

FUTURE CALLING - THINK PIECE | 2012

**BAS HEIJNE**



**DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION,  
HUMANISM, CRISIS  
WHERE TO FROM HERE?**

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## Colophon

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**DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION,  
HUMANISM, CRISIS**

**WHERE TO FROM HERE?**



*"It's the hardest thing in the world to go on being aware of someone else's pain"*

Pat Barker, *Life Class*

# Development Cooperation, Humanism, Crisis – Where to from here?

By Bas Heijne

## 1

Fifteen years ago I interviewed author and Nobel Prize winner V.S. Naipaul in London for *NRC Handelsblad*. We spoke mainly about his work and literature in general – Naipaul believed that the traditional nineteenth century novel had fully exhausted its possibilities. After discussing Joseph Conrad's famous *Heart of Darkness* (1899), we touched on how Africa is seen through Western eyes. "That novella is a basic work about Africa and about men who have horrendous power over people who are vulnerable – unimaginably vulnerable. But these are people who, in their own eyes, live in a complete, fully developed world. Africa sees itself as finished, complete. The rest of the world talks about development and wants to squander money, but that's nonsense!"

Naipaul is known for his provocative and rather frenetic statements, but nonetheless I was surprised, especially when we went on to talk about the horrific mass murders that had taken place in Rwanda a few years back. "I was in Rwanda in 1966, just after a large-scale massacre had occurred. Everything that happened in the recent genocide – the bodies floating down to Uganda – it also happened then. How are opinions formed about these things, can you tell me? Just send some money and food and hope that things will sort themselves out? And send some doctors? Then you film doctors holding a baby for the eight o'clock news, or something like that. That's just vanity, isn't it? Excessive vanity – a version of Conrad's Kurtz. It's so easy to step in the limelight when you're surrounded by people who are so vulnerable."

At this point I mustered the courage to contradict Naipaul – an exercise not entirely without risk. To compare Western doctors attempting to avert a humanitarian crisis in Africa – as inadequate as that may be – to the crazed monster that is Conrad's Mr Kurtz was, in my view, a step too far. Aside from vanity, I ventured tentatively, were those rescue operations not simply the result of a sense of moral obligation towards people in dire circumstances, the need to do something even if the outcome is often negligible? Surely that was not just vanity?

Then something remarkable happened; the author kept silent for a while and furrowed his brows as if to process this statement. He was visibly moved. "Yes, of course, we shouldn't forget that side of the story," he said slowly and deliberately. "It's a very important aspect of post-renaissance civilisation. Indeed, we should not disparage this. Montaigne was the first to comment on man's cruelty towards man. The rejection of cruelty is a remarkable phenomenon, as it was unheard of in the past. When the Roman army conquered an enemy and invaded their city they usually slaughtered everyone – people, dogs, ... just to instil fear. And look at the Mongols with their pyramids of severed heads. Cities were plundered during successive days. Sheer cruelty! These things can still happen, but are now met with mass resistance. I believe our present civilisation is the first to feel this way about it. There is vanity, but there is also the other side."

What was Naipaul trying to say? It seemed to me he was contradicting himself in no uncertain terms. To portray the eminently humanistic impulse to alleviate the suffering of others as a vain gesture seemed at the time primarily a provocation intended to punish Western self-satisfaction. Thinking you could mould the world indiscriminately to the rosy picture you had of it was indeed pure pride. His sudden about-turn, his anger instantaneously making way for marked poignancy only made his statements seem the stranger. What did he really think?

That moment in the interview with Naipaul has always stayed with me, all the more because its resonance has increased over the years. The apparent contradiction in his words is much less strange to me now.

Instead, they show dilemmas that in recent years have become increasingly relevant in discussions on aid and development, and not just in those discussions. Although Naipaul may have seemingly contradicted himself – aid is a vain and self-indulgent exercise aimed at buying off guilt, but the compulsion to do something about the suffering of others is one of the great achievements of modern times – it is precisely in that contradiction that he touched the heart of the crisis in postwar humanism.

## 2

Blood is thicker than water – when asked in this time of economic crisis where public spending cuts could be made, the answers given by the Dutch speak for themselves. Development cooperation, art and culture are always at the top of the list, usually followed at a considerable distance by defence. According to the respondents, education and health care, which have the biggest impact on people's own lives, should be spared wherever possible. A populist political party such as Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom, which bases its manifesto predominantly on the preferences of its electorate, advocates doing away entirely with grants for art and the development cooperation budget. For the most part these views are considered radical; they appeal to a limited constituency. However, opinion polls show that the underlying sentiments are shared by a wider group of people. They are in favour of less public spending and in any case of spending public funds differently, although they rarely mention how.

Often fallacies are used. Artists are expected to fend for themselves – this purportedly leads to better art; at the same time, patronage by private individuals is advocated. Development cooperation should be abolished because it is ineffective, yet it is considered a good thing for people to give of their own accord. When the discussion becomes complicated people simply point to the practical necessity: in times of economic hardship we have to cut spending in *all* areas.

These arguments usually contain an element of class rancour; it's not so much about the issue itself but about the people who are in charge of it. We aren't against art, they say, but against the art elite who enrich themselves with taxpayer's money. People who want to enjoy fine arts, opera, modern dance or theatre must pay for these themselves, since they usually belong to the wealthiest class. Why should people who are not part of the audience for these artistic activities have to contribute to them financially?

The same sentiment characterises the recent discussions about nature conservation policy. Here, again, the complaint is that a small group of people unduly represents the greater public and that public funds are used to support the unrealistic ideals of an elite class. It is argued that legislation in this area has gone into overdrive and that the policy and its underlying assumptions are imposed on citizens. Where do the boundaries lie? How much space – literally and figuratively – may the greater spotted woodpecker claim? Here too, the economic crisis brings the debate into sharp focus. Or, brings the debate to a halt: in times of economic crisis material interests supersede others. People come before animals – there is scorn for idealists who, in their boundless empathy with animals and the environment, seem to have lost sight of human needs.

To the dismay of representatives of environmental organisations, recent far-reaching proposals to significantly cut down on the budget for nature conservation met with remarkably little protest. As with the cuts in art grants, the financial crisis was used as an argument, but everything seemed to point to a shift in sentiment as the real reason behind the consensus.

What for a long time appeared to be self-evident was suddenly open to reinterpretation. A wide gap now lay where consensus had been assumed. In the case of development cooperation, apart from the need to economise, the argument cited is that it does not work – the money donated to developing countries is invested mostly in local, corrupt elites and in any case does not contribute to lasting structural change. Individual aid operations, such as after the earthquake in Haiti in 2010, are invariably followed by reports on how spontaneously collected funds did not reach those for whom it was intended, or were simply not used. Again and again, the spontaneous, humanitarian impulse and the expectation this entails is followed by the

picture of a complex reality in which goodwill seemingly loses out to local factors. Sometimes the reality of a situation is almost unbearable, for instance when it is established that famine in parts of Africa is not the result of climatic conditions but the reign of terror inflicted by warring local rulers.

Is that the entire story? Other motives and emotions also seem to play a role in the negative response to development cooperation. Here again, there is opposition to the advocates and representatives. Assumptions that were long considered self-evident are now being questioned, opinions that seemed to have a wide basis of support are now regarded as being imposed by a leftist elite which, in its complacent idealism, seems to have drifted far from reality.

This elite is criticised for not seeing, or not wanting to see, that all these wonderful ideas amount to little in the real world, despite all the evidence in retrospect. Evidently the intention is given more weight than the result. The inhabitants of the countries that receive aid are no longer seen as innocent victims but as co-responsible.

Moreover – and this emotion plays a role in the resistance against all the above issues – people consider the attention for and interference with “poor countries” as a form of denial of “our own people”. Taxpayers feel that they are paying for other people whilst they themselves are increasingly being used and ignored.

From this perspective, multiculturalism as an ideology, the subsidizing of art and nature, and development cooperation are seen as expressions of misplaced superiority, as means by which a privileged class can feel superior to others at the expense of the “common citizen”. The shocked indignation of the elite at the enthusiasm with which these cuts are greeted only reinforces that sentiment, and loudly proclaiming a lack of understanding at this response increases polarisation. It is not so much about the issue itself – art, development cooperation, the right of minorities to live in freedom – but much more a social battle in which the governing elite in particular comes under attack and in turn, retaliates with equal force. It is the identification of that elite class with these lofty and idealistic causes that incites aggression – not so much the ideal itself should be punished, but rather the lack of realism – and idealism as a form of snobbery. The elite class, it is felt, professes ideals in order to feel superior and has become blind to the inadequate implementation of these ideals. They also partake in a type of cosseted exoticism whilst the needs of ordinary citizens at home are grossly neglected.

Such accusations are remarkably similar to the vanity Naipaul lectured on so vehemently in our conversation fifteen years ago. Yet the focus has shifted radically in that time. Whilst Naipaul felt that the complacency of Western aid workers belittled Africa first and foremost, a growing number of people are no longer interested in Africa as such. To many people’s surprise, citizens of Western countries themselves feel increasingly belittled; it is not Africans who suffer from Western arrogance, but the common man in the West. Not surprisingly, the new mantra of populist politicians in discussions on art subsidies, immigration and European integration is: “We didn’t ask for this.” Or: “... without us being asked.” The underlying sentiment is that these things were imposed, that for many years they have had to accept them against their will. It seems to them the time has come to settle the account, to dispense with the costly hobbies of misguided idealists and arrogant administrators who supposedly want to improve things for the world but not for their “own people”.

### 3

At one of the many meetings on European integration held during recent years I heard the British diplomat Robert Cooper (currently Counsellor in the European External Action Service and member of the European Council on Foreign Relations) comment that the anti-European sentiment among the populace of European states should not be taken too seriously. The unification of Europe, in Cooper’s view, has been an elitist project from the outset. Like space exploration, he added on a mildly ironic note.

It was therefore best to simply ignore the *No* vote on the European Constitution by several member states midway through the first decade of the 21st century: in hindsight, angry citizens would discover for themselves that they were far better off in the European Union.

It was a private meeting, but Cooper's words would have been grist to the mill of the so-called Euro-sceptics – who had not been invited. It confirmed their worst suspicions: here was an administrative elite with a barely-concealed disdain for their own people because they supposedly do not know what is good for them.

Of all the areas in which there is a strong backlash against the ideals and assumptions that seemed undisputed after World War II, that of the European project is the most remarkable. Here too, a radical change seems to have taken place. Not so long ago the complaint by champions of European unification was that “Europe” did not evoke strong emotions among citizens – not even in election time – whereas today, there is passionate emotion, albeit a negative one. Until recently, Euro scepticism was considered to be one of those mildly eccentric, especially typically British phenomena on the outskirts of international politics; today, that scepticism is everywhere – not just among the supporters of populist parties.

In some radical right-wing circles, the paranoia that was previously focused on the alleged expansionism of Islam (“Eurabia”) has shifted to the threat of so-called Brussels technocrats who are pursuing nothing less than a totalitarian state (“EUSSR”). This underlying anger can be traced back to the same sentiment: own people and culture being threatened by outside, totalitarian forces which should be fought with the same ruthlessness as fascism and communism before.

Here again, the criticism is directed against the administrative elite, who supposedly facilitate these menacing forces. They do it out of weakness, it is alleged, or worse – out of conviction. They are “cultural Marxists” who engage in fatal relativism of “our values” in the light of encroaching Islam. Likewise, nowadays it is the “Europhiles” who squander “national sovereignty” in exchange for “Brussels decrees”.

These anti-European attacks are generally met with annoyed incredulity. The administrative elite that is committed to project Europe is willing to explain it one more time, to show that along with peace Europe has also brought much economic prosperity to its member states. “We must explain it even better,” is the slightly desperate call at all meetings where scepticism towards the European project is discussed. The idea is to use the voice of reason as an antidote to the voice of emotion. There is always the hope that opponents can be persuaded through reasoning and that statistical lists and graphs will calm tempers.

Where we often fail is in understanding the nature of the new rebellion. Too often the criticism is passed off as vague regurgitations which will eventually somehow disappear as they lack any reasonable basis. The overwrought rhetoric of the attacks not only invokes aversion but also incomprehension, since the language used is malicious, cynical and offensive. How is it possible that assumptions and ideals which were matter-of-course not so long ago are now contested as if they were humiliating decrees? Why are substantial groups of citizens now seemingly opposed to intangible values such as compassion, solidarity and concern for future generations? Rather than on reforming and improving, the emphasis has come to lie on dismantling and abolishing. Critical, protesting voices are ostensibly regarded as further evidence of a misplaced sense of superiority.

If there is any debate at all, it is one between the deaf. The different issues – the debate on development cooperation, Europe, the arts, nature – are usually considered separate phenomena. The representatives of the agencies concerned are usually too busy with their own problems to be engaged with the causes of the others. The representatives of environmental organisations have little attention for the reaction against the European project, and the advocates of further European integration are not inclined to analyse the erosion of art grants in great depth.

I believe that this is unwise. I think it is extremely useful to juxtapose the various ongoing debates as much as possible and to consider them the symptoms of a single phenomenon. This way it will be easier to get to the core of the negative response.

## 4

It is no coincidence that concern for the environment, the arts, and the economic and social development of poor countries has become the target of critics at more or less the same time. Together with the great twentieth-century emancipation movements, these are the pillars of what I call postwar humanism. They are rooted in a humanistic mission characterised by three motivational incentives. The key concept is empathy. First, self-interest should be subordinate to a shared, common interest. The community of mankind should be continually expanded, precisely in the name of a shared humanity.

Second, the emphasis on one's "own" kind – race, culture, nationality – which had led to such horrible abuses in the first half of the twentieth century had to be eliminated as much as possible. In a community of mankind people are bound by their humanity; every other distinction is an illusion – and usually a dangerous illusion.

Third, concern for one's own small world – family, village, religious community, district – had to go hand in hand with an engagement that extended far beyond those boundaries. This often took abstract forms: an individual was also expected to be responsible for the planet and to provide for subsequent generations.

For a long time the ideals underlying this mission seemed self evident. When I was growing up – in the 1970s – they were part of a progressive world view which, in the Netherlands at least, encountered little resistance. Without giving the matter too much thought, it was generally assumed that society would be multicultural as well as pluralistic – "own" would accommodate "other". It was also assumed that national sentiment would give way to a sense of European solidarity, but without the sharp edges of classical nationalism.

People also envisioned a society increasingly organised on rational grounds; faith would play an increasingly smaller role and would, at some point, disappear altogether. Men and women would be equal and cultural minorities could claim their rightful place in society.

What humanism aspired to was a constant broadening of empathy and solidarity, empathy with others, even if they did not traditionally form part of the community, even if they lived on the other side of the world. Empathy with the world itself, in the present and in the future. Solidarity with the victims of atrocities inflicted by others, solidarity with the poor, the dispossessed, the disadvantaged, the sick and the hungry, the mentally disabled.

In the years that I was growing up many of these ideals were embodied in organisations and institutions, often supported by the government. The liberation movements of women, blacks and gays became mainstream and part of government policy. The élan of the protest movement was slowly but surely being cast in policy documents and procedural guidelines. Nature conservation was also a priority for the government, as was stimulating new art forms.

One could argue that the more firmly the idealism following World War II, as well as avant-gardism, was embraced the more it was formalised and bureaucratised. In other words, the expansion of empathy expected from individuals after the horrors of World War II gradually became formalised in institutions which no longer seemed to need the individual. Where one gap had to be bridged – the gap between own and other, the gap between man and nature, the gap between one's own perception of the world and the unknown world of the other, the gap between the present and the future – a new gap was being created. The humanist movement was becoming more and more formalised in statutes, reports and conferences. In turn, this gave rise to a specialised group of administrators, which again created a gap – the gap between citizens and an elite of initiates.

It was a knife that cut both ways: over time, this latest development undermined both the support in the countries from which these organisations were working and the countries in which they operated. Correspondents like the Brit Jason Burke (The Observer) and the American David Rieff, two men with extensive experience in war zones, have in recent years faulted the behaviour of aid organisations during the civil war in Yugoslavia and the occupation of Afghanistan. The organisations failed to secure local

support in those hotbeds, and besides providing practical aid they also propagated a world view in a manner perceived by the local population as arrogant and authoritarian. In these specific cases the shared belief in the need for humanitarian intervention by military means led to the NGOs being seen as instruments of the occupying powers. In the 1990s and in the decade that followed, the humanitarian impulse, rooted in the ideals of the Enlightenment, acquired messianic and narcissistic overtones; they knew what was good for the world and seemed to agree that if necessary, force should be used to enforce these ideals. Often, local conditions and cultural sensitivities were ignored and the distance between privileged aid workers and the local population widened rather than narrowed.

At the same time a critical discourse was unfolding worldwide which was increasingly questioning the universal claims of humanism – and which seemed to confirm Naipaul in his vehement accusation of vanity. Humanism has been influenced predominantly by the Enlightenment – in essence a Western concept – and has been propagated from the West, even though this was often claimed not to be the case. History proved that humanism often had a very limited idea of humanity and assigned entire categories of people a subordinate or even no place. Lofty ideals could very well go hand in hand with barbaric behaviour – Joseph Conrad's Mr Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* is a good example: a man who combines his lofty ideal of civilization with ruthless cruelty.

In the eyes of many people who were confronted with Western humanism, it seemed one had to sign the Statute in order to become a member, and even then it was debatable whether you really belonged. Moreover, it was precisely this universal claim of humanism that made it difficult to be embedded in local situations. Culture, a sense of local traditions, group and tribe loyalties and affinities were, in the eyes of Enlightenment adepts, part of the Counter-Enlightenment and had to make way for a sense of shared humanity based on man as an individual.

Groups that almost always adhered to (often religious) ideas and customs that were opposed to the ideals of the Enlightenment were therefore seen as an obstacle rather than as a means to provide a local basis of support for those ideals.

## 5

For a considerable time it had been felt that an undesirable distance had grown between the empathy being asked of citizens in the West and the purpose of this empathy. In that time, citizens in the West had also become more and more individualised. A citizen was constantly told that he could make his own world. On the one hand he was an individual, and on the other hand he had the whole world at his disposal. He was asked to support a community of people, but he himself had increasingly less sense of belonging to a community. It mattered less and less what the world looked like – it was about how he *experienced* the world. The new citizen-consumer lived in a *personal* world in which he could decide for himself what he considered important.

Distant engagement with others through official organisations was perceived as abstract and lifeless. Whereas the Live Aid concert in 1985 raised money to feed the world, the follow-up in 2005, entitled Live 8, only urged people to let the G8 know that they should meet their obligations to developing countries. For concert goers and television viewers it was mainly about awareness – awareness of what was happening in poor countries and an appeal to a collective sense of responsibility. Demonstrating engagement through a bank number was seen as misguided charity – and moreover it was now known that much of the money raised through Live Aid had ended up in the wrong hands. Evidently, the world had not improved much in twenty years' time. Tellingly, the new goal was to awaken people from their solipsism and give them a glimpse of another world – through performances by their favourite artists. It was hardly noticed that this attitude entailed the danger of designating engagement as part of a lifestyle and thus only requiring symbolic acts.

The rise of “celebrity engagement” that started in the 1980s can be seen as an attempt to bridge the gap between citizens and the world. Celebrity culture could bridge the gap between the citizen-consumer who was trapped in his comfortable prosperity and serious issues that begged attention. At all levels, organisations that could not or struggled to put their cause in the limelight deployed celebrities to engage citizens. The fact that a star put his or her name to a particular cause, or called attention to what risked being forgotten, lent an aura of glamour to engagement – who didn’t want to participate if stellar names like Madonna, George Clooney, Naomi Campbell, Katja Schuurmans were also dedicated to the cause? At the same time it became clear that those who were trapped in a celebrity bubble could escape the emptiness of their existence by connecting with real misery elsewhere in the world – the celebrity was a compassionate person who was not removed from the world and who acquired authenticity by engaging with the poor and the hungry. As sincere as this form of engagement may be, it is always secondary to the culture of fame. The gap between the individual citizen and the cause he is supposed to feel engaged with is deceptively narrowed; he is looking at the cause through the prism of celebrity culture. In effect, the distance is growing rather than diminishing – as soon as the celebrity withdraws from the cause, the engagement disappears.

Awareness has proven to be an unstable form of engagement. One may wonder whether a concert like Live 8 has increased scepticism about the usefulness of development cooperation rather than diminish it.

Overall, it can be asserted that in recent years attempts have been made to make classical humanist engagement a part of contemporary consumer society. What was once a seemingly insurmountable contradiction – postwar humanism demanded empathy for “the other” – was no longer perceived as such by some advocates of practical idealism. You no longer had to step outside your own world to do something for the rest of the world – you simply made the rest of the world part of your perception of the world. This shift was presented as a generational issue; engagement in the 1960s was characterised by imaginary dreams of revolt and revolution, for which personal sacrifices had to be made, whereas the practical idealist was much more modest and realistic. Changing the world for good and all was not possible, but at least you could contribute your bit, especially if you did that with several million others. “We can party *and* improve the world”, was the title of an article in NRC Handelsblad a few years ago, which assured that you were free to fly to faraway places as long as you paid for the planting of trees to offset CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. You could outsource your engagement; in fact, it was probably more effective to do so.

This kind of engagement soon garnered scepticism, however, since it ultimately proved highly non-committal. Moreover, planting trees to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions proved not as easy and efficient as it seemed. But at another, less casual level the consumer society proved well suited to certain forms of engagement: green energy, solar panels on the roofs of homes, fair trade coffee and chocolate, responsibly caught fish and an FSC certificate for tropical hardwood floors.

As difficult as it is to measure the effect of these forms of engagement – sense and nonsense are often difficult to distinguish, precisely because of the commercial interests at stake – they allow individuals to give shape in a practical way to a sense of responsibility that extends beyond their own circle. This kind of engagement, which is individual and collective at the same time, somewhat diminishes the gap between ideal and real.

The fact remains that these initiatives are all consumption oriented and do not assume behavioural change: you’re still doing what you’ve always done, but now you’re doing it responsibly.

## 6

When analysing the opposition to the tenets of postwar humanism, the nature of the problem soon becomes clear: distance, resulting in alienation. Slowly but surely, the support for humanistic idealism has crumbled. That idealism has been bureaucratised and placed in the hands of a ruling elite which, predictably, professes those ideals but seems no longer concerned about how they should be put into practice in a

complex reality. Hence opponents constantly emphasise that they are not against the cause itself, but the way in which it is represented.

In other words: I'm not against Europe, but against the way Europe behaves; I'm not against art, but against the current system of art subsidies; I'm not against development cooperation, but it doesn't work.

Such arguments have been repeated so often and so indiscriminately in discussions on these issues that they have become mantra-like. Undoubtedly there is a grain of truth in them – it is not difficult to find practical examples that demonstrate this – but what is actually being expressed is a deeper crisis. Empathy with others as instructed by humanism is not only considered false – a version of Naipaul's scorn for doctors holding babies on the news – but also as hostile, something that must be challenged.

By constantly emphasising the other, the self-transcending and the lofty, people felt that their own values were under threat. The populist movements that emerged throughout the Western world over the past decade are a reaction to the dilution and fragmentation of the concept of community by the process of globalisation, of which immigration is one aspect. Postwar humanism's mandatory articles of faith, which emphasise a moral duty to identify with the other, seem only to promote the disintegration of community and in doing so incite further distrust and aggression. No longer are they seen as marks of civilization, but as forces that weaken the bond between the individual and society; to win the world, it seems, one must lose oneself.

Although the arguments put forward are usually about money, inappropriately spent and wasted, the underlying emotions have little or nothing to do with money. Contemporary populists often talk about wasted money, but the emotion they are really exploiting is a sense of being sold short – even more than the fear of the evil outside world so often cited, for instance in books like *The Fearful Netherlands (Het bange Nederland)*. Many people feel that they are being overlooked, that others – in the name of humanistic and humanitarian principles – count for more than they do, that only their wallets are interesting, that the pillars of their world – culture, community, small scale – are being taken from them in the name of abstract, lofty principles.

No wonder that extremists who spawn this line of thought, such as the ideologically motivated mass-murderer Anders Breivik in Norway, lose themselves in romantic fantasies about crusaders who protect their people against subversive influences from outside by attacking a treacherous elite that is squandering native (Western) values in the name of enlightened, humanist fallacies.

As detrimental and hysterical as this line of thinking may be, it points to the fact that postwar humanism is finding itself increasingly on less solid ground: the views of extremists, albeit in a moderate form, are shared by many more people.

The criticism by the left of the excesses of neoliberalism can be partly traced to this cultural malaise. When a factory in a town like Oss is closed down because workers in South Korea are cheaper, a sense of community is also broken down – not only are the dismissed workers losing their jobs, but their small world is being trampled by a big, insensitive world. Again, a sense of "ownness" is being attacked by hostile forces.

You could say that humanism has become lazy, lazy and jaded – everyone knows it is good, so why explain it again? Idealism works better when it is well organised, so it is best left to the experts. It is tiring and quite difficult to reformulate principles in a society that is perceived increasingly less as a society (e.g. the difficulty in recent years of getting to terms with the concept of *citizenship*), so let us focus instead on practical, everyday matters – at least that's tangible. And thus the gap between the individual and the world with which he should engage widens.

## 7

It is time to put aside the last remnants of outrage at the insensitivity and callousness of the indiscriminate counter-voices and look for ways that will bridge this gap.

The key word is engagement: you cannot demand solidarity of people if you do not give them responsibility. You cannot draw attention to the big world when the little world in which most people live is bluntly ignored. The small world and the big world must be reconnected, both idealistically and practically, so that people realise that the two are not separate, even if this is what they might prefer. That requires real engagement, for each project, by giver and receiver; people who are directly engaged see difficult dilemmas and disappointments as challenges rather than as abstract forces that prove that “it doesn’t make any difference anyway.”

And above all, it is necessary for people to be reminded that humanism is not a science, nor a collection of doctrines to be cast into a manifesto which only needs to be signed.

Humanism – and this is why there is always so much discussion about the meaning of the term – is above all an attitude, the desire of man to be in command of his own nature, to allow his capability for empathy to override his tendency to barbarism.

This aim must be constantly redefined and re-embedded in a perpetually changing society. When the language of humanism becomes hackneyed, new words must be sought. When an ideal is bureaucratized, it must be stripped of memorandum and policy jargon. When the gap becomes too wide, true contact must be restored.

Humanism, like any other belief system, carries the danger of complacency and arrogance – blind faith in so-called humanitarian/military intervention in recent years, the idea that democratic rule can be enforced with violence, is a good example of this.

Contemporary humanism should show that “own” does not have to be at odds with “other”, that the small world is not separate from the world at large, that engagement is not an abstract concept that can only be achieved in a bureaucratic way or through a form of entertainment. Contemporary humanism should show that it is possible – difficult but possible – for individuals to maintain a dynamic relationship with the world around them without being swept away by that world.

## **About the author**

Bas Heijne (1960) is a writer, translator and essayist. He studied English language and literature at the University of Amsterdam and translated works from Evelyn Waugh, E.M. Forster and Joseph Conrad. In 1983, he debuted with the novel *Laatste woorden* ('Last words'), after which he started writing travelogues for Dutch magazine *De Tijd*. Since 1992, Heijne works as an editor for the daily newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, writing a (two-)weekly column since 2001. In 2011, Heijne gave the annual Socrates Lecture organised by the Dutch Humanist Association, titled 'Militant Humanism'. In his publications, Heijne writes on Dutch identity and the relationship between politics and society. In his latest book, *Moeten wij van elkaar houden?* ('Must we love each other?'), he unravels contemporary populism, circling around issues of globalization, localization and identity politics.

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