

REACTION

The need for roots, balance and a new Enlightenment

David Howell November 22, 2023



The Dinner of Philosophers by Jean Huber, 1772-73, showing Diderot, Huber-Voltaire, Marmontel, Voltaire, Alembert, La Harpe, Grimm, Father Adam and Condorcet. Credit: Universal Art Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

We have to, we just have to, make a better fist of understanding the roots of the modern world and the causes of many of our troubles. To do that we have to go deeper, much deeper, than the usual catalogue of issues and challenges, or tirades about broken Britain and demands for a new and shinier future.

As barbarities mount around the world, causing populations to turn inwards and vistas to narrow, it is plain that the great hope of human progress, which carried us through a bloody 20th century, has faltered again. The **Enlightenment**, which triggered the rise of many modern values (much of it taking place in Britain), showed how science and humankind could be brought together, and which pushed aside the superstition and harsh manacles of lives “nasty, brutish and short”, has ceased to shed light on much of the world. It must be revisited and reinterpreted if we are to start moving forward again, or at least prevent the drift backwards to a darker age of disorder and violence.

In the 18th century, it was Voltaire who looked with admiration at British thoughts and freedoms and described us as “a nation of philosophers”. But where are the philosophers today? Where are the modern equivalents of the coffee-house swirl and intellectual tumult? They brought balance, not bloodshed, to British politics, government and constitutional reform (slowly down from precedent to precedent), in the face of vast and fast industrial advances and the enormous social upheaval that went with it.

The time is surely long overdue for another Lockean *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Now it would be an “Essay Concerning Human Relations” – all aspects of which have been changed at every level of existence, life and work, by the microprocessor and the communications revolution. These are now shading off into the **Artificial Intelligence Revolution** – artificial intelligence being spawned from, and having to be dovetailed in harmony with, human intelligence – itself already being melded with, and deeply distorted by, the digital age.

But do we live anymore in an enlightened age, or an age of progress and hope at all? Are today’s intelligentsia afraid to come forward with their superior insights on this central question, for fear of being branded as insufficiently progressive or class conscious? Are they afraid to ask again what the whole digital upheaval, so far, with its intrusive transparency, its information overload, its identity pressures, its silo separatism, its giant paradoxes of hyper-connectivity and yet fragmenting hyper-individualism, have done to every kind of relationship in society and the nation, from the humblest to the most international, from the innermost part of family life to the loftiest aspects of world order?

The evidence on all sides tumbles in. Start with the basics, family relationships. Parents lose authority over their children (truancy is soaring). Parental control, let alone mutually respectful dialogue, becomes increasingly exhausting, the more so with heat and light bills that cannot be paid, food that cannot be afforded. So the family unit, still the fundamental building block in society, turns out, like school buildings, to be developing aerated holes in it, creating unsafe foundations at the very roots of the stable society.

Move one up from the family to the community and local relationships, now filled with empowered and blogged anger and more assertive than ever. Yet these relationships are weaker, too, as the internet keeps people at home, fixated on the laptop screen and away from sustained community cooperation altogether, leaving the “tedious business” of local government in less experienced and more impulsive hands.

Devolution and decentralisation are all the rage. Yet the other balancing side of the constitutional process, the paramount need for central coherence and a framework, as Immanuel Kant long ago explained, hardly gets a mention.

Move up again to national governance and the nation state. “Everyone needs a nation to love”, opined the former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros Ghali two decades ago — a man much maligned. Yet his words once again took us to the edge of the yawning gap, the consuming contradiction — that love of homeland, or the idea of the home country, now polarises and is many times amplified into dislike of the foreign, the opposite, the “Them”. “Us” first please is the insistent populist chorus — pressures on governments everywhere to spend on “Us” first, to put the treatment of domestic social ills well before helping the ills of others. And the weaker or more precarious the government, the more vulnerable it is to every minority demand for more homeland funding, leading inevitably to higher inflationary pressures, more erosion of real wages and more pay militancy, compensatory wage demands and more cost inflation — the whole doom loop.

Move finally to the international level. There relations have altered beyond recognition, with the new instant information and comment flow, with the new online rumours taking wings, the new shower of bogusly authoritative blogs and with outright fakery of increasing sophistication.

Here is an entirely new opinion milieu of which too many sleepy diplomats seem still sadly unaware. Yet it changes the tally of who are a nation’s best friends on which occasions, the best kind of allies, best associates, and who are genuinely like-minded in a shifting international landscape. And it changes radically the best ways of relating to other societies.

Just as the unfolding digital age so far has already placed transforming demands on human relations, and the ordering of human affairs, at *all* levels, along comes AI awareness to place juddering further demands on individuals, on families, on institutions and on society to adopt new attitudes and new behaviour.

With the AI upheaval, as with previous pivoting points, come the usual sillinesses and wild predictions. Thus we have Elon Musk announcing, and given dismally uncritical attention in doing so, that AI will put an end to work as we have known it. This is a crass misunderstanding of everyday life, both family and social, where unending tasks await attention — in the home, in the neighbourhood, in the community and beyond, and where

there is never any shortage of work, either for betterment or more often to halt deterioration and keep things the way they are, or seemed to be (usually rose-tinted).

Musk means of course, an end to swathes of routine wage-earning or salaried work – a declining proportion of total employment. But even that demands a mindset which can separate paid job income, necessary for living and breathing and daily existence, from other kinds of – often hard – work which may not be paid, or paid very little, but is rewarded by lifting the spirit and making a contribution in a satisfying and fulfilling way.

No one is being taught to think this through, since it does not immediately mesh with any of our inherited “values”, from **Marx** or **the market**. Few policy-makers show much interest in the bigger question which follows, namely how to resource with income, dignity and security the millions (the majority) who find themselves in this entirely transformed milieu. That matter, the fair distribution of asset growth, as well as from income generated now almost entirely by machines, becomes the hottest and most intractable political issue of all. It cannot be ducked or sidelined, or dismissed as a mere matter of distribution. Distribution of life’s goods is *the* central political question, which so far digital capitalism has spectacularly failed to resolve.

In the recent confabulation about **AI at Bletchley Park**, there was plenty about international sharing of technical knowledge. But there was little or nothing about sharing in the new enlightenment, about how resources for daily life will require a fundamental change of attitude to the distribution of wealth and income, as well as in personal views about the way life will have to be lived to stay in harmony with the new science and technology closing all around us; and how to tame it.

As Robert Skidelsky observes in his ambitious new volume ***The Machine Age: An Idea, a History, a Warning*** (Allen Lane, £25), we enter this new world of free will but then find escape from our imprisonment impossible.

The deep mining of intellectual origins to guide us through this predicament is just not happening. Instead we are subjected to a relentless flow of shallow thinking in almost every column, in almost every interview or discussion, but especially on the morning radio shows. The art of the good and informative political discussion, rooted in intellectual integrity and the search for truth, has truly been lost in a cascade of point-scoring and outright hectoring exchanges, with ceaseless interruptions from over-

opinionated but under-informed interviewers barely allowing answers before they answer their own questions.

I suspect this is one reason for the rise of podcasts, where at least there is a chance of frank and friendly exchange in conversation and something gets learnt, while idiotic yes-or-no questions are usually avoided. But even here the banalities keep surfacing and flooding out serious reflection as to *why* things should be as they now are, or are plainly becoming.

Why, for example, the atmosphere of total distrust of all the apparatus of governance? Why the lack of trust, lack of respect, lack of patience, lack of belief? Why the lack of binding agents which hold the centre together strongly enough to contain dissent but preserve a reasonable degree of social and national unity?

This is the glue of association and identity that has gone, leaving the fragments to proliferate and scatter. But if no one stops to ask why, especially now, why we are so clearly moving *not* into a new age of Enlightenment but out of one — with evidence of a slide back to mysticism, superstition, paranoia, mindless crime, repression and incipient madness — then there can be no lasting repairs and no recovery. We cannot address the key points of weakness, with no check on the disintegrating slide, and no progress — in fact, the opposite.

With the shutters going up all around, the situation is fertile for bogeymen and conspiracy panic, for a scattering of “my truth” in place of the search for the Truth, and for a questioning of everything by everyone. Uncertainties now prevail all round, with shoulder-shrugging to end every quest for answers — to massive climate dangers ahead, to social breakdown, to bottomless racial hatreds, to insoluble territorial clashes and ambitious, often laced with religious or ideologically brewed fervour being fed fatally into the mix.

Listen to many public affairs broadcasts and you hear how something called ‘The Government’ is the bogey figure to blame for pretty well everything, wrong at every step, failing to support anything, motivated entirely by the short term and its own survival interests, out of touch and all the rest.

It is as though we had slid back from democracy to the age of autocratic and unpopular monarchs, still claiming divine right and trying to save themselves by one wrong-headed measure after another. It must have been a bit like this in the 1630s and early 40s, the time before the **Civil War**,

when fewer and fewer people had a good word, or reasoned argument for the struggling Stuart monarch, or even for the assertion of divine right, that had once seemed so unarguable and sacred.

Now it's the Government that can be blamed for all ills and accused of the lowest motives. Anyone can cry *j'accuse* against this Leviathan, or indeed the even bigger bogey of "The Establishment" (Henry Fairlie's fantasia of the 1950s) and be sure of an airing. Whether such a thing as the Establishment exists with the slightest permanency at all, hardly matters.

As in the 17th century, the ground is again fertile for conspiracy theories and allegations, although of course magnified 100-fold in the microcircuit age. Popish plots were the strongest runners then. Today we have even stronger runners.

A good example is the current prevalence of Sinophobia – the belief that **China** is the evil behind many of our troubles. The pendulum has swung from the over-the-top golden age of UK-China togetherness of a decade or more ago to fears of Chinese influence round every corner. So far it has not assumed the scale of American paranoia, where China is openly called the enemy and, almost in McCarthyite style, consorting with China – or even calls for balance, for containment but cooperation – are seen as little short of treachery.

This is despite **Chinese trade with the USA** still running at near record levels, as it is with the EU and the UK. Never mind logic and commerce – we have a new bogeyman with which to scare each other.

Indeed, this is just one corner of a much larger picture of confusion – the fading of any balanced international dimension from the debate or the public mood. The Enlightenment's original giants were acutely aware of the international setting of their views and the global consequences for humanity everywhere. Today one might assume that constant and instant connectivity did the same. In practice, it does the opposite. The more that is revealed of overseas trends and views, the more horns are drawn in, the wider world is shut out, and the more the arena is narrowed to home concerns and cleared of foreign issues and linkages.

The recent King's speech to Parliament (not his own of course) contained only the barest reference to the darkening storms of world affairs. Yet in the end these will have infinitely more influence on our daily lives, welfare and

national security and well-being than any amount of domestic legislation, however worthy.

It is as though no lessons have been learnt. What should have come first comes last, or not at all. The old mindset has prevailed, perhaps more strongly than ever, over the new facts of the age. Science and humankind are growing further apart, not nearer as our enlightened forebears urged.

We can blame the opinion pollsters, among others, for this excision of wider world awareness from intelligent debate and public conduct. Lord Sumption notes the lacuna in the proceedings of the current Covid Inquiry, where overseas experience and lessons hardly get a mention. Opinion polls put foreign affairs well down the list of public interests, usually about 13th or 14th, thus perpetuating the widespread view that there no votes in foreign or world affairs.

The founders of the Enlightenment held quite different views — allowing of course for the fact that many fewer people then actually had the vote. For them the context of the new mind-opening era was entirely international, indeed global. Darwin's vision of how man and woman could live with the machine age applied to all. Others, like Malthus, were confidently definite (although in his case mostly wrong) about the national and international implications of the oncoming machine age.

This brings us to the biggest gap of all in the national discourse, as currently orchestrated, and the strongest argument for going back not just to basic values but to the origins and lessons of the Enlightenment, on which so many assumptions, customs, judgements and values still rest.

It is events, whether man-made or natural, or both combined, lying outside the UK which have had, are having, and will have far the biggest impact on our daily lives and safety and on our national fortunes.

Start with oncoming climate violence, so far almost completely unchecked by emissions reductions, which carry the seeds of wars to come, shortages to come and tragic destruction and loss of life to come. The global energy transition, which is a pan-civilisation upheaval larger by far than any in past history, demands new structures and new politics, which remain as yet unshaped and, indeed barely discussed. Meanwhile, total uncertainty clouds the outcomes of the **Russo-Ukrainian War**, the Chinese threat to Taiwan, the Afghanistan or Syrian tragedies, the **Israel-Hamas-Gaza horror** and the result of the US presidential race. Explanations are there

none — although there could be. Vastly greater movements of frightened and starving peoples are the certain outcome, already showing.

In the UK two major parties, both coalitions of 18th and 19th-century origin, struggle to stay internally united in the 21st century in face of completely new challenges and dangers, with every move guaranteed to expose more divisions of view. Between the two of them, arguments range over long irrelevant issues and yesterday's battles, with every statement filtered in dread of exposing more deeply the divisions which are now there all the time anyway.

At the time of the great opening of enlightened minds between the 17th and 19th centuries, the printed word dominated and publications like the Spectator were seen as bringing enlightened views and values to the public debate. Is that still their role? Or is thinking still being focused on the old shibboleths? Has the utter irrelevance of the old axes of debate been exposed, or just ignored by inane chatter pouring especially from the broadcast media? Has the ground been surrendered to the pathetic polarisation of all issues, with no attempt to row back?

Philosophy now has to be restored back onto solid foundations to cope with the waves of change crashing round our past stances and beliefs. What is now upon us has to be understood, and addressed, within the great pageant of history, not in the latest podcast. The pendulum swings. Truth can be attained. Bring on the philosophers — if it's not too late.

This article was originally published in The Article.

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