



The Creation of the Modern School of Thought

Publish Date:

April 2016

Daniel Chirot and Scott Montgomery from the School of International Studies at the University of Washington have telegraphed the Enlightenment into 'four big ideas' that they present through the writings of Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, and the constitutional debates between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. The modern world, both its enormous promise and its gravest troubles—from the existential threats from religious fundamentalism to the dormancy of Marxism and the miracles of science—is best understood through an idea-centred view of history. 'Powerful ideas have no copyright', Chirot and Montgomery explain, observing that concepts like 'the invisible hand', 'dialectical materialism', and 'natural selection' continue to inspire new schools of thought, new critiques, and new views of society and progress.

This is a profoundly important book which has deservedly appeared on a few Best Books of 2015 lists. It is a work of deep scholarship and admirable breadth that reconnects us to the importance of ideas made, discussed, defended and rejected, as the great shaping force of history. This, they argue, is the principal legacy of the Enlightenment, and the energy that animates this book is their sincere fear that the Enlightenment is now at risk.



The Enlightenment is sometimes grounded as a rationalist philosophical project to remake human knowledge about the universe. 'What is truth?' should be answered before one begins to enlighten. As Immanuel Kant said: 'Sapere aude!' (Dare to know!), 'have the courage to make use of your own intellect'. But as Chirot and Montgomery explain:

Originally, the enlightenment liberalism that flourished in the late 18th and 19th centuries had very little to do with such intentions; it was a call for freedom, tolerance, and democracy.

And what are these ideas? In the writings of Adam Smith they find the new idea of all society as an organic machine, shaped by individual impulses for an outcome that is a consequence of human action, not of human design. They observe that the big idea here is that the underlying motive:

Is really human nature and the source of enterprise, this unending surge and wish for something better, for getting ahead.

It's a profound misunderstanding to call that greed; rather, it's an instinctual striving for betterment. We can harness that instinct with economic and political freedom, such that:

The more freedom it can safely be allowed, the better, because it also propels the entire society forward.

This was the profound implication of Adam Smith's big idea.

Of Karl Marx, they seek to explain not only the original formulation, but the continuing attraction of Marxism. They cast Marx's theories as both the best and worst of the Enlightenment. Chirot and Montgomery worry that Marxism may yet rekindle from a nurtured fury in modern universities. They write:

Let us not therefore assume too quickly that the Marxism being held today in reserve by supposedly irrelevant intellectuals has no political future. It does.

Of Charles Darwin, they find an idea of natural selection that has moved from nature to society. In the 19th century, laissez-faire began to be seen as a policy in accord with natural competition among individuals and companies.

By the late 20th century, evolutionary theory had conquered most of the behavioural and social sciences— especially the study of technology and innovation.

The fourth big idea is contained in the constitutional debates at the founding of the US between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. This was the debate between two views of America: Hamilton's view of a big-government America, an industrial economy, a strong central authority



with a powerful army actively engaged on a world stage; versus Jefferson's model of a government staying out of the way of a free people, of local militias and a weak central government, a nation of yeoman farmers, and 'entangling alliances with none'.

The second part of the book examines the ideology of reaction against the ideas and thinkers of the Enlightenment. Chirot and Montgomery focus on several moving targets—the secular anti-enlightenment in fascism, totalitarianism, Maoism, and the religious anti-enlightenment of fundamentalisms. They warn that secular and non-secular movements are essentially alike.

However, they make clear that the most thoroughgoing and dangerous rejection of the Enlightenment today is Radical Islam, and particularly the writings of Sayyid Qutb—'the major theoretician of radical Islam in the 21st century'. In a telling passage they acknowledge that Fundamentalist Christianity can be as closed minded and illiberal as Radical Islam but that it differs in crucial ways.

One way to read this book is as an alternative textbook on world history since the 1700s. In this telling, modern history is not a story of events, dates and places; or of armies, conquests and kings; or of oppressors and the oppressed, but is fundamentally the story of ideas, and of competition between ideas. In this idea-centred view, the modern world begins with the Enlightenment, when the power of ideas as shaping forces over societies reemerged. Chirot and Montgomery want a reformation in intellectual history and argue that the proper task of the humanities is to lead this fight.

Western civilization courses and Great Books programs have largely been decimated in universities by the reactionary oxidization of progressivism. Free speech is being brutalized, especially within the humanities. Chirot and Montgomery's book signals a clear fight-back from within by taking a line that puts big society-shaping ideas, unflinchingly analysed, at the centre of inquiry. They examine the ideas of Adam Smith and of Karl Marx, seeking to understand why they've had such a significant impact on the world. Ideas matter because they are ultimately what a society is made of. A society that neglects its ideas, allows them to become dogmatic, and does not subject them to continuous and rigorous scrutiny, will soon erode to barbarism.