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HUMANITY ON THE THRESHOLD OF 2025

Abstract. As the world approaches the quarter-century mark of the 21st century, humanity faces mounting existential challenges, including geopolitical tensions, climate change, and spiritual disintegration. While myths once bound societies and helped manage existential fears, modern civilization, driven by technological and economic systems beyond individual control, exposes the limitations of human rationality. Intellectuals, once the guardians of societal balance, are increasingly sidelined in a fragmented, polarized, and disinformed world. Despite political inaction and market-driven resistance to change, a radical transformation in values—from materialism to sustainability and spiritual depth—is essential to avoid collapse. The text calls for intellectual courage, mythological awareness, and collective responsibility to steer civilization away from disaster.

Keywords: Human nature, Mythophilia, Climate crisis, Intellectual responsibility, Technological civilization, Societal transformation

The coming year 2025 will mark the end of the first quarter of the 21st century. These have not been idyllic years. Pope Francis declared already in 2014 that the state humanity is in can be considered a fragmented (piecemeal) World War III.

Since then, new local conflicts have been erupting like volcanoes in different parts of the globe. The Russian takeover of Ukraine in February 2022 has started a new Cold War between Russia and the united West. Another cold war is also on the horizon – between the US and China. There is an increasing danger that these cold wars will escalate into a 'hot' war with the use of nuclear weapons. It is no wonder that people feel threatened by the impending doom. What does biology have to say about this?

Humans are mytophilic animals

It is to be expected that bestselling books describing the apocalypse will soon become fashionable, and that they will be written not only by science fiction writers but also by scientists. But it is in the nature of living systems pursuing their own preservation that they do not admit themselves to be destroyed. Of the large number of animal species, humans are so far the only animals that know that they must die. Out of fear of death, humans have created myths, first just a belief in an afterlife, later sophisticated ideas about the persistence of the individual human being through the life's work created by them. Humans are mytophilic animals. They stick to their myths. They see in the threat to their myth a threat to their own life. The myth is an effective "social glue" that binds the followers of the same myth into strongly solidary groups. As an outgrowth, mythophilia also includes our predilection for creating and listening to stories as they are offered to us today by the mass media.

Twenty-three centuries ago, a few wise individuals in ancient Greece initiated the transition "from myth to Logos," giving birth to science and a belief in the power of human

reason. Science and its associated technology have brought humanity to the state of modern civilization today. In the 18th century, the Enlightenment protagonists of continental Europe, enchanted by the advances of science, held that when the light of science penetrated the darkness of ignorance and prejudice, there would be a universal consensus of all. People would see things the same way: as they really are. Most Enlightenment thinkers shared the view of the philosopher Nicolas Condorcet that human amendment had no limits. In the 19th century, Karl Marx, inspired by the Enlightenment, concluded that just as Isaac Newton had formulated the mechanical laws of nature in the 17th century, which science had used to benefit mankind, he had discovered the "economic law of the movement of society" and this should be used "for the scientific management of society". Based on Marx's doctrine, the gigantic social experiment of communism was carried out in the 20th century to test European rationalism.

The limitations of human rationality

The experiment of communism has failed. The rationality of the individual human has been shown to be limited; human nature, the product of Darwinian natural selection, of which mytophilia is a part, is immutable. The critic of communism, the economist Friedrich Hayek, stated long before communism fell, "We never made our economic system. We were not intelligent enough to do it." And this applies not just to economy, but to all the institutions of society. They have their autonomous dynamics. They are perhaps smarter than us. We can generalize Hayek: We did not create our technical civilization. It happened to us.

We didn't create democracy either. It happened to us. Today, universal suffrage leads to the illusion that the dynamics of society are decided by all citizens. This is not so. Long before the birth of democracy, two categories of people had a prominent position in small human societies: chiefs and shamans. Gradually, the function of chiefs was taken over by politicians and the function of shamans by intellectuals. The balance between human nature and the developing society was ensured by intellectuals: philosophers, artists, scientists. They generated ideas that became the spiritual foundations of society and maintained its stability.

We may be entering a time in which the tension and contradiction between unchanging human nature and technical civilization will peak. One year ago, in January 2024, the World Economic Forum published the "Global Risks Report 2024". Disinformation topped the list of threats for the next two years. Experts have warned that their proliferation creates polarisation that can lead to violence, and that governments may slip into censorship and domestic propaganda to tackle the problem.

The spiritual foundations of society

The spiritual foundations of society are beginning to crumble. People are beginning to resort to 'herd identities' and loyalty to strong and confident leaders. Such leaders, once democratically elected, use new technologies of power to turn liberal democracy into a caricature of democracy, euphemistically referred to as 'directed', 'managed' or 'technocratic' democracy.

We do not have to go far. And in 2025 we will see the bleak fate of American democracy.

The dominance of artificial intelligence and robotization, the rise of job insecurity, the looming threat of climate change, and social networks with their creation of a "post-truth world" are rapidly replacing the traditional fear of God and eternal damnation. Even the fear of an all-powerful state or social ostracism get feebler. An instructive lesson is the case of the French economist Thomas Piketty, who rose to fame in 2013 with his groundbreaking book "Capital in the 21st Century". In it, he proposed his "useful utopia": to reduce economic inequality and to ensure that vast wealth does not end up in the hands of a small minority of the hyper-rich, progressive taxation must be introduced globally. When he realised that he was not going to see his utopia through, he published his new manifesto "Time for Socialism", as a book in 2021. If the collapse of communism did not convince the educated economist, how could it convince others who continue to dream of an ideal world?!

Is it left as the only option to resign oneself to any reasonable changes? Just to enjoy the world as the 2008 and 2009 atheist campaign bus signs in the UK advised: "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." And should we consider unprincipledness in the form of "ontological pragmatism" or undisguised cynicism as the other two options? No. For both are nothing more than "denatured religion." Human cannot escape their mythophilic nature.

Here I stand, I can't do otherwise

In the 1920s, the French philosopher Julien Benda published a book called "La trahison des clercs", which was published under the title "The treason of the intellectuals" in English and "The treason of the educated" in Czech translation. If we understand the mission of the "intellectuals" to be the function performed by shamans in primitive societies, as I have defined it in this essay, can we speak of a "betrayal of the intellectuals" in the 1920s? In a century of social networking, of the data deluge, of the overcrowding of communicative space by an overabundance of scribes, of pollution by verbal and visual waste? When we can ironically state that "everything has already been said, but not yet by everyone"?

I think the mission of intellectuals becomes even more important. It just takes intellectual honesty and humility. But also courage. If we are all mythophiles, what the economist Joseph Schumpeter said is true: 'To be aware of the relative value of one's convictions, yet to cling tenaciously to them, is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian'. It means defending one's own right, but also the right of other people, to one's own opinion and treating intellectual disputes as a game. With both respect for the rules of the game and the courage to punish those who break those rules. It means being able to look into the harsh light of truth, however blinding it may be. And, conversely, not to look for something under the lamp with the excuse that we only see something there, and not to be afraid to search in the darkness of ignorance and prejudice. To believe that by the algebraic addition of the diverse beliefs of fallible individuals, humanity arrives at a higher collective wisdom.

"Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise," Lutherans quote Martin Luther.

Humanity faces a tremendous challenge

What happens in the world are one-way moves, unidirectional, determined by a basic law of nature: every step forward involves an increased consumption of usable energy. This is how the evolution of our species has taken us from primitive origins to technical civilisation: today, high energy consumption is causing a climate crisis, the accumulation of material waste and the loss of biodiversity. The warming of the planet is causing the drying up of the soil in Africa and Asia, the melting of glaciers in the polar regions and the rise in ocean levels. It has triggered a migration tsunami: people are fleeing endangered areas and seeking refuge in countries where they can still live. This increases global political tensions enormously.

Confused politicians are looking for illusory solutions: the US is building walls to keep migrants out. When it comes to stopping the planet from heating up, the European Union is indulging in an illusion, formed in 2019 in the European Green Deal, to "transform the EU into a fair and successful society, with a modern and competent economy, in which economic growth is decoupled from resource consumption". However, in this formulation, it is a return to the idea of *perpetuum mobile*, which science has long refuted. At a meeting of world policymakers on climate change mitigation in Paris in 2016, an agreement was reached that the warming of the planet must not increase by more than 1.5°C by the end of the 21st century. But before the end of the first quarter of this century, measurements show that we are already close to that agreed maximum.

In doing so, the first condition for mitigating the warming of the planet should be a radical reduction in material consumption. But this would mean a substantial intervention in the world of values, a global substitution of material values for spiritual values. An asceticism of both material and data. We have only a few years, perhaps two decades, to bring about such a radical social and cultural transformation.

At the recent Leaders' Summit held on 12 and 13 November 2024 in Baku, Azerbaijan, on the margins of the 29th United Nations Conference on Climate Change (COP 29), the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, declared: "We must choose the instinct of self-preservation over collective suicide. And to take action that will lead to a just and inclusive transformation." "The EU is up to the challenge", he said. If only it could. But there was no mention of the need to curb individual consumption in the final declaration of the conference – politicians must secure their voters by promising prosperity.

Fortunately, the intellectuals among the scientists are more realistic. Already in 1992, the American physicist and Nobel Prize winner Henry W. Kendall wrote a document entitled 'The World Scientists' Warning to Humanity', which was signed by some 1,700 leading scientists, including 104 Nobel Prize winners. In 2017, its new form was signed by as many as 15,364 scientists calling for human population size planning and drastic reductions in personal consumption of fossil fuels, meat, and other resources. Books are coming out proving that political negligence, an economy based on insatiable consumption of commodities, and neglect of concern for the fate of future generations has brought humans to a tipping point beyond which human civilization threatens to collapse. Artificial intelligence chatbots state unequivocally that reducing consumerism must be one of the key steps to mitigate the climate crisis.

But the market, an institution with its own dynamics, will not allow this. Friedrich Hayek wrote as early as in 1944 that "the one thing that democracy cannot bear without disintegrating is the inevitability of a substantial reduction in the standard of living in times of peace, or even just of long-term economic stagnation". The market, whose main driving force is maximisation of profit, is parasitic on the human mythophilia. The incredibly primitive level of entertainment offered today by private television stations, with violence, murders, and sex, shows what the dynamics of the market are imposing on us today. The entertainment industry is a significant accelerant in the disintegration of the spiritual foundations of society.

In the 21st century, the human species is facing a challenge that it has never encountered in its history.

Biographic data: 1. This paper was published in Slovak in 2025 in the weekly *Týždeň*, No.3, pp. 32-34. 2. The author, Ladislav Kováč, Dr.Sc. is Professor emeritus at Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovakia. Born in 1932, he graduated in Biochemistry at Charles University, Prague and became teacher and founder, and later Head, of the Department of Biochemistry at the Faculty of Natural Science of Comenius University. In the purges that followed the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, he was dismissed from the university, and worked as a clinical chemist at the Psychiatric hospital in Pezinok (1970-1976) and researcher at an Institute of farm animals in Ivanka pri Dunaji (1976-1989). After the collapse of communism he served as Minister of Education, Youth and Sports of the Slovak Republic (1989-1990) and Ambassador of Czechoslovakia at UNESCO, Paris (1990-1992), and eventually resume his position at Comenius University. He was visiting professor of universities in Bordeaux, Buenos Aires, Dortmund, Ithaca, Stockholm and Paris, and of Konrad-Lorenz Institute for Evolution and Cognition Research at Altenberg. His domains of research have been bioenergetics, molecular biology of cellular membranes, and cognitive biology.