

Nexus Conference 2016

What Will Save the World?



Saturday, 12 november | 9.40 AM — 4.00 PM

National Opera & Ballet, Amsterdam

Speakers

Farida Allaghi — Sidney Blumenthal — Ágnes Heller — Avishai Margalit
Douglas Mwonzora — Mabel van Oranje — Steven Pinker — Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo
Simon Schama — Elif Shafak — Miroslav Volf — Leif Wenar — Adam Zagajewski

Musical intermezzo

Aeham Ahmad
(pianist on the photo)

Programme Nexus Conference

Saturday, 12 november 2016
National Opera & Ballet, Amsterdam

- 9.40 AM Welcome *Rob Riemen*
- 9.45 AM Keynote lecture *Ágnes Heller*
- 10.40 AM Intermission
- 11.00 AM I. WHAT IS THE DEFECT IN OUR CIVILIZATION?
Panel discussion with *Ágnes Heller, Avishai Margalit, Douglas Mwonzora, Elif Shafak, Miroslav Volf* and *Leif Wenar*, moderated by *Rob Riemen*
- 12.45 PM Lunch with complimentary refreshments
- 01.30 PM Musical intermezzo *Aeham Ahmad*
- 02.15 PM II. WHAT WILL SAVE THE WORLD?
Panel discussion with *Farida Allaghi, Sidney Blumenthal, Mabel van Oranje, Steven Pinker, bishop Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, Simon Schama* and *Adam Zagajewski*, moderated by *Rob Riemen*
- 04.00 PM Book signing with *Ágnes Heller* and the other authors speaking at the conference. The signing will take place at the Athenaeum bookstore stand, where a selection of works relevant to the topic of the conference will be available for purchase.

The conference will be held in English.

To attend the Nexus Conference please register online at www.nexus-instituut.nl. The entrance fee includes refreshments for lunch.

The programme may be subject to change. For the latest information on the conference and its speakers, please see our website.

Nexus Conference 2016

What Will Save the World?

At the end of Roger Martin du Gard's epic book *The Thibaults*, one of the Thibault brothers, Antoine, looks into the future. The novel, as monumental as Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, describes the social, political and moral developments in the Belle Époque, the era that came to a close with the outbreak of the First World War. It is 1918, Antoine is critically ill as a result of a gas attack and is reacquainted with his former teacher, doctor Philip. Together they discuss the consequences of the war.

Antoine says: 'A young colleague of mine, also injured, sends me numerous letters in which he announces the collapse of the modern world, the collapse of capitalism! He also thinks the war will continue until Europe is exhausted. But he predicts — when everything will be gone, will be razed to the ground — the advent of a new world. He sees the creation of a world confederation built on the ruins of our civilization, the organization of a large, collective life on the planet, with a completely new foundation...'

His aged teacher, however, sees a very different future: 'I leave these Messianic visions to your friend... The future I foresee is nearer; and very different. I cannot see states readily giving up the absolute power that the war has given them. Therefore, I fear that the times of democratic liberties are over, at least for a while; which is quite confusing for the people of my generation, I must admit. We firmly believed that those liberties had been acquired once and for all; that they could never be questioned again. [...] We thought that humanity had come of age, and that it was well under way to a time in which wisdom, moderation and tolerance would prevail in the world at last... in which intelligence and reason would finally determine the evolution of human society... Who knows whether we seem naive fools with pathetic illusions about man and his ability to be civilized in the eyes of future historians? Perhaps we closed our eyes to certain essential human qualities? Perhaps to the inner urge to destroy, the recurrent penchant to crush what we created with difficulty, one of the fundamental laws that restrict the constructive possibilities of our nature...?'

Twenty years later, 1938. The pessimistic expectations of the elderly doctor have come true. The era of democratic liberties has come to a close. The Old World is cloaked in the garb of totalitarian fascism, Nazism and Stalinism. In the New World, in Chicago to be exact, Italian intellectual Giuseppe Borgese realizes that evil forces cannot be thwarted by weapons alone. He is convinced that a new war is inevitable, and he blames the intelligentsia for their complicity in this state of affairs.

In Italy, he was one of the few who stood up against fascism; but it was a lonely enterprise, a lost battle in advance. More than ninety percent of academics pleaded their allegiance to Mussolini; not only out of cowardice, but also out of an actual confidence in the fascist over a democratic world order. Disappointed, Borgese left for America in 1931.

Here, in 1938, he resumes his battle against the demonic forces and his fight for a new world order that would guarantee the dignity and independence of each individual. He works on a manifesto in which he calls on intellectuals to take on responsibility; the future of the world must not be left to the blind forces of nature and history. Moreover, it is their intellectual duty to reflect on major social, moral and political questions in order to provide the political elite with ideas and knowledge that ought to be the basis on which this new world order will be created. To achieve this, he brings several leading intellectuals together, a 'Committee on Europe'. Prominent European exiles and their main American sympathizers are involved: among others Thomas Mann, Hermann Broch, Lewis Mumford, Christian Gauss and Reinhold Niebuhr.

After several meetings, they publish *The City of Man. A Declaration on World Democracy* in March 1940. In less than a hundred pages, they envisage the steps which must be taken after the war (!) to create an actual, lasting, new humane world order. World democracy must be based on humanistic values, inspired by Christian ideals. The *Pax Americana* has to evolve into a *Pax Humana*, in which the poison of nationalism will cede to a universal democracy with a universal parliament and an elected 'president of mankind'. They envision a social democracy that ensures individual freedom and social justice, while simultaneously cultivating solidarity. Only then will unity be protected against the forces that seek to divide humankind into races, classes, or slaves and masters; forces that threaten the survival of the humane world.

The authors of *The City of Man* were no naive idealists. On the contrary, these men, the European exiles in particular, had experienced life at first hand and were well aware of the power of evil and the limits of human potential. This makes their publication of a *Declaration* expressing a great confidence

in the victory of good over evil, a few months after the outbreak of World War II, even more remarkable.

In the decades that followed, their confidence turned out to be justified. The democratic forces overcame totalitarianism; the United Nations and other international organizations were created to settle conflicts by peaceful means; a universal declaration of human rights was endorsed; globalization reduced international poverty; scientific and technological advances offered humankind mastery of its own destiny; the end of history could be proclaimed. The nineteenth-century optimistic dream, described by doctor Philip, seems to have been fulfilled: 'Humanity had come of age and was well under way to a time in which wisdom, moderation and tolerance would prevail in the world at last... in which intelligence and reason would finally determine the evolution of human society...'

First panel discussion. What is the defect in our civilization?

Thirty years later: today's world. Is the dream of a humane world an illusion after all? For what is the news of the world? Extremism, fanaticism and barbarism surface in every corner of the planet. More and more authoritarian regimes emerge, and fascism — political and academic denials notwithstanding — poisons both Western and Arab society once again. The ideas of democracy and freedom are too often misused and, as a consequence, have lost their essential significance. Social cohesion and solidarity evaporate and social inequality and xenophobia are on the rise. A politically untouchable elite is in power, showing no evidence of any moral sense. The *Pax Americana* has not evolved into a *Pax Humana*.

Instead, we face a renewed struggle for world domination. The world as we know it is falling apart, tainted and polluted; the destruction of our planet is well under way. Technology can be a blessing, but can also turn out to be akin to Frankenstein's monster. International institutions and organizations are no longer considered trustworthy and effective; confidence in a democratic world order is in decline. Spiritual values and virtues seem to have been swept away by an ocean of worries and desires. The language of the Muses, the world of books and the love of wisdom are ideas associated with an era that seems long gone: the era of humanism cultivated and upheld by citizens. Meanwhile, millions of people are on the run for war, violence and poverty — and nobody offers them a place at the inn or welcomes them with open arms... What will be the consequences of these developments? And if the situation in the world is as serious as the reports suggest, what exactly is

the defect in our civilization? What goes wrong, time and again, and *why*? Why do we fail to learn the lessons from history, why do we squander the opportunity to create the ‘city of man’? Why are we dwelling in this fog of fear that seems to entrap us?

György Lukács, a Hungarian literary critic and Marxist, became famous with his portrayal of ‘Grand Hotel Abyss’, where intellectuals reside while discussing and complaining about the world rather than taking action to change it. A similar sentiment is expressed in the manifesto by Giuseppe Borgese and his friends, when they call upon intellectuals to forsake all academic abstractions and quibbles. Instead, thinkers should shed their intellectual light on our current worldly darkness to help us understand what goes wrong, and to suggest courses of action that should be taken to save our humane world which guarantees our independence and dignity. And we should answer that call again!

These questions are neither new nor devoid of answers; but these earlier responses are not only diverse, but often also contradictory. The defect in our civilization would be the result of: Satan (the Gnostics), original sin (St. Paul and Augustine), human desires (Spinoza), the lack of independent thinking (Kant), religion (Voltaire and Feuerbach), reason (Rousseau), a crisis in reason (Husserl, Horkheimer and Pirsig), the death of God (Nietzsche), capitalism (Marx), the pathology of civilization (Freud), the decay of values (Hermann Broch), democracy (Georges Sorel), the masses (Ortega y Gasset), the demise of European humanism (Thomas Mann)... to only name a few philosophical views on the defect in our civilization.

In addition, there are many equally important sociological and pragmatic analyses that try to interpret the signs of crisis in our society. They often point to the cultivated selfishness of neoliberalism; economic crisis and social inequality; the betrayal by the elite and changing power structures; the scientific approach and technologization; materialism and decadence; religious fanaticism; resentment and the temptations of totalitarian politics; cultivated meaninglessness as spread by the mass media and entertainment industry; the lack of solidarity and of shared responsibility in an individualistic society...

Which of these answers best describes the current situation and developments in the world? Only when we know this we may try to answer the most important question:

Second panel discussion. What will save the world?

What will save the world, and what can vanquish evil once and for all? These questions are as old as humanity itself; mythologies, religions and philosophical schools try to answer them with stories about demigods, gods and God; good works, faith and grace; incarnation and reincarnation; prophets and the Redeemer; the idea of humanity and the existence of the Good, Beauty and Truth; the power of reason... The world is saved by God or the Good!

Art and beauty can save the world — at least, in the eyes of Dostoevsky. Albert Camus agrees, finishing *The Rebel* with these compelling words: 'In beauty, we prepare the day for the day of regeneration when civilization will give first place — far ahead of the formal principles and degraded values of history — to this living virtue on which is founded the common dignity of man and the world he lives in, and which we must now define in the face of a world that insults us.' Schopenhauer and Wagner were convinced that only the Arts and the Artist can redeem the world. And it was only after losing faith in Wagner that Nietzsche lost his belief in redemption and salvation of the world. He then embraced Schopenhauer's bleak notion that it was better not to be born at all.

Alternatively, reason has also been claimed as 'saviour of the world'. This was, at least, the belief rooted in the minds of the great thinkers of the Enlightenment. More recently, a belief in the redeeming qualities of science and technology has gained ground. This optimistic stanza is also adopted by energetic idealists, who struggle to protect our environment; who fight against poverty, inequality and disease; who defend the rights of each individual; or who primarily strive to raise the quality of and access to education for all.

And then we have realists, who have faith in the pragmatic approach of diplomacy and nuclear disarmament; who put their trust in the United States to act wisely as the sole superpower or who rather believe in a lasting international balance of power; who urge to strengthen international institutions; who are confident that scientific and technological developments will make this world better; and who believe in ever-lasting economic growth and increasing prosperity for all. But they are always challenged by moralists, who believe there can be no adequate solutions to the world's problems as offered by this utilitarian and pragmatic approach without first answering the question of the nature and foundation of our moral values. They uphold the idea that love for the world, *amor mundi*, will never exist without the cultivation of spiritual values.

Let us take the wise counsel, as expressed by the Romanian-French playwright Eugène Ionesco at the Salzburger Festspiele, to heart. Saving the world will only be possible if every single man is capable of answering this one fundamental question: what is the purpose of life on earth?

Rob Riemen

Founder and president of the Nexus Institute



Speakers

AEHAM AHMAD (Syria) is a Palestinian-Syrian pianist, born and raised in Yarmouk, a district of Damascus populated by Palestinian refugees. He studied at the conservatory in Damascus and the Faculty of Music in Homs, and came to international fame in 2015 as ‘pianist in the ruins’ with his public performances in war-torn Syria. After ISIS fighters occupied Yarmouk and destroyed his piano he was forced to flee to Germany, where he continues to play the piano in protest against war and terror. In 2015, he was the first recipient of the Beethoven Prize for Human Rights.



FARIDA ALLAGHI (Libya) is a human rights activist. Since the early 1970 she has been involved in different political opposition groups against the Gaddafi regime. She was forced to leave Libya, and spent forty years in exile. She obtained her PhD in Sociology at Colorado State University in the United States. Her life and career are dedicated to the struggle for human rights and the empowerment of women, young people and civil society in the Arab region. Allaghi worked as an advisor for the United Nations on women’s emancipation and children’s rights. After the fall of the Gaddafi regime she founded the Libyan Forum for Civil Society; in 2015, she was appointed as Chargée d’affaires of the Libyan Mission to the European Union. Disappointed with the functioning of both her own government and the eu, she stepped down from this position earlier this year. She is now taking steps to revive the Libyan Forum for Civil Society and working as a regional and international Strategic Advisor on human development.





SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL (United States) is a journalist, historian and presidential adviser. He was assistant and senior adviser in the White House to President Bill Clinton and has been a senior adviser to Hillary Clinton. He graduated from Brandeis University, was a senior fellow at the New York University Center for Law and

Security, and worked as a journalist for such prominent publications as *The Washington Post*, *The New Yorker* and *The Guardian*. He has written several influential books, including *The Permanent Campaign* (1980), *The Clinton Wars* (2003), *How Bush Rules: Chronicles of a Radical Regime* (2006), and *The Strange Death of Republican America* (2008). He was executive producer of the documentary film on torture *Taxi to the Dark Side*, which won an Academy Award and an Emmy Award. He has also written a widely produced play, *This Town*. This year saw the publication of the first volume of his widely acclaimed, four-part Lincoln biography *A Self-Made Man*.



AGNES HELLER (Hungary) is one of Europe's last true philosophers. During her long life, she has seen and participated in much of recent European history. As a Jew, she survived the Nazi regime in Budapest during the Second World War. After the war she studied philosophy with György Lukács, under whose influence she joined the

movement of Marxist critical theorists. Her convictions caused her to clash repeatedly with the ruling Communist Party, which forced her into exile in 1977. Subsequently Heller lived in Australia and the United States, where she was appointed Professor of Philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York. She has now returned to live in Budapest, where Viktor Orbán's regime treats her as a bothersome dissident who must be kept silent — something Heller adamantly refuses to accept. Heller wrote numerous books on ethics, existentialism and the history of philosophy. Among her many works are *A Philosophy of Morals* (1990), *The Time is Out of Joint* (2002) and *The Immortal Comedy* (2005).

AVISHAI MARGALIT (Israel) is a philosopher, famous for his profound analyses of social and ethical issues. His work deals with fundamental social concepts such as human dignity, memory as a constructive force and moral responsibility in times of conflict. Margalit wrote numerous influential works, including *The Decent Society* (1996), *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of its Enemies* (2004, with Ian Buruma) and *On Compromise and Rotten Compromises* (2010). He received various honorary awards, including the Spinozalens Prize in 2002, the Israel Prize in Philosophy in 2010 and the Dr. Leopold-Lucas-Preis in 2011. In 1978, he was one of the founders of the Peace Now movement. He delivered the annual Nexus Lecture in 2004, on the topic of *Occidentalism*.



DOUGLAS MWONZORA (Zimbabwe) is a political activist and one of the most important opponents of president Robert Mugabe. After obtaining his degree in law at the University of Zimbabwe, he joined the Zimbabwe Unity Movement in 1989, which resisted the establishment of a one party state in Zimbabwe. In the 1990s Mwonzora was involved in drawing up a constitution for his country, and as a result he was arrested and imprisoned. In the following years he was arrested no fewer than 33 times. Despite these attempts at repression by the government, Mwonzora continues his fight for political change to the present day. He has campaigned tirelessly for new constitutional rights, and in 2008 he took part in renewed negotiations on a new constitution for Zimbabwe, which was eventually ratified. Mwonzora is the Secretary General of the Movement for Democratic Change, which is the major opposition party in Zimbabwe. Earlier this year, the BBC broadcast the fascinating documentary film *Democrats* on Mwonzora's heroic struggle.





MABEL VAN ORANJE (the Netherlands) has been a global advocate for freedom, justice and development for over two decades. In 1993, Mabel founded the European Action Council for Peace in the Balkans and was its CEO until 1997. From 2008 until 2012, she was the first CEO of The Elders, a group of global leaders working together for peace and human rights brought together by Nelson Mandela. She is the initiator and chair of 'Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage' and co-founder and executive chair of the European Council on Foreign Relations. She serves on the (advisory) boards of Crisis Action, Global Witness, the Malala Fund, the Open Society Foundations and The Elders.



STEVEN PINKER (Canada) is a renowned linguist, cognitive scientist and psychologist. He is one of the most influential voices in the current debate on progress, arguing that humanism, science, and reason have contributed to creating a more civilized, less violent world. Pinker studied experimental psychology at McGill, MIT, and Harvard, where he is currently Professor of Psychology. He has written a number of bestselling books on language, the mind, and human nature, including *The Language Instinct* (1994), *How the Mind Works* (1997) and *The Blank Slate* (2002/2016). His book *The Better Angels of our Nature* (2011) presented extensive quantitative evidence that the present is less violent than the past. Pinker has also written for publications such as *The Atlantic* and *The New York Times*, and sparked a famous debate with Leon Wieseltier with his article on the status of science in *The New Republic*. *Time*, *Prospect* and *Foreign Policy* have listed him among the top 100 most influential intellectuals in the world.

MARCELO SANCHEZ SORONDO (Argentina) is a Roman Catholic bishop, a philosopher and a close associate of Pope Francis. He is an expert on Aristotle, Aquinas and Hegel, and worked as a lecturer and professor of philosophy at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome, where he also served as dean of the Faculty of Philosophy. As Chancellor of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, he is a leading figure in the campaigns against climate change and modern slavery proclaimed by the pope. In this context, Sánchez Sorondo organizes conferences with noted scientists and politicians such as Bernie Sanders, Jeffrey Sachs and Joseph Stiglitz. He also published numerous articles on globalization, terrorism, justice and philosophy of science in scientific and religious journals. Amongst many other honorary awards, he was appointed to the French Légion d'Honneur in 2000.



SIMON SCHAMA (United Kingdom) is Professor of History and Art History at Columbia University in New York. He previously taught at Harvard and Oxford, and became known to the wider public as writer and presenter of popular BBC series such as *A History of Britain* (2000) and *The Story of the Jews* (2013). Schama is not only a great narrator, but also an excellent writer. His books on the history of the Dutch Republic, *Patriots and Liberators: Revolution in the Netherlands 1780–1813* (1977) and *The Embarrassment of Riches* (1987) have been widely praised for Schama's style and erudition. In 2014, Schama delivered the annual Nexus Lecture, entitled 'History Lessons'.





ELIF SHAFAK (Turkey) is an award-winning novelist and the most widely read woman writer in Turkey. She obtained her Master's degree in Gender and Women's Studies and a PhD in Political Science, and has taught at various universities in Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States. Her books, such as *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2007) and *The Forty Rules of Love* (2010), have been translated into over 40 languages. In addition to being a gifted writer, Shafak is also an influential political commentator and inspirational public speaker. She has been featured in major newspapers and periodicals around the world, including *The Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *La Repubblica*. She is also a TED Global speaker, a member of the World Economic Forum Global Agenda Council on Creative Economy and a founding member of the European Council on Foreign Relations. In 2010, Elif Shafak was awarded the title of Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.



MIROSLAV VOLF (Croatia) is a public intellectual and one of today's most prominent Protestant theologians. He is the Founder and Director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, and Henry B. Wright Professor of Theology at Yale University Divinity School. Volf was educated in his native Croatia, in the United States and in Germany, where he earned his doctoral and post-doctoral degrees from the University of Tübingen. His most significant books include *Exclusion and Embrace* (1996, winner of Grawemeyer Award in Religion and one of *Christianity Today's* 100 most important religious books of the 20th century), and *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World* (2015). The main concern of his work is to explore the resources of religious traditions for living flourishing lives in our pluralistic, late capitalist societies.

LEIF WENAR (United States) holds the Chair of Philosophy and Law at King's College London. After earning his first degree from Stanford, he went to Harvard to study with John Rawls and wrote his doctoral thesis on property rights with Robert Nozick. He has often been a Visiting Professor at Princeton and Stanford. His new book *Blood Oil* (2016) uncovers a global rule as old as the slave trade that forces consumers to fund tyranny, conflict and extremism when they shop — and shows how realistic reforms in global trade can turn the world's escalating threats and crises into greater justice and peace.



ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI (Poland) is world-renowned as a true 'metaphysical poet' and essayist. He studied philosophy and psychology in Poland, and gained fame in 1974 with his polemical manifesto *The Unrepresented World* (*Świat nie przedstawiony*), in which he charged literature with a lack of engagement. Already in the 1980s, Nobel Prize-winners Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky considered him to be the most important Polish poet of his generation. He was awarded the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 2004, and the prestigious Griffin Poetry Prize in 2016. Translations of his work into English include *Mysticism for Beginners* (1999), *Unseen Hand* (2011) and *A Defense of Ardor* (2014). Zagajewski has taught at the University of Houston and has been a professor at the University of Chicago since 2007, where he is also a member of the Committee on Social Thought.



NEXUS INSTITUTE

The Nexus Institute cherishes and celebrates the European humanist tradition and strives to keep the European intellectual heritage alive by stimulating informed discussion on universal questions and contemporary issues. To this end, the Institute organizes conferences, lectures and master classes and publishes thought-provoking essays by international intellectuals in the Nexus Library series. The journal *Nexus*, published three times a year, compiles engaging cultural-philosophical essays by the world's foremost scientists, philosophers, artists and politicians.

Nexus Library

The Nexus Institute regularly publishes new issues in the Nexus Library, a book series in which authors such as George Steiner, Sonia Gandhi and Jonathan Sacks reflect on our times. Many of these are available in bilingual editions and some in English editions.

Garry Kasparov

'No one is simply entitled to democracy or even basic human rights. I was always looking for a more aggressive approach, because I believe that you have to be ahead of the curve.'

In March 2015, Garry Kasparov (Russia, 1963), the youngest world chess champion in history and an important voice in the pro-democracy movement against the repressive regime of Vladimir Putin, delivered the annual Nexus Lecture. His lecture *Timeless Values in a Shifting World*, a message of opposition against Putin's regime, is now available in a bilingual hardcover edition in the Nexus Library. Visit our website to order your copy.

www.nexus-instituut.nl

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