

Foreword

This is a history of the present, in light of yesterday, with an eye to tomorrow.

We live in uncertain times. Complex times too. The speed of the news is breathtaking. Constantly we are caught off guard by events we did not see coming. Repugnant attacks that kill innocent people. The climate that is changing. New technologies that open unprecedented horizons. A virus that is uprooting the daily lives of millions worldwide. Newcomers popping up in the smallest of our villages. An American president inciting a mob to assault the seat of American government. Life used to be simpler, we often sigh.

It doesn't. We are not living in unique times. The world has not gone crazy. Claiming such a thing may seem strange when we reread the above paragraph. But often we forget to ask history if what we experience as new today is really as new as we think. The past is often not part of the map with which we find our way in today's world, let alone the one with which we face tomorrow's world. Yet the past is the only guide to the future we have.

Worlds of uncertainty have emerged now and then in the past. The impression that the world is complex, unpredictable, entirely new and never before seen in the course of time, it too has surfaced in earlier times. History is a long, slow river. But sometimes waves bring it into a torrent that washes away our familiar environment. For some, that opens up boundless perspectives. Others feel lost, like shipwrecked without a foothold.

This is what happened again in recent decades. In the 1970s, history started to speed up again. The world became smaller as globalization brought it into our living rooms. The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union gave way to a seemingly unpredictable power play between major and secondary powers, sometimes working together but often colliding. The computer penetrated every pore of our society, turning the workplace, and with it our daily lives, into a roller coaster. By the 1990s, those waves had become a torrent, radically changing the large environment of world politics and the small environment of our daily lives.

In 2008, I published *History of Tomorrow's World*. It aimed at connecting the present with the past in order to give some relief to the map with which we look for a path towards tomorrow. It also ventured a prediction. As far as history could be our guide, we had better assume that we were heading for turbulent times. It had only just reached bookstores when the world plunged into the Great Recession. In Europe this was followed by a banking and debt crisis, which was only overcome a decade later. Then Europe was in the midst of a refugee and asylum crisis. When that subsided, the world was hit by the new coronavirus, which caused the most serious economic crisis in over a century. And parallel to those crises came waves of protest, one after another.

So it's time to take stock again, of the large environment of world politics and the small environment of our daily lives. Between the two there is no watertight barrier, as we will see again. Choices are always present. These choices will define what tomorrow will look like.

No one can predict how the world of 2100 will look back on that of today. After all, the future cannot be predicted. It can be made, moulded, modelled.

For we are not willfully at the mercy of the flow of time.

Brussel — Aix-en-Issart, January 2021