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# Hjemstavnsløshed (‘Home(land)lessness’)

Carsten Jensen

Winner of the Europa Prize of the Europa-Universität Flensburg, Germany

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In 2018, the Danish writer Carsten Jensen became the first winner of the Europa Prize of Europa-Universität Flensburg, endowed with €10,000. Jensen, whose numerous awards include Sweden’s prestigious Olof Palme Prize, was selected for this honor due to the border-crossing humanism of his work and his outstanding literary examination of the disastrous consequences of nationalism and militarism. One of his major works, the 2006 novel *Vi, de druknede* (We, the drowned), received international acclaim. We are delighted to be able to publish here Jensen’s prize acceptance speech, given at Europa-Universität Flensburg on May 17, 2018.

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There is nothing somber or sinister about the Danish word *hjemstavn* (homeland). We even have ‘homeland-literature,’ which admittedly is only read by literary historians such as Jeppe Aakjær and Johan Skjoldborg but which—remarkably enough—is incensed by social injustice and portrays the homeland as a savage and brutal place in which uprising comes as a liberation. In Germany, the word “homeland” carries a dark undertone of a different kind, having been inextricably connected to the Nazi’s racist cult of blood and soil in a way that has compromised the term ever since. Rootlessness denoted human misfortune, rootedness the condition of all true humanity, and *Heimatlosigkeit*, or the homelessness of not having a homeland (“home(land)lessness”)—a cumbersome word that only seemed to make sense in German—was a curse. Only now, many years later, can we again use these words with a certain lightheartedness.

The German sociologist Ulrich Beck asserted in his optimistic 2005 book *Der kosmopolitische Blick* that the word *Heimatlosigkeit* has finally lost its grim connotations. We have all become citizens of the world in one way or another.

Was Beck right? Yes and no. Whether we like it or not, we have become world citizens. In a globalised world, it no longer makes sense to distinguish between a nation’s domestic policy and its foreign policy. Foreign policy is domestic policy, and vice versa. So yes, Ulrich Beck was right. And no, he wasn’t right. His definition of homeland as something we are supposed to have cheerfully abandoned in favour of global citizenship, is wrong. We never said our goodbyes to a pristine village idyll complete with cows and green fields. Even the producers of postcards no longer believe in this idyll. The real homeland for today’s Europeans is the welfare state.

If you replace the village idyll with the welfare state, the word *Heimatlosigkeit* immediately regains its warning undertone of apocalyptic portent. The true nightmare of Europeans is a life without the welfare state—Europe’s real, lasting contribution to the twentieth century. The technocrats were about to forget that, but the electorate remembered it. This is also what the populist rebellion is about, and as a concession to these populist

currents Germany has suddenly been given a Homeland Ministry. Its task is regional development, but its true function is symbolic and, as such, it is self-referential. Rather than a remote village in a pristine landscape, it is the ministry itself that is the homeland.

### **The Ice Age in Europe**

The attack on the welfare state started a long time ago. The British conservative politician Margaret Thatcher, who came into office as Prime Minister in 1979, led the way when she stated that there is no such thing as society. There is no such thing as shared responsibility or caring for each other across class and social groups. There is only the free market which, humanly speaking, is most reminiscent of a windblown ice floe drifting in ocean currents towards an unknown destination. With Margaret Thatcher, the Ice Age in European policy began.

Margaret Thatcher's iron baton has been passed on to changing political parties and currents until all, even the social democracies, have arranged to meet on the drifting ice floe of market ideology and words such as privatisation and outsourcing have become synonymous with realism. The financial crisis of 2008 was the culmination of a development driven by a financial capitalism that caused astronomical losses for the economy in a crazy spiral of speculation. The disaster concluded paradoxically, when the same state that rushed to rescue endangered banks with enormous amounts of aid is accused of having caused the crisis through extravagant overspending. The state as both saviour and convenient scapegoat come together in the so-called austerity politics led by Germany, which seeks drastic spending cuts and the limitation of governmental activities. The "politics of necessity" denotes the same thing, while the welfare state, which has now officially played out its role, has been rebaptized the "state of competition."

### **Resurrection from the dead**

The miracle occurs in the summer of 2015, when the Christian tradition of Resurrection takes on a new topicality: Europe experiences a secular Easter morning, as the dead welfare state is pulled up out of the earth and its funeral shroud is brushed off by the same undertaker who has just buried it. The term "competition state" is expunged from all dictionaries and the welfare state is reinstated in all its glory, but only rhetorically and not in the budgets. As an institution of care, community, and social justice, it has certainly played its role. However, it now has a new role to play: that of being under threat of death. If Europe opens its borders to the refugees who are currently streaming into the continent, the welfare state will collapse—or so, in cacophonous confusion, said the 28 nations that made up the European Union during that fatal summer of refugees. For years they have been singing the welfare state's requiem. Now they are setting themselves up as the last defenders against the incoming hordes of refugees, whose parasitic instincts urge them towards a historical plundering of Europe.

In its foundation, the welfare state expresses the idea of rights across all sectors of the population. Human equality is its first commandment. The artificially revived welfare state, now clothed in a party dress that is difficult to distinguish from a funeral shroud, is not for everyone; it is only for certain people. It is the welfare state of the Danes OR THE GERMANS, not only because it was created by them, but also because it has to be exclusively intended for them. The ethnical welfare state is not only a national construction but also a nationalist one—one that, when seen from a historical perspective, is a completely new institution whose task is not to open its doors, but to close them. The welfare state has become a fortress with a raised drawbridge.

This is populism's great moment. It is true that the populists don't say much about the welfare state, but they celebrate it indirectly by talking constantly about its enemies. While the welfare state retains its popularity, the workers' parties that founded it do not. Compromised by their careless handling of the politics of necessity and dreams of privatisation, most European countries are approaching collapse.

### **What do refugees seek?**

What do refugees seek? What is their driving force? Are they fleeing something or going towards something? Are they experts on the welfare state who risk their lives to become life-long clients in a large bureaucratic machinery? Or do they just seek the absence of war, corruption, and oppression? The Europe that we want to defend is that of the welfare state. The Europe they seek is the free market with its opportunities. This is the paradox of the so-called refugee crisis, which in reality is a political crisis. It is not the clash between Christianity and Islam, between a religious set of values and a secular one. It is the clash between two different concepts of Europe, the continent of restrictions against the continent of opportunities. We Europeans emphasise our limitations. The refugees believe in our opportunities. Perhaps that is the catchphrase of the future: Europe as a continent of possibilities. Not as an extension of the neoliberal Ice Age, in which Europe is just a 24-hour self-service shop without security guards, where financial speculators and multi-national companies are free to plunder the continent's human resources without giving anything back, but Europe as the continent of opportunities when it comes to the creation of a new community.

### **The continent of the elderly**

Dare I break a taboo for a moment? Formerly, everyone agreed that Europe's biggest problem was the rising average age of the population. This is still the case, but now we no longer talk about it. Instead, the elderly with their anxieties have become a political power factor, with the same attitude towards the future that they have towards their own impending death: they prefer not to face it. In a young world, Europe has become the continent of the elderly.

North Africa and the Middle East are our great neighbours—half continents which, up until a few years ago, were full of uprising and hope and which we could have helped to shape, but we chose to ignore them. Europe has a common destiny with both North Africa and the Middle East. They are our neighbours. Major European powers once colonised them. Since then they have broken free, sometimes in bloody wars. But we are still connected to them for better or worse. The meeting between a young generation in North Africa and an aging Europe could have been a happy one. When the Middle East was still preoccupied with the search for new forms of governance, we could have contributed with our rich experience. What could we not have created together? A historic opportunity has now been missed. Our neighbouring continents have returned to authoritarian forms of governance, or else have been torn apart in devastating wars for which we have a shared responsibility.

### **A revealing pause for thought**

Human rights or civil rights? What is the difference? We must think carefully before answering this question, and maybe it is the pause for thought that reveals our problem. Human rights safeguard us against governmental violations; civil rights guarantee our influence on the state. Human rights are about the right to be protected. Civil rights are about the right to decide. Human rights apply to everyone; civil rights apply to the people

of a specific nation. If a country is without civil rights, then it will also be without human rights. But if a country has civil rights, must it also have human rights? That is the question being asked now, also in countries that call themselves democratic. What does it mean if the majority within a country votes to "revise" or simply abolish human rights, and turns against the obligation to help people in need who are fleeing from a country at war? Totalitarian states know how intimately interrelated human and civil rights are, and when such a state abuses one set of rights, it is also abusing the other. People are being subjected to indiscriminate attacks and, at the same time, are deprived of any influence. Do we know that too?

Should human and civil rights really be on a collision course, and should the people of a nation really be able to use their civil rights to refuse human rights to those who are exposed and persecuted? Can a majority vote a minority out of the human sphere? Have the fall of the Berlin Wall, the dissolution of the South African apartheid state, and the retreat of military dictatorships in Latin America led us to the sad conclusion that people no longer need rights, and therefore cannot claim our protection if they are in flight? Is this the real European dilemma, two decades into the new millennium—a growing rejection of the continent's own historical experience?

### **No nation can stand alone**

As with what was later to become the European Union, the European Convention on Human Rights, laid down at the beginning of the 1950s, had its background in World War II. If there was one lesson to be learned from WWII, it was that no single nation can defeat a mighty totalitarian enemy. Nazism was nationalistic, as the first part of the movement's name suggests, but it was also this monstrous, totalitarian movement that dealt the fatal blow to the nationalism in nationalism's own name. The lesson of the Nazi defeat was simple: the nation that invoked its own sovereignty, and insisted on single-handedly defending itself against the invading enemy, was doomed. Only an alliance—not just between nations, but also between disparate social and political systems, from the liberalism of the United States of America to the conservatism of Great Britain to the communism of the Soviet Union, which itself had totalitarian features—was able to defeat the Nazi aggression. In the fight against Nazism, the nations involved had to abandon any notion of sovereignty if they were to survive. Only countries that allowed soldiers in foreign uniforms onto their soil were able to drive out the enemy. Only countries whose people were prepared to learn how to pronounce the names of foreign generals would be liberated. World War II was not a struggle for national sovereignty, but first and foremost a fight against a totalitarian state's abuse of all human rights. The crime of Nazism was not only that it started a large-scale war of conquest which upset the balance of power in the whole of Europe, but also that in the wake of its conquests it initiated the complete annihilation of whole population groups or reduced their lives to slave-like conditions.

Try the following thought experiment: Adolf Hitler does not send his armies across the border to any foreign country. The extermination of the Jews instead becomes a phenomenon restricted to German soil. If the outside world considers national sovereignty to be inviolable, its only course would be passive protest when the smoke rises from the crematorium chimneys of the extermination camps. Any attempt to save the Jews through anything other than diplomacy's powerless hands is rejected. This is the grim lesson of World War II: respect for national sovereignty can lead us to condone genocide.

Abuse of a dissenting minority may well have public support. In Poland, Romania and Lithuania, the eradication campaigns against the Jews by the German occupying forces were enthusiastically supported by locals with a lust for murder. In the populism of our day, it is considered democratically legitimate if a parliamentary majority adopts discriminatory laws against ethnic minorities. In Hungary the tripartition of power, which guarantees the courts their independence, is also under pressure, together with freedom of expression. Does a democratic majority have the right to vote to abolish democracy? Only if democracy is merely a calculator, and human rights can freely be disregarded as long as a mathematical majority for it exists.

Today as in the past, the right of the majority must encounter a limit—not only when abuse comes from a totalitarian state, but also when it is backed by a parliamentary majority. Human rights, not the right to vote, are the last defence against barbarity.

What does it mean when powerful forces today deny human rights their universal validity on the grounds that the situation today is different from that after World War II? Why is it a different situation? When do people fleeing from abuse not need protection from harm?

### **Optimism and pessimism**

When I embarked on a year-long journey around the world in the early 1990s, I started out as a pessimist and returned home as an optimist. My pessimism was due to the fact that I had recently witnessed in person the barbarity of the bloody civil war in the Balkans. I lost faith in the humanistic tradition's fundamental belief in human goodness about which the Norwegian poet Nordahl Grieg writes in *Kringsatt af fiender* ("Surrounded by Foes"), where he asserts that poverty and hunger are caused by betrayal. No, my new experiences had taught me that sometimes it is also caused by evil as an active driving force in human beings.

My optimism, which in the ensuing years would become a counterbalance to my experiences from the Balkans, was based on my experiences with people during the course of my journey around the world. All of them expressed a genuine desire to live with each other in a decent way, even in countries such as Vietnam and Cambodia, which in previous decades had been ravaged by war and political disaster. As a foreigner I was dependent on the kindness of others to the point of helplessness, and wherever I went I encountered the same gesture. There were no clenched fists rallying in self-defence at the sight of me. Always, I was greeted by outstretched hands.

Pessimism and optimism. Was I ever closer to the truth about human beings than when I witnessed the barbarity in the Balkans? Was my optimism a naive daydream, influenced perhaps by the mood in the early nineties, when the Berlin Wall had just fallen and dictatorships everywhere were on the retreat while democracies were on the rise? Or was I grappling with two truths that, even though they appear to be contradictory, in reality possess the same validity as a testimony to the fact that man is a free creature that must choose for himself whether he will be on the side of good or evil?

If the latter is the case, then I think that we are closer at present to the Balkans than to the fall of the Berlin Wall. New walls are being raised everywhere and totalitarian regimes are spreading, along with the partitioning of the world of tribal thinking into an irreconcilable us-versus-them. That itself has brought democracy into disrepute with the

fatal interventions in Iraq, in Afghanistan and in Libya. When extensive looting broke out in Baghdad a few days after Saddam Hussein's fall and the American Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld reacted with a laconic "freedom is untidy," he also signed the death warrant of his own mission. If democracy is synonymous with chaos and crime, then nobody would wish to live in freedom. Is this why democracy is on the retreat? Or is it, as some claim, that cultures are disparate and not everyone wants to live in the same way?

I believe there is no person in the world who would not like to be able to go to sleep at night without the fear that the door to his or her home would be kicked open in the middle of the night by unknown men. Anyone who wants to sleep peacefully until the sun comes up is a supporter of human rights. The divisions between cultures are no more insurmountable than that; there is no more disparity than that between us as human beings.

### **The ordinary virtues**

Michael Ignatieff, the Canadian intellectual and former head of his country's liberal party, gave a similar assessment in his book *The Ordinary Virtues*, after a three-year journey led him to the most diverse places on earth. Everywhere, whether in the US, Brazil, Bosnia, Myanmar, Japan or South Africa, he met local people who shared the same awareness that no one should be allowed to push them aside, trample on them or silence them. The idea that they have rights regardless of their social status has taken root everywhere. This is the awareness to which Ignatieff refers when he speaks of "the ordinary virtues" in the title of his book. But these virtues are locally rooted and have obvious limitations. The feeling and helpfulness embrace only those who are like the locals themselves, not those who are ethnically, religiously or culturally different. And this brings us to the heart of Europe's dilemma: hostility towards refugees.

Ignatieff's book, which will be released in 2017 without a single reference to the word "nationalism," offers a very gentle but at the same time polemical description of the dilemma. In a country that refuses to open its doors to refugees, he says, we are facing a conflict between democratic sovereignty—that is, the will of the majority who wish to keep the country's borders closed—and a moral universalism that demands help for people who are in need, regardless of where they come from. His wording is gentle, because here he is ascribing democratic sovereignty to a people's majority that wants to override human rights. It is polemical, because in several places in his book he describes human rights as an abstract, global work-desk ethics, when instead they are something completely different: a hard-won historic right that can be costly to forget.

We belong to the same species, but we don't all live in the same moral world, claims Ignatieff. We cannot look past our differences, those of colour, race, history, sex and culture. We live in a globalised economy, but our hearts and minds are not globalised; this is his conclusion. Must we not therefore open up for refugees; is it not their rights as persecuted people that we must discuss? Instead we highlight the host country in the role of the giver. Asylum is a gift we give to the refugees, not a right that they have.

### **Condemned to muteness**

In his previous book, *Fire and Ashes*, Ignatieff had a different attitude. There, he reflected over his bitter defeat as the leader of Canada's Liberal Party, which his successor, Justin Trudeau, later led to a triumphant victory. Without specifically mentioning the refugees, he expressed his belief in standing together against the forces that seek to divide us by means of inequality, hatred and envy. "It will be a story that teaches us that we should

be better than we are.” No wonder Ignatieff suffered defeat as the leader of the liberals. His project is a pedagogical one, and today it is standard voter psychology never to lecture voters or tell them that they are not good enough just as they are. The driving force behind the success of populism is that it always makes sure to assure its voters that they are precisely good enough— not in spite of their shortcomings, but because of them. It holds before them the mirror of self-confirmation, not the wagging finger of reprimand. Is, then, an appeal to our own generosity, rather than a reminder of refugee rights, the way forward? Is there not a risk that a hierarchical relationship will be established in advance, with us in the role of the giver and the others in the humbler role of the beneficiary?

What sort of emotions do we expect from the beneficiary of our gift, even though we owe him or her nothing? Gratitude—as the chairwoman of the Danish Social Democracy Mette Frederiksen happened to reveal when on Twitter she criticised a young Danish woman with a Somali background who had criticised the party’s foreign policy. “These are hard words from a young woman that Denmark has welcomed with kindness.” “The fact of my ethnicity is being raised and it is more or less indicated that I should be grateful as a refugee. And that I should remain silent and uncritical,” replies Hanna Mohamed Hassan, who with her criticism has broken the unwritten rules of the game for lifelong gratitude which condemns the refugee to muteness.

Playing the role of gift beneficiary carries with it a reduced status for the refugee. She should say thank you with silence and subservience, and thus convey her will to adapt. The fate of the gift recipient is to be an outsider, not only in the cultural sense as a refugee from another part of the world, but also when it comes to her position within the democracy. Here, as in George Orwell’s dystopic *Animal Farm*, some people are more equal than others and the refugee is not a citizen, but rather is doomed to remain a half-citizen for the rest of her life.

### **Everyone has something to give**

The welfare state was never a handout state, but a state with rights, an equality state, a state of mutual helpfulness. The original idea was not to see weakness as an identity but always just as a transient, temporarily phase. Thus, the welfare state was also an inclusive state instead of its opposite—an exclusive one. But when welfare is sent out the back door when charity enters through the front door, the beneficiary’s vocabulary is necessarily reduced to one word: thank you. This is the deeper meaning of the concept, now newly taboo, of a competition state: the welfare state’s transformation from an inclusive one to an exclusive one, because the competition society is an exclusive society, not an inclusive society. The sudden, explosive spreading of the word “loser” bears witness to this. The welfare state knows of no winners and losers, but only of strong and temporarily weak members, a hierarchy that is not here to stay.

“There is always something you are good at. You just need to find out what it is,” says the crane driver Ole in Ole Lund Kierkegaard’s children’s book *Rubber Tarzan*, in which Ivan Olsen, a victim of bullying sneeringly known as Rubber Tarzan, finally learns to lift his head when he discovers what he’s good at. We can choose to see ourselves in the role of overbearing givers, or, in the spirit of Rubber Tarzan, we can choose to see everyone as someone who has something to give. The latter looks like the way forward, if we are to overcome the growing inequality and what we have chosen to call the refugee crisis.

### **What can we learn from Don Quixote?**

Can we live together? The Spanish author Miguel de Cervantes' novel about Don Quixote is famous for its representation of a naive, idealistic dreamer who does not understand the times in which he lives and goes to battle against giants where others just see wind-mills. His counterpart is his faithful squire, the down-to-earth, matter-of-fact Sancho Panza, who is also a comical character but portrayed in a more affectionate tone. At one point, Sancho Panza finds himself in a similar situation to the drunken peasant Jeppe in *Jeppe on the Mountain*, who ends up in the baron's bed where the latter is supposed to expose the peasant's incompetence at taking the reins of society. In the case of Sancho Panza, a duke offers him the position of governor in the island state of Barataria. The peasant seeks guidance from the Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance, who despite his foolishness turns out to be a great judge of character. Sancho Panza follows his advice to the letter and ends up passing the test, even to the extent that his decrees are later kept in the city under the designation "the decrees of the great governor Sancho Panza."

The furious duke, who sees that his plan to humiliate the squire has been foiled, harasses him out of his position, but Sancho Panza leaves as the moral victor after having demonstrated—unlike Ludvig Holberg's Jeppe—that the common man is well able to rule the kingdom. Yet he could not have done it without the advice of the idealist, Don Quixote, and it is the success of this rare combination of down-to-earthiness and idealism, common folksiness and elite daydreaming, that has never received the attention it deserves despite its clear relevance to the populism of our times.

When the odd couple embarks on its journey from Barataria, Sancho Panza encounters an old acquaintance, a man from his village who has been exiled by royal decree because of his Moorish, (i.e. Muslim) background. The two old friends exchange life stories. For the Moor, now living disguised as a German pilgrim, exile is a tragedy. He never tires of repeating that his true homeland is Spain. And he himself is mostly Christian with just a little Muslim, as he humorously describes it. His wife and daughter are Christians; his brother-in-law is Muslim. This is a very culturally mixed family, one that had once a good life in a culturally mixed country. And although, both being royalists, neither Sancho Panza nor the Moor criticizes the king's decision, the portrayal of the expulsion is in itself a criticism. The culture and religious war are decreed from above, but in the village there are tears when the Moors have to leave, and many people offer to hide them.

What was Cervantes' motive for this sympathetic portrayal of the hapless Moors' misfortune? He participated in the Battle of Lepanto, which put an end to the Ottoman Empire's attempts to conquer Europe, but he was wounded several times during the battle and lost the use of one hand. Later he was kidnapped by pirates from Algeria and had to live five years in the most humiliating circumstances as a slave before he was ransomed. Cervantes had no reason whatsoever to care about Islam or Muslims. Nevertheless, he overcame his reluctance and focused his sympathy on the Muslims when they were under attack. He also offered a glimpse of harmonious cohabitation between Islam and Christianity.

This was in a novel published in 1605. Between Miguel Cervantes and us lies the Age of Enlightenment with its message of humanism and tolerance, as well as the twentieth century in which infamous forces were allowed to live out their devilry in the clash of cultures. Have we learned nothing in all this time, such that we cannot even manage to rise to the same level as a novel written 413 years ago by a veteran of war against Islam?



**He who is silent on climate change...**

Any discussion of globalisation, economy, refugees and populism that does not end by addressing climate change is escapism. The same applies to the discussion of the future of Europe. By the end of the century, the Middle East will be uninhabitable due to temperature increases, half of Africa will be migrating north, and if we do not want the Europe of the twenty-first century to take over America's role in the 19th as the crucible continent of cultural mixing, the Mediterranean will be the scene of mass death on a historical scale never seen before. The Gulf Stream is also in the process of weakening, and if it stops completely Northern Europe will no longer be safe either. Rather, it will be stricken by an apocalypse of ice that would force even the privileged Scandinavians to join the astronomically growing numbers of climate refugees.

**Disaster is our chance**

Ulrich Beck wrote in his last, posthumously published book "Metamorphosis" that we are living in the midst of what he calls a metamorphosis. A metamorphosis is something different and greater than a change, because in a change we still have tools that allow us to understand and classify what is happening—concepts, ideas and words that gives us an ostensible control, and above all an idea of where it all leads and what we will do about it. In the grip of metamorphosis we are without words and concepts. It may well be that we are heading towards a nameless disaster and our always delayed reactions to climate change could indicate that. We have to find new words and concepts if we want to understand the world and gain just a minimum of influence on our future destiny. We have to reinvent ourselves and the idea of our presence on the planet. Disaster, says Ulrich Beck, is our big chance to rid ourselves of our view of the world and society forms which have led us to the verge of collapse, and instead think and create something crucially new. When we hear the issues of war, refugee crisis and climate change, our instinctive reaction is to withdraw from the world in populist or nationalist escapism. Instead, we must join the world with militant messages about how everything could be different. If populism wins, we will all be losers. The problems we are confronted with are so great that they can only be solved if we all stand united, across continents, religions, ethnic backgrounds and political positions. Climate change is handing us the opportunity for a completely new language and a completely different way of life. We must be creative as we have never before been in our history. It is an unwritten ground rule in history which we must break. Look at the history of the tribes, the nations, the wars and the enmities: we only really know for sure who we are ourselves when we face an opponent. But now the them-or-us way of thinking is also the recipe for our downfall. We must get together in a new community that crosses all borders, or else the house we live in will collapse in the earthquake that climate change will be for all the things we thought we knew about the conditions of life.

We must think big. We must not confine ourselves to being imaginative for our own sake, but also for the sake of humanity. This applies not only to our survival as a species. It also means creating a society that is more attractive and humane than the current one, if the struggle for survival is not to end with everyone struggling against everyone else.

When the danger is greatest, dreams must also be great. Our common journey must lead to the stars—not the ones that twinkle inexorably in the firmament, unattainable light years away, but to those that we ourselves have lit.

**Is optimism a duty?**

“I’m a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will,” the quotation is by Antonio Gramsci, the founder of the Italian Communist Party. Gramsci was a brilliant thinker whose independence from the Stalinism of his day came from the tragedy of having been kept for eleven years in deep isolation in a prison cell of the fascist leader Benito Mussolini, until his body—which was already weakened—gave up. I have always felt that pessimism promotes clarity and is therefore intellectually attractive, but pessimism can also nurture thoughts of doom, or the defeatist sense that there is no point in either thinking or acting. And optimism? The optimism of will? Is it enough to have will, without thought or clarity? Or is there a possible alliance between the will and the intellect, optimism and pessimism, which cancels out this always fatal either/or thinking?

When in my mid-forties I became a father, I felt that optimism was a moral duty. If I did not believe that there was a future worth living in, also beyond my own death, then I had no right to bring children into the world. It corresponded to putting one’s own child out onto the street and leaving it to the law of the street. But optimism must not lead to a naive confidence that things will just work out. Optimism requires will, also to act. Then pessimism, with its sober clarity, can also be an important ally.

Many of us are parents or grandparents and those of us who are not belong to networks where children play a role. All that is required of us is to engage in the familiar exercise of stepping back from ourselves and realising that life goes on in children and grandchildren, even when we are not here anymore. The children are on a journey beyond a horizon that we will never cross, but their journey started with us and its continuation is also dependent on our choices and actions.

Every child knows that the fairytale happy ending is never at hand here and now, but only comes after many hardships. There is nothing abstract about having your gaze fixed on the horizon, regardless of whether it lies ten, twenty or fifty years away. It is in the horizon that our children will be living. What we think of as a distant future will be their daily life.

Anyone who has children is by nature long-sighted. Only bad parents, advertising consultants, and communications advisors live in the moment. But that is what we are at risk of becoming on behalf of our children, grandchildren and the world: bad parents. Love has become an ethical imperative and there is no psychological excuse to fail when the future of the planet is at stake. We must look forward, not in the name of neglected progress, not in the name of growth-dogmatism, but in that of caring for future generations, in the name of our children and grandchildren.