
The Shape of the New: Four Big Ideas and How They Made the Modern World

By Scoot L. Montgomery and Daniel Chirot

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The Shape of the New consists of two parts, seven chapters and a conclusion. The subtitle, “Four Big Ideas and How they Made the Modern World” refers to Montgomery and Chirot’s belief that modern institutions and political systems are created and shaped according to the thoughts of the important thinkers. The authors claim that the history of the twentieth century is founded on the ideas of Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin and the founders of American democracy. The impacts of these thinkers have continued in the twenty-first century. The authors, in this book, follow a different method in writing intellectual history. They argue that ideas are among the primary forces behind modern history, and that those ideas define and shape the modern world. The main subjects of the book are the concepts of the Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment; and the two main parts are classified according to these concepts. The first part of the book, entitled “Inventors of Modernity and What Became of Their Ideas,” examines the major thinkers of the modern Enlightenment, namely Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, and Jefferson-Hamilton, in four chapters. In the second part, entitled “Secular and Religious Reactions Against Enlightenment,” the authors examine the examples of the counter-Enlightenment in three chapters, which are “Counter-Enlightenment: From Antimodernism to Fascism,” “Christian Fundamentalism: The Politics of



God in America,” and “Purifying Islam: The Muslim Reaction against the Western Enlightenment.”

In the first chapter, the authors extensively delineate the main ideas of Adam Smith, the founding father of the modern economy. They describe the world he wanted to bring about, and evaluate his rightfully famous book *Wealth of Nations* in this framework. It is vital to note that the ideas we use today, instinctively, were radical at that time of their introduction, even though they were not produced to violently destroy contemporary beliefs. Smith wrote on modern economics, when there was no modern economy at all; hence, the book he wrote at a time when mercantilist economy was widely accepted became a key source for the creation and legitimation of modern economics. The authors trace the debates pioneered by Smith by analyzing post-Adam Smith economic theories and controversies in this framework, and they claim that Adam Smith will be remembered as one of the major historical figures that fundamentally changed world history. Smith stated that individuals should have the freedom to make all essential decisions affecting their material and moral lives, and that if they were allowed to do so, the resulting society would be the most efficient and free. According to Montgomery and Chirot, this was a very big idea that opposed both the communal tradition and the prevailing forms of authority in Smith’s time.

The second chapter, “Karl Marx: The Tragic Consequences of a Brilliant Theory,” indicates how the authors approach Karl Marx’s theory. According to the authors, Marx did not think that utopian dreams would realize universal equality, but rather that an egalitarian world would emerge as a result of ‘scientific laws’ governing history. This chapter evaluates the thesis of ‘dialectical materialism,’ which they define as his ‘big idea.’ It then goes on to discuss the emergence of Marxist parties and the failure of the Marxist prophesy in Western Europe. Montgomery and Chirot address the Bolshevik revolution in terms of Marxism and the failure of the labor movements and communist revolutions which escalated after the First World War in Western Europe. They also discuss the spread of Marxism in Eastern Europe under the leadership of Soviet Russia, as well as Maoism in China and the rise and fall of Marxism in the third world.

According to the authors, Charles Darwin transformed the theory of evolution into a correct scientific theory and presented a secular history to humankind. Darwin raised tough questions about the purpose of life. The third chapter narrates Darwin’s life story in detail, and evaluates his scientific views by examining his masterwork, *On the Origins of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. Montgomery and Chirot go on to explain how Darwin’s views spread across Europe, the Middle East and the rest of the world. In particular, they assess the impact of his thought on the disciplines of philosophy, literature, psychology, and education. The authors argue that Darwin’s ideas in the first decades after 2000 are more alive, controversial, and capable of inspiring emotion than ever. Darwin continues to be immediately relevant, tested and reconfirmed and modified.

The fourth chapter evaluates the views of Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton,

the founding fathers of the United States, under the heading “Making Democracy.” Since the United States of America has undertaken the role of institutionalizing and preserving liberal Enlightenment in the twentieth century, the relationship of the founding fathers to enlightenment must be well understood. Hamilton and Jefferson came up with two different views on American democracy inspired by English philosophical and polemical writings, the views of French and Irish Enlightenment thinkers, and classical Roman and Greek writings. Hamilton envisioned a strong central authority, a large military, a federally driven industrial economy, and an active foreign policy. Jefferson wanted a weak center, local militias, a nation of yeomen farmers, and “entangling alliances with none.” One version was urban and expansive, other rural and more parochial. But in any case, the founding fathers were men of the Enlightenment. They were in perennial contact with the world of Enlightenment, therefore the idea of America emerged out of the world of enlightenment, not the ashes of the old World.

Montgomery and Chirot start to evaluate counter-Enlightenment ideas in the fifth chapter, “From Anri-Modernism to Fascism.” They analyze the reasons behind the anti-liberal and anti-democratic behavior of nationalists in nineteenth century Europe and provide a detailed perspective on how the intellectual roots of counter-Enlightenment in Europe emerged as a reaction to Western Enlightenment. The authors advocate that fascism is a successful attempt to mobilize mass support; they examine the intellectual roots of fascism and claim that fascism is based on fears of excessive individualism, the selfishness of capitalism, probable antagonistic thoughts, and results in the destruction of healthy organized community. Then Montgomery and Chirot discuss varieties of fas-

cism from Europe to East Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, examining how fascism has become the political system in Germany and Italy. The authors cautiously point to the relationship between Arab nationalism and fascism, stating that Arab nationalism should not be categorized as fascist because of its anti-Semitic rhetoric, although linking Arab nationalism with fascism and nazism is not totally irrelevant.

The sixth chapter, entitled “Politics of God in America” examines Christian fundamentalism as a counter-Enlightenment movement. After reviewing the background and context of Christian fundamentalism, evangelicalism in the nineteenth century and the birth of fundamentalism, they discuss American fundamentalism in the twentieth century in detail in terms of its social, political, intellectual, and religious aspects. In this discussion they devote a significant portion to the evangelists, since it has been argued that evangelists have been responsible for the religious hostility toward the Enlightenment in the U.S. in the last decades. Following this comprehensive discussion, the authors raise a question: “What would American society look like if fundamentalist were placed in power? What sort of America would this be?” They go on to critically evaluate the possible effects of fundamentalist administration on government, social norms, and universities. They link Christian fundamentalism with Islamic fundamentalism by saying that “Fundamentalism in Christianity therefore shares some key aspects with its Islamic counterpart, particularly its closed mindedness.”

In the seventh chapter, entitled “Purifying Islam,” Montgomery and Chirot examine Islamic fundamentalism. According to the authors, fundamentalist Islam is the Muslim reaction against Western Enlightenment. Al-

though some distinguished scholars in the Islamic world try to synthesize modern liberal ideas and Islamic thoughts, and some secularist intellectuals are even eager to push Enlightenment ideas through their societies, today such thinking appears more unlikely than ever to succeed in Muslim societies. Focusing or bringing fundamentalism in to the front for the Muslim World is, beyond doubt, controversial, as almost all intellectuals in the Muslim world oppose fundamentalist ideas. Because the fundamentalist ideology and the various relevant groups that adhere to it use violence as a means of protest, researchers are more likely to examine this subject; therefore, there is a broader literature on this subject than that of general Islamic beliefs, thoughts, and interpretations. For this reason, this claim should be revised. According to the authors, the Islamic world had experienced an Enlightenment era, which was interrupted by the conservative revolution led by Abu-Hamid al-Ghazali. After that, Islamic thinking and society turned into an absolute and state enforced doctrine. As seen in the examples of Ibn Rushd, Nasuriddin al-Tusi and Ibni Haldun, intellectuals living in the post al-Ghazali era, attempts to generate an Islamic philosophy were not successful and did not achieve the desired result. However, studies of many Turkish scholars such as Ihsan Fazioğlu and Tahsin Görgün, and others such as Jamil Ragep from McGill University on the intellectual debates in the Islamic world in the thirteenth and fourteenth century as well as under the Ottoman Empire necessitate a re-examination of the literature to which the authors refer. Montgomery and Chirot claim that the less educated Turkic nomads imposed on Muslim Societies a more puritanical, restrictive, and closed version of Islam. As I have pointed out, it has been clearly revealed in the new studies that in the regions ruled by the Seljuks, the Ottomans, the Safa-

vids and the Mughals, a series of dynamic and profound intellectual debates raged regarding science and philosophy. There are numerous scientific papers on this subject in the journal of *Nazariyat* published in Turkey. Doubtlessly, the authors rely on secondary sources on this subject; however, the secondary sources the authors refer to are problematic. Therefore, the opinions expressed by the authors based on these secondary sources become controversial. With references to Timur Kuran they claim that Islamic societies relied too much on stultified, traditional schooling that discouraged original thought. Building on this argument, they try to explain why there was no Enlightenment in the Islamic world and what was unique about the West. Although Timur Kuran is one of the most prominent experts on the subject, the transformational stages of the Ottoman Empire comprise a complex subject that must be discussed in depth.

It is understandable, when taking into consideration the general theme of the book, that the following topic in the same chapter is Islamic Modernism; however, there is a disconnection between the first and second topics. The authors also repeat the disconnected transitions between the topics in this chapter. For example, after describing Afghani as the pioneer of Islamic modernism, they come to the emergence of nationalism, fascism, and socialism in the 1930s; then they mention the birth of the Muslim Brotherhood. Even though these passages are quite understandable to those familiar with the subject, people without pre-existing comprehensive knowledge on the connections between these developments may not have such a clear cut understanding.

The authors explain Salafism under the title of "Rise of New Salafism." They mention Sayyid Qutub and Sayid Abul A'la Mawdudi as the chief modern Salafis, and emphasize Sayyid Qutub's Salafism strongly. Then they give information about Sayyid Qutub in detail, especially his role in the emergence of violent Salafism. It is true that Sayyid Qutub was influential in the transformation of Salafism into a violent ideology; however, it is controversial whether Qutub would be regarded as a Salafi or not, even though his ideas are powerful in contemporary Salafism. Therefore, the authors' views on Salafism and Sayyid Qutub can be revised in the light of a broader literature review.

In conclusion, it is quite impressive that the authors, in their advocacy of liberal enlightenment, analyze in detail the historical and intellectual roots of liberal Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment, taking into account different geographies of the world including the Middle East. The book leads the reader to deeply contemplate what has happened over the last two centuries in the world. Since the book investigates a long period of time and a vast geographical region, it is understandable that some periods and regions would be represented more accurately and extensively than others; the primary criticism in this respect is directed toward the chapter entitled "Purifying Islam." However, regional intellectual history studies might bring about a brand new intellectual debate building upon the points the book puts forward. As such *The Shape of the New* is recommended to readers, scholars and intellectuals seeking a comprehensive debate on the intellectual and political transformations in the contemporary world by enlightened perspective.