

NOT JUST DEFENSE: THE POWER OF CULTURE FOR EUROPE'S FUTURE

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Three decades after the Maastricht Treaty, the world is departing from the post-Cold War liberal internationalism that paved the way for the foundation of the EU. The US-led liberal order is fractured, globalisation driven by free trade and markets contested, neoliberalism has weakened democracy and fuelled inequalities, and war in Ukraine threatens the principles of national sovereignty and international law. Meanwhile, the AI revolution and the climate emergency are reshaping the future of humanity. In this essay, I argue that the humanities can provide us with the intellectual and cultural resources needed to develop an alternative planetary politics and reimagine Europe in a post-imperial and cosmopolitan context.

For some observers, Europe should address current predicaments by building the infrastructure and governance to act as a post-imperial or liberal empire against those who challenge the rules-based international system¹. According to this vision, Europe should assert itself as a «liberal geopolitical force» willing to stand for the «principles of the liberal “free world”» against autocracies, project influence, and defend democracy through foreign and economic policies². The effort to make Europe «stronger» is underway in the defence and security sectors. The recent US radical foreign policy shift

¹ T. Garton Ash, *Postimperial Europe*, in «Foreign Affairs», May/June 2023, pp. 64-75.

² N. Helwig and J. Jokela (eds.), *The EU in an age of empires. A liberal geopolitical force in the making*, in «Finnish Institute of International Affairs», Briefing Paper 410, April 2025, pp. 1-10.

in Ukraine and Donald Trump's peace talks with Putin have raised concerns over European security. Since then, European leaders have started plans to increase defence spending, and the EU commission has announced a *ReArm Europe Plan* (4 March) to help member states mobilise public funding and loans, including EU cohesion programmes, for defence investments³. Relaxation of EU fiscal rules for defence spending and diplomacy to form a «coalition of the willing» are shaping a new Europe. One that is «united by a shared sense of threat, urgency, and purpose» to escape from Trump and Putin's spheres of influence. One that cannot afford to be «slow and cumbersome» but must act and be ready for military mobilisation and wartime⁴.

Is this the Europe we need? Europe's current military mobilisation might build a more integrated and ready-to-act EU, but it will not be decisive for securing Europe in a multipolar world. Europe's defense shift does not address two bigger questions that should prepare and guide such a major policy decision: is Europe's understanding of the world fit to face the grand challenges of the twenty-first century? What is Europe's sense of purpose? The European vision of the world is shifting from one centred on liberal internationalism to one focused on imperial geopolitical competition. None of this is suited to address current predicaments. As I argue in this essay, Europe should develop new cultural infrastructure and thinking, drawing on the critical skills of the humanities.

If, as Timothy Garton Ash argued, these are times of «beginnings» and what happens in Ukraine will determine the «character of the new era», then we must ensure our analytical and critical tools are well refined⁵. Continental security will depend on Europe's

³ European Commission, *Press statement by the President von der Leyen on the defence package*, 4 March 2025 [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/sv/statement_25_673 last access 3 May 2025].

⁴ N. Tocci, *Out of Putin's war and Trump's treachery, a new Europe is being born*, in «The Guardian», 12 March 2025 [<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/mar/12/out-of-putins-war-and-trumps-treachery-a-new-europe-is-being-born>, last access 3 May 2025].

⁵ T. Garton Ash, *A new cold war? World war three? How do we navigate this age of confusion?*, in «The Guardian», 3 May 2024 [<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/may/03/cold-war-world-history->

cultural preparedness to map and understand the challenge of Russia's neo-imperialism as part of a broader framework. It is time to rediscover the value of cultural thinking (and invest in it) to reimagine the world beyond the paradigms of liberal internationalism and imperial geopolitics.

Making sense of «global disorder»

The European policy shift towards defence investments is part of an increasing militarisation and securitisation of international affairs. This transformation is driven by anxiousness that a return of empires and autocratic powers will contest liberal values and democratic governance. From Greenland to Taiwan, the US, Russia, and China pose themselves as empires committed to territorial expansion⁶. Trump, Xi, and Putin's imperial politics are accelerating the demise of the post-Cold War rules-based system centred on liberal democracy, international cooperation, free markets, and Western-led globalisation. Can Europe prosper in a world where military power dictates over international law, redesigns state borders, and trumps rights? How can we best make sense of the world after liberal internationalism?

Faced with this scenario, European – and more broadly Western – political elites look at the world either through the lens of nostalgia for the rules-based system or the framework of geopolitical competition and clash of civilizations. Both are a product of a Euro-Atlantic liberal international project that existed throughout the twentieth century, had a major resurgence in the 1990s, and still presents itself as the only possible form of internationalism and global order.

Current public and policy debates on Europe and international affairs tell us that we live in times of «polycrisis», «disorder», or «un-peace». The world, as experts and political elites repeat, is heading towards a new Cold War or WWIII – one in which the West might

future, last access 3 May 2025].

⁶ G. Rachman, *Trump, Putin, Xi and the new age of empire*, in «Financial Times», 10 February 2025 [<https://www.ft.com/content/8d1afb00-57ee-4b59-abe3-df0ff18084fb>, last access online 3 May 2025].

be facing a new «axis of authoritarianism»⁷. Public debate often draws comparisons with the 1930s, fascism and Nazi Germany. Yet, as Tony Barber recently observed, such historical parallels can be an interesting intellectual exercise but have a limited value in mapping current affairs⁸. We rarely acknowledge what it means to adopt these geopolitical and historical categories. Furthermore, we do not seem to pay attention to how these ideas shape our understanding of the world and eventually inspire foreign policies. By embracing these paradigms, European and Western liberal elites accept that the world is spinning in an ungovernable chaos, and a new era characterized by geopolitical competition and a clash of civilizations is unfolding⁹. According to these visions, security and military deterrence are the only necessary and wise policies to prepare for the inevitable deluge.

Europe still views the world through the lenses of liberal internationalism. Media, intellectual, and political elites look back nostalgically at the 1990s as a «global liberal interregnum». They acknowledge the end of that rules-based world but gloss over the causes of its crisis and the limits of an order that was based on double-standards and excluded most of the world beyond the West¹⁰. Most analysis presents us with two scenarios on the reordering of global affairs. The first centred on a multipolar world which «return(s) to an international order defined by spheres of influence» and great power competition. The second based on a «reinvention» of the liberal order and cooperation around major public chal-

⁷ Garton Ash, *A new cold war?*, cit.

⁸ T. Barber, *Europe's future in historical context*, in «Financial Times», 29 March 2025 [<https://www.ft.com/content/cb40783c-8842-423b-ab04-de8204d48414>, last access 3 May 2025].

⁹ N. Gilman, *Samuel Huntington is getting his revenge*, in «Foreign Policy», 21 February 2025 [<https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/02/21/samuel-huntington-fukuyama-clash-of-civilizations/>, last access 3 May 2025].

¹⁰ M. Leonard, *Europe after the end of the liberal international order*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 16 April 2025, [<https://ecfr.eu/article/europe-after-the-end-of-the-liberal-international-order/>, last access 3 May 2025].

lenges¹¹. Yet both visions simply revive the old Euro-Atlantic language and ideas of internationalism.

As historians have shown, the post-Cold War liberal order of the 1990s was the continuation of a twentieth century imperial Euro-Atlantic project. It did not shape an inclusive international system, nor it was a triumph of liberalism. Rather than a «global interregnum» of liberalism, it was the «golden age» of Western hegemony. Indeed, liberal internationalism rested on older hierarchical and racially ordered European understandings of the world anchored to the concept of ‘civilisation’ to justify inequalities among nations. Euro-Atlantic internationalism emerged – and peaked in the 1990s – as a project and worldview centred on Western moral superiority, missionary zeal, military interventions, opposition to ‘apocalyptic’ enemies, and free-market globalisation. This rhetoric presents the coming of a liberal and globalised world – taking the form of a neo-liberal economic agenda in the 1990s – as a project with «no alternatives». Overall, liberal internationalism offers the picture of a post-colonial yet not post-imperial and still unequal world¹².

The ideas of global disorder and polycrisis are not the rejection of liberal internationalism but rather its direct filiation. They are the product of Euro-Atlantic attempts at making sense of a world in which the West is no longer hegemonic. On the one hand they project anxiety for a world spinning out of Western control and values, on the other hand they reassert the need to defend the Euro-Atlantic civilisation as the only foundation of any possible «global order». It is not a coincidence, as observed by Nathalie Tocci, that European leaders look at their shrinking global power with fear and terror but are unable to take a stand on migrations in the Mediterranean, genocide in Gaza, or natural resource extractions and civil wars in Africa. The exact issues that are currently undermining the liberal paradigm, are also exposing its limits, hypocrisies, and double standards¹³.

¹¹ L. Vinjamuri, *Envisioning the future international order*, in *Competing visions of international order*, in «Chatham House», March 2025, pp. 115-120.

¹² C. Donert, S.-L. Hoffman et al., *Viewpoints: Eclipse of Internationalism?*, in «Past & Present», 264, 2024, pp. 283-356.

¹³ N. Tocci, *As Europe's power shrinks, its fear is growing – and the result is huge*

Europe is imprisoned by its own angst of irrelevance. The perception of 'global disorder' reinforces a sense of nostalgia for liberal internationalism and encourages a geopolitical conceptualization of the world as a land of chaos on which the European 'civilisational' must be imposed. This end-of-empire anxiety was outlined by Emmanuel Macron's Sorbonne speech (2024), when the French leader claimed: «our Europe is mortal [...] it can die, and it all depends on our choices»¹⁴. Macron's called for a «sovereign» Europe, ready to act, secure its borders, increase its defence capabilities, and protect its «values» against «geopolitical» challenges. Rather than offering a new vision for Europe, the Sorbonne speech embodied the imperial nostalgia for a 1990s «liberal hegemonic power» and updated the liberal programme as a geopolitical competition against civilisational enemies. The defence of «European humanism», as plainly stated by Macron, is a «matter of survival» and «civilisational combat»¹⁵. If these are the «beginnings» of the current European soul-searching, nothing good will come of it.

How could Europe build peace in Ukraine, cooperate with the Global South to promote a fair green transition, and defend international law against conquest, if its vision of the world is still framed by Eurocentric and hierarchical ideas that split the world between the «West» and the «rest», «global order» and «disorder», liberal and civilisational states? The liberal conceptualisation of the 'international' is no longer fit for the global challenges of the twenty-first century. Rather than promoting a post-imperial world, it will intensify conflict and securitisation in international affairs.

Instead of reviving the dead myth of a liberal order, Europe should invest in the power of culture to reimagine international affairs beyond current paradigms. Echoing what Perry Anderson has

mistakes, in «The Guardian», 14 May 2024 [<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/may/14/europe-power-fear-ukraine-russia-migrants-gaza>, last access 3 May 2025].

¹⁴ G. Araud, 'Our Europe is mortal. It can die.' *Decoding Macron's Sorbonne speech*, Atlantic Council, 29 April 2024 [<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/our-europe-is-mortal-it-can-die-decoding-macrons-sorbonne-speech/>, last access 3 May 2025].

¹⁵ *Europe Speech*, Élysée, 24 April 2024 [<https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2024/04/24/europe-speech>, last access 3 May 2025].

argued on the power of ideas in promoting historical changes to overcome neoliberalism, we must understand that change will not come:

« [...] from feeble adjustment or euphemistic accommodation to the existing order of things. What is needed instead, and will not arrive overnight, is an entirely different spirit – an unflinching and where necessary caustic analysis of the world as it is, without concession to the arrogant claims of the Right, the conformist myths of the Centre, or the *bien-pensant* pieties of too much of what passes for the Left. Ideas incapable of shocking the world are incapable of shaking it»¹⁶.

The elaboration of an alternative and coherent vision for Europe must rediscover the power of culture in the broadest possible sense. Far from being limited to public sites of «high» culture, such as museums, theatres and libraries, culture – «the culture of everything» as Vaclav Havel argued – is about the «civility of everyday life», the ideas and obligations that shape relations between people and people's relations with the society and nature around them¹⁷. Culture is nothing less than the intellectual and moral world that sustains human societies, promotes mutual trust between human beings, and allows the possibility of community in «historical time and social space». Culture is the understanding of the world developed by a human community, the language and ideas through which any community interprets and makes sense of the world.

Liberal internationalism offers a teleological, polarised, and hierarchical vision of the world. It will not give Europe a new soul, identity, or sense of purpose fit for the planetary challenges of this century. Instead, Europe needs to embrace culture or the human factor, namely the power of human societies to build community and a vision of the world through the ideas and endeavours of the human mind. Europe can promote this shift from geopolitics to humanity by rediscovering the value of the humanities.

¹⁶ P. Anderson, *Idées-Forces*, in «New Left Review», 151, January-February 2025.

¹⁷ V. Havel, *Politics, Morality, and Civility*, in *Summer Meditations*, New York, Vintage Books, 1993, pp. 12-19.

Why the Humanities matter

The humanities hold the critical skills we need to reimagine a new sense of purpose for Europe. The humanities are neither an elite pastime nor sciences that accumulate knowledge about facts and human creative productions from the past. Humanities place at the centre of their inquiry the study of humanity across time and space. They explore the self-consciousness of human beings and societies through their endeavours, and how humanity makes sense of itself and the world – who we are, where we come from, where we go – through culture as production of understanding. By exploring the creation, transmission and re-elaboration of human knowledge, the humanities offer insights into the past, present, and future of humanity¹⁸. They study the «intricate web of knowledge» and the products of human minds not to accumulate knowledge for the sake of it. Their mission is to make sense of what we are as individuals and societies. What does it mean to be human? How did humanity get here? Where is it going?

Despite their relevance, the humanities are in danger of extinction. Reduction in university funding and public investments, commodification of education, prioritisation of quantitative research threatens the existence of these studies on campus. Meanwhile policy and political debates sidelines the humanities due to their perceived lack of economic value and scientific rigour. We need to challenge this narrative and communicate to students, politicians, policymakers and the media that the humanities have a vital role to play in our society and in the future of Europe. To bring the humanities back to the fore of our societies we need to rediscover their public value and show how they bring new perspectives to current global predicaments¹⁹.

Humanities scholars are not antiquarians. In an academic world that is often too eager to chase trends and the next theoretical «turns», the humanities are based on the philological study of evidence from our past. Yet this should not lead to misunderstandings about their nature. The humanities truthful to their mission do not

¹⁸ R. Bod, J. Kursell, J. Maat, T. Weststeijn, *A New Field: History of Humanities*, in «History of Humanities», 1, 1, 2016, pp. 1-8.

¹⁹ *A Case for the Humanities*, UCL Grand Challenges, June 2024, pp. 3-8.

simply teach us facts (about history, literature, etc...) but they teach us how to think and interpret them. They're not oriented towards the past to chase 'relevance' in the present or to speculate for the sake of the future. They integrate facts with interpretation to offer an understanding and «vision of human becoming» and are inevitably charged with a strong «ethical and political dimension». What makes them special is that they rest on a unique «marriage between history and philosophy»²⁰. There might be no better way to describe the nature of the humanities than Giambattista Vico's principle of *verum ipsum factum*, literally we know what we make. We can understand the human experience because it is the product of humanity.

First, the humanities help us make sense of people, culture, and society through history. The value of the humanities lies in their «pursuit of knowledge and understanding of humans and humanity across time and across place»²¹. Humanities offer an understanding of culture, power, and society beyond the «here» and «now». They help us contextualize information, cultural narratives, and propaganda. They teach us to analyse, interpret, and deconstruct arguments in their specific contexts, question myths and dogmas, and embrace diversity of thinking beyond national prejudices. Most of all, the humanities show us that nothing in history is fixed or inevitable, and even the most solid belief systems can be based on wrong or contingent foundations²².

Second, by exploring the totality of the human experience, the humanities encompass different subjects and build bridges between disciplines. The humanities' capacity to draw connections between different areas of knowledge offers a great resource for «horizontal» or «wide thinking». Unlike other degrees, the humanities are not

²⁰ S. Moyn, *Bonfire of the Humanities*, in «The Nation», 21 January 2025 [https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/bonfire-humanities/, last access 3 May 2025].

²¹ J. Black, *Humanities in a changing world*, Transformative Humanities lecture series, University of Birmingham, 29 May 2024, [https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/5397/Julia-Black-Birmingham-Speech-May-2024.pdf, last access 3 May 2025].

²² *A Case for the Humanities*, cit., pp. 1-14.

vocational subjects. Instead, their strength lies in the critical skills and perspectives they offer on the human experience and the world around us. They teach us the skills in critical and independent thinking, textual analysis, cross-cultural dialogue that are key to develop new interdisciplinary approaches to present transformations²³. These interpretative skills have become even more relevant in an age of grand challenges – such as geopolitical rivalries, big data and AI, the Anthropocene – that are revolutionising human understandings of the self and of our relations with nature, technology, and politics.

Third, the humanities cross-temporal and cross-disciplinary scope fosters creative thinking for reimagining our articulation of human and collective life beyond the present. The ability to decentre the present through historical and lateral perspectives is not just an exercise in criticism but it is key to reimagining the future. This places the humanities in the unique position of being able to see the «bigger picture», think about how contemporary events are reshaping the self and human societies, and provide new paradigms to build paths forward for humanity.

The humanities' three-dimensional insight into humanity broadens the presentist and quantitative approach to knowledge typical of many social sciences and policy debates. The humanities study human endeavours across time (depth), draw connections across subjects (width), and explore knowledge production as a creative process always re-imagining the given reality (length). Their long-term, cross-disciplinary, and creative approach to human knowledge offers unique intellectual resources to interpret contemporary challenges from original perspective and draw conclusions that challenge consolidated paradigms.

Ready-to-think Europe

When applied to Europe's search for identity and role in a multipolar world, the humanities challenge the assumptions supporting the EU policy shift towards security and defence. At least, the humanities would help us look with some scepticism at the notions

²³ Ivi, pp. 15-16.

of Europe as a «civil power» or «liberal empire», and at the core dogmas of liberal internationalist and geopolitical thinking that block our capacity to reimagine the future of Europe.

Europe's rebranding as liberal hegemon greenwashes the imperial origins of the EU itself. While containing autocratic imperial ambitions abroad, Europe should also draw on history to address the legacies of empire in the EU and reflect on its post-colonial identity. Instead of adhering to the present only, history helps us think about politics contextually and lets us perceive current debates «as contributing to a longer-standing debate or set of ideas»²⁴. This makes us aware of the contingency of any political truth or ideology, but it also trains us to understand the problems of the present by looking at how similar issues have been addressed in the past. While the EU presents itself as a post-imperial project, history shows instead that «Europe was designed to rescue the imperial nation-state» in the 1950s and that it is still shaped by its colonial origins²⁵. At the time of the treaty of Rome (1957), 90% of the European Economic Community territories were in Africa. European politicians revived the imperial vision of «Eurafrica» to maintain the colonies as extra-European appendages of the EEC. Meanwhile, African intellectuals reimagined Eurafrica and the EEC as the framework for a post-imperial future. Léopold Sédar Senghor envisioned Eurafrica as a project for vertical and horizontal solidarity, built on the cultural complementarity of unlike civilisations, European and African. His cosmopolitan vision involved the creation of Eurafrican federal institutions, to give a voice to Africans, challenge colonial rule, and promote equality and balanced economic interaction across the Mediterranean²⁶.

That cosmopolitan project was never realised. French African colonies were relegated to the status of associate members of the

²⁴ R. Whatmore, *The History of Political Thought*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 107-121.

²⁵ Q. Slobodian, *The delusion of a new European Empire*, in «The New Statesman», 17 June 2023 [<https://www.newstatesman.com/the-weekend-essay/2023/06/europe-rotten-core> last access 3 May 2025].

²⁶ J. Burbank, F. Cooper, *Post-Imperial Possibilities. Eurasia, Eurafrica, Afroasia*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2024, pp. 89-152.

European Economic Community. Unequal relationships and terms of trade with Europe were preserved well after the end of empires, while the right to free movement into the former metropole was denied. Eurafrika was realised as a system of vertical subordination that continued older understandings of Europe as a political space built on civilisational hierarchies and the exclusion of «others»²⁷. The failure of the Euro-Mediterranean project in the 2000s confirms that Europe still maintains a post-colonial yet not post-imperial identity. The Euro-Mediterranean partnership with Southern countries promised political and economic integration but never established a free trade area, promoted only limited development policies, and eventually limited its scope to border security, counterterrorism, and surveillance²⁸.

What halts Europe's search for its «soul» and power to act is not just the resistance of its member nation-states, but also that Europe still refuses to deal with the legacies of national empires. Instead of renewing its cultural resources and embracing a post-imperial identity, Europe still frames itself as a «fortress» and repels from its political and cultural space areas such as the Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Middle East. They are essential components of what was, is, and could be Europe but instead are being treated as civilisational borders and being pushed at the margins of the European «garden».

While Europe focuses on building up physical borders, the European «fortress» is exposed to new threats from the digital space. The cross-disciplinary viewpoint of the humanities offers new perspectives on preparing Europe for how the infosphere – the digital and physical space of communication and information – is transforming democracy and individuals in the age of big data and AI. While Europe invests resources in military hardware and a new Nato-style alliance, it remains exposed to Russian cyberwarfare, acts of subversion and digital propaganda²⁹. Information and commu-

²⁷ G. Sluga, *The Invention of International Order: Remaking Europe after Napoleon*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2022.

²⁸ K. Kaush and R. Youngs, *The end of the 'Euro-Mediterranean vision'*, in «International Affairs», 85, 2009, pp. 963-975.

²⁹ H. Small, *Europe and Russia: the Longest War*, in «History & Policy», May

nication technologies (ICTs) are an opportunity for human flourishing, but they come «with a huge intellectual responsibility to understand them and take advantage of them the right way»³⁰. The computing power of machines, their capacity to process information logically faster than us, has replaced humans as the only smart agents in the infosphere. It also challenges the role of the state as «*the* information agent» who developed ICTs to exercise political power and social control and remained the «primary collector, producer, and controller of information»³¹.

How to make sense of humanity's predicament in the new informational environment created by ICTs? To navigate this new environment, centred not just on communication but on the creation and management of information, the skills offered by the humanities will be even more crucial. Indeed, the advent of big data and AI makes the critical tools of the humanities essential in interpreting information and allowing us to preserve control over our self-consciousness as individuals and human beings. While social media fuels anger and misinformation, philology and linguistic analysis can expose fake news through the analysis of grammatical and language patterns³². While computer sciences build AI algorithms to perform and disregard the cultural and social context of data used to train algorithms, humanities researchers can help refine them by bringing «qualitative» insights from culture³³. We need to use this strategy in order to avoid building AI which echoes social media's indifference towards content propagating misinformation and anger³⁴.

2025 [<https://historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/europe-and-russia-the-longest-war/>, last access 3 May 2025].

³⁰ L. Floridi, *The 4th Revolution. How infosphere is reshaping human reality*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. vii.

³¹ Ivi, pp. 167-175.

³² J. Grieve, H. Woodfield, *The Language of Fake News*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023.

³³ T. Blanke, *AI and humanities: new intelligence with attention to detail*, University of Amsterdam [<https://www.uva.nl/en/about-the-uva/organisation/faculties/faculty-of-humanities/research/faces-of-humanities/tobias-blanke/interview-to-bias-blanke.html?cb&cb>, last access 3 May 2025].

³⁴ D. Hemment, C. Kommers, *Why the Humanities must shape the future of AI*, University of Edinburgh, 12 March 2025 [<https://impact.ed.ac.uk/opin->

The humanities and AI work in two different but complementary realms. They can support each other to increase our «consciousness of ourselves» and of the world around us. The humanities' goal is not to produce knowledge about texts and artifacts, but rather to help us address questions about human life through the study of the products of human mind. They are a «work of *being*, not *knowing*». Vice versa, AI increases the availability of «fact-based knowledge about humanistic things» but does not increase our ability to use that knowledge to ask ourselves questions about humanity³⁵. How to govern the power of this new archive? It will be up to humans and democracy to steer machines away from market-oriented algorithms that will further transform individuals into mere commodities of the «attention economy». Likewise, it will be up to humanity's critical thinking to find a balance between the seemingly boundless spaces and resources of the digital world and its environmental impact on the finite materials and physical spaces of the planet. Will AI become a new territory of imperial competition for power and resources, or will it be a platform for deepening our consciousness of ourselves and help us address humanity's predicaments?

Finally, can the humanities help us rethink Europe's role in the world? The EU is pushing for new relations with the «Global South» yet its trade policy is still driven by «Eurocentric assumptions» that undermine its efforts³⁶. ASEAN countries stand up against Europe's sustainability standards as a form of protectionism challenging a fair distribution of the cost of the green transition. Meanwhile, African countries censor critical raw material deals as «neocolonial resource grabs».

ion/why-the-humanities-must-shape-the-future-of-ai/ access 3 May 2025].

³⁵ G. Burnett, *Will the Humanities survive Artificial Intelligence?*, in «New Yorker», 26 April 2025 [https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-weekend-essay/will-the-humanities-survive-artifi, last access 3 May 2025].

³⁶ S. Islam, *The EU can't replace the US as a global player until it sheds its own colonial thinking*, in «The Guardian», 29 April 2025 [https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/apr/29/eu-replace-us-global-player-colonial-thinking-global-south, last accessed online 3 May 2025].

Can the EU build equitable relations with the «Global South» and avoid a pattern of neocolonial exploitation? This will be hard to achieve until Europeans address the environmental and depredatory impact of colonialism. Visual arts and the humanities provide us with the creative resources to reimagine the language and goals of European commercial policies. What is at stake is the possibility of resetting trade relations and rebalancing the cost of the green and digital transitions by taking into account the legacies of empire. Art history and collections have the power to shed light on the colonial foundations of European wealth. Museums and curators enable the creative practices that can make it possible to imagine post-imperial futures and relationships overcoming the asymmetries of colonialism. Bringing the visual and material histories of colonial trade, slavery, and wealth into the centre of museums forces us to confront with the fact that the «colonial» is not just «formative of our past» but is «persistent and fundamental to the experience of contemporary life». It allows the creation of new «emotional, political, cultural relationships» between indigenous communities and collecting cultures³⁷. As with Hew Locke's creative exploration and resignification of the colonial memorabilia, archives, and imperial spoils of the British Museum (*Hew Locke: What have we here?* 2024), collections and artistic practice have the power to offer a visual display of the human and natural costs of empire³⁸. By confronting the past, Hew Locke's exhibition revealed the patterns of injustice, racism, and exploitation that still runs deep in our society, but also offered resources to imagine alternative relations of trade and prosperity in the present.

These case studies show how the humanities have the potential to challenge our understanding of Europe, reassess the predicaments of democracy, and provide resources to build a post-imperial Eu-

³⁷ E. Edwards, *Addressing colonial narratives in museums*, in «The British Academy», 19 April 2018 [<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/addressing-colonial-narratives-museums/>, last access 3 May 2025].

³⁸ I. Seligman, B. Duch Giménez, *Unlocking 'Hew Locke: what have we here?'*, in «British Museum», 14 September 2024, [<https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/unlocking-hew-locke-what-have-we-here>, last access 3 May 2025].

rope. One that is not afraid to uphold democratic and liberal values but does so through relationships built on justice and equality. The historical and philological methods of the humanities highlight the cultural limits of European policies and visions of the world. They also offer the critical skills to elaborate a new systemic interpretation of the grand challenges of the twenty first century.

Planetary culture for a post-imperial Europe

The concepts of «polycrisis» and «global disorder» testify the failure of liberal internationalism in making sense of the current global transformations. Meanwhile, the humanities' interpretative skills and 'big picture' perspective invite us to think through the *planetary* as an alternative paradigm capable to offer an integrated and coherent vision of humanity's predicaments.

What do pandemics, climate change, AI, migrations, and imperial competition have in common? They are all planetary scale challenges that go beyond national, international, and global frameworks. These issues have either an impact on or are the result of the planetary condition of human life and Earth itself. Planetary is not simply a synonym for earth as a «whole» but stands for the awareness of a peculiar situation. First, that humanity has become a geological or telluric force (Anthropocene). This process, starting after the Industrial Revolution, has made human activities on earth and the atmosphere so pervasive that they have an impact on the geology and ecology of the planet. Second, that human beings, part of the biosphere and part of Earth, are threatening with their activities the ecosystems of which they are just one element, and on which their life and the planet depends³⁹.

Humanities are the critical framework for building a new planetary culture. The conceptualisation of the planetary needs critical skills and perspectives to rethink what it means to be human, and how to adapt human activity, politics, and institutions to this planetary age. To promote this paradigm shift, we need to pull together the temporal, horizontal, imaginative thinking provided by the humanities. We will need to frame a culture that places the «geological

³⁹ D. Chakrabarty, *The Planetary: An Emergent Humanist Category*, in «Critical Inquiry», 46, 2019, pp. 1-31.

time and the biological time of evolution in conversation with the time of human history and experience»⁴⁰.

Firstly, we need temporal thinking to conceptualise the transition from the ‘international’ and «global» frameworks of modern globalisation to the planetary⁴¹. While the latter describes earth as a space of states, empires, market capitalism and global institutions, and is centred on human beings as historical actors, the planetary instead offers a framework that goes beyond humanity. The planetary framework looks at human flourishing as part of the biosphere and shifts the focus from sustainability (that sees nature as existing for humans’ responsible use) to habitability, which focuses on what makes complex multispecies life possible on the planet⁴². Ironically, by adopting a point of view that goes beyond humanity, the planetary is the only framework that lets us address contemporary challenges not through nation-states and global governance, both centred on state sovereignty, but through the primacy of humanity’s existence.

Secondly, the humanities provide insight into how humanity has imagined its relationship with nature across time and space, and how we can develop new paths. This means that we need to bridge natural and human experience and reconcile the power of human freedom with habitability. This cultural transition to a planetary framework requires us to understand how empires, colonialism, and capitalism have developed relationships among human societies as well as between humanity and the earth through infrastructures of exploitation. After all, we might discover that habitability is the most effective conceptual tool against the geopolitics of imperial competition and hierarchies.

⁴⁰ D. Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2021, pp. 7-8.

⁴¹ *From the Global to the Planetary. A Conversation with Glenda Sluga, Stephen Macekura, and Jonathan Blake*, in «Toynbee Prize Foundation», 5 June 2024 [<https://toynbeeprize.org/posts/discussion-from-the-global-to-the-planetary-a-conversation-with-glenda-sluga-stephen-macekura-and-jonathan-blake/>], last access 3 May 2025].

⁴² Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, cit., pp. 81-84.

Finally, the humanities help us rediscover the power of political imagination and future thinking required for building new visions of community and governance. Planetary problems act at the same time on a planetary and hyperlocal scale, and thus they escape both national and global institutions. States and the current infrastructure of global governance – founded on national interests and state sovereignty – fail to address them. Neither a «single world state» nor current institutions would be an effective solution to tackle the «multiscalar nature» planetary issues, operating from small local communities to the entire earth and affecting them in different ways⁴³. What is required is to build new plural forms of governance combining political institutions at local, national, and planetary levels, empowering different levels with appropriate authority and resources, and coordinating them through the principle of subsidiarity. Can Europe, with its layered sovereignty, above and beyond nation-states, be a «laboratory» for promoting a new planetary politics?⁴⁴

Europe needs to embrace the power of the humanities to build the planetary through cosmopolitan dialogue rather than on a new Eurocentric imposition of values. While Europe's institutional set up is already fit for promoting plural governance, it still needs to change its culture and understanding of the world. The critical thinking of the humanities will be essential to avoid transforming the planetary into a new infrastructure for the continuation of unequal power. In turn, the humanities will offer the resources for reinventing Europe beyond imperial nation-states.

Europe can become an infrastructure for upholding planetary politics, but it needs to embrace the humanities to revise the cultural paradigms that are currently inspiring the EU's soul-searching. Europe needs to draw on the humanities' «bigger picture» perspective to reimagine its sense of purpose and escape the trap of impe-

⁴³ J.S. Blake, N. Gilman, *Governing for the Planet*, in «Aeon», 16 July 2024 [https://aeon.co/essays/why-planetary-problems-need-a-new-approach-to-politics last access 3 May 2025].

⁴⁴ L. Marsili, *From the Age of Empires to the Age of Humanity*, in «Noema», 27 July 2023 [https://www.noemamag.com/from-the-age-of-empires-to-the-age-of-humanity/ last access 3 May 2025].

rialism. The humanities must nurture Europe's moment of self-consciousness and provide a new set of values to make sense of the world. Abandoning liberal internationalist and geopolitical narratives and building the infrastructure for a planetary politics is Europe's best chance at security in the twentieth first century. This time as ever, the possibility to envision a different future lies in the power of culture.

