

The Idea Makers



The Prophet Jeremiah by Michelangelo, Sistine Chapel, circa 1508–1512

by [Robert Lewis](#) (February 2022)

an unselfish belief in the idea –
something you can set up,
and bow down before,
and offer a sacrifice to . . .

–*Joseph Conrad*

culture is the predominance of an idea
which draws after it this train of cities and institutions.
Let us rise into another idea;
they will disappear.

–*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

How is it that the human brain is so receptive to ideas, many of them fatuous, untested, having no basis in reality? Dangle one on a line and in no time you'll have a school of fish

fighting over the first bite. Superstitions – and we all entertain and act upon them – reinforce the suspicion that reason is powerless against even the most ludicrous.

A quick glance at the history of ideas suggests that the mind functions less as a sieve and more as a repository or coliseum where winner takes all. The fittest idea will exercise a significant influence over those in whom it has been implanted.

Every idea begins as a seedling – in the mind of its creator – that best answers to the existential questions of a particular time, place and situation. Perceived advantage and/or self-interest underlie the advent of most ideas. An idea's success will be judged in terms of its ability to self-replicate and disseminate. An idea that is not shared is not yet an idea in any meaningful sense.

What distinguished early man from his more primitive antecedents was the disposition to formulate, be informed by, and surrender to ideas.

There was a time when thunder and lightning were merely weather events until someone proposed they were the speech of gods – an idea that continues to resonate with the meteorologically challenged.

There was a time when Christianity didn't exist. And then one day someone submitted that a woman, let's call her Mary, without the benefit sexual intercourse, gave birth to a son who turned out to be the Son of God, who, it was reported, died for our sins and was subsequently resurrected. On the surface, the idea sounds a bit far-fetched; but today, 2,000 years hence, millions of people subscribe to the notion of immaculate conception and that Jesus Christ is, *de facto*, the Son of God. The ready acceptance of the above speaks not so much to the unskeptical nature of the mind but the very nature and limitations of human intelligence since the believer is

prepared to pay the ultimate sacrifice in defense of propositions that would normally elicit a chorus of guffaws if the results weren't so tragically bloodstained. Since the resurrection, millions have perished in defense of Christianity.

In India, under the auspices of Hinduism, someone decided that killing a cow was the same as killing a Brahmin (the high priest). In no time, the cow came to be regarded as sacred, and in the midst of plenty, in the midst of protein, millions suffer from inanition.

There was a time, in Mesoamerica, when a mother and father, swollen with pride, would watch on as the high priest plunged a knife into their daughter and ripped out her heart. Word got out that the gods required human sacrifice and being chosen was the highest honour that could be bestowed on a family. A tough sell? Apparently not. Long before Pol Pot turned his jungles into the killing fields, the Aztecs had turned their green spaces into red places.

In Haiti, someone floats the notion that it's possible to put a hex or take revenge on someone by sticking a pin into a voodoo doll so long as it has a lock of the intended's hair. Absurd you say? I'll be meeting with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's barber later in the day.

Elsewhere, an upwardly mobile politician decides that the world will be a better place once a particular race or ethnic group is eliminated. The demonization process begins, a persuasive benefits-versus-costs analysis is advanced, the good idea spreads like a prairie fire in a wind and in no time a genocide is under way.

In the long history of ideas, the majority of them, like the latest fashion, come and go while only a few acquire legitimacy and prestige after having survived an arduous winnowing process; but what remains constant in man's complex

and often baffling relationship to ideas is his innate susceptibility to them.

Since it is in the vital interest of the individual to perceive reality for what it is in its truth, to distinguish between friend and foe, to live and not die, why has natural selection favoured a species that so readily, if not reflexively, accepts, as fact, ideas that not only constitute an affront to reason but often place the bearer of the idea in mortal danger?

That humans are, for all intents and purposes, defenseless against the next good idea on the block forces the conclusion that to be possessed or taken over by an idea confers a range of comforts that both mind and body deem essential. Psychological and physiological indices indicate that humans would rather dwell in harmony than not, and that sharing in an idea satisfies this primordial *desideratum*. The very basis of community is founded on the concept of unity through common purpose, with the idea serving as catalyst and connective tissue. Like lawn bowling, it's not so much the game but the community it engenders and predicts our participation since it is the means to an end we employ to defend against being alone in the crowd.

If once upon a time there was a species that was not receptive to ideas, it didn't survive because it couldn't generate the requisite numbers required to safeguard a vital natural resource or territory. According to Desmond Morris (*The Naked Ape*), the most significant event in human evolution was the emergence of the super-tribe, which predated the town, city and megacity. Without ideas, their binding properties, the individual, severed from the compactness of the tribe and its certainties, would have not been able to overcome his estrangement and gut mistrust of strangers in whose midst he suddenly found himself. The idea was the great enabler, allowing for the emergence of a new social order founded on common purpose.

Reduced to its teleological nuts and bolts, the idea is the seed and sun of every nation state whose maintenance and defense require the cooperation of tens of thousands of individuals who share the same hopes and beliefs. That there exists, in feelings and deeds, solidarity among strangers is the idea's greatest single achievement.

Man, precisely because his particular intelligence is exceptionally suited to the hosting and incubation of ideas, has survived and flourished like no other species.

Oswald Spengler (1880-1936) proposed in *The Decline of the West* that history, in its repetitions, is the outcome of the unequal relationship between those who author and promulgate ideas and those who don't. Since an idea requires a physical host, a brain that can direct a body politic, every nation state will consist of a head – where ideas are birthed – and essential moveable body parts without which ideas would remain stillborn. The head is the command-and-control center; the individuals – the mass in whom the idea has been implanted – are the raw material. The heads, or heads-of-state, must ensure that their ideas are effectively instilled in their populations in order to maintain and defend a territory. The more passive and docile are those in whom ideas are implanted, the more efficient and stable will be the nation state.

The good citizen or soldier must never be allowed to suspect he is a pawn in the service of an ambitious king. If this should happen *en masse*, should an idea suddenly be questioned or lose its authority, the dog will suddenly find itself being wagged by its tail. During the Viet Nam War, the contention that a distant war was necessary in defense of American interests lost credibility, and the entire *raison d'être* of the war unraveled.

Every war is preceded by a war of ideas. With the rise of satellite communication and the Internet, the nature of war is changing, fought less with conventional armies and more

between the ideas themselves: cyber wars. In the great clash of civilizations between the West and Islam, it has become increasingly difficult for Islam to defend its ideas (its traditional values) against those of the West. In an earlier period, Islam, owing to its geographical isolation, was immune to Western contagion, but this is no longer the case. The thick walls inside of which Islam is ensconced have been breached not by any enemy's armies of the night but by western ideas. Traditional Islam is being undone from within, by its own followers who have been compromised by repeated exposure to Internet generated western content. These apostates (many of them women) can no longer abide by an ethos that 'satanizes' freedom and democracy, and regards gender inequality as a self-evident given.

It wasn't so long ago that the idea of global warming was passed around the table like impolite conversation at a book-of-the-month club meeting, or was conveniently swept under the *lingua obscura* native to extreme weather lab reports and scientific journals. But that is no longer the case and the great debate is on: is global warming man-made or due to solar activity or a big bit of both – or something else?

For the first time in human history, man finds himself face to face with an implacable enemy, who is so close that he is out of focus and hasn't been properly perceived much less assessed. This formidable enemy is man himself, whose cave-contoured, savannah-honed DNA is catastrophically obsolete in today's wired world. At the beck and call of an explosive, untamed primordial energy that is deaf and blind to everything but its immediate, unmediated wants, man can do no better than pander to his worst instincts while plundering and imperiling his one and only home – the good earth.

Since it is now commonplace for ideas to go viral, there may come a day when a world-wide citizens' revolt will compel the Lords of Industry, whose greed and rapacity is a runaway train, and consumers for whom consumption is the only game in

town, to radically revise their priorities because the alternative is the next *Book of the Dead* where no adult and child is left behind.

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Above the bright lights that illuminate our cities millions of stars have disappeared along with the calm and quiet of the world. And now a great unholiness rings the earth and the gods that might save us are nowhere to be found.

Every idea begins as a single seed in the mind of its maker.

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