

# A New Enlightenment<sup>i</sup>

*Throughout human history the great philosophers have returned to three questions in the search for 'general truths'<sup>ii</sup>: what can I know (ontology), how can I know it (epistemology) and how then should I act (ethics). To these the moderns would add questions of political economy and morality, and 'the self'. The Marxists and their followers – originating with Rousseau in fact – retreated from these old ideas in order to supplant them with class conflict, historical materialism and violent struggle. The result was communism, fascism and national socialism. However, rather than returning to the old philosophies of life and the wisdom of ages, the 1960s saw a further decline into post-modernism, moral relativism and narcissism led by such 'thinkers' as Derrida, Foucault and Marcuse, leading to the shallow aimlessness of identity politics and 'inclusion'. These latter are not philosophies at all, but once-fashionable posturing. It is time for a New Enlightenment says **John Montgomery***

It has become the orthodoxy – indeed fashionable – for public policy – especially towards cities – to be framed as a latter-day “Renaissance”. This is true of the UK, where the policy pronouncements on the “urban renaissance” have often bordered on the pretentious and the embarrassing, led by the pompous-sounding ‘Office of the Deputy Prime Minister’. Policy towards cities has certainly improved from the 1970s, but this trajectory can be traced back to the mid 1980s when it was known simply as urban regeneration. Meanwhile, the return to compact, traditional cities has been a feature of European city planning since at least the early 1990s, in some cases the mid 1980s.

The word ‘renaissance’ is certainly apt in so far as new life was breathed into the cities from the early 1980s, and in the sense that urban design is a re-application of traditional forms of city building, that is to say those before modernism. In any event, it is certainly the case that the cities have already been reinvigorated by a combination of new industries, the knowledge economy, increased sophistication and urbanity and a re-design of city streets and squares. A reasonable assumption is that this will continue for a few more years at least.

Yet, by the same token, people very often have a love-hate relationship with cities, or at least some of them – some people and some cities. Peter Hall argues that the outstanding problems faced by cities<sup>iii</sup> are traffic congestion and damage to the environment, a growing welfare-dependent underclass of single parent families with poor educational attainment, and urban crime. Jones also points to pollution and too rapid urbanisation in China, for example. He draws attention to the tensions caused by waves of large-scale immigration by differing ethnic and religious groups<sup>iv</sup>. Fear of crime, poor schools, a sense of unease, the simplistic doctrine of multiculturalism, political correctness, the perceived attack on indigenous ways of life, falling educational standards, drugs, street violence, public drunkenness . . . so that it is tempting at least for the middle classes to flee the larger cities in favour of the market town, the countryside or the beach. Nearly 250,000 leave

London each year in this way, a phenomenon now referred to as 'white flight'; in Sydney the arrival of new migrants each year is balanced almost exactly by Australians leaving for the country and the Gold Coast.

This means that even the best town planning in history will prove to be unsuccessful for so long as the cities are dogged by high levels of crime, ideologically-driven governance and a lowering of standards in the public services, especially education. While many of our towns and cities have improved considerably as built environments, the problem is the people who, by their own standards of behaviour, drive others away. It is true that compared to the 1970s and 1980s – and indeed to London in the present time – New York and other American cities are paragons of safety and sociability. This has been brought about by zero tolerance of anti-social behaviour and petty crime, school bullying and street gangs, drug pushing and illegal street prostitution. The generation that brought multi-culturalism, hippies, free love, black militancy, the civil rights movement, the wilder extremes of feminism and more . . . has quite possibly come to a point where its basic assumptions about humanism are being challenged, not least by that generation itself. If true, then there is a possibility that we may be reaching the end of over-liberalisation, ill-considered blanket tolerance, moral relativism and the intellectual dead-end of post-modernism; but rather may come to be associated with a move towards more mannered and respectful – in terms simply of respecting other people - forms of public social life.

The Enlightenment of the early and mid 18<sup>th</sup> century was a secular movement based on rational and humane views of mankind. As such, it was a reaction to theological obscurantism and religious intolerance. It was notable for the works of Voltaire, Hume and Smith, the towering genius that was Sir Isaac Newton, the astonishing Henry Cavendish, and the notable development of historical research by Gibbon and Montesquieu who would also write a major treatise on manners. Its greatest achievement was the American Constitution, although it would also help set the conditions for the Terror in France. The academic John Carroll has argued that the major flaw with humanism is that it rejects cheerfulness and gratitude for all that is beautiful, and degenerates instead into narcissism and rancour – the cult of the 'I'. He asserts that there are eternal laws, both moral and metaphysical, and that at its deepest level ... 'the human conscience is born understanding them'. Because of this 'the great markers of the central way of ...our culture survive, and are there for each new generation to read, if it will'. A new Enlightenment would achieve this, but this time it need not be exclusively secular, for under enlightened self-interest religious and secular beliefs can exist side-by-side as long as each respects the others' rights to believe whatever they believe. The problem arises where fundamentalists try to gain ascendancy over others.

The building blocks for such an Enlightenment are already with us. These are:

1. *Economics* – the ascendancy of capitalism and free trade as a dynamic system for producing, distributing and consuming goods and services, and for wealth creation. There is no prospect of an alternative economic system coming into being in the next 200 years at least, probably much longer. Capitalism will continue to create wealth, alongside new cultural forms. Everyone gets wealthier as a consequence, certainly in material goods, although the entrepreneurs, the already rich and the new rich will continue to accumulate more wealth than the average person. This is not a question of 'the rich getting richer and

the poor getting poorer' as the left argues, but simply the outcome of a system which values risk and investment. The 'poor' will have greater opportunities than ever before to increase their own wealth and that of their families. They will in any event continue to become wealthier. Countries such as Britain and Australia should trade globally, provide low-tax business environments, have highly skilled and well-educated workforces, remove barriers to employment, reform the public services, tackle crime head-on in the cities, extend choice into the health, pensions and education sectors.

2. *Politics* – liberal democracy is, as Churchill is reputed to have said, far from perfect but it is better than any other system of governance. With the collapse of communism and the end of 'cradle to grave' socialism, the option would appear to be the corrupt dictatorships of Africa or the regressive feudalism of most of the Middle East. The dangers to western democracy come from within: the widespread disdain for professional politicians and the main political parties, falling voting rates and the prospect of extremist groups seeking to overthrow western society. By 2050, between a third and half of the people living in Europe will be non-European, and at present these show little sign of assimilating with the host cultures or indeed respecting western democracy. The dangers of the coming period will be heightened religious and racial conflict caused by too rapid an influx of migrants and the rise of Islamic militantism. This is already happening in the race riots of Birmingham, Sydney and Antwerp. There are serious questions over whether the demands of radical Islam are reconcilable with Western civilisation, market economies and democracy.
3. *Culture* – the convergence of cultural products with new technologies means that to a large degree we will see an ever-closer relationship between culture and economics, as well as with traditions, the high arts and local identities. Societies will need to retain their historical cultural identities, but also be open to the new. This will include learning from other cultural traditions as in the past: the Renaissance was in part a rediscovery of antiquity, Debussy was greatly influenced by Japanese art and Indonesian music, early jazz was a fusion of African rhythms, French classical music and Scottish and Irish sets, modern jazz borrowed much from Debussy, Ravel and 'Les Six'. Nash was influenced by Adam, so too the American architects of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Scott was inspired by the German Romantic Poets, Philip Glass and the Minimalists by eastern music, Handel by the *opera seria* of the Italian courts, Bertholt Brecht by the Beggars Opera, Hollywood by the German, French and Russian film-makers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This 'borrowing' of ideas and motifs from previous generations and ages has always been a feature of art, music and literature. This will no doubt continue and new movements will emerge, possibly combining traditional forms with a revisiting of modernism. This is already true of interior design, for example, or the digital landscape movement. This is an opening up of culture rather than the dead hand of post-modernism and its rejection of progress. In turn this implies a return to genuine forms of historical research and criticism, based on much better knowledge and a respect for the past. There may be no absolute certainties any more, but there are known facts that can be learned and built upon. Every so often, prior assumptions will be challenged by new evidence, and this is entirely consistent with logical positivism. As Camille Paglia puts it, 'If there were no facts, buildings would fall down,

4. *Ethics* – that is to say, the set of values that govern the life and workings of a society. The enlightened self-interest of Adam Smith, following David Hume, is located within a broader philosophical approach which includes the works of Thomas Hobbes, John Stuart Mill, Bertrand Russell and Karl Popper. This involves a rejection of metaphysical speculation (Hegel, Marx) and is therefore to this extent compatible with Foucault’s dismissal of totalising systems of thought. This, however, is not to agree with the post-modernist Marxists that the rejection of a single explanatory theory leads inevitably to the rejection of all theory and all value systems. That way lies the ruin of moral relativism and a regression to the lowest common denominator. Just because everything cannot be deemed to be wrong in every case does not mean that it is right either. Thus while the taking of life might at least be understandable in certain circumstances – in self-defence, in times of war, possibly in ending suffering, for the most part murder and manslaughter are crimes even allowing for extenuating circumstances. Rape is also wrong, but so too are false accusations of rape or sexual harassment. Insider dealing and wilful tax evasion are wrong, so too is welfare fraud. Of course, precise definitions of right and wrong vary between cultures. Acts such as adultery and homosexuality are punishable by death in Islamic countries, but not in the western democracies. Spitting and chewing gum in public are crimes in Singapore, vandalism is punishable by caning and drug trafficking by the death penalty. Corruption in Nigeria goes largely unpunished; indeed, is a way of life. Clearly, some laws and customs are the products of particular places at particular times. This has always been the case, although we might hope that international cooperation will help codify crime and punishment to a greater extent. But not if this is marked by a collapse into moral relativism and the fetishisation of ‘human rights’ or what the philosopher Roger Scruton calls ‘the social entropy (that) is the root cause of our “post-modern” condition’<sup>vii</sup>. All of this implies that enlightened self-interest is the best and most realistic course, together with respect for others and the rule of law, plus a sense of compassion. This is really about the values of a society and standards of behaviour, and the ethically practical.
  
5. *Epistemology* – that is, the theory of knowledge, developed initially by Aristotle as the ‘know why’ of scientific analysis<sup>viii</sup>. This argues that scientific truths are, at least within the paradigms of the day and often across paradigms, universal, largely invariable and exist independent of context. An example would be Newtonian physics and its assimilation into Einstein’s conception of the universe. Epistemology relates closely to *ethics* in that fundamental laws about what is right and wrong are forms of universal truth. It also fits with the rejection of totalising meta-theories in that scientific truths must be tested empirically, and in relation to systems of logic. This is certainly more difficult to apply to the everyday workings of societies, as opposed to experiments in laboratories and research centres. Yet it is not impossible either, certainly in relation to economics or even political science. Incumbent on researchers and academics would be the obligation to demonstrate factual conclusions rather than simply falling back on ideological totems and mantras. In this way, the study of culture, society and economics will hopefully extract itself from the quicksands of post-modernism, multi-culturalism as an ideology, the everything is equally valid, anything goes society. The only way to do this is by applying reason and objectivity.

This stands in marked contrast to what Popper<sup>ix</sup> referred to the ‘pseudo-sciences’ of Marxism and psychoanalysis, as these never specify in advance the conditions under which they can be tested and/or refuted. Rather, an elaborate game of shifting the goal-posts is followed, where rather than admit they are wrong, Marxists simply move on to another construct, each more complicated and linguistically contorted than its predecessor. Now that the cracks have appeared in post-modernism and multi-culturalism, the latest vogue is the obtuse and largely incomprehensible meanderings of Lacan. A return to empirical research and verification linked to more grounded theories is long overdue. In turn, this implies that education should put learning back at the centre. This means learning historical facts, skills and methods as opposed to endless interpretation and contextualism. There would have been no Renaissance in Florence had Brunelleschi and Donatello not studied the architectural principles and methods of ancient Rome. In the arts and humanities, therefore, the need in my view is for historical study, learning and illumination. Again, as Paglia puts it: ‘The distant past holds the key to the present and the future. It is up to each person to seek knowledge...’<sup>x</sup> Or, as John Carroll has argued the modern university might once again become a place for the advancement of knowledge and the teaching of ways of thinking.

6. *Morality* – is the way in which we deal with ethical problems on a day-to-day level and over the life-span of societies. As Oliver Thomson has pointed out,<sup>xi</sup> this tends to fluctuate over time as codes of behaviour are relaxed in one generation, only to be reintroduced for a later one. Punishment too – its severity – varies in tandem with social attitudes to crime, anti-social behaviour and indeed to the form of punishment itself. In Britain, for example, slavery was abolished in late 18<sup>th</sup> century, although it remains widespread in Africa and the Middle East, female flogging was abolished in 1820, the pillory in 1837, public hanging in 1864, army flogging in 1868, prison treadmills in 1895, the death penalty in 1964. This has tended to occur as the middle classes have grown and have become dismayed and unsettled by cruelty sanctioned and carried out by the state. Certainly very few people in western societies would consider adultery or homosexuality sins punishable by death. Yet there is a rising concern, not only that crime is escalating out of control, but that everyday standards of decency are also in decline. Bad language in public and on television is the least of it, general rudeness appears to be endemic, certainly in England. Anti-social noise, shouting and swearing in the street, drunkenness and violent behaviour, inappropriate clothing in social settings, all of these are symptoms of moral change. There appears to be a growing ‘obscenification’ of everyday life. It seems the challenge will be to combine tolerance of different ways of living, tastes and preferences with an over-arching respect for others, minimum standards of public behaviour and at least some recognition that societies have, or should have, shared core values. At its simplest this might mean a revival of saying ‘please’ and ‘thank you’, observing the everyday courtesies of urban life<sup>xii</sup>. As Don Watson has observed, the place to start is with the language itself<sup>xiii</sup>. But even this may require a change to how people are taught to behave in schools. At its simplest, morality is some inner restraint within society, and unless this and the rule of law are in broad terms upheld on an everyday basis by citizens, then the alternative suggested may be the police state. Those free thinkers and free lovers who hark back to the 1960s, and who find it fashionable to denounce western nations as police states, might ponder what happened to their predecessors in France during the Terror and in the Soviet Union under the perfect system

of communism. Whatever the modern embodiment of fundamental decencies may be, observed through manners and everyday conduct, we need to consider these soon and urgently. Otherwise, extremes of bad and anti-social behaviour will push us, as individuals living in a society, ever further apart.

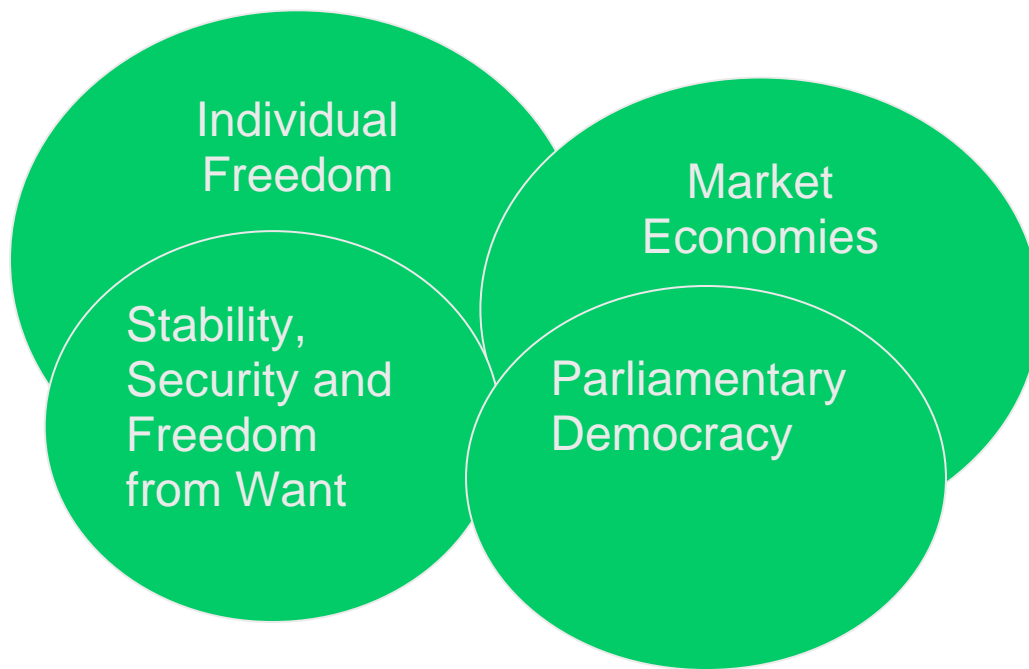
I see the first three of these as more or less given, the fourth – ethics – within reach, but I am much less certain about morality and the basic ground-rules of living in human societies. This is not simply because of ideological opposition from the left who have most to gain from moral relativity and politicised and heavily unionised public services, it is also likely that the majority of people are simply uninterested in such questions, except perhaps in relation to crime and punishment. For improvements in the conduct of everyday life in any society can only be brought about by agreement, that is government by consent. Where governments try to impose upon or alter behaviour by regulation and dictat, only resentment and a disengagement from politics will follow. As Plato observed, trying to govern by an ever-increasing panoply of rules and regulations is like fighting the Hydra: for every head one cuts off, another two grow in its place. Even so, there are beginning to be signs of improvements in everyday morality, for example in the question of appropriate clothing for women in the workplace and at social functions.

What is being described, of course, is a society based on shared principles, acknowledged truths, respect and tolerance, decency, manners and a set of core values. This is not too dissimilar to the Athens of ancient Greece, although with some improvements (female voting, abolition of slavery). Nor indeed is it, therefore, divorced from the renaissance that, after all, combined a rediscovery of classicism (conceptual and technical knowledge) with new ways of doing things. This would be a combination of principles, objectivity, proportion, scale, reason and manners, as argued by Lord Kames. This would not run counter to personal freedoms, liberal democracy or wealth creation, or religious faith, but would provide a framework within which these would sit. However, this can only be achieved in an economic system where increases in the levels of wealth are achieved.

All of this implies an at first sight odd mix of policy attitudes: liberal on economics – and therefore supporting wealth creation in market economies; a reliance on parliamentary democracy and the rule of law; interventionist in urban planning, spatial planning and local place-making through urban design; interventionist too in the sense of helping to grow particular economic sectors; progressive and modern in the arts and culture, whilst learning from the past; and fairly conservative when it comes to manners, public social life, everyday decency and civility. General truths, in every respect, are preferable to isms.

## PANEL

**Figure 1: A Philosophy of Society**



*Source: John Montgomery, 2008*

**Dr John Montgomery** is Managing Director of urban and cultural planning consultancy *Urban Cultures Ltd.* His latest book, *The New Wealth of Cities*, was published by Ashgate (2007).

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Based on an extract from *The New Wealth of Cities* by John Montgomery, Ashgate 2007.

<sup>ii</sup> Manheimer, R *A Map to the End of Time*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999.

<sup>iii</sup> Hall, P. *Cities in Civilization*, (London: 1998), chapter 30.

<sup>iv</sup> Jones, E. *Metropolis: The World's Great Cities* (Oxford University Press, 1990), Chpt 9.

<sup>v</sup> Carroll, J *The Wreck of Western Culture* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2004).

<sup>vi</sup> Paglia, C *Sex, Art and American Culture*, Penguin, New York 1992, p231.

<sup>vii</sup> Scruton, R. *Conserving the Past*, in Bartlett and Scruton *Town and Country* (London: Vintage, 1999), p327.

<sup>viii</sup> Flyvbjerg, B *Phroentic Planning and Research: Theoretical and Methodological Reflections*, Planning Theory and Practice, vol 5, no 3, September 2004, pp283-306.

<sup>ix</sup> Popper, K 'The Logic of Scientific Discovery', REF

<sup>x</sup> Paglia, op cit 1992, p169.

<sup>xi</sup> Thomson, O. *A History of Sin* (Edinburgh: Canongate 1982).

<sup>xii</sup> Truss, L. *Talk to the Hand: The Utter Bloody Rudeness of Everyday Life* (London: Profile Books, 2005)

<sup>xiii</sup> Watson, D. *Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language* (Sydney: Random House, 2003)