



Normative Universalism as an Illusion of Order: from the Slogan of 1789 to the Global Compliance Regimes of the 21st Century

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Annotation.

The article is devoted to the critical study of the phenomenon of normative universalism in the historical and modern perspective – from the 1789 slogan "one law, one weight and measure" to the global compliance regimes of the XXI century (GDPR, ESG, ISO 37301, AI Act).

The central problem of the paper is to identify the limitations of normative models that assume that uniformity of rules automatically creates fair and just behavior.

In the course of the study, a comprehensive interdisciplinary analysis is performed: (1) a historical and political review of normative reforms from the period of the French Revolution; (2) an analytical review of contemporary publications on compliance management, organizational ethics and digital regulation; (3) a comparison of normative approaches with the concepts of E. Deming, P. Senge and O. Scharmer; (4) a comparative analysis of 18th and 21st century normativism in a structured way.

The results show that modern regulatory systems – like the universalist project of the eighteenth century – strive for a unified field of responsibility, but encounter a fundamental contradiction between the formal equality of norms and actual cultural practices.

Empirical research confirms: formal elements of compliance explain only part of employee behavior, while actual effectiveness is determined by a culture of fairness, trust, perceptions of procedural integrity, and intrinsic motivation.

A comparison of normative models with the theories of Deming, Senge, and Scharmer revealed that sustainable change is only possible when moving from control to systemic improvement, from reaction to organizational learning, and from bureaucratic "downloading" to conscious action from the future. The norm forms the frame, but culture and motivation determine the reality of behavior.

The conclusions substantiate that normative mechanisms, both in the eighteenth and twenty-first century, cannot deliver transformation without cultural and systemic work. Modern compliance can avoid the "illusion of order" trap only when integrated with approaches of organizational development, systems thinking, and ethical maturity.

Keywords: compliance-management, normative universalism, organizational culture, ethical behavior, systems thinking, motivation, management transformation

Нормативний універсализм як ілюзія порядку: від гасла 1789 року до глобальних режимів дотримання норм 21 століття

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Анотація.

Стаття присвячена критичному дослідженню феномену нормативного універсализму в історичній та сучасній перспективі – від гасла 1789 року «один закон, одна вага і міра» до глобальних режимів дотримання вимог XXI століття (GDPR, ESG, ISO 37301, AI Act).

Центральною проблемою статті є виявлення обмежень нормативних моделей, які припускають, що однорідність правил автоматично створює справедливу і чесну поведінку.

У ході дослідження проводиться комплексний міждисциплінарний аналіз: (1) історичний і політичний огляд нормативних реформ з періоду Французької революції; (2) аналітичний огляд сучасних публікацій з управління комплаєнсом, організаційної етики та цифрового регулювання; (3) порівняння нормативних підходів з концепціями Е. Демінга, П. Сенге та О. Шармера; (4) порівняльний аналіз нормативізму 18-го та 21-го століть у структурованому вигляді.

Результати показують, що сучасні системи регулювання, як і універсалистський проект XVIII століття, прагнуть до уніфікованої сфери відповідальності, але стикаються з фундаментальною суперечністю між формальною рівністю норм та фактичними культурними практиками.

Емпіричні дослідження підтверджують: формальні елементи комплаєнсу пояснюють лише частину поведінки співробітників, тоді як фактична ефективність визначається культурою справедливості, довіри, сприйняття процедурної цілісності та внутрішньою мотивацією.

Порівняння нормативних моделей з теоріями Демінга, Сенге та Шармера показало, що стійкі зміни можливі лише при переході від контролю до системного вдосконалення, від реакції до організаційного навчання та від бюрократичного «завантаження» до свідомих дій з майбутнього. Норма формує рамки, але культура та мотивація визначають реальність поведінки.

Висновки підтверджують, що нормативні механізми, як у XVIII, так і в XXI столітті, не можуть забезпечити трансформацію без культурної та системної роботи. Сучасне дотримання норм може уникнути пастки «ілюзії порядку» лише тоді, коли воно інтегровано з підходами організаційного розвитку, системного мислення та етичної зрілості.

Ключові слова: комплаєнс-менеджмент, управління дотриманням норм, нормативний універсализм, організаційна культура, етична поведінка, системне мислення, мотивація, трансформація управління

Introduction.

- *"How do you assess the impact of the French Revolution of 1789?"*

(American diplomat's question to Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai during the visit of a US delegation to the PRC, early 1970s)

- *"It's too early to judge."*
(Zhou Enlai)

Contemporary global regulatory regimes – GDPR, ISO 37301, EU Sustainability Directives, ESG, AI Act – seek to create a universal space of accountability and transparency. In their logic, they reproduce a long-standing idea first institutionalized during the French Revolution: to create a just social order through uniform laws, uniform standards, and unification of rules of conduct.

The slogan of 1789 - "One God, One King, One Law, One Weight and Measure" – expressed the belief that the ordering of norms was the basis of social justice (Gedj, 2000). The parallel with contemporary compliance is obvious: standards and regulation also claim to be universal and rational.

However, social history and contemporary studies of compliance show: normative equality is not identical to real equality, and standardization does not guarantee honesty and ethical behavior.

Analysis of recent publications. Modern publications on ethics and compliance management in general show a rather optimistic picture: ethics and compliance programs can indeed reduce the frequency of violations, increase employee awareness and support more responsible behavior. Analysis of works and empirical studies show that the presence of a formalized program that includes several complementary components (code, training, lines of trust, investigations, reporting) correlates with a lower incidence of unethical behavior and a greater willingness to report wrongdoing (Kaptein, 2015; Weaver & Treviño, 1999).

Reviews on ethical culture record a fairly consistent relationship between a strong ethical culture and the quality of decisions, reduced incidents and increased trust within an organization (Roy et al., 2022). New research also highlights the contribution of compliance culture in specific domains: the influence of compliance culture on employees' green behavior and companies' environmental practices, and the role of ethical culture and internal controls in improving fiscal discipline (Hair et al., 2023). In addition, ethical training has been demonstrated to increase clarity of expectations, transparency of procedures, and perceived enforceability of norms, especially at the team level (Cabana et al., 2025).

However, a number of recent works also point

to significant complexities accompanying the practice of compliance. First, systematic reviews in the area of business process compliance and formal methods show that despite the development of powerful modeling and monitoring tools, actual business processes are still often non-compliant, and financial penalties and reputational losses remain significant (Souenjoya et al., 2025)

Second, compliance officers themselves emphasize in recent qualitative studies that there is no "quick solution": measuring program effectiveness, resource constraints, legal formalism, and employee fatigue from regulatory burden prove to be persistent obstacles (Soltes, 2022; Frommelt, 2024).

Third, recent work on digital compliance captures the difficulties of institutionalization: companies declare a commitment to data protection and cybersecurity, but in practice are often limited to partial, project-based solutions, failing to embed requirements into process architecture and corporate culture (Schilirò, 2024; Schrödter & Weißenberger, 2024).

Finally, conceptual studies also point to fundamental limitations of the "purely legal" view of compliance: programs perceived as a tool of self-defense management suffer from a lack of internal legitimacy and do not change underlying behavioral patterns (Roy et al, 2023; Stansbury et al, 2007; Ethics and Compliance Programs..., 2023).

When these empirical results are compared with the theories of E. Deming, P. Senge and O. Scharmer, a fairly consistent picture emerges. Deming pointed out that most failures are due to system defects, not "bad people", and therefore it is necessary to improve processes and culture, not just to increase control. Contemporary publications support this thesis: it is the combination of "hard" program elements (policies, procedures, monitoring) with "soft" factors – ethical culture, fairness, trust - that produces more sustainable effects (Kaptein, 2015; Roy et al., 2022; Cabana et al., 2025).

Senge's logic of the learning organization is reflected in works that treat compliance as part of organizational learning and systemic reflection rather than as an external supervisory function (Weaver & Treviño, 1999). Finally, Scharmer's U Theory resonates with research criticizing the "download level" of bureaucratic repetition of procedures and calling for a shift of attention to deeper levels - conscious system visioning, sensing contexts, and shaping the future of organizational ethics (Schilirò, 2024; Ethics and Compliance Programs..., 2023).

Taken together, this suggests that recent publications are gradually shifting the focus from compliance as a legal compliance technique to compliance



as a space of cultural and systemic transformation, which is fully in line with the criticism of normativism and the human-centered approaches of Deming, Senge and Scharmer.

Main text

The French Revolution as a historical precedent for normative universalism. The decrees of August 4, 1789 abolished feudal privileges, proclaimed uniform measures and uniform law. It was an attempt to create a new social system from above, through the elimination of legal asymmetries. Formally, the changes were radical: class divisions disappeared, feudal courts and church tithes were abolished (Gedj, 2000; Jones, 2006).

However, studies of the socio-political dynamics of the revolution show:

- old power structures disappeared but new ones emerged,
- social inequalities changed form but did not disappear,
- corrupt and clientelistic practices have adapted,
- ideological equality was not transformed into actual equality (Furet, 1981; Tackett, 2015).

Reform has created an ideology of equality, but has not created institutions capable of holding this equality in reality. Such a historical parallel is suggested when analyzing contemporary compliance programs.

There is a limitation of normative reforms in which culture acts as an insurmountable factor. And contemporary research on organizational ethics confirms this. Thus, Weaver & Treviño (2001) found that:

- formal elements of compliance programs explain only 20-30% of employee behavior,
- the remainder is determined by culture, perceptions of fairness, levels of trust, moral standards and leadership.

Also Kaptein (2015) and OECD (2021) confirm:

- normativity creates a structure,
- but behavior is created by culture.

Based on these assertions, the following formula for organizational maturity can be formulated:

$$\text{Effective Compliance} = (\text{Law as a framework}) \times (\text{Culture as a content}) \times (\text{Motivation as a driver})$$

Or more compactly:

$$\text{Effective Compliance} = N \times C \times M,$$

where

C - effective compliance and ethical behavior,

N - normative frame (law-as-frame),

C - cultural content (culture-as-substance),

M - motivational driver (motivation-as-drive).

And this is where the key parallelism between the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries emerges.

Modern compliance regimes: a new implementation of the idea of "one law". Today, modern regulations are striving for global unification. Thus:

- GDPR establishes a single data processing regime in the EU;
- ISO 37301 sets standards for compliance systems worldwide;
- ESG-directives introduce universal sustainability requirements;
- AI Act claims to create a unified AI ethics architecture;
- supply chain due diligence laws require companies to be equally liable for third parties.

This normative universalism is close to an enlightenment logic: the world should be a fairer place if the rules are uniform.

However, empirical studies show:

- having a code $\neq$ following the code
- regulation does not eliminate abuses, but only changes their form,
- corrupt practices adapt faster than standards are updated (Coglianese & Nash, 2020).

Thus, twenty-first-century normativism reproduces a fundamental error of eighteenth-century normativism: the assumption that standardization alone ensures moral progress.

Let us examine the key features of eighteenth- and twenty-first-century normativism through a comparative blitz analysis (Table 1).

Table 1.

Historical and conceptual parallels of normativism

Parameter	XVIII century (1789)	21st century (compliance and global standards)
Source of normativity	Revolutionary state	Supranational institutions (EU, OECD, ISO)
Basis	Reason, equality, universal law	Universal standards, global ethics, risk management
Mechanism of realization	Equalization of rights and obligations	Equalization of procedures, policies, accountability
Expectations	Fairness through harmonization	Ethics through standardization

Parameter	XVIII century (1789)	21st century (compliance and global standards)
Reality	New inequalities, adaptation of old practices	Formalism, circumvention of rules, adaptation of corruption
Main weakness	Discrepancy between law and social culture	Discrepancy between norm and organizational behavior
Key lesson	Structures can be changed quickly while minds can be changed slowly	Unification without culture $\neq$ transformation

Source: developed by the author

Naturally, the question arises: Why does the modern "uniform law" not guarantee change?

It is necessary to realize that even the most perfect regulation does not take into account fundamental factors, specifically:

- Corruption is adaptive and creative - new rules generate new schemes.
- Human psychology is stable - motivations, fears and interests are stable.
- Organizations develop shadow practices - "regulatory gaming".

Control causes resistance, here we can remember that the more total regulation, the more sophisticated resistance, the more total control, the more inventive human behavioral schemes to get out of control, as evidenced by studies in the field of neuromanagement (Jacobs, 2009).

It can be argued that modern compliance systems show that effectiveness arises only when norms and culture are combined, rather than norms alone.

Understanding the nature of modern compliance systems is impossible without referring to the ideas of Edwards Deming – one of the key theorists of quality management. His criticism of traditional management approaches and emphasis on systems thinking allow us to take a fresh look at the weaknesses of normativist models of both the 18th century and the 21st century.

At the heart of Deming's philosophy is the thesis that quality is determined by the system, not by individual efforts or penalties (Deming, 1986).

It is the system – with its processes, relationships, motivational mechanisms, and culture - that shapes people's behavior. According to Deming, up to 94% of errors and violations are caused by defects in processes, work organization and management decisions, not by employee dishonesty.

From these perspectives, modern compliance programs face a fundamental contradiction. Formal regulation assumes that norm control and sanctions can eliminate violations. However, Deming showed that:

- employee behavior reflects context rather than intent,

- trying to "correct" people instead of process leads to the illusion of control,
- punishment suppresses intrinsic motivation,
- fear and formalism destroy the ability to learn and consciously follow rules.

In this sense, compliance based on fear and monitoring is in direct conflict with a systemic approach to quality. It reproduces the same mistake as eighteenth-century normativism: the attempt to achieve social order through external uniformity.

Deming emphasized that sustainable quality is possible only through understanding the variability of processes, involving people and developing their skills, eliminating systemic causes of violations, and changing culture (not just policies and procedures).

These points fundamentally correspond to contemporary research on organizational ethics, confirming that formal elements of compliance explain only a small portion of employee behavior (Abdullah et al., 2016, Weaver & Treviño, 2001).

From Deming's point of view, the main shortcoming of modern compliance is that it often attempts to correct what is an consequence rather than a cause. Regulations require compliance but do not reform the system that generates risks. Therefore, traditional measures – policies, inspections, and sanctions - seldom produce lasting results.

Deming advocated replacing the "culture of fear" with a culture of trust and learning, where employees act not out of fear of punishment but out of a desire to do their job well. This approach transforms compliance from a tool of oversight to a tool of development.

Thus, through the prism of Deming's view, it becomes evident that modern attempts to create universal compliance structures are clearly limited because they do not address the systemic roots of non-compliance - organizational culture, motivation, process structure and quality of management decisions. Like normativism in 1789, 21st century compliance risks becoming an illusion of order if it does not focus on system change, but only on standardizing behavior. Let us consider some divergences in the views of E. Deming and the compliance approach (Table 2).



Table 2.

Compliance vs Deming: coincidences and divergences

Comparison parameter	Modern compliance (normative approach)	E. Deming's approach (systemic quality management)	Divergences
Management philosophy	Management through rules, standards, responsibility for non-compliance.	Management through the system, processes and their continuous improvement.	Divergence: compliance is normative; Deming's approach is process-oriented.
Source of problems and violations	It is assumed that a significant portion of violations is a consequence of human behavior.	94% of problems are due to system, process and management defects.	Fundamental divergence: focus on the person vs focus on the system.
Main instrument of influence	Control, monitoring, auditing, sanctions, political regulation.	Process change, training, employee engagement, removing barriers.	Divergence: external coercion vs internal improvement.
Attitude toward mistakes	A mistake is a violation; requires investigation, corrective action, and sanctions.	A mistake is a signal of a system defect; requires variability analysis.	Divergence: blaming the individual vs examining the system.
Role of culture	Often underestimated; culture is seen as an secondary factor.	Central: without a quality culture, the system does not improve.	Divergence: secondary importance vs fundamental importance of culture.
Source of motivation	External: fear of sanctions, regulatory pressure, formal requirements.	Intrinsic: pride of labor, excellence, responsibility, improvement.	Divergence: extrinsic vs intrinsic motivation.
Role of management	Enforces rules and establishes procedures.	Creates a fear-free environment, supports learning, removes barriers.	Divergence: control vs serving the system.
Expected outcome	Compliance, minimization of legal risks.	Improved quality, process stability, reduced variation.	Divergent goals: compliance vs quality.
Attitude towards standards	Standards are mandatory, they set employee behavior.	Standards are useful, but must be developed through training and PDCA.	Partial overlap: standards are necessary, but Deming's are dynamic.
Mechanism of system sustainability	Mechanism of external control.	Mechanism of internal improvement and learning.	Polar difference: control from outside vs development from within.
The role of the individual in the system	Potential intruder, object of observation.	Central value, source of knowledge and improvement.	Opposing anthropological models.
Form of responsibility	Hierarchical, personalized, sanctioning.	Collective, systemic, learning.	Divergence: punitive vs learning responsibility.
Understanding of ethics	Compliance with formal norms.	Ethical culture as a practical basis for behavior.	Divergence: formalism vs culture.
Type of risk	Legal and regulatory.	Operational, qualitative, human, systemic.	Divergence in risk models.
Logic of change	Behavior change through regulations.	Behavior change through system improvement.	Opposing mechanisms of transformation.

Source: developed by the author

Thus, it can be argued that the overlap between compliance and E. Deming's quality management system is minimal and is mainly limited to recognizing the need for standards and documented processes. However, even at this point of overlap the approaches are fundamentally different: if in compliance standards are interpreted as rigid nor-

ms of behavior, fixing the limits of what is acceptable, Deming's standards act more as operational hypotheses, which should be constantly checked, clarified and improved in the course of work. Thus, instruments that are identical in form are filled with content that reflects two incomparable management philosophies.

The fundamental differences between the two can be observed in five key dimensions. First, it is the anthropological model: compliance is based on the assumption of potential human wrongdoing and builds the system around monitoring and prevention of deviations, while Deming considers the employee as a carrier of knowledge, meaning and opportunities for improvement. Secondly, the logic of management differs: compliance is based on control and sanctions, while Deming emphasizes process improvement, eliminating systemic causes of errors and supporting the conditions in which a person can perform well. A third difference relates to understanding the causes of violations. In compliance, the primary source of risk is more often associated with individual behavior, while Deming emphasizes that errors are produced by the system, not by individuals. The management strategy depends on this: compliance seeks to correct the individual, while Deming seeks to change the process. The fourth divergence is the role of culture. For compliance, culture plays a secondary role to regulations, whereas for Deming it is culture - motivation, trust, psychological safety - that is the central condition for sustainable quality. Finally, the fifth key difference is the mechanisms of sustainability. In compliance, sustainability is achieved through external coercion, regulatory pressure, and fear of consequences, whereas in Deming's model, sustainability is born out of internal maturity, conscious responsibility, and the pursuit of professional excellence.

These differences combine to explain why compliance, unsupported by underlying cultural change, often becomes a formality and 'paper compliance', whereas Deming's approach fosters an environment in which genuine quality, responsibility and sustainability are possible.

Examining contemporary compliance through Peter Senge's systems paradigm and Otto Scharmer's transformational approach also reveals the underlying limitations of traditional normative models and outlines the contours of a more mature, evolutionary form of corporate responsibility. Both thinkers assume that sustainable change in organizations arises not from external pressure and control, but from the internal development of consciousness, collective learning and the ability to see the system holistically.

P. Senge's ideas suggest that an organization becomes effective when it becomes a learning system capable of becoming aware of its patterns, identifying limiting mental models, and adjusting its own actions through reflection (Senge, 1990).

With this position, traditional compliance faces a number of contradictions:

1. formal control reinforces defensive reactions and reduces an organization's ability to self-reflect;
2. rules, if not embedded in the culture, become "dead artifacts";
3. behavioral dysfunctions are more often symptoms of structural and systemic deficits rather than individual bad faith;
4. an organization focused only on compliance loses its ability to learn in depth.

According to P. Senge, systems thinking suggests that a violation is the system's message to itself, signaling dysfunction in processes, motivational circuits, or hidden assumptions.

Thus, compliance in P. Senge's logic would have a diagnostic and developmental rather than a controlling function, helping the organization to identify root causes rather than just reacting to symptoms. Instead of the favorite compliance question "who is to blame?" the key question should be "how does the system produce this behavior?".

And Otto Scharmer develops the idea that sustainable changes are not possible without changing the source of attention from which people and organizations act (Scharmer, 2009). In his conceptualization, levels of response range from automatic reproduction of old patterns (downloading) to creative presence and co-creation of the future (presencing). In such a context, traditional compliance is at the first, most superficial levels of management:

- Re-acting - responding to violations;
- Downloading - bureaucratic repetition of formal procedures;
- Controlling - attempting to enforce rules through fear and sanctions.

These levels clearly do not lead to sustained behavior change because they are based on fear rather than awareness. They demonstrate external manifestations but do not reveal internal causes. And they reproduce an outdated management logic - "from the outside to the inside."

Scharmer argues that an organization moves into a qualitatively different mode when it begins to operate at levels:

- Seeing - the ability to see the system and its dynamics;
- Sensing - sensing the interconnections and impact of one's own actions;
- Presencing - to act out of a future that wants to manifest itself, not out of fear of punishment.

Compliance in this understanding could become not a tool of control, but a mechanism for raising awareness, a kind of process of collective listening to the system, a platform for making ethically mature decisions, i.e. a tool for building trust rather than supervision.



In other words, to avoid the illusion of order, it would be beneficial for compliance to become a part of organizational development rather than acting as

a bureaucratic control function. The approaches of P. Senge and O. Scharmer can enrich the worlds of compliance (Table 3).

Table 3.

Comparison of Senge and Scharmer's approaches with traditional compliance

Measurement	Traditional compliance	Senge's approach	Scharmer's approach
Focus	Regulation, norms, risk-minimization	System, interconnections, learning	Understanding, attention, creating the future
Mechanism	Control and sanctions	Diagnosis and reflection	Awareness and transformation
Source of problems	Individual, violation	System and its structures	Level of consciousness and quality of attention
Logic of change	Enforce compliance."	"Understand how to change the system"	"Create conditions for a new type of action"
Result	Formal compliance	Systemic improvement	Ethical maturity and innovation

Source: developed by the author

The table shows that Senge and Scharmer's approaches shift the focus of compliance from superficial behavior to root causes, from control to understanding, and from sanctions to creating conditions in which correct behavior becomes natural.

In Senge and Scharmer's interpretation, compliance could play the role of an indicator of organizational maturity. In a company dominated by fear, formalism and closedness, however, compliance would be perceived as a limitation. In an organization that is evolving as a living organism, compliance could theoretically be a tool for co-creating a safe, responsible and ethical environment. But whether a living system needs policies and procedures is also a big question.

Results.

So, the slogan of 1789 - "One God, One King, One Law, One Weight and Measure" - expressed the deep conviction of the Enlightenment era that the codification of norms could become the foundation of a new public society based on social justice. Uniform law and standardized rules were expected to create equality where previously class privileges and arbitrary practices had dominated. The parallel with modern compliance is very obvious here: modern standards, international regulations and corporate rules also strive for universality, rationality and manageability of behavior. Both then and today are based on the same idea - that an orderly regulatory system is capable of forming a fair social field.

However, as both the historical experience of the 18th century and modern research show, normativity has its limits. In considering the role of norms in organizations, we inevitably come to an important conclusion: norms and standards are indeed of fundamental importance, but their influence is limited.

They provide structure, set formal expectations, create the necessary transparency, and delineate minimum boundaries of responsibility. Norms act as an architectural framework within which sustainable, ethical behavior can potentially emerge.

But regulations alone do not automatically produce honesty - just as the single law of 1789 could not guarantee real equality and sustainable practices of justice. Ethical behavior is not derived directly from the existence of a regulation or code. Honesty arises where a culture of fairness has been established (Kaptein, 2019), where there is trust in leadership and a sense of procedural fairness (Weaver & Treviño, 2001), where employees feel a sense of responsibility and belonging, and where compliance is motivated by internal reasons rather than fear of sanctions.

This is where the key logic of the modern understanding of compliance comes into play: standards create opportunity, culture creates reality, and behavior creates results.

The norm sets the direction, but only culture determines whether these norms will be lived, interiorized and turned into internal principles of activity. Thus, modern compliance, like Enlightenment normativism, can claim to be universal, but its real effectiveness is determined not by the size of the set of rules, but by how deeply these rules are integrated into the cultural fabric of the organization.

Conclusions.

Modern corporate and legal standards do indeed inherit the eighteenth-century dream of a rationally ordered world where a single law ensures a single behavior. However, as in 1789, this project faces the fact that normativity never replaces culture, and formal uniformity does not lead to real ethical pro-



gress. History shows: without changing behavioral patterns and organizational cultures, any normative reforms lead only to the reproduction of formalism and the adaptation of old practices to new conditions.

Compliance of the 21st century can be effective only when it is built not on control, but on culture; not on coercion, but on motivation; not on universalism, but on adaptability and mature responsibility.

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