

# Vanishing Worlds

By Henri J.H. van der Kooij

*Moving forward without looking back is a serious mistake.  
Looking back without any sense of direction is another.  
In combination there is no real possibility of identity determination or meaningfulness,  
and all human striving remains without perspective.*

These words encompass basic notions of the human psyche that determine most human actions and without which morality remains an empty shell. Although quite some (laboriously) accomplished achievements are pointlessly demolished because of violently conflicting interests and continuous warfare, *human nature* itself is also by no means free of destructive elements. Some even argue that without 'destruction' – be it 'creative' and 'sustainable innovative' or not – there would be no progress at all. <sup>1</sup> In this respect two main existential questions are relevant: *who are we* and *what is the purpose of all our efforts?*

Two considerations are relevant to shed further light on such questions:

1. Humans derive their identity from such diverse issues as *identification* with (groups of) others, a culture, society, the nation, state, a religion or ideology – with notions of prosperity, freedom, success, (collective) destiny, a shared history, and so on. Human aspirations are frequently directed parallel to these concepts, assuming the central idea that 'belonging' would be decisive. To *what or where* one then does or does not 'belong' usually remains secondary or obscure. Human anchors (*roots*) shaped over time determine to what extent one is 'rooted', however to be able to act accordingly requires a *rooted society* as well. <sup>2</sup>
2. New worlds emerge as rapidly as old ones disappear, such as vanishing craftsmanship and skills, taking responsibility, losses of sense of proportionality, fellowship (solidarity), humanitarianism, and many more. Not to mention profound losses of cultural pluralism as well as huge environmental and ecological problems such as a loss of biodiversity and an almost uncontrollable accumulation of pollution of the biosphere with severe dangers for public health. In this respect, man always seems to pay 'a price' for his ambitions. According to *Hegelian dialectics* (historical) development and (possible) progress are fundamentally linked to action and reaction (vice versa), allowing new contexts and constellations to emerge (synthesis). The key question here is whether – and to what extent – the price that people pay for their pursuits outweighs the (assumed, or real) advantage that is presumed to be achieved. After all, such 'benefits' are never absolute, but always relative.

"Progress to the benefit of all", it is often said. But *who* in reality *benefits from what* when the *general purpose* is systematically neglected and frustrated both politically and governmentally? To what extent can one speak of real 'progress' in this context? Especially when *technological utopias* are presented

and advocated as a panacea for almost every problem <sup>3</sup> and *financial shareholder capitalism* is left a free hand.

Therefore, to prevent developments from slipping needlessly through our fingers, 'dynamic movement' requires both *solid positioning and accountability*. We will briefly address those issues below.

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### Positioning dilemmas

Everything that is intended or thought to be possible to achieve with the organization of societies depends on sound *political orientations* that are consequently and consistently implemented. If this is not the case or lacking, fine objectives such as *reducing inequality* and *offering opportunities and possibilities* will hardly be realized. There are no 'natural processes' that would automatically lead to 'pursuit of happiness'. Such processes are *human endeavors* and depend primarily on government intervention and related responsibilities. What it mainly comes down to is the way in which people think they can – or should – push societies 'up the ladder' and how they assess their development. Since these processes are usually characterized by 'trial and error', it is certainly not true that there is *only* continuous improvement, however much the unshakeable belief in progress may suggest otherwise. Since societies are man-made, social engineering of any society is a construction in which the *human factor* remains crucial and decisive.

For all their 'innovative achievements', have humans made as much progress *at the interpersonal level* as is conveniently assumed? That is highly questionable.

First, opportunities and possibilities – not only in distinct societies, but also globally – are extremely unequally distributed. *Global inequality* has not decreased, but increased. Poverty problems do not lie. Second, it appears that despite all its achievements, the *human psyche* is far from having reached the stage of true maturity when we consider the frankly infantile way in which *conflicts* are often met and handled. Many cling to ideas and attitudes that facilitate (needlessly escalating) *polarization mechanisms* rather than offering any prospect of meaningful progress for the benefit of communities *as a whole*. Or rather, *the common good of society*. <sup>4</sup>

Political positioning appears to have become increasingly problematic since the time when it was thought – quite wrongly – that there would (or could) be a general *de-ideologization*, since the end of the Cold War would have accomplished this. The opposite turned out to be true. The rise of neoliberal-oriented (market) ideologies and the harsh manner in which they were propagated and implemented in policy proved it. This development came on top of the long-standing *anti-etatism*, which by definition put intervening governments and political orientations that advocated it in the suspect and accuser's box. However, it led to the overall *depoliticization* of political issues, which consequently were hardly addressed as such anymore, but henceforth had to be 'managed'. Where *left-right* dichotomies were already problematic, there the political cluttering of basic political concepts took a bizarre flight. Anyone still pointing to the importance of distinct positions was dismissed as 'inconsistent with (the demands of) modern times'. Politics was considered 'passé' and policy makers wallowed in their own 'rightness'. Societies had to accept this, but the disastrous consequences of this 'value-free politics' would unmistakably assert themselves.

## Shattered accountability

*Who is responsible for what?* That is the central question at stake. Are citizens to blame for failing governments? Since democratic societies lean on electoral *mandates* from the people while such mandates generally imply *blank checks*, great risks are taken with administrative responsibilities. If policy-makers are no longer accountable for their decisions and one hides behind concepts of general interest that are not fulfilled, this is asking for trouble that cannot simply be dismissed with occasional arguments such as a misplaced (for disproportional) appeal to the public's use of individual '(cap)a-bilities'. If, in addition, accountability proves highly *problematic in a broad cultural sense*, then we are even further from home.

What systematically corrupts itself is above all the way in which *images of the self* are pumped up to bizarre heights, seriously complicating the *verifiability and accountability* of choice decisions and their justification. There seems to be a general flattening of responsibilities to which the established *management culture of 'interchangeability'* is particularly to blame. After all, a 'professional manager' can organize and arrange anything – no matter what – so it is falsely believed. Whether it is a cookie factory, an educational institution, a hospital, or public administration, it makes no difference to such individuals. Such *self-glorification* knows no bounds. As a result, state and government functions become severely cluttered and rather sentimentalistic approaches of 'togetherness' that are meant to address the (possible, but unwanted) public dissatisfaction and to 'meet' her concerns in a reprehensible way, gain the upper hand. A dubious – ambivalent – morality of 'individual liberty' alongside *neglect of collective interests* forms the lamentable finale.

These developments are closely related to disturbingly **regressive** orientations that seem to be gaining the upper hand more and more, such as *neoconservatism, reviving orthodoxy, fundamentalism and new-Victorianism, neocorporatism, (neo)nationalism* and the forementioned *anti-etatism*. How, under these circumstances, it is still believed that one can speak of 'progress' is a mystery. Such qualifications are very far away from reality and do not testify to or indicate great analytical abilities. A clear view of such developments is often hard to find. Not only with politicians, certainly also with those responsible for the media. Here, too, a shadowy entanglement of interests avenges itself with major consequences for the political-social awareness of many. That the aforementioned orientations are by no means 'non-committal', may be confirmed by many ongoing global conflicts. These hardly offer any prospect of *real* improvement in the living conditions of many.

New developments have always been coming and were again succeeded by others. So far, nothing new. But the way people today think about 'change' and 'moving with the times' is disturbing. Old shoes shouldn't be thrown away until you have new ones, it used to be said, but this advice seems to be collectively ignored these days. Self-exaltation with regard to 'change' borders on hubris, while on the other hand flat and trivial motives of exploitable 'efficiency and profit' prevail.

Many behave like slip carriers of the market, assuming they are doing society a service by positioning themselves that way. But societies have no single need for this. First and foremost, citizens want their *legitimate claims to be met and social issues and questions to be resolved*, not pushed forward or ignored. Only if this were actually taken in hand would it constitute real improvement.

## Conclusion

It should be clear that just as the nostalgic desire to cherish the old is unproductive, so too the indiscriminate embrace of all that is new offers no solace. This is not only the case with regard to education<sup>5</sup>, but also as far as the *political culture of decision-making* is concerned. A misleading *culture of complacency* is the major culprit in all the policy wandering and aberrations, and all that ensues socially. Xenophobia, pervasive rabid nationalism, cultural self-centeredness (ethnocentrism) and short-term thinking obstruct views on reality and block the necessary scope outward. That is why worlds (i.e. constellations) do not simply vanish or automatically disappear, but this is effected by intentional choices of action that result in breakdown despite all rhetoric of 'dynamic progress'. That is also why former social security states have been dismantled, social and legal certainties have been eroded, and in various countries (such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and others) *institutional organizational structures* whose purpose was to secure the public interest have been dismantled in favor of commercial market players. All under the guise of (neoliberal) 'progress' for which 'no alternatives' were said to exist.

All in all, there is a serious gap between *state and citizen* that will widen even further if the basic principle of the right man/woman in the right place continues to fail in practice and opportunity politicians not only continue to dominate the political spectrum, but foremost use politics to secure their individual career aspirations. Real *commitment to the public cause* is then usually far away.

*Governing* requires craftsmanship and an incisive – matter-focused – attitude that does not allow itself to be corrupted by improper or irrelevant considerations. Such people seem to have become scarce, not to say sorely missed. The *entanglement of interests* and the *accumulation of power* (oligarchic concentration) do no good to societies in this regard. The temptation to join 'the big boys' is proving too great and irresistible for many. This avenges itself on all fronts.

When the general public remains largely uninformed about all this and citizens are not given an understanding of how the interests of society are, or are not, being promoted and safeguarded, freewheeling debates on social issues become pointless exercises. Consequently, these proliferate. Meanwhile, much slips through our fingers and more disappears than one cares to, or at least considerably more than one usually realizes. Yes, high prices are being paid that will certainly not be easily 'recouped'. The 'old world' may be rapidly fading, for now the new one(s) look rather grim and promise little good.

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<sup>1</sup> Economists such as Schumpeter used the notion of *creative destruction* to emphasize the mechanisms of 'innovation' by which 'competitive advantage' would be gained. During the nineties there were others such as Nolan and Croson who drew on similar lines of thought (Nolan, R. and D. Croson, *Creative Destruction: A Six-Stage Process for Transforming the Organization*, Harvard Business School Press 1995). In contrast to Marx who blamed capitalism for modeling the economic order after selective interests, such economists actually promoted the importance of forementioned processes, to which (business) organizations should conform.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Mishray, P. *Age of Anger: A history of the present*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2017. See also his interview in *El Pais*, Oct. 25, 2022

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<sup>3</sup> See Van der Kooij, H. *The 'inevitability' of a hi-tech utopia in question*, ISSR 2023

<sup>4</sup> Instead of 'communities' it is much more appropriate to speak of *societies* when addressing social and political matters that involve the population as a whole.

<sup>5</sup> See Van der Kooij, H. *The reproduction of mediocrity*, ISSR 2023