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# **Homo Sapiens Adrift**

*Quest for Certainty and Security in Today's World*  
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The world is not flat. The world is caught up in a white water rafting race. Some of the passengers fall overboard. Others row with all their might. Many close their eyes and grope for something to hold on to.

History is a long, slow-moving river. But sometimes sudden rapids appear. Fifteen years ago we were thrust into a maelstrom. The world suddenly invaded our homes and turned into a global village. People were invited to become cosmopolitans, a long cherished dream of philosophers and scholars. But in reality humanity felt more like a **castaway** shakily floating on the river of time.

Indeed, too suddenly familiar beacons disappeared. Too much old truths were replaced by too many new uncertainties. Never before had so much information been available to such a large number of people. But the sheer quantity of that information tends to conceal our inability to sort it all out. Men see, but no longer understand. And when the human mind fails to read the world we live in, then the dark side of human nature surfaces.

That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons of history, Aldous Huxley famously quipped. This need not be the case. The world is still comprehensible. And castaways may yet become cosmopolitans.

### *Fifteen Years in a Nutshell*

Fifteen years ago, euphoria was almost universal. At last, prosperity for all in a world at peace seemed within reach.

The Wall had fallen and with it the division of the world in good and evil. A “New World Order” was in the offing. Wars, such as the one in Afghanistan, came to an end. Frozen conflicts, in South Africa, in the Middle East, were thawing out. Europe awoke from hibernation and a wave of democratization swept over Africa.

On Christmas Day 1991 the Soviet Union imploded. From now on democracy, universal human rights and free market economy were to be the worldwide norms. The United States lived through a never-ending economic boom. Worldwide stock markets climbed sky-high. A New Economy was born, so it was said, leaving the booms-and-busts of the old behind. The American growth model – the Washington Consensus – was considered to be the new miracle recipe for a new era of continuous economic growth. Thanks to globalization the sky was the limit.

But then disenchantment set in. We were not about to enter an era of global peace and international cooperation. It turned out to be quite the opposite. New conflicts have broken out, with Lebanon as the latest in a row. Nationalism and religious zealotry have led to violent implosions of states, to ethnic cleansings and genocides. Peacekeeping missions have failed miserably. Multilateralism gave way to unilateralism as the preferred policy option of major states. The no-votes in France and the Netherlands seemed to indicate that the European project was over. And today a new Wall is being built, this time separating the children of Abraham.

9/11 was the symbolic turning point. In the name of the “Global War on Terror” two wars were launched, in Afghanistan and Irak, which keep dragging on. Military power and national security have returned to the very heart of international politics – exactly the opposite of what many had expected to happen after the end of the Cold War.

“Prosperity for all” did not materialise either. A local financial crisis in Thailand in 1997 spread as a monetary and economic whirlwind throughout Asia, Latin America and Russia. In the spring of 2000, as a result of the spectacular fall of the Nasdaq, the dotcom bubble burst. The New Economy turned out to be nothing but an illusion. And an old truth was rediscovered: free markets are inevitably bound

to experience phases of speculation and crisis, economic predictability being the exception rather than the rule.

Globalization lost its shine. For, as Bill Clinton put it, there was a dark side to it that was difficult to master: terrorism, drugs, crime, money laundering, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, HIV-AIDS. In Millau, France, José Bové with his “*la mal bouffe*” gave the go-ahead for the anti-globalization movement.

### *Global Malaise*

If there's one feeling today that unites people on all continents, it is their shared uneasiness about the state of affairs, both in their own countries and in the rest of the world. That was one of the findings of an international Pew survey in 2002.<sup>1</sup> The more than 38,000 people interviewed were overwhelmingly dissatisfied with the way things were going in their countries. Solid majorities in nearly every country in every region surveyed said they were unhappy with the state of their nation. Their assessment of the state of the world was even more negative.

Two years later the Dutch Socio-Cultural Planning Bureau confirmed that a lot of Dutch citizens – and through extrapolation, a lot of people worldwide – shared the feeling that the familiar environment they had been living in, was disappearing rapidly. And **when society changes too fast, feelings of insecurity set in.**<sup>2</sup> The strong then tend to cocoon or to withdraw into gated communities, physically separated from the dangers of the outside world. The weaker have no shelter and drop out. And many, just like castaways, grope for new certainties to hold on to: from family trees to New Age, over cults, spirituality, nationalism and – often – religion.

Sometimes these new guiding principles provide for a positive outlook, such as the World Youth Day in Roman Catholicism or the Fethullah Gülen movement in Turkish Islam. But all too often the new certainties have proved to be dangerous life buoys, steering towards a mental wall dividing the world in a **protective ‘Us’ and a threatening ‘Them’**<sup>3</sup>, leaving no middle ground, no room for nuances or tolerance.

The religious revival had already started in the 1970s, but it gained enormous traction in the following decades. In 2004, both UNDP and the CIA noted that in the years to come religious identity was likely to become an increasingly important factor in how people define themselves. Both reports mentioned the rise of **identity politics**: ‘In vastly different contexts and in different ways (...) people are mobilizing anew around old grievances along ethnic, religious, racial and cultural lines (...)’, according to UNDP. Within all major religions, the CIA noted, the same tendency towards radicalization exists, producing a whole new generation of activists, with the same characteristics: ‘A worldview that advocates change of society, a tendency toward making sharp Manichaeian distinctions between good and evil, and a religious belief system that connects local conflicts to a larger struggle.’<sup>4</sup>

In the Muslim world, from Sudan to Indonesia, this translated into a Salafist renaissance, based upon a literalist reading of scripture and holding out the prospect of a return to the seemingly simple world at the time of the Prophet. After the Shiite revolution by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 and the defeat of the Red Army in Afghanistan, Islamism (also called political Islam) made its definite entrance on the international scene. Fringe groups amongst the islamist movements then carried the reasoning all the way down to its extremist end, splitting up the world into Us and Them and disposed to wage jihad, first against the ‘near enemy’, their lapsed fellow-Muslims, and subsequently against the rest of the world, the ‘far enemy’.

In the United States, the literalist reading of the Bible was the inspiration for the revival of Christian fundamentalism and some Christian extremists went so far as to bomb abortion clinics. The religious revival in this country was furthermore accompanied by a real uneasiness about the identity of the nation. It had started in the beginning of the 90s with a passionate debate about the nature of the

American nation, which according to some was in peril due to a rising multiculturalist tide in the US.<sup>5</sup> Fifteen years later, in 2006, in a new episode in this debate the Senate decided to formally qualify English as the 'national language' of the United States.

In India radical Hindu nationalists attempted to redefine the nature of the nation along the Hindu religious identity and in doing so re-appropriated heroes from a distant past, such as Mother India, Rama and Hanuman. The same goes for the Sikhs, Jewish fundamentalists in Israel, such as the Gush Emunim, and Christian evangelicals in Latin America. In Japan the Aum Shinrikyo cult, which claimed to be associated with Buddhism, poisoned commuters on the Tokyo subway system in 1995?

Western Europe seemed to stand apart from this growing global religiosity – except for migrant communities with a Muslim background. But here a parallel demon popped up: the seemingly inescapable growth of extreme-right and populist right-wing political parties. What links all of these parties in Europe is what they dub the 'invasion' of our familiar surroundings by the 'Migrant'. Having asserted itself in the eighties, the extreme right succeeded in growing further during the nineties, and now appears to have turned into a permanent feature within European political structures. The debate on integration and multiculturalism has been hardening as a consequence. And the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims have become the talk of the town.

**Global uneasiness is the common source on which the extreme right in Europe as well as religious revival and radicalization in the rest of the world feed.** All of them have the same recipe on offer: nostalgia for times gone, simple certainties, distinct scapegoats and simple solutions. They use the same rhetoric: Us-vs-Them, offering an apparent order in a chaotic world. **Political forces that capitalize on this, stand to score.**

### *Beacons Adrift*

And now for the crucial question: What is the cause of this worldwide discomfort? What has really been happening during the past fifteen years or so that explains this all ? The answer: **the beacons that permit individuals to construct their identity have all gone adrift.** Identity provides for a sense of togetherness, for certainties and for self-esteem. People need an identity to be able to interact with the others. But one's identity is not set in stone. We assemble our identity in relation to very specific beacons or reference points surrounding us: the world, the state, the society we live in and finally our individual life story. He, who loses his identity, becomes vulnerable for the sirens' songs of a lopsided world view.

Profound mutations have shattered every one of these four beacons. Some started to drift earlier than others. But in the past fifteen years the effects of these profound mutations flowed together to form the maelstrom we're now rafting on.

**Mutation and Uncertainty Number One.** With the Cold War ending, a familiar and predictable world order broke down. The Cold War with its neat division of the world into two ideological blocs had given people a general sense of belonging. In its aftermath instead of a New World Order, a New World Disorder surfaced. The United States presented itself as the world's only hope in uncertain times, but the rest of the world dismissed this claim as pompous arrogance of a superpower and rejected it *en masse*. And now without a pilot in the cockpit of world politics, we seem to be heading for an unpredictable pattern of changing alliances and confrontations with no set rules.

Enhancing the feeling of uncertainty created by the end of the Cold War, a new technological revolution developed, leading the world into a post-industrial era, in which both information technology and biotechnology will have the same impact as the steam engine and electricity in previous industrial revolutions. However, such revolutions always have winners and losers. This time is no different: hyper-competition, job insecurity, increased work floor pressure, marginalisation of

unskilled labour, growing inequality. Mutation and Uncertainty Number Two – now in our daily lives, where the apparent predictability of the postwar welfare state is now bygone history.

Globalization turned out to be a third mutation and thus a source of uncertainty. Distances shrank due to revolutionary advances in technology, communication and transport. More than ever before goods, services, capital and people could move freely all over the world – as wheels in a global labour division. But globalization also made everyone dependent on everyone else. Day after day, we now have to face the bewildering complexity of an immense number of local situations. It's easy to miss the forest for the trees.

And just as times were getting tougher, the polity seemingly withdrew its protective cloak. Mutation Number Four. Labelled neoliberalism, a growing discourse stressed the need for downsizing the state and giving free reign to market forces. As described by Joseph Stiglitz, the world began its love affair with deregulation.<sup>6</sup> Governments claimed that citizens were smart enough to make it on their own. As a consequence, people started to feel as if society existed for the economy instead of the other way around.

Threatened by all these novelties, individuals came to believe that from now on they had to fend for themselves. The Great Stories of the past centuries – the classical ideologies – no longer provided for comfort, since they were unable to give meaning to a rapidly changing world. People felt alone and abandoned and went looking for something to hold on to. Fear and uncertainty are conducive to a world view framed along an Us-against-Them paradigm, as a kind of surrogate for the lost beacons of our identity. Within societies, new forms of polarization developed, between newcomers and native citizens, between Muslims and non-Muslims. World politics discovered new clashes, between civilizations, between rising and old superpowers, between haves and have-less's. Mutation and new Uncertainty Number Five.

Amin Maalouf, the French-Libanese writer and novelist has warned against the dangers of such surrogate identities. As individuals we all dispose of a unique identity. This is much more the result of our relations with our contemporaries than it has to do with our inheritance from our ancestors. It is shaped by one's experiences, one's encounters and confrontations. Identity thus is always multi-faceted, composed of many elements. Some of these however are more sensitive than others, such as language and religion. When an individual feels threatened in one of these sensitive aspects of his or her identity, this threatened aspect will begin to dominate one's entire identity. People then tend to look for support by likeminded peers who experience the same feeling of aggression. And this newly created group may then start to behave as a "murderous predator" of the kind we have witnessed in Rwanda, Yugoslavia and the Lebanon. Today's *Zeitgeist* makes it imperative, Maalouf urges, to replace the tribal view of our identity by a more complex one. If we fail to do so, globalization may very well result in global tribalism.<sup>7</sup>

**Uncertainty is the over-arching common characteristic of today's world.** The newly discovered beacons and the Us-versus-Them paradigm entail the closing of our minds and, as Amin Maalouf warned, the coarsening of politics, both global and local, is the end result we now witness.

### *Rowing in the Maelstrom*

The world appears threatening today. When in 2003 Gallup asked people in 51 countries to rate the international security situation, only 20 percent worldwide rated it as 'good'. Just over twice as many, 41 percent, rated it as 'poor'. In every region except West Asia, more people rated the international security situation as 'poor' than rated it as 'good'.<sup>8</sup> They are wrong. **Global security is not getting worse.** Actually, in lots of different dimensions the world is doing better than it used to do.

Over the past fifteen years the global magnitude of armed conflict has declined, following a peak in the early 1990s. Genocides and large-scale killings have been decreasing in number since 1988.

International crises, often harbingers of war, declined by more than 70 percent between 1981 and 2001 and have now reached an all-time low since the end of the Second World War. The number of refugees dropped by some 45 percent between 1992 and 2003, as more and more wars came to an end. Repression and political discrimination against ethnic minorities have declined significantly, coinciding with the dramatic decline in autocratic regimes since the late 1980s.

These are some of the most striking conclusions to be drawn from two studies published in 2005.<sup>9</sup> Other recent research indicates furthermore that international terrorism isn't the big international threat the media and governments made it out to be.<sup>10</sup> Life expectancy has increased almost everywhere (with the exception of Africa) and child mortality has decreased everywhere (even in Africa). Hundreds of millions of people succeeded in climbing from below the poverty rate, especially so in India and China. And for almost a decade, education has been making great progress everywhere. The world has become a better place for lots of people.<sup>11</sup>

These positive trends are no warrant for unqualified optimism about the future of the world. For indeed, quite a few time bombs are ticking. But if the world has become a better and safer place, then this is due to the efforts of lots of individuals, non-governmental organisations, local and national authorities as well as international organisations.

Why don't we perceive the world as it really is? Simply referring to the abovementioned mutations, is not entirely satisfying as an analysis. Taken separately, none of the mutations we identified is new, indeed. World orders come and go. Industrial revolutions are old acquaintances in world history. For two centuries the relation between politics and economics has been vacillating between *laissez-faire* and state intervention. Globalization is a process as old as the hills, having its origin in mankind's search for expansion and evolving by stop-and-go ever since.

But **today's world is more than usually in transition**, since all our reference points – the beacons for our identity – are drifting at the same time. Man cannot deal with chaos.<sup>12</sup> For those who feel insecure, dangers always loom larger than they really are. The world has become less confident, because it's going through one of its pivotal moments. Pivotal times have existed earlier in history. On closer examination, we will indeed find out that the current maelstrom is not so very different from the one our ancestors lived through a hundred years ago. Those living at the turn of that century than also experienced how riddles suddenly replaced simple truths, writes Barbara Tuchman in *The Proud Tower*.<sup>13</sup> The same forces, the same symptoms: globalization, migrations, terrorism, social unrest, racism and, yes, the need for scapegoats. Migration is a case in point. Wanted for work but unwelcome as citizens, is what migrants experienced a hundred years ago and what they experience now.

In the middle of the thirties of the twentieth century the Dutch cultural philosopher Johan Huizinga made a similar analysis and described the same symptoms.<sup>14</sup> "There is no doubt that our age has a fever," he wrote. He painted a picture of a world captivated by pessimism and a sense of global complexity: "From public life to family life a disruption seems to be going on as never before."

What to conclude from these historical parallels ? **The times we're living in, are not unique.** Aldous Huxley can be proven wrong. Indeed, as soon as one is aware of the fact that in earlier times people went through similar experiences as we today, the first step has been set on a journey towards deciphering the world's complexity and giving the patient the first medicine to lower the current fever.

For those who would like to learn again how to steer and to lead the raft with its castaways into more tranquil waters, three old-fashioned thoughts may come in handy. First, society is makeable, both nationally and internationally. Each of the big mutations was the result of human decisions. Man can thus correct them as well. Secondly, we need more politics and not less – that is if we don't want the good of the many to be defeated by the egoism of the few. The present *Zeitgeist* is steering our society towards segregation and polarisation. Polity must oppose this. And thirdly, don't ask what society can do for you, but what you can do for society.

To get started, we could decide to ban the word “Them” forever from our daily vocabulary. Cosmopolitans don’t believe in a world divided between Us and Them.

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<sup>1</sup> *What The World Thinks in 2002*. Washington, Pew Research Center for the People & the Press

<sup>2</sup> *In het licht van de toekomst* (2004). The Hague, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau

<sup>3</sup> Tariq Ramadan (2006), ‘The Global Ideology of Fear’, in: *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Vol 23:1, Winter

<sup>4</sup> *Human Development Report 2004. Cultural Diversity in today’s diverse world*. Washington, UNDP; *Mapping the Global Future* (2004). Report of the National Intelligence Council’s 2020 Project. Pittsburgh, GPO

<sup>5</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The desuniting of America. Reflections on a multicultural society*. New York, Norton, 1992. And a decade later: Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We ? The Challenges to American National Identity*. Simon & Shuster, 2004

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Stiglitz (2002), ‘The roaring nineties’, in: *The Atlantic Monthly*, October, pp. 76-89

<sup>7</sup> Amin Maalouf (2003), *In the name of Identity. Violence and the Need to Belong*. Penguin

<sup>8</sup> *Voice of the People Survey 2003*, Gallup International, 5 January 2004

<sup>9</sup> *Human Security Report* (2005). University of British Columbia, Human Security Centre; Monty G. Marshall, Ted Robert Gurr (2005), *Peace and Security*, Center for International Development & Conflict Management

<sup>10</sup> Rik Coolsaet, Teun Van de Voorde (2006), *The Evolution of Terrorism in 2005. A statistical assessment*. Ghent University, Department of Political Science, February 2006

<sup>11</sup> *Human Development Report* (2005). New York, UNDP

<sup>12</sup> Suzanne K. Langer, as quoted in: Paul Bloom (2005), ‘Is God an accident ?’, in: *The Atlantic Monthly*, December, Vol. 290:5

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Tuchman (1966), *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World before the War 1890-1914*. New York, Macmillan

<sup>14</sup> Johan Huizinga (1935), *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*. New York, Norton & Company