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DOI

[10.1080/10848770.2014.976934](https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2014.976934)

Publication date

2015

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

The European Legacy, Toward New Paradigms

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Heerikhuizen, A. (2015). La Société des Nations suppose la Société des Esprits: The Debate on Modern Humanism. *The European Legacy, Toward New Paradigms*, 20(1), 25-40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2014.976934>

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On: 28 May 2015, At: 01:22

Publisher: Routledge

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The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cele20>

La Société des Nations suppose la Société des Esprits: The Debate on Modern Humanism

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Published online: 13 Nov 2014.

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To cite this article: Annemarie van Heerikhuizen (2015) La Société des Nations suppose la Société des Esprits: The Debate on Modern Humanism, *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms*, 20:1, 25-40, DOI: [10.1080/10848770.2014.976934](https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2014.976934)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2014.976934>

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La Société des Nations suppose la Société des Esprits: The Debate on Modern Humanism

— ANNEMARIE VAN HEERIKHUIZEN —

ABSTRACT *This article focuses on the themes of the two conferences organized by the League of Nations —“Modern Man” and “The Foundations of Modern Humanism”—which were held in Nice and Budapest in 1935 and 1936, respectively. It was a time of deepening crisis, when the pervasive belief was that European civilization was declining. The more specific questions discussed in these conferences included the relation of modern man to the state, the impact of irrational theories on modern life, and the need for free education for everyone. Renowned writers and academics of the period participated in the debates, among them Thomas Mann, Jules Romains, Salvador de Madariaga, Alfred Zimmern, and Johan Huizinga. I present a critical overview of their debates, beginning with Paul Valéry, the initiator and chairman of these conferences, who coined the intriguing slogan “La Société des Nations suppose la Société des Esprits.”*

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the 1930s Europe appeared to be in a general state of decline. The European papers were full of worrisome news about the failure of the League of Nations to curb the belligerent politics of Mussolini in Italy, and in Germany, with their rise to power it soon became evident that the Nazis refused to respect the peace agreement of Versailles. Remarkably, in spite of all this, intellectual Europe showed little sign of despondency in the thirties. This spirit of optimism is attested by the establishment of the so-called “entretiens” international conferences of European intellectuals, set up with the help of the League of Nations to keep the ideals of peace and internationalism alive. Did politics not start with culture, with mutual understanding and the creation of a solid international intellectual framework? A special resolution was adopted by the Assembly of the League of Nations to make culture part of its agenda, and in 1922 a new organization, the International Commission on Intellectual Cooperation, was founded in Geneva. In the thirties this commission, with the help of its executive organ in Paris, started the “entretiens.”¹ The French poet and essayist Paul Valéry played an important part in initiating these conferences: the intellectuals should be free in the expression of their ideas, which would, he believed, facilitate the spread of the universal ideal.² In 1935 the subject matter of the entretiens was The Formation of

Modern Man, and in 1936 the European intellectuals considered—as a follow-up of their deliberations on modern man—the Foundations of Modern Humanism. Famous intellectuals of the time participated in the discussions, among them Jules Romains, Salvador de Madariaga, and Thomas Mann. In fact, when the League founded the organization of intellectual cooperation it had stipulated that its members should have an international reputation.³ Thus all the participants of the *entretiens* were members of the international intellectual elite.

Valéry chaired the conferences that took place in Nice and Budapest. He was convinced that the League of Nations could restore its international authority and cope with the problems in the world by forming a ‘society of minds,’ a republic of lettered men. He was the spiritual father of the then frequently-quoted motto “La Société des Nations suppose la Société des Esprits.”⁴ The shortcomings of “our time,” Valéry wrote to De Madariaga, was a lack of intellect, of “esprit.”⁵ “More Brain, O Lord,” he wrote, referring to the English poet George Meredith (these words were actually intended for the women of his day!).⁶ For Valéry politicians had discredited themselves: the *homo politicus* was inferior to the intellectual, because he was completely captivated by impassioned, irrational ideas.

From the point of view of the League of Nations Valéry must have been the ideal chairman. He strongly believed in the ideals of the League (peace, reconciliation, international arbitration) and the creation of larger political entities than currently existed. To him the concept of the state was a thing of the past, the future was for large continental blocks.⁷ Valéry, who was at the height of his fame as an essayist in the mid-thirties and had many influential friends inside and outside France, was also convinced of the importance of intellectual exercise. His own early morning meditations had led to his famous *Cahiers*, which Paul Clifford described as a “laboratory of self-cognizant thought.”⁸ But one could also refer to Valéry’s interest in the academic exercises that took place in the real laboratories of his time: the scientific experiments that were performed there and the lively debates on new theories and hypotheses that attracted him so much.⁹ In a way this emphasis on intellectual exercise was the ideal preparation for his chairmanship of the *entretiens*, which were, after all, an attempt to create a laboratory of the human mind.

One of the first *entretiens* was organized in Paris in 1933 and included a varied company of intellectuals from several European countries who had gathered to discuss the future of the European mind. The participants, it turned out, strongly disagreed among themselves, revealing a complete lack of consensus. However, Valéry remained calm and unruffled. He saw the harmony of opinion as “monotonie,” for lively debates needed difference of opinion.¹⁰ But Valéry would later suffer from his rather nonchalant, relaxed attitude to the participants’ conflicting ideas. For example, Jules Romains disputed Valéry’s fundamental conviction that the world just needed a society of intellectuals that was superior to politics and political thinking. Romains was of the opinion that politics ought to be part of the intellectual debate and should also attend to current political problems, or else the “esprit” would lose its authority and would never capture the attention of the masses.¹¹ Yet Romains nevertheless attended the Nice discussions at the Centre d’études méditerranéennes. A “home game” for Valéry, who was its administrative director.

This article aims to describe, as precisely as possible, the discussions that took place in Nice and, later on, in Budapest. What opinions were put forward concerning politics in these conferences? In 1935 in particular, when mankind itself was put on the program, it must have been difficult to ignore the political, “real” world.

1. NICE: AN URGENT APPEAL

In 1935 Hitler had already been in power for two years, Germany had left the League of Nations and was building up a mighty military force, including a strong marine and Luftwaffe. In 1936, the Rhineland was remilitarized, while Europe remained silent, and soon it became clear that Germany and Italy, under the leadership of Hitler and Mussolini, were developing close relations. Although the intellectuals who participated in the *entretiens* could not know what exactly awaited Europe in the near future, by that time the political consequences of Nazi politics were no longer a mystery: Germany had been transformed into a totalitarian state, all political parties except the National Socialist Party had been banned, and the Jews had lost their civil rights. Artists and writers were also among the first victims, many being forced to flee the country and to start anew elsewhere. One of these was the Nobel Prize laureate Thomas Mann. Considering his circumstances at the time, it is not surprising that the written “communication” Mann sent to the conference in Nice, which he was unable to attend in person, was pessimistic in content.¹² First he defended himself against possible allegations of being a pessimist, an old embittered man—he was already sixty years old—who could no longer understand the world. He argued that old men were nevertheless often right, for had Goethe not been as pessimistic when he reached an advanced age? Mann, a great admirer of Goethe, with whom he strongly identified, warned against irrational theories and the loss of individual, critical thinking. Intellectuals were morally obliged to react against this trend. Here Mann agreed with his French colleague Henri Focillon, who was also at the conference and who insisted that the intellectuals had to make clear what their ideal modern man looked like, the man they wanted to “formulate.” According to Mann, Focillon’s use of “wanted to” (in French: *vouloir*) was of special significance, as it showed a willingness to take a stand:

Ce mot “vouloir” que Focillon vient de faire entendre dans nos entretiens me paraît nouveau parmi nous et me semble présenter une importance sensationnelle. Il signifie cette recrudescence d’activité dont j’ai parlé, il implique la fermeté morale vis-à-vis des phénomènes du temps, le courage de dire oui et de dire non, ce courage qui, dans un monde où règne la confusion et l’égarement, est seul capable de donner naissance à l’autorité de l’esprit. (21)

Of course these words must also be placed against the background of Mann’s personal life at that time. In the memoirs of Klaus Mann, his eldest son, Klaus writes that at home politics was not a favorite subject of discussion; political programs or the outcome of elections were barely mentioned in the family.¹³ But starting from 1935 politics could no longer be ignored. The Nazis suspected Mann, an elite writer in their view, of disloyalty to Germany and therefore as an enemy of the state; his house was confiscated and a warrant issued for his arrest. So Mann and his family had been forced

to leave Germany and build a life in exile, for a while living in the south of France and later settling in Zurich. Mann had tried to come to terms with the Nazis and to rescue his house and library in Munich, yet from 1936 onwards he openly opposed the Nazi ideology.¹⁴

What effect did Mann's urgent appeal have on the discussions in Nice? To what extent were the intellectuals willing to take a position and clearly ventilate their opinions? One of the most obvious effects was that, directly after the start of the discussions, it was decided that not only the ideal human being should be discussed but also the kind of man the intellectuals rejected on principle. Besides, Jules Romains drew attention to another aspect: what exactly was the relationship between the intellectual and the common man? Could ordinary people participate in the culture of the intellectual elite or join them in creating a unified culture? In Romains's words: "Est-il souhaitable... d'appeler le plus grand nombre d'hommes ou la totalité des hommes à la totalité des hommes à la culture, de faire une culture du plus grand nombre ou une culture de l'ensemble?" (22). In line with Mann's communication, the growing public interest in irrational theories was also put on the agenda. After all, it was argued, the "leaders of the modern world" have the possibility to use irrational means such as myths and symbols to seduce the masses. Should these means be considered a dangerous threat to civilization or a plausible means of educating and motivating the general public?

THE CHAIRMAN COMES UNDER ATTACK

Immediately at the start of the gathering Valéry, who chaired it, met with severe opposition. The result of this was that he failed to draw up an inventory of all possible types of human beings in the world, which he considered indispensable for a thorough discussion on modern man. He also encountered strong opposition to his proposal to discuss European values at length. The only participant whose ideas were at all close to Valéry's was the historian Gonzague de Reynold, who commented on the rising public concern about the potential demise of European civilization and, as a consequence, the urgent need to give attention to whatever could still be "rescued."¹⁵ Valéry referred to De Reynold's words and linked them to the potential "shipwreck" of European civilization: "Celui de M. de Reynold est extrêmement intéressant: qu'est-ce que nous désirons voir surnager dans le naufrage de la civilisation moderne?" (41).

Valéry described how, even in daily life when traveling by bus and metro, it was clear that values were changing. The lack of politeness was not just a "petit detail" but a serious "brutalité" (43). However, Jules Romains, together with the Spanish writer Salvador de Madariaga, expressed their reluctance to waste time on matters they considered irrelevant to the theme of the conference and resolutely rejected Valéry's proposal to draw up an inventory. Somewhat provocatively, De Madariaga remarked: "a priori modern man, that's civilized man" (29). In contrast, Valéry preferred to think carefully about concepts and terms as was his custom in his routine intellectual exercises. He responded by saying that the term "civilized man" was also a vague concept, which position was supported by the French ethnologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl: there was not even a clear distinction between "primitive" and "civilized man" (30–31). But in

the end Valéry failed to achieve his aim and an inventory defining all the different types of humans on the globe was not drawn up.

There were several other fundamental disagreements between Valéry in the role of chairman and the conference participants. He disagreed with Romains and De Madariaga on the subject of the increased power of the state. In Valéry's opinion this formed a great threat for modern man, while for his opponents it was simply an aspect of modern society which had to be accepted (37). They also rejected his pessimism regarding European civilization and rejected his use of "shipwreck" to describe the state of European culture. To Romains this was the typical view of a man who was himself the victim of a "shipwreck." He, Romains, was definitely less pessimistic: "C'est un peu un point de vue de naufragé. Je suis moins pessimiste que cela. Nous ne sommes pas les spectateurs d'un désastre. Nous sommes ici pour travailler à la formation du monde nouveau." And he added to this: "Il ne faut pas pleurer sur le passé, mais penser à l'avenir" (42–43).

Valéry must have been annoyed by the way Romains interpreted his words. He was undeniably a man with a great interest in the future, not in the past. After all, he had been the memorable chairman of the Paris entretiens on the future of the European mind where he had emphasized the importance of intellectual power in overcoming the problems of the past (9). From his *Cahiers* we know that he even disliked history as an academic discipline, or as a subject from which it was thought one could learn and draw lessons. History, according to him, was "the most dangerous product ever produced by the chemistry of the intellect."¹⁶ So Valéry, we may assume, was not a man who easily shed tears for the past. None the less, as an academic he preferred rational strategies and wanted to know exactly what was at stake. But his opponents blocked all debate on definitions, as well as on the question of what could still be "rescued" from European civilization. When the discussions finally started, after all these mutual irritations, Valéry, perhaps already a little battle-weary, merely fulfilled his role as chairman, politely giving the floor to the speakers.

MODERN MAN

At the start of the conference in Nice many opposing views were expressed. Some of the intellectuals emphasized the great importance of individualism, freedom and liberty. Others underlined the importance of religious, Christian ideas. Modern man was also seen from a more pragmatic point of view, as, for instance, how a small community such as a university could prepare the new generations of young people for the modern world. At the same time there were also those who defended state control, arguing that without a powerful nation state no one could survive.

In this heated debate it was the liberal De Madariaga who was the first speaker. His ideal modern man was simply a human being who believed in himself, that is, in the laws of nature and his own experience (74). From this point of view the state was inferior to the individual and not the other way round. The most important task of the state was to create an environment in which the individual could fully develop himself: "de créer, d'organiser, de perpétuer et d'administrer une culture qui servira à

la formation, à l'encadrement, à la finalité de l'individu et que c'est dans l'individu qu'est la finalité" (76).

The historian De Reynold, who, as we learn from the proceedings, was seated next to De Madariaga, was eager to express a completely different vision, based on his Christian belief. "I represent," he said, loud and clear, "all those human beings whose destination is not here on earth but elsewhere, in heaven." It was of great importance, he said, to discern the profound differences between De Madariaga's anthropocentric ideas and his own theocentric way of reasoning. From the theocentric point of view, man was incapable of reaching his final destination without God: "Du point de vue théocentrique, la fin, c'est la réalisation de tout cela sans doute, et autant que possible sur la terre, mais non en l'homme seul et par l'homme seul: oui bien en Dieu et pour Dieu" (81). Each human being, moreover, was partly a "person" (a spiritual being) and partly an "individual" (a non-spiritual, natural human being). Thus, although he personally considered the "person" more important than the "individual," the obligation of the state was nevertheless to create an environment where the "person" as well as the "individual" could fully develop.

Alfred Zimmern, professor of international relations at the University of Oxford, completely rejected all these ideas (83–86). In fact he disliked the whole undertaking of the conference (the aim of which was the *formation* of modern man) because intellectuals were not Gods who could create man; that was rather too ambitious. The intellectuals simply had to accept modern man as he was. The problem lay in the identity of this modern man. Was he the man on the street? Was he a farmer, a laborer?

Zimmern's criticism was the logical result of the fact that the conference had started without any agreed on definitions. He was therefore free to express his own vision, that of an English professor clearly wishing to distance himself from Thomas Mann's grim view of modern man, which he thought was exaggerated. In his opinion people were not less critical than in the past and could cope with the problems of modern times. Besides, it was a great pleasure to live in modern times; never before had life been so comfortable: "Was there anyone who wanted to go back to the Middle Ages?" he asked the audience. Only De Reynold dared to answer this question and said, "Moi."

Zimmern also believed that modern man could perfectly prepare himself for modern life. He explained how small communities, such as those in universities, offered interesting possibilities towards this end and referred in particular to his own university, Oxford. His discourse was decidedly that of a pragmatist, in other words, that of a proud Englishman who wanted to teach his ambitious colleagues from the Continent a lesson. But in his speech we also recognize the view of the professor of international politics. Zimmern was a man who strongly believed that politics required a practical framework, a starting point. In international politics this starting point could be the League of Nations, while in national politics the university offered interesting possibilities where modern man could be prepared for dealing with complex relations and loyalties.¹⁷

Surprisingly, Valéry's reaction to Zimmern's views was positive, although he himself definitely belonged to the ambitious Continentals Zimmern had criticized; for, on the other hand, his plea for the creation of a "société des Esprits," which would

support and further the aims of the League, seemed to acknowledge the importance of universities as the basis of the intellectual community.

There were also differences of opinion concerning the relationship between modern man and the state. Valéry, as noted, was deeply concerned about the power of the state in which modern man could hardly escape the “will of the collective,” so powerfully conveyed by the press, radio and cinema. De Madariaga and De Reynold, although less concerned, were clearly not in favor of too much state control. The task of the state was to create the best conditions for human life, and nothing more than that. This view, however, was strongly opposed by the Italian philosopher Francis Orestano who believed that the state and the individual were closely linked to each other: they were “solditaires” (103–4). Orestano, an admirer of Mussolini’s Italy, pleaded for the fascist, corporate idea of the state as the unifying power and highest authority in social and political life.

In the end Valéry tried to mitigate all this dissension concerning the relationship between modern man and the state by introducing the notion of “responsibility”, a term that was suggested by the French writer, Henry de Jouvenel: every human being was responsible for his family, his city, his own country (104–7). However, the differences of opinion were hard to harmonize, and Romain even warned them not to stray from the problems Mann had sketched. Finally, De Madariaga proposed a formula that included the various ideas concerning modern man: “L’homme, en tant qu’individu, est encadré dans l’Etat; en tant que personne, il dépasse l’Etat. L’homme a droit à la liberté de son expérience et à porter de façon autonome le poids de sa propre responsabilité” (110). So human man was encapsulated by the power of the state, but because he was more than just an individual, his liberties were still intact.

However, the sole concept that was utterly excluded from this definition was the fascist idea, as expressed by the Italian sociologist Francesco Coppola, according to which there were at least *two* different types of humans: an elite of qualified leaders and, alongside this elite, a majority of people who needed discipline and rules. To which Romain, who constantly monitored the discussions, simply retorted: “We don’t accept this theory” (98), further distancing himself by not using the first person singular but the plural “we” (the non-fascists). As his literary work demonstrated, Romain preferred friendship and loyalty over rules and discipline.¹⁸

NON-RATIONAL MAN

All the speakers at the Nice conference, however, agreed on the great importance of education for the formation of modern man (111–47): the general consensus was that without education modern man could not survive. In his speech De Madariaga made clear that it was the task of the government to provide a high quality education; according to Lévy-Bruhl every child had the basic right to go to school; Orestano pleaded for free education, and Zimmern advocated the introduction of general courses on culture in primary as well as in secondary schools. Surprisingly, it was Valéry himself who commented that not only did the “man on the street” no longer understand the modern world but the intellectuals themselves were seriously hampered by “old notions.” So, he argued, they hardly needed extra training or more education.

Apparently, even the topic of mass education was open to debate. In his written statement Thomas Mann had already warned that the educated people were seduced in large numbers by irrational theories (racist theories) and thus formed a direct threat to European civilization. Besides, so was said during the discussions, education could affect human intuition and thus undermine the shared culture of the people. Was the ordinary person not attracted foremost to intuitive, non-rational ideas? Was the farmer in particular not much closer to nature than the intellectuals, who mostly lived in cities? And was the farmer's happiness not based on this connection to nature? In line with this, the Romanian poet Elena Vacaresco defended the value of "low culture," clearly inspired by Rousseau's ideal of natural man who was uncorrupted by modern civilization (139–40).

Romains, in contrast, fiercely defended rational man: "We prefer an unhappy Socrates to a happy but stupid pig," he stated in no uncertain terms (140). But this point of view and his plea for education of the masses was not shared by most of his colleagues. Vacaresco, perhaps irritated by Romains's undiplomatic words, stood up for intuitive man: "On ne saurait rester pourceau, si l'on dispose d'intuition, de mythes et de symboles. Nous parlions de gens intuitifs, de gens attachés à la terre à cause de la beauté de la terre" (141). Remarkably, De Madariaga, who mostly agreed with Romains, now supported Vacaresco, praising intuitive folk culture, especially the traditions of his native Spain and of Vacaresco's Romania (145), saying that if you wanted to ruin the talent of folk artists, you should send them to school! We should remember that at the time when these views were expressed, the majority of people in Europe, not just in Spain and Romania, still lived in the countryside.¹⁹

Romains soon gracefully surrendered by saying, as if to erase the image of the pig: "Il y a une culture de l'intuition. Les grands artistes cultivent l'intuition" (147). In fact throughout the conference it was not rational but irrational forces that were considered as having the greatest impact on modern man. De Reynold again underlined the importance of religion, repeating that without God modern man had no future; Orestano referred to Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Stirner and pleaded for the rehabilitation of human instinct. De Madariaga seemed to be primarily interested in "irrational" means of expressions (myths and narratives) to facilitate communication with ordinary people. He was intrigued by the way communists and fascists made use of myths for spreading their ideology and was looking for a similar method intellectuals could use; provided, so he argued, that myths were not manipulated by the state but contributed to the unity and peace of mankind, they were harmless and "positive"; if, however, these myths threatened unity and peace they became dangerous:

Les mythes et les symboles à caractère positif élargissent l'humanité, élargissent le concept de l'homme, élargissent le mythe de l'homme, tandis que les mythes et les symboles négatifs le rétrécissent, détruisent l'unité et dressent l'homme contre l'homme. Cela, c'est une conséquence fatale. (165)

His contribution to the debate on myths was the most concrete but also the most cynical. The League of Nations, he argued, lacked symbols and myths and therefore failed to appeal to the masses. What the League needed were symbols and flags, music and even fireworks. In other words, it didn't need arguments but imagination (191).

It was Zimmern who again failed to support and in fact fiercely opposed his Continental colleagues on this subject, saying that he, as an Englishman, disliked all myths. He rejected not only negative but also positive myths. Romain, however, had made it clear from the beginning that participants were expected to take a position towards myths, which could therefore not be neglected or dismissed. Zimmern, who presented himself as the spokesman of all English-speaking people in the world (he was the only Englishman at the conference in Nice), and noting the great interest of his colleagues in myths, was obviously irritated. The debate had reached a complete deadlock, he said, with a deep divide separating English and Continental civilization. And so the outcome of the conference in Nice exposed the ideational conflict between the English and the European (French) positions, although Romain did not think the gap between the two sides was unbridgeable: "Ce n'est pas entre la France et l'Angleterre que passe la séparation, mais nous sommes frappés de l'importance des mythes dans le monde moderne. Il en est qui se développent comme de gros orages autour de nous et dont il faut tenir compte." To which Zimmern's uncompromising reaction was: "Dites plutôt qu'il y a de fausses religions" (212). So in his view myths were nothing more than misleading beliefs.

Valéry concluded the conference with conciliatory words, not as chairman but as the administrative director of the new Centre d'études méditerranéennes, founded in 1933. For him the most important thing was that the representatives of so many European countries had gathered at the new Centre dedicated to the study of western Mediterranean culture. He was hopeful regarding the future of the intellectual cooperation and pleased with the work done so far.

2. BUDAPEST: A NEW HUMANISM

A year later, in 1936, the discussions that had started in Nice were resumed in Budapest. The initiators of the conference were mostly pro-French Hungarian intellectuals and politicians, among them the former prime minister Istvan Bethlen. These Hungarians were very much in favor of maintaining good relations with western European countries, in particular with France, while maintaining cold diplomatic relations with Nazi Germany. When the participants arrived in Budapest, it seemed as if everything was peaceful, although some local anti-Semitic groups were already active in Hungary. The guests were warmly welcomed at an official banquet and invited to the opera and theater. The conference was to be held at the Académie des Sciences and at the Hungarian Parliament, as attractive and stylish as any venue in Paris or Nice.

As in Nice, Valéry again presided over the conference, with the difference that now, Thomas Mann was present in person. Remarkably, Romain was absent, though De Madariaga was on the list of participants. Although De Reynold and Zimmern were absent, religious questions were proposed by the German theologian Dietrich von Hildebrand and the Polish historian Oskar Halecki. Present too was the classical scholar Richard Livingstone, from Oxford, but he was not a "new Zimmern." It seemed that the controversy (exposed in Nice) between the English and the Europeans was, for the moment at least, over. Besides, there were many accomplished figures

from the hosting country, among them four professors from the University of Budapest.

First, however, let us consider the sole participant from the Netherlands, the historian Johan Huizinga, whose contribution strongly influenced the conference. Huizinga had delivered a remarkable speech on the future of the European mind in the 1933 entretiens in Paris. That future, he had argued, was the particular responsibility of the intellectuals, as the direct heirs of the classical *Respublica Litteraria* (the republic of letters). It was thus their duty to watch over Christian ideals, universal humanism, peace and reconciliation (53–64). Huizinga was close to Valéry and had supported the chairman's view about the mind's "power of transformation." Intellectuals had the capability to change things, to transform the world around them (9).²⁰ Now that the discussions had to deal with the term "modern humanism," Huizinga complicated Valéry's work as chairman. In his essay "Humanisme ou humanités?" Huizinga wrote that he really did not know what was meant by the term humanism.²¹ This term was very vague, as was the term "modern man"; these terms were based on diverse, sometimes even contradictory notions. As happened in Nice, here too the participants decided not to define the central term of "humanism." De Madariaga, who, as we know, was not an advocate of defining terms, emphasized Huizinga's words right at the start: "Ici nous avons à souligner la communication de M. Huizinga qui rapproche au terme 'humanisme' un certain vague, un certain arbitraire. ... Peut-être n'est il pas nécessaire de serrer de trop près la définition, et suffit-il d'admettre ce que l'on appelle ordinairement la culture gréco-latine" (12, 18). Huizinga too was not in favor of defining the "new humanism," because, he explained, this term was almost meaningless. The only "new facts" were those ensuing from the rise of science and the intensified contacts between East and West. But, he argued, the influence of antiquity, of the Greek and Roman civilizations, was still dominant in modern times.

Valéry must have regretted that yet again the conference started off without discussing the question of definitions. The opposition, however, which included prominent figures such as Huizinga and De Madariaga, was simply too strong.

ENGAGEMENT AND UNIVERSALITY

Although no definitions were put forward, the representatives in Budapest certainly had some clear-cut opinions on humanism in the twentieth century. Thomas Mann expressed his great interest in the irrational aspects of human beings. He wanted the new humanism to include more than only letters and arts, but to embrace the life sciences such as the study of primitive man (ethnology) and the new movement of psychoanalysis. Valéry however, was not at all interested in Freud's psychoanalytical theories, having described himself once as "the least Freudian of men."²² It was thus thanks to Mann that Freud's theories nevertheless received some attention at the conference.

Mann's interest in psychoanalysis and ethnology did not mean that he was no longer a principal opponent of irrational theories. On the contrary. Perhaps because in 1936 he had given up all attempts to come to terms with the Nazis and had openly taken a stand against their regime, he had become more militant than ever before.

This militancy also found expression in his vision of the new humanism which was incomparable with the humanism of the past; “Cette humanité—telle est mon impression—englobera et absorbera le domaine spirituel comme un élément naturel de la vie, au lieu d’assigner, à la manière de nos pères, aux belles-lettres, à la chose littéraire, une province spéciale, en marge de la Réalité et de la vie active” (175). In his speech Mann defined humanism as the complete reverse of fanaticism. It was closely related, he said, to justice, freedom and tolerance. This kind of humanism ought to be defended; its defense was even a moral obligation! (54–55).

De Madariaga’s position was as principled as Mann’s. Humanism, he said, was identical with universalism. The activities of the League of Nations were of great importance for modern man. Geneva, he stated, was a symbol of the emergence of a new kind of humanity. To understand De Madariaga’s view we should remember that from 1931 to 1936 he was the permanent Spanish representative at the League of Nations. In other words, he was part of the universal political system he was propagating.

According to De Madariaga one of the conditions for modern humanism was that the individual was given priority over the state. This was because the state represented just a small community, while the universal human being represented the whole human community on earth. This view meant that the political theories of “old” humanists were no longer relevant or acceptable. Even the celebrated Machiavelli was excluded from De Madariaga’s modern humanism because he had given priority to the state: “Certes c’était un grand humaniste, mais ce n’est pas un humaniste moderne. C’est de lui que provient l’idée du service de l’Etat comme d’un service auquel tout le reste doit s’asservir. Non, notre nouvel humanisme ne peut admettre cette doctrine” (90).

These ideas accorded with Valéry’s negative view of the power of the nation state, and with his low opinion of politics. According to Nicole Celeyrette-Pietri the discoveries of Louis Pasteur and Alessandro Volta fascinated him much more than treaties and battles.²³ Humanism without the great diplomat and political philosopher Machiavelli would therefore not have been a great loss for Valéry.

However, the Italian writers Vicanco Ussani and Ugo Ojetti opposed these ideas and upheld *their* Machiavelli (110–18). He was on a level with the famous classical writers and philosophers such as Virgil, Cicero, and Horace, so his ideas could not simply be disqualified as outdated. De Madariaga, they said, was a dreamer, a man who naively believed in the coming into existence of a universal state and a universal humanity. They saw him as an unlucky aviator who disappears into the clouds without ever returning to earth. But this “aviator” stood firm and repeated that for modern people Machiavelli was no longer of relevance.

At the same time De Madariaga welcomed artists from the past who were capable of promoting a universal spirit, including Bach and Mozart, whose “supra-rational” music stimulated the unity of mankind (92). This did not imply that De Madariaga was now more lenient towards religious ideas. The laws of nature remained fundamental for him, yet the inner man was more complicated than could be understood at first sight. This inner man was made up of diverse faculties, such as reason, intuition, memory and imagination (88). Religion, he said, certainly should be respected, but in the end it was subordinate to everything that was natural.

At the conference there were however several defenders of the Christian religion, including Dietrich von Hildebrand and Oskar Halecki, who, while supporting De Madariaga's universal ideal, found something very important missing from it. Without God, after all, there could be no universal humanity. Or, as Von Hildebrand put it, God was "le seul point d'unité" (135).

Valéry, although seldom interfering in the discussions, naturally sympathized with the universal ideal, the fundament of the League of Nations. To him, as noted, the nation state was an outdated political form and thus irrelevant to the modern world. Still, nationalists were welcome to deliver their speeches unhindered at the conference, which was, perhaps, an attempt to keep the intellectual front united.

CLASSICAL CULTURE AND THE HUMANITIES

So the concept of *humanism* was based on diverse notions, springing from diverse ideological positions, religious ideas and personal circumstances. But no one denied that modern man's intellectual environment had changed with the rise of science and intensified worldwide contacts, especially with the East. It is obvious from these debates that most of the participants had a strong preference for familiar Western, classical ideas, in spite of their interest in the idea of a new kind of humanity. Somewhat paradoxically, the most passionate advocates of Western culture were the East Europeans, as, for example, the Polish historian Oskar Halecki who claimed that Eastern Europe wanted nothing more than to integrate into Western culture (22–27). He attacked Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* (1918), because the idea of the unavoidable decline of the West—which meant "sentencing the west to death"—was scientifically incorrect in that it totally contradicted Henri Pirenne's theory of historical continuity. Besides, he concluded, Spengler's idea of decline was unacceptable to the recently-founded, Western-oriented nation states like Poland. Without the West these states had no future.

However, the exchange between Alexander Eckhard and Valéry nevertheless made it clear that times had indeed changed. Eckhard had asked Valéry to set up a committee that would defend classical studies in the educational system so as to ensure that the great Greek and Roman thinkers were not lost to future generations. Although Valéry like Eckhard was convinced of the cultural superiority of the West and had a keen interest in Mediterranean culture, he opposed this idea.²⁴ Classical culture, he reasoned, was not a universal culture, and therefore could not be imposed on Asiatic societies: "Il ne faut pas oublier que cette communauté gréco-latine ne peut s'appliquer au monde entier: nous ne pouvons généraliser au point de vouloir étendre à l'univers la culture gréco-latine... évidemment, les nations asiatiques ne sont pas obligées d'adopter cette culture" (124).

Alongside their attachment to classical culture the participants also felt strongly about the traditional, authoritative academic disciplines of the humanities. According to the French physician and writer Georges Duhamel, there was a fundamental divide between "practical" studies, that is, the technical sciences, and "impractical" studies, that is, the humanities, the importance of which he defended (22). As too did Eckhardt, who claimed that the practical sciences were even a great threat to mankind

because they developed at a much faster rate than the moral conscience of human beings. The result was—and the Great War had proven this—the production of terrible weapons. It was therefore the task of the intellectuals to focus unremittingly on humans' moral development.

The Swiss engineer Arthur Rohn tried to lead the discussion away from the war and presented a much more positive view of science (77–82). Did technical science not also produce wonderful results? He referred in particular to the bridges over the Danube in the beautiful city of Budapest. Were these high-quality technical constructions a moral contradiction? Besides, these bridges were of great importance for traffic and trade. In other words, it was thanks to technology that the economy grew and flourished. Rohn was determined to prevent the separation between the technical sciences and the humanities so his message to the conference was not to exclude the sciences. Duhamel responded to this by suggesting that technical research should be incorporated into the concept of humanism (82–83).

Valéry must have been relieved to see that a division between the sciences and the arts had been avoided. He considered it of great importance to maintain some unity and not allow the intellectual world to fall apart as the political world was falling apart at the time. Besides this, Valéry had many good friends outside the world of the humanities. He had always been attracted, as noted earlier, to the strictly logical way of scientific reasoning. Some of his best friends were scientists, such as the physicists Maurice de Broglie and Albert Einstein.²⁵ Einstein especially had left a deep impression on him and strengthened his belief in the unity and indivisibility of the universe. Thus the very idea of dividing the sciences from the humanities would have contradicted all that Valéry believed in.²⁶

CONCLUDING REMARKS

“La Société des Nations suppose la Société des Esprits” was the slogan with which Valéry started the “entretiens.” Members of the European intellectual elite actively participated in the conferences in Nice and Budapest and were willing to ponder deeply over the nature of modern man and the foundations of modern humanism. But opinions differed, of course, as the viewpoints reported in this article illustrate. Immediately at the start of the conference Thomas Mann, whose personal life had been dramatically disturbed by politics, questioned Valéry's strictly non-political approach. A society of intellectuals was powerless, he said, if the intellectuals were not willing to take up positions and did not have the courage to say “yes” or “no” to what was going on in the world. Jules Romains who, as we have seen, did not support Valéry's non-political stance, probably agreed with Mann. Romains and Salvador de Madariaga, because of the sense of urgency of the conference, refused to spend time on formulating definitions of the main terms of the discussion and blocked Valéry's attempts to define modern man and to draw up an inventory of human types. As discussants they certainly were in need of definitions, since from the very start there was much disagreement and sometimes even outright resentment. De Madariaga, for example, upheld the idea of the free, universal human being but was opposed by Gonzague de

Reynold who defended religious man. For his part, Francesco Copolla proposed two types of human beings, leaders and followers.

In spite of all these differences all the discussants agreed on the importance of education for modern man. Education, moreover, was one of Valéry's major priorities, for it was the means to strengthen the role of the intellect in the world ("more brain"). Yet intuitive knowledge was also defended in Nice, with Elena Vacaresco in particular pleading for the popular culture of ordinary people.

The discussions in Nice ended in a deep disagreement about the meaning and relevance of myths for modern man. Zimmern blamed his colleagues, particular the French, for their interest in "false religions" (myths). Modern man, according to him, could easily do without myths: step by step, first in small and later in larger communities, mankind could be trained how to live in the complex modern world.

Valéry must also have been disappointed to see that many of his colleagues wanted to discuss at such length the question of myths. In Budapest, even Mann, although in Nice he had warned against irrational theories, seemed intrigued by the irrational faculties of human beings and insisted on extending the humanities to include the new fields of psychoanalysis and ethnology. Others pleaded for the presence of more music and more imagination in the world, so that the highly educated could share a common language with the people.

Paul Valéry was perhaps one of the last people who believed that only the brain-power of writers, the representatives of high culture, could save the world. Interestingly, the 2010 Nobel Prize laureate Mario Vargas Llosa has recently reiterated Valéry's words, stressing the importance of a revival of culture as a stimulus to critical thought. He cautions us that today the world is dominated by mass culture, the world of the common run of people, which is why the elite must win back its cultural hegemony.²⁷

NOTES

1. For the aims, assumptions and organization of intellectual cooperation, see Pham-Thi-Tu, *La coopération intellectuelle sous la Société des Nations* (Geneva: Droz, 1962); Jan Kolasa, *A League of Minds: The International Intellectual Cooperation Organization of the League of Nations* (Diss. Princeton University, 1960); and Jean-Jacques Renoliet, *L'Unesco oubliée. La Société des Nations et la coopération intellectuelle (1919–1946)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1999). For intellectual cooperation as part of the broad field of "cultural internationalism," see Akira Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997). For an overview of the discussions on modern man in Budapest, see Henri de Montety, "L'Entretien de Budapest sur le rôle des Humanités dans la formation de l'homme moderne (8–12 juin 1936)," *Revue d'Études Françaises* 12 (2007): 195–215.
2. Michel Jarrety, "Les 'Entretiens' de la Société des Nations," in *La république des lettres dans la tourmente (1919–1939)*, ed. Antoine Compagnon (Paris: CNRS/Alain Baudrie et Cie, 2011), 97–105.
3. Jan Kolasa, *A League of Minds*, 65–72.
4. Paul Valéry and Henri Focillon, introduction to *Correspondance 1. Pour une Société des Esprits* (Paris: Institut International de Coopération Intellectuelle, 1933), 13. Some years before, Valéry had already introduced the term "la politique de l'esprit." See Paul Valéry,

- The Outlook for Intelligence*, trans. Denise Folliot and Jackson Mathews (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 89–113.
5. Lettre de Paul Valéry à Salvador de Madariaga, in *Correspondance* 1, 115–32.
 6. George Meredith, *Modern Love* (sonnet 48), 1862. Ironically, the Nice and Budapest conferences were all male affairs, with only one woman, Elena Vacaresco, contributing to the discussions.
 7. Valéry was highly interested in the Paneurope project of count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi. Valéry participated in the French Paneurope Committee that was founded in 1927. See Jean-Luc Chabot, *Aux origines intellectuelles de L'Union européenne. L'idée d'Europe unie de 1919 à 1939* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 2005), 101.
 8. Paul Gifford, "Thinking-Writing Games of the 'Cahiers'," in *Reading Paul Valéry: Universe in Mind*, ed. Paul Gifford and Brian Stimpson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 40.
 9. Judith Robinson-Valéry, "The Fascination of Science," in *Reading Paul Valéry*, 77–78.
 10. Paul Valéry and Henri Focillon, introduction to *Correspondance* 1, 13.
 11. *Entretiens. L'avenir de l'esprit européen* (Paris: Institut International de Coopération Intellectuelle, 1934), 289–93; hereafter cited in the text.
 12. *Entretiens. La formation de L'homme moderne* (Paris: Institut International de Coopération Intellectuelle, 1936), 12–21; hereafter cited in the text.
 13. Klaus Mann, *Het Keerpunt* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 1985), 97.
 14. One of the reasons Mann hesitated to oppose the Nazis was his concern for his German publishing house. See Hermann Kurzke, *Thomas Mann: A Life as a Work of Art. A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 381–87.
 15. De Reynold and Valéry were definitely not the only intellectuals who believed that Europe was in a deep crisis in those days. Pessimism concerning Europe's civilization characterized the ideas of Arnold Toynbee, Oswald Spengler, Hermann von Keyserling and many other leading intellectuals. See Jean-Luc Chabot, *Aux origines intellectuelles de l'Union européenne*, 229.
 16. Nicole Celeyrette-Pietri, "Politics, History and The Modern World," in Robinson-Valéry, *Reading Paul Valéry*, 238.
 17. So long as the intellectual foundations were not in place, Zimmern thought that the League was powerless and thus that "all those whose activity lies in the realm of the intellect must set to work to lay those intellectual foundations. A. Zimmern, *Learning and Leadership: A Study of the Needs and Possibilities of International Intellectual Cooperation* (Geneva: League of Nations, 1927), 13–14, cited in Kolasa, *A League of Minds*, 88.
 18. See the twenty-eight volumes of his novel *Les hommes de bonne volonté* (Paris: Flammarion, 1932–1946).
 19. So De Madariaga, although he adhered to the international ideals of the League of Nations, clearly expressed himself here in nationalist terms. A phenomenon that was not uncommon during the intellectual debates, as can be learned from: Daniel Laqua, "Internationalisme ou affirmation de la nation? La coopération intellectuelle transnationale dans l'entre-deux-guerres," *Critique internationale* 52 (2001): 51–67.
 20. Valéry, *The Outlook for Intelligence*, 91, 94.
 21. Johan Huizinga, "Humanisme ou humanités?" *Entretiens. Vers un nouvel humanisme* (Paris: Institut International de Coopération Intellectuelle, 1937), 200–203; hereafter cited in the text.
 22. Malcolm Bowie, "Dream and the Unconscious," in Robinson-Valéry, *Reading Paul Valéry*, 263.
 23. Nicole Celeyrette-Pietri, "Politics, History and the Modern World," in Robinson-Valéry, *Reading Paul Valéry*, 238.
 24. From Valéry's *Cahiers* we can learn that he was fascinated by the old world of the Mediterranean, a world in which trade and culture flourished and the notion of citizenship and respect for the individual predominated. To rescue this world for future generations and stimulate the study of the Mediterranean the *Centre d'études méditerranéennes* (later renamed the *Centre Universitaire Méditerranéen*) was founded in 1933.

25. Robinson-Valéry, "The Fascination of Science," 70–84.
26. Einstein himself strongly defended the position of science with respect to philosophy. See his controversy with Henri Bergson on time and relativity in Jimena Canales, "Einstein, Bergson, and the Experiment that Failed: Intellectual Cooperation at the League of Nations," *MLN, Comparative Literature Issue* 5 (2005): 1168–91.
27. Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Future of Humanism*, Lecture at the Nexus Institute, Tilburg, 8 June 2013.