

Paul Kennedy's New Zeitgeist in an Age of Confusion

Speaker: Paul Kennedy (Yale University, Professor of History) Dr. Kennedy

Moderator: Chulki Ju (Cheong Wa Dae, Senior Secretary to the President for Foreign Affairs and National Security)

"Is a new Zeitgeist in the 21st century possible to imagine?" asked Paul Kennedy, Director of International Security Studies at Yale University and author of *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. Professor Kennedy attempted to answer this question by presenting his views about the "New Zeitgeist in an Age of Confusion" at the 16th World Knowledge Forum on October 21, 2015.

Professor Kennedy began his discussion with an overview of the concept of Zeitgeist, the 'spirit of the times we are in,' and its appearance in history. During the time of the French Revolution, the first notion of a new Zeitgeist appeared when a fresh optimism corresponded with the breaking down of the old order, the ancien régime, and its potential replacement by something better. Professor Kennedy noted that thinkers and artists such as Wordsworth, Hegel, Beethoven, and Kant optimistically anticipated the coming of a new, better age, but this notion soon died and faded from view.

After the First World War, Prof. Kennedy noted that a second Zeitgeist seemed to arise. United States President Woodrow Wilson established the League of Nations.

However, he said, "Strong and powerful nations like Nazi Germany destroyed the new Zeitgeist." Therefore, that attempt at establishing a new world order failed.

Similar results followed World War II, when a new Zeitgeist was set into action with the creation of the United Nations, but that optimism was broken by the Cold War. And again, in 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union seemed to usher in yet another new Zeitgeist.

"The old order was gone, hope rose again," said Professor Kennedy. Yet, this hopeful, forward-looking "New World Order" has now been broken by problems within our modern world.

And these problems are manifold. Professor Kennedy presented a few of them: deep poverty and malnutrition in Africa, the loss of borders in places like Ukraine, the Middle East, and parts of sub-Saharan Africa, and the way jihadist extremist group ISIL "has come almost out of the sun, out of the desert" to challenge order in the Middle East. How do such issues relate with the notion of a contemporary Zeitgeist?

They speak against the idea that we might be experiencing a new age of optimism, Professor Kennedy said. Describing our world as "fractured and confused," he noted, "Legality, international understanding, and international treaties and contracts are what the new world order is based on."

However, many today are "taking the law into their own hands." Quarrelling parties are not really coming to the table to try to work out their disputes; in fact, he said, many "despise governments and despise the world order." As a result, Professor Kennedy said, "We don't have a great, optimistic, overwhelming Zeitgeist. We have a world in a lot of trouble."

Nevertheless, Professor Kennedy did note signs of progress in today's world. Successful United Nations peacekeeping missions, international election monitoring, helpful World Bank investments and International Monetary Fund loans to underdeveloped nations, and various institutions like the Federal Reserve and the United States Treasury helping to ensure economic stability all indicate hope within our troubled age.

"Our advancement may be small and incremental, and it may break down," Kennedy said, "but sometimes you do get improvements."

Such improvements are not necessarily achieved by the people at the top, Professor Kennedy noted.

"The people who get things done are the negotiators, the diplomats, the engineers, the scientists," he said. Realizing that we can make the world better by continually looking ahead and moving forward, like Sisyphus rolling the boulder up the mountain, we should take this to heart.

"It really is hard, hard work," Professor Kennedy warned. "It's not easy, it's not jubilation."

Although we may have no general, optimistic Zeitgeist in our current time, we nevertheless can improve the world. We can go forward by taking smaller-scale steps and incremental measures, Professor Kennedy said.

Joseph Rogers, Reporter