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In Decline or on the Threshold of a Renaissance? On the Place of the Philosophy of History in the Contemporary World

*A science which hesitates to forget its founders is lost.*¹

Alfred North Whitehead

Questions, which – like the one in the title – signal some kind of paradox and contain radical phrases, appear in science not infrequently and not infrequently give rise to justified suspicions of over-interpretation or a peculiar pursuit of attention. Here, however, as will be discussed in a moment, we are talking about a dilemma whose authenticity is confirmed by numerous observations. And although we could limit ourselves to presenting them, the aim of the article is to take the next step and consider them in the context of the role that reflection of a historiosophic nature has to play today in constructing a rational image of the world.

However, let us begin with these observations.

¹ Alfred North Whitehead, “The Organization of Thought”, *Science* 44(1134) (1916): 413.

1. At the root of the problem

In 1991, in his work *Geschichtsphilosophie*, Emil Angehrn stated that the discipline of the title was regarded as an intellectual achievement of the past times rather than the current topic of philosophy. Such an image of the philosophy of history is reflected in the observations of Angehrn himself, who added that its birth should be associated with the era of the Enlightenment, its peak with Hegel's philosophy, and its end with the period of activity of Jacob Burckhardt,² who contested this form of cognition.

Of course, this is just one of many periodisation proposals. After all, the beginnings of historiosophical reflection can be found in the texts of St. Augustine, Lucretius or even Plato³ (although, as it seems, the view shared by Angehrn, that the time of its disciplinary separation is as late as the second half of the 18th century, prevails⁴), while the thesis about its decline at the threshold of the 20th century is debatable insofar as it does not take into account the theory of civilisational pluralism, developed in that century by such thinkers as Oswald Spengler or Arnold Toynbee.

Whatever one may think about the caesuras set by the Swiss researcher (they inevitably reflect a particular way of understanding the matter of philosophy of history⁵), it seems that he was right in at least one thing – the philosophy of history is, so to speak, a dead discipline, a closed chapter in the history of philosophy, arousing interest only among academics exploring the past. After all, even if the history of the discipline were to include the aforementioned civilisation paradigm, this history would come to an end in the middle of the 20th century, at a time when the last volumes of Toynbee's *Study of History* were being published, a time constituting a kind of prologue to the crisis whose barometer would prove to be the number of new concepts and authorities. After all, can anyone other than Francis Fukuyama (who is regarded as a political thinker) come to mind in this context? Is it not the case that

² Emil Angehrn, *Filozofia dziejów*, transl. by Józef Marzęcki (Kęty: Marek Dewiecki, 2007), 3.

³ Zbigniew Kuderowicz, *Filozofia dziejów* (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1983), 7–10.

⁴ Leszek Kopciuch, *Szkice systematyczne z filozofii dziejów* (Lublin: UMCS, 2014), 19.

⁵ Angehrn did not claim that history ceased to be a subject of philosophical reflection. However, he believed that nowadays there is no place in it for monumental concepts that would treat about some plan or sense of history. Cf. Angehrn, *Filozofia dziejów*, 3–4.

studies devoted to the philosophy of history end their discussion of its history with such figures as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin or Karl Jaspers (possibly also mentioning outsiders like the aforementioned Fukuyama or the political scientist Samuel Huntington)?

On the other hand, it is impossible not to get the impression that theses of a more or less historiosophical nature are omnipresent in the public sphere. Olga Tokarczuk's Nobel speech of 7 December 2019, a kind of compendium on the challenges and fears of the present day, is an excellent testimony in this regard. After all, it is difficult to draw a different conclusion when one takes into account the numerous references to the climate and democracy crises, which are so often asserted today, as well as the pessimistic diagnosis of the Nobel laureate herself: "The world is dying, and we don't even notice it".⁶

The conviction behind this suggestive yet ambiguous statement (as if from *fin de siècle*) also resounds more and more often in books. Let us consider, for example, Tomasz Stawiszyński's *Co robić przed końcem świata* (What to do before the end of the world), published in 2021, whose motto was taken from the question accompanying the promotion of the film *Matrix*: "Did it ever occur to you that there is something wrong with this world?".⁷ Another example is *W Polsce, czyli wszędzie: Rzecz o upadku i przyszłości świata* (In Poland, or Everywhere: On the Collapse and Future of the World)⁸ by Edwin Bendyk from 2020, where the perspective of civilisational regress – as in Stawiszyński's book – is considered not only from the point of view of the author's conclusions but also on the meta-level. Finally, we have the publishing series of Nowa Konfederacja with the very telling name of "Kroniki Międzyepoki", in which special attention, for obvious reasons, is drawn to *Koniec końca historii* (The end of the end of history)⁹ by Jacek Bartosiak.

Crisis, breakthrough, imminent end – these are phrases used almost daily also by contemporary media. This is clearly visible in relation to climate change, a topic sometimes considered in almost apocalyptic categories (who among us has not heard about the spectre of catastrophe

⁶ "Przemowa noblowska Olgi Tokarczuk Laureatki literackiej Nagrody Nobla 2018", 16, access 24.08.2021, <https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2019/12/tokarczuk-lecture-polish-2.pdf>.

⁷ Tomasz Stawiszyński, *Co robić przed końcem świata* (Warszawa: Agora, 2021), 5. In Olga Tokarczuk's speech cited here, a similar phrase appeared: "There is something wrong with the world" (*Przemowa noblowska Olgi Tokarczuk*, 15).

⁸ Edwin Bendyk, *W Polsce, czyli wszędzie: Rzecz o upadku i przyszłości świata* (Warszawa: Polityka, 2020).

⁹ Jacek Bartosiak, *Koniec końca historii* (Warszawa: Nowa Konfederacja, 2020).

or doom in this field?). And although at this point we could put a footnote referring to the countless television, radio and Internet productions, I think that for the purpose of these considerations, one, but a significant example will suffice – a series of interviews “Rozmowy o końcu świata”¹⁰ (“Talks about the end of the world”) prepared by TVN24.

2. Between crisis and renewal

I am aware that specialists in the field of historiographical issues may perceive this list as a kind of heresy. After all, the products of culture in the broadest sense of the term – despite their more or less close references to the classical issues of the philosophy of history – cannot be placed in one line with the works of Vico, Condorcet and Marx. I think, however, that it is worth considering what determines this. Then we will not only understand where the theses about the crisis or decline of the philosophy of history come from, but we will also come closer to answering the question of what kind of philosophy of history we need.

What are the classical issues in the philosophy of history? Karl Popper, one of the discipline’s most prominent theorists, pointed to three big questions in this context. The first was whether history has a plan, and if so, what plan. The second was related to the problem of the possible utility of history. The third was about the method of history – how we should write it.¹¹ This position corresponds with the division of the discipline into ontological and epistemological (or material and formal) forms, where the former would focus on events, and the latter on historical cognition. The first type of reflection would include questions about the meaning of history and the forces determining its course, or about what kind of order (progressive, regressive, or other) we are dealing with in it. The second type of reflection would refer to theoretical problems (the question of access to the past, methods and criteria of cognition, the validity of research findings).¹²

However, one would be wrong if one considered that the above terminological remarks, which cannot be omitted in a text on such a topic, provide a complete picture of the differentiations and interpretations

¹⁰ “Rozmowy o końcu świata”, access 28.08.2021, <https://tvn24.pl/go/programy,7/rozmowy-o-koncu-swiata-odcinki,499186>.

¹¹ Karl R. Popper, *Mit schematu pojęciowego: W obronie nauki i racjonalności*, transl. by Bohdan Chwedeńczuk (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1997), 147.

¹² Kopciuch, *Szkice*, 32–33.

functioning in this field. For there still remains the question of the distinction between the philosophy of history and historiography. The issue is important not so much because of the need to organise the argument, but from the point of view of the diagnosis of the crisis of the discipline we are interested in. The issue here is nothing else, but the fact of the parallel functioning of these terms. It seems, after all, that because of it researchers dealing with historiographical issues pay disproportionate attention to the history of research and the definitional disputes that belong to it. One can even get the impression that they must not fail to respond to these disputes and not justify their preferences in this regard (in the case of other philosophical disciplines, for example, aesthetics or axiology, it is rather unheard of¹³). Subsequent articles that attempt to sort out these issues become new interpretations themselves and thus fail to achieve their goal.

This is a crisis phenomenon for the philosophy of history in the sense that it makes it a “sick man” of philosophy – a field incapable of meeting the challenges of the present, an object of antiquarian (in Nietzsche’s sense) interest of unread specialists. I do not mean to say that terminological precision and referring to the history of science have no value in this case. However, I believe that they should not close our eyes to the media debate, which is constantly hosting opinions about entering a new epoch, the inevitable collapse of the West, or a crisis of one kind or another, and which still remains, so to speak, philosophically undeveloped from this point of view. Why not change this?

This postulate is not an expression of naive faith in the possibility of taming the aforementioned crises with philosophical methods (especially since the word “crisis” is overused and often there would simply be nothing to taming). The goal here is solely to develop a rational image of the world, and what is at stake is not some kind of pansophical vision, but the verification of diagnoses and predictions functioning in the public discourse, which try to “tell us” about this world. The challenge in this context is, for example, the cognitive dissonance that appears when the news of contemporary achievements of humankind (elimination of new diseases, gradual reduction of the problem of hunger, prolonging the period of peace in the world¹⁴) is superimposed on

¹³ I used the word “rather” because of such disciplines as philosophy of culture and philosophy of man.

¹⁴ Yuval N. Harari, *Homo deus: Krótka historia jutra*, transl. by Michał Romanek (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2018), 7–8.

what after Fukuyama could be called “the pessimism of our times”.¹⁵ Another issue worth examining in this spirit is the contemporary impact of historicism. For is it not the case that it is precisely its trap that we fall into when we announce our affiliation to successive societies (consumer, information, network, risk, and others¹⁶) or announce the advent of post-truth?

From this perspective, researchers dealing with historiosophical issues could play an important role in sorting out the media and intellectual reality that is filled with contradictory views and filter bubbles petrifying them.¹⁷ It is known, for example, that the heritage of Western civilisation (and, consequently, its present condition and future) is viewed differently by the right and the left-wing. This is clearly visible when one juxtaposes the works *Roztrzaskane lustro. Upadek cywilizacji zachodniej* (The Shattered Mirror: The Fall of Western Civilisation) by Wojciech Roszkowski¹⁸ and *The Collapse of Western Civilisation: A View from the Future* by Naomi Oreskes and Eric Conway.¹⁹ The former defines the retreat from Christian values as a fundamental threat to the survival of the West, which is already underway and manifests itself in such phenomena as the growing acceptance of abortion and euthanasia, the departure from the classical family model, and the regression of broadly defined culture. Although the second one also focuses on the axiological confusion, its character is different. The problem turns

¹⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *Koniec historii i ostatni człowiek*, transl. by Tomasz Bieroń, Marek Wichrowski (Kraków: Znak, 2017), 45.

¹⁶ The view that we live in a consumer society assumes that it is something new in history. And while it is hard to disagree with it, it seems that the proponents of this view fail to notice that mass consumption may be something inevitable in a collective that reaches a high enough ceiling of economic development and that it does not at all have to be associated with some kind of moral decline. Why not assume that people living several hundred years ago, with wealth similar to ours, would not have acted as we do? I think the accounts of the Greek symposiums and superfluities with which the leisure classes surrounded themselves in subsequent centuries shed some light on the matter. An interesting critique of the other varieties of society mentioned above was made by Marek Graszewicz and Dominik Lewiński in their article “Co to jest społeczeństwo sieciowe i dlaczego ono nie istnieje?”, *Nowe Media* 1 (2010): 13–21.

¹⁷ Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You* (London: Penguin Books, 2012).

¹⁸ Wojciech Roszkowski, *Roztrzaskane lustro. Upadek cywilizacji zachodniej* (Kraków: Biały Kruk, 2019).

¹⁹ Naomi Oreskes, Eric M. Conway, *Upadek cywilizacji zachodniej. Spojrzenie z przyszłości*, transl. by Ewa Bińczyk, Jan Gużyński, Krzysztof Tarkowski (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2017).

out to be the disregard for scientific findings and putting immediate economic and political benefits above concern for the natural environment. This, in turn, is to lead to its degradation and make our future all the more bleak.²⁰

Who is right here? Both sides? Neither? Are they based on strong enough premises? Will we really face the demographic (and consequently cultural) expansion of Islam? Will Christian tradition and ethics drown in a sea of decadence? Or maybe our fate is to function on an overpopulated planet deprived of natural resources? I think these are questions that should interest us no less than whether Spengler was really a pessimist and Fukuyama was right to proclaim the end of history. This is not to say that scholars interested in the philosophy of history should abandon its history altogether (I do so in a way here), but one cannot help but ask: who, if not they, would provide the most reliable answers to the questions that open this paragraph? By ignoring these questions, are they not exposing themselves to accusations similar to those levelled at contemporary philosophers by the aforementioned Popper half a century ago? He stated then:

In my opinion, the greatest scandal of philosophy is that, while all around us the world of nature perishes – and not the world of nature alone – philosophers continue to talk, sometimes cleverly and sometimes not, about the question of whether this world exists. They get involved in scholasticism, in linguistic puzzles such as, for example, whether or not there are differences between “being” and “existing”.²¹

Of course, the chances that Popper’s words and the question that preceded them would influence a wide range of researchers are slim. It is also clear that even if this were to happen, it would not necessarily immediately lead to the aforementioned ordering of media-intellectual reality. The hope is that in this reality voices like Bartłomiej Radziejewski’s, who in his article *Filozofów nam trzeba. Właśnie teraz* (We Need Philosophers. Right Now) from 2020 wrote that in times of mass production of information noise, it is they who should tell society what is most impor-

²⁰ Someone who has not read these works and has knowledge of them only to the extent of the above description could possibly consider them to be studies of selected dangers facing our civilisation. The point is, however, that the “recipes” for disaster presented in these works are closed in their own way, and what is presented as a “cure” in one is seen as a source of problems in the other.

²¹ Karl R. Popper, *Wiedza obiektywna: Ewolucyjna teoria epistemologiczna*, transl. by Adam Chmielewski (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1992), 50. The Austrian scientist said these words in 1970.

tant, will appear more often. This would be determined by their ability to synthesise detailed knowledge, distinguish real from fake knowledge, and disseminate the findings of experts among the masses.²²

Certainly, these are the competencies that today's philosophers of history should be expected to possess. What kind of researcher should he be? What should be the focus of his or her discipline?

3. In search of a method

The basic issue in this context is to take into account the accumulating achievements of social science methodology over the decades. After all, since the publication of Popper's *The Poverty of Historicism*,²³ one cannot seriously claim that the purpose of philosophy of history is to search for the laws of history. After reading this work, as well as those by Nassim Taleb²⁴ and Philip Tetlock,²⁵ it is also untenable to claim that we can predict the future and alleviate the "labour pains" that accompany its arrival. This does not mean, however, that the philosophy of history in its previously mentioned ontological form has no longer any tasks ahead of it. After all, even though Popper did not claim that in relation to history, one cannot legitimately operate with the categories of progress and regress. The point is how we conceptualise these terms. As one might guess, the Austrian scholar presented an approach to this issue that eschewed all metaphysics. In his lecture *The History of Our Time: An Optimist's View* in 1956, he stated:

First let me make it quite clear that if I call myself an optimist, I do not wish to suggest that I know anything about the future. I do not wish to pose as a prophet, least of all as a historical prophet. On the contrary, I have for many years tried to defend the view that historical prophecy is a kind of

²² Bartłomiej Radziejewski, "Filozofów nam trzeba: Właśnie teraz", *Nowa Konfederacja*, 7.05.2020, access 7.09.2021, <https://nowakonfederacja.pl/filozofow-nam-trzeba-wlasnie-teraz/>.

²³ Karl R. Popper, *Nędza historycyzmu*, ed. Stefan Amsterdamski (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1999). This work (in parts) was first published in the journal *Economica* in 1944–1945 (ibidem, 7).

²⁴ Nassim N. Taleb, *The Black Swan: The impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House, 2007).

²⁵ Philip E. Tetlock, Dan Gardner, *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction* (New York: Broadway Books, 2015). The authors of the paper prove that reliable forecasts of social life phenomena can be formulated only in a small time horizon.

quackery. I do not believe in historical laws, and I disbelieve especially in anything like a law of progress. In fact, I believe that it is much easier for us to regress than to progress. Though I believe all this, I think that I may fairly describe myself as an optimist. For my optimism lies entirely in my interpretation of the present and the immediate past. It lies in my strongly appreciative view of our own time. And whatever you might think about this optimism you will have to admit that it has a scarcity value.²⁶

In a similar way Steven Pinker writes about progress in his book *Enlightenment now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*:

Most people agree that life is better than death. Health is better than sickness. Sustenance is better than hunger. Abundance is better than poverty. Peace is better than war. Safety is better than danger. Freedom is better than tyranny. Equal rights are better than bigotry and discrimination. Literacy is better than illiteracy. Knowledge is better than ignorance. Intelligence is better than dull-wittedness. Happiness is better than misery. Opportunities to enjoy family, friends, culture, and nature are better than drudgery and monotony. All these things can be measured. If they have increased over time, that is progress.²⁷

I have quoted these statements to signal that the failures of the pioneers of the philosophy of history do not invalidate the entire project, and thus do not force us to consider it only in chronicle categories. It is clear, after all, that understanding the sources of the surrounding world and grasping the direction of changes taking place in it is of no less interest to us than it was to people living in the age of Enlightenment, and that this interest will always “demand” philosophical reflection – even if we were to exclude monumental systems and goals that escape scientific cognition.

We would be talking here, then, about a philosophy of history that is agnostic in its way, because it seeks support for its theses in what is relatively measurable and verifiable; a minimalist philosophy of history that focuses more on falsifying circulating opinions than on developing far-reaching visions. Of course, one can say that such a philosophy of history is not a philosophy of history, and there is no need or basis for redefining the term. And although in this situation I think that creating a new one – in view of the presence in the scientific discourse of a spec-

²⁶ Karl R. Popper, *Droga do wiedzy: Domysły i refutacje*, transl. by Stefan Amsterdamski (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1999), 606.

²⁷ Steven Pinker, *Nowe Oświecenie: Argumenty za rozumem, nauką, humanizmem i postępem*, transl. by Tomasz Bieroń (Poznań: Zyska i S-ka, 2018), 73.

ulative, critical and substantial philosophy of history or an analytic and narrative philosophy of history – is a symptom of multiplying entities beyond the need, I also see no reason to enter into an argument with such a person. For it is not about definitions, but about emphasising the need to truly philosophise the philosophy of history.

What I mean by that is to treat it not so much as a hermetic discipline with a rigidly defined subject, but as a tool for giving proper (from the point of view of historical knowledge) proportions to our evaluations of experienced changes and their potential consequences. This is the direction taken by two recent works by Steven Pinker which, although they are not classified (also by him) as historiosophical, in my opinion fully deserve the name. It is about the *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*²⁸ from 2011 and the aforementioned *Enlightenment Now* from 2018.

In the former, he tries to prove that violence has declined throughout history and that, contrary to popular belief, the era we live in is probably the most peaceful one. In order to do so, he referred to extremely rich historical material (the original edition is over 800 pages long, while the Polish one is almost 1000), and based his reflections on statistical data, which he incorporated into numerous charts, tables and maps. They show a decline in the number of homicides, judicial torture, executions, and acts of sexual and racial violence. Where such data were lacking, he resorted to conclusions typical for historical research. In this way, he examined, among other things, the works of Homer, the Old and New Testaments, as well as the *Grandmother's Fairy Tales* and *Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*,²⁹ based on folk tales, which, although not strictly speaking historical sources, give insight into the values of the times in which they were written. Turpid accounts of ancient battles, accounts of rapes, slaughters and tribal vendettas, the brutality of the Old Testament God, or stories that have functioned in European culture for centuries, filled with descriptions of murder, famine, which radicalised attitudes and sometimes led to cannibalism, sexual abuse or the cold, sometimes even ruthless treatment of children, have all been exposed in this field; in other words, everything that would suggest that the lives of our an-

²⁸ Steven Pinker, *Zmierzch przemocy: Lepsza strona naszej natury*, transl. by Tomasz Bieroń (Poznań: Zysk i S-ka, 2015).

²⁹ How cognitively valuable the analysis of fairy tales can prove to be is demonstrated by Robert Darnton's *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984). Pinker otherwise lists him as one of those who shared his expertise (Pinker, *Zmierzch przemocy*, 21).

cestors were, as Hobbes put it in *Leviathan*, “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”.³⁰

In this way, Pinker tries to show the moral gap that separates us from people living in the past. What is worth emphasising, however, is that he does not stop at references to antiquity and the Middle Ages, which could be taken for granted, and he sheds similar light on subsequent centuries, reaching in his narrative as far back as the second half of the 20th century. Each time, the point is to prove that the fact that we do not tolerate (and in a sense do not understand) acts of violence, which used to be socially acceptable, falsifies the popular view that today’s world is becoming more and more dangerous, and that technological progress does not go hand in hand with moral progress.

The historical examples he refers to in this area are quite impressive. Consider, for example, the public burning of cats, which was a popular entertainment in 16th-century Paris, or the fact that as late as the 18th century the English justice system used the stocks, and the French – breaking wheels and water torture (also in front of crowds).³¹ There is also room for analyses of the various dimensions of modern religious wars, as well as inquisition trials, colonial conquests, and the slave trade, which were still present in the reality of the old continent in the 19th century.

All these facts and processes, however, do not speak as strongly in the context of Pinker’s thesis as do his reflections on the 20th century’s decline of violence. This is all the more understandable given that these are transformations that are not so far removed in time and are still remembered by many people alive today. From this perspective, it is hard to believe that only sixty years ago in the United States, a country that is regarded as a model of liberal democracy, racial segregation existed (it was ended only by the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968), and participants of peaceful marches who opposed this phenomenon were harassed by security forces with dogs, truncheons and water cannons.³²

No less striking is the information presented about the position of sexual minorities and women living in the 20th century. It is hard to argue otherwise with the fact that in post-war Britain one could be sen-

³⁰ Thomas Hobbes, *Lewiatan, czyli Materia, forma i władza państwa kościelnego i świeckiego*, transl. by Czesław Znamierowski (Warszawa: PWN, 1954), 110.

³¹ Pinker, *Zmierzch przemocy*, 198–201. The fate of the merchant Jean Calas is worth reading in this context.

³² *Ibidem*, 494, 500–501. The events in the American city of Birmingham in 1963, immortalised in many photographs that are available in virtual space, may serve as an example here.

tenced to prison or chemical castration because of one's homosexuality (I am of course referring to the fate of Alan Turing,³³ mentioned by Pinker in this context) or the fact that as late as the mid-1970s marital rape was not considered a crime in any of the American states.³⁴ Yet all of this has gone by the wayside and is now something completely unthinkable in the Western world. Shouldn't this be seen as a symptom of the moral progress occurring throughout history?

Pinker's answer is positive here.³⁵ It is not, however, based on belief in the inevitable "laws of history" but rather emerges from historical data. For these not only provide a point of reference for a colourful and evocative narrative but also, as already mentioned, take the form of statistical summaries and curves on dozens of charts. But can they be considered convincing in the face of the tragedy of World War II? Does this not, along with other crimes of the 20th century, undermine the thesis of the decline of violence? According to Pinker, not necessarily, which he justifies by referring to numbers. It is not about the absolute numbers of victims of particular historical phenomena, as the mentioned war is unparalleled, but about the share of those numbers in the world's population at that time. Then the title of the greatest tragedy in history would fall – depending on the choice of the lower or upper limit of estimates – either on the 13th century Mongol conquests or on An Lushan's rebellion in Tang Dynasty China in the years 755–763 (World War II would come ninth, World War I – sixteenth).³⁶

Is this a convincing argument? Probably not for everyone. After all, it could be accused of downplaying the tragedy of the victims of 20th-century crimes and reducing their unspeakable suffering to statistics. The question arises, however, as to whether this is not the way we behave when we consider crimes committed centuries ago, such as the murder of hundreds of thousands of inhabitants of Merv and Baghdad by the

³³ Ibidem, 574.

³⁴ Ibidem, 516. Marital rape was penalised in all American states in 1993. In the United Kingdom and Germany this occurred in 1992 and 1997 respectively. Cf. Aneta Michalska-Warias, *Zgwałcenie w małżeństwie. Studium prawnokarne i kryminologiczne* (Warszawa: Wolters Kluwer, 2016), 13.

³⁵ Pinker, *Zmierzch przemocy*, 881.

³⁶ Ibidem, 259–261. According to the author cited by Pinker, between 13 and 36 million people have died as a result of rebellion. Cf. Matthew White, "Selected Death Tolls for Wars, Massacres and Atrocities Before the 20th Century", access 10.10.2021, <http://necrometrics.com/pre1700a.htm>. The American psychologist gives this higher figure in his work. If proven true, it could be as high as one-sixth of the world's population at the time (Pinker, *Zmierzch przemocy*, 261).

Mongols. The answer becomes obvious when we take into account how little (if any) space we devote to the qualitative dimension of those sufferings, or when we realise that they remain unknown to the general public (this contrasts sharply with the vast amount of works devoted to trauma and other psychological experiences of the participants of 20th century conflicts). Why does this happen?

According to Pinker, our view of the distant past, and consequently our assessment of recent history, is distorted by disparities in our knowledge of particular eras (we may not know about many past tragedies due to the decreasing volume of historical reporting as we move back in time) and by the availability heuristic that results from these disparities, namely the tendency to consider as more probable the phenomena that are easiest to recall.³⁷ In this case, this would mean exaggerating the importance of conflicts that are least distant in time (they are the best-studied).³⁸

Although this peculiar rehabilitation of the 20th century is not free of weaknesses and is not *The Better Angels of Our Nature*³⁹ greatest asset, it must be admitted – as perverse as it may sound – that the objections it raises do in a way justify the thesis of moral progress over the centuries. After all, one can assume that the incomprehensibility of the crimes of 1939–1945 stems from the conviction that something similar could not have happened in such a recent past – in a world with parliamentary democracies and international organisations. Moreover, it is clear that atrocities committed on a mass scale hundreds of years ago, for example, by Vlad the Impaler or Tamerlan (he ordered towers to be erected from the heads of murdered enemies⁴⁰) not only appear to us as something relatively natural in light of their temporal affiliation but also sometimes they are presented in an almost anecdotal way (such an attitude to past

³⁷ Daniel Kahneman, *Pułapki myślenia: O myśleniu szybkim i wolnym*, transl. by Piotr Szymczak (Poznań: Media Rodzina, 2012), 175–185.

³⁸ Pinker, *Zmierzch przemocy*, 259.

³⁹ The problem with the *The Better Angels of Our Nature* listing of the most deadly historical phenomena is that the pre-World War II items occupy processes spread over decades or hundreds of years. Moreover, for the most part, they are not related to the Western circle of civilisation, and it is its history that provides the reference point for Pinker's research. Items 3–8 include the Middle Eastern slave trade, the fall of the Ming dynasty, the fall of Rome, Tamerlan's reign, the extermination of American Indians, and the Atlantic slave trade (*ibidem*, 260).

⁴⁰ Marian Małowist, *Tamerlan i jego czasy* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1985), 44.

acts of violence is also reflected in the idea of museums of torture and taking pictures of ourselves next to the inquisitorial chair or the iron maiden, which are after all the source of incomprehensible suffering). Is it not so that our image of history is shaped by cognitive illusions and historical ignorance? Is it really the case that our negative assessment of reality is justified?

These are just some of the questions that Pinker's work raises. We devote so much space to it because it shows that philosophical reflection on history does not have to equate with pure speculation and lead to claims that are not subject to scientific scrutiny; that philosophy of history is not some discredited idea, but a discipline that faces many challenges, and which therefore needs to revise its original assumptions. What distinguishes *The Better Angels of Our Nature* from classic works of historiography is also its departure from the Nietzschean scheme of monumental history and showing the phenomena that lie under the "surface" of the historical process. After all, Pinker is not interested in political cycles and turning points, but in mental transformations taking place over the long term. Here, he rejects appeals to a scientifically unidentifiable historical necessity, instead opting for the analysis of factual material, which he confronts with the findings of psychology and other human sciences (this is evident when he looks at how the brain works, or when he considers the relationship between the decline in violence and the Flynn effect).⁴¹

It should be noted, however, that *The Better Angels of Our Nature* is not dominated by specialist considerations in the field of psychology, and the research used in it was conducted not by Pinker himself, but by countless researchers, whose efforts he skilfully integrated and wrote into the initial thesis. What is noteworthy here is the comprehensiveness of the view and the references to phenomena and processes that have been overlooked in historiosophical works. Here I mean, for example, reflections on the influence that the spread of reading has had on the growth of empathy (reading teaches us to accept other people's point of view and thus sharpens our moral sense)⁴² or the rise of hygiene

⁴¹ The Flynn effect is a phenomenon observed since the beginning of the 20th century of a systematic increase (from generation to generation) of the intelligence quotient in various regions of the world. Cf. James R. Flynn, *What is intelligence? Beyond the Flynn effect* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁴² Pinker, *Zmierzch przemocy*, 232–238.

standards (people who are less repulsive seem closer to us).⁴³ It is worth noting that in these attempts to go beyond simplistic, historicist explanations, Pinker is extremely cautious, and he subjects his hypotheses to criticism and confronts them with counterarguments.

This view of the historical process is novel in the sense that it brings to the fore phenomena that function on the margins of monumental theories. Pinker is interested in how our manners, table behaviours, entertainment, and reading have changed; he considers diet, health problems, and body odours. In other words, he takes into account the grassroots dimension of civilisational change and the facts that go with it – something we too often downplay when making statements about history or the value that our times show in its light. For while we can condemn the successive declines in morality by citing content present on the Internet, in entertainment programs, or in the works of pop culture stars, it is hard to accept the idea that we are worse than the people who felt like watching cats burn. From this point of view, how to evaluate the medieval practice of buying out those sentenced to death in one city by another city in order to provide the inhabitants with a spectacle in the form of a bloody execution?⁴⁴ Are we really morally inferior to our ancestors who accepted the harsh punishment of children and used them to work in mines and factories?⁴⁵

All these phenomena are quite well known and are striking by their historical obviousness, and yet one cannot help feeling that they completely disappear from our sight when we refer to the condition of the modern world and proclaim the crises of values. How to explain this? Is there something like historical amnesia at work here? Or perhaps the banality of the past evil, with all its unsympathetic details, simply does not match the great treatises created by thinkers who reveal reality in a flush of philosophical revelation? Regardless of how we address these questions, reading *The Better Angels of Our Nature* makes us appreciate the factual aspects and consider them an indispensable part of philosophical reflection on history (at least if this reflection is to be as comprehensive as possible).

Of course, erudite meticulousness does not guarantee the success of historiosophical projects, as the example of Toynbee's impressive, though methodologically poor, *Study of History* clearly shows. Neverthe-

⁴³ To illustrate this thought, Pinker referred to the reactions elicited by homeless people emitting an unpleasant odour (*ibidem*, 229).

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, 698.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 535.

less, facts, and even more so statistical analyses based on them, can challenge established patterns of thinking and falsify circulating opinions. It is in this context that Pinker's concept appears as a reference point for today's philosophers of history. After all, his methodology can be applied to many problems, not necessarily related to the psychic sphere. Let us think, for example, about the post-truth era, the advent of which has been announced by numerous authors⁴⁶ for some time now. Reaching back into history, it is not difficult to point to plenty of evidence that lies, manipulation and collective delusions have accompanied us for centuries. One need only think of the nations that fed on pseudo-scientific theories and built up a sense of superiority based on them, the fate of the Ems telegram, or the role played by so-called yellow journalism in triggering the U.S.-Spanish war of 1898.

The purpose of all these remarks is not to suggest that the renewal of the philosophy of history should consist in polemics with pessimism and viewing the proverbial glass as half full, or that historical erudition is the key to understanding the dynamics of changes taking place. The aim was rather to signal the great number of important scientific challenges faced today by those who are passionate about this discipline and who study its history. For, as already mentioned, they are well placed to enter the most important debates of the day, such as that concerning the Anthropocene⁴⁷ (in my opinion, a thoroughly historiosophical issue), and to bring intellectual rigour to them.

4. The role of philosophy of history in reflection on contemporary changes

Not only *The Better Angels of Our Nature* but also (and perhaps most importantly) Pinker's second work mentioned above, *Enlightenment Now. The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*, can serve as a signpost in this regard. In this work, the American psychologist clearly goes beyond his traditional interests and with Condorcetian enthusiasm creates an optimistic vision of the modern world. The world, because he tries to work out as complete a picture of reality as possible, and bases his reflections on an analysis of such areas as health, food, security,

⁴⁶ Ralph Keyes, *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004).

⁴⁷ Ewa Bińczyk, *Epoka człowieka: Retoryka i marazm antropocenu* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2018).

quality of life, wealth, or the environment. Here, too, the starting point is the opposition to pessimistic diagnoses, and here, too, the conclusions are based on historical research and numerical data.

The graphs on which they are placed actually leave no illusions – today's world is a much more peaceful, safe, and simply better place than the statements of intellectuals and media authorities would suggest. We see curves that show historical increases in such parameters as life expectancy, caloric intake, gross world product, social expenditures, intelligence quotient, and hours of leisure time, and decreases in child mortality, percentage of mothers dying during childbirth, malnutrition, starvation, extreme poverty, and deaths from natural disasters, traffic accidents, and aeroplane crashes. So why the opinions that the world is getting worse?

According to Pinker, our habits of thought and the influence of media and cultural figures play a decisive role. Thanks to the psychological literature he extensively cites, it is well known that we fear losses more than we expect gains, that we dwell on failures longer than we enjoy successes, and that criticism hurts more than praise lifts our spirits. It is also known that nostalgia for what used to be, has its roots in confusing the growing burdens of maturity with a less innocent world, and the deterioration of our own performance with the deterioration of the world.⁴⁸ All of this, Pinker argues, creates a kind of market for those who make their living by directing our attention to the bad as well as the disturbing. This is why a critic who disqualifies a book is seen as more competent than one who praises it; this is why we equate scepticism and gloomy prophecies with responsibility and moral seriousness. No wonder, then, that journalists want to appear as whistleblowers and debunkers, and intellectuals as theorists of unsolved social problems.⁴⁹

Pinker's observations about the sources of pessimism are important for us because they show how much distance and research caution is needed when formulating and evaluating diagnoses about the condition

⁴⁸ Pinker, *Nowe Oświecenie*, 69.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, 70, 346–347. According to Pinker, an important role in creating a bleak picture of reality is played by daily news programs that focus on individual, incidental events rather than on processes spread over time. Hence there is room for news about accidents, murders and political scandals, but not for reports on increasing life expectancy or decreasing poverty rates. News programs also deal primarily with what happened, not what didn't happen. Thus, we will not see a journalist saying that he is connecting live from a country where war has not broken out, or from a school where there has not been a shooting (*ibidem*, 61).

of the modern world. From this point of view, philosophical reflection on history can certainly be an effective tool in mitigating disputes resulting from political polarisation. For is it not the case that fears about cultural conflicts, the collapse of civilisation, overpopulation or climate catastrophe are dictated not so much by analysis of the facts as by a sense of belonging to a particular group?⁵⁰ Is it not the case that history is just another political battlefield?

Much food for thought in this context is provided by Pinker's own observations, who accuses both the Right and the Left of historical amnesia. The former is criticised for nostalgia for an unspecified "golden age" free of decadence and anomie, or for the praise of pre-Enlightenment life, which, however, is known to have been overshadowed by pestilence, superstition, and sadistic executions; the other, for not accepting that the development of industrial capitalism has given rise to an escape from widespread poverty, while communism and its contradictions have repeatedly caused misery, famine and acts of genocide.⁵¹

Meanwhile, it turns out that the fears of both are either insufficiently reflected in the figures and forecasts based on them, or can be tempered by historical experience. Consider, for example, the belief expressed by conservative thinkers⁵² in the coming Islamisation of Europe, which would be brought about by a decline in the birth rate among the native population and an influx of high fertility Muslims. To counter these visions, Pinker cites research showing that over the course of three decades (until 2011) fertility rates in Muslim countries declined by an average of 40%, with Iran's rate dropping by as much as 70%.⁵³ So are Muslim communities really immune to the social changes experienced by the West? Do we not have the right to think that the burkini will share the fate of the voluminous swimsuits worn by European women at the turn of the 20th century and that the mini skirt will sooner or later cause a revolution in the Islamic world similar to the one that swept through the West in the 1960s?

It should also be noted that these demographic changes are part of a broader trend, confirming predictions that global population growth

⁵⁰ Dan M. Kahan, Hank Jenkins-Smith, Donald Braman, "Cultural Cognition of Scientific Consensus", *Journal of Risk Research* 14(2) (2011): 147–174.

⁵¹ Pinker, *Nowe Oświecenie*, 425–426.

⁵² Roszkowski, *Roztrzaskane lustro*, 57, 399–407; Patrick J. Buchanan, *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2002).

⁵³ Pinker, *Nowe Oświecenie*, 158.

will slow down until it stops around 2070 and the number of people begins to decline.⁵⁴ It is hard to see this information as meeting the neo-Malthusian visions advanced by left-leaning intellectuals. It is also hard not to be cautious about their most far-reaching predictions, given the failure of Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*⁵⁵ and *The Limits to Growth*⁵⁶ of the Club of Rome.

Of course, it is not the case that the problems mentioned are of a virtual nature and that discussions about them should be cut off. Nor is it to give the impression that Pinker has captured the essence of the historical process and that his claims in this area remain unchallenged. However, regardless of the extent to which we agree with him (and this is not always easy, as I have already indicated), it should be said that his two approximate works show that philosophical reflection on history is something that is sorely needed today, in an age of a multitude of contradictory diagnoses and radical prophecies. For while it would be an exaggeration to claim that we live in an age of ignorance, it is hard to argue that the intellectual phenomena he writes about are merely an apparent problem.

It is proved, for example, by the appearance of new thematically related studies. As far as the Polish publishing market is concerned, we are talking primarily about *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong About the World and Why Things Are Better Than You Think*⁵⁷ by Hans, Ola and Anna Rosling (these researchers proved that a pessimistic view of reality is a common phenomenon, the sources of which should be sought in our mental predispositions), as well as *Best. Times. Ever*⁵⁸ by Mark Juddery and *Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future*⁵⁹ by Johan Norberg (all of which cite Pinker's research).

The answer to the question of whether this is enough to speak of a revival (and in the future perhaps even a renaissance) of the philosophy

⁵⁴ Ibidem, 157.

⁵⁵ Paul R. Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine, 1968).

⁵⁶ Donella H. Meadows et al., *Granice wzrostu*, transl. by Wiesława Rączkowska, Stanisław Rączkowski (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Ekonomiczne, 1973).

⁵⁷ Hans Rosling, Ola Rosling, Anna Rosling Rönnlund, *Factfulness: Dlaczego świat jest lepszy, niż myślimy, czyli jak stereotypy zastąpić realną wiedzą*, transl. by Monika Popławska (Poznań: Media Rodzina, 2018). The book is the fruit of the Gapminder Foundation, founded by the Roslings in 2015.

⁵⁸ Mark Juddery, *Coraz lepiej: Dlaczego świat nie schodzi na psy*, transl. by Małgorzata Guzowska (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2018).

⁵⁹ Johan Norberg, *Postęp*, transl. by Mikołaj Iwanicki (Wrocław: Fijorr Publishing, 2019).

of history depends, of course, on what we mean by it. Thinking about it today in terms of a distinct discipline that would have its own chairs at universities, and which could be reformed at that level in one way or another, is undoubtedly absurd. However, it is possible to adopt a different perspective and simply identify this notion with philosophical reflection on history – philosophical, that is, genuinely scientific, free from pre-determination, speculation, and goals that elude cognitive abilities. The philosophy of history understood in this way is certainly not in a state of decline, which is emphatically confirmed by the interest enjoyed not only by Pinker's works, but also those by Yuval Harari, Nassim Taleb, and Jared Diamond.⁶⁰

Conclusions

We do not know what prevents the above-mentioned names from being among those mentioned in publications devoted to historiosophical issues. Perhaps the decisive factor is the "burden" of the discipline's history, as described at the beginning, and the inability to go beyond the disputes that have been waged within it for decades. Anyway, the question is whether maintaining this state of affairs by those who take up this problem does not expose them to accusations of research hermeticism and committing one of the "cardinal sins" of a scientist, which is not taking into account what is called the "current state of research".

Admittedly, one can claim that one is doing the history of philosophy and then these accusations become groundless, but we know that numerous studies devoted to the concepts of Koneczny or Huntington are often justified precisely by the role that these concepts can play in the analysis of contemporary phenomena. It is not the case, therefore, that only purely cognitive considerations always count, and that today's context remains irrelevant. And since this is the case, we cannot ignore the changes that are taking place in science and assume that the answers to the questions that concern us will be provided by, for example, Dilthey, Windelband, Rickert, Buckle or Croce.

We must not forget that we have a completely different knowledge of the world than the thinkers of the past, including those of the 20th century. It is not only about the development of science, which provides more and more precise data in an increasing number of fields, but also about

⁶⁰ Diamond's work which I am primarily referring to here is *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

the philosophical or cultural conditions of this process. In this context, it is worth noting, for example, that it was only in the 1930s that the link between the increase in atmospheric CO₂ concentration and the observed increase in the Earth's temperature was established,⁶¹ or that the first census of the Russian population was conducted in 1897.⁶² From this point of view, it is not difficult to understand why Hegel or Danilevski could not share many of the fears that are so characteristic of our times, and why they dealt in such a way, and not in another, with what is the driving force of history.

I do not mean to say that the world in which they lived was less complex, for that might suggest that somehow the richness of their thought is being diminished here. Without a doubt, however, they did not have as much information at their disposal about the surrounding reality as we do today. For this very reason, as it were, they had to take the greatest interest in issues bordering on politics and culture. That is why those who study their work and try to relate it to contemporary realities should consider the words of Whitehead quoted at the beginning. Then completely new perspectives will open before the philosophy of history.

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⁶¹ Marcin Popkiewicz, Aleksandra Kardaś, Szymon Malinowski, *Nauka o klimacie* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Nieoczywiste, Wydawnictwo Sonia Draga, 2018), 425.

⁶² Jerzy Holzer, *Demografia* (Warszawa: Polskie Wydawnictwo Ekonomiczne, 2006), 42.

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Summary

The aim of this article is an attempt to diagnose the current condition of the philosophy of history, as well as to show its potential in explaining contemporary phenomena and constructing a rational image of the world. Two recent works by Steven Pinker (*The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* and *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*) and the methodological work of Karl Raimund Popper provide a point of reference. And although the works mentioned are not classed as historiosophical (even by Pinker himself), it is the author's opinion that they fully deserve this title by showing that philosophical reflection on history is something that is sorely needed today, in an age of multiple contradictory diagnoses and radical prophecies.

Keywords: philosophy of history, contemporary history, Steven Pinker, Karl Raimund Popper