Thoughts on the End of Reason, Idealism, and Critical Thinking

A Reflection on the State of Global Political Discourse

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This essay is inspired by my observations of the shifting global geopolitical tides: Russia-Ukraine; the genocide in Palestine; China-Taiwan; Trump's trade war with the world; Latin America's shift to the right once again; the rightward shift in Western Europe; the ANC's difficulty in shaking the service delivery curse; the claims to sovereignty in the Sahel region of Africa; and the gradual shift from the Western domination of global politics to a more balanced global order with the economic emergence of the BRICS alliance. When such seismic shifts occur, entire nations and alliances may be destabilised and react to the loss of power in unpredictable ways as the shift from reason to populism demonstrates.

The 21st century is a paradox of progress and regression. While humanity has achieved remarkable feats in technology, science, and connectivity, we are simultaneously witnessing the erosion of reason, idealism, and critical thinking — the very foundations of our collective advancement. The re-election of Donald Trump in the United States, the rise of right-wing populism in Europe, the glorification of war over peace, the ascendancy of narcissism in political discourse, and the misinterpretation of cultural differences as governance failures all point to a deeper crisis. This is not merely a political or social issue but a philosophical one, rooted in our collective failure to uphold the values that have historically guided human progress. To understand this crisis, we must examine its manifestations, their implications, and the philosophical foundations that can help us reclaim a path toward a better world.

The rise of populism, exemplified by figures like Donald Trump in the United States of America, Georgia Meloni in Italy, Javier Milei in Argentina, and Viktor Orban in Hungary and right-wing movements across Europe, is often framed as a rebellion against entrenched elites. Populist leaders position themselves as champions of the "common people", tapping into legitimate grievances about economic inequality, cultural displacement, and political disenfranchisement. Yet, while populism gives voice to the marginalized, it often does so at the expense of reasoned discourse.

Populist rhetoric thrives on emotional appeals, misinformation, and divisive narratives, creating an "us vs. them" dichotomy that polarizes societies and undermines the possibility of constructive dialogue. This erosion of reason is not incidental but deliberate, as populist leaders often reject expertise and evidence in favour of simplistic solutions and inflammatory rhetoric. The result is a political landscape where critical thinking is side-lined, and governance becomes reactive rather than visionary.

Yet, amid these unprecedented advancements, there is a disturbing erosion of reason, critical thinking, and idealism — the very pillars that once guided human progress.

This decline in reasoned discourse is mirrored in our global approach to war and peace. History and media are saturated with narratives of conflict, heroism, and conquest, while the mechanisms of peacebuilding are often relegated to the margins. War is framed as inevitable, even noble, while peace is dismissed as passive or utopian. This imbalance skews public perception and policy priorities, diverting resources from diplomacy and conflict prevention to military spending and preparation for war.

Yet, the history of peace is no less significant than the history of war. From the Treaty of Westphalia[1] to the Treaty of Shimonoseki[2] to the post-World War II international order, humanity has demonstrated the capacity to build systems of cooperation and coexistence. The challenge lies in shifting our collective imagination — from glorifying the drama of conflict to valuing the quiet, sustained work of peacebuilding. This requires not only a reorientation of priorities but also a deeper commitment to critical thinking, empathy, and long-term planning.

Nowhere is this contradiction more evident than in the proliferation of misinformation, where the same social media that connects us has also become a breeding ground for conspiracy theories and falsehoods. Movements like QAnon have attracted millions, weaving baseless narratives that warp perceptions of reality. The COVID-19 pandemic became a crucible for this crisis of reason, with social media amplifying both life-saving information and dangerous myths in equal measure. Instead of uniting against a common threat, societies fractured along lines of belief in science versus conspiracy.

One of the most troubling manifestations of this crisis is the resurgence of the "Great Replacement" conspiracy theory — an idea falsely claiming that white populations are being systematically replaced. Once confined to the fringes of extremist thought, this narrative has found a new platform among right-wing circles, with public figures like Donald Trump, Elon Musk and Tucker Carlson either promoting or failing to denounce it. Musk's Grok AI model recently became embroiled in controversy when it was discovered that it had initially been manipulated to reflect that a "white genocide" was taking place in South Africa, a result of deliberate programming, ostensibly against the policy of its creators, xAI.

Not so coincidentally, this is a view widely promoted by Elon Musk, who was born in South Africa and spent a significant part of his formative years in apartheid-era South Africa. Only after significant backlash and reprogramming did Grok's outputs more accurately reflect the truth — that the "white genocide in South Africa" narrative is a baseless conspiracy theory with no factual grounding.

Such manipulations of reason are not new. Even the Enlightenment, celebrated as the age of reason, harboured its own

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[1] The Treaty of Westphalia, signed in 1648, marked the end of the Thirty Years' War in the Holy Roman Empire and the Eighty Years' War between Spain and the Dutch Republic. It was a series of treaties negotiated in the cities of Münster and Osnabrück, bringing peace to much of Europe after decades of devastating conflict. This treaty is often credited with laying the foundation for modern international relations, introducing the concept of state sovereignty, where nations could govern themselves without external interference. It also reshaped territorial boundaries and religious freedoms across Europe.

[2] This treaty ended the First Sino-Japanese War between China and Japan. While it resulted in territorial changes, it also influenced diplomatic relations in East Asia and set the stage for future negotiations on sovereignty and peacebuilding.

contradictions. Immanuel Kant, one of the era's most consequential philosophers, laid the foundation for universal ethics and human dignity. His Categorical Imperative[3] is a guiding principle in moral philosophy. Yet, Kant also advanced pseudoscientific theories of race, classifying humanity into a hierarchy that placed white Europeans at the top and relegated other races to inferior categories. His ideas, rooted in racial prejudice, justified European superiority — an intellectual contradiction that echoes in the 21st century's struggles with racism and xenophobia.

Kant's racist theories influenced other Enlightenment thinkers and laid an intellectual foundation for European racial superiority theories in the 19th century. Despite his enormous contributions to philosophy in areas like epistemology, ethics, and metaphysics, his racist views have led to significant re-evaluation of his legacy.

Gustave Le Bon's insights in *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* offer further understanding of how such dangerous ideas spread. Le Bon argued that crowds are driven by emotion rather than reason, easily manipulated by charismatic leaders who bypass critical thinking and appeal directly to base instincts. This understanding is disturbingly relevant today, where populists like Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, and Viktor Orbán masterfully manipulate mass emotions through social media and mass gatherings, using fear and resentment as political tools.

The glorification of war over peace has further darkened this era. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, rationalized by historical grievances, starkly illustrates how militarism can be cloaked in narratives of anticipatory defence and national security. But this militarism did not emerge in isolation. NATO's eastward expansion, despite assurances given to Russia at the end of the Cold War that such expansion would not occur, and the United States' pursuit of strategic dominance in Europe, fuelled Russian perceptions of an existential threat. The West's duplicity and pursuit of military supremacy thus set the stage for this violent confrontation.

Yet, even as the Western world condemns one conflict, it allows another to unfold with impunity in the Palestinian territories. The ongoing tragedy faced by Palestinians — deemed a probable genocide by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and declared a genocide by several reputable international organizations and nations — unfolds under the ironclad emotional distance of leaders like Joe Biden, Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu and Elon Musk. In the face of international pleas, these leaders maintain their course, shielded by narratives of security and anti-terrorism. Despite overwhelming evidence of civilian suffering and the ICJ's preliminary opinion ordering Israel to cease its offensive, the neoconservative mindset that dominates their approach remains unmoved, exposing the moral contradiction of an era that claims to champion human rights.

The rise of narcissism in political discourse compounds this crisis. Leaders who focus more on personal adulation than on public service have transformed politics into a spectacle of personalities rather than a forum for ideas. Donald Trump's political style, with its emphasis on self-promotion, personal vendettas, and a disregard for established norms, is emblematic of this shift. As the politics of substance gives way

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[3] At its core, the Categorical Imperative insists that any action should be one that could be universally applied. In other words, before making a decision, one should ask: *What if everyone did this?* If the action leads to contradictions or chaos, then it cannot be considered morally sound. For example, if lying were universally accepted, trust would collapse, making honest communication impossible — thus, lying is always wrong.

to the politics of spectacle, reasoned debate is being replaced by emotional rhetoric.

In an age dominated by social media, where self-promotion and instant gratification are rewarded, and narcissistic traits — such as a hunger for admiration, a lack of empathy, and a disregard for facts — have become increasingly prevalent in leadership. Narcissistic leaders prioritize personal image over collective well-being, short-term gains over long-term stability, and divisive rhetoric over inclusive dialogue. While their charisma can mobilize support and disrupt stagnant systems, their focus on self-interest often leads to governance that is erratic, polarizing, and ultimately unsustainable. The degradation of political discourse under narcissistic leadership is not merely a failure of character but a failure of culture — one that prioritizes individualism over community and spectacle over substance.

This cultural shift is also evident in the way we perceive and judge governance models outside the Western liberal democratic tradition. The relentless promotion of liberal democracy as a universal ideal has often led to the dismissal of alternative systems as "authoritarian" or "backward." Yet, governance models that prioritize community, stability, or tradition may be more culturally relevant and effective in certain contexts.

For example, the emphasis on social harmony in some East Asian systems or the communal decision-making processes in many African societies reflects values that are deeply rooted in their cultural and historical contexts. The failure to appreciate these differences has fuelled resentment and resistance, particularly in regions where Western interventions have been perceived as arrogant or exploitative. A more pluralistic approach, as advocated by thinkers like Amartya Sen, would recognize the value of diverse governance models while promoting dialogue and mutual understanding.

Misinterpretations of cultural differences have also contributed to governance failures. In the Middle East, Western perspectives often reduce complex socio-political landscapes to simplistic notions of authoritarianism, disregarding the historical and cultural contexts that shape these societies. The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, predicated on a revenge narrative for the events of 9/11 and a flawed understanding of local dynamics, led to long-term instability in Iraq rather than the promised establishment of democracy. The same playbook was employed in the total destruction of the Libyan state in 2011 when they tried unsuccessfully to erase an idea by assassinating Muamar Gaddafi.

These examples reflect a broader crisis in thought and values, one that threatens to undermine the very progress our technological era promises. This essay explores these phenomena, their implications for the trajectory of the Western world and the broader Global South, and the philosophical foundations of reason that must be reclaimed to envision a better future.

The Rise of Populism and the Erosion of Reason

The re-election of Donald Trump in the United States and the shift toward right-wing politics in Europe signify a profound transformation in political discourse. Populist leaders have capitalized on fear, misinformation, and identity politics, often bypassing reasoned debate and critical analysis. Political analyst Yascha Mounk argues in *The People vs. Democracy* that the rise of populism reflects a growing disillusionment with liberal democracy, fuelled by economic inequality, cultural anxiety, and a sense of disenfranchisement.

However, this shift also reveals a deeper crisis: the erosion of reason in public discourse. Populist leaders often rely on emotional appeals, simplistic solutions, and the rejection of expertise, undermining the Enlightenment ideals of rationality and

evidence-based decision-making. Philosopher Jürgen Habermas warned of this danger in his work on the "public sphere", emphasizing the need for reasoned dialogue as the foundation of democratic governance. The current political climate, however, suggests a retreat from these ideals, with profound consequences for the future of democracy.

The rise of populism in South Africa has been marked by a surge in anti-immigrant sentiment, with political figures like Gayton McKenzie leveraging these feelings to gain support. McKenzie, leader of the Patriotic Alliance (PA), has positioned himself as a champion of the marginalized, particularly within the so-called "Coloured" community, advocating for stringent immigration policies and mass deportations of undocumented migrants. His rhetoric often blames immigrants for the country's socio-economic challenges, including unemployment and crime, resonating with voters disillusioned by the government's failure to address these issues effectively.

McKenzie's populist approach extends beyond immigration. He has expressed pro-Israel sentiments, criticizing the ruling African National Congress (ANC) for prioritizing international issues over domestic concerns. This stance appeals to certain segments of the South African electorate and aligns with broader global populist trends that favour nationalist policies. Critics argue that such positions are strategic, aiming to secure financial backing from affluent sectors of society and to distract from systemic issues like economic inequality and governance failures. By capitalizing on public frustration and redirecting blame towards immigrants and foreign policy stances, McKenzie's brand of populism underscores the complexities and dangers of simplistic solutions to deep-rooted national problems.

War, Peace, and the Failure of Critical Thinking

The global discourse on war and peace further illustrates the decline of critical thinking. While history is often dominated by narratives of conflict and conquest, there is a glaring lack of emphasis on the mechanisms of peacebuilding. As historian Yuval Noah Harari notes in *Sapiens*, humanity has the capacity to create shared myths — whether religions, nations, or ideologies — that can unite people across cultural divides. Yet, the glorification of war overshadows the equally important history of peace, cooperation, and diplomacy.

This imbalance reflects a broader failure to engage critically with global issues. Instead of analysing the root causes of conflict and exploring sustainable solutions, public discourse often devolves into binary oppositions: *us vs. them*, *good vs. evil*. This lack of nuance stifles meaningful dialogue and perpetuates cycles of violence. Philosopher Immanuel Kant, in his essay *Perpetual Peace*, envisioned a world governed by reason and international cooperation. Today, however, the pursuit of such ideals seems increasingly distant.

Narcissism and the Degradation of Political Discourse

The rise of narcissism in political discourse further exacerbates the crisis of reason. Social media, with its emphasis on self-promotion and instant gratification, has created a culture of individualism and superficiality. As sociologist Christopher Lasch predicted in *The Culture of Narcissism*, this trend has profound implications for democracy, as it prioritizes personal image over collective well-being.

Political leaders who embody narcissistic traits — such as a lack of empathy, a hunger for admiration, and a disregard for facts — have gained prominence, further eroding the quality of public discourse. This phenomenon is not limited to any one country or ideology; it is a global trend that

undermines the principles of accountability, transparency, and reasoned debate.

Cultural Differences and the Pitfalls of Governance Models

The Western world's relentless promotion of liberal democracy as the universal ideal has often led to the misinterpretation of cultural differences as governance failures. Political systems that diverge from the Western model are frequently labelled as "authoritarian" or "dictatorial," without a nuanced understanding of their historical, cultural, and social contexts.

In *The Idea of Justice*, Nobel prize-winning economist and philosopher Amartya Sen, argues for a pluralistic approach to governance, recognizing that different societies may prioritize different values — such as community over individualism or stability over freedom. The failure to appreciate these differences has fuelled resentment and resistance, particularly in regions where Western interventions have been perceived as arrogant or exploitative.

The Philosophical Foundations of Reason

At the heart of these crises lies a fundamental question: What is the role of reason in human existence? From Aristotle's emphasis on logic to Kant's categorical imperative, reason has long been regarded as the defining characteristic of humanity. It is the tool through which we seek truth, resolve conflicts, and envision a better future.

However, as philosopher Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno warned in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, reason can also be corrupted, leading to domination and oppression. The challenge, then, is to reclaim reason as a force for liberation and progress toward a shared future, rather than a weapon of division and control.

Toward a New Paradigm: Thinking Differently for a Better World

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To address these challenges, we must rethink our approach to global issues. This begins with education systems that prioritize critical thinking, media literacy, and the ability to engage with diverse perspectives. It requires a political culture that values dialogue over division, collaboration over confrontation, and long-term planning over short-term gains. It demands a global perspective that respects cultural differences while seeking common ground. And it calls for a reimagining of peace — not as the absence of war but as the presence of justice, equity, and mutual understanding.

To address these challenges, we must rethink our approach to global issues. This requires:

1. *Reviving Critical Thinking*: Education systems must prioritize critical thinking, media literacy, and the ability to engage with diverse perspectives.

2. *Promoting Dialogue Over Division*: As philosopher Hannah Arendt argued in

The Human Condition, meaningful dialogue is essential for understanding and co-existence.

3. *Embracing Pluralism*: Recognizing that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to governance, we must respect cultural differences and seek common ground.

4. *Reimagining Peace*: Instead of glorifying war, we must invest in peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and the study of cooperation.

Philosophers like John Rawls, with his concept of the "veil of ignorance"[4], and sociologists like Zygmunt Bauman[5], with his insights on "liquid modernity", have offered frameworks for creating a more just and peaceful world. Their ideas remind us that reason, idealism, and critical thinking are not relics of the past but essential tools for navigating the challenges of the present and future.

The end of reason, idealism, and critical thinking is not an inevitability but a consequence of choices — choices to prioritize emotion over evidence, individualism over community, and division over dialogue. To reverse this trend, we must recommit to the values that have historically guided human progress. By doing so, we can envision a world that is not only more peaceful but also more just, more inclusive, and more humane. The task is enormous, but the stakes could not be higher. As Kant famously wrote in *Idea of a Universal History on a Cosmopolitical Plan*, "*Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made.*"

Yet, it is through reason and collective effort that we can aspire to create a better world.

The path forward is neither simple nor easy. It requires a fundamental shift in how we think about ourselves, our societies, and our world. Yet, the stakes could not be higher. As Kant famously wrote, "Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made." Yet, it is through reason, empathy, and collective effort that we can aspire to build a better world — one that honours the complexity of human experience and the possibility of progress.

The end of reason, idealism, and critical thinking is not an inevitability but a choice. And it is a choice we must urgently reconsider.

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[4] John Rawls' *Veil of Ignorance* is a thought experiment designed to ensure fairness in society. It suggests that when designing social rules, individuals should imagine themselves in an "original position" where they have no knowledge of their own race, gender, wealth, or social status. This prevents bias and encourages the creation of just policies that benefit everyone, especially the most disadvantaged. By removing personal interests, Rawls argues that people would choose principles that promote equal rights, fair opportunities, and protections for the least advantaged. His theory has influenced modern discussions on justice, democracy, and ethical governance.

[5] Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* explores the shift from a structured, stable society to one characterized by constant change, uncertainty, and fluidity. Unlike the "solid" modernity of the past— where institutions, identities, and social roles were more fixed — *liquid modernity* describes a world where traditional structures dissolve, leaving individuals to navigate an unpredictable landscape. Bauman argues that in this era, people experience greater freedom, but also insecurity, as relationships, careers, and identities become more transient. Consumerism, globalization, and technological advancements accelerate this instability, making adaptability a key survival skill.