

summary

Introduction of Jo Callahon and His Background



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The chapter begins with Gerd Leonhard introducing Jo Callahon, who is from Belgium. Jo Callahon describes his extensive experience of over thirty years in the digital, innovation, and disruption sectors. He highlights his pioneering role in establishing the first web agency in Belgium 33 years ago, which allowed him to witness and participate in numerous technological innovations. For the past seventeen years, he has shifted his focus from providing services to analyzing the broader implications of these changes on companies, the economy, and society. He has authored seven books, with the latter three focusing on the intersection of technology and society, and his most recent book solely on society.

Shared Perspectives on Societal Shifts and Personal Evolution



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Gerd Leonhard notes the striking parallels between his and Jo Callahon's messages, particularly concerning Europe, technology, and a shared shift towards questioning fundamental aspects of human existence and purpose. He mentions reading Callahon's book, "Fuck the System," and finding significant overlap in their perspectives. Both speakers have experienced a change in their professional focus from business transformation to addressing deeper philosophical questions about the future of humanity, the role of machines, and policy-making. This evolution has moved them from discussing straightforward topics to engaging with philosophy and the future survival of society, a shift they find both challenging and interesting.

The Evolution of Disruption and Transformation Beyond Digital



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Jo Callahon elaborates on his experience with a digital transformation project for BNP Paribas, which revealed that disruptions extend beyond the purely digital realm. He explains that factors like an aging population, housing affordability, and climate change also significantly impact industries like banking. This realization led to a broader approach to transformation, moving beyond just digital aspects. While acknowledging the current prominence of AI in disrupting technologies, businesses, and economies, Callahon emphasizes that digital is no longer the sole or even the most important driver of societal transformation.

The Challenge of Focusing on Meaningful Discourse



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Gerd Leonhard discusses the challenge for speakers like himself and Callahon to move beyond simply making a living and instead focus on making a difference by addressing what truly matters, which often involves the future of human thriving. He notes that this shift can be threatening to traditional business models, as audiences and clients may find discussions about deeper societal issues more personal and unsettling. Leonhard shares his recent decision to abandon less critical topics and focus solely on what he deems truly important, moving away from discussions about using AI for sales. Callahon acknowledges this as a luxury they can afford due to their established careers, noting that while many in their field recognize these issues, not all can afford to act on them, even if it impacts economic value. He observes that boards and CEOs understand these broader concerns but struggle to integrate them into their core business strategies due to stakeholder pressures.

The Shift Towards Addressing Core Societal Issues and the Role of AI



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Gerd Leonhard expresses gratitude for the ability to focus on what truly matters, including inherently social, political, policy, and belief-related issues, even if it disrupts his business model. He highlights the importance of asking fundamental questions about what humanity wants with AI and Europe, and what sacrifices are acceptable. Callahon notes a significant shift in public awareness over the past year and a half, with more people acknowledging that current global events are not normal, making it easier to convey a broader narrative beyond just business concerns. Leonhard also observes that AI is becoming proficient in forecasting, prediction, and analytics, with services like FuturSearch emerging. He expresses a reluctance to simply deliver AI-generated scripts for his work, indicating a move towards advocacy.

Redefining the Speaker's Role and the Purpose of Europe



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Gerd Leonhard articulates his new focus on the “human future” rather than “human business,” transitioning from a service provider of speeches to an advocate. He emphasizes the critical question of “what do we want?” over “what can we have?” This, he believes, is the central question for Europe, moving beyond the capabilities offered by American technology to defining its own desires and purpose. He then transitions to discussing Jo Callahon’s book and the journey that led him to these insights.

The Genesis and Core Themes of “Fuck the System and Other Bad Ideas for the Future”



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Jo Callahon clarifies the full title of his book, “Fuck the System and Other Bad Ideas for the Future,” explaining its origin during US election night in Amsterdam. His desire to understand the underlying mechanisms and risks behind political events, particularly the rise of Trump, spurred his research. He discovered patterns that led him to write the book, starting with a pessimistic outlook but ultimately finding hope and solutions. The book was written between February and mid-July, incorporating real-time developments, including the materialization of AI. The book aims to answer three key questions: what is happening in the world and why it's not going away, how strong or weak Europe truly is, and how Europe can adopt a new innovation paradigm to address its challenges, moving beyond traditional competition.

The State of Europe: Challenges and Potential



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Gerd Leonhard agrees that the first part of Callahan's book, concerning global events, is clear and reflects a disaster for Western norms. He likens the current situation between America and Europe to an "ugly divorce." He then focuses on the second part of the book, which addresses the actual problems in Europe, and the third part, which proposes reasonable actions. Leonhard highlights Callahan's search for "European self-confidence" as a crucial point. He reflects on his own European identity, living in Switzerland, and how Europe is often viewed with a degree of detachment, despite being an integral part of it. He prompts a discussion on the current state of Europe, its strengths, weaknesses, and a realistic analysis.

Europe's Innovation Infrastructure and Strategic Mistakes



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Jo Callahon asserts that Europe is in a much better position than commonly perceived, possessing a strong infrastructure for innovation and change. He identifies two major mistakes made over the past twenty years: outsourcing manufacturing and production to the East (China) due to cost-effectiveness, and following the path of least resistance in bringing innovations from the lab to market. He recalls a time when Europe led in inventions like video recorders and had prominent companies in mobile and social media, but this began to fade about twenty years ago. European innovators often sought funding and exits in the US due to its larger market. However, Callahon emphasizes that the underlying talent and academic foundations, particularly in areas like AI graduates, remain strong in Europe. The recent geopolitical shifts and the perceived “divorce” from the US have spurred a renewed focus on “sovereign technology” within Europe, with a desire to reduce reliance on companies like Microsoft and Google. He points to existing European technologies like NextCloud and Proton as examples of strong, underutilized innovations.

The Mindset Problem in Europe: Laziness and Risk Aversion



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Gerd Leonhard echoes Callahan's sentiment, identifying a "mindset problem," a cultural and attitudinal issue, and a degree of saturation in Europe. He contrasts this with the Darwinistic and highly pressured culture of the US. Leonhard points to institutions like ETH in Switzerland, a leading tech school, and the presence of great inventors who have moved abroad. He suggests that Europe lacks the "guts," determination, and risk-taking capacity, attributing this partly to intellectual and general laziness. He believes that cultural change often requires a painful catalyst, likening it to the realization that arises during a divorce or therapy. Leonhard argues that the economic struggles in Germany, for instance, are not due to a lack of intelligence or desire, but rather an issue of attitude. Callahan counters that individuals who are lazy in Europe would likely fail elsewhere too, but acknowledges that many Europeans move to the US due to its entrepreneurial spirit and easier market access.

The Shifting European Landscape and the "Teenager" Metaphor



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Jo Callahan discusses the cultural challenges within Europe, citing the complexity of twenty-seven countries with varying levels of alignment and administrative burdens. However, he notes a significant and rapid shift occurring over the past year and a half, partly catalyzed by events like Trump's pronouncements, which have fostered a more nationalistic and self-reliant sentiment across Europe. He uses the metaphor of Europe as a "teenager" to describe its current state. Just as parents might cut off financial support, the US is signaling a withdrawal of its previous level of engagement, forcing Europe to mature and become self-sufficient. Callahan clarifies that the US is not simply abandoning Europe but wants it to adopt a more conservative, right-wing stance, as outlined in its national security strategy. This forces Europe to confront its own capabilities and responsibilities, akin to a teenager suddenly needing to manage their own finances.

The Evolution of Europe: From Market Project to State Project



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Jo Callahon highlights that Europe, unlike the US, is more fragmented in its laws and regulations, despite having federal laws on top. He mentions that efforts to create a more unified economic structure began in January of the previous year. Gerd Leonhard adds that Europe has historically been a “market project” but now needs to evolve into a “United States of Europe project,” a “state project,” or a “power project.” He emphasizes the distinction between market-driven integration and the necessity of becoming a united entity. Leonhard suggests that this involves pooling sovereignties rather than abandoning them, enabling greater collective strength. He draws a parallel with Switzerland’s federal system, with its cantons retaining autonomy while contributing to a federal level, as a potential blueprint for Europe. He reiterates that a market project alone will be insufficient, especially in the face of geopolitical pressures from Russia and China, necessitating a stronger union. Leonhard supports the idea of a “minister for the future” for Europe, referencing Kim Stanley Robinson’s book, to drive this change in mindset and accelerate progress.

The Need for a European Vision and Thought Leadership



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Jo Callahon emphasizes that his recent books serve as a call to action for those in policy-making positions to develop a future vision for Europe. While acknowledging the presence of numerous experts, he points out the lack of a compelling, simple, and almost populist narrative that can unite people around a shared vision for Europe in 2050. He believes that without a clear outcome and purpose for the changes being asked of citizens and companies, resistance to change will persist. Callahon references the European streaming series “Euphorias” as an example of a sci-fi scenario that realistically depicts future challenges. Gerd Leonhard questions the absence of pan-European public intellectuals and thought leaders, contrasting this with the US, where he can easily name numerous influential figures. He notes the linguistic and geographical barriers in Europe that hinder the creation of widely recognized European intellectuals, suggesting a need for a council of such individuals to foster public thinking and leadership.

The Nature of European Leadership and the Absence of a “European Trump”

Europe Needs Pan-European Thought Leaders

How do we build a shared narrative—beyond national silos—so European voices become household names?



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Jo Callahon theorizes that Europe's stability and its twenty-seven countries with diverse cultures contribute to a lack of a single, dominant leader. He believes this is a positive attribute, preventing the emergence of a "European Trump." While acknowledging the presence of populist figures like Le Pen and Farage, he argues that they do not hold the same level of influence as Trump. Callahon suggests that Europe's intellectual landscape, while rich, does not translate into populist appeal. He also posits that Europeans are unlikely to trust figures like Elon Musk, indicating a need for a different approach to leadership and influence.

The Looming Clash: Humanity vs. Machines and Europe's Stance



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Gerd Leonhard anticipates a significant clash between humans and machines, a “foreign war” between transhumanist, singularity, and techno-optimist ideologies, largely originating from the US, and Europe’s vision for a “human future.” He stresses the importance of Europe standing its ground and rejecting a brand of transhumanism driven solely by efficiency. This ideological conflict, he believes, is inevitable regardless of political changes in the US. Leonhard argues against AI becoming a god or even a person, advocating for it to be viewed as a tool or an agent. He sees a coming clash of civilizations, with Europe, the US, and China representing distinct approaches.

The Transversal Battle for the Future and the Limits of AI Supremacy



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Jo Callahon reframes the conflict not as good versus evil or East versus West, but as a “transversal battle” between those who embrace radical technological advancement and those who do not. He argues that even within the US, many, including Trump supporters, do not desire transhumanism or off-world colonization, preferring a more conservative worldview. Callahon suggests that the proponents of extreme technological acceleration do not represent the broader US population. Gerd Leonhard acknowledges this but points out that the promise of an AI gold rush and dominance is driving support for these developments, with the potential for AGI to lead to transhumanism. He expresses concern about merging with machines, as advocated by figures like Ray Kurzweil, and sees this as an extension of ultra-capitalism and American influence. Callahon proposes that Europe should opt out of the “AI race” as defined by military and economic supremacy, arguing that such a race is ultimately unwinnable and potentially destructive. He questions the utility of an AI arms race and the concept of AGI ruling the world, suggesting that regimes like China would never allow an AI that could undermine their power.

The True Race: AI Implementation and Societal Benefit



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Jo Callahan argues that the race Europe should focus on is the optimal use of AI across all aspects of society and the economy. He suggests that investing billions in developing a European frontier AI model that is only slightly behind existing ones is less critical than focusing on implementation. Callahan asserts that the real-world usage difference between leading AI models is minimal, and the key lies in integrating AI to boost productivity, especially in Europe with its aging population. He advocates for discussions with unions and companies to invest in AI integration for smarter output, rather than solely pursuing the “best AI.” He also extends this to education and military applications, suggesting AI can enhance control and command systems without necessarily developing autonomous killer drones.

Focusing on Transition Sectors for European Economic Strength



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Gerd Leonhard agrees that AI should be viewed as a powerful tool to improve society, not as a god, and that the ultimate goal is to equip society for the future. He asks Jo Callahon to elaborate on his book's suggestion to focus on "transition sectors" within the European economy. Callahon explains that Europe cannot compete in traditional commodity markets like energy, which are subject to scarcity and geopolitical manipulation. However, by reframing energy as a technology, focusing on solar, wind, and other renewable sources, and optimizing their creation and implementation from lab to market, Europe can achieve energy independence and drive down costs. He draws a parallel to the food industry and mobility, questioning whether these sectors will resemble their current forms in fifteen years, suggesting a significant protein transition and potential shifts in personal mobility.

Future of European Industries and Geopolitical Independence



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Jo Callahon discusses the potential for Europe to achieve geopolitical independence by transitioning its industries. He highlights that after decades of effort, Europe can become independent in areas like energy, removing a significant geopolitical weapon. He poses a question about the future of food production and farming in fifteen years, suggesting a shift from current methods. Similarly, he questions whether personal car ownership will persist or be replaced by autonomous shared mobility, predicting the latter. Callahon also touches upon defense, stating that Europe needs different capabilities than traditional fighter planes. He emphasizes that these industries will be different in ten years, and by investing in talent, funding, and market introduction with a transition-focused approach, Europe can compete. He notes that while China is also pursuing transitions, the US has stepped out of this game, creating a significant asset for Europe to compete in various domains over the next decade, driven by planetary needs rather than external dictates.

Competing in the New World and European Social Media Initiative



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Gerd Leonhard agrees with Jo Callahon, stating that Europe needs to compete in the “new world” rather than the old. He observes that the US is politically regressing in many ways, despite its tech companies looking towards the future, creating a paradoxical situation. Leonhard then brings up the idea of building European social media, a topic he has discussed and attempted to address previously by creating alternatives funded directly by users rather than advertisers or investors. Callahon confirms that his project is still in its early stages but has been described in his book. He explains that European technological sovereignty has two dimensions: the platforms and data centers (the “hard B2B side”), which Europe is addressing with AI and cloud initiatives, and the control of traditional media. He argues that social media platforms act as gatekeepers, shaping public narratives, and if Europe doesn’t control this, its efforts on the business side are insufficient. Callahon proposes the need for a direct connection with people, honest storytelling, and the development of “European algorithms” and a platform like “Europe Online.” He acknowledges the network effect of existing platforms like Facebook and TikTok, describing them as a “black hole” from which it’s difficult to escape.

“Europe Online” as a Social Media Alternative



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Jo Callahon outlines a scenario where European media companies could collaborate to create “Europe Online,” a new social media platform. He suggests reverse-engineering popular features from existing platforms while addressing user frustrations with the “entityification” of platforms like Facebook and X. Callahon believes that by copying key features and offering a familiar user experience, this new platform could gain traction. He mentions that technologies like the AT protocol, used by Blue Sky, exist and could enable rapid development. However, he stresses that even with a functional platform, breaking through the network effect of established giants like Facebook and TikTok requires a significant user base, which initiatives like Blue Sky and W Social currently lack. Callahon’s proposed solution involves leveraging existing European media companies to integrate “Europe Online” into their daily content. He envisions a scenario where every article, video, and celebrity interaction from European media outlets would direct users to “Europe Online” to continue the conversation. This would create a massive advertising campaign, potentially allowing Europe to break the network effect and build its own social media ecosystem within a year.

Public Media, Copyback Strategy, and European Cloud



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Gerd Leonhard connects Callahon's "Europe Online" concept to the idea of public media, suggesting it could be a form of public infrastructure funded by taxes, similar to existing public media. He questions whether organizations like the EBU or ITU would be suitable for this, but expresses strong support for the project of creating a European public social media platform. Leonhard then introduces the "copyback strategy" and the "Eurostack," explaining the copyback strategy as taking accessible existing technologies and making them European again, rather than reinventing them. Callahon elaborates that this strategy involves reverse-engineering, not necessarily rebuilding entire legacies. He uses the example of social media, where instead of copying twenty years of code, one would copy the fifteen features people use. He also applies this to AI, suggesting that Europe shouldn't just distill American models, as he believes they have appropriated European culture. Callahon uses the example of Tesla's full self-driving and China's advancements in autonomous driving, suggesting that European AI specialists could train models to replicate these functionalities, even without the same volume of driven kilometers.

Technological Sovereignty and European Cloud Adoption



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Gerd Leonhard shares a concerning statistic from a search indicating a very low percentage (one percent) of achieving technological sovereignty by 2030. He expresses a more optimistic view, suggesting ten to fifteen percent might be achievable, but emphasizes the need for a strong European response. He acknowledges the EU's efforts with the European Cloud model and AI Act but notes the difficulty in convincing companies to switch from established providers like Microsoft for operating systems or Google for productivity tools, despite liking alternatives like ProtonMail. Jo Callahon counters this by describing his successful transition away from Microsoft and Google to a purely European cloud solution using NextCloud, Proton Mail, and a photo app with machine learning capabilities. He asserts that powerful European cloud solutions exist and are sufficient, acknowledging some quirks but believing Europe is on the right path. Callahon disputes the one percent prediction, convinced it's wrong, and explains that as governments and their employees migrate to European solutions, service providers will follow. He predicts that within a decade, a significant portion of people will be using European cloud services, especially with free and capable alternatives like OpenOffice to Microsoft Office.

Supporting European Tech and Communication Strategies



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Gerd Leonhard discusses the potential for companies like Proton to become the next Dropbox or email provider if more funding and supportive legislation were available. He highlights the challenge of balancing pro-European sentiment with the reality of global tech dominance, emphasizing that the goal is not to be anti-American but pro-European. Leonhard stresses the need for Europe to gear up, suggesting that change often comes through “pain and love.” He believes Europe can achieve a federal structure with a happy population, similar to Switzerland. He expresses a desire for continued conversations and the collection of practical ideas, noting the critical moment Europe is in, especially concerning the “intelligence revolution.” He believes Europe’s response to this revolution will shape its future and serve as a blueprint for navigating other technological advancements like robotics, synthetic biology, and genomics.

Europe's Communication Challenge and "I Love the Future" Narrative



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Jo Callahon identifies Europe's biggest problem as its communication strategy, describing it as outdated and lacking a compelling narrative. He contrasts this with the individual efforts of people building their own image of Europe based on external perceptions, like those of Donald Trump. While acknowledging Europe's institutional strengths in defining architecture, finding funding, and creating legislation, he states they "suck at storytelling." Gerd Leonhard agrees and shares his own narrative ideas: "Taking Back Tomorrow" and a campaign called "I Love the Future." He believes this campaign can promote a positive, future-oriented vision for Europe, especially for younger generations who may feel disillusioned. Leonhard argues that this narrative is crucial for combating populism and providing a better outlook. He suggests that in the German approach, reality is built first and then given a narrative, which he believes is ineffective for Europe's current situation. Instead, he advocates for a narrative-first approach to shape how the future is presented.

Collaboration and Finding Information



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Gerd Leonhard fully supports Jo Callahon's ideas and proposes a collaborative effort, inviting those interested in "I Love the Future" to reach out. He then transitions to discussing how people can find more information about their work. Jo Callahon suggests his website, joachimgudron.com, as a starting point for information about his book and speeches, and encourages direct outreach for deeper conversations. Gerd Leonhard shares his updated brand and web address, gertleonhardt.com, and recommends his TV platform, gert.tv, as a free resource for his movies and content, comparing it to YouTube but better. He humorously warns against searching for "Gert" due to a more popular medical condition. Leonhard concludes by emphasizing the importance of forming, loving, building, and helping Europe become the future, calling it a worthy mission.