

NEXUS INSTITUTE

Nexus Conference 2015

Waiting for the Barbarians

Saturday, November 14 | 9.45 AM — 4.00 PM

Nationale Opera & Ballet, Amsterdam

Speakers

Anne Applebaum — Ahmed Gâaloul — Amin Gemayel
John Haldane — Azza El-Kholy — Amos Oz — Robert Putnam
Donald Sassoon — Michael Shermer — Abderrahmane Sissako
Bettina Stangneth — Zeev Sternhell — Marian Turksi — Leon Wieseltier

SYLVESTRE 1890

Programme Nexus Conference

Saturday, November 14, 2015

Nationale Opera & Ballet, Amsterdam

- 9.45 AM Welcome *Rob Riemen*
- 9.50 AM Keynote lecture *Amos Oz*
- 10.45 AM Intermission
- 11.15 AM I. WHY ARE THERE STILL BARBARIANS?
Panel discussion with *Anne Applebaum, Amin Gemayel, Donald Sassoon, Abderrahmane Sissako, Bettina Stangneth* and *Marian Turcki*, moderated by *Rob Riemen*
- 01.15 PM Lunch with complimentary refreshments
- 02.00 PM II. HOW CIVILIZED ARE WE?
Panel discussion with *Ahmed Gáaloul, John Haldane, Azza El-Kholy, Robert Putnam, Michael Shermer, Zeev Sternhell* and *Leon Wieseltier*, moderated by *Rob Riemen*
- 04.00 PM Book signing with *Amos Oz* and others

The Conference is held in English.

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

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

Waiting for the Barbarians

I

In *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1898), the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy portrays a fictional city that has spiralled into decadence in times of plenty, within a Roman Empire, in which the emperor, senators, rhetors and citizens are presented as almost eagerly looking forward to the arrival of the barbarians. When the barbarians do not come, the disappointment is felt deeply. Cavafy's description of this imaginary city ends with the following haunting lines:

*And now, what's to become of us without barbarians.
Those people were a solution of some kind.*

— Translated by Daniel Mendelsohn

The arrival of the barbarians would have offered a way out of the spiritual emptiness, lethargy, boredom and laziness that the city has fallen prey to. Cavafy's lines illustrate poetically Edward Gibbon's argument in his superb epic *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1788): that Roman civilization primarily withered as a result of decay from within, waiting for the barbarians that eventually came.

II

In 1794, in his eighth letter in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, while enjoying the blossoming of a new European civilization, the result of Enlightenment ideals coming to fruition, Friedrich Schiller unexpectedly posed a painful question: 'Whence then is it that we remain still barbarians?' A few decades later, his old friend Goethe gave the following answer in a conversation with Johan Peter Eckermann in 1831: '[the historian Barthold] Niebuhr was right in predicting an era of barbarism. It is already here and we are in the midst of it; for wherein does barbarism consist unless in not appreciating what is excellent?' A few years later, in *Democracy in America* (1840), Alexis de Tocqueville observed: 'Because Roman civilization perished through barbarian invasions, we are perhaps too much inclined to think that that is the only way a civilization can die.'

Innocent people, who are beheaded or burned alive in front of running cameras – and these atrocities are thereupon sent into the world for everyone to see; editors, who are murdered in cold blood for their satirical cartoons; fanatics, who torture and desire to die as martyrs for their cause. Modern slavery, organized rape, a superpower that invades other states for more *Lebensraum*. We hear the news of so much cruelty, so much violence, so much barbarism in disbelief, disgust, bewilderment and fear. Our European history is similarly marked by bonfires, guillotines, torture and martyrs, slavery and raids; but this is past, it happened long ago, it is over. We are proud to be civilized.

At least, so we think. Just as we thought at the beginning of the twentieth century, when European culture reached its zenith and we were completely unaware of how easily and how quickly European civilization would enter the realms of the greatest barbarity. A savagery, to which the most unconceivable evil of Auschwitz and the Gulag will always be connected. And to this day, we still do not really understand, we still do not really have an answer to the questions that Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Thomas Mann, Albert Camus and George Steiner were bound to ask: how come that a developed civilization may lapse into new forms of barbarism? Whence this evil? Whence nihilism? How come that the humanities failed to humanize us? What went wrong with reason?

Only a few months before his voluntary death, Primo Levi wrote two paragraphs in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986) that now read as his testament, a testimony and warning to those among us, who consider themselves living in a civilized society:

For us to speak with the young becomes ever more difficult. We see it as a duty, and at the same time as a risk: the risk of appearing anachronistic, of not being listened to. We must be listened to: above and beyond our personal experiences, we have collectively been the witnesses of a fundamental, unexpected event, fundamental precisely because unexpected, not foreseen by anyone. It took place in the teeth of all forecasts; it happened in Europe. Incredibly, it happened that an entire civilized people, just issued from the fervid cultural flowering of Weimar, followed a buffoon whose figure today inspires laughter, and yet Adolf Hitler was obeyed and his praises were sung right up to the catastrophe. It happened, therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say.

It can happen, and it can happen everywhere. I do not intend to nor can I say that it will happen; as I pointed out earlier, it is not very probable that all the factors that unleashed the Nazi madness will again occur simultaneously but precursory signs loom before us. Violence, 'useful' or 'useless', is there before our eyes: it snakes either through sporadic and private episodes, or government lawlessness, both in what we call the first and second worlds, that is to say, the parliamentary

democracies and countries in the Communist area. In the Third World, it is endemic or epidemic. It only awaits its new buffoons (there is no dearth of candidates) to organize it, legalize it, declare it necessary and mandatory and contaminate the world. Few countries can be considered immune to a future tide of violence generated by intolerance, lust for power, economic difficulties, religious or political fanaticism, and racialist attritions. It is therefore necessary to sharpen our senses, distrust the prophets, the enchanters, those who speak and write 'beautiful words' unsupported by intelligent reason.

— Translated by Raymond Rosenthal

Mindful of these words and of the critical observations by Schiller, Goethe and De Tocqueville, we would be wise not to let us solely be dazzled by the barbaric conditions at the borders of Europe for the survival of our civilization. Rather, we need to start asking ourselves some uncomfortable and critical questions.

Why are there still barbarians?

In his treatise *On Human Dignity* (1487), the European humanist Pico della Mirandola put the following words on the nature and destiny of man into the mouth of the Supreme Being: 'We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine.' If this is true, then man is free and may choose his own path in life. But then, how come that people have a barbaric inclination, a tendency to fall back into barbarism? Who are today the barbarians? What feeds barbarism?

Is it justified to describe Islam as a seedbed for barbarism, now so many fanatics act in the name of this religion? Then again, how to handle the simple fact that so many of these Muslim extremists and jihadists are born and bred in Europe? Why were they not receptive to the European ideal of civilization? What feeds fanaticism, ferocity and self-destruction? And what is our response to the still unanswered question, raised by the stained past of our twentieth-century history: how come that a developed culture may lapse, seemingly easily and rapidly, into the most horrific forms of barbarity? Where does the disloyalty of intellectuals and the connivance of scientists originate? Why are aestheticism and barbarism in line, why are they neighbours, as Thomas Mann argued in his novel *Doctor Faustus* (1947)? And from where springs murderous nihilism? Are Nietzsche's 'death of God' and barbarity interconnected? What symptoms are indicative for a culture in decline? And what would Schiller, Goethe and De Tocqueville — if they would be with us in this present world — be able to see that we are not (yet) able to see?

How civilized are we?

What protects us from a relapse into barbarism? What protects us from savagery? The answer to these questions is always the same word, a word that has become the shibboleth for a just and peaceful society: *civilization*.

Then again, what is civilization? In his small yet brilliant text *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* (1646), the Spanish author Baltasar Gracián summarizes it concisely: ‘Man is born a barbarian, and only raises himself above the beast by culture. Culture therefore makes the man; the more a man, the higher.’ With these words, Gracián wanted to elucidate the fact that everyone without a sense of what matters for human dignity is a barbarian; to emphasize that anyone has to cultivate the virtues and spiritual values that enable a harmonious existence with one’s neighbour. This ideal is also echoed in Goethe’s vision: ‘Civilization is a permanent exercise in respect. Respect for the divine, the earth, for our fellow men and so for our own dignity.’

If this is what civilization and culture comprise, what are in that case the values that we cultivate today? Are these universal values or does the post-modern (‘post-cultural’, in the words of George Steiner) era exclude a universal interpretation? And what is the foundation of our morality? Every now and then we find a reference to ‘the sources of our civilization’, to Judaism, Christianity, Greek philosophy and the social and legal organization of the Romans. Have these wells of culture not already run dry, taking into account that these traditions are barely upheld in our time? Religion, art and philosophy are traditionally considered carriers of civilization. Given the limited relevance ascribed to the arts and culture in our society in general, we may also question the influence of these so-called ‘civilizing forces’. Nevertheless, we recognize unquestionably the dominance of science and technology in our world and as part of our worldview. May it be that Nietzsche was right, when wondering about this dominance in the unpublished fragments of *The Dawn* (1880): ‘An age of barbarism is about to begin, the sciences will serve it!’ Will reason, or rationalism, provide a solution? Is this the pillar upon which we may build our ideal of civilization?

In the meantime, political and social discontent are noticeably on the rise in our current society. Nationalist and fascist movements generate politics of fear again, and trust in political elites is steadily declining. The horrible results to which these phenomena could lead are notorious and accordingly, the question remains what might restore confidence in European politics.

In a gloomy letter from May 1960 on social developments in Europe, Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, publisher of Boris Pasternak’s novel *Doctor Zhivago*, which was banned in the Soviet Union, wrote to the author about the era of the Fourth Reich that in his eyes had come into being: ‘The “Fourth Reich” is the era of compromise, money and intellectual poverty.’ The fact is, we live in a plutocracy; our media and educational system in particular cultivate stupidity. What is the subsequent impact on our culture? And what can be

changed, if this is ‘what people want’? And if even our education does not offer a spiritual and intellectual formation, then what does?

Grand narratives, great ideals; those are the essential characteristics of every culture, because with these narratives and through these ideals people relate with each other and to their history and, at least for a moment, feel raised above and beyond their personal experiences, relieved from their daily concerns by a vision of how the future could be. Even so, Robert Musil, working in the interbellum on his novel *The Man without Qualities*, which remained unfinished, noted down as central message that we had entered an age without a Grand Narrative or Binding Ideal: ‘Each era must have a guideline, a *raison d’être*, a balance between theory and ethics, God etc. As yet, the Age of Empiricism has failed.’

Do we still retain a Grand Narrative or are we tired of narratives? Do we still believe in an ideal of culture, in an ideal civilization, and what are we willing to do for it? Or are we also waiting, prosperous yet apprehensive, for the barbarians?

Rob Riemen
Founder and president Nexus Institute

Speakers



ANNE APPLEBAUM (United States, 1964) is a columnist for *The Washington Post* and *Slate* and the director of the Transitions Forum at the Legatum Institute. She is a graduate from Yale and the London School of Economics and wrote several books, including *Gulag. A History*, which won the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for non-fiction, and *Iron Curtain. The Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944-1956* (2012), which won the 2013 Cundill Prize for Historical Literature. She is a former visiting professor at the London School of Economics, a former member of *The Washington Post* editorial board, a former deputy editor of *The Spectator* magazine and a former Warsaw correspondent of *The Economist*. Her work has also appeared in *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Republic* and many other publications.



AHMED GÂALOUL (Tunisia, 1966) had to flee his country at the end of 1990 because of his political attitude and values. He travelled to Morocco to finish his undergraduate studies in philosophy. In 1993, he sought asylum in the United Kingdom and was accepted as a political refugee. In exile, he took up his postgraduate studies, combining an interest in the philosophy of language and Islamic studies. After the successful Tunisian Revolution of 2010, Gâaloul returned to his home country and served as adviser to the newly appointed prime minister Hamadi Jebali. He is currently a member of the Shura council, the most influential body advising the party line, of the islamist party Ennahdha and the executive director of its cultural bureau. Gâaloul has written a number of articles on philosophy, Islamic studies and political affairs. A prolific writer, he also wrote several children's books and has published two novels.

President AMIN GEMAYEL (Lebanon, 1942), born in Bikfaya, graduated from the Jesuit Université Saint-Joseph in Beirut with a degree in law. Gemayel was elected a member of parliament for the Kataeb Party in 1970. He founded the Maison du Futur in 1975, a think tank specialized in Middle Eastern political and development issues.



In 1982, he was elected president of Lebanon. As the country was war-torn and ripped apart by internal conflicts and foreign interventions, Gemayel advocated political moderation and strove for peace and unity, a difficult message in the explosive Middle East during the turbulent 1980s. After his term in office in 1988 and during the Syrian occupation of his country, he lived as an exile in France and the United States for twelve years, lecturing at several leading universities and writing insightful books reflecting on the difficult political situation in the region. After his return to Lebanon, he lost his son Pierre — also a MP for the Kataeb Party — in a political assault in 2006.

JOHN HALDANE (United Kingdom, 1954), chair of the Royal Institute of Philosophy in London, is professor of philosophy at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, and professor and director of the Centre for Ethics, Philosophy and Public Affairs at the prestigious Scottish University of St Andrews. He was educated in the arts and studied philosophy at Birkbeck College, London. Haldane is an insider at the Vatican Curia and is considered a leading Catholic philosopher, exploring theological issues, the philosophy of the mind, ethics and aesthetics. His public appearances in radio and television programs at the BBC and his diverse and prolific publications have made him a familiar voice and face in present-day discussions on art, society and theological matters; next to his academic work, he writes columns, articles and essays on art for various renowned British newspapers and journals.





AZZA EL-KHOLY (Egypt, 1960) is head of the Academic Research Sector of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina and professor of American literature at Alexandria University, where she also obtained her doctorate. Her academic and research interests include feminist criticism, women's issues, nineteenth-century literature translation and the

current political state of affairs in Egypt and the region — she is very critical of Western interference. Alongside her academic career, she was the director of the Centre for Democracy and Social Peace Studies at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina and has taken on many directive functions promoting translation initiatives. El-Kholy strives to empower women in the Middle East through education, emphasising the important role women had in the recent social changes in Egypt. She is a consultant for the National Translation Project in Egypt, and an editor of the Feminist Press project *Women Writing Africa: The Northern Region* (2009), giving a voice to the many female writers of Africa.



AMOS OZ (Israel, 1939) is a world famous, award-winning and prolific writer of novels, stories, articles and essays. His autobiographical *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, originally published in Hebrew in 2002, sold more than a million and a half copies worldwide and was translated into 31 languages. During his teenage years, he lived in a

kibbutz, a period of peace forming a stark contrast with the succeeding years in military service. He actively participated in border skirmishes and thus experienced war at first hand. Since then, Oz has often spoken in favour of military self-defence but has equally taken a strong stand against military expansion. He studied philosophy and Hebrew literature in Jerusalem and lectured at the Ben-Gurion University in Beersheba for nearly twenty years. Since 1967, Oz has been a prominent champion of the two-state solution and has repeatedly pleaded for peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, based on practical arrangements. His most recent books are the historical study *Jews and Words* (2012, with his daughter Fania Oz-Salzberger) and the novel *Judas* (2014).

ROBERT D. PUTNAM (United States, 1941) is the Malkin Professor of Public Policy at Harvard. Educated at Swarthmore, Oxford and Yale, he is the recipient of the Skytte Prize, the world's highest accolade for a political scientist, and the National Humanities Medal, America's most prestigious honour for contributions to the humanities. He has written fourteen books, including the prize-winning *American Grace. How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (with David Campbell, 2010) and the bestseller *Bowling Alone. The Collapse and Revival of the American Community* (2000). His most recent book, *Our Kids. The American Dream in Crisis* (2015), examines increasing inequality of opportunity in America.



DONALD SASSOON (Egypt, 1946), emeritus professor of comparative European history, was born in Cairo and educated in Paris, Milan, London and the US. He obtained degrees from University College London and Pennsylvania State University, and a doctorate from Birkbeck under Eric Hobsbawm's supervision. He taught successively at Westfield College and Queen Mary University of London, until his retirement in 2012, but he also lectured at universities throughout Europe, Asia, Australia and North America and spoke at conferences in over forty countries. He is the author of many articles and editor of various academic journals. His books, which include classics such as *One Hundred Years of Socialism* (1996), *Mona Lisa* (2001), *The Culture of the Europeans* (2006) and *Mussolini and the Rise of Fascism* (2008), have been widely translated. He is currently working on global capitalism, researching the period between 1880 and 1914.





MICHAEL SHERMER (United States, 1954) is a public intellectual and professional skeptic. He is the founding publisher of the widely-read *Skeptical Magazine*, a monthly columnist for *Scientific American*, and presidential fellow at Chapman University. Shermer first studied theology and (experimental) psychology, and thereafter received his doctorate in the history of science. Once a fundamentalist Christian, Shermer ceased to believe in God during his studies and now attempts to explain the ubiquity of irrational or poorly substantiated beliefs, while also explaining how scientific ways of thinking have profoundly changed the way we perceive morality and the world around us. His lectures, television appearances and bestselling books, among which *The Moral Arc* (2015), *The Believing Brain* (2011) and *The Science of Good and Evil* (2003), are a worldwide success.



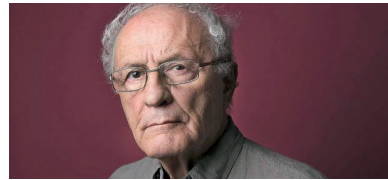
Film director ABDERRAHMANE SISSAKO (Mauritania, 1961) left his country for Moscow to pursue his cinematographic studies at its leading film school. Here, he produced his first film *Octobre* (1993), which took Cannes by storm and initiated his career as Africa's most influential filmmaker. In his work, Sissako confronts an international audience with their lack of interest in the 'forgotten continent'. He conjures up visions of the displacement of its people and the large-scale violation of human rights in Africa. His critically acclaimed film *Timbuktu* (2014), picturing an African town and its Muslim inhabitants taken hostage and being terrorized by fundamentalists, was awarded seven Césars and was nominated for both the Palme d'Or and the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film. Sissako recently moved back to Mauritania, after having lived in France for years.

BETTINA STANGNETH (Germany, 1966) received her doctorate in philosophy for her work on Immanuel Kant's 'religion' and his concept of 'radical evil'. For her work on the anti-Semitic ideas of Immanuel Kant, a second project after her doctorate, she was awarded with the first prize by the Philosophisch-Politische Akademie of Cologne.



Thereafter, she started her work on the National Socialists' philosophy and undertook the daunting task of searching for Eichmann documents, including his postwar writings and hours of tape-recorded discussions with fellow Nazi exiles in Argentina. This resulted in the ground-breaking work *Eichmann before Jerusalem* (2011), in which she portrays Eichmann as a convinced and thoughtful Nazi, hence challenging Hannah Arendt's image of the passionless bureaucrat while subtly demonstrating that National Socialists' crimes in particular cannot be described in terms of the 'banality of evil' and 'thoughtlessness'.

Israel Prize laureate ZEEV STERNHELL (Poland, 1935), the former editor of *The Jerusalem Quarterly* and a long-time supporter of the Israeli peace movement, was injured in 2008 in a pipe bomb attack at his home for his stand against the Israeli policy towards the Palestinians. A fervent Zionist since childhood, he left Poland, where he barely



escaped the brutal madness of the Holocaust, for Israel in 1951. An emeritus professor of political science and a fellow of the Academy of Sciences and Humanities of Israel, he is one of the world's leading experts on the history of fascism and a resolute defender of the rationalist traditions of the Enlightenment. His most influential books translated into English, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology* (1994, with M. Sznajder and M. Ashéri) and *Neither Right nor Left. Fascist Ideology in France* (1995), changed the historic perception of fascism. His recent *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition* (2006) presents a controversial new view of the fall of democracy and the rise of radical nationalism in the twentieth century. For his outstanding contribution to French culture, he was awarded the prestigious titles of Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres and of Commandeur des Palmes Académiques.



MARIAN TURSKI (Poland, 1926), a distinguished journalist and historian, is one of the last living Holocaust survivors. Having outlived the Lodz ghetto and captivity in Auschwitz, he was finally liberated at Theresienstadt in 1945 after a gruelling death march from Buchenwald.

Turski decided to stay in postwar communist Poland to work towards the reconciliation between the various communities, mainly through his contributions as editor and journalist for the Polish weekly *Polytika*. The highly praised BBC documentary *Auschwitz, the Nazis and the 'Final Solution'*, for which he was intensively consulted, was a television hit around the world in 2005 and his book with heart-breaking testimonials of fellow survivors was translated as *Polish Witnesses of the Shoah* in 2007. As chairman of the Council of the Jewish Historical Institute, Turski is one of the founding fathers of the POLIN Museum of Polish Jews, which opened its doors in 2014. His fight for the memory of the Holocaust has been widely recognized; he received the prestigious French Légion d'Honneur (2012), the German Großes Verdienstkreuz (2013) and the Polish Gloria Artis Medal for Merit to Culture (2015).



LEON WIESELTIER (United States, 1952) is one of America's leading public commentators, a distinguished critic and prolific writer. After his studies at Oxford and Harvard, he quickly became the principal literary editor for *The New Republic*. After more than twenty years at this influential journal, he left in 2014 in protest of managerial changes.

Wieseltier, whose moving diary *Kaddish* (1998) phenomenally addresses the eternal themes of loss and faith, freedom and predestination and the significance of traditions, is a devoted Jew. He wrote *Against Identity* (1996) and translated Yehuda Amichai's poetry for *The New Yorker*. He is currently the Isaiah Berlin Senior Fellow in Culture and Policy at Brookings, the world's most influential think tank, and writes as contributing editor for *The Atlantic*. He regularly publishes articles on a wide variety of social issues, with a sharp eye for the central problems of our time, setting the standard for serious cultural discussion.

Nexus Publications

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 upon our times. Many of these are available in bilingual editions and some in English editions.

Garry Kasparov

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. Order your copy at our website.

Timeless Values in a Shifting World

'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.' — Garry Kasparov

The democratic societies of the modern world are facing challenges new and old to their openness and security. The territorial integrity of Europe has been breached by Vladimir Putin's dictatorship while terror both from abroad and home-grown has no simple solutions. Evil still persists in the world today and will only grow if unopposed. Open societies that cannot protect their citizens will not remain open for long.

NEXUS INSTITUUT

The Nexus Institute cherishes and celebrates the European humanist tradition and strives to keep the European intellectual heritage alive by stimulating and 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.

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www.nexus-instituut.nl

PO Box 90153 | 5000 LE Tilburg, The Netherlands | +31 (0)13 466 3450

info@nexus-instituut.nl



Provincie Noord-Brabant

gemeente Tilburg

