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Laina Farhat-Holzman
lfarhat102@aol.com

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Reviewed by Laina Farhat-Holzman

Daniel Chirot is the Herbert J. Ellison Professor of Russian and Eurasian Studies in the University of Washington's Henry Jackson School of International Studies. Chirot's most recent book, co-authored with Scott Montgomery, is *The Shape of the New: Four Big Ideas and How They Made the Modern World* (Princeton University Press, 2015.) Chirot's other books have been about genocide, ethnic conflicts, tyranny, social change, and Eastern Europe.

In a digital world of quickly passing opinions and "points of view," how is it possible that just a handful of deep ideas could still be dominant? That is the challenge of the authors of this book. They claim to have hit upon just four deep ideas that have shaped our world, its economics, politics, and notions of freedom since the late 18th century.

Scott Montgomery and Daniel Chirot focus on the main ideas that were authored by Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, and the combined thought of Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. Although these ideas and the people from whom they came were not the only shapers of the modern world, they were surely among the most important. The authors not only explain the ideas, but explore the characters and times of these five intellectual innovators.

Adam Smith (a Scot who lived just before the industrial revolution, 1723-1790) was the first to explore how enlightened self-interest was the best guide to economic prosperity, and laid the basis for modern economic thinking. These ideas provided a justification and guide for the capitalism that was starting to transform the world and is still with us today.

As well as it worked, Smith was wise enough to warn that for such a system to avoid enormous and unfair inequality, capitalists and the wealthy must have strong moral underpinnings. Smith's second book: *The Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, is much better known than his first, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), which deals with the sorts of values that we see even today in the new popularity of philanthropy being promoted by the best of today's billionaires. The key to Smith is that he was a *moral* philosopher, not readily found among economists.

The authors conclude that free and open markets in economic matters and free markets in the expression of political ideologies are essential for democracy. Freedom and political liberty cannot exist without both.

Karl Marx, born in 1818, was a difficult, irritable man who raged against the world he lived in; yet he created a theory for how it would one day become a near paradise.” In identifying the inequality inevitable in untrammelled Capitalism, he imagined a world in which inequality would be impossible, thus conceiving of a utopia. Utopias, unfortunately, are a joke of Plato who selected the word to describe his imaginary Republic, Utopia meaning “no place.”

Although Marx, a baptized Protestant, was hostile to religion, including his father’s religion at birth (Judaism), the system he created functioned as a virtual religion and his works serve as a kind of gospel. No other thinker of the 19th century was ever the source of such transformative, life-and-death power. “What is so astonishing about Marx, however, is that his influence led to the wholesale restructuring of societies, with unparalleled consequences, achieved purely through the ideas he expressed in his writing.”

Marx’s big idea was *Dialectical Materialism as the Theory of History*. He believed that the economic system of a society determines all else: its political and legal institutions, cultural values, and the very forms of daily life. This was belief in a purely materialistic interpretation of history affecting every aspect of human existence.

The Communist Manifesto of 1848 predicted that once the industrial proletariat was organized, it would sweep away the existing order by means of revolution and make itself the ruling class. Marx died well before this happened in Russia.

After his death, his colleague (and economic patron) Friedrich Engels, assembled materials from Marx’s and his own writings to publish *Das Kapital*, considered the gospel of Communism. A British scholar of Marxism, David McLellan, noted: “For a book which has a reputation for length and difficulty, *Capital* is an unlikely best seller.” This enormous and turgid book has been translated into more than 50 languages and has been one of the most widely quoted books of the last hundred years.

The authors conclude: Karl Marx’s theories encompassed much of what was both good and dangerous about the Enlightenment. He sought scientific rigor, idealized progress, and wanted to liberate mankind from what he saw as oppressive economic systems. But his utopian vision resulted in a whole series of nightmarish, ultimately failed political systems. Fury was present at its birth, and may yet come to life again in another incarnation.

Charles Darwin was a gentle and conventional Victorian gentleman who never intended to pull down centuries of belief in a fixed, divinely ordained universe built by a benevolent God. Yet his major opus, *Origin of Species*, not only changed the life sciences, but unintentionally provided fodder for more sinister ideas about “survival of the fittest” as a justification for some terrible economic and political systems that emerged later. Darwin’s great idea is that man evolved through natural selection and random mutation. For religionists that has been a hard pill to swallow, and this is why Darwin’s science is still being rejected by those who refuse to give up the older view of a God-ordered stability. But here again is an idea, or a systematized science of how creation really works, that has changed the world.

Democracy, as found in the Jefferson-Hamilton Debates, is an extraordinary set of ideas centered on notions of human freedom and ways to preserve it. Yet Hamilton and Jefferson strongly differed on how the core values of the new American experiment could be preserved.

Modern democracy harks back to ancient Athens. That extraordinarily innovative regime had some rough procedures which we could broadly call democratic; but it was limited to native born, male, property owners. Montgomery and Chirot note that it was a very long time between the maturation of those ideas and the *rebirth* of democracy in the modern world on the American continent. That it happened there, in such a primitive, non-urban setting and in a colonial outpost of the British Empire, has always been a puzzle. The authors give a good account of the political ideas that were then percolating in Europe and American access to them. It was from those ideas that our liberal democracy of today evolved. It could not as easily have happened in Europe, with its authoritarian traditions and hereditary aristocracy.

Although there was a problem in the American South, which looked more like a hereditary aristocracy and a slave labor force, Southern aristocrats such as Jefferson and the northern Harvard-educated lawyer John Adams, accompanied by the entrepreneurial genius of Alexander Hamilton, debated for decades what the nature of their new country should be.

Jefferson and Hamilton disagreed on the size and responsibilities of government. Jefferson believed that the new country should be in the hands of independent yeomen farmers and a weak central government while Hamilton believed that the country needed a strong central government. This included a central bank, to maintain order and encourage development. Their debates illuminate issues that to date have not been completely resolved. But what they both agreed on was that there must be rule of law universally accepted with the separation of powers to prevent tyranny and corruption, and that there is a need for a diligent citizenry that is literate, hardworking and informed by the values of the Protestant Reformation.

This chapter is an excellent exploration of America's earliest years and it casts light on the varieties of democracy in the world today. Not all democracies are the same. A liberal democracy differs from an illiberal one. In the latter, the people may vote, but how they vote scarcely matters because an autocrat rules. We see many such around the world today.

The *idea* of democracy matters, and has created a country that is, and may, in its ideals, continue to be, the best example of how a country should be run. But American progress has not been linear. It has had setbacks and emergencies (such as the Civil War and some near brushes with totalitarian ideas). Yet, we have expanded the rights and duties of citizens to include women, blacks and many who are not property owners. No idea that sees the light of day and becomes influential lacks its opposition. Ideas that change traditional patterns of human culture threaten people vested in the older system. This is certainly true today.

The Enlightenment proposed that humans be guided by reason, not by tradition. It was a system that promoted science, the exploration of the world without heeding the mythological or religious explanations that were accepted as truth for millennia. But the danger of an Enlightenment can be that all traditions are swept away, both good and bad, with new, untested ideas put forth as truth.

Nonetheless, the Enlightenment has given rise to a modern world in which many miseries of the past (starvation, plagues, slavery) have become largely, if not entirely, eliminated. It has given us cultures in which every adult can voice preferences about issues in their daily lives. It has also produced some violent ideologies that are devoted to the destruction of this democratic world order.

A group of outliers in the United States are populist believers in extreme Christian evangelical fundamentalism. This is our most resistant sector to the ideas of the Enlightenment.

There have been three other major opponents of the Enlightenment: Fascism and totalitarian dictatorships (the Nazis and the Japanese in World War, and formerly, the totalitarian Soviet Union), and today, a backlash that has pushed archaic Islam into a new form of totalitarian domination.

All of these hark back to darker times, yet their practitioners are not reluctant to use the sciences and material benefits of the Enlightenment without also adopting the modern political institutions that created rule-by-law.

Two of these enemies of modern democracy, the Fascists and Communists, have lost in conflicts with the United States and its democratic allies. The third, a violent ideology that marries literalist Islam with fascism, is now roiling order around the world. The proponents of it have declared war on modern ideas and institutions, but it does not seem likely that they will prevail for long.

I cannot praise this book enough. Ideas are indeed the stuff of culture and how they have played out in the 20th and 21st century is a matter of paramount interest to us all. Although Montgomery and Chirot do not say it, they have identified and articulated a vital, core set of values, unique to the Western world. In the days to come, we can expect them to face serious opposition around the world. As our authors point out in their chapter on the “Making of Democracy,” after the emergence of a number of new democratic states in the first third of the 20th century, the process stalled so that by 2014 only forty percent of the world’s population now live in fully democratic societies. Will there be a new, fourth wave of democratization? Present signs are not favorable.