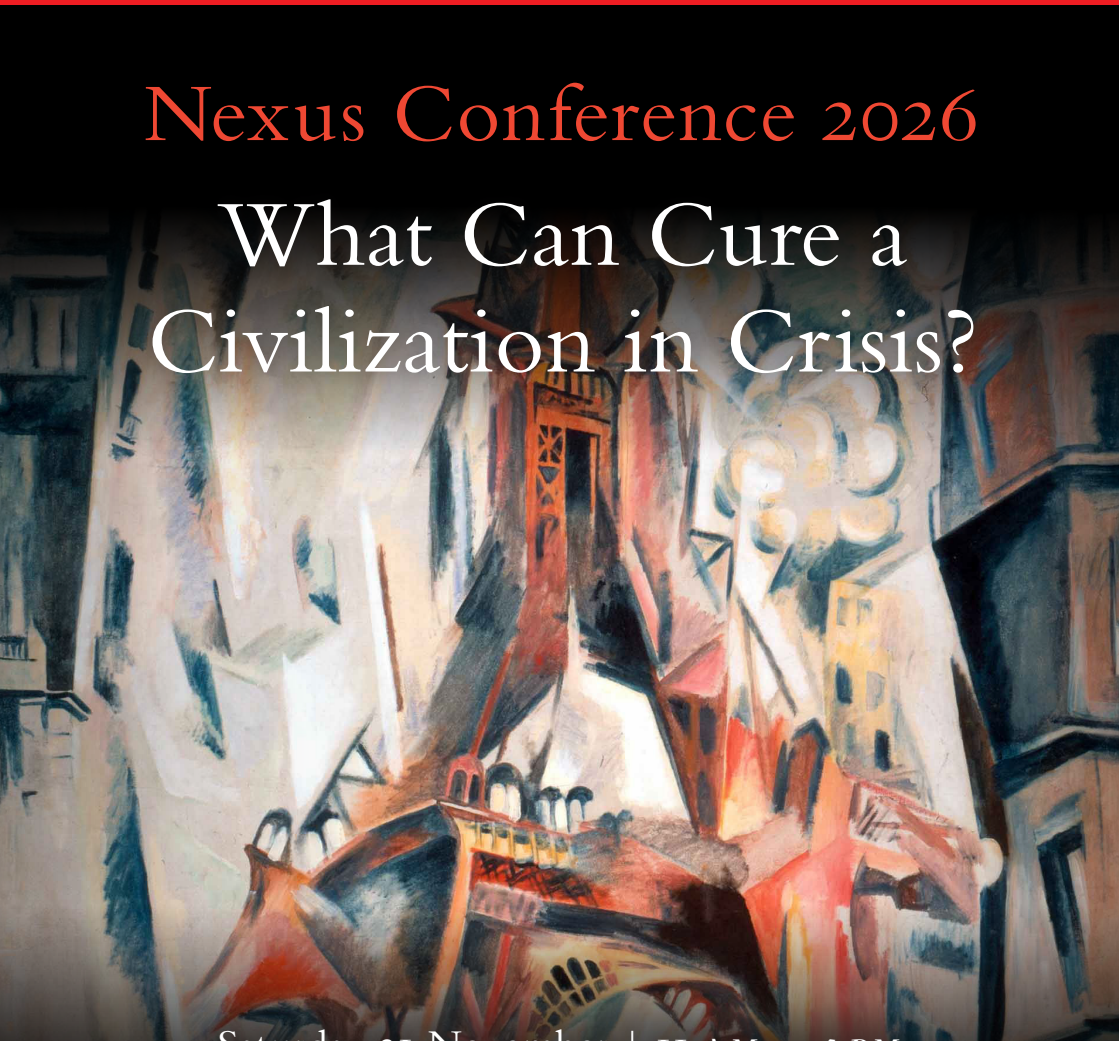
NEXUS INSTITUTE

Nexus Conference 2026

What Can Cure a Civilization in Crisis?



Saturday 21 November | 11 AM — 5 PM

National Opera & Ballet, Amsterdam

Christopher Caldwell — Senator Bill Cassidy — Benedetta Craveri
Chrystia Freeland — Yoel Gamzou — Alicja Gescinska — Paul Kingsnorth
Ryszard Legutko — Enrico Letta — Eric Li — George Packer
Abderrahmane Sissako — Maria Stepanova — Bhaskar Sunkara
Loukas Tsoukalis

Sponsored by: ammodo art

Program Nexus Conference

Saturday 21 November 2026
National Opera & Ballet, Amsterdam

11.00 AM Welcome *Rob Riemen*

11.10 AM **AND HERE WE ARE ON A DARKLING PLAIN... THE DECAY OF CIVILIZATION**
Roundtable conversation with *Christopher Caldwell*, *Chrystia Freeland, Alicja Gescinska*, *Paul Kingsnorth*, *Ryszard Legutko*, *Eric Li, George Packer*, *Loukas Tsoukalis*, moderated by *Rob Riemen*

1.30 PM Lunch with complimentary refreshments

2.30 PM **THE CANDLE ON THE TABLE BURNED... A LIGHT TO GUIDE THE RENEWAL OF A CIVILIZATION IN DECAY**
Roundtable conversation with *senator Bill Cassidy*, *Benedetta Craveri*, *Yoel Gamzou*, *Enrico Letta*, *Abderrahmane Sissako*, *Maria Stepanova*, *Bhaskar Sunkara*, moderated by *Rob Riemen*

5.00 PM Book signing

A vegetarian sandwich, fruit and a bottle of water is included with your ticket. Please notify us of any allergies you may have before 10 November with an email to info@nexus-instituut.nl.

The conference will be held in English.

The program may be subject to change. For the latest information on the conference and its speakers and for terms and conditions, please see our website www.nexus-instituut.nl/en.

Sponsored by: ammodo art

Nexus Conference 2026

What Can Cure a Civilization in Crisis?

21 November
National Opera & Ballet, Amsterdam

'The supreme duty of the thinker of today is to auscultate civilization', said Victor Hugo in one of those reflections on the sociopolitical reality with which he interrupts from time to time his gripping account of the turbulent life story of his hero Jean Valjean in his monumental novel *Les Misérables*.

As readers, we have by this point reached the seventh book in the fourth volume, in which Hugo, among other things, considers the fates of civilizations. He establishes that countless ancient civilizations have met their ruin, for reasons we cannot now determine. This, he says, makes it all the more important to know our own civilization's weaknesses and malformations. 'Our civilization, the work of twenty centuries, is at once their monster and their prodigy; it is worth saving. And it will be saved. To doctor it is to do a great deal; to enlighten it is to do still more. All the work of modern social philosophy should bear this end in mind.' We might add that this precisely reflects the way that Hugo, in his novel, focuses on offering the insight needed to save civilization from social danger, from the misery that threatens it. From the poverty and hunger that prevail among the outcasts of society, like Jean Valjean — a good person sentenced to hard labor purely and simply for stealing a little bread to relieve his hunger —, from the wickedness of those who profit from the misery of others, from the social inequality produced by the egotism of a wealthy bourgeoisie, from the merciless judicial system that has eyes only for the law and is blind to justice.

None of these things are inevitable. Not very long ago, Hugo maintains, the courageous French people broke the chains of injustice and unfreedom

with their revolution of 1789, and so gave back to the whole world once again the ideal of a civilization of freedom, equality, and fraternity. Except that now 'the past is reviving, and this rejuvenation of a corpse is surprising. It is on the march, and it seems to be winning — a dead thing yet a conqueror! It comes with its army of superstitions, its sword, which is despotism, its banner, which is ignorance. It advances, laughs, and threatens; it is at our door.'

In 1862, *Les Misérables* was Victor Hugo's stethoscope for investigating the health of civilization. And anyone granting themselves the pleasure of reading this magisterial and moving epic will quickly realize that the novel has lost none of its value as a stethoscope more than 160 years later.

⋆

Like Victor Hugo, Thomas Mann was profoundly convinced that a thinker has the important task of auscultating civilization, listening attentively through a stethoscope in order to detect symptoms of sickness.

On 20 April 1919, Mann resumed work on his novel *The Magic Mountain*, which he had stopped writing when war broke out in 1914. It is no accident that this novel about the future of Europe is set in a sanatorium for the treatment of tuberculosis, between the peaks of the Swiss Alps. Because European civilization is sick, deathly sick even.

Only a few months before Mann took up his pen again to continue writing *The Magic Mountain*, an end came to the war in which Europe destroyed its own civilization and world order in the space of four years, and in which the lives of millions of people were ruined. The faith of the past, of before the war — faith in God, or science, socialism or liberalism, in the innate goodness of people and the power of human reason, which promised humanity the longed-for prospect of never-ending Progress — had been taken from the generation still alive.

No wonder, then, that in the summer of 1919, Mann was reading with approval the first part of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, published the previous year. In contrast to Victor Hugo, who remained convinced that our civilization, despite all its sicknesses and deformities, could still be saved, Spengler predicted, according to his own convictions and with scientific precision, a dark future that could not be avoided: Western civilization was doomed and would inevitably suffer the same fate as the Babylonian and Egyptian civilizations, declining before disappearing.

Spengler bases this somber conclusion above all on the fundamental distinction that he, like Kant and Nietzsche, makes between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*. The former refers to the inward, spiritual civilization with its moral and religious values, the latter to the external, material civilization. It is a law of history, Spengler believes, that a cultural epoch will be transformed organically into a civilization that is by definition external: *Zivilisation*. It will

become characterized by rationalism, relativism, bureaucracy, massification, scientification, liberalism, technologization, the power of money. The final phase of the always soulless *Zivilisation* is 'Caesarism', an imperialist power politics that puts an end to democracy with war, in torrents of blood.

In Spengler's vision, every region of the world has its own culture, so it is impossible to speak of universal values: all values are relative. 'Freedom', he believes, is a dubious concept, because all social developments are predetermined. The European part of the world is characterized by a Faustian *Kultur*, meaning it is driven by a restless search for boundless knowledge and self-perfection. Western man, Spengler prophesizes, will end up a slave to his own creation: technology.

The spell that Mann initially fell under evaporated in 1921 as he started to realize that Spengler was not even a pessimist but instead a defeatist who believed that the fate of civilization is sealed, so there will be no escaping it. Not only that, Mann now suddenly saw before him a scholar for whom the concept of 'humanity' was empty, an erudite man with an inhuman character, hostile to an ideal of civilization in which the dignity of each individual is paramount. Mann's final verdict: Spengler is a snob who instead of love for life has nothing to offer besides *Verkalkungs-Prophetie* ('calcification prophecy').

Now that Spengler's work no longer offered him the stethoscope with which to make a diagnosis of our civilization, what did it offer him?

It was 1921. Confusing times. Europe lay in ruins. In Germany, with all its poverty and violence, confronting a practically hopeless situation, people were desperate and distraught. Meanwhile, politicians in Weimar were frenetically attempting to transform the centuries-old German Empire into a democratic republic.

In the face of such a ravaged civilization, for Thomas Mann it was more urgent than ever to find the answer to questions like: What is civilization? Can the civilization that Hugo wanted to preserve still be saved? Won't it have to be replaced with a different set of ideals?

With these questions in the back of his mind, Mann paused the writing of *The Magic Mountain* once again in late July 1921 and started working on a lecture about Goethe and Tolstoy's different visions of life, which he delivered in his native city of Lübeck in September 1921. Towards the end of the lecture he is forced to acknowledge that with the Bolshevik Revolution that brought Lenin to power in Russia in October 1917, in that immense country and now in Germany and the rest of the world too, an era has come to an end: 'the bourgeois, humanistic, liberal epoch, which was born at the Renaissance and came to power with the French Revolution, and whose last convulsive twitchings and manifestations of life we are now beholding'. This historical event raises in him the following existential query:

> We will have to ask the question whether the Mediterranean-classical-humanist tradition is a spiritual heritage that will remain significant for all mankind, and is therefore eternal and universal, or whether it was no more than an idea, an incidental part of an era, the bourgeois-liberal era, and will die with it.

Four years later, in February 1925, when Mann expanded his lecture 'Goethe und Tolstoi. Fragmente zum Problem der Humanität' ('Goethe and Tolstoy: Fragments on the problem of humanism') to create a sizeable essay, he added the following response to the question he had posed:

> Europe seems to have answered the question already. The anti-liberal rebound is more than plain, it is palpable. It finds political expression in a disgusted turning away from democracy and parliamentary government, in a beetle-browed about-face toward dictatorship and terror. Italian fascism is the precise pendant to Russian bolshevism; all its archaistic gesturings and mummery cannot disguise its essential hostility to the humane. […] I do not propose to dwell upon German fascism, nor upon the circumstances, the quite comprehensible circumstances of its origin. It is enough to say that it is a racial religion, with antipathy not only for international Judaism, but also, quite expressly, for Christianity, as a humane influence; nor do its priests behave more friendly toward the humanism of our classical literature.

It is an answer he does not himself share. On the contrary, it is an answer that he resists with all the strength of mind he has in him and will continue to resist.

Mann completed his work on *The Magic Mountain* on 27 September 1924, and over the years he spent writing the novel he arrived at the belief that the essence of civilization does in fact lie in that Mediterranean-classical-humanist tradition, which must indeed be eternal and universal. This view of civilization became for him the stethoscope with which he investigated further social developments.

Thomas Mann would thereafter put his ideal of civilization into words in countless essays and lectures as follows: civilization is nothing other than the cultivation of moral and spiritual values; it is a culture that gives expression to the striving of humanity to make the idea of being human its own: an innate obligation to have an attitude of reverence for God, reason, truth and justice — a craving for human dignity. In this ideal of civilization there is no place for violence, while spiritual education through *Bildung* is essential and the oneness of humanity is presupposed. It is characterized by faithfulness to humanity through love, goodness and a social justice best served by social democratic politics.

Now in possession of his stethoscope, Mann observed with growing concern, from his home in Munich, the city in which Hitler was also active, the increasing popularity of German fascism among the German people as the years went by. When in September 1930 Hitler's party achieved a mammoth victory in parliamentary elections, his worry about what this might mean for the future of Germany and Europe became so great that he decided to use a planned lecture in October in Berlin to speak out with the force of reasoned argument against the growing danger of a fascist Germany.

When rumors began circulating in Berlin about what Mann was intending with his lecture 'Deutsche Ansprache. Ein Appell an die Vernunft' ('German Address: An Appeal to Reason'), Dr. Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's confidant, who had been given the task of spreading the ideas of their *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*, knew it was time to act.

Goebbels recruited twenty men of the paramilitary *Sturmabteilung* (SA) to attend Thomas Mann's lecture with him. To avoid attracting too much attention, he instructed his henchmen to rent tuxedos. At an opportune moment they were to disrupt Mann's lecture as much as possible. (Cancel culture has in the past been a tried and tested weapon of every form of totalitarianism.)

Thomas Mann started his lecture with the observation that the wretched economic circumstances were not a sufficient explanation for the huge popularity of German fascism. It was therefore important to recognize that a large proportion of the population had taken leave of humanist, spiritual, and moral values. For them, he goes on, faith in human dignity through the cultivation of reason, justice and freedom has given way to the eccentric barbarity of a mass democracy. This mass democracy is hooked on technology, noise, and the sensation of sporting records. It cherishes racism, nationalism, and a barbaric, orgiastic philosophy of life as the expression of our most primitive instincts, irrationalism, and fanaticism.

At those remarks, the fascists in the audience started to shout and boo in an effort to drown out Mann's voice. They were ejected from the hall, but the next day, 18 October 1930, Goebbels noted in his diary, with some pride: 'My men have spat on Thomas Mann's head now that he has insulted us by calling us "barbarians" in his speech.'

Goebbels was not the only person to feel offended by this lecture by a writer who a year earlier had been awarded the Nobel Prize and therefore ought, in the view of Goebbels and his ilk, as *Dichter und Denker Deutschlands*, to support fascism. The same went for a thirty-year-old German literary scholar in Hamburg, Dr. Rudolf Ibel. He was an idealist with a great love of German classical literature, of which he was highly knowledgeable, proud of his membership of the local Goethe-Gesellschaft.

For all these reasons, Ibel found the remarks by Mann unacceptable and in January 1931 he published his sharp riposte in the periodical *Der Kreis: Zeitschrift für künstlerische Kultur.* He reproaches Mann for failing to realize

that since the World War those nineteenth-century notions of the European bourgeoisie — freedom, justice, *Bildung*, optimism — have lost all significance and are no more than a relic of a now secularized civilization. The only true civilization has nothing any longer to do with rationalism and spirit; it can exist once more thanks to its solidarity with its own people, its own blood, its own race, the vital instincts in the dynamic unconscious, heroism…

Someone must have drawn Mann's attention to that little-known magazine, because a week later, still on holiday in St. Moritz, Switzerland, Mann decided that such criticism could not be left unchallenged.

Dr. Ibel himself was no more to Mann than the umpteenth erudite academic whose understanding was inversely proportional to the amount they had read. Precisely because Dr. Ibel was attempting to use his academic status and his knowledge of the German classics to give fascist ideology a certain intellectual standing and posit it as a new, more contemporary ideal of civilization, Mann felt forced to write a response under the title 'Die Wiedergeburt der Anständigkeit' ('The Rebirth of Decency'). In it he says again that concepts like 'truth', 'freedom', and 'justice' refer to attainments of the nineteenth century that must not be lost, precisely because only these universal values safeguard the oneness of humankind and so ensure a 'decent society'. The ideas propagated by Dr. Ibel, Mann concludes, would inevitably lead to a society from which every form of decent conduct towards fellow human beings has disappeared, and then to a cataclysmic war.

Two years later, in February 1933, Dr. Ibel became a member of the NSDAP, the Nazi Party, and for Thomas Mann a long period of exile began.

★

In January 1936, George Orwell was asked by publisher Victor Gollancz whether he was interested in writing a book about the lives of the miners of Northern England. Gollancz was devoted to pacifism and socialism, and that same month he had set up the Left Book Club in order to spread socialist ideas as part of the struggle against rising fascism. Copies of the book he asked Orwell to write would be distributed among members of the Left Book Club.

In December that same year, Orwell delivered the manuscript of *The Road to Wigan Pier*. It is a book in two parts. In the first of them, as requested by the publisher, Orwell movingly describes the social and economic misery of the miners who, if lucky enough not to be unemployed, do dangerous work deep underground in the most wretched conditions and are paid a pittance. Touched by everything he has witnessed, he remarks with shame that 'intellectuals and left-wing people' generally prefer to ignore the fact that 'all of us really owe the comparative decency of our lives to poor drudges underground'.

This first part was exactly what Victor Gollancz was hoping for, and he happily offered it to his Left Book Club as a stand-alone work.

He has greater difficulty, however, with part two, in which Orwell takes the opportunity to reflect on an anxiety that is troubling him now more than ever:

> What I am concerned with is the fact that Socialism is losing ground exactly where it ought to be gaining it. With so much in its favour — for every empty belly is an argument for Socialism — the idea of socialism is less widely accepted than it was ten years ago. The average thinking person nowadays is not merely not a socialist, he is actively hostile to Socialism.

Orwell finds this all the more disturbing because it seems evident to him that socialism alone can put an end to the injustice of a society divided by class, to poverty and economic inequality, because socialism alone provides an ideal of civilization founded on freedom and justice. Yet it could not be more obvious that 'at this moment Socialists almost everywhere are in retreat before the onslaught of Fascism, and events are moving at a terrible speed'.

Precisely because he was a socialist, Orwell took it upon himself to play devil's advocate. To learn to defend itself, socialism must first be attacked. And it is here that Orwell arrives at a number of conclusions that Victor Gollancz quite understandably experienced as rather painful, both for himself and for members of his Left Book Club.

What does not help, Orwell establishes, is that members who boast of being socialists all too often belong to 'that dreary tribe of high-minded women and sandal-wearers and bearded fruit-juice drinkers'. These vegetarians, pacifists and feminists pose as morally superior to the beer-drinking and meatball-eating workers. Another thing that does not help is the use of socialist/Marxist jargon, which no one without an academic education can understand. Nor is it helpful to continually curse the wealthy bourgeoisie, as if being left-wing amounts to nothing other than hatred. Socialism, Orwell goes on, cannot be seen in isolation from the rise of industrialization, with all its machinery. The idea that the 'socialist paradise' would consist of a society in which, thanks to machines, everything is orderly and efficient and nobody needs to work, plus the obsession with economics, as if every human being is merely a 'homo economicus', lacking a soul, merely drives people into the clutches of the fascists.

Orwell illustrates the fact that the left-wing world is not free of hypocrisy by pointing out the following:

> Under the capitalist system, in order that England may live in comparative comfort, a hundred million Indians must live on the verge of starvation […]. The alternative is to throw the Empire overboard and reduce England

> to a cold and unimportant little island where we should all have to work very hard and live mainly on herrings and potatoes. That's the very last thing that any left-winger wants. Yet the left-winger continues to feel that he has no moral responsibility for imperialism. He is perfectly ready to accept the products of the Empire and to save his soul by sneering at the people who hold the Empire together.

Orwell mentions all this precisely because he believes that socialism is the only social force capable of defeating fascism: 'Socialism is the only real enemy that Fascism has to face. The capitalist-imperialist governments, even though they themselves are about to be plundered, will not fight with any conviction against Fascism as such.' But fascism can be defeated only if socialists stop being unworldly, know-it-all, doctrinaire types and succeed in making a broad public aware that the socialist ideal is far more than merely economic justice. For Orwell, socialism equates with 'common decency'. It is 'justice and liberty', and the achievement of it will be accompanied by 'immense changes in our civilization and […] way of life'.

A week after delivering the manuscript of *The Road to Wigan Pier* to Victor Gollancz, Orwell left for Barcelona to fight on the side of the Spanish republicans against Franco's fascist troops. In *Homage to Catalonia*, published two years later, a book about his experiences and observations during the Spanish Civil War, he writes:

> When I came to Spain, and for some time afterwards, I was not only uninterested in the political situation but unaware of it. I knew there was a war on, but I had no notion what kind of war. If you had asked me why I had joined the militia I should have answered: 'To fight against fascism,' and if you had asked me what I was fighting for, I should have answered: 'Common decency'.

It is extremely unlikely that George Orwell had a chance to familiarize himself with Thomas Mann's essay about 'the rebirth of decency', which only makes it all the more remarkable that two writers with such different backgrounds both use the concept of 'decency' as their stethoscope for investigating the health of a civilization.

⋆

As a result of her tuberculosis, French philosopher, mystic and political activist Simone Weil had only a few months to live when in January 1943 she honored the request of André Philip, prominent member of France libre, a movement of free French forces set up by General de Gaulle, to put her ideas down on paper about what needed to change in society to ensure that

those things that had led to a First and a Second World War could not occur again.

Despite her illness — she was plagued by chronic headaches and was further severely weakened because out of solidarity with the poor and imprisoned she lived on an extremely sparse diet — Weil began working on a document that was to become her plea for a new civilization, one that must be made a reality after the war. She foresaw that without a new ideal of civilization, humanity would inevitably at some stage call down total destruction upon itself.

The essence of the twelve-hundred-page document that resulted is given in its title: *L'Enracinement. Prélude à une déclaration des devoirs envers l'être humain* (*The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind*). People, she begins, can have rights only if they also have obligations. The most important of those obligations relates to the fact that the destiny of humankind lies in its connection with something holy, something eternal and universal: the absolute good. For the sake of this connection, this rootedness, our first duty is respect: for God, for our fellow human beings, the Earth and our own dignity.

This has been lost to us because we have become 'uprooted' and now live without a consciousness of beauty, culture, and tradition. It is a fate that affects more than anyone else the people for whom Simone Weil had most sympathy: the workers. More even than Orwell, she was concerned about the fate of the working class; out of solidarity she even took a job in a factory. There she experienced at first hand that capitalism — but also, as she went on to realize, colonialism and totalitarianism — are powers that have reduced the worker to no more than an extension of the machine, a thing in which thinking has been destroyed. She therefore regards it as the first calling of her time to found a new civilization on '*la spiritualité du travail* — the spirituality of work'. Work must be far more than simply a way to earn much-needed money. When work is truly meaningful, it will offer people the opportunity to make the true greatness of humankind their own.

She continues her argument with the following observation: 'The unhappy peoples of the European continent are in need of greatness even more than of bread, and there are only two sorts of greatness: true greatness, which is of a spiritual order, and the old, old lie of world conquest. Conquest is an *ersatz* greatness.' Hardly anyone is aware of this, however, because: 'Our age is so poisoned by lies that it converts everything it touches into a lie.' One of the biggest lies we have come to believe is that only power counts, that power is an end in itself.

Simone Weil identified four obstacles that separate us from a valuable civilization, four obstacles that we will have to overcome to make a new civilization possible: 'Our false conception of greatness; the degradation of the sentiment of justice; our idolization of money; and our lack of religious inspiration.'

★

George Orwell would add a fifth obstacle to Simone Weil's list: the consequences of totalitarian politics and technological power. This became the subject of a story he began writing in 1947, which became the book *1984*.

Orwell understands all too well that in an age when God has been declared dead and Christianity is in decline, room emerges for worldviews like fascism, national socialism, and Marxism-Leninism, which promise humanity a new civilization that would guarantee not a heavenly paradise but a paradise on earth. And what Orwell understands infinitely better than all those scholars, intellectuals, artists and scientists who despite their intelligence have knowingly made one of these ideologies their own, are the consequences when, as Simone Weil also realized, power becomes an end in itself. And that is what it quickly becomes for anyone powerful, because if anything is addictive, it is power. With a prophetic gaze (since he had never encountered Big Tech and AI) Orwell foresaw that not just political power but also technological power could be totalitarian. Hence the character Big Brother, who always sees everything and robs his subjects of every form of privacy.

In *1984* Orwell depicts a world divided up between three great powers. The story takes place in Oceania, where the party has ultimate power and full control over both the past (which is rewritten) and the language (which no longer serves thinking but instead is a means of manipulating and controlling thoughts), and where every individual is reduced to a soulless robot.

In the story there are two people, Winston Smith and Julia, who discover something completely forbidden: human feelings, feelings of being in love, of loving each other. Both believe they are part of a small resistance cell, the Brotherhood, an underground opposition to the omnipotence of the Party. But the man in whom they have placed their trust, O'Brien, turns out to be a highly placed member of the Inner Party. It is O'Brien who tries to break Winston Smith's spirit, to destroy Winston's spiritual and moral values to such an extent that he too becomes a loyal, believing follower of Big Brother. Winston will then join those who are profoundly convinced that '2 + 2 = 5' and 'Freedom = Slavery'. This is where manipulation of thought, oppression, torture, and the loss of privacy through continual surveillance lead us.

Before things reach that point, Winston resists, despite the torture he is subjected to. O'Brien tells him that the goal of power is power alone, nothing else, and that the only way for one person to exert power over another is by making him suffer:

> 'Obedience is not enough. Unless he is suffering, how can you be sure that he is obeying your will and not his own? Power is inflicting pain and

humiliation. […] The old civilizations claimed that they were founded on love or justice. Ours is founded upon hatred. In our world there will be no emotions except fear, rage, triumph, and self-abasement. Everything else we shall destroy — everything. Already we are breaking down the habits of thought which have survived from before the Revolution […]. There will be no love, except the love of Big Brother. There will be no laughter, except the laugh of triumph over a defeated enemy. There will be no art, no literature, no science. […] The heretic, the enemy of society, will always be there, so that he can be defeated and humiliated over again. […] Always we shall have the heretic here at our mercy, screaming with pain, broken up, contemptible — and in the end utterly penitent, saved from himself, crawling to our feet of his own accord. That is the world that we are preparing, Winston. A world of victory after victory, triumph after triumph: an endless pressing, pressing, pressing upon the nerve of power. You will accept it, welcome it, become part of it.' […]
'You can't,' said Winston weakly. 'You could not create such a world as you have just described. It is a dream. It is impossible.'
'Why?'
'It is impossible to found a civilization on fear and hatred and cruelty. It would never endure.'
'Why not?'
'It would have no vitality. It would disintegrate. It would commit suicide.'

O'Brien counters that this is nonsense, at which Winston once again remarks:

'Somehow you will fail. Something will defeat you. Life will defeat you.'

To that O'Brien responds with a question:

'Do you believe in God, Winston?'
'No.'
'Then what is it, this principle that will defeat us?'
'I don't know. The spirit of Man.'

Winston is eventually locked in the notorious Room 101 where, confronted with his deepest fear, he will betray his great love, Julia. So his spirit is broken and he loses the last remnants of his dignity. He too now loves Big Brother. His dehumanization is complete. Winston Smith is spiritually dead.

What George Orwell and Simone Weil have in common is not only a sharp eye for the obsession with power as the ultimate goal and its consequences. It is also that both of them wrote their final works, the stethoscope they provide for us, when they were suffering from the disease that eventually killed them: tuberculosis.

A certain unintended symbolic significance resides in their deaths, in the fact that tuberculosis is the disease for which the sanatorium in Davos was founded that serves as the setting for Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, as a symbol of the sickness from which European civilization needs to be cured.

Where Weil and Orwell differ is that the French philosopher seeks a new foundation for civilization in religion and spirituality, whereas Orwell regards 'the spirit of Man' as the only firm footing we have — if it is not already too late.

*

Dean Acheson, Secretary of State to President Harry S. Truman from 1949 to 1953, was justified in giving his memoires the title *Present at the Creation*.

After the Japanese surrender in August 1945, the Second World War was finally over and from that moment on, the United States of America was in every respect the richest and most powerful country in the world. What this great power was confronted with at that same time is summed up by Acheson in one sentence in the epilogue of his sizeable book: 'Only slowly did it dawn upon us that the whole world structure and order that we had inherited from the nineteenth century was gone and that the struggle to replace it would be directed from two bitterly opposed and ideologically irreconcilable power centers.'

One pole of power was the totalitarian Soviet Union, ruled by Stalin — and as such a source of inspiration for Orwell's *1984*. It had half of Europe in its grip, it had a kindred spirit in Mao's China, and it had the intention of conquering the world with Marxism-Leninism as its ideal of civilization. The other pole was formed by the United States, now under the leadership of President Truman.

America is the country of which British philosopher Tom Paine wrote at the time of the American War of Independence in 1776: 'We have it in our power to begin the world over again […]. The birthday of a new world is at hand.' It is the country described by President Abraham Lincoln in December 1862 as 'the last best hope of earth'. It is the country that under the leadership of President Woodrow Wilson came to support the European democracies during the First World War in their battle with the German Empire, and that under President Franklin D. Roosevelt went to war with the Nazis, the fascists and the Japanese militarists as 'the arsenal of democracy', to quote FDR himself.

The immense task that now confronted President Truman and his people, as Acheson reminds us, was only slightly less formidable than that described in the book of Genesis. 'That was to create a world out of chaos; ours, to create half a world, a free half, out of the same material without blowing the whole to pieces in the process.'

Acheson was not merely present at the creation; he played an active role in creating a new and prosperous Europe, as one of the architects of the Marshall Plan, in creating the United Nations, in creating NATO and in creating a united Europe beginning with the plan launched by French foreign minister Robert Schuman on 9 May 1950. In short, in creating a liberal democratic world order in which human rights, the rule of law, international law, the freedom of the individual, the sovereignty of nations and respect for every person's human dignity would triumph. That was the task that President Truman, Acheson, and his friend and colleague General Marshall set themselves during this era of the Cold War.

The fragility of the *Pax Americana* initiated by Truman, Acheson and Marshall and the ideal of civilization inherent in it was first recognized by Hans Morgenthau. Jewish by origin and born in Germany, Morgenthau emigrated to America in 1938 after attending a speech by Hitler in Munich. There he and his friends Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt developed to become America's most important political thinkers. And perhaps it could be argued that precisely because of his background, Morgenthau had a great sensitivity to the decay of an ideal of civilization.

America has a special place in world history as the only country based, by its Founders, on an idea and an ideal. The idea is expressed in the Declaration of Independence:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

The ideal, 'the purpose of American politics' as defined in Morgenthau's 1960 book of that name, is 'equality in freedom'. Like every ideal, it will need to be investigated afresh by each generation and brought up to date if it is to exist in reality. With the United States as the largest superpower after the Second World War, it was of the utmost importance that, for the sake of its own future and that of Western civilization, it made its idea and ideal a reality in day-to-day politics. But in 1960 it was clear to Morgenthau that the country was entering a deep existential crisis. It had still not come to terms with its history of slavery, remaining a place of unremitting racism that was irreconcilable with the ideal of 'equality in freedom', and now the population had fallen prey to materialism, hedonism, and apathy. The only moral precept that still applied was: grab whatever you can lay your hands on. Freedom had become license. The concept of democracy had been hollowed out to mean whatever the majority wanted. But the majority consisted of a mass that in its ignorance could be manipulated all too easily through the power of commerce and the media, and so was susceptible to the demagogues that Morgenthau so feared. In this 'democracy', Morgenthau writes, even the

concept of quality would be lost as it was increasingly replaced by quantity, the power of numbers. Whatever most people think had suddenly become 'good' and 'true', simply because most people thought it was. The notion that quantity is the measure of all things had repercussions for American education, which in Morgenthau's view had not for a long time been focused on excellence, the quest for knowledge and the shaping of young people into independent, thinking characters. Instead it had degenerated into a social instrument to make young people conform as far as possible to what was expected of them: socially respected behavior as the royal road to a good career. Morgenthau saw American democracy, and with it America's original ideal of civilization, as being in decline as a result of a betrayal of its very reason for existence, just as he had witnessed the loss of an ideal of civilization long before in Europe, as a result of a betrayal of its spiritual and moral values.

And then?

★

Metropolis (1927), Fritz Lang's science fiction film about a futuristic city of that name, with a script by his wife Thea von Harbou, is set in our very own year of 2026.

The film opens with the image of a big, powerful machine. It is because of this machine that aboveground an elite, 'the thinkers', can live in huge skyscrapers surrounded by lush gardens and vast stadiums. With the plutocrat Joh Fredersen as absolute ruler, the oligarchs live a life of luxury and pleasure, enjoyed to the full by the powerful-looking blonde young men and charming young ladies who share it. This delightful, hedonistic life is possible only because deep beneath the ground of their city an army of workers, de facto slaves, labor twenty hours a day at huge machines to provide the city with energy. Their lives are as monotonous as they are dangerous.

Freder, only son of the plutocrat Fredersen, happens to meet Maria, a woman so loved by the workers that she is revered almost as a kind of saint. Freder falls in love at first sight, and when he goes in search of her he is confronted for the first time with the horrifying conditions underground, something that his father has always kept hidden from him. Hardly anyone in the above-ground Metropolis knows anything about it, and in fact no one is at all interested in what they have to thank for their luxurious existence.

The son tries to convince his father that he must do something about the wretched conditions in which the proletariat lives, toiling away in the dark. Freder is fortified in those efforts when he has a ghastly vision in which an enormous machine turns into Moloch, the monstrous god of the

Old Testament who demands human sacrifice. With shock he realizes that because of how they are used, these machines are not an aid to better living conditions but an idol that devours human lives.

Freder's father, who has no intention of giving up his riches and power, tries to keep control with the help of a mad inventor called Rotwang, who manages to make the first ever robot in human form. It looks exactly like Maria, and this Maria robot is deployed to sow chaos, to incite the workers to violent revolt and so to give the elite an excuse for a crackdown. This is what we see next:

> Twelve men walk with a monotone gait: men, men, men, all in the same uniform, dark-blue cotton from neck to ankles, their hair tied tight under black caps, their feet in heavy boots. They all have the same face: a savage face, with mad eyes. And they all sing the same song, a song without a melody that is an oath, a pledge:
>
> *We've passed sentence upon the machines!*
> *We have condemned the machines to death!*
> *The machines must die — to hell with them!*
> *Death! Death! Death to the machines!*

When they then destroy the 'heart machine' that provides the city with electricity, the pumps stop working and the workers' underground city begins to flood. Houses, children: everything is in danger of being lost to the water.

The workers now direct their anger at Maria, who incited them to commit these deeds. She is thrown onto the pyre and only then does the furious mob realize to its astonishment that she is not the real Maria but a robot, a machine. The evil inventor meets his death too. The son is reconciled with his father, who regrets what he has done. In accordance with the film's motto — 'The mediator between head and hands must be the heart!' — the son is a born mediator. So at the end of the story Freder succeeds in bringing the workers and his father, ruler of the city, together. From now on they will cooperate, bound together by empathy and humanity.

The happy ending to this Hollywood production proved short-lived, alas. In 1938 Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created the superhero Superman, who must battle against the evil — and the threat it presents to all humanity — perpetrated by Lex Luthor, a brilliant but corrupt businessman and scientist, upon… Metropolis.

But the duo Fritz Lang and Thea von Harbor, with their 1927 film *Metropolis* about a future world, set in 2026, once again prove Oscar Wilde right when he says in his 1889 essay 'The Decay of Lying — An Observation': 'Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life.'

When and why does a civilization enter a state of crisis? What are the symptoms by which we can recognize a civilization in decline, and what are the causes?

Curious as to how it could be that the *Imperium Romanum,* an omnipotent empire that had ruled the western hemisphere for centuries, collapsed in the fourth century, Machiavelli came to a sobering conclusion in his *Discorsi* (1531): it was self-destruction! Not the barbarians at the gates but the moral decline of its own civilization through tyranny, greed, social unrest, and corruption was the cause of the fall of this once so powerful empire. That conclusion was corroborated a century and a half later by Edward Gibbon in his six-volume study *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

The fact that history inexorably repeats itself when its lessons are not learned was demonstrated once again in the first half of the twentieth century by the First and Second World Wars, both of which ignited in Europe, with self-destruction as a result.

Present at the Creation by Dean Acheson is the story of the lessons of history that were in fact learned. The lesson that the freedom of the individual is best safeguarded by the rule of law in a liberal democracy. The lesson that the notion 'might makes right', which the Athenians held up before the Melians in their famous dialogue in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, belongs among the laws of the jungle but not in a civilized world. Hence also the lesson that military conflicts can be banished if all countries conform to an international rule of law and if each country's sovereignty is respected. The lesson that there are universal rights that must never be violated. The lesson that the craving for power is one of the greatest passions of all human beings, and that the only way to prevent the abuse of power is sufficient, and lawful, countervailing power. The lesson that freedom and justice are fundamental but always fragile moral values that must be defended and when necessary fought for.

In 1940, on the initiative of Giuseppe Borgese, an Italian antifascist who had emigrated to America, a small group of intellectuals, among them Thomas Mann, Lewis Mumford, Reinhold Niebuhr and Hermann Broch, published the manifesto *The City of Man: A Declaration on World Democracy*, as a final lesson that the whole world must learn: ultimately the world can be safeguarded against yet more self-destruction only if instead of the poison of nationalism, of putting one's own people and interests first, there now arises a universal democracy that can protect our common humanity against all those forces that want to divide us by race and class, or into slaves and masters. 'Diversity in unity and unity in diversity will be the symbols of federal peace in universal democracy.' (The fact that this lesson was heard and understood in Africa and in India by Gandhi and Nehru, but for political and economic reasons not yet in colonial Europe, comes as no surprise.)

A Pax Americana, consisting in part of an alliance between America and Europe in the form of NATO, would protect the liberal democratic world order built on the above lessons.

*

All of these lessons are lost on President Donald J. Trump.

Concepts such as the rule of law and an international legal order as a necessary counterweight to prevent the abuse of power mean nothing to him. When on 8 January this year the question was put to him — the most powerful man in the most powerful country with the most powerful army — in an interview by journalists of *The New York Times*: 'Are there any limits to your global power?' he answered: 'Yeah, there's one thing. My own morality, my own mind. I don't need international law.' In other words: my will is law.

In this way of thinking it speaks for itself that just as for the Athenians at the time of the Peloponnesian War, might makes right. This was confirmed once again by President Trump's young Jewish house ideologist, his deputy chief of staff Stephen Miller, when in an interview on CNN with Jake Tapper on 5 January, in the context of the abduction of the autocrat Maduro in Venezuela to a New York prison, he said: 'We live in a world, in the real world, Jake, that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power. These are the iron laws of the world since the beginning of time.'

It is no accident that we hear something similar in Russia from Putin's Russian Orthodox ideologist Aleksandr Dugin, who less than three days later, angry that with the kidnapping of Maduro, Russia had lost a geopolitical ally, made it known publicly that 'Russia is duty bound to do something terrible to restore its credibility. It is very sad that we have to use arguments like this, but we have no choice. Only brutality, power, mass destruction, and cruelty matter in this Trumpian world. You strike first, or you're dead.'

In the view of Trump and co, the world, as in George Orwell's *1984*, is ruled by three superpowers: America, Russia, and China. Europe and the Global South have to comply with these superpowers, while the idea of a world democracy that as an ideal of civilization must protect our common humanity is so distant that it is not even a dot on the horizon.

Marking American Independence Day in 1914, President Wilson said:

> My dream is that as the years go by and the world knows more and more of America, it […] will turn to America for those moral inspirations which lie at the basis of all freedom […] and that America will come into the full light of day when all shall know that she puts human rights above all other rights, and that her flag is the flag not only of America, but of humanity.

That dream of President Wilson's has gone. That America and the liberal democratic world order, for which the American people fought under the leadership of President Roosevelt during the Second World War, and that after that war President Truman brought about, no longer exists. President Trump has succeeded in short order in transforming the Pax Americana into the Bellum Americanum.

Much of the world will shed few tears at that. It saw the Western world order mainly as serving the economic interests of the West (and principally America). Moreover, people have not forgotten that the history of slavery in America and Europe's colonial past were in many respects a kind of prelude to the bestial practices of the Nazis.

For a Europe that after the Second World War interwove itself to such an extent with America politically, culturally, economically, and militarily that it can rightly be called 'Americanized', the shock was all the greater when the new National Security Strategy of the USA was made public in November 2025.

In it we read that President Trump wants to make America 'safer, richer, freer, greater and more powerful than ever before' (in short: *America First*), but a no less important ambition is: 'Promoting European Greatness'! This is necessary because the people who compiled the report were not only forced to conclude that Europe is having to cope with 'insufficient military spending and economic stagnation', but also — and even worse — that 'this economic decline is eclipsed by the real and more stark prospect of civilizational erasure'. Europe faces becoming a civilization in decay because of 'the European Union and other transnational bodies that undermine political liberty and sovereignty, migration policies that are transforming the continent and creating strife, censorship of free speech and suppression of political opposition, cratering birthrates, and loss of national identities and self-confidence'.

The cheerful message of those who compiled the report in President Trump's name is as follows: 'We want to support our allies in preserving the freedom and security of Europe, while restoring Europe's civilizational self-confidence and Western identity'. This support is available thanks to the fact that 'Europe remains strategically and culturally vital to the United States', and American diplomacy will continue to dedicate itself to 'genuine democracy, freedom of expression'. So America will continue to support all those political allies in Europe that want to get rid of the European Union, one of the achievements of the postwar democratic world order and the lessons that were learned in that period, by making nationalism, the ideology of 'our people first', victorious in Europe too.

All this, we are assured time and again, for the preservation of a European ideal of civilization that must not be lost… (A somewhat unnecessary concern for those who believe that the 'European civilization' does not exist in the first place.)

★

Along with Victor Hugo, we recognize the fact that the thinker of the present day has the important task of putting a stethoscope to our civilization and listening, so as to detect the weaknesses, distortions and lies that can result in the decline of a civilization. But where do we find a reliable stethoscope, now that we are confronted with such contradictory ideas about what a civilization is?

The ideal of civilization expounded by Dr. Goebbels and Dr. Ibel is in every respect opposite to that of Thomas Mann. The ideal of civilization of the house ideologist of President Trump, Stephen Miller, and the house ideologist of President Putin, Aleksandr Dugin, is emphatically not that of Simone Weil. She would regard the belief that might makes right, and that a striving for power is both good and necessary for the sake of preserving civilization, as confirmation of the bitter fact that 'Our age is so poisoned by lies that it converts everything it touches into a lie'. President Trump's ideal of civilization is emphatically not that of his predecessors Wilson, Roosevelt, and Truman. The ideal of civilization held by those European political forces that want to dismantle the European Union is opposite to that of European statesmen like Robert Schuman, Jean Monnet, Konrad Adenauer, Altiero Spinelli, Alcide De Gasperi and Paul Henri Spaak, who strove for the oneness of a united Europe.

The needed stethoscope can therefore be found only if we first discover the original meaning of the concept of civilization. If we trace it back, we eventually arrive at no less a person than Dante. It was he who, in the early years of the fourteenth century in his philosophical treatise *Convivio* (*The Banquet*), was the first to define civilization as follows: '*della umana civiltà che a uno fine è ordinata, cioè a vita felice* — human civilization is ordained to one end, that is, to a happy life.'

Happy life as the goal of civilization is the opposite of a shallow ideal of enjoyment, ease, or pleasure. Civilization is what Dante learned from a philosopher he admired, Aristotle, in his *Ethics*: doing good, making your moral values and virtues your own in striving for excellence. Baruch Spinoza too would adopt this concept of civilization, but at the end of his own *Ethics* he added a warning: '*Sed omnia praeclara tam difficilia quam rara sunt* — But all excellent things are as difficult as they are rare.' Sustaining civilization is therefore an unending task, and because humans are social creatures, it is by definition a shared task. Another century later, the French philosopher Marquis de Condorcet articulated the political significance of civilization for the future of the world as follows: 'The more civilization extends across the world, the more we shall see wars and conquests disappear, as well as slavery and poverty.'

On 4 July 2026 it will be precisely 250 years since America was born as a new nation, with the Declaration of Independence compiled by Thomas Jefferson in which he declares, in a clarion call:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

It is a perfect rendering of the concept of 'civilization' as defined earlier by Dante, Spinoza, and Jefferson's French friend Marquis de Condorcet. Because Thomas Jefferson too knew his classics. 'Happiness' is identical to the happy life in Aristotle's *Ethics*. To create, cultivate and defend this civilization is what Hans Morgenthau meant with his 'purpose of American politics'.

⋆

That the worldview of President Trump is closely related to the ideas of Dr. Ibel from 1930, and not at all closely to the humanistic ideal of civilization that Thomas Jefferson declared to be the raison d'être of the United States, is an indisputable fact, of which he himself has never made a secret. It is a worldview marked by what Victor Hugo saw as a typical symptom of decay, namely the return of the past:

> The past is very strong, it is true, at the present moment. It censures. This rejuvenation of a corpse is surprising. Behold, it is walking and advancing. It seems a victor; this dead body is a conqueror. He arrives with his legions, superstitions, with his sword, despotism, with his banner, ignorance; a while ago, he won ten battles. He advances, he threatens, he laughs, he is at our doors.

Not only in America, however, where Trump has been elected president convincingly for the second time, but in countless countries in Europe, in Latin America, in India, the ghost of the past is rising up and the people en masse are giving preference to nationalism, the form of a closed society and an authoritarian leader, whose will is law and who preaches that might makes right, above the pluriformity and rule of law of a liberal democracy.

Why? Where does the disappointment in and even revulsion for liberal democracy come from? People often point to the influx of immigrants who refuse to integrate into their host country, and to the loss of their own cultural identity, partly because of 'woke' ideology. But the disappointment also arises out of a resistance to a technocratic society that lacks religion, tradition, and morality. One undeniable fact is that in many respects both the Brussels EU and America show characteristics of the soulless *Zivilisation* that

Spengler predicted would accompany 'the decline of the West': rationalism, relativism, bureaucracy, massification, scientification, liberalism, technologization, the power of money. The paradox is that the aversion to liberal democracy, this conservative revolution, is inspired by a resistance to the loss or decline of culture. What, then, is the response of liberal democracy? For its defenders the answer is as crucial as it is urgent, because in President Trump's America the last phase of *Zivilisation* predicted by Spengler is now underway: 'Caesarism', an imperial power politics that will put an end to democracy with war and in torrents of blood.

There is another prediction of Spengler's that has come true: that Western man with his Faustian character would become the slave of his own creation, technology. Technological developments, especially those of artificial intelligence, are making 'machine civilization' — including the first humanlike robot that the duo Thea von Harbou and Fritz Lang foresaw with their film *Metropolis* — a daily reality.

Why has the West in so many respects become a *Zivilisation*? And what influence does the no longer futuristic 'machine civilization' have on our ideal of civilization? Should we fear the power of Silicon Valley (some critics even talk of the rise of 'technofascism'), or does it, with the technology of artificial intelligence, harbor a liberating power that gives humankind unprecedented opportunities to create a better world?

The extent to which politics is bound up with the fate of the economy is clear from the following two famous examples.

One week before the presidential election in 1980, on 28 October, the last television debate was held between President Carter and his challenger Ronald Reagan. When both men were asked for a closing statement, Reagan, looking straight at the camera, spoke the historic words: 'Next Tuesday all of you will go to the polls. You'll stand there in the polling place and make a decision. I think that when you make that decision it might be well if you ask yourself: Are you better off than you were four years ago?' For millions of Americans the answer was: 'No, I am not better off', and so Reagan won the election. Twelve years later it was Jim Carville Jr., Bill Clinton's spin doctor, who provided him with a slogan for the presidential elections in 1992: 'It's the economy, stupid!' Those words struck a chord with the American people, and so Clinton won the election.

When for voters in the voting booth everything turns on the economy, stupid, it is perhaps unsurprising that political leaders initially attribute dissatisfaction in society to a problem that can be solved by more economic growth, more innovation through technological development and lower taxes. But is the economy really the miracle cure for all our difficulties? Can everything, including education and culture, be reduced to an 'economic value derived from a market mentality'? And what to make of social decay, of deaths of despair — the loss of life to suicide, alcoholism, drug use, and

homelessness as the consequence of a capitalist system? These are part of the pattern of an American Dream in decline. Instead of creating life, we are primarily engaged in destroying it. Which raises another question: is our modern society actually capable of satisfying the most essential needs of human beings?

Why, in the rich West, is the social problem of poverty and increasing inequality not only still unsolved but, partly as a result of all our technological developments, on the rise? At the same time, what George Orwell observed ninety years ago is even more true now than it was then: 'With so much in its favour — for every empty belly is an argument for Socialism — the idea of Socialism is less widely accepted than it was ten years ago.' Why are we seeing the downfall of socialism and social democratic parties that stand for precisely the justice and freedom that Orwell championed? With as the one exception — like Asterix and Obelix's Gallic village — a Zohran Mamdani as the democratic socialist mayor of New York.

Robert Schuman, who joined the French resistance and became minister of foreign affairs under President de Gaulle after the war, and who with his declaration of 9 May 1950 more or less laid the first stone for the building of a united Europe, had his political writings collected in a book published in 1963 with the title *Pour l'Europe* (*For Europe*). In it he writes:

> Democracy owes its existence to Christianity. It was born the day that man was called to realize in this temporary life, the dignity of each human person, in his individual liberty in the respect of the rights of each and by the practice of brotherly love to all. Never before Christ were such ideas formulated.

This leads us to another question: is there a connection between the fact that the influence of Christianity in Europe is on the wane and the decline of our liberal democracy?

In a somber letter about social developments in Europe, Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, publisher of *Doctor Zhivago*, a novel banned in the Soviet Union, wrote in May 1960 to the author of that masterpiece, Boris Pasternak, about the era of the Fourth Empire that he believed had now dawned: 'The Fourth Empire is the age of compromise, of money and intellectual poverty.' Just like his contemporary Morgenthau, Feltrinelli understood that in such a cultural climate, a humanist ideal of civilization cannot survive as the foundation of a liberal democracy. Often enough, the weaknesses and malformations of a civilization are attributed to a specific powerful elite, but what role do the intellectuals play? How much moral and intellectual corruption actually exists alongside the corruption of financial interests? What the Roman historian Tacitus wrote in his *Annals* at the start of the second century before our era remains true: '*Corruptissima re publica plurimae leges* — The more corrupt the

state, the more numerous the laws'. And are the Epstein Files not the epitome of moral corruption and of a society in decay?

What can a politician do in such a society? In his essay *The Education of a Christian Prince* Erasmus observes: 'It is fruitless to give advice to a Prince on the principles of government without previously setting his mind free from those popular opinions which are at once most widely held and yet most fallacious.' Such a Prince, in other words such a political leader, can no doubt still be found, but what are the chances of being elected for anyone who goes against the beliefs of the great mass of the population, especially in this era in which truth and facts no longer count?

The dream of Robert Schuman and those other visionary statesmen of the late 1940s and 1950s who strove to create a United States of Europe — sovereign, with its own constitution and army — has not yet come about. In fact the most recent developments have shown that Europe is anything but a superpower; instead it is dependent to a great degree on the United States for both its prosperity and its security. It turns out that so much in Europe is copy-pasted from the USA that this in itself is causing Europe's fragility and decay. So will Europeans now finally make a virtue of necessity and create their United States of Europe?

Meanwhile we are confronted with one dream of President Trump's that is coming true, namely that the world will be run by three semi-totalitarian superpowers. World democracy and its common humanity may now be further away than ever, but will the prediction, the hope of Winston Smith in *1984*, come true, that these superpowers will ultimately be unable to hold out, because you cannot found a civilization on fear and hatred and cruelty?

*

In 1930 Ortega y Gasset closed his *La rebelión de las masas* (*The Revolt of the Masses*) with the words: 'This is the issue: Europe has been left without a moral code.' A society without morality; indifferent in regard to everything of value; lacking civilization; full of resentment, xenophobia, fear and violence; proud of its own ignorance and not interested in knowledge, truth, culture or the needs of others; obsessed with self-interest, its own identity and putting its own people first; featuring demagogues who come to power, and a liberal spirit that succumbs to a culture of lies and is forced to yield to authoritarian leadership.

If Western liberal democracy does in fact no longer have any morality, something of which the rest of the world has been convinced for many years, and if it is no longer founded on a humanist ideal, we perhaps ought to ask whether liberal democracy should still be defended, or whether it is time to search for a different form of government.

In 2026 the words written in 1867 by British poet and essayist Matthew Arnold in the final lines of his moving poem 'Dover Beach' seem to hold true for us:

> *And we are here as on a darkling plain*
> *Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,*
> *Where ignorant armies clash by night.*

II. THE CANDLE ON THE TABLE BURNED... A LIGHT TO GUIDE THE RENEWAL OF A CIVILIZATION IN DECAY

After the diagnosis of a civilization in decay has been arrived at with the aid of a stethoscope, along with its causes, the question remains: is there a doctor who can cure a civilization in crisis; is there a medicine, or a treatment?

In 1945, for a special Christmas issue of a magazine for German prisoners of war, Thomas Mann wrote a foreword on the theme of 'world civilization'. In it he refers to a speech made on radio by President Roosevelt on 3 September 1942 in which he spoke about the resistance of young people in Europe, China, and Russia to a despotic imperialism, reaching the following conclusion:

> It means that the old term, 'Western Civilization', no longer applies. World events and the common needs of humanity are joining the culture of Asia with the culture of Europe and the culture of the Americas to form, for the first time, a real world civilization.

There can be no doubt that in these remarks, Mann heard an echo of what he and his intellectual allies had in mind in 1940 with their 'declaration on world democracy' as the only way to create world peace and so to save humankind from perpetual military conflicts and war. That is what Mann now, after the war, argued once again: only a world civilization, a recognition of the equal value of all human beings, can protect the entirety of humanity by means of a social politics in which a balance is found between on the one hand respecting everyone's individual freedom and on the other the egalitarianism of a classless society and economic justice.

Long before Roosevelt and the group surrounding Thomas Mann, Victor Hugo enthusiastically impressed upon the audience in his opening speech at the International Peace Congress in Paris on 21 August 1849 what it would mean if people realized that humankind is one big family, and what would change in the world if huge sums were no longer spent on weaponry and preparations for war but instead on creating employment, education, industry, agriculture, science and the arts. The world would look different. There would no longer be any poverty, and with the disappearance of poverty

there would no longer be any revolutions. Instead of tearing each other apart, people would traverse the earth in peace.

This ideal of civilization is conceivable, however, only if the question Mann asked in 1921 — whether the Mediterranean-classical-humanist tradition is a spiritual heritage that will remain of significance to the whole of humanity and is therefore eternal and universal — can be answered in the affirmative. If there are no universal humanist values, then there can be no common humanity and world peace will never be possible.

Does the fact that wars and an arms race are underway mean that those universal values, which make a world civilization and with it world peace possible, do not exist? Or are they simply no longer recognized? If the latter is the case, then why not?

A society must be able to defend itself, must feel itself safe from external threats. That such security is no guarantee of the existence of a civilization becomes obvious if we merely glance at the societies of the three superpowers America, Russia, and China. None of the three has any need to fear for its continued existence. Yet in none of the three superpowers is the humanist ideal of civilization cultivated: the striving in freedom for human dignity and moral excellence as a common task. Russia is an aggressive police state, China the embodiment of Big Brother and America a broken society where little is left of 'the purpose of American politics'. None of the three superpowers is any longer capable of restoring an international legal order with the ambition of creating a world civilization.

Hence the question: what is the power — if there is one — that can restore that international legal order? Do we need to wait for America to rediscover its own raison d'être, or for China to be led once again by the ideas of Confucius rather than Mao? Can we place our hopes in the united forces of the Global South, to the extent that it is not infected with the sicknesses of Western civilization? Or is it now the task of the middle powers, with their power of the powerless (dixit Havel), having meanwhile learned their lesson, to build a world order based on moral values, as Canadian premier Mark Carney outlined in his historic speech to the World Economic Forum in Davos on 20 January 2026?

A similar story could be heard in 1931 in Naples, where the Italian philosopher and antifascist Benedetto Croce held a series of talks about freedom and liberalism as the essence of the European ideal of civilization. In 1932 Croce published those talks in a book entitled *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono* (*History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century*). He dedicated the book to his kindred spirit Thomas Mann, and he added an epilogue in which he expresses his conviction that just as Italy had become a political unity seventy years before, the European countries would become a united Europe, although this would only be possible if first a different class of politicians arose, who were sufficiently competent.

In other words, how do we get political leaders who dare to pay heed to Erasmus's adage that the politician who wants to be a statesman must be liberated from 'the beliefs of the masses, which are totally wrong, but at the same time the most firmly established'? Where do we find politicians who, in accordance with the maxim of Plato, Aristotle and Confucius, have been shaped by a humanist tradition — because soulcraft comes before statecraft — and what kind of new politics is needed to solve the social problems of our time?

*

If the decay of civilization is the story of the decay of spiritual and moral values, then the story of a rebirth of civilization is the story of the restoration of spiritual and moral values.

In 1931 Thomas Mann began writing his essay 'The Rebirth of Decency', his response to the fascistic ideal of civilization of Dr. Rudolf Ibel and his ilk, with a reference to the socially critical play from 1877 by Hendrik Ibsen, *Samfundets Støtter* (*The Pillars of Society*), in which a prominent businessman in a Norwegian port city learns the hard way that not money and self-interest but truth and freedom are the pillars on which society stands.

In that same period, Benedetto Croce, in his series of talks about freedom and liberalism, would make exactly the same assertion: 'Only in freedom can a society flourish and bear fruit; freedom is the only reason for an earthly existence, because without freedom life is not worth living.'

Fifty years later, in 1981, it was Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre who, with his book *After Virtue*, made a connection between on the one hand the fact that after the war the ideal of civilization in the free West consisted merely of a striving for economic, scientific and technological progress, that the West had become addicted to both money and technology (Spengler's *Zivilisation*), that countless people, the young especially, were experiencing the spiritual emptiness of a disenchanted, meaningless world, and on the other hand the fact that we actually no longer know what concepts like 'truth' and 'freedom' mean. The entire moral repertoire that we draw upon, which we use to reach moral judgements, is in reality nothing more than opinion, driven by emotion.

What has happened? The hypothesis that MacIntyre presents is that our ethics, the moral repertoire, has become an immense disorder because it has been separated from the original context from which these concepts derive their meaning: the work of the Greek philosophers, the Jewish prophets, and the Church Fathers. Separated from this philosophical and religious context, all those concepts, which ought to be the pillars of society, are no more than moral wreckage, and we are ourselves in danger of becoming a moral wreck.

The Enlightenment, MacIntyre says, was the great and definitive rupture

in our cultural history, and from that time onwards all the great thinkers attempted to create a rational foundation for morality. Thinkers of no less a stature than Pascal and Nietzsche, and writers including Dostoyevsky and Hermann Broch, knew that this is not possible. The reason was summed up succinctly by Pascal: '*Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point* — The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing.' MacIntyre writes:

> In a world of secular rationality religion could no longer provide such a shared background and foundation for moral disclosure and action; and the failure of philosophy to provide what religion could no longer furnish was an important cause of philosophy losing its central cultural role and becoming a marginal, narrowly academic subject.

All this will also be a reason why we so often talk of rights but rarely of obligations, of values (although without truly knowing that they are) but rarely of virtues, and why everyone has an opinion of their own about what civilization, democracy, good and evil, freedom, justice or beauty are. Where a common morality is lacking, we should not be surprised that what Nietzsche predicted and Simone Weil and George Orwell observed is true more than ever of our own time: the will to power and the law of the jungle prevail.

The paradox, however, is that this same Enlightenment, and with it the French and American Revolutions, also brought liberation. Liberation from a feudal, clerical society in which autocrats and priests were in charge. And freedom! The freedom to dare to think and the freedom to choose your own way in life. Equal rights, too, and especially equality before the law. Thanks to the French and American Revolutions and the ideas of the Enlightenment, slowly but surely a sociopolitical form was discovered through which a humanist ideal of civilization first put into words by Dante could be cultivated in society: liberal democracy.

Now that we, on our darkling plain in the face of so much decline of civilization, are thrown back on our own resources, where do we rediscover amid this moral wreckage the foundations of our humanity, upon which a new civilization can be built?

Will it again be a matter of searching for a God already declared dead — killed, according to Nietzsche, by us?

Do we have to rely on the unprecedented opportunities provided by technoscience, especially the capacities of artificial intelligence? Yann LeCun, former chief AI scientist at Meta and now the founder of Advanced Machine Intelligence Labs told the *Financial Times*: 'My legacy will be increasing the amount of intelligence in the world. Intelligence is really the thing we should have more of. With more intelligence, there's less suffering, more rational decisions, and more understanding of the world and the universe. We suffer from stupidity.'

All civilization ultimately begins with upbringing and education. In his dialogue *Laws*, Plato gives a concise description of upbringing in the tradition of *paideia*, a broad cultural education:

> Education is the schooling from boyhood in goodness which inspires the recipient with passionate and ardent desire to become a perfect citizen, knowing both how to wield and how to submit to righteous rule. […] Any training which has as its end wealth, or perhaps bodily strength, or some other accomplishment unattended by intelligence and righteousness, it counts vulgar, illiberal, and wholly unworthy to be called education.

This ideal entails training in the art of conversation, training in *sprezzatura*, effortless grace. It is the striving to be an honest man or woman.

But how realistic is such an upbringing in the digital age, with the impact of both social media and artificial intelligence, plus the fact that for the acquisition of a secure livelihood our society requires entirely different skills?

Something similar arises with regard to education. In 1874 Nietzsche predicted in his talks about the future of education that the 'school of civilization' would be unable to exist any longer because the whole of society was focused on what was useful for the state, the economy and therefore for earning money. Once again he showed great foresight, because the most recent surveys in America (and it will not be very different in Europe) demonstrate that making money is by far the most important value. It is therefore no wonder that education at schools and universities is dominated by science, technology, economics, and mathematics.

The humanities, reading books, being at home in the classical canon, have become marginal phenomena. The German-Jewish philosopher Leo Strauss saw, like his friend and colleague Hans Morgenthau, a close connection between the decline of democracy into a mass democracy, in which fears and desires rule instead of moral and spiritual values, and the negation of a liberal education. In a talk in 1959 he observed that a mass democracy is ruled by elites who manage to please a broad public but never read a book: 'The salt of modern democracy are those citizens who read nothing except the sports page and comic section.' The need for the humanities and for knowledge of the classics lay according to Strauss in liberal education: 'Liberal education is the ladder by which we try to ascend from mass democracy to democracy as originally meant. Liberal democracy is the necessary endeavor to found an aristocracy within democratic mass society. Liberal education reminds those members of mass democracy who have ears to hear, of human greatness.'

That such an education is in no respect useful for economic, scientific, and technological development should be obvious. That it is elitist, likewise. Furthermore, because of the critical insights of contemporary cultural studies it has also become clear how far this vision of education is from being inclusive

and diverse, which is to say open to other cultural expressions. And quite apart from all this, there is the fact that the tradition of *Bildung*, which in Germany goes back to Goethe, did not succeed in halting the rise of Nazi Germany.

The question remains: what kind of upbringing and education are necessary for us to cultivate an ideal of culture that leads to a nonviolent world in which everyone can live in freedom and dignity?

No less important is a question regarding the opportunities and responsibilities for our ideal of culture of the purveyors of culture: publishing houses, writers, artists and arts institutions, magazines, media.

In her *L'Enracinement*, about what needs to change in society if we are to create a new civilization, Simone Weil gives one example of how great the influence of a cultural climate is. She expresses her anger at the publication of a book about Lucius Cornelius Sulla, a tyrant of Ancient Rome famous for his cruelty, his bloody reign of terror and his megalomania. She remarks:

> We learn from one of the biographies of Hitler that one of the books that had the deepest influence on his youth was a tenth-rate work on Sulla. [...] The author of this mediocre book on Sulla, as well as all those who, by writing about Sulla or about Rome, had made possible the atmosphere in which this book was written, and, more generally, all those who, having authority to handle word or pen, contributed to the intellectual atmosphere in which the adolescent Hitler grew up — all these are perhaps more guilty than Hitler of the crimes he committed.

Fortunately there is also a counterexample concerning the political influence of a book, a novel about the fate of a doctor, a book that should serve as medicine for curing a civilization in crisis.

*

In early January 1958, in Langley, Virginia, at the headquarters of the CIA, a Russian novel in manuscript was delivered in the form of two film rolls made in the deepest secrecy. John M. Maury Jr., at that point Chief of Soviet Operations, read it and immediately understood why the work was banned in the Soviet Union. In a memo to his colleague Frank Wisner, responsible for secret operations, he wrote: 'Frank, the humanistic message — that every person is entitled to a private life and deserves respect as a human being, irrespective of the extent of his political loyalty or contribution to the state — poses a fundamental challenge to the Soviet ethic of sacrifice of the individual to the Communist system.'

There were further aspects of the novel that would be a challenge to any totalitarian regime: the question of how a society can suddenly be confronted with abuse of power when the progress of reason and freedom

seem assured; the place of moral aspirations and human feelings in a world governed by violence; how in such a world full of lies people can continue to believe in truth; the conflict between a political goal and personal values. It is this perspective on a dignified life that the Soviets wanted to keep from their people.

Fully aware (in those days although sadly no longer) that the pen is mightier than the sword, the secret services organized an operation, with the knowledge of President Eisenhower. Just a few months later, well-to-do Russian citizens who visited the Vatican's Civitas Dei pavilion at the World Expo in Brussels were handed a copy of the novel with the message: '*Prochtite eto* — Read this!'

The story of how this novel, which instilled such fear into the holders of power in the Soviet Union, came into the world begins not in the headquarters of the CIA but two years earlier, in the summer of 1956, when the original manuscript landed on the desk of a small, recently founded Italian publishing house in Milan: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore. It was named after a thirty-year-old man from an extremely wealthy family who had joined the partisans during the war to fight against fascism, and who after the war, to his mother's horror, became a member of the Partito Comunista Italiano. Feltrinelli could not read Russian, hence the request he made of an Italian Slavist to read the book quickly and advise him as to whether or not it should be published. Practically by return mail, the answer came: 'Not publishing this novel would be a crime against culture.' So it was that on 15 November 1957 the Italian edition was published of the only novel written by Russian poet and translator Boris Pasternak: *Doctor Zhivago*.

Party leader Khrushchev in Moscow was furious. Furious with 'Comrade Feltrinelli', who had not yielded to all the threats. And so furious with Pasternak that it justified the author's cynical prediction when he passed the manuscript to the scout for Feltrinelli so that it could be published, if only in a foreign language: 'You are hereby invited to my execution.'

The life of Dr. Yuri Zhivago is marked by the Bolshevik Russian Revolution led by Lenin, Stalin, and Trotsky, who with the overthrow of the tyrannical tsarist regime in favor of a communist utopia are attempting to create a new civilization on earth. Initially this fight for a more just world can count on Zhivago's sympathies. But the ruthless revolution leads to a civil war between the Red Army and the Whites, and Zhivago sees that a time has dawned that justifies the saying 'Man is a wolf to man'. 'The human laws of civilization ended', he writes. 'Those of beasts were in force. Man dreamed the prehistoric dreams of the caveman.' He also comes to realize that the revolution not only brings chaos but attempts to replace everything that was once the basis of civilization with the dominion of lies. That is also the experience of Lara, whom Zhivago meets again (they know each other from childhood but had lost touch) when both of them, she as a nurse and

he as a doctor, are working in a field hospital in southern Russia during the civil war. When as two lovers they briefly escape the war and go to stay in an old country mansion, Zhivago asks Lara why her husband, whom she still loves, left her to go and fight with the Bolsheviks, wrecking their happy marriage. Lara replies:

> I remember quite well how it was in my childhood. I can still remember a time when we all accepted the peaceful outlook of the last century. It was taken for granted that you listened to reason, that it was right and natural to do what your convenience told you. For a man to die by the hand of another was a rare, an exceptional event, something quite out of the ordinary. Murders happened in plays, newspapers and detective stories, not in everyday life. And then there was the jump from this calm, innocent, measured way of living to blood and tears, to mass insanity and to the savagery of daily, hourly, legalized, rewarded slaughter. […] It was then that falsehood came into our Russian land. The great misfortune, the root of all evil to come, was the loss of faith in the value of personal opinions. People imagined that it was out of date to follow their own moral sense, that they must all sing in chorus, and live by other people's notions, which were being crammed down everybody's throat. And there arose the power of the glittering phrase, first tsarist, then revolutionary.

'Disappointment embittered him. The revolution armed him', Lara says of her husband. So, with his belief that Marxism would wipe all evil from the world, he left for the front. In that quiet, remote house, Lara and Zhivago know that:

> even more than by what they had in common, they were united by what separated them from the rest of the world. They were both equally repelled by what was tragically typical of modern man, his shrill textbook admirations, his forced enthusiasm, and the deadly dullness conscientiously preached and practiced by countless workers in the field of art and science in order that genius should remain extremely rare.

Although a doctor by training, Zhivago's true passion is art, especially poetry. Deep in the night, when Lara is asleep and the howling, hungry wolves are creeping around the house, he makes notes about art and writes poems. Art is always meditating upon death and it is always thereby creating life. That is why he wants to be a poet. The essence of art, he writes, is not the form but the soul, the core and foundation of what is depicted, and all art, including tragic art, is a story about the happiness of existence.

He writes his poem 'Winter Night', and the burning candle of the opening verse and the ending symbolizes for him that in the midst of darkness, desolation, violence and death, the human soul has been granted immortality:

Snow swept over the earth
Swept it from end to end.
The candle on the table burned,
The candle burned.

[…]

The snow swept all through February
And now and again
The candle on the table burned,
The candle burned.

(Translation Manya Harari and Max Hayward)

Zhivago also writes his poems in the knowledge that he and Lara are threatened in their existence as a couple, that an end will come to their happiness together. This proves the case not long afterwards when Lara leaves Zhivago on a false pretext. When at the close of the story Zhivago dies a lonely death, Lara realizes that it is only because of their love that she can now understand 'the riddle of life, the riddle of death'. The novel ends on a summer's evening in 1929. Zhivago's two friends sit at an open window in Moscow, talking and leafing through the little book of poems that Zhivago has left them. Both have suffered at first hand the apocalyptic horrors, but now, on this beautiful evening, when a portent of freedom hangs in the air, they look out over their beloved city:

> To the two ageing friends sitting by the window it seemed that this freedom of the spirit was there, that on that very evening the future had become almost tangible in the streets below, and that they had themselves entered that future and would, from now on, be part of it. […] And it seemed that the book in their hands knew what they were feeling and gave them its support and confirmation.

The friendship between Feltrinelli, courageous publisher of *Doctor Zhivago*, and Pasternak was an epistolary one. The final sentences of the letter that Feltrinelli wrote to Pasternak on 5 March 1958 sum up why we should regard this novel, this work about Dr. Zhivago's image of humanity and the world, as a medicine to heal a civilization in crisis:

> Many thanks for *Doctor Zhivago*, for everything he has taught us. In these times where human values are discarded, where human beings are reduced to robots, where most people only try to run away from themselves and to solve the problems of their ego by hurrying and killing what remains of

their human sensitivities, Zhivago was a lesson never to forget. And every time I do not know my way I can go back to Zhivago and learn from him the greatest lesson of life. Zhivago will always help me, whenever they seem definitely lost, to find the simple and profound values of life. With a sense of profound-loving friendship yours, Giangiacomo Feltrinelli.

How complex we humans are and life is becomes clear from the remainder of Feltrinelli's life story. If in 1958 he still identified with the character of Zhivago, in the 1960s he would increasingly identify with Lara's other lover, her husband, who, disappointed in himself and in society, arms himself to fight in the revolution. Feltrinelli did the same. He fell under the spell of figures like Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, and set up an armed organization closely related to the extreme left-wing terror organization the Red Brigades, in order to protect society against a resurgent fascism. Feltrinelli was forced into hiding, sought on suspicion of terrorist activities.

On 14 May 1972, close to an electricity pylon on the outskirts of Milan, his dead body was found. The explosives he had been trying to plant had gone off prematurely. Was it his own fault, or had someone deliberately sabotaged the detonator? No one will ever know. But this is what Yuri Zhivago knew:

The candle on the table burned,
The candle burned.

Rob Riemen
Founder and president Nexus Institute
January/February 2026

Speakers



CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL (United States, 1962) is a journalist whose well-researched arguments make a distinctive contribution to the debate about the future of the West. He takes the view that the moral and ideological foundations of Western civilization are at risk of being eroded by progressive and utopian experimentation. Caldwell writes for the conservative journal *Claremont Review of Books* and is known for his opinion pieces in *The New York Times*. As a member of the editorial board of the French journal *Commentaire* and as the author of *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: Immigration, Islam, and the West* (2009), he is also well acquainted with Europe. His book on his own country, *The Age of Entitlement: America Since the Sixties* (2020), a reflection on the unforeseen consequences of American liberalism, was a *The New York Times* Best Seller.



BILL CASSIDY (United States, 1957) is a Republican US Senator for the state of Louisiana. He grew up in Baton Rouge, and attended Louisiana State University (LSU) for undergraduate and medical school. In 1990, he joined LSU Medical School teaching medical students and residents at Earl K. Long Hospital, a hospital for the uninsured. During this time, he co-founded the Greater Baton Rouge Community Clinic, a clinic providing free dental and health care to the working uninsured. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Cassidy led a group of health care volunteers to convert an abandoned building into an emergency health care facility, providing basic health care to hurricane evacuees. Not long after, Cassidy entered politics: he was elected to the Louisiana State Senate in 2006. Two years later, he was elected to the United States House of Representatives and in 2014, he was elected to the US Senate where he has worked, amongst other things, to reduce health care costs and reform mental health care. Cassidy is chairman of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP). After he supported Trump's impeachment in 2021, Cassidy lost support within the Republican party and was not re-nominated for another term. He will leave the Senate in January 2027.



© *Fiorenzi Niccoli*

BENEDETTA CRAVERI (Italy, 1942) embodies the spirit of Europe. As the granddaughter of the intellectual Benedetto Croce and the daughter of the writer Elena Croce and resistance hero Raimondo Craveri, she breathes history and culture. She studied philology, taught French, and wrote passionately about her favourite subject: salons and the sociopolitical power of women in the run-up to the French Revolution. Among her masterpieces are *The Age of Conversation* (2001), which explores how women in Parisian salons dictated the rules for conversations between writers, philosophers and statesmen, thereby shaping modern society; *The Last Libertines* (2016), a cultural-critical study in which she chronicles the lives of young aristocrats who found themselves at the crossroads between the era of traditional court culture and the emerging revolutionary ideas; and *The Contessa* (2026), a biography of Countess Virginia Oldoini of Castiglione, an aristocrat who became a notorious figure in nineteenth-century Europe and was a pioneer in photography. Craveri is a member of the Accademia dei Lincei, and president of the Fondazione Biblioteca Benedetto Croce, one of Italy's most important cultural institutions.



The Honourable CHRYSTIA FREELAND (Canada, 1968) is former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance of Canada and currently serves as Economic Advisor to the President of Ukraine. She is also the author of *Unreliable Boyfriend: An Insider's View of Dealing with a Chaotic Superpower, Plutocrats, and Other Complicated People* (2026). Freeland was elected in five consecutive national elections and served as a Member of Parliament from 2013 to 2026. She also served as Deputy Prime Minister from 2019 to 2024. She held office as Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs from 2019 to 2020 and as Minister of Finance from 2020 to 2024, becoming the first woman in Canadian history to hold the position. Her stewardship during and after the covid-19 pandemic protected jobs and businesses and delivered a historic soft landing for the Canadian economy, while preserving Canada's AAA credit rating and securing the lowest debt and deficit ratios of any G7 country. During this same period,

she played a central role in the global response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, including the seizure of Russian sovereign assets to support Ukraine.



YOEL GAMZOU (Israel, 1987) is a conductor and composer. He studied in Tel Aviv, New York, Paris and Milan, and has been the musical director of the Polish National Opera in Warsaw since 2026. Previously, he held the same post at the Theater Bremen and was deputy musical director at the Kassel State Theater. He has also appeared as a guest conductor at, amongst other places, the State Opera in Vienna, Hamburg and Munich, the Opéra national de Paris and the Teatro San Carlo in Naples. Gamzou is renowned for his interpretations of the works of Gustav Mahler. At the age of 23, he received widespread acclaim for his own 'complete' version of Mahler's Tenth Symphony, which he released on CD with the International Mahler Orchestra, which he founded. For this, he was awarded the German ECHO Klassik Award. In 2013, he received the Princess Margriet Award from the European Cultural Foundation 'for his exceptional talent and energy in inspiring different generations of musicians and audiences across Europe'. In his work, Gamzou always seeks the 'why' behind art and culture, and their significance for society.



ALICJA GESCINSKA (Poland, 1981) is a Polish-Belgian writer and philosopher. She made her debut in 2011 with the award-winning book *De verovering van de vrijheid* ('The Conquest of Freedom'), an autobiographical reflection on the meaning of freedom. In 2012, she obtained her PhD from Ghent University with a thesis on Max Scheler and Karol Wojtyła. Gescinska's literary work is as versatile as it is impressive: she has written several philosophical books on music and morality, political engagement and responsibility, and also published the poetry collection *Trojaanse gedachten* (2021); the theatre monologues *Apate spreekt* (2022) and *De ontdekking van de vrouw* (2026); and the novella *De gezichtslozen* (2025). In 2026, she won the Socrates Cup for the most thought-provoking Dutch philosophy book of the year with *Vrouwen in duistere tijden* ('Women in Dark Times'). As an academic, Gescinska has worked at Princeton University, Amherst College and the University of Buckingham amongst other institutions. Through her columns and opinion pieces, and as chair of the writers' association PEN Vlaanderen, she is a prominent voice in public and cultural debate in Flanders and the Netherlands.



© *Paul Kingsnorth*

PAUL KINGSNORTH (United Kingdom, 1972) is a writer, poet and essayist. In his younger years, he was a journalist and a passionate environmental activist, until, disillusioned, he came to the conclusion that the environmental movement was failing to achieve results because it had become part of the system — or, in his words: 'the Machine'. Together with a friend, he subsequently founded the Dark Mountain Project, a movement of writers, artists and thinkers seeking to disrupt society, with the aim of shedding light on the problems of our time by operating outside traditional frameworks and the system's lies. Between 2010 and 2013, the annual highlight of the Dark Mountain Project was the Uncivilisation Festival. In his most recent book, *Against The Machine: On the Unmaking of Humanity* (2025), which has been published worldwide and received critical acclaim, Kingsnorth argues that 'the Machine' — the system underpinning our society, in which the belief in growth, bureaucracy and control reigns supreme — governs and transforms everything for the worse. He lives in the west of Ireland, with his family, some hens, lots of trees and a beehive.



RYSZARD LEGUTKO (Poland, 1949) is a philosopher and politician. He studied at the Uniwersytet Jagielloński in Kraków, where he also lectured for many years, specializing in Greek philosophy and political theory. During the communist era, Legutko was a member of the opposition and served as editor of an underground journal on culture and politics. After the fall of communism, he was one of the founders of the conservative think tank Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej ('Centre for Political Thought'). Legutko is an outspoken critic of classical and contemporary liberalism, which, as he argues in *The Demon in Democracy* (2012) and *The Cunning of Freedom* (2021), has totalitarian tendencies because it subjects all spheres of life — politics, culture, education, morality, religion and the family — to a single, all-encompassing emancipatory and egalitarian worldview: all spheres have become politicized and are forced to legitimize themselves according to the standards of liberal democracy. In 2005, Legutko joined Kaczyńskis' Law and Justice Party (PiS), after which he successively held the posts of Deputy Speaker of the Senate, Minister of Education and foreign affairs adviser to President Kaczyński. He subsequently served in the European Parliament for fifteen years, where he criticized the undemocratic and intolerant aspects of the Parliament. Legutko recently published an annotated Polish translation of Plato's *Politeia*.



ENRICO LETTA (Italy, 1966) served as Prime Minister of Italy from 2013 to 2014. Currently, he is the dean of the IE School of Politics, Economics, and Global Affairs, president of the Jacques Delors Institute and president of the Italian AREL Institute for Economic and Political Research. In September 2023 the European institutions tasked him with writing a report on the future of the EU Single Market, which led to the influential publication *Much more than a Market*. From 2021 to 2023, Letta was the National Secretary of the Democratic Party in Italy. Prior to that, from 2015 to 2021, he was dean of the Paris School of International Affairs at Sciences Po. In 2019, he was appointed president of the Association of Professional Schools of International Affairs (APSIA) for a two-year term. Earlier in his career, Letta served as Minister for EU Affairs (1998–1999), Minister for Industry, Trade

and Crafts (2000), Minister for Industry and Foreign Trade (2000–2001), and Undersecretary of State to Prime Minister Romano Prodi (2006–2008). Letta is a strong believer in deeper European integration.



ERIC LI (China, 1968) is a venture capitalist and political scientist. After studying economics and business at Berkeley and Stanford, he returned to China to complete a PhD in political science at Fudan University. Through his business and academic experiences, he became convinced that the notion that in order to become a developed country, China must follow the path of Western liberal politics and capitalist economics, is misguided. In his lectures and his book *Party Life: Chinese Governance and the World Beyond Liberalism* (2023), he argues that the era of globalization is over, that Western liberal democracy has had its day, and that the Chinese model is a viable alternative. Li is chairman of the venture capital firm Chengwei Capital and chairman of the news outlet Guancha.cn. As a board member of universities in both China (Fudan) and the US (Stanford), and as a member of the Asia Society Hong Kong, Li is equally at home in both the academic and corporate world. He publishes regularly in newspapers and magazines such as *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *The New York Times*, *Financial Times* and *The Economist*.



GEORGE PACKER (United States, 1960), as a writer and journalist, has been exploring for decades the question of why the liberal democratic order — which appeared to have triumphed after the Cold War — has been weakened from within. In *The Unwinding: Thirty Years of American Decline* (2013), he described the economic, social and institutional upheaval in America; in *Our Man* (2019), he explored the end of the American era of self-assured global power through a portrait of the diplomat Richard Holbrooke; and in *Last Best Hope* (2021), he seeks to understand why American democracy has lost its sense of community and self-governance. Packer is a staff writer at *The Atlantic*. Alongside his journalistic work, he also writes plays and novels, most recently the brilliant novel *The Emergency* (2025).



ABDERRAHMANE SISSAKO (Mauritania, 1961) is a film director and screenwriter. After spending his childhood in Mauritania and Mali, he moved to Moscow to study film studies. It was there that he made his first film, *Octobre* (1993), which was enthusiastically received at Cannes. Sissako is currently the most influential filmmaker of African descent. In his work, he confronts an international audience with its indifference towards the 'forgotten continent' and powerfully depicts the consequences of the African diaspora and human rights abuses in Africa. His impressive film *Timbuktu* (2014), which explores how fundamentalists have taken control of an African city and the various ways in which the population copes with this, won seven Césars and was nominated for the Palme d'Or and the Oscar for Best International Feature Film. *Black Tea* premiered in 2024. Alongside his work as a director, Sissako is committed to nature conservation in his country: as part of the Great Green Wall project, he and his wife, Kessen Tall, look after a plot of land near the border with Senegal.



MARIA STEPANOVA (Russia, 1972) is one of the most important contemporary Russian writers of poetry and novels. In 2021, *The Guardian* rightfully called her 'Russia's next great writer'. Her work has been translated into more than 25 languages and has received numerous awards. In 2005, she was awarded the Pasternak Prize and the prestigious Andrei Bely Prize, and her book *In Memory of Memory* was shortlisted for the International Booker Prize. Stepanova not only writes fiction but is also an influential essayist and journalist. She is the founder and editor-in-chief of the independent digital magazines OpenSpace.ru (2007–2012) and its successor Colta.ru. She has been living in Berlin since March 2022, after finding herself in a precarious position in Moscow due to her outspoken criticism of President Putin and the invasion of Ukraine.



BHASKAR SUNKARA (United States, 1989) is a political writer and activist. In 2010, whilst still a student, he founded the magazine *Jacobin*, which soon attracted tens of thousands of subscribers. In 2016, he became vice-chair of the Democratic Socialists of America, a socialist organization that campaigns for socialist policies in the United States. Sunkara gained widespread recognition with his book *The Socialist Manifesto: The Case for Radical Politics in an Era of Extreme Inequality* (2019), in which he explains how capitalism is inherently built on inequality and in which he proposes democratic reforms. He advocates for a more egalitarian society, in which ordinary people have a greater say over the institutions that shape their lives, particularly through workplace democracy. Since 2022, Sunkara has been president of the progressive magazine *The Nation*.



LOUKAS TSOUKALIS (Greece, 1950) is a European political economist who not only works towards further European integration but is himself a prime example of it. He studied in Manchester, Bruges and Oxford, where he also obtained his doctorate and taught for many years. He subsequently held the Jean Monnet Chair in European Integration at the University of Athens and was a professor at the European Institute of the London School of Economics. Throughout his impressive career, Tsoukalis has always operated at the intersection of academia and policy and has advised various Presidents of the European Commission and the European Council, always with a focus on further European integration. In 2026, Tsoukalis is a professor at Sciences Po and chairman of Greece's largest think tank, the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP). His status as an EU insider and advocate is also evident from his books, including *In Defence of Europe: Can the European Project Be Saved?* (2016) and *Europe's Coming of Age* (2023).



ROB RIEMEN (The Netherlands, 1962) is the founder and president of the Nexus Institute. Riemen founded the journal *Nexus* in 1991 to keep alive the tradition of European humanism. In 1994, he established the Nexus Institute, which has become one of Europe's most prestigious organizations to inspire public intellectual debate about the most important subjects for humanity and society. He is the author of the bestselling books *Nobility of Spirit: A Forgotten Ideal* (2008), a passionate plea for the revival of classical humanist values; *To Fight Against this Age* (2018), consisting of two beautifully written, cogent and urgent essays about the rise of fascism and the ways in which to combat it; *Mens worden is een kunst* ('Becoming Human is an Art', 2023), written as an empowerment of all those individuals who are eager to regain the virtues and values necessary to realize the coming victory of democracy and to defeat the growing totalitarian mindset; and most recently *Het woord dat de dood verslaat* ('The Word that Conquers Death', 2025). So far, his work has been translated into 24 languages.

BROOK FOUNDATION

ammodo art

Don Quixote Foundation.

FONDS 1999

www.nexus-instituut.nl/en | info@nexus-instituut.nl | +31 (0)85-047 1229
Herikerbergweg 292-342 | 1101 CT Amsterdam, The Netherlands