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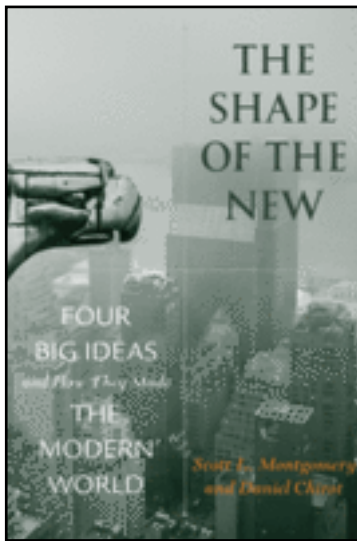
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The most powerful of men

Scott L. Montgomery and Daniel Chirot attempt a different type of intellectual history



Scott L. Montgomery / Daniel Chirot The Shape of the New . Four Big Ideas and How They Made the Modern World

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Who were the most powerful men and women of the twentieth century? Picks are likely to include Sergey Brin, Winston Churchill, Henry Ford, Mahatma Gandhi, Bill Gates, Ruhollah Moosavi Khomeini, Nikita Khrushchev, Martin Luther King Jr., Vladimir Lenin, Chairman Mao, Josef Stalin, Margaret Thatcher and any or each of the US presidents since Franklin Delano Roosevelt. But according to Scott L. Montgomery and Daniel Chirot's count, none of the most powerful men of the twentieth century actually lived to see it. These men were Adam Smith, Karl Marx and Charles Darwin.

The ideas that began in the imagination of these thinkers, Montgomery and Chirot (both faculty members in the University of Washington Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies) argue in their book, proved to exert a formative if not determining role in the making of last century's social reality. These big ideas are, of course, freedom (free market capitalism), socialism (an egalitarian world) and evolution (the secularization of human history). The fourth is liberal democracy which the authors pair with both Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, and that Europeans are perhaps more likely to associate with Benjamin Constant or John Locke.

The first part of the book discusses each of these thinkers' ideas by providing a well-argued synthesis of their evolution and larger impact. This retelling is called for because, as the authors claim, the fact that "ideas have been among the primary forces behind modern history" has not been sufficiently acknowledged. It also seems to have been motivated by the perception that students of political science are taught too little of it and, if they are, often only truncated versions of the rich and interwoven matrix of human thought.

The gist of the first half of the book, however, does not depart from the mainstream consensus on what these three "inventors of modernity" thought, but Montgomery and Chirot do set important emphases. Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* is portrayed as the work of *political* economy it is, dealing with a wide array of issues including education, colonialism, civil society, the nature of sovereignty and a scathing critique of mercantilism. The true aim of it, they argue, is "to match man's thoughts and actions to the natural principles that govern them, for this, in the end, is the way to true liberty and the only way a ruler can maintain a productive, advancing state." (47) According to Montgomery and Chirot, this is "the real Smith that deserves our interest" (21). It is not the Smith of the invisible hand, a metaphor which only appears once in over eight hundred pages, as they note in quoting Emma Rothschild.¹ Nevertheless, it would have been interesting for the understanding of the workings of ideas to inquire why an apparent footnote managed with great success to capture the imagination of later generations while 'the real Smith' gradually faded into the mist of history. It is only when considered in context with another, popular metaphor of Smith's time – the body politic – that Smith's metaphor gains shape and that its longevity and continuing force becomes intelligible.² Toward the end of the chapter on Smith, Montgomery and Chirot, however, rightly and importantly note that underneath the Smithian metaphor of the invisible hand as it has been appropriated by radical free marketeers in the second half of the twentieth century "lies a deeply conservative social philosophy that is no more scientific or dependent on natural or irrevocable laws than any other ideology." (69)

Other conclusions they draw from the syntheses in part one are debatable. For example, on Smith they conclude that "the world should hope that in the long run Adam Smith's ideas prevail ... , because [...] free and open markets in economic matters and free markets in the expression of political ideologies that are essential for democracy are tied together. Without them freedom of thought and personal liberty cannot be guaranteed." (80) This, however, is clearly the authors' personal disposition as there is no such inherent connection, neither in Enlightenment thought nor in its real life instantiations.

Marx, on the other hand, appears as an Enlightenment thinker seeking “scientific rigor, idealiz[ing] progress, and want[ing] to liberate mankind. Yet his rage about injustice combined with his utopian vision,” Montgomery and Chirot conclude, “resulted in a whole series of nightmarish, ultimately failed political systems.” Still his vision, they argue, is not without the possibility of a political future in the twenty-first century. (147) As for Darwin, he “has never left.” That is to say that it is too early to assess what the legacy of his ideas will turn out to be. The shaping of the new by his “organic, materialistic, vigorous, changeable, uncertain, [...] godless continuum,” according to the authors, “is still very much in progress.” (213)

One thing struck me about the larger Enlightenment narrative that serves as a background story. Montgomery and Chirot seem to subscribe to the tripartite model of time which divides human history into a distant golden age of antiquity; a dark and backward age of intellectual stagnation, of religious superstition and rigid dogma devoid of inquisitiveness; and, finally, the modern age of the rebirth of reason. “The Enlightenment”, they write, “was [...] an era of deep separation from all that has gone before, a period of enormous creativity and destruction, [...] when most of the fundamental ideas of modernity were born.” (6) This ‘Stunde null’-myth of modernity as an era of its own creation is still in wide-spread use, albeit, over the last half century, scholars of the Middle Ages have increasingly undermined it. Indeed, it was throughout the centuries of the Middle Ages, as Johannes Fried prominently argued, that for the first time “there arose a form of global knowledge based on first-hand experience, [...] and a desire to use the knowledge thus gained.” The application of reason, along with many far-reaching innovations “in many different areas, repeatedly undermin[ed] the traditional body of knowledge and view of the world.” Both, the Enlightenment and the Western culture of rationality can be traced back to this period, and even Kant, as Fried put it, stood “on the shoulders of giants he knew nothing of”.³

For a number of reasons my chief interest lies with the second part of the book which deals in three chapters with reactions against the Enlightenment, that is, anti-modernism, fascism and Christian as well as Muslim fundamentalism.

Montgomery and Chirot recognize in the introduction that inasmuch as democratic freedom, economic self-determination, individual liberty and equality or religious tolerance can be “considered a product of Enlightenment thought, so can trends that eventually led toward its opposite, totalitarian communism and fascism”, they nevertheless strongly support the view that, as a consequence of Enlightenment ideas, “real, concrete progress has taken place” (7). The possibility that Enlightenment reverts to mythology, that a creative

and humanist reason degenerates into a purely instrumental and manipulative one, a thesis most prominently raised by Frankfurt School philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in their *Dialektik der Aufklärung* in 1944, is too quickly brushed aside for my liking and has no central role in what follows. Neither has Michael Oakeshott's prominent critique of rationalist politics. Oakeshott, as for that matter Michel de Montaigne, argued for moderation against rationalist schemes of change and perfection. Contrary to the modern belief that the realization of the ideal state is inherent in reason itself, both thought that the task of political philosophy is not to be an instrument of rule but that of limiting the pretensions of politics. Thus, the ever-expanding claims of the universal and homogenous state needed to be resisted in order to preserve the richness and plurality of human life.⁴

Especially the Arab Muslim world, in Montgomery's and Chirot's reading, is very close to appear as the new European Enlightenment's "Other", structurally taking the role the Middle Ages had in much of eighteenth-century thought. This not only seems a dangerous line of thought to follow but as wrong as seeing the Middle Ages as an era "hopelessly ensnared in a kind of self-inflicted intellectual immaturity". Voltaire and Kant, perhaps the greatest of Enlightenment heroes, had nothing but negative preconceptions about the millennium preceding the Renaissance and no inclination to learn anything about it.⁵

To be sure, any author would be dealt a serious challenge when faced with the task of discussing the Arab Muslim reaction against Western Enlightenment on just under forty pages (about half of the space they devote to each thinker in part 1). Montgomery and Chirot do an admirable job of breaking it down into digestible episodes and succinctly conveying the core ideas of major thinkers. However, the way in which those are woven together into a larger narrative is somewhat disconcerting. Here Montgomery's and Chirot's tendency is most apparent to narrow down the whole of Western Enlightenment to what they call Enlightenment liberalism and attribute the current state of the Arab Muslim world to either, following the wrong set of ideas or the wrongful application of the right set of ideas.

On Egypt they write: "Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser [...] espoused a similar [to the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, C.M.] socialist, nationalist philosophy and became a key rival of the Ba'ath for Arab allegiance. Sadly for Egypt, his ideas contained the same fatal flaws." As for the economy and military, "what Third World regimes did was nationalize some of the more efficient parts of their economies against the will of many of their people, turning over state enterprises and purchasing boards to inept, corrupt bureaucracies. The results typically

were economic stagnation and falling legitimacy, which necessitated greater repression to keep the regimes in power. [...] Arab armed forces were run by the same corrupt and inept political allies of the dictators as the ones who were in charge of economic matters. [...] It became clear, in short, that [...] a powerful internal element had been overlooked. It did not take long, that is, for Islamic religious fervor to grow and expand in rejection of the corrupt, oppressive and religiously impure dictatorships.” Thus, the authors conclude, “[o]ther similar failures led to the rise of extremist Muslim political forces as well, even where they were unable to seize power.” (390–392)

Based on the same logic, how would it be possible not to hold the US-led Operation Iraqi Freedom responsible for the failure of democratization and the outbreak of sectarian civil war in Iraq, the subsequent destabilizing of the entire region and, at least in part, the rise of ISIS?⁶ Assuming that we can safely rule out corruptibility and military ineptitude of US elites, does this mean they were acting on flawed ideas? The misconception here seems to lie in the assumption that there is a right manner or direction for the application of Enlightenment ideas, one that is largely self-explanatory to those in the “more advanced West”. Yet even if this was true, is it really so surprising that a process which in Western Europe took a number of centuries to unfold could not be successfully engineered in the newly independent Arab countries in the Middle East in the course of forty years, nor transplanted into it by the US and its allies in less than ten?

We need to recognize, as Montgomery and Chirot do, that religious fundamentalism is not anti-modern but in itself a modern phenomenon. Neither is it, however, a problem of evil nor the result of intellectual closure nor resistance to Enlightenment thought. Rather it is a failure of political and social structures and institutions, one that gave rise to self-defeating incentive structures and preposterous legitimizing narratives for a certain group of individuals. This perhaps became most clear in the Paris terrorist attacks of January 7–9, and November 13/14, 2015 committed by radicalized French and Belgian second generation immigrant citizens, in the majority of cases the end point to petit criminal careers. Obviously, there is no one-size-fits-all solution but I would tend to concur with Maajid Nawaz in seeing Islamist ideology as a problem of civil society rather than a military one that can be solved by airstrikes in Syria and Iraq.

In a sense, Montgomery and Chirot have written a book which more properly belongs to the (American) twentieth century, one that provides a testimony to its one time aspirations and still has a good portion of the utopian impulse and sense of mission which has always been an element in the American self-conception. What the late William Pfaff pointedly called

the “most influential myth of modern Western political society from 1789 to the present days”, “the idea of total and redemptive transformation of human society through political means” is an intellectual luxury that for many European thinkers had died in the ruins of Second World War Europe. Not so on the other side of the Atlantic.⁷

There is also a cautionary lesson here that emerges clearly from Montgomery’s and Chirot’s comprehensive and often detailed study. Precisely because ideas matter, intellectual historians should be wary of their part in creating, by stanchly committing themselves to Enlightenment ideals, representations of earlier ages or distant people, thereby shaping the preconceptions and collective consciousness of later generations and thus perhaps – even if inadvertently – producing a myth of backwardness and intellectual closure which in case of the Middle Ages took almost 300 years to undo. The overarching question that arises from *The Shape of the New*, one that as far as I can see the book does not take seriously, is whether the unfettered faith in Enlightenment ideas and their association with human progress is actually still warranted. Indeed, many of the eminent thinkers of the last centuries – Edmund Burke, Reinhold Niebuhr, Raymond Aron or Hannah Arendt, to name but a few – were deeply skeptical of the progressive view of history. Looking at the first decades of our own century, the question, it would seem, remains far from decided.

Beyond clearly charting the terrain of Enlightenment and Anti-Enlightenment thought, Montgomery’s and Chirot’s plea for the general importance of ideas – and those of Western Enlightenment liberalism in particular – neither offers a substantial methodological explanation of the way in which the ideas of the Enlightenment’s most powerful thinkers impacted and worked together with structural, institutional or psychological factors nor of the specific situations and context when ideas actually do take precedence over those other factors in causing and constraining human behavior and shaping “the new”. This seems unfortunate since critics of ideational explanations have long argued that ideas have no genuine agency and that behind every ideology, for example, we find well-calculated interests. Still there are a number of possibilities, even within hard-nosed rational choice paradigms which tend to view ideas talk as a kind of immeasurable, pseudo-scientific occultism. Next to Antonio Gramsci’s meanwhile classic ‘trickle-down-theory’ of ideas from intellectuals via quasi-intellectuals to the masses, Isaiah Berlin’s belief in the transformative power of ideas, it is also Arthur T. Denzau and Douglass C. North’s concept of shared mental models and representational redescription that comes to mind.⁸ Yet it is not clear where within this spectrum Montgomery and Chirot situate their own approach.

As I argued elsewhere, recognizing the often paradoxical internal structure of sets of ideas –

their heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory elements – is a prerequisite for making sense of their changing combinations and, not least, their success. Multilevel analysis that combines conceptual analysis, contextual (historical) inquiry and morphological analysis seems best suited to capture such incoherent structures.⁹ However, considering the extensive scope of Montgomery’s and Chirot’s study, such an approach would have required at least another five hundred pages.

Endnoten

1. See Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment*, Cambridge, MA, 2001, p. 117.
2. For an instructive analysis see Harald Bluhm/Karsten Malowitz, *Märkte denken: Ideengeschichtliche und ideenpolitische Koordinaten*, in: *Berliner Debatte Initial 18* (2008), 6, pp. 4–25.
3. One of the most acute repudiations of the image of “the dark Middle Ages” is Johannes Fried’s epilogue in *The Middle Ages*, transl. by Peter Lewis, Cambridge, MA, 2015, pp. 505–526, direct quotes on pp. 512, 515, 517.
4. Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, foreword by Timothy Fuller, Indianapolis, IN, 1991.
5. Fried, *The Middle Ages*, p. 505.
6. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair recently acknowledged as much in an interview with CNN’s Fareed Zakaria, saying that there are “elements of truth” in viewing the 2003 invasion of Iraq as the principal cause of the rise of ISIS. See Jethro Mullen, [Tony Blair says he's sorry for Iraq War 'mistakes,' but not for ousting Saddam](#), CNN, October 26, 2015.
7. See William Pfaff, *The Bullet’s Song. Romantic Violence and Utopia*, New York 2004, p. 186.
8. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London 1971; Isaiah Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, ed. by Henry Hardy, Princeton, NJ/Oxford 2001; Arthur T. Denzau/Douglass C. North, *Shared Mental Models. Ideologies and Institutions*, in: *Kyklos* 47 (1994), 1, pp. 3–31. A particularly useful, recent collection on the causal agency of ideas is Daniel Béland / Robert Henry Cox (eds.), *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research*, Oxford 2011.
9. See Harald Bluhm/Christoph M. Michael, *Anglo-American Conservatism since Thatcher and Reagan*, in: *Neue Politische Literatur* 58 (2013), 3, pp. 449–491.

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