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**HUMANKIND AND ORGANISATION OF CULTURAL VALUES  
AND HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE: PROMISING TIES SEARCH**

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses the potential of the idea of humankind for structuring historical knowledge and determining the direction of historical studies. The discussion is based on the ideas proposed by Jörn Rüsen. He discusses the role of humankind in connection with the search for ways to make sense of traumatic historical experience and to find techniques to overcome ethnocentrism. Rüsen identifies the concept of humankind as a historical principle and claims that the priority in selecting of this principle depends on its role in the implementation of the epistemological and cultural functions. He believes that the idea of humankind can provide a new mode of universal history and a new culture of recognition. The paper argues that the idea of humankind should be regarded as the determining condition for recovery (or preservation) of historical sense, as the main alternative to it is a certain form of ethnocentrism. The ability of this idea to solve these tasks is connected with determination of its functions in the structure of historical knowledge and identification of the type of plot structures suitable for its implementation. Humankind should play a regulative rather than constitutive function in relation to historical knowledge. It means that the mission of humankind is not to shape the content of our stories, so confirming its status as a cultural value by this content, but to provide forms of presentation and interpretation of all historical plots to ensure their cross-cultural significance.

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**Keywords:** Jörn Rüsen; humankind; ethnocentrism; cultural value; trauma; mourning; historical narrative.



## 1. Introduction

In his recent reflections on the prospects of historical thinking Jörn Rüsen notes that the role of the new mode of universal history is rooted in the concept of humankind (Rüsen, 2004a). He treats the concept of humankind as a principle (Rüsen, 2004b) or a historical category (Rüsen, 2012) that should be applied to the organization of topical discourses on historical studies. According to Rüsen, ‘such principles, each singular principle as well as all principles as a whole, constitute history as a discipline’ (Rüsen, 2005). He speaks of the search for definition of such principles as being dependent on the cultural and practical significance of historical knowledge. Therefore, “historical narration brings about the orientation of practical life in time – an orientation without which it is impossible for humans to find their way” (Rüsen, 1987). In other words, Rüsen indicates that the principles of historical knowledge are to provide implementation of not only epistemological but also cultural and practical functions (Rüsen, 2005).

Moreover, Rüsen believes that to integrate the concept of humankind as a historical category into the works of historians is to contribute to the creation of a new culture of recognition, which is ‘the most important task of scholarly works in the humanities in general, and historical studies in particular, at the beginning of the twenty-first century’ (Rüsen, 2004a). This means that the concept of humankind should not only act as a link between epistemology and cultural practices but also provide a productive transition from one space to another and back.

So, the concept of humankind as a cultural and a historical principle must simultaneously implement two large-scale and different tasks. As a historical category it is to provide a new mode of universal history, while as a basic cultural value, to provide a new culture of recognition. This approach raises an important question. What is the novelty of a concept of humankind as kind of cultural value in relation to historical thinking?

## 2. Research Methods

In this study we used the following methods: the critical method, which allowed setting ways and limits of using the idea of humankind in the structure and functioning of cultural values and historical studies; the comparative approach for the characteristic of the basic features and specifics of modern ideas about the role of historical knowledge in culture and the influence of cultural contexts on the kinds of configuration of historical writing; the hermeneutical method, which helped to reveal implicit cultural and epistemological contexts of the functioning of trauma and mourning and their role in the change of the basic cultural values.

We used Rüsen’s ideas about the epistemological and cultural role of the concepts of humankind, trauma and mourning, in particular, their role in the formation of identity, and the impact of the existing forms of historical knowledge on the occurrence of ethnocentrism.

## 3. Results

### 5.1. Why Humankind?

It is reasonable to assume that discussion of idea of humankind and its role in historical writing require pre-explicated contexts in which Rüsen uses the concept of humankind. This concept appears in at least

two different, yet interrelated, contexts. The first context is the analysis of the conditions, opportunities, and prospects for rethinking the basic principles of historical sense generation triggered by the Holocaust as 'the most radical negative historical experience in recent European history' (Rüsen, 2004a). When summed up, the key concepts are as follows. In his reflections Rüsen starts with determining the status of this event. He speaks of the trauma and emphasizes its nature that creates a 'black hole' of sense and meaning, which dissolves every concept of historical interpretation (Rüsen, 2004a).

In this situation Rüsen has grounds for classifying historical experiences into 'normal', 'critical', and 'catastrophic'. Accordingly, an event becomes traumatic if it acquires the 'catastrophic' features, that is, if it destroys the traditional patterns of historical and cultural meaning without plausible interpretations of what happened (Rüsen, 2004a).

His thesis about the destructive nature of 'catastrophic' experience has another aspect that can be treated as a turning point in Rüsen's logic. This is a question about the epistemological and ideological evaluation of possible strategies of further detraumatization or interpretation of traumatic events. Rüsen thoroughly lists and describes the types of such strategies he refers to as detraumatization by historicization (Rüsen, 2004a). These classifications are intended to show that such strategies are inefficient in task completion, for they are not able, first, to retain the traumatic effect of the historical experience, and thus, second, to convert it into a trigger for rethinking the value orientations of contemporary culture. In other words, expected interpretation consists in preserving the awareness of uniqueness of traumatic events, their crucial role in culture and historical cognition, thus preventing their conversion to 'normal' historical experience.

Rüsen believes that task completion is to be stipulated by a procedure he calls 'secondary traumatization' that ensures a 'new historical narrative, in which the narrated traumatic events leave traces in the patterns of significance itself.' (Rüsen, 2004a). This leads to the concept of mourning that Rüsen describes as a new mode of making sense of history (Rüsen, 2004a). Figuratively speaking, mourning becomes a way to attract attention or to revive the past in the present. However, it is not a mere grieving about a loss, as it aims not to fill gaps in the incomplete picture of historical reality, but to function as a trigger for its rethinking and, what is more, to set its vector. Epistemologically mourning can be seen as the launch of a mechanism that brings back the past experiences that were suppressed or otherwise interpreted by the collective memory or official historiography. It can be said that the memory of the past becomes mourning due to its specific role.

In his definition of mourning Rüsen uses the concept of loss. 'Mourning would have to consist of acknowledging the loss' (Rüsen, 2004a). The key point here is that the nature of the traumatic event (the Holocaust) indicates the nature of the loss. 'Humankind as a normative concept is lost or absent in historical experience' (Rüsen, 2007). Thus, Rüsen raises the question of the role of humankind in the context of a discussion of the role of traumatic events for historical consciousness and historical identity. Rüsen treats humankind as a consequence of discussing the type and role of the trauma rather than an a priori orientation predetermining this course. In other words, traumatic historical experiences not only destroy the traditional patterns of historical and cultural meaning but also can change our fundamental values and become an 'effective stimulus to accentuate the validity of an orientation towards humankind' (Rüsen, 2004a).

In his article about trauma and mourning Rüsén uses metaphorical expressions to describe humankind, defining it as ‘presence in its absence’ (Rüsén, 2004a). His interpretations of this metaphor are more focused on humankind as a fundamental value designed to shape and guide our actions and goals. The way of conversion of humankind into a historical category is raised and specified by the author in another context, in his search for ways to overcome ethnocentrism.

Overcoming ethnocentrism in historical consciousness and historical knowledge is one of the key topics in Rüsén’s recent works. According to Rüsén, ethnocentrism ‘presents one’s own form of life as humane, civilized, and advanced, whereas those of others are either not human (as in the case of archaic societies) or they lack elements of humanity’ (Rüsén, 2012). The ethnocentric view of the world is stipulated not only by the official ideology adopted by a society in certain historical circumstances; it is rooted, Rüsén underlines, in the basic conditions of constituting any individual and collective identity, which means that one’s own self is defined by comparison with others and drawing relevant borderlines (Rüsén, 2007). Identification becomes more ethnocentric, if such borderlines become more value-laden, which is manifested in the asymmetrical distribution of positive and negative traits.

Ethnocentrism, according to Rüsén, is not only a key cultural value, but also a basic category of historical sense and historical discourse. As a category of historical thinking, ethnocentrism forms corresponding historical plots, provides selection of empirical material, and, furthermore, blocks the possibility of differing interpretations. In relation to historical writing, ethnocentrism is a type of unconscious archetype to provide the perception and creation of certain forms of historical narratives as conventional and is even identified with the essence of historical knowledge as such. Thus, ‘by this logic of identity-formation a fundamental and universal clash of civilizations is constituted’ (Rüsén, 2004a) at the level of the basic cultural values as well as of the dominant forms of historical discourse.

The ways to overcome ethnocentric logic, as outlined by Rüsén, appear as a peculiar inversion of its formative methods. He formulates them as three principles: that of equality or principle of mutual recognition of differences, of historical development or revision of the official versions of national histories that presented history as a continuous unifying and teleological process, and of multiperspectivity and polycentrism (Rüsén, 2007; Rüsén, 2004a). The principle of multiperspectivity and polycentrism develops the thesis on equality and thereby implies the exercise of the right that ‘each nation and even many regions have their own perspective representing the past’ (Rüsén, 2007).

However, in Rüsén, multiperspectivity and multitude of voices raise the problem of preserving the unity of history. One of the consequences of multiperspectivity is general relativism that ‘would open the door for an unrestricted ‘clash of civilizations’ (Rüsén, 2004a). What does it mean, provided that relativism is an unavoidable condition for the modern picture of the world? Moreover, it was possible to recognize multiperspectivity only by rejecting the unifying epistemological and cultural potential of grand narratives.

The possible answer can be found in Rüsén’s thesis that use of non-Western ‘tradition in topical discourses of history is highly problematic since it follows the traces of ethnocentrism, whether the authors know it or not’ (Rüsén, 2012). In other words, the call for mutual recognition of differences can transform into a simple inversion of the opposition of the dominant/suppressed voices or general ethnocentrism dissemination. Then, Rüsén’s concern about the growth of such relativism can be justified. It requires alternatives to the negative consequences of multiperspectivity. In this context, he reiterates the

concept of humankind that is to become the principle to ‘mediate and even synthesize the different perspective’ (Rüsen, 2004a).

## **5.2. Ways of Historical Thinking from the Standpoint of Humankind, or how It Could Work**

Rüsen’s reasoning about humankind as an basic cultural value and organizing principle of historical thinking allows outlining both the content of this concept and its role in the structure and functioning of cultural values and historical studies. Though this article does not offer a complete description (neither does Rüsen), it provides the following interpretations of this concept. These interpretations can be considered as interrelated, yet emphasizing different aspects. Then, in the context of argumentation about trauma and mourning, the restoration of humanity is viewed as the recognition of the intrinsic value (dignity) of any human being. In the context of overcoming ethnocentrism humankind recognizes the equal value of any culture or civilization, and hence orients to dialogue between people and cultures as equals as a key means of intercultural communication.

As Hayden White once noted, ‘the encodation of events in terms of such plot-structure is one of the ways that a culture has of making sense of both personal and public pasts’ (White, 1978). The reason is that ‘the historian shares with his audience general notions of the forms that significant human situations must take by virtue of his participation in the specific processes of sense-making which identify him as a member of one cultural endowment than another’ (White, 1978). This idea about the links of cultural contexts (as cultural determinants or cultural functions) and historical knowledge has already become commonplace, but some aspects should be reiterated and even enhanced.

First of all, it is possible to claim that both the interest the past and various ways of interpreting it emerge only due to certain social and cultural needs. Figuratively speaking, the past as such becomes meaningful not out of its mere existence, but because it is necessary for solving certain cultural problems. As Rüsen underlines, ‘historical narration has the general function of orienting practical life in time by mobilizing the memory of temporal experience by developing a concept of continuity and by stabilization of identity (Rüsen, 1987). Therefore, periodic explication of cultural contexts becomes necessary not to purify historical discourse from the prejudice of the epoch, but to use the cultural contexts efficiently to combine the truth claims and public demand for historical knowledge.

Then the issue of the cultural value of historical knowledge can not be considered neutral to this knowledge itself. Then, the identification of cultural functions or a cultural determinants of historical writing (both implicit and explicit) becomes important not only for better defining its cultural values, but also for understanding its internal structure. Following White, cultural contexts influences not only the content, but also the kinds of configuration of historical writing. White distinguished such kinds of plot structures as tragedy, comedy, irony/satire and romance and connected the use of such types of stories, in particular, with the fact that ‘these concepts are part of our generally cultural and specifically literary heritage’ (White, 1978).

What do these ideas provide for the analysis of the problems under discussion? If ethnocentrism determines identity constitution and the related historical discourse, the loss of trust to such identity models provoked by events and processes of the previous century inevitably entails the loss of historical sense or, at least, makes urgent the question of why write stories. On the other hand, as Rüsen emphasizes in his reflections on detraumatization by historization, it was questionable whether the traditional forms

of historical discourse were able to cope with recent historical events and recognize them as a trigger to the revision of key cultural values of modern civilization. Thus, the effect of catastrophe, trauma, and mourning should be connected not only with the importance of the past-century events, but also with the feeling of the lost efficiency of traditional categories of historical sense in their ability to integrate those events without losing their explosive force.

So, the events of the twentieth century are to be viewed as a turning point in the revision of both fundamental cultural values and basic historical categories. The events of the twentieth century are a trigger to seeing them in a new light in the context of the lost humankind or an appeal to it. In turn, this new vision allows and even requires new interpretations of such extreme events. The traditional way of historical sense-generation is questioned because its foundation (ethnocentrism) shatters and collapses. Such a situation allows understanding in what the value and novelty of the idea of humankind can consist in relation to historical studies.

The first reason is that this concept can be viewed as a condition for restoring the value of historical studies and historical sense in modern culture. Moreover, Concept (or principle) of humankind can be considered not as one of the possible ways to make history writing meaningful, but as a vital condition, for the only conceivable alternative to it is ethnocentrism. The second reason is that the idea of humankind can provide the restoration of the unity of history. In terms of criticism of grand narratives this unity does not imply another universal system of history, but assigns an all- and cross-cultural role to certain historical topics or kinds of configuration of certain historical plots. The concept of humankind can provide selection of such topics or such ways of configuration. The third reason is that epistemologically the potential of humankind can be associated not only with a mere need for 'making sense' of extreme events of our recent past, but also with generating new modes of historical writing as such.

How is it possible or how can the concept of humankind be implemented as a basic historical category? Ihab Hassan once noted that 'limited critical pluralism is in some measure a reaction against the radical relativism' (Hassan, 1987). This thesis means that overcoming any forms of ethnocentrism as a condition for relativism should start with critical reflection. In other words, as any history somehow affects relationships with others, it is necessary to expand the field of view or 'to give others a voice of their own' (Rüsen, 2004b). According to Rüsen, this implies comparison of different historical perspectives and interpretations, which is to integrate the 'elements of methodologically rationalized empathy into the work of the historian' (Rüsen, 2004b).

Rüsen believes that such empathy can be implemented through a different interpretation of cultural differences. It should not be based on the belief in the essential uniqueness of a particular culture, but built in the awareness of cultural particularity as a 'composition of different elements each or at least most of which can be found in other cultures as well' (Rüsen, 2004b). This approach apparently allows presenting 'the otherness of different cultures as a mirror, which allows a better self-understanding' (Rüsen, 2007). When and how does it work? It can be assumed that as long as we focus on the histories of other cultures, this methodology allows overcoming the vision of others in the light of our own cultural superiority. Others are either like us (or we are like others), if any culture consists of similar elements, or is equal to us in its cultural identity and cultural originality, if we abandon certain teachings about the universal historical progress.

The question is how the concept of humankind works, if stories discuss interrelations with others, especially when stories serve as direct or indirect conditions or methods of constituting one's own identity? How can they integrate the non-ethnocentric vision that overcomes the discourse using such approaches as 'on the one side' and 'on the other side'? Representation of humankind (in the form of humanity or intercultural dialogue) as a theme of historical writing will be valuable as a unique historical experience, yet lacks versatility. Our stories show violence, conflict, and dominance as the predominant form of 'real' cross-cultural interaction. Therefore, descriptions of the direct embodiment of humankind in human history remain isolated historical plots. Moreover, Rüsen's reflections on historization of traumatic events shows how different strategies of historization fails to provide the anticipated explosive force. The desire to scatter direct evaluations in historical texts can hardly be efficient. This approach would rather lead to presentism and general anti-historicism, thus creating new myths and ideological distortions. And of course, Rüsen's thesis on humankind as a condition of restoring the unity of history can not be read as a call for another grand narrative in the form of a teleologically oriented 'universal history'. As Keith Jenkins speaks: 'Postmodernism's anti-essentialism and anti-foundationalism empties out *all* intrinsic meanings and values from everything: nothing *intrinsic* is left anywhere. Which means that any putative intrinsic meanings and values are always an imposition from outside' (Jenkins, 2007).

Therefore, if humankind is treated as a condition for re-writing of both painful and urgent topics and traditional historical plots, it can only be done in the following way. In terms of Immanuel Kant, humankind should be treated as a regulative rather than constitutive concept. Humankind does not function as an immediate content of our stories, but gives a position or direction for us to relate to any content of any story. It means that the task of humankind as of a new regulative concept is to answer the question of *how* to write, not *what* to write. Thus, the concept of humankind will work if it secures a change in types of configuration or kinds of stories. Conversely, only a change in frameworks of historical writing will make the concept of humankind viable.

#### **4. Conclusion**

As stated above, humankind should be viewed as a perspective to interpret the past rather than a topic for historical writings. In other words, the problem is not the development of humankind in history, but the lesson that should be learned from the past, if any. Therefore, the mission of humankind is not to become another real or potential goal of world history or one more kind of human values among the others, but to provide us with another vision of the reality (and the past) and a more productive link between values and knowledge. It is possible to say that the idea of humankind not only leads to new modes of historical writing but also provides a broader view of things. This idea allows expanding our knowledge of what should be considered the effects of the activities of certain social institutions, and the consequences of certain decisions and actions. It provides us moral and cognitive sensitivity in evaluating and interpreting the events and processes that are referred to as history.

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