

demonstrate the lack of any serious externality (when speed limits were increased, there was no net change in accidents).

One chapter is a very useful chronicling of a NGO campaign. Greenpeace, in pursuit of PVC its then demonisation objective, sought to paint a picture of concern for children with a campaign 'Play Safe' targeting children's toys. This remains part of the organisation's long standing campaign against dioxins, a focus of which was Nufarm in this country. The campaign in Canada amassed junk science myths and forced the authorities there, acting on the 'precautionary principle', to take action against certain toys. Needless to say, the empirical evidence of harm was non-existent and the theoretical possibilities remote. But the regulatory authority had little to lose by implementing a ban but much to gain in relief from attacks by activists and even more if the most remote possibilities were true.

The piece is important in dissecting the tactics of Greenpeace as a fomentor of general distrust of industry, the role it and its fellow activist NGOs have taken over from the now defunct socialist revolutionaries. In doing so and in ensuring the campaigns are sensationalised, NGOs also obtain the publicity which is an essential drip to ensure funding. The hallmarks of such activity include a high profile of the targeted products, forming coalitions, issuing large volumes of press releases, finding people who will offer 'expert' advice to support their campaign and so on. IPA has commenced a new program, NGO Watch, to act as an early warning against such campaigns as well as to address the funding levels and tactics of the NGO's engaged in them.

Understandably given the two compilations' titles, *Safe Enough?* has a more spartan treatment of the precautionary principle than *Rethinking Risk and the Precautionary Principle*, for which Morris actually counts 19 different definitions. This innovation stopping nonsense reverses the scientific

method which has been instrumental in bringing mankind its present level of affluence and safety.

The precautionary principle, whatever the favoured definition, comes down to saying 'don't progress with developing an idea (flying to the moon, crossing the road) unless all possible adverse outcomes are discovered and eliminated'. It prevents experimentation and hijacks a gradual improvement in products that has been brought about by the search for profits using competition and innovation to seek out better ways of meeting consumer needs.

Having been introduced into international treaties initially in an anodyne fashion, the precautionary principle now threatens to undermine the open trading system by allowing new protectionist opportunities to be grafted onto general hostility to globalism. It underscored the 1997 Basle Convention on the control of transboundary movements of hazardous wastes and their disposal, which inhibits the movement

of waste to countries that are best able to treat it; it features strongly in the 1999 Cartagena Protocol on Biodiversity that offers an opportunity, at least on one reading, for countries to ban imports because of the way they are grown.

The final chapter in *Safe Enough?* is by Professor William Stanbury of the University of British Columbia. This is a discussion of perceptions of risk and a didactic scheme for a policy response to it. Though an exposé of the dangers of risk regulation, it also seeks to use the tools, including the dreaded precautionary principle, as a means of limiting its damage. Morris has chosen authors who are far less compromising. To many this means his book is more rigorous; others would view *Safe Enough?* as having more practical relevance to policy advisers.

Reviewed by Alan Moran

The Riddle of the Modern World

by Alan Macfarlane

Macmillan Press Limited 2000

326pp, \$130.90

ISBN 0-312-23204-7

There's no doubt that the Number One Mystery for mankind is the utterly improbable origin of life. But if Alan Macfarlane is to be believed, the improbable origins of modern commercial civilisation can fairly claim to be Mystery Number Two. It was easy enough for Adam Smith to write in the 18th century that all you needed for general prosperity was 'peace, easy taxation, and a tolerable administration of justice', but how and why had these eminently desirable conditions arisen out of the generally unpromising preceding epoch? Who could have foreseen that in the 250 years since Smith, global economic growth and development (despite periodic hiccups) has kept moving steadily up?

After all, several other civilizations stopped dead in their tracks. Despotism, China, a 'place where the customs of the country can never be changed,' was a classic example noted by Montesquieu. Whether China's condition was best described as conservative paralysis or benign equilibrium may be debatable, but it is plain that the world's oldest continuous high civilisation did eventually lose its way. And Europe too, says Macfarlane, might have come to a halt 300 years ago. In the 17th century France was the most powerful nation in Europe, but there were periodic famines, high mortality, and a fateful indifference to the lives and welfare of its most productive workers. By about 1700 'The world, with its roughly 500 million inhabitants, seemed to have reached the limit to its potential to support human life . . . Mankind seemed to be caught on a treadmill.'

Then along came the industrial revolution, and its bells and whistles have been driving us on ever since. Several books have treated the rise of the West and tried to explain the dynamics of western development. *How the West Grew Rich* by Nathan Rosenberg and L.



E. Birdsell is one of the best, and David Landes' *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* is a more recent and fascinating exploration of the subject. Macfarlane shares these authors' interest in economic matters, but he gives more attention to specifically sociological and political problems. He also takes a distinctive biographical approach, trying to find an answer to his 'riddle' by examining the lives and thinking of four men—Montesquieu, Adam Smith, Tocqueville, and the late philosopher and anthropologist Ernest Gellner.

As might be expected from the author of *The Origins of English Individualism*, Macfarlane's argument points significantly toward British exceptionalism, something he finds support for in Montesquieu. 'I am here in a country which hardly resembles the rest of Europe' wrote Montesquieu in 1729. Unlike innumerable other nations, the English had 'progressed the farthest of all the peoples of the world in three important things: in piety, in commerce, and in freedom'.

But why? If the riddle of liberty is best explained in terms of a nation's overall institutional form, says Macfarlane, then it was Montesquieu who answered this question by identifying the structural requirements long ago. What was needed was the separation of 'economy from polity, religion from polity, religion from economy, and society (that is, kinship) from polity, religion and economy'—a separation reinforced and secured by crucial boundaries between legislature, executive, and judiciary. Montesquieu was also keenly aware of the significance of commerce, and why commercial activity could not be tolerated by the Russian state:

Commerce itself is inconsistent with the Russian laws. The people are composed only of slaves employed in agriculture, and of slaves called ecclesiastics or gentlemen, who are the lords of those slaves; there is then nobody left for the third estate, which ought to be composed of mechanics and merchants.

Commerce brings Macfarlane to Adam Smith. For readers familiar with Smith's thought, Macfarlane's most interesting

comments may be those deriving the economist's highly original ideas from the world about him, and the way he was able to see the social and economic transformation of Scotland taking place in the streets of Glasgow before his eyes. There, in the middle of the 18th century, a vigorously expanding 'third estate' of merchants and mechanics was displacing the last remnants of the feudal order. Drawing on Rae's *Life*, Macfarlane describes a man who 'lived in a boom town and watched a feudal, Calvinist, world dissolving into a commercial capitalist one.' This completed a succession of historic steps. A few years earlier the 'pastoral' stage of civilisation in the Highlands had yielded to a settled 'agricultural' stage, and by the 1760s

he could observe from his windows and talk to the people who were rapidly bringing about a commercial society and laying the groundwork for an industrial one.

The main elements of Smith's social thought are well set out by Macfarlane—among them the fact that 'his first principle of taxation was equality'. And with the subject of equality we come to Tocqueville, 'one of the deepest thinkers about the riddle of the modern world.' This may well be true, but he was certainly not one of the more economical writers. For the uninitiated and unimpressed, struggling with so much that is sinuously oblique in Tocqueville's exposition, and so little that is brief and clear, Sainte-Beuve's jibe that he 'began to think before having learned anything' rings true. There is nevertheless deep insight in the following, about commercial constraints on war, from his 1835 *Democracy in America*:

As the spread of equality, taking place in several countries at once, simultaneously draws the inhabitants into trade and industry, not only do their tastes come to be alike, but their interests become so mixed and entangled that no nation can inflict on others ills which will not fall back on its own head. So that in the end all come to think of war as a calamity almost as severe for the conqueror as for the conquered.

Well, I suppose *almost* everyone comes to think that way. But traditional military castes change their habits of mind only

reluctantly. And conquest and military predation were always so much easier than increasing production at home, that the cessation of war-making and brigandage remains a big part of the riddle that Macfarlane has set himself to explain. In Africa today, brigandage in pursuit of gold or diamonds or oil resources remains an important road to power for military elites. Increasing production in that unhappy continent is largely impossible under the prevailing conditions of violent coercion and rapine.

The final thinker in Macfarlane's list is Ernest Gellner, a man who spent a lot of time ruminating on the shift to modernity, pondering how it was that the West escaped the 'trap' which had paralysed earlier agrarian civilisations and brought them to a stop. In the West, somewhat amazingly, civil society emerged, and the explanation Gellner offers for this is broadly in line with the explanation already offered by Montesquieu. The separation of powers is the defining characteristic of civil society, a social order which 'refers to a total society within which the non-political institutions are not dominated by the political ones, and do not stifle individuals either'. Indeed, the one distinctive new feature Gellner suggests is the exponential increase in power, technique, and scientific knowledge which has driven development since Smith's day:

Sustained and unlimited expansion and innovation. . . finally turned the terms of the balance of power away from coercers and in favour of producers.

The Riddle of the Modern World is a fairly pedestrian read. I suspect it could have been editorially tightened with advantage. But it does bring together in an original format the ideas which best explain the civilisation we enjoy today.

Reviewed by Roger Sandall