



**In the Shadow of Modern Colonialism: Totalitarianism or Democracy?
Karl Jaspers' View on the Future of Modernity and the Authoritarian Turn
in Contemporary Global Politics**

Hans Schelkshorn

University of Vienna, Austria

johann.schelkshorn@univie.ac.at

Abstract: As one of the few philosophers of his time, Jaspers responded to Europe's geopolitical decline with his work *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (*The Origin and Goal of History*, 1949). According to Jaspers, Europe must integrate itself into a polycentric global society. In global society, different cultures coexist, each drawing on philosophical traditions dating back millennia, as Jaspers emphasizes with his widely noticed theory of the Axial Age. For the future, Jaspers foresaw an apocalyptic struggle between a world empire and a world order based on human rights and international law. In his search for strategies to implement a liberal world order, the later Jaspers seriously explored the issue of European colonialism. Since the idea of political freedom is a distinctly European concept, a peaceful future for humanity depends on whether Western states—despite the legacy of colonialism—can convince the peoples of other regions of the world of the political ideals of the European Enlightenment. Considering the current global rise of authoritarian movements and regimes, Jaspers' geopolitical vision of a communicative global society has taken on unexpected relevance.

Keywords: Axial Age theory; authoritarianism; human rights; international law; democracy; postcolonialism; global politics; philosophy of history.

**Introduction: Europe in the Twentieth Century –
The Slow Fading of Geopolitical Hegemony**

The twentieth century marked the decline of Europe's global hegemony. Pankaj Mishra eloquently chronicles that for peoples of Asia, the victory of Japan over Tsarist Russia in 1905 had already dispelled the myth of modern Europe's invincibility.¹ Under

the impact of World War I, a sudden awareness of impending decline also emerged within Europe itself. Especially in defeated Germany, a broad discourse developed regarding the collapse of the intellectual foundations of European modernity, extending, amongst others, to Oswald Spengler's diagnosis of the decline of the West. Yet, even in France, Paul Valéry placed the European powers—specifically England, France, and Russia—within the long history of the rise and fall of great empires such as Elam, Nineveh, and Babylon. Valéry summed up the general consciousness of his time in his famous

¹ Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt against the West and the Remaking of Asia*, London, UK: Allen Lane 2012, p. 1.

dictum: "We later civilizations...we too now know that we are mortal."²

Moreover, as early as shortly after 1918, Max Scheler and José Ortega y Gasset both argued that Europe must henceforth find its place within a polycentric global society, albeit for different reasons. Scheler placed his emphasis on the emergence of a metaphysics based on independent entities and relations,³ while Ortega y Gasset emphasized a historical perspective.⁴ The founding of the League of Nations in 1920 was intended to pave the way for the equal coexistence of peoples and cultures. Within the sphere of the League of Nations, intellectual forums for intercultural dialogue among writers and philosophers also emerged, notably the *Sociétés de l'Esprit* led by Valéry.

However, calls for cultural and geopolitical restraint met with little response in Europe during the interwar period. In philosophy, Edmund Husserl in particular revived the vision of a "Europeanization" of humanity. According to Husserl, Europe's crisis can be overcome only through European philosophy itself—more precisely, through the idea of a humanity grounded in reason, whose origin lies exclusively in Greek philosophy. He explains:

Only then could it be decided whether European humanity bears within itself an absolute idea, rather than being merely an empirical anthropological type like "China" or "India"; it could be decided whether the spectacle of the Europeanization of all other civilizations bears witness to the rule of an absolute meaning, one which is proper to the sense, rather than to a historical non-sense, of the world.⁵

² Paul Valéry, "The Crisis of the Mind [1919]," in *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry, Volume 10: History and Politics*, transl. Denise Folliot and Jackson Mathews, New York, NY: Pantheon Books 1962, pp. 23-36; here p. 23.

³ Max Scheler, *Die Wissensformen und die Gesellschaft, Gesammelte Werke Band 8*, Bern, CH: Francke Verlag 1960, pp. 88-90.

⁴ José Ortega y Gasset, "Las Atlántidas (1924)," in *Obras Completas, Tomo III (1917-1928)*, Madrid, SP: Revista de Occidente 1966, pp. 281-316, here pp. 307-14.

⁵ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, transl. David Carr, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press 1970, p. 16.

Nor did an era of peace by any means dawn in the realm of geopolitics. On the contrary, the victorious powers continued their colonial policies with undiminished severity even after the Great War. For example, the British government violently suppressed the Indians' demands for independence through the Amritsar massacre in 1919. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire even opened up new opportunities for France and England to pursue their policies of imperial spheres of influence. The rise of fascism brought an end to the democratic upheavals following the Great War, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in Spain. In the 1930s, fascist Germany and Italy also entered the competition among imperialist powers. Mussolini invaded Ethiopia in 1935 under Emperor Haile Selassie, while Hitler's invasion of Poland marked the beginning of the war against the Slavic barbarians, aimed at expanding the German Reich eastward.

It was not until World War II that the end of Europe's geopolitical hegemony was finally sealed—an event that was perceptively recognized by non-European philosophies. Especially in Africa and Latin America, which had been repeatedly excluded from world history since Hegel, the decline of imperial Europe suddenly opened up a space to reaffirm their own cultural traditions. The Négritude movement laid an important foundation for the critique of Europe's racist colonialism that continues to the present day. In Latin America, the intellectual movement of the "Historia de las ideas" emerged, initiating a comprehensive research program about the extremely heterogeneous history of philosophy in Latin America in which indigenous and European traditions of thought intertwine in diverse ways. As Leopoldo Zea, the maestro of Mexican philosophy, emphasized, the crisis in Europe around 1945 enabled even the Creoles to discover the Americas—more precisely, to creatively appropriate the history of European philosophies, which had been transplanted into Latin American culture on American soil since the sixteenth century.⁶

⁶ Leopoldo Zea, *En Torno a una Filosofía Americana*, Mexico City, MX: Colegio de México 1945, *Jornadas* 52, pp. 16-7.

A Non-Eurocentric Philosophy of History? The Theory of the Axial Age and Its Postcolonial Critique

Although the emergence of postcolonial thought found some resonance in Europe after 1945—particularly within Jean-Paul Sartre's circle—a profound revision of Europe's Eurocentric self-image was largely absent from the mainstream of European philosophy. In the postwar period, European philosophy remained largely a monologue with itself. Against this backdrop, the significance of Jaspers' philosophy of history becomes immediately apparent in hindsight: In his 1949 book *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*,⁷ Jaspers was one of the few thinkers who philosophically reflected the challenges posed by Europe's geopolitical decline. Europe must—this was Jaspers' firm conviction—integrate itself into an interculturally constituted global society. To this end, however, a new philosophy of history was needed, one that goes beyond the tradition from Hegel to Husserl, in which Europe's superiority had been justified by invoking the exclusive origin of philosophy in ancient Greece. By way of his theory of the Axial Age, Jaspers dismantles the claim to a monopoly so far held by European philosophy, a claim that still underlay Husserl's idea of a "Europeanization" of humanity. Philosophy—according to Jaspers' well-known thesis—emerged between 700 and 200 BCE in at least three places: India, China, and the West, which, however, encompasses not only ancient Greece but also ancient Israel and Iran.

However, Jaspers' attempt to overcome the Eurocentrism of modern philosophies of history has hardly been taken up in Western philosophy since 1945. It was not until the 1970s that the theory of the Axial Age was adopted and further developed by macrosociology—specifically, by the research project largely initiated by Shmuel Eisenstadt and Johan Arnason. Since the late 1980s, Jaspers' theory of the Axial Age has also been taken up by currents in intercultural philosophy, including studies by Adhar Mall and Heiner Roetz, and by prominent contemporary philosophers such as Charley Taylor and Jürgen Habermas. Undoubtedly, these various interpretations are underpinned by the intention to

overcome the Eurocentrism of European narratives. However, Jaspers' works also contain problematic elements that call these intercultural openings into question. All peoples living outside the sphere of influence of Axial Age cultures are disparaged as *Naturvölker* (primitive peoples) (OG 7-8, 27). Furthermore, in the transition to modernity, the horizon of universal history narrows once again to Europe. For, according to Jaspers, the origins of modern science and technology—as well as political freedom—lie solely in Europe (OG 81-125). Last but not least, in his theory of modernity, Jaspers completely ignores the imperial expansions of the European powers. Similarly, Jürgen Habermas also remains subject to the Eurocentric narrowing of perspective in the theory of modernity.⁸ In contrast, Shmuel Eisenstadt has developed a theory of multiple modernities based on the theory of the Axial Age.⁹

Jaspers' philosophy of history has therefore come under fire from intercultural and postcolonial philosophies. For example, Rolf Eberfeld critically assesses the approaches of "global and entangled history," that is, intercultural philosophies that have recently begun to describe the historical developments of intellectual currents as tales of interconnectedness.¹⁰ Postcolonial and decolonial philosophies, on the other hand, have exposed the close interconnections between the European Enlightenment and colonialism and the imperialism of modernity. Walter Mignolo chronicles that the "darker side" of European modernity refers not only to the concrete colonial policies and economies of Europe's imperial powers, but also to the main strands of the Enlightenment's philosophical justifications.¹¹ For decades, a bitter dispute has

⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *Also a Philosophy of History, Volume 1: The Project of a Genealogy of Postmetaphysical Thinking; Volume 2: The Occidental Constellation of Faith and Knowledge; Volume 3: Rational Freedom. Traces of the Discourse on Faith and Knowledge*; transl. Ciaran Cronin, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2023, 2024, 2025.

⁹ Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus* 129/1 (Winter 2000), 1-29.

¹⁰ Rolf Eberfeld, *Philosophieren in einer globalisierten Welt: Wege zu einer transformativen Phänomenologie*, Freiburg, DE: Verlag Karl Alber 2017, pp. 232-3.

¹¹ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2011, pp. xix, 181-209.

⁷ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, transl. Michael Bullock, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953. [Henceforth cited as OG]

raged between defenders and postcolonial critics of European modernity over the founding figures of the Enlightenment. In this context, John Locke and Immanuel Kant, for example, appear on the one hand as the founders of human rights, and on the other as ideologues of colonialist racism. James Tully primarily initiated the debate over the colonialist elements in Locke's political philosophy;¹² and, in particular, African philosophers such as Emmanuel Eze have called for a critical examination of Kant's theory of race.¹³

The Authoritarian Turn in Contemporary Global Politics in Light of Jaspers' Later Political Philosophy

Meanwhile, the fault lines between Europe—or the West—and the so-called Global South have moved to the center of world politics. The current wars in Ukraine, the Middle East, and Africa are not merely about local conflicts but also about the struggle for a new world order. Moreover, in both the Global South and the West, the political ideals of the Enlightenment—human rights, democracy, and international law—are today being radically challenged by identity politics. For this reason, it is not only Western thinkers who are warning against anti-democratic movements. In his acceptance speech for the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade on 18 October 2020, the Indian philosopher and economist Amartya Sen emphatically made the warning:

The world does face today a pandemic of authoritarianism, as well as a pandemic of disease, which debilitates human life in distinct but interrelated ways.¹⁴

As is well known, the struggle between democracy and authoritarianism was already a central theme in

Jaspers' philosophy of history, which grew out of the experience of Germany's National Socialist regime. For *The Origin and Goal of History* is not merely a proposal for a new periodization of universal history, but a normatively oriented philosophy of history. In contrast to a purely historical interpretation of universal history, philosophy, following Hegel, is "*its own time apprehended in thoughts*."¹⁵ In this sense, Jaspers also views his philosophy of history as a diagnosis of his own time. He elaborates:

The purpose of an overall philosophical view of history, such as we are seeking to arrive at, is to illumine our own situation within the totality of history. It serves to light up the consciousness of the present epoch and shows us where we stand. [OG 81]

Admittedly, a philosophy of history must also be grounded in empirical data in order to avoid slipping into fiction. However, according to Jaspers, the normative perspectives of a historically oriented analysis of the present can only be developed through philosophical reflection. The theory of the Axial Age, therefore, is based both on research in history and cultural studies and on philosophically grounded normative evaluations (OG 1, 9).

To properly understand Jaspers' analysis of the present, it is necessary to take another look at the theory of the Axial Age. For, unlike Eisenstadt or Habermas, Jaspers makes a strict distinction between the Axial Age and the new great empires, which are usually referred to in macrosociology as axial cultures. According to Jaspers, the controversy among schools regarding the Axial Age produced a social anarchy that served as fertile ground for the emergence of new great empires. Jaspers explains:

In the end, the collapse took place. From about 200 B.C. onwards great political and spiritual unifications and dogmatic configurations held the field. The Axial Period ended with the formation of great States, which forcibly realised its unity (the unified Chinese Empire of Tsin-Shi-Hwang-Ti, the Maurya dynasty in India, the Roman Empire). [OG 194]

For Jaspers, the transition from the Axial Age—a period in which entirely novel ways of thinking were explored—to authoritarian empires provides an

¹² James Tully, "Rediscovering America: The Two Treatises and Aboriginal Rights," in *An Approach to Political Philosophy: Locke in Contexts*, ed. James Tully, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 1993, pp. 137-76.

¹³ Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, "The Color of Reason: the Ideas of 'Race' in Kant's Anthropology," in *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Emmanuel C. Eze, Oxford, UK: Wiley Blackwell 1997, pp. 103-40.

¹⁴ Amartya Sen, *Books and Freedom*, Acceptance Speech, Friedenspreis 2020 des Deutschen Buchhandels, pp. 11-4, here p. 14. <https://www.friedenspreis-des-deutschen-buchhandels.de/en/alle-preistraeger-seit-1950/2020-2029/amartya-sen>. [The download link is located immediately above Sen's audio file.]

¹⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, transl. Thomas M. Knox, ed. Stephen Houlgate, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press 2008, p. 15.

important backdrop for understanding the present: While modern science and technology have indeed promoted the unity of humanity, it is only in the modern era that one can speak of world history in any real sense. At the same time, however, science and technology have given rise to new dangers. First, modern global society is characterized by painful asymmetry. Jaspers points out:

Only those peoples who make Western science and technology their own...are still capable of playing an active part in determining the destiny of man. [OG 61]

Second, the dominance of modern science and technology—which subjects all areas of life, including morality and religion, to its own logic—has given rise to a nihilism that threatens to crush the moral and spiritual achievements of the Axial Age. Against this backdrop, an almost apocalyptic struggle is unfolding in the modern era between democratic movements and totalitarian systems that rely on modern science and technology to assert their power. Jaspers forecasts:

All the phenomena of the present have the appearance of a preparatory struggle for the points of departure of the final battle for the planetary order. Contemporary world politics are seeking a basis for the ultimate settlement, whether this is to be reached by military or peaceful means. Until this has been achieved, all conditions and power relationships are temporary. Hence the present appears as a transition to this final planetary order, even if the exact opposite develops first: e.g. the radical interruption of communication on earth for the majority of people by totalitarian regimes. We shall now proceed to a more detailed analysis of the tendencies which are leading out of this transition period into the future. [OG 196]

For Jaspers, the looming conflict between a world empire and a liberal world order stands in a "historical analogy with the end of the Axial Period" (OG 194), that

may, perhaps, cast some light on our future, despite the fact that this will look quite different. It is, at the same time, a warning for all who desire the liberty of man. [OG 195]

While every analogy contains an element of similarity, it also contains an insurmountable dissimilarity. Therefore, according to Jaspers, the current search for a world order represents a challenge that is entirely novel compared to antiquity. For, as Jaspers explicitly emphasizes—despite upholding his thesis that philosophy has multiple points of origin—the idea

of political freedom is an exclusively European idea. He writes:

Political freedom has only been tried in the West. But most of the realisations have come to naught. They teach us what caused the collapse of freedom in Athens, in Rome. The question that is today exciting Europe and mankind is whether the road leads on to liberty, or whether it passes first into the annihilation of liberty for an unpredictable period. [OG 153]

Since, in the modern era, a political order must no longer be established merely for the polis or a particular empire, but for humanity in its entirety, Jaspers argues that a completely new challenge arises, namely, whether European states can persuade peoples of other cultures to adopt the political ideals of the European Enlightenment. He explains:

The road to world order leads via the awakening and self-understanding of political liberty in as many countries as possible. This situation is without analogy in the conditions of transition to earlier world empires after the Axial Period. The idea and the task were scarcely conscious at that time; the reality of free States did not exist amongst the powers that were coming to sovereignty.

World order today, if it is realised at all, will start from the federalism of the States which are already free. It will be successful only if it exercises a sufficiently strong attraction to lead others to follow it out of conviction, and peacefully to join in with the world order which brings liberty, wealth and spiritual creativeness, the potentiality of humanity in its plenitude and multiformity. [OG 203]

As this brief overview makes clear, in *The Origin and Goal of History*, Jaspers describes the struggle for the future world order primarily from the perspective of European history. In the hope that the peoples of the Global South will embrace the idea of political freedom, European colonialism is completely ignored. Without ever mentioning British colonial rule or the humiliation of China by the European powers in the nineteenth century, Jaspers does speculate that China and India might play a key role in global society in the future when writing:

Alongside the existing Great Powers of today, which industrial development has made mighty, there are the powers of the future; above all, China, which through its raw materials, human masses, aptitudes, cultural heritage and geographical position may perhaps become a key to political events at a not too distant date; in addition, there is India, which like a separate

continent, on the fundament of a unique spiritual heritage handed down by its various peoples, presents the possibility of a power developing which, despite all movements of liberation, is still in fact slumbering there. [OG 201]

However, in his later work, Jaspers impressively corrected the Eurocentric bias in his philosophy of history. The looming nihilism posed by scientific and technological civilization must—according to Jaspers' hope—be overcome through a philosophical renewal of the religious and metaphysical currents of the axial cultures. From this perspective, Jaspers presented intercultural studies in his 1957 work *Die Großen Philosophen*, focusing on both the founding figures of the Axial Age (Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus) and the tradition-forming metaphysicians, including Parmenides, Plato, and Plotinus, as well as Laozi and Nagarjuna.¹⁶ I have elsewhere presented perspectives from the philosophy of religion on a global peace order in which the dogmatic claims to revelation are radically dismantled.¹⁷

On the other hand, the idea of political freedom—a thesis to which Jaspers remains committed even in his later work—was developed exclusively in Europe. However, in addressing the global implementation of the political ideals of the European Enlightenment, Jaspers now explicitly confronts the realities of European colonialism. In his 1961 work *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen. Politisches Bewußtsein in unserer Zeit*, Jaspers does not merely develop an ethical-political analysis of the possibility of humanity's self-annihilation through nuclear weapons—an analysis that anticipates some of Hans Jonas' ideas. Rather, in his initial assessment of the global political situation, Jaspers places European colonialism at the center. He notes:

The present world situation is the result of four centuries of European expansion.¹⁸

¹⁶ Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, transl. Ralph Manheim, New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962.

¹⁷ Hans Schelkshorn, "Karl Jaspers: Philosophical Faith and the Vision of an Intercultural Democratic Global Order," in *Religious Experience, Secular Reason and Politics around 1945: Sources for Rethinking Religion and Spirituality in Contemporary Societies*, eds. Hans Schelkshorn and Herman Westerink, Paderborn, DE: Brill Schöningh 2024, pp. 91-115.

¹⁸ Karl Jaspers, *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1961, p. 67. [Henceforth cited as AB]

Jaspers is evidently responding here to the decolonization of Africa and Southeast Asia following World War II. In this context, Jaspers now exposes in a merciless manner Europe's contradictions between the proclamation of the universality of human rights and the racist ideologies of colonialism. He elaborates:

Decisive for this colonial age was the fact that Europeans did not regard non-Europeans as human beings like themselves. The biblical view of the unity of the race held good in theory, but in practice the foreign peoples were not only not equal, they were without any rights whatever...they were objects of exploitation. No authority with political power kept the Europeans from forcing these people to do their bidding, or from killing them outright. [AB 69]

Jaspers by no means overlooks the fact that there was also criticism of racist colonialism in Europe, as well as a strong interest in foreign cultures. Yet these critical voices were unable to halt the colonial expansion of the European powers. Moreover, as Jaspers states without any illusions, even after the processes of decolonization, the experience of European colonialism remains deeply embedded in the souls of the people of the Global South. His words accurately describe current world affairs:

The consequence of this colonial process of four centuries was a hatred of Europeans by all other nations on Earth. It was inevitable, since they were deemed inferior races, since the spirit of their native cultures was slighted, since their exposure to ruinous technology kept them for a long time in humiliating impotence. For generations this hatred has been bred into them. They have become rightly sensitive, so much so that today the slightest reminder of their past will rekindle their indignation. A basic reality of mankind's present existence is this open or hidden hate of Westerners—both Europeans and Americans—in all who are not Westerners. [AB 70]

As Jaspers explains in great detail, the legacy of European colonialism threatens to undermine the hope for a liberal world order—one that, as mentioned, is possible only through postcolonial societies' adoption of the European ideal of political liberty. Jaspers therefore presents a broad spectrum of ideas on how Europe and the United States can reduce the pent-up hatred toward the West. The first and fundamental step is, of course,

the actual and unqualified liberation of all colonial areas. [AB 74]

However, according to Jaspers, political decolonization must be supplemented by new forms of economic relations. For, as he argues,

people resent not only the political power of the West but its economic power. Their experience with this strikes them, often justly, as exploitation, oppression, fraud. Taxation seems like tribute to them, the procurement of raw materials from their territories, with the help of freely hired and paid native labor, like robbery and enslavement. [AB 78]

In this context, Jaspers clearly rejects the ideology of unrestricted global trade. Nor should support for the economies of postcolonial states be left solely to international organizations, which have little power to enforce their policies. Rather, according to Jaspers, the asymmetrical relationships between Western corporations and postcolonial societies must be overcome through active economic policies implemented by Western states themselves. He proclaims:

And in foreign policy the renunciation of colonialism calls for private enterprise abroad to be controlled by the renouncing nations; they can no longer allow their citizens to contract freely for the uncontrolled exploitation of the natural resources of formerly colonial areas. In fact, economics can no longer be separated from politics. The method of winning global economic success without accepting political responsibility, of economic domination and political "neutrality" — "dollar imperialism" — has become illusory. [AB 78]

Jaspers' philosophy of global politics has taken on new relevance in view of the current worldwide rise of authoritarian systems. Humanity today does indeed seem to stand at a crossroads between a world order based on human rights and international law and totalitarian authoritarianism. However, the battle lines in the struggle over the political and economic world order no longer run between Western states and the Global South. For authoritarianism has now taken hold even in the core states of Western democracies. Conversely, numerous movements outside Europe are fighting for democratic reforms — a struggle that has shaped political conflicts in many regions of the world since the late nineteenth century. For this reason, the philosophies of Asia, Africa, and Latin America have engaged in a continuous and critical engagement with the idea of human rights since the nineteenth century.

Against this backdrop, Jaspers' vision of global politics requires certain revisions, despite the later criticism of (neo-)colonialist power structures. Certainly, as Jaspers perceptively recognized early on, the liberal world order also depends on whether Western states can convince postcolonial societies of the political ideals of the European Enlightenment, despite the legacy of colonialism. Neither the United States nor Europe has risen to this epochal challenge in recent decades. On the contrary, the wars against Iraq and, more recently, against Iran — both of which violated international law — as well as neocolonial policies in Africa, have permanently discredited the credibility of Western states when it comes to human rights, democracy, and international law. Moreover, even if the modern concept of human rights and the philosophical foundations of international law can — for good reasons — be understood as a European achievement, the promotion of a liberal world order cannot be reduced to the mere adoption of the political ideals of the European Enlightenment by postcolonial societies.

These are complex questions that cannot be addressed in detail within this framework. I can only briefly outline my perspective here in two short theses. The modern idea of human rights consists of two components: moral universalism and a contract-theoretical conception of the state. Both elements are already found in the philosophies of the Axial Age — not only in the West, but explicitly in China too. The synthesis of moral universalism and contractualist state theory does indeed appear to be an innovation of modern European political philosophy. A similar constellation emerges regarding the question of having international law. As the peace treaty between Ramesses II and Hattusili III in 1259 B.C. demonstrates, international treaties already existed among the archaic empires. A philosophical justification of international law appears to have been developed in Europe only in the sixteenth century by Francisco de Vitoria. This is because ancient Greek philosophy was focused on the polis, while the Stoics largely accepted the Roman Empire without criticism as a political framework.

The philosophical foundations of the political ideals of the European Enlightenment are — as especially philosophies from postcolonial regions of the world have lucidly revealed — in each case amalgamated with colonialist and racist elements. Above all, Western defenders of the European

Enlightenment should therefore have an inherent interest in engaging in dialogue with philosophies outside Europe in order to critically examine ideological or problematic elements of the concepts of human rights and international law. From this perspective, I have presented elsewhere a self-critical defense of Francisco de Vitoria, who is celebrated in Europe as the founder of international law but, in postcolonial thought, is regarded as the founder of coloniality.¹⁹ Conversely, for postcolonial philosophies that continue the critical reinterpretation of the political ideals of the European Enlightenment, dialogue with European thought has also taken on new significance. For just as in Western states, authoritarian ideologies have gained power in other regions of the world too—ideologies that no longer merely scrutinize human rights and international law for Eurocentric distortions but reject them entirely. Sen's reference to a pandemic of authoritarianism is based on various forms of identity politics, particularly

ideologies of religious or cultural nationalism, which are linked to a policy of imperial spheres of influence.

In today's multipolar world, as the policies of Russia, China, and Iran demonstrate, imperial expansion and military intervention are no longer the monopoly of the West. This means that preserving and further developing a liberal world order—one that takes both cultural differences and economic asymmetries seriously—requires intercultural dialogues and alliances between emancipatory philosophies and movements from all regions of the world. With his vision of a global community of communication—a vision that had already been foreshadowed by the movements of the Axial Age—Jaspers opened up a new horizon shortly after the civilizational rupture in the mid-twentieth century, one in which human rights, democracy, and international law can continue to be defended against neo-imperialist ideologies also in the future.

¹⁹ Hans Schelkshorn, *Rethinking European Modernity: Reason, Power, and Coloniality in Early Modern Thought*, London, UK: Bloomsbury 2024, pp. 139-88.