had ceased to serve as a frame for world history.

Toynbee thus threw overboard the entire progressivist intellectual baggage of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries without losing himself in metaphysical pessimism. In this sense, the 1930s volumes of *A Study of History* were a major analytical statement. Although he emphasized the clash of civilizations, an example of which he had personally witnessed taking place between Greeks and Turks in the eastern Mediterranean, his politics were those of liberal internationalism. He was a League of Nations man until, as William H. McNeill

25 Jürgen Osterhammel, “Globalisierung: Denkfiguren der neuen Welt,” *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* 9 (2015): 5-16.

points out in his splendid biography, the spring of 1936, when Britain and France abandoned Ethiopia to Italian aggression.<sup>26</sup>

After 1945 and especially after 1954, when volumes seven, eight, and nine appeared (eleven was to be an atlas, and ten and twelve somewhat lame conclusions and responses to his critics), Toynbee became a global celebrity less on the strength of new insights than of his Stakhanovite reputation and his ubiquity as a lecturer, broadcaster, and author of innumerable short pieces for which he found time in retirement from 1955 onward. Since there was no upswing of world history after 1945 comparable to the 1920s (a strange phenomenon still to be investigated), Toynbee virtually found himself alone in the field. Who nowadays remembers his few competitors, people like Christopher Dawson?<sup>27</sup> Toynbee was “Mister World History” and everyone turned to him for the broadest possible picture.

His personal mood as well as that in Western Europe and the United States during this period was much more optimistic than after 1918 — despite an even more violent war. “Civilization” with a capital “C” had survived its mightiest challenge and was now set to flourish in a peaceful age. The errors of the Versailles settlement would not be repeated, and the emancipation of the colonies was regarded by the serene world historian as a natural course of events. Toynbee was no hardliner in the Cold War and considered Soviet Russia to be a civilization in its own right. Of course, he was no socialist either. He offered a comprehensive world view suitable for liberals and moderate conservatives in the U.S.-dominated West. The integrative scope of his vision — Big (or biggish) History *avant la lettre* — in a way distracted from the horrors of the recent past and assigned everyone a legitimate place in the great drama of civilizational evolution. This is why he had many admirers in West Germany.<sup>28</sup> For some, Toynbee’s ideas served to counter the only other historiographical grand design pitched at the same level of generality: the Marxist drama of class struggle, modes of production, and imperialist exploitation. Yet, intellectual Marxism had been bled white under Stalin’s tyranny and offered few attractions until the rise of a less arid neo-Marxism in the 1960s.

My second point in explaining the extraordinary resonance he found late in life is that Toynbee said many critical and incisive things about specific topics; he never lost his well-trained ability to interpret international politics. But he mainly enjoyed a kind of Olympian harmony with the dominant mood in the postwar West. His prominence may

26 McNeill, *Toynbee*, 169.

27 On these postwar authors see Paul Costello, *World Historians and Their Goals: Twentieth-Century Answers to Modernism* (DeKalb, 1993).

28 A careful study of Toynbee’s reception in Germany would be worth undertaking.

have exceeded his influence, and not always did his wisdom suffice to give satisfactory answers to the very big questions that his numerous interviewers loved to put to him. He did not always retain the enormous intellectual precision of Raymond Aron, Lord Ralf Dahrendorf or, another Toynbee Prize winner, George F. Kennan. The public had difficulty following his preoccupation with religious universalism and a world state: no doubt a noble vision, but one based on personal spirituality rather than on the scholarly authority of the professional historian who feels uncomfortable when he moves too far away from his sources.

How we judge this almost unique public performance is a matter of debate. The historian as sage and as councilor to the powerful has not disappeared from the scene. Alexander Dugin in Putin's Russia is such a figure, preceded by the slightly less sinister Lev Gumilev.<sup>29</sup> And Henry Kissinger is still active as an oracle. How many world historians appeared in the Obama White House, how many will be summoned to advise President Trump? How many will present their own TV shows? Arnold Toynbee personified the dilemmas of the historian in the media and on the marketplace. On the one hand, the humanities desperately need spokespersons who prove the usefulness and legitimacy of "soft" disciplines to people who have no time to read books. If they fail to reach those people (which seems more than likely), they should speak up critically in the public forums accessible to them. On the other hand, handling the media rather than being handled by them is tricky business. Even Toynbee, the media virtuoso disguised as a quaint English professor, would surely have struggled today.

Let me add a personal observation to these remarks on historians and politics. Germany may lag a little behind the United States in the development of global history studies. Therefore, this observation probably does not fully apply to the U.S. The current generation of our (German) Ph.D. candidates and postdocs is the first that approaches global history without a strong political motivation. Their interest originates from inside a fairly well-established sub-discipline. They have been socialized within research programs, they design their work as "projects" and know where to present their papers and publish their articles. In short, they follow the path-dependency of firmly established research routines and thus are the beneficiaries of specialization and professionalization. They live in the academic cocoon. This enables them to produce work far

29 Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia's New Nationalism* (New Haven, CT, 2016); Mark Bassin, *The Gumilev Mystique: Biopolitics, Eurasianism, and the Construction of Community in Modern Russia* (Ithaca, NY, 2015).

superior to what was possible thirty years ago. For them, Arnold Toynbee is an antediluvian figure.

He became a world historian because he wanted to preserve peace after two world wars. My generation, born sixty or seventy years later than Toynbee, arrived at global history via twisted and highly individual paths. We were not trained as global historians as that specialty did not exist at German universities, and even the history of Asia and Africa was seldom taught in history departments. We had a primarily political motivation, call it an “extrinsic” impetus, which did not emerge from inside academia. What impressed us was the end of empires, the attempt of new nations to establish viable societies, persistent misery in the global South, military dictatorships in Latin America, China’s course of international autonomy and, above all, the Vietnam War that ended in 1975, the year Arnold Toynbee died.

For us, non-Western history was “Third World” history; it was a political project originating at a time when nobody talked about “globalization” yet. This kind of global history predated the internet, the collapse of communist rule in Russia and Eastern Europe, and the economic rise of China. It had nothing to do with an old-style world history of the so-called “great civilizations,” and it was absolutely free from any rise-of-the-West triumphalism. In fact, looking from Europe towards Asia in the 1970s, many developments seemed to suggest the “rise of the East”: Japan’s economic miracle, Vietnam’s military victory, China’s position of independence between the super-powers, the sudden bargaining power and affluence of oil-producing Arabian states, the toppling of a Westernizing client-regime during the Iranian Revolution of 1979. All these were exciting developments we wanted to understand. Those among us who got a chance to do that professionally were happy that at some point someone invented the glamorous label of “global history” and made academic life at the margins of the discipline a little easier for us.

### **III. The Three Professor Toynbees**

Arnold Toynbee reinvented world history less as a feat of compilation than as a serious intellectual enterprise. His massive tomes are useless for checking facts and figures; a great number of canonical topics are left undiscussed. They basically contain an empirically based philosophy of history that has to be judged by the quality of its reasoning alone. For an author, this is a risky strategy to pursue.

In the end, Toynbee's harshest critics have claimed, he combined the worst of two worlds: bad history and bad philosophy.

There were three different Toynbees: (1) the sage of the last twenty years of his life, (2) the constructivist master of world-historical comparison of the 1930s, and (3) the analyst of the contemporary scene that he became through the publication of his first book in 1915 and somehow remained to the last. Toynbee the Director of Studies at the British (later: Royal) Institute of International Affairs — his bread-and-butter job from 1924 to 1956 — prevented Toynbee the historian from getting lost in the endless depths of world history. He always kept an eye on the twentieth century.<sup>30</sup>

The second Toynbee, the author of volumes one to six of *A Study of History* (published in two installments in 1934 and 1939), would have been a worthy recipient of the prize named after him. In those volumes he showed himself to be a social science historian, developing his own brand of historical sociology, uneasily camouflaged as a philosophy of history. As you have well realized by now, my counterfactual dream is that Toynbee might have read Max Weber.<sup>31</sup>

Explicitly or implicitly, Toynbee has raised many questions that continue to be relevant, even if most of his answers do not satisfy us anymore. His deficiencies jump from the page after the briefest immersion in his texts: he had little use for economic history in a technical sense. He wrote before the great upswing of social history. Eschewing the tools of Marxist or Weberian social analysis, he lacked a convincing approach to analyzing “societies” (a word he uses frequently) rather than “civilizations.” He devoted two volumes of *A Study of History* to contacts between civilizations, and it is a caricature to say that he studied cultures as isolated monads the way Spengler did. But this interested him much less than it does today's global historians, and he framed it somewhat narrowly — though innovatively for the 1930s — as “the impact of external forces” and the encounter with “the modern West.”<sup>32</sup> The perhaps defining concept of global history — dynamic connectivity — lay beyond his intellectual horizon, however. The notion of “circulation,” in his time mostly used in medicine and economics, was left unexplored — as it was until about twenty years ago.

Yet how could someone who started his career with a thorough examination of the relations between Greeks and Turks ever neglect encounters?<sup>33</sup> He was a trained expert on classical and modern

30 From 1924 to 1956, Toynbee was on the staff of the Royal Institute of International Affairs. During that time, he authored (or partly co-authored with his wife Veronica) sixteen large volumes of the series *Survey of International Affairs*. Today one would call him a professional International Relations scholar. Arnold J. Toynbee, “Thirty-three Years at Chatham House,” in id., *Experiences* (London, 1969), 60-87.

31 For brief remarks on Toynbee in a Weberian context, see Pietro Rossi, “Universalggeschichte und interkultureller Vergleich,” in *Das Weber-Paradigma: Studien zur Weiterentwicklung von Max Webers Forschungsprogramm*, ed. Gert Albert et al. (Tübingen, 2003): 111-22.

32 Especially in vol. 8 (1954) of *A Study of History*.

33 See Arnold J. Toynbee, *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey: A Study in the Contact of Civilisations* (London, 1922), still an impressive book.

Greece, but his sympathy for the Turkish side cost him his first professorial appointment. Writing his best books in the 1920s and 1930s with a keen sensitivity for the world around him, his experience prevented him from being a naive ideologue of the rising West. Nobody since Gibbon had studied dissolution and breakdown with greater seriousness.

Toynbee did not really care for globality as such:<sup>34</sup> his preferred levels of analysis were intermediate structures, large spaces, civilizational ecumenes, and empires. Many of us, too, feel more comfortable with such units than with the planet as a whole. His geographical coverage was patchy: South America and Sub-Saharan Africa rarely caught his attention. This, too, should be seen as a pardonable sin, and it reflected the state of archaeological and ethno-historical knowledge in the 1930s. Good world history and global history does not bow to the vulgar demand for encyclopedic completeness.

Toynbee was a cultural historian with a sense for much more than just elite culture. Whereas the mainstream of nineteenth-century *Historismus*, that offspring of German idealist philosophy, had excised nature from history, narrowly defined as a story of unfettered human agency and individual choice, Toynbee brought it back in, writing comprehensively on climate and environmental determinants. His most famous concept of “challenge and response” is a simple environmental model.<sup>35</sup> He is incomparably more materialist than Spengler and the *Kulturphilosophen* in Spengler’s footsteps, people such as Alfred Weber, Max Weber’s brother. Thus he remains largely immune to the essentialist fantasies popular in the early twentieth century that attributed “souls” or “physiognomies” to individual cultures or even endowed them with “racial” characteristics — although it has to be said that some of his remarks on “race” betray the spirit of his time.<sup>36</sup>

#### IV. A Few Systematic Questions

In short, while unsuitable as a blueprint for global history, Toynbee’s work addresses questions of lasting importance. Let me briefly discuss a few of them.

Firstly: Krishan Kumar, in a recent thoughtful reassessment, recommends Toynbee, above all, as a much more sophisticated theorist of “civilization” than the crude Samuel Huntington, who made that somewhat stale concept fashionable again.<sup>37</sup> My own response would be that we have moved beyond a simple mapping of humanity,

34 But see Michael Lang, “Globalization and Global History in Toynbee,” *Journal of World History* 22 (2011): 747-83.

35 The model is described at great length in vols. 1 and 2 (1934) of *A Study of History*.

36 Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. 1 (1934), 207-49. But Toynbee was in no way a racist. His conception of history was a kind of anticipated countervision to the kind of “völkisch” historiography that became prominent in Germany at exactly the same time.

37 Krishan Kumar, “The Return of Civilization — and of Arnold Toynbee?” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56 (2014): 815-43; id., “Civilized Values: The Return of Arnold Toynbee?” *Times Literary Supplement*, October 24, 2014, 16-17.

past and present, in terms of a set of “great civilizations.” Toynbee was honest and playful enough to admit that he arrived at different numbers whenever he started counting his civilizations: sometimes twenty-three, sometimes thirteen, or anything in between. He did not really care.

But the general problem has not changed since Toynbee’s day: what are suitable units of global history if we want to avoid the nation-state? I somehow managed to do without “civilizations” in my own book, *The Transformation of the World* (2014).<sup>38</sup> Yet, we often need some kind of macro-unit, perhaps, *faute de mieux*, “civilization.” In that case, two major theorists provide more refined concepts than Toynbee: S. N. Eisenstadt and Jóhann Páll Árnason (whose comments on Toynbee are extremely insightful).<sup>39</sup>

Secondly: the temporal framing. Nowadays one receives e-mails from demanding readers such as: “I enjoyed your book on the nineteenth century. But why didn’t you start with the Big Bang?” Well, Toynbee would have faced this with gentlemanly composure. The time scale was not an *a priori* problem for him, no matter of fundamental belief. The famous conductor Sergiu Celibidache used to say, a little whimsically, that tempo in music was a function of the musical structure. Likewise for Toynbee — and this seems to be a sensible point of view — the problem at hand decides about temporalities. He studied civilizations. Where else should he begin than with the first cities? Unlike Braudel, Toynbee has no original theory of historical time. He did not need one.

A third issue concerns methodology. World history since the time of Spengler, H.G. Wells, and the Toynbee of the interwar period has struggled hard to overcome its fatal image of irresponsible dilettantism — dilettantism being the naive accumulation of knowledge regardless of its origin and validity. The problem is not just one of scholarly critique and correct scientific methods. It has far wider ramifications and concerns world history more than any other kind of history.

The popular book market, history magazines, and various media from television to internet games abound with crude world history, ranging from the trivial to the lunatic. To this day, world history is a favorite verbal and visual idiom for myth-making, panic mongering and conspiracy theories. We should know and confront this fantasy world that many of us only meet through questions from popular

38 Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton/Oxford, 2014).

39 The quintessence of Eisenstadt’s decade-long work on the concept of civilization is in a brief article: S. N. Eisenstadt, “Civilizations,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 3 (Amsterdam, 2001), 1915-21; Jóhann Páll Árnason, *Civilizations in Dispute: Historical Questions and Theoretical Traditions* (Leiden, 2003), esp. 105-19 on Toynbee.

audiences, who believe in evil empires and pharaonic curses and have been told that the Chinese discovered Australia and that Charlemagne never existed.

Until the Herculean labors of William H. McNeill<sup>40</sup> and Fernand Braudel, the respectability of world history remained in doubt. Toynbee himself was attacked from many quarters as a waffling fraud, and it is amazing how readily he conceded ground to his critics. That academic world history managed to pull itself out of this quagmire is due to several factors. One is that it now uses the full range of available primary sources, and that it successfully applies the normal methods of the historical sciences and adheres to their standard methodologies. World history, as Raymond Grew pointed out a long time ago, gained respectability by not being special.<sup>41</sup>

However, this can only be one half of the story. The other half concerns the peculiarities of world and global history. Are there methods and approaches characteristic of and, perhaps, unique to world history, or more precisely, global history? Are there methods created or refined in this particular sub-discipline? Might they even be applicable to other fields? Can non-global historians learn from them? Is there a methodological surplus to be gained by taking a global view?

Toynbee is not completely reticent about methodology, although he never treats it in a systematic fashion: he left that to R. G. Collingwood, his exact English contemporary.<sup>42</sup> Volume one of *A Study of History* begins with a reflection on “the relativity of historical thought,” and later in the book Toynbee digresses on the “comparability of societies.”<sup>43</sup> Both chapters are still well worth reading. They started debates that have never ended.

The “relativity” of historical thought was no original discovery. The German Enlightenment author Johann Martin Chladenius had already developed his theory of *Sehepunkte*, and nineteenth-century hermeneutics was keenly aware of the epistemological problem of perspectivity. Toynbee discusses it within a decidedly post-World War I context. His powerful critique of national conceptions of history establishes a close connection between national visions of history and the kind of nationalist and self-centered politics that led to the catastrophe of 1914. Acknowledging the relativity of points of view is a methodological and, at the same time, moral, pedagogical, and political corrective against ethnocentrism. Before the war, Toynbee memorably says in 1934, nation states and other “communities”

40 Ever since the influential William H. McNeill, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (Chicago / London, 1963).

41 Raymond Grew, Review of Paul Costello, “World Historians and their Goals”, *History & Theory* 34 (1995): 371-94, at 385 (discussing the importance of William H. McNeill).

42 R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, revised edition, ed. Jan van der Dussen (Oxford, 1993).

43 Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. 1 (1934), 1-16, 147-81.

had “an aspiration to be universes in themselves.”<sup>44</sup> Nowadays they must learn to see themselves as “parts of some larger universe.”<sup>45</sup> The world historian should help both national historians and the reading public to overcome their dangerous narrow-mindedness.

Toynbee’s politics, more hinted at than made explicit in the early volumes of *A Study of History*, is similar to that of Marc Bloch in his famous lecture “Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes,” which he delivered at the International Congress of Historical Studies at Oslo in 1928.<sup>46</sup> Bloch combined his methodological case for comparison with the hope that talking about variants of a common European experience would transform the “dialogue among the deaf” (as he put it) into a genuine exchange across borders. He himself later compared European and Japanese feudalism as an example of relating independent occurrences of similar phenomena to one another. Bloch and Toynbee shared an interest in comparison at several levels, and it might be fruitful to read their programmatic texts of 1928 and 1934, respectively, in parallel. Comparison is best understood looking at the practice of comparative historians. Those who expect Toynbee to compare systematically between his various “civilizations” will be surprised to discover that he does nothing of the kind. One does not find anything in his work resembling the carefully laid-out comparison between ancient Greece and China of which Geoffrey Lloyd at Cambridge is such a great master.<sup>47</sup> I would describe Toynbee’s procedure (one hesitates to call it a “method”) as a kind of fast-moving change of contexts in the service of generalization. Amazingly, it reminded me faintly of my own practice — in *The Transformation of the World*, though not in other books — of micro-comparison across varying distances. Since I had not read Toynbee for decades, some mysterious subliminal force must have been at work.

Today, the vigorous debates between comparatists and champions of transfer analysis are over. In the late 1990s, the transfer faction seemed to have carried the day.<sup>48</sup> The consensus now apparently is, to quote Sebastian Conrad, that “comparative history in recent years has taken a global turn as well, and indeed there are no inherent contradictions between the two approaches.”<sup>49</sup> In historiographical practice, however, the problem of balance reasserts itself. As soon as attempts are made to integrate world history (understood as a comparative history of discontinuous phenomena on a planetary scale) with global history (as a history of connections), fine-tuning is necessary between static and dynamic factors. Comparative thinking

44 Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. 1 (1934), 15.

45 Ibid.

46 Marc Bloch, “Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes,” in id., *Histoire et historiens*, ed. Étienne Bloch (Paris, 1995), 94-123

47 A recent addition to a long series of outstanding volumes: G.E.R. Lloyd, *Analogical Investigations: Historical and Cross-cultural Perspectives on Human Reasoning* (Cambridge, 2015).

48 These debates seem to have been something of a German speciality. Their high point is marked by two collections of articles: *Vergleich und Transfer: Komparatistik in den Sozial-, Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften*, ed. Hartmut Kaelble, Jürgen Schriewer (Frankfurt am Main/New York, 2003); and *Comparative and Transnational History: Central European Approaches and New Perspectives*, ed. Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, Jürgen Kocka (New York/Oxford, 2009).

49 Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton/Oxford, 2016), 39.

prefers observable structures of a certain stability; relational thinking favors flux and dissolution, metamorphosis and hybridity. To bring the two together is possible but difficult.

Since this particular problem is more pronounced in global history than in other fields of historical (and in general: social scientific) inquiry, it may be one of those specificities mentioned before. Even more than in the past, the methodology of global history should focus on a theory of dynamics and motion, of speed, acceleration and retardation, of unilinear and reversible processes, of flows, counter-flows, and the non-flowing. This moves far beyond Toynbee and requires the kind of cooperation with the social sciences that he himself neglected.

I am not a theorist and I am happy to leave to those better qualified than me the challenges of historical theory. A few final remarks may suffice.

Toynbee was pilloried by his contemporary critics for having invented his own terminology: “challenge and response, withdrawal and return, blows, pressures, standardization, disintegration, cataclysm,” and so on. In the eyes of a good historicist (in the sense of *Historist*) this was a sin against the spirit. His critics believed that a historian’s language had to keep as close as possible to the sources, more precisely: the historian was a mediator between the language of the sources and the language of the educated reading public in her or his time. It is difficult to imagine the shock caused by the bombshell of Toynbee’s initial volumes. In the late 1890s, the much more restrained Karl Lamprecht had been ostracized in Leipzig for similar reasons. To be sure, both innovators had produced readable prose; their terminology should not be confused with jargon. From our present perspective, the riddle is easily solved: Toynbee offered social science history, and the modern social sciences from Adam Smith via Comte, Marx, and Spencer to Toynbee’s contemporaries (whom he ignored) based their very existence on terminological innovation. Toynbee’s analytical language was idiosyncratic, and few of his key concepts have caught on. Even so, he made a laudable effort absolutely worth discussing. That such a discussion did not take place is a major missed opportunity in twentieth-century historiography.

Historical studies, beyond *Historismus*, are dependent on terminologies borrowed from economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, cultural geography, political science, law, and, recently, also from the natural sciences. They then have to adapt those concepts to their

own specific needs. Global history, for example, profits from a critical and selective appropriation of the language of globalization studies.

The very concept of the “network” comes along with heavy theoretical baggage and shouldn’t be used in a merely metaphorical way. From time to time, imaginative historians themselves are successful as terminological innovators and introduce such seminal concepts as “the frontier,” “the invention of tradition,” the “gunpowder empire,” the “Columbian exchange” or “the industrious revolution.” Toynbee would have felt comfortable in their company.<sup>50</sup>

## V. Conclusion

The Toynbee of the 1930s (whom I earlier called “the constructivist master of world-historical comparison”) is closer to us than the Toynbee of the 1950s and after — “the sage.” He surely does not rank among the greatest classics to whom one returns time and again. He is no Tacitus, Gibbon, or Marc Bloch. Some of his books deserve a few more readers, though not his problematic last work, *Mankind and Mother Earth*.<sup>51</sup> My personal favorites, next to the early volumes of *A Study of History*, are an account of a journey to East Asia in 1929/1930 and a collection of essays on current affairs: *Civilization on Trial*, published in 1948.<sup>52</sup> One of his late books containing dialogues with Japanese interlocutors bears a title that is of obvious urgency in January 2017: *Surviving the Future*.<sup>53</sup>

Toynbee lived through two world wars. He took part in the Paris Peace Conference and chronicled the emergence of the second big war at close quarters from his office at Chatham House in London. He alerts us to the burning issues of war, peace, and the military, which do not feature prominently enough in current global history. It certainly was in a Toynbeean spirit that William H. McNeill wrote his book *The Pursuit of Power*.<sup>54</sup> Looking at the contemporary scene, Toynbee would be puzzled by the marginalization of organized violence in today’s global history studies. Likewise he would be surprised that global history and international history have parted ways. To some readers, a long chapter on international orders and war in my book *Transformation of the World* seemed like a redundant relic of an out-of-date type of historiography.<sup>55</sup> It is nothing of the kind. The most pressing problems of global significance — above all, climate change and nuclear armament — cannot be solved by the benign workings of global governance alone. They still require the old instruments of inter-state diplomacy. Toynbee knew all about it. So did Raymond

50 See my own remarks on the terminology of global history: Jürgen Osterhammel, “Global History and Historical Sociology,” in *The Prospects of Global History*, ed. James Belich et al. (Oxford, 2016), 23-43.

51 Arnold J. Toynbee, *Mankind and Mother Earth: A Narrative History of the World* (New York, 1976).

52 Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Journey to China: Or, Things Which Are Seen* (London, 1931); id., *Civilization on Trial* (London, 1948).

53 Arnold J. Toynbee, *Surviving the Future* (London, 1971). The book contains Toynbee’s dialogues with Kei Wakaizumi. A kind of companion volume, published soon after Toynbee’s death, is Arnold J. Toynbee and Ikeda Daisaku, *The Toynbee-Ikeda Dialogue: Man Himself Must Choose* (Tokyo, 1976).

54 William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000* (Oxford, 1982).

55 Osterhammel, *Transformation of the World*, 469-513.

Aron and George F. Kennan, and so does Sir Brian Urquhart, the former Undersecretary General of the United Nations — at age 97 the oldest living member of our imaginary Toynbee Prize club.

Great women and great men are most impressive when they remain down-to-earth. I once invited Professor Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt (who spent a few days at the University of Konstanz) to my class. We expected the most eminent living sociologist to make some grandiose statement about theory or the world as such. Instead, he brought along the morning paper and immediately started up a conversation with students about the front-page news. It is hard to imagine how Arnold Toynbee would have behaved in a similar situation. What is certain is that, until his final years when he was very old, he rarely succumbed to pomposity and over-generality. That, of course, is a temptation not for young researchers who are the ones to take global history forward, but for retired professors past a certain age.

I remember a world historian talking on a radio panel. When he was asked to comment on the 2015 European refugee crisis, his answer was: “Well, there have been population movements throughout history. Societies have mostly coped, and sometimes they have not.” This sort of cloudy wisdom from stratospheric detachment will not do. The generalist Toynbee would have been much more incisive. He did his duty as a commentator and as an educator of the public. And it is with his encouragement that we should now, with the Presidency of Donald Trump in view, turn to the task ahead: surviving the future.

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Toynbee was the nephew of the economic historian Arnold Toynbee, with whom he is sometimes confused. Born in London, Arnold J. was educated at Winchester College and Balliol College, Oxford. He began his teaching career as a fellow of Balliol College in 1912, and thereafter held positions at King's College London (as Professor of Modern Greek and Byzantine History), the London School of Economics and the Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA) in Chatham House.Â Civilisations declined when their leaders stopped responding creatively, and the civilisations then sank owing to nationalism, militarism, and the tyranny of a despotic minority (see mimesis). Toynbee argued that "Civilizations die from suicide, not by murder."