Identity Politics and Polarization

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The Contested New West

By

Hans Boutellier

Translation: Ron Otten

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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Dedicated to
Bella (2019), Kiki (2020) and Boris (2023) Boutellier Houben
and to their future in the new West

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FOREWORD TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

Just a few years separate the first version of this book from the present English-language edition. In the meantime, world history has thundered past us. The power grab in the United States, Israel's seething violence, the territorial war in Ukraine, the rise of far-right extremism in Europe, the devastating consequences of the climate crisis and its blunt denial, and the erosion of democracy in numerous countries. Each development called for adjustments to the text, yet the central idea has held firm: the West is undergoing an unprecedented transformation.

This transformation is marked by intense political struggle—struggle that centers, above all, on identity. Deep-seated sentiments have surfaced: the fight for personal recognition (*thymos*) expressed through increasingly polarized group formations (*tribus*). Much of this is linked to the digitization of the (Western) world. Social media interactions, algorithmic steering, the rise of artificial intelligence, and the unchecked power of Big Tech have reshaped social relations. We are witnessing new forms of tribalism—emerging, paradoxically, in a digital age.

The internet—and social media in particular—facilitates both old and new networks: self-chosen or inherited, fleeting or enduring, grounded in firm beliefs and organized around new themes. What defines these networks is their tendency to grow in opposition to one another. I see this as a perilous development, as it legitimizes the construction of enemies. It reflects the ambivalent longing for community in a world that feels unmoored. We do not know where this will take us, but for now, it seems that reactionary forces are gaining the most ground. Is there still room for tolerance and solidarity?

That question is central to this book. For this edition, the text has been expanded with a new chapter on how tribal sentiments have come to the surface. We are witnessing a sharp erosion of liberal reasoning around the democratic rule of law. A new basis for legitimacy is needed—but what might it look like in a polarized world? While the book was written in a Dutch context, its scope is Western. Local examples have been clarified or adapted accordingly. The book aims to understand how this identity-driven conflict has emerged—and what kind of response it might require.

This, then, is the introduction to a theoretically inspired interpretation of today's realities in a multicultural Western world, interspersed with

anecdotal experience. It is a book to be read attentively—but I hope it also offers moments of recognition. I am deeply grateful to Ron Otten, who independently translated and curated this English edition of The New West.[1] And I thank you, too, for your interest. As a virtual reader, you were already of inestimable value during the writing process.

Haarlem / Walsoorden, October 2025

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from French (or Dutch, German, etc.) are my own.

PREFACE

The year of my birth was eight years after the Second World War ended. In the course of my life, I have come to realize how short that timespan really was. On its heels came the threat of the Cold War and the fear of a nuclear war, as well as the cultural revolution of the sixties and way that became politicized in the seventies. We experienced serious political conflicts and heavy economic crises. At times these movements became pretty intense, and the chips were flying, but I never had the feeling that it would all turn out wrong. That has changed.

That change is undoubtedly related to growing older and to my youthful naivete back then. But I believe that there is also something else going on. Fundamental ideas about living in a society in the West are no longer self-evident in the 21st century. By "the West" I refer to several things at once: a kind of geographic boundary, a moral-political model, the notions of development and prosperity. That comprehensive, self-aware Western world I grew up with doesn't exist anymore.

In the beginning of the nineties Francis Fukuyama (1992) announced the triumph of the Western liberal-democratic model. At that time, he considered it to be the optimal outcome of the evolution of history. Thirty years later we (along with him) know that this was overly confident—think of China and Russia and authoritarian regimes, including European ones. Or think about the conflicts and tensions within Western societies. Fukuyama's proclamation of the end of history turned out to be just as naive as my own easygoing youthfulness of many years ago. At the same time, it wasn't complete nonsense: to date not a single attractive alternative has appeared on the horizon.

That is exactly where I pinpoint my feeling of being threatened, a feeling I detect in many others as well. The Western societal model is facing challenges which will test its fundamental principles. These principles no longer seem to live up to their promise, in fact they often elicit repulsion.[2] The term "the West" resonates with its colonial past. It represents exploitation of other peoples and the depletion of the earth's resources. The problem is, we don't have a readily available alternative. And if one appears,

[2] This is why the CBS (Central Bureau for Statistics Netherlands) decided to stop making a distinction between the Western and non-Western ancestry of immigrants.

—usually on the flanks of society—then it doesn't particularly offer an appealing perspective.

We do hear the call for a new narrative, a new imagining of our country, of Europe, of the West and of our way of being a society. A piece of cake, right? In this sense, I see the current contradictions, also in my own country, as a struggle to capture the imagination or representations of a new West, beyond the old one. In this book I hope to tackle the culturally diverse nature of that quest, and I use that term for lack of a better one. There's a struggle going on between identities, in all kinds of ways. We can't close our eyes to it, and I have a desire to understand it.

This book is an answer to my own need come to grips with this tumultuous time we are in. I hope it will bring a certain amount of peace in the face of the threat which I personally, along with many others, am feeling. The self-evident privileges of this white man (and baby-boomer) with an academic background and an ongoing membership in the chattering class of prosperity, are under pressure. And not without good reason. The Western societal model creates inequality, as it always has. And I happen to be on the good side of the line.

Many people have benefited from the brutal market-driven thinking which has dominated Western society since the eighties. Obviously, the big companies, the multi-nationals, but also the middle class, the "well" educated, in fact everyone who was more or less able to participate in the consumer society—we all benefited, even if that meant buying super cheap goods made in China.[3] But the victims are numerous—particularly on the other side of the world. And we are becoming more and more aware of that.

At the same time, the struggle in the West is not primarily socioeconomic. The crisis I see goes deeper than material inequality. The struggle is happening on the level of identity—it is identitarian.[4] The jury is out on whether this is a desirable development (for example, Engelen, 2018a; Van Reekum & Schinkel, 2018). I prefer to focus on the reasons how it came about, its meaning and possible answers to the questions it raises. I hope you will see the book as an informed contemplation on the background and efforts of current identity politics.

My analysis takes place between its two extremes: Islamism and extreme nationalism. These are the two dangerous variants because they think in terms of enmity. It is here that we hear the most radical voices in the "buzz" of opinions which I characterize as polyphonic. In the last two

[3] This occurred at the expense of planet Earth, a matter which I could not include in my analysis.

[4] This concept has been claimed by extreme nationalistic movements, but I use it in the neutral sense of the word.

chapters of this book, I investigate possibilities for the *social imagining* of culturally diverse societies. In doing that I unite two souls within myself: I love dealing with the big questions, but I am also looking for any small possibilities for hope.

I undertake this investigation from my position as endowed professor Polarization & Resilience in the Social Sciences Faculty at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, a chair established by the Knowledge Platform Integration and Society (KIS), funded by the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. I am very grateful to those people who have made this appointment possible.[5] I would also like to thank my co-readers Robert van Putten, Serena Does and Charlotte Hagenaars for offering inspiring counterpoints, suggestions and editorial corrections. And I thank Els, who repeatedly saw me off to the province of Zeeland where I was able to work on this book in peace and quiet—without ever for one minute feeling lonely.

[5] Dean of the Faculty of Social Science, Karen van Oudenhoven-Van der Zee (VU), Majone Steketee en Onno Zwart (Board of Directors Verwey-Jonker Instituut) en Saskia Keuzenkamp (director Movisie).

CHAPTER 1

GET REAL!

My last name is Boutellier, French by design. In our family we often say to each other: "be vigilant about the pronunciation". Recently, a sturdy-minded Rotterdammer had a different understanding of this approach. When I corrected her pronunciation, she didn't bat an eye: "This is the Netherlands, so it's Báutelier". I was speechless, wanted to apologize and felt indignation, all three at the same time. In a second, I understood what it means if your family name works against you. I know, such a slightly offensive moment has little to do with structural dismissal. And I'm not inclined to participate in cultural appropriation, but for a moment I experienced something which hundreds of thousands of Dutch people experience daily.

In the course of my career, I have developed a growing interest in the culturally diverse society. Not because of any higher ideal but because I experienced its necessity. Whoever considers "living together in society" as his or her intellectual topic cannot escape dealing with its intercultural nature. Not as an ideal but as a reality. And doing that is a matter of ups and downs. Words like "multicultural" and "migration country", appear to have been labeled as taboo for the simple reason that they actually describe the reality. Willfully blind—we don't want to take on the discussion. But that is no longer possible. It's time to *get real*!

Impervious pragmatism

More things have been labeled as taboo in the 21st century. Particularly sensitive are references to external features and identity characteristics. And that leads to another reaction—terms like "woke" or "politically correct". The culturally diverse society is all about identities. It relates increasingly to "how I see myself" and "how I want to be spoken to", on characteristics which I may or may not share with others. This is the context which is referred to as "identity politics". If we view the 20th century as primarily ideological, then the 21st is primarily identitarian. That's a statement I dare to take on. But what does it mean?

The ideological age was all about the struggle between comprehensive ideologies. These world-and-life views often took on insane, totalitarian, and unprecedented violent forms—Auschwitz, the Gulag. But after the Second World War we saw pacification between the dominant movements—liberal, Christian, and social democratic. There were orthodox movements in the margins (communist and strict Protestant Christian Reformed), at least in the Netherlands. This was known as the time of "the grand narrative" and its success in the formation of "the West" as an overarching concept. In the Netherlands, this was called the pillarized society (Lijphart, 1968).

A characteristic feature of an ideological movement is the merging of views on humanity and society, including organized communities and an acceptable elite. It's a package deal, and you identified with it mostly as a matter of convention. After all, that's what your parents did. From the seventies onward, that relatively solid and uncluttered landscape began to come apart—and I've devoted a fair amount of writing to that development (see, among others, Boutellier, 2019a). The ideological model is gradually being supplanted by what I have termed a *pragmacracy*, a moral political model where "reasonableness" trumps ideology.

In a *pragmacracy* everything revolves around effectiveness and efficiency. De facto this meant giving the market free range. An economic model emerged where the state pulls back when it comes to capital, societal organizations operate as businesses, and citizens (must) begin to see themselves as entrepreneurs in the public domain.[6] All of which fit nicely into meritocratic thinking where one's (supposedly personal) achievements take the center stage. The more education you have, the higher your status. You could say: the Western welfare state was taken for a ride through the neoliberal carwash.[7]

This thoroughly pragmatic and de-politicized society is under pressure. The reasons are numerous: geopolitical shifts, digitalization, social media, growing inequality. But there is also a political-moral reason. A pragmacracy may be relatively successful, but it is a model for society bereft of narrative: you can hardly say you "believe" in it. It's fundamentally soulless. Ideals are a personal matter. At the same time, it has an enormous absorptive capacity—criticism of the system is easily engulfed. Which makes it robust, but also untouchable.

[6] In this connection, see "the neoliberal personality" (Gandesha, 2017).

[7] An idea which has recently and extensively been criticized by Markovits (2019) and Sandel (2020).

Against reasonableness

Speaking from an ideologically partisan point of view, a pragmacracy is primarily a central playing field with a largely powerless periphery. Some even see it as a political party cartel, as if a conscious and purposeful agreement has been made. There is of course no such agreement, but even so the idea of a party cartel isn't completely ridiculous. Social liberal thinking dominates the political center. Getting into the ring with such a well-placed pragmatic, a-political contender is not easy. It will consider "reasonable" commentary, for example regarding uneven effects on equality or environmental issues. A pragmacracy tends to seamlessly adapt to the ebb and flow of social relationships.

At the same time, many aren't experiencing this colorless pragmatism as being all that reasonable, and the amount of fundamental criticism aimed at it is increasing. Any pre-supposed equality turns out to be a farce for many, socially and economically speaking but also in terms of identity. The Dutch *Black Pete* has become world famous, not because *Sinterklaas* has distributed the Christmas presents so unequally, but because of the unashamed display of black-faced white people. It has become symbolic for what we now know as institutional racism.[8]

On the other hand, we see a development which sets "reasonableness" up as being hypocritical or even treacherous. That began with Dutch media platforms like GeenStijl (NoManners, since 2003) and Powned (since 2009), examples of a growing right-wing resistance to the educated chattering class who are convinced they "know how the world works". And that resistance is even more pronounced when the same class takes up the banner of marginalized groups like migrants. The Netherlands has a long tradition of ridiculing the (upper) middle class. Now, in the 21st century, the stakes have been raised.

A crucial figure in this tradition was Theo van Gogh who was murdered in 2003 by the Muslim extremist Mohammed Bouyeri (now serving out a lifelong sentence in jail). Van Gogh was controversial because he made fun of others, particularly Jewish and Muslim people. His approach was first and foremost an attack on political correctness and was as often as not witty in tone. Nevertheless, it was by no means completely innocent, as can be

[8] 'It is a long-standing Dutch tradition that Sinterklaas, assisted by the character Black Pete, distributes gifts to children on the fifth of December. There has been a lot of controversy about this character; it is hardly used anymore.'

seen in the political rise of Pim Fortuyn.[9] The murder of Van Gogh was a traumatic event in Dutch life–the definitive end of ironic tomfoolery.[10]

In the last decade the verbal attacks have become increasingly vicious, leading to hostile, antagonistic politics which are new in the post–World War II setting: groups within the population turning against each other. This has been most evident on the internet and in social media but is also consistently seen in the physical domain. At the same time, we see a growing resistance to the elite, by which I mean the alliance between politics, science, journalism, and the judiciary (politicians, scientists, journalists, judiciary system) the cornerstones of the post-ideological society. The institutions which support the system are losing their self-evident authority.

This development comes to its most visible expression in the social media but frequently takes the form of physical threats to politicians and journalists. The pragmacracy has given birth to movements which resist the politics of the reasonable middle ground, not so much in the social economic sense, but in the core of her legitimacy: the promise of equality. The one group feels that equality is not being realized, the other feels that it should not even exist. And between these two extremes, there are all kinds of variations—welcome to the identitarian struggle. Hardline expressions, in accordance with the logic of the media, demanding and vying for attention.

Polarization?!

Within this context, the term "polarization" is bound to fall. It refers to the strained relationships between groups, where identities are on the line. The first decades of the 21st century have introduced us to a litany of identity groups: #metoo-feministen, Black Lives Matter activists, white supremacists, Muslim haters, Islamists, and extreme nationalists. Lumping these identitarian movements together should be avoided at all costs. Some of them are oriented toward emancipation, others are dedicated to eradication of the other group(s).

There are fundamental differences between the stakes involved in their struggle, but a noticeable common denominator is their vehemence. I will return to this topic in further detail further on. For now, it is important to see this struggle as a clash between cultural diversity as such and the pragmacracy. The dominant management culture is being unmasked as the privileged playground for a theoretically educated, white middle class of

[9] The first very successful politician in the Netherlands to speak out against migration, especially against Muslims.

[10] See further the Ian Buruma's analysis of Van Gogh (2006).

primarily male, hetero baby-boomers. The abstract idea of "citizenship for everyone" is being challenged head on, and from different sides. Some are claiming it, while others reject it.

In my use of the concept "cultural diversity" I am referring to the tremendous variety in descent, but also to gender and religious affiliation. In the present network society, identity and cultural values are more important than the economy (Castells, 2011). Such a society consists of a labyrinth of affinities and associations, without common or shared storylines. Complicated and without direction, the ideal bedding for a pragmacracy.[11] Such a society does not offer much stability or security—at best to some degree in one's own immediate circle, where some sense of identity may be provided if it is recognizable.

People generally prefer to organize themselves around certainties: obvious physical characteristics or deepest convictions. That could be about being gay, being Black,[12] being Dutch, being a climate activist, being physically disabled, a feminist, a Muslim and so the list goes on. These forms of identity don't exclude each other; usually we're many of them simultaneously. And yet there is the unmistakable need to make our image of ourselves as coherent as possible (Ward et al., 2018). That is precisely why the way we are seen and addressed by others plays such an important role.

We see differences in places where it is not desirable; or we don't see them in the places where we should be seeing them. I say "we" because this holds true for everyone. We feel offended if we are not understood in who we are or who we aspire to be. It determines the mental representation we make of ourselves and our world: our *social imaginary*. This is even more true when we are rejected or discriminated on the basis of primary characteristics. Or when we feel hurt because of what we hold dear. I see *polarization* in the 21st century as a battle for the social imaginary within which our understanding of self is centered.

The social imaginary

In fifty years, Dutch society has acquired a completely different appearance. I summarize it as a "super-diverse secular network society"—a mouthful, but that's the way it is. A society that no longer revolves around the "grand narratives", the sense-making beliefs and traditions with which large groups can identify. We hear it often these days: "we need a new grand narrative".

[11] See *The Improvising Society* (Boutellier, 2011).

[12] The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement deliberately chooses the capital letter form (https://zwartmanifest.nl/begrippenlijst/).

But that is exactly the problem: have you tried creating one of those recently (or even the beginning of one) that captures the imagination of others. Welcome to the new West!

And by "the West" I refer geographically speaking to Europe (with all of its diversity), including the former "new colonies" (Canada, New Zealand, Australia) and the United States. "The West" however, is in the first place, an idea: the liberal-democratic constitutional state, the based on the "rule of law," complete with its claim for universal human rights. Simply put, everyone is equal, we determine how we want to be governed, and we have checks and balances between the different bodies of power—that is the Western pretense in a nutshell. Freedom, equality and a pinch of brotherhood thrown into the mix as well. It's brought quite a nice level of prosperity for many.

The bottom line is that no one is the boss—that's the big difference when compared with authoritarian regimes. And if you look a little further you see that the West features a public sphere with freedom of speech, scientific advancements, and the possibility for public opinion based on free press and media. All that against a backdrop of entrepreneurial productivity, kept in check by a regulating government that operates from principles of fairness and justice—at least that was the idea. It almost sounds too good to be true.

According to Charles Taylor (2004) these are the pillars of the *social imaginary* of the West: the free market economy, the public sphere and democracy. This is the social liberal, or if you prefer the social-democratic model that Francis Fukuyama in 1992 declared as the worldwide winner: a liberal democracy with a relatively high standard of living. It is the dominant social imaginary of our time, or better said, that is what it was. For the 21st century it is apparently falling short.

We now have the success of China and other state capitalist countries, illiberal democracies (Hungary, Poland), reactionary populistic movements in the U.S., England and on the Continent, and growing inequality and corresponding dissatisfaction in Western countries. We have the depletion of the earth as the result of unbridled economic exploitation of nature. And we have the growing realization from within that "the West" also is (or has been) an inherently violent concept. After all, the West is a product of colonialism.

These are huge issues which lead to the current struggle for the imagining of a "new West" with respect to external developments and internal struggle. Issues which mostly fall beyond the scope of this author's competencies.[13] But they do determine the context of my analysis. I

[13] See further *Het grote wereldtoneel* by Philip Blom (2020). According to Blom we are in a time of transition but remain stuck in old beliefs about economic growth.

ascertain that the struggle for the social imaginary of "the new West" appears to have identitarian tendencies. I want to understand its background. Which is why I am reasoning through the eyes of the Dutch situation. It's the one I know best, and it's where I feel the strongest desire for this book to be relevant.

The analysis in a nutshell

This book serves two purposes. The first one concerns the need for insight into the background of the identitarian struggle: what is actually at stake? The second purpose is the search for an answer": how can we begin to make a social imaginary of the new "West".

The analysis starts out in the next chapter with the erosion of the "idea of truth" which pulls the conceptual rug out from under our feet. The (postmodern) idea that truth is a construction has become perverse in the social media. Truth becomes an opinion—and that means that everything can be true, or it could be a conspiracy. A struggle for "my own truth" develops. And if that truth is going to determine who I am, then I need it to be recognized.

This need for recognition, and the potential rage, which is concealed within it, has deep roots. To explore that I bring in the concept of *thymos* in Chapter 3, a term that refers to a leitmotif which was of great significance in classical antiquity. And particularly relevant if we are to better understand the current situation in the West. Amplified in algorithmic echo chambers and without the shock-absorbing qualities of a great collective narrative, a deeply human urge has burst out into the open.

That situation has turned the nation-state into a battlefield once again (Chapter 4). The nation-state may be a construct, but it calls forth enormous passion. The nation-state arose in the 18th century and developed an increasingly ideological nature. The current nation-state, however, is one made of identities and in particular of the differences between them. These differences become embodied in the digital era. The struggle for a social imaginary of the nation-state reveals the essential difference between an inclusive and an exclusive identity politic

The changes in the population's composition in the 21st century have brought the matter into sharp relief (Chapter 5). The post-war migration waves coincided with the secularization and digitalization of the West. Against that background, we have observed the rise of fanatical Islamism and extreme nationalism. The enemy has returned to the scene of the battle, the ultimate consequence of identity politics, where differences escalate and become sentiments and where the "Other" is no longer allowed to exist.

These developments throw a monkey wrench into the creation of a social imaginary for a new West.

This is the context within which the West is confronted with its own past. We witness the white man's painful *Vergangensheitsbewältigung* (Chapter 6). Similar to the Germans who had to work through and integrate the Second World War, the Western world is only now on the threshold of coming to grips with its colonial past. This renewed historical perspective threatens to become an identitarian bone of contention, where the greatest achievement of the West, the liberal-democratic constitutional state—may well become the decisive factor.

Which leads to an inevitable question, what is the value of this liberal-democratic constitutional state if liberal has become neoliberal and the distance between citizens and institutions is only growing. The democratic constitutional state is losing its credibility and its universal pretentions. The actual relevance of the constitutional state requires further examination (Chapter 7) within the context of the common good (public interest) and above all in terms of religious claims. In a culturally diverse context even the democratic constitutional state is merely a belief system. But it is a generous belief if it lives up to its fundamental values.

We need a new concept of what it means to be a society. In moving toward that concept, I reach back to the notion of "reciprocity" (mutual exchange) as the basis for every social relationship. In our complex societies, this notion has been snowed under whereas in fact it needs to be made more explicit. Even in our kaleidoscopic world of differences, social relationships are based on giving and receiving, giving back, or passing on. The social imaginary for the new West begins and ends with the reciprocal nature of its organizations and institutions. This reciprocal nature creates the conditions for moments of commonality, community, and for stories of acknowledgment, recognition, and identification.

CHAPTER 2

THE END OF TRUTH

The corona crisis made it extra clear: we are no longer organizing our society on the basis of the long view but rather "in view of the circumstances". According to the Dutch premier Rutte at the beginning of the crisis in March of 2020, "We are navigating on the basis of partial visibility". By using science and rational decision-making the government led the Netherlands through the crisis. Initially that brought more than enough support and trust. Gradually the critical voices grew but a pragmatic approach prevailed—in the final analysis there wasn't much choice. We didn't exactly need the corona crisis for a style of governance, where action is always based on situational necessity.

The pragmacracy arose as an alternative to the ideologically driven society which was prevalent after the Second World War. And it has been successful—the fears our parents and ancestors had for a godless society have been largely disproved. But it is a success without much of a communal soul, without a shared narrative and without real alternatives. The only recourse seems to be radical rejection (as seen for example in the form of virus conspiracy theories). Western society has become primarily a matter of producing and consuming.[14] But that doesn't inspire us or engender much enthusiasm—and the lack of it will avenge itself.

Unknowable truth

The pragmacracy is operating "as planned" but it's not convincing. In fact, it's starting to show serious breaches in places that till now only appeared as hairline cracks. And that has everything to do with the erosion of a particular belief: the belief in truth. This erosion can be understood as the last phase in the process of secularization.[15] That process is of course deeply rooted in the Enlightenment and perhaps even much earlier (Siedentop,

[14] We are living as the final (bored) people in Fukiyama's book (1992; see chapter 3). See also research by Prins (2007) on boredom.

[15] Worked out further in *Het seculaire experiment* (updated publication 2019a).

2014). But in the sixties of the last century, we saw a definite departure from faith in the organizational capacity of a higher power.

God has vanished in the Netherlands, and in a large part of the Western world. That doesn't necessarily mean that the West has become atheistic. As far as faiths are concerned, it's mostly become very cluttered—locally differentiated, individually tinted, and thanks to migration very diversified. Anyone can choose his or her own God or even believe that they themselves are God. But a societally dominant faith has gone missing—and it's hardly considered relevant anymore. Even the substitutes for those faiths have lost much of their meaning, in particular socialism and its diverse variations. In the Netherlands we refer to it as *de-pillarization*—the breakdown of the traditional religious and socio-political and pillars in society.

As we have said, these anchors were replaced by a pragmacracy, functioning on the basis of effectiveness and efficiency, carefully managed in reference to insights based on research and science.[16] Science from the Enlightenment period onwards has become the driving force of innovation and progress—filling in the gap left by truths that were no longer self-evident. And the scientist accepted that—searching for truth in the hope that it would become outdated (paraphrased freely from Max Weber, 1918). With that insight the Enlightenment stirred the Western world to unprecedented levels of innovation in production and consumption: the consequence of an undying skepticism.

A skeptical approach was the driving force behind the development of the West for centuries: statements are only true under certain conditions—another insight may be just around the corner. Western culture is founded on deep-seated doubt, and on marketing the intermediary products which it yields. Capitalism and the Enlightenment proved to be a great couple. And Christianity provided a matching morality.[17] Scientific skepticism had become embedded in collective world-and-life views. The radical secularization lauded in by the sixties meant the dissipation of that bedding—it left the road wide open for the brute force of market thinking.

Doubt and truthfulness

These developments were a secular experiment the results of which are only now becoming increasingly visible. If we as a community no longer believe ***in*** anything, than we are free to believe anything. Taking it even a step further: we can pretty much claim anything—the burden is on the other to

[16] Particularly the social sciences have taken in the position of ideological guidance (Boutellier, 2019a, chapter 7).

[17] As has been exhaustively argued by Max Weber (1905; Dutch translation 2012).

prove that it's not true. Why wouldn't Bill Gates be the evil genius behind the COVID-19 virus? Unless of course it's caused by 5G radiation. The insight that absolute truth is an illusion is what distinguishes science from religion (although doubt is also widely accepted in Western churches). But the "concept of truth" is cherished by both: they imply a point on the horizon.

Findings and assertions (propositions) from a religious or scientific perspective stand for truth. Even when one realizes that they are never "true", they still carry the weight of veracity (truthfulness): "although I don't know for certain, I cannot find another way to say it."[18] *Doubt and truthfulness form the symbiotic twins of a secular morality.* A statement made by someone may be nonsense, but it's there to be challenged on the basis of presumed sincerity. That science and religion coincide on this point is now becoming visible, particularly in this time when even sincerity (truthfulness) seems to be ebbing away as a shared criterium.

In *The Death of Truth* (2018), Michiko Kakutani links the disappearance of the "conception of truth" to the combination of postmodern relativism and cultural narcissism. Making truthful statements acquired an ironic undertone. This insight has achieved the status of philosophy, for example by the American philosopher Richard Rorty in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989). Truth is in principle unidentifiable and therefore moral foundations do not exist. Saying that something is true is equivalent to giving someone a compliment: "nicely said." And moral underpinning is gone. [19]

Rorty is known as a neo-pragmatist: if something works, it is true. This pragmatic relativism, strengthened by social media, has developed further in extremis. Something which started out as a liberal emancipatory deconstruction with regard to claims of truth was hijacked by alt-right politicians, Russian trolls, and paranoid conspiracy thinkers—and irony, so exalted by Rorty, was included. The Dutch politician Thierry Baudet[20] can announce the most despicable viewpoints with a wink and a smile and then deny that he meant it in any kind of a literal way (Ede Botje & Cohen, 2020). Digitally speaking, we can anonymously have all kinds of opinions without tangible repercussions.

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[18] I borrow this insight from Alicja Gescinska (2020).

[19] Rorty's work was the cornerstone of my Ph.D. dissertation *Solidariteit en Slachtofferschap* on the victimization of morality, translated as *Crime and Morality* (2000).

[20] Populist intellectual, who started the political party Forum for Democracy, whose popularity declined due to the promulgation of conspiracy theories.

All of this has considerable impact on social relations. Without that dot on the horizon—even an illusory one—all hierarchy in the realm of statements disappears. The erosion of truth pulls the conceptual rug out from underneath our feet. In social media every message is equal, and its value is determined by the number of clicks it gets. By now we've become familiar with the American terms: *fake news, alternative facts, post-truth, fact-free politics.* According to Manjoo and Johnston, as early as 2008, we live in a *post-fact society*. If we don't look out—*anything goes*!

The bottom line in the secular West is that every faith finally surrendered, even faith in truth as a fictional idea. Or better said, it turned out you could wrap it around your own finger. And in that way, it could also become source of power and influence.[21] The social media in particular removed the basis for every claim to truth, even the claim to authenticity (truthfulness). Or to use Alessandro Barrico's words (2018): "of all truths, the fastest one wins".[22] The Western mix of doubt and truthfulness turns out to be vulnerable in digital times.

The need to believe in something

So this is where the radical secular experiment ultimately brings us. "Modern liberal societies are heirs to the moral confusion left by the disappearance of a shared religious horizon" (Fukuyama, 2018, p. 55). The disappearance of God as a central almighty power has released centrifugal forces, with radical repercussions for our practices and ways of living. It is simultaneously risky and exciting. We live in complex times, where unequivocal answers fall short almost as quickly as they are spoken. The truth declared by the Vatican's website must compete with the virus lunatics or the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change—they all appear to have the same value.

If we don't believe in anything, not even in the "concept of truth", then we can believe everything (or not)—and that is the context in which we find ourselves. The question "what is true?" seems to have been resolved in a polyphonous context in which all statements have become opinions.

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[21] In her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Hannah Arendt wrote: "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e. the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e. the standards of thought) no longer exist."

[22] In *The Game*, Alessandro Barrico gives us a piercing analysis of the development and meaning of internet for culture (2018).

But of course, it is not a massive process in which everyone agrees. We are often shocked by the lack of commitment that this entails, by the emptiness of the liberal image of man, by hyper-consumerism, by the fluid formation of opinions, by a life without “more and more”. It makes us insecure and vulnerable.

And in the meantime, the big issues keep piling up. The counterpart to the growth of prosperity is the injustice of how it is shared. And economic growth stands in opposition to climate change. In these big issues we see something unusual happening. In that procedural search for the best answers, we run into a particular demand which emptiness seems to create: we are *required* to have viewpoints! We must have an opinion! Our lives without “appeals to truth” repeatedly force us to take a position, whatever the activity or issue might be. “What are my values, what is important to me, what do I actually believe in?”

It’s true that we consistently turn to science but we’re also aware of its limitations. Thanks to systematic methodologies, scientific knowledge is not just a matter of opinion. Scientists have a fundamentally objectifying approach. But even this fundament rests on values—values that can be questioned in the current context. These are the moments when climate skeptics or virus lunatics for example, strike—taking advantage of the immanent uncertainty of the scientific verdict, they claim to know the truth.

It distinguishes the querulent from the real scientist: the former certainly knows what cannot be true with the provisional knowledge of the latter. The seemingly desolate moral landscape is teeming with implicit and explicit opinions, truth claims, views, and beliefs - moralities if you will. It is faith beyond the religions, the ideologies, even beyond science and the rule of law—it is believing beyond the self-evident. It's believing in something, simply because we to have to. A world without common faith paradoxically forces us to believe in something. And that something can be anything.

We are inspired by the stories of yesteryear and those of today. From Greek virtues to Danish police series, from Christian virtues to scientific texts, and from Nelson Mandela to QAnon. And in between there are the rock-hard positions of the fundamentalists, the orthodox, the atheists and the radicals. And the non-committal “talk till you drop” opinion-making in the media. We are forced into taking positions even though we don't want to and even if we don't necessarily see it as such. Most of us can still live (more or less) comfortably with the duo of doubt and truth.

Belief as identity

In 2014, religious studies professor Markus Davidsen obtained a doctorate on Tolkien Spirituality at the University of Leiden. This is a so-called fiction-based religion, similar for example to the Jedi-ism which is based on Star Wars. Followers of the Tolkien religion believe that the stories of writer J.J.R. Tolkien refer to paranormal places and beings. Some followers identify themselves with elves, others believe in the actual existence of the beings Valar, Maiar and Quendi. They see Tolkien as a visionary or a prophet.

Davidsen speaks of a post traditional religion. This is characterized by combinations (bricolages) of elements borrowed from existing religions, fiction and science. Some stories lend themselves very well to a religious reading because of their so-called *'affordances'*: references to otherworldly matters or to rituals. The Tolkien Spirituality seems to fit into what is often referred to as the "*metaphorical turn*" in religious studies—religion becomes a metaphorical game. The Tolkien religion throws an interesting light onto the radical secular phase where we no longer believe *in* anything, and therefore potentially believe anything, compelling us to believe in *something*.

The human capacity to be a non-believing believer comes to the surface. Genuinely "faking it" according to the essayist Frans Kellendonk. And it also explains why Guus Kuijer, author of the Bible for Unbelievers,[23] can say: "I don't believe in God, but I am intensely grateful to him for life." The human race is only as good as its imagination: fables and fantasies dominate our choices. If there is no organized religion anymore, then we'll come up with something else. A new word for this phenomenon has come into being in the U.S.A: *kayfabe*—the belief that a game is real, like professional wrestling. In fact, it's a game playing with truth. But a game with potentially huge consequences: no marbles, but bullets—take for example the storming of the Capitol in Washington.

In my opinion, the phenomenon of "having to believe in something" rests on the following logic:

- Faith is a quest in which you have to find your own way if you no longer rely on self-evident traditions;
- The motive for doing so is the need to "want to believe in something" even if you know that it is not true;
- On this path you search eagerly for confirmation; an anchor point in which to believe;

[23] Two prominent Dutch writers.

- The durability and resilience of this faith is founded on confirmation by others, repetition, and rituals.

Internet provides a perfect infrastructure for such individualized belief systems. It helps us to find allies. In this way, the end of truth becomes the breeding ground for identity politics. I discover who I am in a sea churning with opinions and viewpoints. When I have doubts, the tendency arises to either persist or seek the confirmation of others. My "I" prefers to attach itself to fixed features or it takes the form of passionate conviction. I believe, therefore I am. Believing—regardless of its object—can develop a political nature when it takes on the characteristics of a movement. Identity politics came to earth under the digital heavens of the internet, and it achieves societal relevance when it mobilizes collectively.

Christianity as identity politics

Doubt and truthfulness have been able to drive Western culture forward for a long time as long as the big, signifying narratives stayed in the picture—the ideological age. That model of society has dissolved into the secular network society without any big narratives—we act according to the necessity of the situation. In that context we look for frameworks to interpret the world, frameworks which back us up as we face the challenges of the time. Without some kind of faith or belief, that is pretty much impossible. The search for it often focuses on new points of reference but can also fall back on old frames of reference, such as the Judeo-Christian tradition.

In spite of—or perhaps more precisely as a result of—this secular condition, the concept "cultural Christians" has come into fashion. The term refers to someone who does not believe in a (Christian) God but values Christian culture. There are several variations of this. Some do not believe morality is possible without God (as Dostoyevsky argued), and they look for inspiration in secular versions of "the good life". Others are driven by fear of belief in another God (such as Allah). This latter variant is particularly relevant in the identity struggle over the social imaginary.

It is reasonable to argue that Western culture grew out of Christian history. Liberalism was the necessary result of a process in which "individual equality before God" evolved into individual conscience. The Reformation gave birth to an unwanted child that eventually matured into the constitutional nation-state (Gregory, 2012). From the 1960s onwards, the tipping point—centuries in the making—became visible. God withdrew from public life and retreated into the private minds of individuals (or perhaps, disappeared altogether).

Precisely during this period, in which Christianity disappeared from public life, a new religion entered the public sphere—with headscarves for women, minarets on mosques, prayer rooms in semi-public buildings, calls to prayer, refusals to shake hands, and more of the like. Islam takes many forms, but modesty (restraint) is not always among its defining traits. This gave rise to a fair amount of fussing to "get it right" in school and work situations—issues typically resolved in pragmatic ways. (Boutellier, De Winter-Kocak et al., 2018; see Chapter 7).

This is the context in which cultural Christianity became popular. The West became aware of itself in its origins and cherished the cultural traditions connected to them. Cultural Christians were, in effect, a kind of penitent. The appeal to Christian traditions was an attempt to re-establish the foundations of the West. And consequently, newcomers lost their cultural claims on Dutch soil. Christianity could then be deployed in identity politics. Cultural Christians appeared as the saviors in a culturally diverse context—a good example of the complex dynamics in such a society.

Conclusion

The longing for the past is a reaction to a changing world in which truth seems to have gone missing, and a multicolored cityscape emerges. For many this is apparently a development which is difficult to accept—or maybe a convenient projection screen for discontent. That reaction is somewhat understandable if you feel you are the unwilling object of the change. My mother-in-law, for example, watched as her proud 1960s neighborhood changed into an environment in which she could no longer feel at home. We also see intellectual attempts to absolutize the past, particularly around the Dutch political party Forum for Democracy.

People are not always willing to resign themselves to a development which has indisputably changed society. Especially one that is irreversible because it derives from the assumptions of the liberal-democratic constitutional state. The end of truth necessarily involves starting a new process of imagining the true nature of the West. Facilitated by digitalization, truth is now a belief, belief is an opinion, and opinion is an emotion. And so it happens that "I" am at stake in the struggle that ensues. This is the background of the identity politics that became dominant in the 21st century. This emotionalization of the truth has deep roots, as we shall see in the next chapter.