

Theo Korthals Altes

MANKIND IN THE BALANCE

Essays on the future of humanity

The Hague, May 2012

©2012 Theo E. Korthals Altes, The Hague (theokaltes@hotmail.com)
Second edition 2014

Cover: David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974) - The March of Humanity (detail)

All rights reserved, which includes the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever except as provided by the copyright law of the Netherlands.

ISBN 9789461933010

Published by **mijnbestseller.nl**

Other publications by the same author:

Koninkrijk aan Zee (1999)

Het Verpulverde Tafereel (2010)

Liberty and Progress – A Dutch-American biography of the 20th Century (2012)

Gelukkig Nederland (2013)

Geschiedenis, volgens mij (2014)

*I never think of the future,
it comes soon enough*

Albert Einstein

Content

Introduction.....	3
We, the baby boomers .. at 60	6
Are we headed for infinity until the very end?.....	8
Not the end, not a beginning	12
The costly decade after 9/11	15
Total fall-out or new progress	17
The 21 ST Century as yet remains undefined	20
Each new generation will need to articulate its own visions.....	22
Visualizing the future	29
A movie made in 4000 A.D., about ‘us’	37
Who wants to kill his baby grandfather?	40
Internet connects all the people in the world	43
Avatar acting: a future in movies and on the web	45
No man on Mars in the coming decade	49
Earth’s stance in the Universe	52
Truth and the pursuit of meaning.....	55
Education: sharing the interests of our students	58
The duty of our own opinion.....	61
The delivery of justice.....	63
In defense of democracy.....	71

The roots and prospects of Christian Europe.....73

The role of religion in our future society77

Thinking of Europe – what Europe?.....87

The society of owners vs. the public society94

Unleash your shackles, slaves ought to be free.....98

Power and responsibility in our future world101

A global treaty to save our planet.....104

Let’s assume there will be no killer-asteroid.....106

Unspeakable futures108

History is made by ambition111

The guiding minds of human kind.....113

Adjusting ourselves to the common good.....116

Redefining progress118

A future that can energize.....121

Much will change, much remains the same124

Can humanity still improve its ways?.....127

Mustering the power of our sustainability130

Reinventing society131

Human survival beyond our time136

Awaiting the further process of history144

Epilogue147

Introduction



A portrait gallery of 2 million years of evolution

Human kind is still in its infancy. We are far away from the end station, whatever people may think. When we look in the mirror we see a transient face. Our species continues to be on the move.

What do we expect of humanity, say, four million years from now? Will there be those who actually resemble us? In such a period much can change. We started as an upright walking chimp. It has taken us some five to six million years to finally become the species we are today. Evolution is ongoing. Whatever we do – or don't do.

In our present day we are very much confronted with the notion of continuity and its opposite: extinction. We have changed our habitat planet Earth beyond recognition in a glimpse of time – in just a few thousand years - and killed off countless species, gone for eternity. In the process we influence the wheel of evolution, including the evolution of our own species, unwillingly, and mostly unknowing of the nature and direction of that influence. In our habits we both protect and destroy. I believe it will be another ten to hundred thousand years

before its cumulative impact can be assessed and solid evidence of ongoing evolution of our species will actually surface.

New isolation would have to play a key role. It is a fundamental prerequisite. If it occurs it will most certainly progress through – i.e. by virtue of – adversity: adversity inflicted by nature, or, as likely, by man himself. It may also be that some quality is being favored by other means, e.g. cultural means: ideal models of fashion may well become ideal models of human progress. We don't know. We either end up with a Planet of the Gods or we create a Planet of the Brutes. Both outcomes are plausible, none is more or less unlikely.

We are being warned today that the western white man is moving towards extinction unless he now starts procreating at a more massive scale. Our western civilization is rapidly becoming short of western children. So, at least we are being warned about one possible course of evolution, i.e. not including the descendants of western modern man. We better make up our minds.

But this is a very narrow view of course. We are just a few thousand years into civilization anyway. Many civilizations must still follow. So let's be a little bit neutral about it. We cannot claim to be the ultimate civilization. We are still very far from that.

As a species we have only scratched the surface of our brain potential. One Einstein will in the long run be thousands of Einsteins, millions perhaps. There is no end to the potential qualities of man and his descendants at any time in any era.

And apart from Einstein there are many other things to cherish. We have our accomplishments. We have our western science. We have our libraries. We have our music, our amenities.

There is a lot worth preserving and worth transferring to future generations. And this includes our genes.

In the mean time great perils lay ahead. To call for mass reproduction is a slap in the face of the imminent overpopulation of our planet. We have all but exhausted our key resources and many millions of people already lack even the most basic necessities such as clean water. The perils we have to overcome are largely manmade. Our national and international institutions are ill equipped to effectively face them. It is a fascinating exercise to visualize the world many eons ahead, but we better look at the next forthcoming century as our greatest priority, at every level and in every language.

In the process our societies, our politics and our corporate world need to address the issues – and the conflicts which arise from them – that they carry along from past history: matters of lifestyle and values, our ambitions, the technology that has been accumulated, and so on. In all these and similar dimensions our present is what we have to deal with. We cannot escape it, but we do have the power – and the responsibility – not to let it dictate our future course. If at any time in human history this is a paramount directive, it is in our time.

We, the baby boomers .. at 60

Post WWII baby boomers are gradually moving on to the autumn of their existence. Symbolically it is perhaps apt that we remind ourselves who we are at 60 as a generation which so much cherishes everything 'sixties' – indeed - as a source of magic remembrance and of an undiminished belief in a better future.

One commentary pointed out that never in recorded history one single generation has been so well educated and so prosperous as the generation that came out of the rubbles of WW II. And perhaps never in history so much wealth followed a period of so much devastation. It serves as yet another – symbolic – irony that it has been our generation too which invested so much energy first of all to challenge the world order that was being (re) built to produce this education and wealth.

We vigorously wanted to change our world; our dream was to eradicate every single authority and all the bossiness that our civilization had erected to secure the orderly conduct of human affairs and to safeguard what for us, youngsters, constituted highly rigid values and codes of conduct that dominated the style and tone of the world of our youth. We came a long way to change all this indeed, but we also set out to enjoy with equal vigor the seemingly boundless fruits of our heritage (and what we progressively made of it) in a way unparalleled in history.

Many symbols accompany the shared memory of our generation and many icons can be found along the road of our lives' history: noisy youngsters on motorbikes, the Cuban Revolution, Dallas 22 November 1963 and its aftermath, The Beatles, Paris 1968, Anti-Vietnam protests, HAIR and flower power, new democracy and social experimentation. To a large extent all of us are the children of John F. Kennedy, and Winston Churchill is our grandfather.

In the end, most of us focused on the need of a good career and the dreams of our youth regressed or they transformed into other pursuits such as the development of new management concepts, progressive government policies,

new fashion and architecture, new institutions. Subsequent generations have already made their own mark or are finding their way to do so.

We all now wish to be happy grandparents, and some have already reached this blessed situation. The great – last – challenge we face is to achieve that other emerging Guinness record: a healthy and vital old age.

I am well aware that much of the achievement of our generation is the result, directly or indirectly, of the silver spoon with which we were born. Our wealth, our education and our health – all of this would have been unthinkable without the efforts – and sacrifices - of our own parents and their generation. And yes, some sacrifices were made in our generation too, most notably by those who were sent out to Vietnam.

But otherwise, our generation is a generation of great enjoyment, of unprecedented leisure and entertainment. One could say: well, yes – but they are a great value of life, and happiness is a fundamental human pursuit.

Still, we developed our life style of enjoyment – and massive consumption – at a cost. Let's not forget. In our Western world we deliberately created a paradise of entertainment beyond imagination, exploiting every capacity of our environment that we could extract.

And however prosperous our world may appear, it does not resemble any of the utopias conceived in human history. In the eyes of many, particularly in the non-western world, we have created not a paradise but a horror story of mass depletion. We are essentially leaving it to the next generation to solve the great dilemma that has already become apparent. Bush at 60 may scoff at Climate Change, but if he is still alive at 80 and then has difficulty to breathe fresh air, he should not complain.

But otherwise, having reached the age of 60 myself, I do not complain. Whatever downsides I too can see, I will always tell my story of the sixties and beyond as a tale of adventure, inspiration and real advancement.

Are we headed for infinity until the very end?



Some twenty years ago Francis Fukuyama published his claim that the victory of liberal democracy over communism and similar totalitarian ideologies marked the end of history. Most of all his book marked the end of a particular phase in history: the dominance of the antagonism between East (communism) and West (liberal capitalism) and forty years of fierce technological and military competition. In the two decades that have since passed many new developments emerged on the world scene: the new thrust of our information and communication age, globalization and its adversities, especially on the axis between the Arab and Western countries and so on. As a result, the idea of a finite history has lost much of its credibility. Major challenges lie ahead if we

wish to avoid massive political but also natural disasters – the possibility of one feeding the other.

Thus, however we define history, the human story is very likely to continue without any prospect of an end but the very end itself. We could say this almost by definition, assuming we retain our ability to record and store our life's accounts until such final moment one day in a probably very distant future. ¹

With this prospect in mind I am not necessarily looking at the course of history as we generally know it: the rise and fall of civilizations, the tales of peoples, nations and great ideologies, the *faits et gestes* of kings, emperors and presidents; of war, conquest and expansion. In these classical dimensions many histories have already passed or ended. We no longer live in a world dictated by the whims of absolute monarchs or by grave mass superstition and religious ceremony such as the world of the Pharaohs or the Aztecs. I am rather more looking at the story of humanity in a broader sense, its general advancement in many different fields, such as science, arts and culture at many different levels and in many different expressions.



¹) I wouldn't be surprised if at some point in the future, mankind will make sure that - whatever the fate of planet Earth and its inhabitants - the memory of their existence will not be lost in the Universe. In fact, we already sent a probe - Voyager I, launched in 1977 - with exactly this purpose, and no doubt others will follow.

However, it is obvious that we cannot dissociate one from the other. The advancement of our space technology and everything derived from it would have been unthinkable without the pressure of the Cold War – the competition between the US and the Soviet Union – in this critical period. We could expand this observation to many other fields no doubt. The broader social, political and economic drama of humanity is an essential inspiration for the arts, for scientific developments and so on.

Thus, if it were true that history would end – as Fukuyama once contended – all other endeavors of humanity would come to a grinding halt too. There would be no more inspiration for advancement or innovation – or the retention of certain beliefs and practices - in any field. We would return to an existence of no more interest than for instance the existence of the baboons. Human kind being the way it is, I believe this is a highly unlikely prospect, however our existence may be disrupted by unforeseen disasters or – alternatively – however new species may still evolve out of mankind. ² There is much history still ahead of us in yet unthinkable dimensions and of a scope beyond our current imagination. We believe we can foresee everything, but it is obvious we cannot. We may speculate about certain aspects – technology, biology, space travel and so on – but there is no way that our future can be foretold in a remotely credible way. Why, if we look back at our own lives, how much of it was foreseeable when we were young?

The metaphor of our individual lives is a pertinent one. In our own mind we live forever, until the reality of our mortality overtakes us. And many of us invest as much in the present as in our personal legacy. We want to be remembered and, if possible, leave a lasting footprint for the world after us. We do not readily accept that, one day sooner or later, there will no longer be a single trace of our existence. This, I believe, is true for mankind as a whole. So let's think of humanity as a story unfolding in infinite space and time, indeed until the very end, one day sooner or – *hugely* - later.

All of the above for me is a starting point, not a final argument, in considering this challenging phenomenon called “the (distant) future”, the scope and potential of humanity's story. It can liberate our mind from today's prevailing paradigms. I am not particularly interested in liberalism or capitalism per se. I am interested in every dimension on which humanity can put its mind and

²) I would consider the evolution of intelligent beings out of other species, though theoretically plausible, a very remote prospect.