

What is to Be Done?

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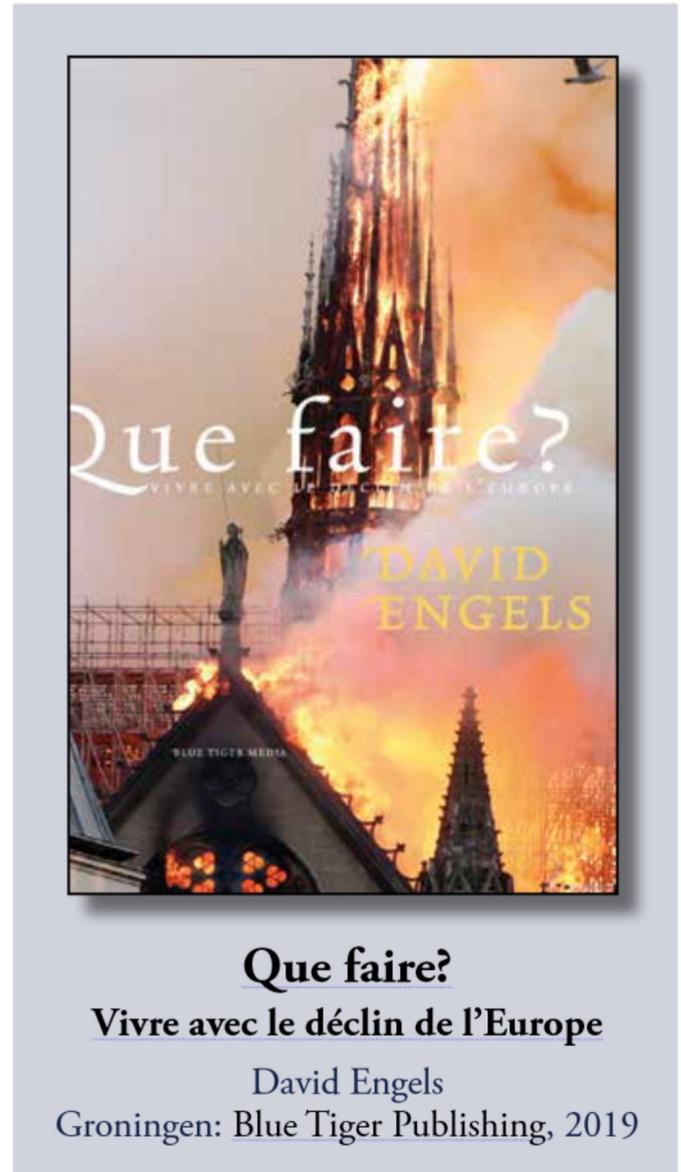
More than a hundred years ago, the Russian Communist revolutionary Vladimir Lenin published his famous book, *What is to Be Done?* (in Russian, *Tschto delat?*). Now, after decades of socialist and liberal devastation across modern Western societies, Belgian scholar David Engels has published a book that asks the same question. Available in several languages (although an English version has yet to be published), this slim volume serves both as a conservative manifesto and as a guide to “living with the decline of Europe” (the book’s subtitle).

While Lenin critiqued the “bourgeoisie class” — and Friedrich Engels in particular for being *too* bourgeois — David Engels has written a critique of contemporary Western societies and their decline. He writes: “Our institutions, our values, our identities have become empty shells, which we possess only in name, but which have long since lost their real content, their soul.” That loss goes hand in hand with the decline of Christianity, which Engels calls the “actual breath of life of the Occident” — its biggest cultural force.

Engels is a Belgian professor of Ancient History, now serving as a Senior Analyst at the Institute of Western Affairs in Posen, Poland. He received acclaim for his 2012 book, *Le déclin: la crise de l’Union européenne et la chute de la République romaine* (Decline: The Crisis of the European Union and the Fall of the Roman Republic), in which he compared the disintegration and downfall of the Roman Empire to the present-day EU. In that work, he concluded that the EU will either develop into a centralised, semi-totalitarian entity or collapse within itself.

A prolific writer, Engels followed that book with several others — such as the 2019 collection of essays, which he edited, *Renovatio Europae: Plädoyer für einen hesperialistischen Neubau* (A Plea for a New Hesperialist Construction of Europe). In his own contribution to that work, Engels proposed the use of the term “Hesperialism” to refer to a “patriotic commitment to a united Europe, which, however, should be based not only on universalist but also on conservative values.” Engels also recently wrote a proposal for a “Preamble for the Constitution of a Federation of European Nations,” which was published in several languages. [The English language version appeared online and in the previous edition of this magazine.]

Engels — who is president of the Oswald Spengler Society and a member of the newly founded think-tank, *Renovatio Institut für Kulturelle Resilienz* — is one of the fastest rising stars in European conservatism. However, *Que faire?* is less programmatic than other works and reads more



Que faire?

Vivre avec le déclin de l’Europe

David Engels

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like a personal reflection, written during his transition from academic life in Belgium to his new life in Poland.

The crisis that Engels describes in this book is not only of a cultural-intellectual nature; it is predominantly political. He mentions, among other things, the reign of a “false morality” in public life, as well as the increasing (and quite obvious) polarisation between rich and poor, the transfer of power to anonymous financial oligarchies, and a growing totalitarianism which has manifested itself in the spread of surveillance, special laws restricting freedom, and the demonisation (and hindering) of any genuine opposition. Engels describes these phenomena and others in 24 chapters,

whose very titles evoke a certain pessimistic pragmatism: “Overcoming Desperation,” “Renouncing Obedience,” “Recapturing Europe,” “Surround Yourself with Beauty,” “Choosing the Battlefield,” and “Preparing for the Worst.”

Engels does speak of the need for a “constructive resistance” in order to save and protect the principles and ideals that once undergirded Western society. To this end, he proposes concrete actions, such as moving out of urban centers to more manageable areas — that is, to villages, small towns, or the countryside (big cities must be completely avoided). He also urges withdrawing from speculative, profit-oriented financial investments and, instead, urges support for small, local businesses. He advocates for a reconnection to our natural environment, to wilderness and the agricultural life. And he even recommends a rejection of the cult of youth and sexualisation, and a greater appreciation for the body as ‘gift.’

In terms of our attitude towards the state, Engels recommends a healthy scepticism and cautions against our reliance on state institutions for safety and security. (After all, such institutions have been promoting the very developments that have contributed to our insecurity.) At the same time, he opposes making distinctions among people in terms of nationality, which he sees as standing in the way of European cooperation. In his conclusion, Engels provocatively calls on Christians to stop being merely “model citizens” and, instead, demonstrate a real commitment to their beliefs through firm and continual resistance to official structures by all legal means.

An underlying theme in all of Engels’ proposals is that they must serve to *isolate* harmful influences. We must cut ourselves off, he argues, from the ties that bind us to the misguided developments of recent decades and centuries. In particular, Engels proposes an “inner demarcation” between those who think in transcendent terms and those who essentially regard themselves and others as ‘machines.’ His hope is that such a demarcation will encourage people to concern themselves more with their own spiritual destiny rather than their own material satisfaction — and thereby serve as heroic role models for others and perhaps thusly contribute to the preservation of the Occident.

Interestingly, Engels also calls for a rejection of what he sees as “quarterly thinking” — an attitude or mindset that only seeks short-term profits — and for a return to thinking in terms of decades, or even centuries and millennia. Adopting such a long-term perspective could change our strategic thinking about the future. In fact, in order to overcome the *zeitgeist*, which is obsessed with the here and now, and for the sake of the salvation of Western civilisation, Engels proposes an alliance of “tradition-oriented” actors who may share an appreciation and awareness of time.

The creation of such a civilisational alliance would require, to begin with, a restoration of *realism*, particularly in these unprecedented times. “Whatever one may think of this epidemic,” he writes, “everywhere the impression is getting

stronger that life will not be quite the same from now on.” As such, Engels concludes that we have to prepare for the worst. Sentimental nostalgia is inappropriate. “The moment when it’s too late and our collapse is unstoppable: this is the moment we have reached today.”

Beyond the pandemic, he also notes the oppressive dominance of left-liberal ideology — in politics, business, media, education, and in our general culture — and the transformation of society through the loss of *real* values, as well as demographic decline, mass migration, and Europe’s political impotence. The effects of these factors are so far-reaching, Engels says, that a restoration of the Western political order as we once knew it is highly unlikely.

This little book is a powerful call to arms. Each of us who feels connected to our Western heritage is being called to take responsibility for his actions and to prepare for even greater struggle. It is, recalling a thought by Nietzsche, only when we focus on the inevitable that we can truly become who we really are. But in order to become our real selves, certain steps are required. These include the continual re-conversion of the individual in his pursuit of happiness. As Engels reminds us, this is not about the desire to ‘find oneself’ but, rather, about the merciless sacrifice and extirpation of any mediocrity — and the rejection of all compromise. In other words, we need to know what we are really fighting for. Otherwise, true self-respect is impossible.

As Engels writes, our task is thus “to carry on the torch and pass its flame, as pure and bright as possible, to those who come after us, so that from the night of a world devoid of meaning, a new order may arise.” Such words are sorely needed today. May this book have an effect similar to Lenin’s book — and provoke a fundamental political-philosophical conversion in the very heart of Western man. ■

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Christians battle Moors in a scene from the 13th century “*Cantigas de Santa Maria*,” commissioned by Alfonso X of Castile (1221-1284).