

Speech of Mohsin Hamid

at: Opening Press Conference Frankfurter Buchmesse 2022

When I was a child in California in the 1970s, I believed that the world would keep getting better. This seemed obvious to me; we lived in the preamble to science fiction. In the week that I was born, the fourth pair of human beings ever to walk on the moon arrived there and went about their mission. As a six-year-old, I followed broadcasts of the first Space Shuttle undergoing test flights just a few hours away from our house. I saved beautiful postage stamps depicting the Viking probes to Mars.

In the 1980s I lived in Pakistan. We had a horrible dictator and experienced the fallout of the Soviet-American proxy war in Afghanistan. But relatively safe in my comfortable neighbourhood I still believed the world would continue to improve. Sure enough, when I was seventeen, our dictator died and a young woman named Benazir Bhutto was elected our Prime Minister; a year later, the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan and the Berlin Wall fell.

I spent the 1990s in the United States. The American economy was booming, at least for students at elite universities like me. Email arrived, and the internet, and web browsers, and dot coms. Friends of mine were leaving their studies, leaving their jobs, to found new companies and become multi-millionaires. Some even succeeded. There were wars, of course, and genocides, and an emerging sense that fossil fuels might be a problem, but surely nothing, I reasoned, that technology and democracy and the market could not eventually solve.

The 2000s were more problematic for me, but somehow my sense of optimism remained mostly intact. I spent the decade in London, and from there I saw (on television) the Twin Towers fall, and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq begin, and tens of thousands die in terrorist and counter-terrorist violence in Pakistan. I was stopped and searched at Western airports, held and questioned for hours at immigration. The financial crisis struck and threatened to bring national economies to their knees. But still, I had faith this disastrous era would pass. I believed a trend towards the better would return.

I forced myself to continue to believe through much of the 2010s, living once again in Pakistan. I forced myself to believe through the Syrian civil war. I forced myself to believe through Brexit and the election of Donald Trump. I forced myself to believe through Pakistan's rolling back of civil liberties and press freedoms and democracy; through the terrible Pakistani flood of 2010, through the shockingly rapid retreat of glaciers in the Himalayas, through the blistering day in 2017 when my nation recorded a temperature of 53.7 degrees Celsius.

And then, sometime around 2020, as the Covid pandemic came, and it was every country for itself, and borders closed, and there were no flights in or out of Pakistan for many weeks, and schools and offices were shut, and driving around was restricted, and the stars came out again at night, because the pollution had receded, and bees and butterflies and birds were everywhere, and my city of twelve million people was quiet, I could no longer force myself to believe, and I found that my faith in inevitable improvement was gone.

I no longer believed our world would just get better. I spoke to friends on my phone and on my computer, both around the city and around the world, and it struck me that they no longer believed either. I turned fifty in 2021, and my birthday arrived with no real sense of celebration, but rather with a feeling, which I tried to hide, both from others and from myself, of confusion and of loss.

I often lecture at schools and universities, in many different countries, and I often hear from young people that they never believed what I believed. They never believed the world was getting better. For them it seemed instead that it was getting worse. Their parents might have grown up in a less troubled era. But for their own generation the task was just to do the best they could in the face of mounting uncertainty and anxiety.

At first I tried to explain to them that I had been able to believe for so long because I had thought there was a clear formula for progress, the formula of democracy plus science plus economics. Even as I said this, however, I realized that the foundation of my old conviction was both more simple and more profound than that. I had believed that the world would get better because I had believed in the irresistibility of cooperation.

But in recent times cooperation has gone into reverse. We know that without cooperation we cannot tackle challenges like climate change, inequality, migration, disease, weapons of mass destruction. And yet we seem determined to cooperate less and less. Our world is fracturing into mutually suspicious nations and clans and tribes.

I do not know why this is the case, though, like all of us, I do have my theories. One of these theories is that we have been taking what was not ours to take. We have taken huge sums of money from future generations, in the form of debt. We have taken millions of years of sunshine from the past, in the form of fossil fuels. We have depleted our aquifers and poisoned our rivers and our air. We have exploited our poor and our vulnerable. We have been stealing. And now we have been caught. Our punishment is the destruction of our environmental and social habitats. We feel this destruction as a diminishment of our potential. We feel the pie is shrinking. And so we must each grab as big a slice as possible.

Eventually, new solutions will be found, better and fairer ways of using energy and building economies and organizing societies. And once that happens, our turn away from cooperation will be reversed. But between now and then, we face terrible risks unknown to our ancestors. As we polarize and tribalize, we are unlike the civilizations of the past in one very important dimension. We are vastly more powerful. The harm we can do to one another, and to our planet, is unprecedented in its scope and complexity. We require, therefore, a resistance to the current trend away from cooperation.

Some of us must swim against the tide.

Which brings me, at last, to novels, to literature. The future of humanity is shaped by the stories we choose to believe in. And in the domain of fiction, we have three main mass-storytelling forms: film, television, and books. Film and television show us a world that looks like our world. People look like people. Trees look like trees. The audiences of these stories are viewers.

But books are different. Books look nothing like our world. When we open a book we encounter letters and punctuation marks against a white field. It is we who then create in our imagination people and places and sights and sounds. The reader of a book is not a viewer. Readers are creators, inspired by the source code of the text they hold in their hands.

Writers do not write novels. Writers write half-novels. It is readers who take these half-novels and animate them into what they experience as novels. Readers are the casting directors and cinematographers of the films of novels that play out in their minds. To read a book is to engage in a radical act of co-creation. And to write a book is to invite another human being into a shared space of imaginative play. It is, in essence, similar to what we did as children, when we met with a friend and pretended to be at a tea party or in outer space, when we pretended to be pirates, and we said this tree is the mast of a ship, and this grass is the ocean, and these fallen leaves are the fins of sharks.

But when we grow up we tend to leave these games behind. As adults most of us do not engage in such shared imaginative play. The very idea seems, somehow, to embarrass us. Except when we are alone, that is, and we pick up a book, and we give ourselves permission to play in our imagination with another person, a person we do not know and who is not there, a writer.

As our world turns away from cooperation, this is why novels are important. Not only because they tell us stories of people who are different from us, and allow us to empathize, and encourage us to blur the boundaries between one group and another. No, novels are also important because of their form, because writing and reading a book is itself a profound and hopeful act of cooperation. Novels emanate from our desire for the fertility that arises when we remember that it is we who imagine ourselves and our world into existence, that we are jointly the authors of what we call reality, and that we can choose to author differently.

In a world that seems to be entering into a time of darkness, novels are embers that we cup in our hands, embers of potential.

They remind us that we can remake our world together.

But far more important, in our time of turning away, they remind us that.

Frankfurt, 18 October 2022

The spoken word is valid.

