Is global history possible? This question seems fairly easy to answer inasmuch as the concept, “global history”, exists and has been used by historians and historiographers to characterize a range of publications that can all be seen, read and studied at any library - works that are a monument to the fact that it is possible. As emphasized by Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau it is therefore more interesting to examine what the possible is - and is not - and what makes it so different from alternative ways of writing history that it requires its own unique name.

According to a recent piece of historiography the concept was invented and developed in the US. That happened in wake of William McNeill’s work, *The Rise of the West*, from 1963. McNeill had the ambition to write a truly global world history, which emphasized the interdependence of people across cultures, countries and continents - as opposed to the old Spengler-Toynbee approach, namely that various civilizations had undergone essentially different and independent lines of development. It was indeed McNeill’s concept of “cultural encounters” which became the first well-known cornerstone of the genre; that became evident after his colleague from Chicago, Professor Leften Stavrianos popularized the concept of global history. That does not seem to have changed much. At least McNeill’s idea of “cultural encounters” occurs very much related to Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau’s characterization of global history today as a field which - as minimum - has to emphasize “links, connections and interactions” across borders of various kinds. Like “cross-cultural interactions”. And maybe that is more than enough to describe what the possible is.

My contribution to this session is therefore rather to ask: Why did the genre appear at all? Did it really happen more or less coincidently when two colleagues from Chicago decided to invent it? And did it survive only because it seemed to fit well with the “borderless age” of the “current phase of economic globalization” mentioned by Michihiro Okamoto and Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau?

In other words: What was the exact purpose of introducing it? And do we know some practical attempts to write a piece of global history that
went terribly wrong - so that we can at least have a glimpse of what could be the not-possible?

First of all: If one takes a careful look at outdated history journals it is does not take long to discover that the concept already existed in the 1940’s, though it was not used frequently and did not characterize a well-defined genre at the time. Secondly: Even if the concept was not in use, older pieces of history could still be global history, if we use Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau’s cautious definition of the genre to analyze it.

In that case, the number of works that can be labeled global history suddenly grows and a certain pattern seems to occur - one that can explain when and why historians invented global history. But also a pattern that contradicts with Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau’s final remark, that global history “is not destined to replace other ways to conceive history”. That might be right today, but it does certainly not correspond with the time, when it came into being.

In my view, global history should be seen as a historically specific genre developed in wake of World War II and Decolonization when there was a political need for getting rid of ethnocentric approaches to history by emphasizing everything that bound people in the world together rather than what separated them. In fact this need was so outspoken that politicians were willing to go a long way to make this new kind of history mainstream in the educational systems in most of the world. Not a mission impossible inasmuch as this new alternative approach to history - as I see it - was invented and promoted by the United Nations and it affiliated organizations; but a mission impossible inasmuch as a lot of things went wrong during the planning and writing process.

Those are the points that I am going to demonstrate for you, by focusing on my research on UNESCO’s History of Mankind project, which was initiated in 1945 and which one of the participants later described as “the first global history of mankind.”

**Global history as mental engineering**
The extent of violence during World War II and the Holocaust caused a widespread recognition among state leaders of the need for political leadership on a global level, and the United Nations came into existence in October 1945. Its task was to ensure collective security and create an international declaration on human rights based on the ethical principle that all human beings – regardless of their differences – were equal and shared the same fundamental rights.
The organization’s way to ensure peace was through military, economic and social measures. But there was also the recognition that peace could only be maintained, if it was based on a sincere solidarity between people. For this purpose, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), was established in November 1945 by 44 countries. The constitution’s preamble formulated the task of the new specialized agency: “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed”. Right from the beginning, UNESCO’s first Director General, the English zoologist Julian S. Huxley, was therefore preoccupied with identifying the tasks that could ensure peace in the long term.

For that purpose he involved people around him, including his old friend Professor Joseph Needham, the eccentric biochemist from Cambridge University, who was in charge of British scientific assistance to China at the time. Needham had become deeply interested in Chinese culture and history and had just published a book on the history of Chinese technology, in which he demonstrated the enormous and underestimated importance of Chinese inventions on developments in other parts of the world.

Needham found that the principal factor promoting historically significant social change was contact with strangers possessing new and unfamiliar skills. History could thus be better understood by emphasizing the mutual indebtedness and interdependence of the peoples of the world, and Needham suggested to Huxley that the new organization took on the task of writing a history of mankind stressing “cultural interchange” – as an antidote to the kind of history taught in many schools focusing on military and political events and based on ethnocentric biases and preconceptions. This would be a work that could be used as a source for classroom textbooks for schools in all countries and could contribute to UNESCO’s mission of education for peace.

Needham was the first person Huxley invited to join the staff, but watching the barrage of unread documents piling up on delegates at that time, he and Huxley decided to wait a couple of years before initiating the process of constructing a collective memory of mankind. They did discuss the idea from time to time though, and they knew, that it would require a rather drastic selection to accommodate the history of the entire world in a few volumes.

During their search for the unifying element a member of staff recalled that a similar discussion had taken place during the war among the Allied
Ministers of Education in exile in London. The idea of this project had been to promote European communality, but the ministers’ conclusion only confirmed Needham’s own supposition, namely that the major unifier between people of various cultures over time had been scientific knowledge and technology. In that sense, the plan still seemed fairly Eurocentric, and project was – for all its good intentions – a reflection of the fact that UNESCO’s principal contributors at all the various levels of the organization were at the time still primarily from France, United Kingdom and USA. The reason for this was that the USSR and several other Communist countries had refused to join the organization, while significant portions of other continents were under colonial rule.

In the end of 1947 UNESCO finally adopted a resolution that welcomed the idea of producing a history of mankind with an emphasis on the “understanding of the scientific and cultural aspects of the history of mankind, of the mutual inter-dependence of peoples and cultures and of their contributions to the common heritage”. But shortly after this the project faced a major blowback. UNESCO had long been under suspicion from the US of being a cover for espionage, and the CIA had warned President Harry S. Truman that the organization was being infiltrated by communists. Joseph Needham attracted particular attention due to his interest in science and to the fact that he was a member of the Cambridge University Communist Group. Needham felt under pressure to resign, and in the beginning of 1948 he moved back to Cambridge, where he began working on what was to become his masterpiece on science and civilisation in China.

With Needham out of the picture Huxley took on the task himself, and in May 1948 he presented a plan of a work consisting of three volumes to be written by a single author whose immense task would be eased by having at his disposal so many resources that he would be able to draw on all the best scholars in the world.

**Approaching globalism**

In the light of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948 and of the organization’s debates on decolonization, the world was about to change, and this was soon to be reflected in UNESCO’s work, too.

In late October 1948 Huxley had meetings and correspondence with European scholars to discuss his plan and its execution. Among the invitees were his friend Joseph Needham and the French historian Lucien
Febvre, Professor at the Collège de France, who was already a living legend among fellow historians for his journal commonly known at the *Annales*, with its emphasis on social rather than political and diplomatic themes, and for his own agenda of organizing the past in accordance with present needs.

Febvre stressed that the History of Mankind project should in his eyes attempt truly to integrate all cultures in the new world civilization. Thus the final plan wiped out cultural hierarchies and emphasized the “exchanges” between all cultures. To ensure this global approach, the work was to be written by an entire group of specialists representing all continents.

Huxley the evolutionist insisted, however, that the interactions should only be chosen when they indicated a direction that pointed forward towards greater unification and integration. But shortly after the Americans, for various reasons, did not support Huxley’s continued candidacy, and the following years the projects was therefore a veritable battleground for Huxley, the evolutionist, on the one hand, and Lucien Febvre, the cultural relativist, on the other - with Needham somewhere in between doing his best to create peace on the small scale!

One of the really interesting documents to be found in the UNESCO Archives from this period is a plan made by Lucien Febvre containing his views on how to write the History of Mankind. The plan was finalized in May 1949, and according to Febvre the overarching theme should be “the history of peaceful relations” based on the conviction that communication and exchange of knowledge, products and values between cultures had occurred for centuries, that all cultures had contributed, and that only cultural loans could explain the sudden appearance of large arrogant civilizations. This approach was not only directed against Euro-centrism, but also against what, in Febvre’s eyes, appeared to be the one-eyed evolutionism characterizing Huxley’s plan.

Febvre imagined a work consisting of six volumes of a more encyclopaedic appearance. Two of the volumes should clarify “everything that had been subject to circulation” such as technical knowledge, systems of ideas, beliefs, material objects, animals etc. “From that will emerge the image of a moving humanity since its origins, travelling permanently through a perpetual series of transcontinental migrations”.

Two other volumes would be divided geographically in order to see what each of the continents had contributed to or received from other parts of the world, starting with Asia. “From this picture would emerge the idea
that separations in the world are mere illusions, and that the earth never ceases to diversify, to enrich, to mutually fertilize with streams of peaceful exchanges”.

Huxley tried desperately to stop Febvre’s intervention and sell his own views, but he was not very successful, and Febvre and Needham soon found a common understanding, which included an opposition towards strictly positivistic, evolutionistic and Eurocentric approaches. Highlighting the “exchanges and borrowings between peoples and countries” would be plenty in their eyes, and in the plan terms like “culture contacts”, “interrelations of cultures”, “interchange between peoples” and “cultural exchanges and transmissions” were used frequently in the spirit of the Febvre plan.

**Dealing with the delicate**
The academic cockfight between Huxley and Febvre was a fair indication that the question of choosing the representatives for the Commission that should carry out the work would be a very delicate question - also when it came to be non-Eurocentric in practice. It simply proved hard to find “suitable” names from non-Western countries. This was partly because of the lack of knowledge of the scholars and partly because China, the USSR and other Communist countries failed to respond to any requests sent to them. The final Commission thus consisted of ten scholars from France, United Kingdom, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, USA, Brazil, Mexico, India and Syria. They were joined by representatives of the International Committee of Historical Sciences and the International Council of Scientific Unions. As a form of consolation to the non-Western countries, the new Commission would be obliged to co-opt a large number of correspondents from all parts of the world, so that all interest groups would have a voice and would be able to provide specialist advice on the project.


The American member, Professor Ralph E. Turner from Yale University became the chief editor. He did not change much of the Needham-Febvre plan with its emphasis on cultural exchanges and its global scope. There was only one noteworthy exception. Turner reintroduced Huxley’s idea of a clear chronological line of development from prehistory to the present time, which through a selective progress had reached its preliminary
climax in – as the French representative, Charles Morazé, bitterly described it – “the American way of life”.

As a kind of compensation Lucien Febvre was appointed as editor of a new magazine that the Commission created for the man, that French delegates still considered to be the intellectual father of the History of Mankind project. In July 1953 the first issue of the *Journal of World History* hit the streets – including versions in French and Spanish and abstracts in German, Russian and Arabic.

The journal soon included many interesting articles as well as special issues on the history Africa, Japan and Latin America, and in fact, the scholarly quality of many of the first contributions to the *Journal of World History* proved to be very high. The most cited article was written by Marshall Hodgson, who was still a young and relatively unknown historian at the time. He argued that a post-war world history needed to be a systematic critique of the basic presuppositions of Western historiography. Nothing less than a radical re-orientation of the contemporary historical and geographical attitudes about the world could produce the kind of world history which the History of Mankind project was supposed to express.

Altogether, the journal was supposed to capture materials relevant to the History of Mankind project, and it was envisaged that the knowledge gathered in the journal should eventually be reflected in the manuscripts of the work.

**The Cold War**

Within the Commission two members now set the agenda: The editor Ralph Turner and the French representative Charles Morazé. Both were energetic and proud historians, and these similarities brought them onto an increasingly confrontational course.

Turner’s enthusiasm for the project and immense knowledge of early history on a global scale was a thorn in the side of Morazé, because Turner’s arguments often proved to be decisive when giving the volumes their definitive form and selecting the editors and authors. It was, for instance, Turner’s idea to avoid national biases by appointing authors who were experts on periods that were different from the heyday of their own culture. This meant planning for the first volume, dealing with prehistory, to be written by scholars from United Kingdom, while the following five in chronological order would be written by people from Italy, France, USA, Peru and India. It was also at Turner’s initiative that the Commission
was enlarged to comprise additional members, to widen its geographical and cultural representation – which had a positive impact on the project and gave it the much needed and enthusiastic support of countries like India, Pakistan and Iraq.

But Turner’s ideas were never adopted without intense clashes with Morazé. Each and every time these two men met there were thunderstorms, and Turner’s occasional outbursts of temper when his ideas were opposed soon became legendary and gained plenty of attention within UNESCO House. The most dramatic meetings attracted so many spectators from all parts of the organization that even its great hall could not hold them all, and people from outside were eventually banned from entering the doors to listen.

At that time, in the early 1950s, another “cold war” - the one in the world outside the UNESCO House - was a harsh reality. Until the death of Joseph Stalin in March 1953, the Soviets had refused to have anything to do with UNESCO, but the Khrushchev administration inaugurated a reappraisal of USSR’s foreign policy priorities and the country joined the organization in April 1954.

That was bad news for Turner, who certainly wanted the Commission to be international but never missed a chance of depicting politicized Marxist history-writing as the image of what the History of Mankind project was not. Now he feared that these historians would ask to join the Commission. Which they did. In November 1954 the Commission received commitments from the Soviet delegates at UNESCO that the Soviet scholars were prepared to take “an active part in this important, interesting and valuable undertaking of UNESCO.” The Soviet representative, Alexandre A. Zvorikine, who was a professor at the Institute of History at the USSR Academy of Sciences in Moscow, arrived in Paris and was – despite Turner’s objections – appointed Vice-President of the Commission.

Zvorikine proved to be a pleasant man, liked by all members of the Commission but, of course, very much influenced by the system that had sent him. Soon the Soviet historians would manage to remove the shine from the miracle of a truly global history of mankind that the Commission was in the process of compiling. I 1956 when Turner received the first full manuscript of one of the volumes, the Commission circulated it to their members and to consultants all over the world, from where the authors then would receive comments that would be incorporated before publication. But the Soviet comments were so voluminous that they verged
on the absurd, and, since several of the eastern European countries that had also been included in the work sent in alterations on a similar scale, the Commission realized that there was no way that the authors could possibly comply with the deadline.

The field of history had now taken on a tangible reality as a major political battlefield of the Cold War, where the different sides of the Iron Curtain fought over the correct interpretation of their common past. As a Czech commentator concluded after having read one of the manuscripts: “Summarily it can be said of this study that the fact that the authors do not see the economic and political development in the world in the 20th century from a class point of view leads them to a positivist and unscientific interpretation of the events of this century.” It was that kind of comment that prompted participants from the US to object to any acknowledgment given to the Communist scholars.

Of course the manuscripts also provoked other comment. Israel was riled by passages highlighting Arab objections to the State of Israel. A number of Muslim countries were provoked by the interpretation of the Christian crusades. The Catholic Church did not like the representation of religion as something that had a tendency to divide rather than unite people. There were also objections to the lack of priority given to African and South American history. But that was minor issues compared with the ideological differences.

The Soviet objections to the manuscripts reached their culmination point when the Commission received the final manuscript for Volume 6, covering the 20th century. Only a few days after the manuscript had been handed over to the Soviet scholars, the Soviet representative and his colleagues returned a comprehensive critical review – a total of 500 pages of objections to the treatment of Communism, of technological developments in the USSR, of the Soviet economy and political system – not to mention a very detailed guideline for the re-writing of the entire manuscript.

Several attempts at reaching a compromise failed, and it was difficult to see how to reach agreement. For how should the concept of democracy be dealt with when, according to Soviet historians, it only expressed “the will of the economically and politically dominant class”? And could the concept of “colonialism” be used only about past Western phenomena, or could it also be used about Tsarist Russia, or the huge investments in other countries made by American companies?
The American author felt obliged to incorporate into her text “contra-notes” to her Soviet colleagues’ notes, which they tried to prevent, and when they failed they demanded space for notes to the author’s notes. The first piece of global history was on the verge of becoming an absurd and useless piece of history.

In June 1963 the first volume of the work was finally published simultaneously in London and New York, marking the first achievement of an international endeavour without parallel in history. But behind the scenes the Commission was still awaiting half of the final manuscripts. “Every time I tried to satisfy one critic, I would dissatisfy another,” one of the authors wrote in desperation. Only in 1965 was the second volume released, and this was accompanied by positive reviews in some newspapers, but this time also by rather more critical comment. This was particularly the case in the influential New York Times, whose reviewer characterized the volume as a history with no soul, a mistaken enterprise with a lot of distracting notes.

At that time William McNeill had already published his book, and the name gave his work a profile rather than the names of the many faceless UNESCO historians. His book was also shorter and easier to understand for ordinary people, and the book immediately reached the American bestseller list and has sold in great numbers ever since. That is probably one of the reasons why it was McNeill’s idea of “cultural encounters” and not the Febvre-Needham idea of “cultural exchanges and transmissions” that became the cornerstone of the new genre of global history.

In the following years volume by volume was published by UNESCO, and the criticism grew no less trenchant as time went, despite the fact that reviewers could never agree on alternative approaches to the writing of a global history of mankind.

The last volume of the History of Mankind was published in 1976.

**The impossible global history**

For its time – not the time of its publication but that of its long preparation – the History of Mankind stands as an intellectual landmark. Not so much in the form of a concrete achievement but as a process. It was the first coordinated attempt to involve experts from around the world to reach agreement on a common understanding of history and thus the first truly international account of the history of mankind.

It was, however, precisely the ambition to achieve international uniformity that also proved a major obstacle towards the other ambition –
that of analysing global cultural diversity and its mutual influences. The priority of universalism over cultural diversity caused a number of problems that undermined the value of the work. Achieving “truth” through majority voting and relying on the ponderous movement of official envelopes to and from the far reaches of the globe, involving more than 1,000 sometimes unwilling scholars, caused major delays, and, when the work was finally released, it had already passed its own sell-by date.

When the last volumes were published, social scientists were already busy reconciling themselves with the elitist notion of “civilization”, which was frequently used in the work as a synonym for a more refined form of “universalistic culture” with the UN system as its provisional culmination. Although the title of the first volume talked about several “beginnings” of civilization, the tendency was still to discuss it in conventional terms: It was born in the Middle East, its backbone was modern science, and it had been the driving force in the creation of the UN system. Intervention by non-Western critics had come too late to challenge this tendency, with the result that the final outcome was slightly more Eurocentric than the participants of the late 1960s and early 1970s wished. Even “mankind”, the work's central concept, which had enjoyed very positive connotations when the project had been initiated, was under attack at the time as it was seen as a sexist relic with “humankind” or “humanity” as more appropriate conceptual replacements.

At the same time the focus on consensus history – especially after the involvement of the USSR in the work in 1956 – turned its content into an extensive, highly complex and diverse text dissected by marginal annotations and additions. And where that was not the case, the texts tended to follow the lowest common denominator, i.e. a harmless, smooth and harmonized history that did not really bring satisfaction to anyone – not even to the authors, who in several cases found it necessary to distance themselves from parts of their own text.

The hard work therefore barely had a fraction of the impact that some of them had envisioned in wake of Turner’s claim that it was going to be the most influential history book ever written. Today the final version of *History of Mankind* does not play a role in historiography as an example for imitation but rather as a monument of a universalism that did not quite succeed. But it would be unfair to regard the entire process leading up to the publication in that perspective, groundbreaking as it was as the first trial of nationalism and Euro-centrism after World War II and as the expression of how far it was possible to extend a Euro-centric view in an
era of burdensome ideological divisions and a time when Western colonialism was still very much both a political reality and a relevant frame of reference for the way historians looked at the world.

It is rather meaningful to characterize the process as the real starting point of the post-war trend of writing global history due to the early start of the entire project and its ambition of focusing on “cultural exchanges and transmissions”, but also due to the fact that UNESCO used this particular project to form its so-called “World Heritage List” (1972) which is probably UNESCO’s most widely known activity today, as well as the fact that UNESCO maintained the ambition of writing history with global approach in wake of this first major attempt.

In 1978 the organization decided to embark on a new and completely revised edition of the work along the same basic principles to include those parts of the world – particularly Africa and South America – which had been heavily under-represented in the previous version. This time the work was under the guidance and Presidency of Charles Morazé and was published under the new title History of Humanity (1994-2005). The work was followed by several others, supporting the United Nation’s decolonization practice through a kind of “mental decolonization”, rehabilitating countries and continents by giving them a place in the history of humanity. The most noteworthy being the work initiated in 1966 as a response to the lack of information on Africa in the History of Mankind, which resulted in the General History of Africa published in the English edition from 1981 to 1993 in eight volumes. UNESCO’s series of area studies also include the important multi-volumes, History of Civilizations of Central Asia (1992ff), General History of the Caribbean (1997ff.), The Different Aspects of Islamic Culture (1998ff) and the General History of Latin America (1999-2009) not to forget UNESCO’s Silk Roads Project (1988-1997).