



## Ideas that Changed the World

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### Abstract

*Ideas have catalytic power to change the world. They are leaders of social evolution. Evolutionary developments in science, religion, art all have at their roots mental ideas that later realize themselves through physical acts. Ideas release the human energy of the collective. That energy is directed into a force for action and becomes effective when it is organized by society. Thus, society is a living organization. History is replete with examples of how major events such as the French, Russian and American Revolutions, India's call for independence, the emergence of Capitalism and Communism, the environmental movement stimulated by publication of the Limits to Growth, had their origins in simple, revolutionary ideas that shook society to its very foundations. Collaborative action is essential to address pressing global challenges. Piecemeal, sectoral strategies of the past may help to an extent, but cannot forge the much-needed psychological unity needed to address global challenges. Unity is possible only in the measure equality in all its forms is made real. Economic equality is the essential basis for sustainable political and social equality. Studied in terms of the evolution of ideas and values, history reveals the pathway of humanity's evolutionary ascent into the future, the problems it has confronted, the errors we should avoid repeating, and the untold opportunities that await development of effective systems of global governance. New economic theory, a human-centered, transdisciplinary education system and a governance model based on psychological, social and economic equality are the foundation for achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.*

The world in which we live keeps constantly changing so much so that the world the present generation lives in is not the same anymore. It is pertinent to ask what causes this change. The world keeps changing because it is a 'living organization'.<sup>1</sup> We say the world is changing but what brings about this change? Great leaders appear now and then and bring about significant changes in the way people live. Recorded history is the narrative that describes the rising comfort level of society. Prior to recorded history, humanity merely survived. Once civilized life came into existence, it required mental direction in the form of thought.

Civilized life is marked by the presence of comfort, but cultured life is even greater. We can say that existence, history, civilization and culture are the graded stages of society. As Man is an evolving mental being, he exhibits capacity for thought that compels him to progress. The animal does not exhibit any such capacity. Human mind observes the world around it through the instrument of thought, which reveals the abundant resources available to it.

The process of observation generates ideas. When these ideas are implemented, they lead to change, which is seen as a form of progress. Such an observation of life, if thorough, leads to the discovery of the laws of life. Using this knowledge, Man is able to command life and make it behave the way he wants. Such a command over life equipped man to launch technological revolutions using coal, steam, electricity and electronics. While these pertain to industry, revolutions in France and Russia were political in nature. Nonetheless, they have had an equally profound impact. Prior to these, monarchy was displaced and democracy was installed by beheading the English king Charles I. When the British Empire was abolished, it led to the creation of 45 new states. Equally, on the religious front, the birth of Jesus and Buddha brought about evolutionary developments in religion.

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*“A new conception of growth is needed to guide humanity’s future progress.”*

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The spread of education from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onward has had a dramatic impact on the knowledge level of people all around the world. Education in particular abridges man’s social life. We must note that every major social revolution has been preceded by the launch of an idea. The idea of Liberty launched the French Revolution. Equally so, the idea of economic equality spurred the Russian Revolution. If we see what lies behind the Industrial revolution, we see that it is scientific inquiry and technological discoveries.

In the year 1972, the world was shocked with the announcement that rapid developmental changes were damaging the environment. The Club of Rome became alert to this danger and after studying the problem, it issued a report entitled *The Limits to Growth*, which had a considerable effect on governments and people around the world. Similarly, in the year 1848, the Communist leader Karl Marx released his *Communist Manifesto*. He moved to London permanently from Germany and studied the growth of Capitalism from its inception. He spent most of his time in the British Museum and came up with a report. His study identified businessmen as robber barons. Money showed itself to be the center of Capitalism and this type of social order was mainly run on the strength of violence. The owners of means of production could be wrested of their control only through violence and this knowledge led Marx to proclaim to the Proletariat: “Workers of the World Unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains.”

Economically speaking, only two philosophical systems—Capitalism and Communism—have ruled the world. While the former stresses selfish intensity, the latter values equality of opportunities. As Karl Marx predicted, capitalism showed signs of disintegration by 1825. In 1928, following the Stock Market crash, the American economy plunged into a deep depression, which started spreading worldwide. FDR corrected the malady. Only the arrival of World War II pulled the world economy out of the Depression and got it going again. FDR’s idealism prompted him to propose the Second Bill of Rights, which included the right to employment. His life ended before the Bill could be enacted as law. Communism was founded on the premise of eliminating economic and political inequalities. Conversely, Capitalism was founded on the basis of selfish aggrandizement. Any action initiated is

backed by an idea. That idea is shaped by the collective energy and organized into force. This is applicable to both the Individual and the Collective.

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Let us consider the case of the nation-state, which is the final form taken by the collective energy. There was a time in history when primitive man did not understand how a woman conceived. It was presumed that a woman automatically delivered a child without any external intervention. It was her responsibility to train her child to walk and get his own food. Once that happened, her responsibility was over and she went on to beget other children. While the human species advanced, the weaning period kept lengthening. This increasing burden necessitated help from another person. This led to the formation of the family.

Meanwhile, the institution of property came into existence with the added stipulation that a man would give his property only to children his wife had conceived for him and not to any children born to men other than him. This is the historical justification for ancient society’s insistence on women’s chastity. This explanation sounds very much plausible. Moreover, it is plausible that sentimental reasons can account for a woman’s loyalty to a man to whom she had borne many children. Thus, the family was born and it marked the first step in social collective organization.

Man is social and gregarious by nature and at the same time very pugnacious. While his social nature helps to create a large settlement, his aggressive nature generates hostility towards outsiders. Such a tendency for clashing led to the emergence of leaders who led the group during fights and clashes. Over a period, regional or national leaders rose on the scene. Ultimately, this led to the emergence of monarchs and royalty. Once royalty came on the scene, along came notions of loyalty and piety. In the beginning, the Collective was stronger than the leader and so he simply deferred to the wishes of the majority. Love of the land one lived on for ages gradually acquired the hue of patriotism. In this manner, the nation-state came into existence. Before the year 1857, no political entity designated as India even existed. The same was true of both Germany and Italy until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The actions and ideas that have gone into its making are obvious facts. These obvious facts are the inevitable truths of existence turning into history.

We are venturing into a field where there has been no prior research or pioneering work. The field itself has not secured any clarity. No answers can be formulated as even the questions have not been framed. Over time, the development of nation-states and industrialization fueled in humans the aspiration for continuous progress until the Club of Rome challenged that notion by insisting on the limits to growth in 1972. Yet in spite of obvious planetary

limitations, the aspiration persists the world over and is embodied in the striving for limitless growth. But the question is growth of what? A new conception of growth is needed to guide humanity's future progress. Humanity's aspiration needs to evolve from the limitless material consumption to the endless growth of human wellbeing and inner personal fulfillment. This requires a shift from seeking ever more powerful technologies for external achievements to an inner seeking for inner well-being.

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*“A universal currency is the need of the hour to overcome the limitations of national currency systems.”*

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Only recently has the world arrived at the form of the nation-state, but the limitations of division of the world into competitive units based on differences of nationality, language and religion are already apparent. The challenges confronting humanity today are global in magnitude and can only be effectively addressed by global cooperation, coordination, rule of law and social culture. The need of the hour is for evolution of humanity beyond the nation-state and the gradual emergence of effective institutions for global governance founded on an awakened sense of the psychological unity of all human beings. This will in turn require other accompaniments including abolition of nuclear weapons, abolition of war and aggression, elimination of destabilizing financial speculation and rising levels of economic inequality. Stated positively, *political liberty must be made real by economic equality*. Beyond that, further steps will be needed to achieve social and psychological equality.

The beheading of Charles I began the decline of monarchy, which received a final death blow through the violence of the French and Russian Revolutions. Inflation remains a key symbol of human duality. Human nature tries to reach goals by going in the opposite direction. When it seeks plenty of wealth, it chooses to do so by exercising austerity. As man evolves, we find him exhibiting such dual attitudes. On such occasions the importance of rationality becomes most evident. The vast expanses of Asia gave rise to emotions while the narrow spaces of peninsular Europe generated thinking and produced the most creative thinkers of the ancient world. Mental culture first emerged in the West in the city-states of ancient Greece, which gave rise to the birth of great minds such as Socrates, Aristotle and Plato.

The initial spark of creative thinking in Greece matured many centuries later as active thinking among the common men of Europe. People in the Middle Ages in Europe were intensely emotional. The vacillation that Hamlet exhibited in Shakespeare's play marks the initial awakening of thinking in the broader population. Hamlet lives among those who unquestionably accept appearances and the status quo, whereas his mind dwells on deeper questions. His deceased father represents the passing emotional man, who remains true to sentiment and convention even when he knows the truth. His father's ghost gives him a command to kill his uncle Claudius, but bids him to leave his guilty mother to her own conscience. But Hamlet is raging to punish his mother first as she had sullied the sanctity of marital fidelity to his father. The emotionally driven human being now receives a mental command. That signaled the birth of Mind in Man. Shakespeare set his play in Denmark at a

time when religious superstition prevailed. It was that emergence of Mind which later spread all over Europe and exhibited itself as mental culture.

Mind is an evolutionary instrument that needs the social support of an institution to solidify itself. It was at this time that Britain took to sea faring and emerged as a great trading nation. The copious rainfall that England received generated luxuriant fields of abundant grass ideal for supporting great herds of sheep. As a result, there was plenty of wool ready for export. England at that time had about 100,000 large and small ships and boats. The discovery of a sea route to India for spice trade gave Europe a big boost for trading. What started as commerce for spice trading grew by leaps and bounds. Soon, Britain established a commercial empire. That later gave rise to London becoming a banking and financial capital. Recently, money has taken the form of blockchain currencies such as Bitcoin. A universal currency is the need of the hour to overcome the limitations of national currency systems. The birth of the Euro prepares for what must eventually result in the emergence of a universal currency capable of supporting the value of true economic equality. The future world is heading in this direction.

Before we understand the concept of economic equality, we must first understand the concept of equality. We now see the Individual as a catalyst of social progress. But in earlier centuries there was no such individual. There was only a social collectivity with an organized being. That collective social entity had consciousness, knowledge and also power. On top of all that, the Collectivity enjoyed some form of delight. When one strikes oil, the oil belongs to those who own the land or the rights for mining it. But in reality, the oil belongs to the whole collectivity. One must understand clearly that no individual left by himself can create technology or any useful resource. The same applies to any corporate entity. It therefore becomes obvious that it is the society that creates and uses technology or any other useful resource.

Humanity has grievously erred with respect to society on two counts. The first error is the habit of becoming a slave to its own creation. The second error is to believe any person who claims that things belong exclusively to him and not to the society. The actual fact is that the discovery belongs to the entire society as it is the whole society that has discovered it in the first place. Let us assume that a lone individual exists on an island. What can such a man accomplish or even if he accomplishes, how can he enjoy his discovery? Until two centuries ago, man worked from dawn to dusk and knew no leisure. His day time was fully taken up with working for his master and employer. Technological advances and increasing leisure have now reduced working hours to 8 hours per day for 5 days. This will be abridged further. It is not possible for Newton to have discovered the principle of gravity without living as a member of society. Values like delight, knowledge and power are collective possessions that have been generated by society. As such they are the rightful possession of society.

Technological advancement should naturally lead to a reduction in working hours. Increasing leisure is the crucible of culture. It is only people who are very physical who need work for their enjoyment. When civilization advances, it raises the physical man to the higher mental level and reduces his physical working hours. Over the last two centuries, humanity has been moving towards mind and away from the body. Previously, history used to be the

history of kings and monarchs or governments. Europe used to be considered the center of the whole world. This is no longer the case. Historian Arnold Toynbee viewed history as the history of societies. We see history is moving away from monarchs and towards people. Political liberty is empowering the common man. Economic equality will ensure that the benefits of production are equitably distributed. The work of the UN supports this evolution by reducing violence, improving health and extending rights to individuals.

Profits should be distributed equitably to reach all stakeholders and not just a company's shareholder. Employment needs to be proclaimed as a birth right, as US President Franklin D. Roosevelt conceived in the Economic Bill of Rights. It should be recognized not only as an economic and political right, but a birth right. Capitalism is an outgrowth of commerce. When the Great Depression struck, capitalism lost much of its vitality. Since 1929, it has been kept alive by human resourcefulness much like a man in coma is preserved on artificial life support systems. Its nature is self-organization.

Today effective efficiency is generated not so much by technological advance as by the social distribution of the process of production. What makes technological discovery possible is the social readiness to empower the individual. When the public is illiterate, printing technology has limited utility. It is the rise of a reading public that spurs advances in printing. Humanity has a tendency to reverse the perception. Napoleon went about campaigning for the spread of democratic ideals of France and he did so by imposing monarchy in places that he conquered. The Soviet Union sought to implement the ideals of Communism through state oppression. India discovered the unity of the Absolute and sought to realize it through caste hierarchy. This policy of reverse perception has its own advantages though. We find society taking a lenient view of the criminal and attempting to transform him. The wealth of today resides mostly with the successors of robber barons of yesterday.

All great achievements of democracy, liberty and equality have only originated as ideas that led to action. The aim of this paper is to find out what actions are called for at present and what ideas will lead to those actions. The practice of agriculture began by imitating the productivity of nature. Similarly, the art of Commerce began after humanity found out that exchange relationships between people lead to the generation of money. In a similar vein, one can argue that man's positive relationship with earth will generate endless joy for the whole of humanity. It is left to humanity to actualize such a vision in the coming future.

Mark Mazower's *Governing the World: The History of an Idea, 1815 to the Present* is extremely informative in this regard. Radhakrishnan, the Indian philosopher, has traced the history of man in terms of his mental development. The available history lends itself to such a review. History can also be studied in terms of institutional development or in terms of values. Anthropologists have studied human history in terms of the tools man has used. In this manner, human history can be studied from the point of view of speech, music, and many other things. Actually, human progress has not been linear or unidimensional, but multilinear and even zigzag.

Progress may be defined as moving from a partial success to total accomplishment. A whole consists of numerous smaller parts. Every small part is a whole by itself. Movement



from a whole to another passes through a metamorphosis. This phenomenon can be traced back to a very small unit, the infinitesimal. That small unit can be observed as energy, force or power. Evolution of form is one line of development; evolution of consciousness is another. In primitive times, the main idea was survival. But in modern times, ideas such as competition, self-reliance and even accomplishment prevail. European aristocracy over the centuries developed truth-speaking as a cherished value.

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*“The world awaits a global movement of unity based on an inspiring idea or a cluster of ideas.”*

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Napoleon inspired the people of Europe to aspire for liberty, citing the ideals of the French Revolution. Washington prepared himself to fight for American Independence even when he found many of the American colonists mercenary and indifferent to the cause. Similarly, Mahatma Gandhi inspired the Indian population to fight for Independence. Such movements calling for Independence are backed by the idea that Freedom is essential for human beings. There are many reasons why a movement like the Indian Green Revolution succeeded. The idea of self-sufficiency in food appealed to the self-respect of Indian farmers and therefore the movement succeeded. Ideas that appeal to the population generate social movements that succeed.

It is worthwhile endeavoring now to frame a goal or goals that will release the aspiration and energies of the whole humanity for rapid social advancement. Perhaps, the UN Sustainable Development Goals are a step in that direction. The unrealized potentials of Life are infinite and infinitely positive. Philosophies speak of everlasting joy in heaven. We can also consider its human earthly version. The striking expansion of American prosperity is directly linked with the values of customer satisfaction, which in turn comes from trusting the honesty of customers.

The UN is a great institution with many accomplishments and also many failures. One of its recent accomplishments is the formulation of SDGs that define the collective goals of humanity to be achieved in the coming future. The question is, how are these goals to be implemented? Another question arises also as to who will achieve these goals. So far, great leaders have emerged to achieve great accomplishments. But currently no such great leader is on the scene. Is it possible for a movement to replace the need for a leader? Can a movement be inspired by the emergence of an idea? First, we can only begin from where we are. Let us first define where we are. We are now in nation-states and the next step may be a global state or global governance. However, there is great resistance to this move.

Throughout history human beings have been motivated by incentives such as profit, competition and ambition. At present, mankind is threatened by various dangers such as climate change, job loss and migration of displaced people. Great unifying movements such as the EU threaten to break up due to disruptive forces. No single government can serve as the world leader at present. The world awaits a global movement of unity based on an inspiring idea or a cluster of ideas. This article is aimed at precisely addressing that question.

Germany became aggressive in 1939 and wanted to establish her own empire akin to those of the other great European powers. Hitler dreamed of running his empire with a civil

service similar to the British Raj. However, her imperial ambitions were shattered and she was broken up into four parts after the War. Despite that, the Germans longed for reunification. It became a reality soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. We do not find such a similar urge of compelling intensity for unity in the world today. If that urge is not there, at least we can try to make a beginning. While economics is fragmented, there are a few voices calling for New Economic Theory that can support policies conducive to global peace and equitable development. Education can foster the urge for human unity. It has already given rise to new opportunities in the form of online courses. Efforts are underway to develop innovative interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary courses. Much more can be done to convert education into a force for leadership.

In retaliation for America's placement of nuclear missiles in Turkey, in 1962 the USSR installed nuclear missiles in Cuba. The ensuing confrontation played out in the UN Security Council before the whole world nearly led to war. Since then the Cold War ended, Soviet Union disintegrated, Germany was reunited, the EU was established, and several former nuclear powers have surrendered their weapons. With the passing of the Cold War, there is some hope for strengthening the movement toward global peace and unity. Eminent nuclear threats of this type have retreated for now, though they have been replaced by other threats such as climate change and financial crises.

Democracy is in retreat. Rising levels of immigration are fueling a rise in populist politics. Military spending is on the rise, including expenditure on new nuclear forces. The threat of Brexit still hangs in the air while Trump's trade rhetoric has disrupted global markets. Yet, in spite of these setbacks, thoughtful men and organizations can still sense an opportunity to move forward and marshal their resources for action. The SDGs have already caught the attention of the whole world and focused human energies on their realization. The most meaningful action would be to place the implementation of the 17 SDGs on a war footing. Ideas such as this have the power to initiate movements. They are ideas with the power to lead the world.

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## **Notes**

1. Dimitar Tchurovsky, "Mankind at the Crossroads: Civilizational Shift or Self-destruction," *Cadmus* 3, no.6 (2019): 43-66