

A Second Enlightenment

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There was a time when my home country, Scotland, led the world in inventiveness. Many things that we now take for granted had their origin in Scotland. The list is long – television, refrigerator, microwave ovens, tarred roads, pneumatic tyres, golf, the steam engine, radar, modern banking, antiseptics, antibiotics, quinine, the fax machine, ATM machines, cloning, logarithms, iron bridges, and many other things. Scotland's inventiveness is relatively well known.

What is not so well known is that much of the intellectual basis for the modern world was developed in Scotland, during the Scottish Enlightenment (roughly 1740-90). Of the personalities involved, Adam Smith and David Hume are the best known, but there were others who made important contributions. It is difficult for us today to appreciate just how influential Scotland was in those days. Scotland's intellectual leadership was so powerful that Voltaire was moved to write: "...we look to Scotland for all our ideas of civilisation."

Of course, the Enlightenment was by no means confined to Scotland, but I think it is useful to look at Scotland's contribution because it helps us to see what the Enlightenment actually gave to the world. Effectively, it gave us things called "modern" - modern economics, modern medicine, modern education, modern science and modern government. Scottish thinkers and pioneers were very active in developing all of these. To put this another way, the Enlightenment gave us *modernity*, namely the ideas, beliefs, values and practices that have shaped the modern world. Few would deny that, for a long time, modernity made life better and easier for many people. It raised the material living standards of many; it increased life expectancy; it enabled us to address many forms of illness that had gone unaddressed before; it brought schooling to millions; it vastly increased our knowledge of the physical world; it gave us a lot of useful technology; and, in theory at least, it allowed most adults to participate in the big decisions that affect them.

Modernity – past its sell-by date?

However, something has gone very wrong. We have just come through the most destructive century in human history, in terms of damage to people and planet, and the present one has not begun well. The litany should be familiar by now: growing inequalities within and between nations; breakdown of family and community; war on four continents; growing levels of crime and violence; pollution and congestion; epidemic

levels of mental and emotional illness; a general sense that culture is “dumbing down”; and very serious threats to climate and the biosphere.

While it is true that many of us are materially richer, we are in some important respects poorer. Most of us have more money and things than we ever had, yet how many of us are truly happy? We receive more schooling and training than ever, yet greed and superficiality are the hallmarks of modern culture. We have more technology and scientific knowledge than ever before, but we struggle to use them wisely. As Martin Luther King said: “Our scientific power has outrun our spiritual power - we have guided missiles and misguided men.”

There is a growing sense that modernity, appropriate for its time, has outlived its usefulness and that the benefits it brings are now greatly outweighed by the problems it causes. *What we have long assumed to be the main solution to our problems may have become their main cause.* The economics, medicine, science, education and politics ushered in by the Enlightenment served us well for a long time but they are no longer fit for purpose. The time has come to replace modernity with new ideas, beliefs, values and practices that are appropriate to the very different conditions of the 21st Century. The time has come, in other words, for a Second Enlightenment that will provide us with an economics, a medicine, an education, a science and a politics that are better suited to the conditions of today. A useful starting point in thinking about a Second Enlightenment is to go to the roots of modernity to understand why it is causing so many problems.

The Roots of Modernity

Modernity ultimately has its roots in the worldview of modern science. At the heart of this worldview are some very deep-rooted beliefs:

The universe and everything in it, ourselves included, is physical and nothing but physical. Scientists may talk about a universe that consists of “energy”, but they leave little doubt that they believe this energy to be physical. There can be nothing beyond this physical universe

The universe can be thought of as a machine – a very sophisticated one, but a machine nonetheless

The universe has no *intrinsic* meaning or purpose

This worldview persists despite profound discoveries in physics and biology that suggest that the universe is anything but a machine, that “chance” may lie only in the eye of the beholder, and that the universe is rich in intrinsic meaning. The classical science worldview has become so powerful and influential that all metaphysical, religious and philosophical claims that contradict it tend to be rejected. Yet if, as science insists, the universe began suddenly for no reason (the “Big Bang”) and life on this planet emerged by chance, then the world that science wants us to believe in must itself be totally

meaningless. The fact that this statement, as part of that world, must also be meaningless is little consolation!

There is little doubt in my mind that one of the consequences of modernity is *loss of deeper meaning*. A lot of people feel that there is little meaning in their lives. This is having far-reaching effects, because it is at the root of many of today's problems. But instead of addressing this root cause, we tend to focus on its symptoms. And that has led to the sensational growth of the "problem-solving industry" in the last 25 years or so. Just think how many people are involved these days in problem-solving jobs. These include the obvious ones, such as doctors, nurses, police, social workers, therapists, coaches, counsellors, and lawyers, but also the less obvious ones, such as politicians, authors of self-help books, and local and national government workers. The more we think about, the more people appear on this list. A very large number of people in the world today rely for their income and job security on a huge and predictable supply of problems for the foreseeable future. It begs the question of what they would do in a problem-free world. Meanwhile, as things stand, there is nothing like a good crisis or tragedy to give people a much needed sense of meaning and purpose, and it is interesting to reflect on the growing status of the emergency and security services over the last 20 years.

The modern world also suffers from *loss of wisdom*. If science rejects the accumulated wisdom of the ages in favour of its own empirically derived body of knowledge, then, since science is the dominant form of knowledge today, wisdom is effectively devalued. Our modern obsession with having to prove things has marginalised two important aspects of wisdom, namely intuition and common sense. Perhaps we should not be surprised that, with wisdom marginalised in these ways, we have become the most dangerous and destructive form of life on the planet.

Thirdly, the modern world is also characterised by *loss of intelligence*. I think that this is partly because education in its true sense has largely been replaced by its opposite, schooling, but also because too many people have become overdependent on "experts" and are therefore not in the habit of thinking for themselves. I think it is significant that non-modern ("traditional") societies place a high value on the exploration and development of consciousness, while this is still regarded as a "fringe" activity in the so-called developed world.

Finally, I believe that the modernity has led to *loss of ecology*. The few societies around the world that have retained wisdom and deeper meaning at the centre of their lives know just how important it is to live in harmony with each other and with the planet. How many of us can put our hands on our hearts and say that we truly live in harmony with each other, let alone the planet? The modern world has made many of us desperate and insecure. It is little wonder that we engage in frenetic activity, such as work, shopping and travelling, when we should be finding ways to live gently and simply, with ourselves and with the world around us.

The Rise of Economism

When we add together loss of meaning, loss of wisdom, loss of intelligence and loss of ecology, there is not much left going for us. This may be why we live in an era of unprecedented *materialism*. For many people, acquiring and consuming material things must seem like the only meaningful thing left for them to do. At the same time, our economics, our politics, our medicine, our education, our science and our culture have become steeped in material values and beliefs and the behaviours that flow from these. We are paying a high price for this, as we exploit and damage each other and the world. Meanwhile, it is short step from materialism and loss of wisdom to *economism*, one of the more recent additions to modernity.

Economism is the tendency to view the world through the lens of economics, and to believe that economic considerations rank higher than other ones. Economism is clearly evident throughout society and is a strong influence in business and political circles. It is surely significant that some politicians refer to countries as “economies” rather than as societies and that, when reporting natural disasters, some news channels mention the value of property damaged before they mention the number of people killed or injured. In non-modern societies economics is a *means* to an end. It is in service to some greater purpose. In contrast, modern societies have made economics the end itself, in the sense that perpetual economic growth seems to be the central purpose of most countries today. This is reflected in the growth ethic of the business world and in the widespread belief that happiness is to be found through money and possessions. If economic growth is the central purpose of the modern world, then we are in deep trouble, because it is a purpose that has no heart and soul and does not reflect our humanity.

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Individuals, organisations and communities all over the world are finding their own ways of bringing meaning, wisdom, intelligence and ecology into their lives and of going beyond materialism. As they do this, I believe that we shall find that a new kind of economics, a new kind of medicine, a new kind of education, a new kind of science, and a new kind of politics are being created, from the ground upwards. It is impossible to predict exactly what they will be, but, if they are imbued with meaning, wisdom, intelligence and ecology, they may look something like this...

The *new economics* will be about enhancing people and planet, rather than exploiting them. At the heart of the new economics will be love, wisdom and ecology. This will bring with it new kinds of relationships, new kinds of businesses, and new kinds of institutions.

The *new medicine* will be about self-reliance and intelligence in health and health-care, rather than dependence on experts and technology. In the new medicine, medical treatment will be the exception rather than the rule, because the main focus will be on staying healthy.

The *new education* will be about bringing out the best and uniqueness in each individual, rather than schooling them to believe certain things and to behave in certain ways, which is what usually happens today. At the heart of the new education will be the development of wisdom, intelligence, meaning and ecology.

The *new science* will be about applying the *whole* of the human being to the search for knowledge, rather than just the physical part, as at present. Science of the physical will continue to give us much that is useful. However, in the new science, knowledge of the physical will be complemented by knowledge of the spiritual, and that will make a big difference.

The *new politics* will be about the return of power to people and communities, rather than having power concentrated in the hands of politicians and the few. At the heart of the new politics are two ideas - the idea that most power stays at the local level, where it belongs, and the idea that everyone has something useful to say and contribute.

None of this is to suggest that we throw the baby out with the bathwater. There are many aspects of modernity worth retaining. For example, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with market economics. What is wrong is the set of values and goals that have come to inform it. And there is nothing intrinsically wrong with modern medicine. What is wrong is its belief that it can effectively address the *whole* spectrum of health problems, when in practice it is good at addressing only parts of the spectrum, such as mechanical repair, emergency intervention and infectious diseases. It is the same for modern education, modern science and modern government. Each has useful aspects that are worth preserving, but each is causing at least as many problems as it purports to solve. It is worth adding that the problems caused by modernity are exacerbated by politicians who are wedded to the idea of *modernising*, which is modernity in the form of government policies. Using modernising to try to solve today's problems is rather like using petrol to try to put out a fire.

The problems caused by modernity, such as climate change, stress, and social disintegration, will just get worse so long as modernity remains the prevailing way of seeing and doing things. We will be able to solve the big problems of our time only when we replace modernity with a set of ideas and practices that are kinder to us and to the planet. None of the above will be easy. People will not willingly give up the habits of a lifetime, and many in power will resist tooth and nail. In fact, if we are honest with ourselves, engaging in the kinds of changes I have suggested here will be the most difficult thing we ever do. But it will well worth the effort.