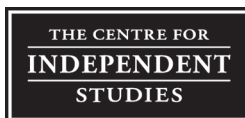


The Age of Endarkenment

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Occasional Paper 137



2014

Published October 2014
by The Centre for Independent Studies Limited
PO Box 92, St Leonards, NSW, 1590
Email: cis@cis.org.au
Website: www.cis.org.au

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication Data:

Cater, Nick, author.

The age of endarkenment / Nick Cater and Brendan O'Neill.
9781922184382 (paperback)

CIS occasional papers ; 137.
Subjects: Science and civilization.
Science--Social aspects.
Civilization--Philosophy.
Social history.

Other Creators/Contributors:
O'Neill, Brennan, author.

Centre for Independent Studies (Australia), issuing body.

303.44

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Nick Cater: It is appropriate that we should be holding this event on the day the National Commission of Audit was released and attention is focused on the next steps we need to take at the end of this 15–20 year boom. It seems we have had a 250-year boom not only in Australia but also for mankind as a whole for much of that time. A clever economist could calculate the net wealth of mankind 250 years ago and now, and we know it would be exponentially higher.

It's no coincidence that the economic boom has coincided with a tremendous leap in science and technology. The two are inseparable. Economic and scientific progress was slow until the middle of the eighteenth century and then it suddenly took off, first in Europe, then in other places around the world. That's the miracle of the Enlightenment. Now we are at this wonderful point where economic growth is taking off almost everywhere. There are a few exceptions, such as North Korea, but everywhere else—in China, in India and now in many parts of Africa—things are going pretty well. The Spirit of the Enlightenment is universal.

What exactly do we mean by the Enlightenment?

Brendan O'Neill: The two most important things of the Enlightenment are, first, 'knowledge'—knowing—and, second, risk-taking—dare to know, the importance of daring, of taking risks.

The fundamental idea of the Enlightenment is that human beings don't need priests and experts and other people to tell us how to live or what to do—we can do it for ourselves. The Enlightenment challenged the idea of Fate and the idea that we all have a fixed path in life that we can do nothing to control. It challenged ignorance in that we should all find out things for ourselves. It elevated Reason over Prejudice, that we should judge things and measure things according to reason and progress rather than according to a pre-judged outlook. And it celebrated freedom. I think that is one of the key components of the Enlightenment. Every single Enlightenment thinker from Locke to Kant to Mill and Hume was absolutely committed to freedom and to the exercise of individual moral autonomy in working out what you think your life should look like and what you think your outlook should be like. Lasting for about 200 years before it started to go downhill, it is *the moment* in human history when we broke free of the straitjacket of tradition and religion and other problematic things, and instead grew up and took some responsibility for our lives.

I am wondering, however, Nick, whether those things that I apply to Europe apply to Australia, whether Australia has gone through a similar process in relation to the Enlightenment.

Nick Cater: I call Australia the Enlightenment's greatest experiment. It was the spirit in which Australia was settled.

The comparison with the United States is interesting. The United States was settled in 1620 with the arrival of the Pilgrim Fathers. It was only a few years after Galileo had been hauled before the Roman Inquisition to be told that the science was settled on the idea that the Sun revolved around the Earth, rather than the other way round. Galileo had got it wrong, apparently. The proposition that the Sun is at the centre of the world is absurd, philosophically false, and formally heretical because it is expressly contrary to the holy scriptures, he was told. The Roman Inquisition's persecution of Galileo and Copernicus continued until 1635, many years after the Pilgrim Fathers had settled in Massachusetts.

So the American settlement begins in the pre-Enlightenment period, and as a consequence, the Pilgrim Fathers find life terribly hard. To cross the Atlantic, they are forced to rely on a simple magnetic compass, technology that had been around since the Han Chinese in 200 BC, and the cross-staff, which was a device invented in 400 BC constructed with two sticks. The journey is long and hard.

The fact that they survive the voyage is, to them, proof of God's blessing. When they first see the shoreline of North America, their first reaction is to read Psalm 100 and fall to their knees. Then they start scratching a living out of the soil, but they have no idea of the science of cultivation. They are saved by Squanto, a local Indian, who teaches them to sprinkle fish meal on the ground to grow some sort of a crop. A third of the settlers die in the first year. It has been a year of living hell, but they still give thanks to God on the day that became Thanksgiving Day in the United States.

Let us fast forward 168 years to 1788 when Australia is settled. The First Fleet has new technology on board that allows them to measure longitude as well as latitude, so they can chart course accurately. They have a relatively smooth journey. Only a handful die, around 20 of the 1,000-odd convicts and marines in the fleet, which is a remarkably small death toll for the time. They were starting to understand scurvy, and go out of their way to pick up fresh fruit on the journey. So already, even before they hit the shore, the Enlightenment has kicked in. They have relied on human reason, not divine blessing.

They land in Sydney Cove on a Saturday, and the following day, the chaplain asks whether they should have a church service. But they are too busy chopping wood and hacking stone. So it's eight days before they have their first religious service—under a tree. It's another two weeks before they have their first communion service and five years before they get around to building a church. God is part of the story—they are people of faith—but He is in the background. It is the story of man making his own destiny.

Unlike the Pilgrim Fathers, they have the benefit of advances in agricultural science that have taken place in Britain in the seventeenth

century. There are some hard times in the early years, but the colony takes off once they have established how to cultivate the soil.

The fruits of the Enlightenment can be seen in the social values of the settlers as well. There was never going to be any slavery in Australia. Neither would Australia be an occupation by conquest, whatever *black arm band* historians might claim. They arrived with what they thought was a deal Indigenous Australians would not be able to refuse—they would offer the benefits of seventeenth century knowledge in return for land. That deal didn't quite work out as they expected. Yet this was a scientific rather than a religious project from the beginning. As a result, there has never been a witch burned in Australia to my knowledge.

Brendan O'Neill: Talking about the scientific aspect of the Enlightenment is important. A key idea of the Enlightenment in Europe was that man should set himself up against Nature. We hear a lot today about rediscovering Nature and going back to Nature and respecting that we are just part of Nature, but we should remember that the Enlightenment grew out of an idea that Nature, in the words of Francis Bacon, should be our slave. He said Nature should be bound into service for humankind, put in constraints, and 'put on the rack and her secrets should be tortured from her.' That's how early Enlightenment thinkers thought of Nature—they knew in their heads that there were some secrets of Nature they weren't getting, some things they needed to understand better. I always thought one of Bacon's best quotes was this one, where he said, 'As woman's womb had symbolically yielded to the forceps, so Nature's womb harboured secrets that through technology could be wrested from her grasp for use in the improvement of the human condition.' That's what he said. Of course, he has since been described as sexist for saying these things. I think what that shows is how important ideas are to progress because what comes from the Enlightenment is the engine of progress, not just intellectual progress but also material progress. And it's only after Bacon and others adopt this attitude of measuring Nature, teasing out her secrets, and using Nature for the improvement of the human condition that you see some great

leaps forward in material wealth and economic progress. I always think of the example of coal. For thousands of years, people didn't do very much with coal. In the Roman Era, women used to wear it. It's only really after the Enlightenment, after this daring to know the secrets, that people discovered that inside coal is trapped sunlight from 300 million years ago—and if you burn it, you can heat things, you can move machines, and eventually, you can transport things from one part of the world to another. So you tease out coal's secret and you use it to your advantage. And the whole world transforms as a consequence of that. The Industrial Revolution would have been impossible without the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution in my mind is the thing that transforms the world forever.

Another example is uranium. For thousands of years, people just used uranium to make windows look more yellow. What happens then in the twentieth century is that you realise this thing has the ability to power entire cities or to destroy cities as well. The Enlightenment's determination to get Nature's secrets out is what transforms the material world around us. That always reminds me of the importance of ideas. If Galileo hadn't taken the risks and said what he believed, if Bacon hadn't been so sniffy about Nature and so determined to put it on the rack, we wouldn't be enjoying the material comforts we are enjoying today. So it's very interesting—the link between thought and progress and I think the Enlightenment really shows that.

Nick Cater: It's a very interesting phrase, 'the spirit of progress,' which comes up time and time again in the history of nineteenth century Australia. It was the driving force of the age. Progress was a multifaceted concept; progress in pure science became applied science, which then enabled industrial progress, and which in turn, brought economic progress. But there was also a keen interest in social progress, which became possible as society grew more prosperous and better educated. All of these things are interdependent, and can't be separated.

One thing leads to another. If you take coal, for example, the coal that transforms the steam engine can produce a rotary force that

can then feed into a loom so you can then start producing cotton garments in large amounts that are increasingly affordable for people to buy. With wool, the mechanisation of production has the same effect, and in turn, produces an almost insatiable demand for fleeces, which brings Australia into the frame. Australia's contribution is—in effect—the invention of the modern sheep, the Australian Merino. It is a highly productive creature that, by the end of the nineteenth century, was producing 5 kg or 6 kg of very fine wool. That's the spirit of progress at work in Australia. It is assisted by the development of a highly efficient logistics chain. The bullock trains could pick up the wool from the farms and travel over rough ground to transport it to the big wool houses in the capital cities quite cheaply. We had an itinerant band of shearers. You would die for labour conditions like that now, where you could bring these people in when you needed them and then get rid of them with no ongoing costs. Australia rides on the sheep's back because it's the most competitive player in the market.

There is also a dividend of social progress because the mechanical looms supplied by cheap Australian wool enable manufacturers to run without resorting to cheap child labour. It becomes possible to implement the Factory Acts without stopping the industrial and economic progress that is giving more people better and cheaper products—and improving living standards. That's the spirit of progress. And everyone—not just the mill owner—benefits.

Brendan O'Neill: So those are the good ideas, but then there is a downward spiral in more recent years in relation to the thing I was just talking about—the use of reason and science. You can see there has been a real shift in relation to this. There's this contradictory thing where you either have a distrust of science, such as the debate about genetically modified food, or there is the transformation of science into a new religion. You hear people talking about 'The Science'—for example, the science of climate change. And if you question or criticise it you are a denier, a heretic. The thing I found very interesting is the Royal Society's change of its motto. In 1660, the Royal Society was founded on the ideas of scientific

experimentation and scientific progress, and in 1663, adopted its motto of 'On the authority of no one.' Then in 2007, the society changed its logo to, as a president of the society summed it up, 'Respect the facts.' I think what that change speaks to is a shift from a scientific method that was about challenging old forms of authority and relying on the authority only of empirical evidence, investigation and analysis to a new slogan that is about bowing down before science and accepting its dictates and not questioning it. I think the Royal Society in 1663 adopted its slogan as a challenge to how the academy had been organised up until that point, which was very much on the personal authority of scholars and priests. They were fairly dictatorial places where the authority of an individual, especially a priestly individual, mattered above all else. Then the Royal Society comes along and says, 'No, we don't accept the authority of all these old fogies, we don't respect the authority of all these old traditionalists and religious people. We accept the authority of no one. We trust the evidence—just what we can discover ourselves through investigation and analysis.' So the fact that we now have this shift to respect the facts or The Science is very worrying because it suggests that the scientific method has disappeared, the method of being investigative, questioning, inquisitive and open-minded has shifted to a new era in which we are either scared of science and we think it's going too far with constant panic about technology and robots, or even worse, we think The Science contains the absolute truth about how you should live, how often you should recycle, how much progress there can be in the world—and we all bow down before it. In terms of the downward spiral, or the rise of the Endarkenment, I think the disappearance of the scientific method, the disappearance of that willingness to challenge authority is one of the key problems.

Nick Cater: Yes, and it has happened quite recently and suddenly around the world. In our lifetime, we have seen a distinct shift in the attitude to science. We once had an unconditional faith in science. Science was knowledge, and it gave mankind the ability to change the world for better or for worse. It could be applied in good or

bad ways, but there was no argument that scientific knowledge was a good thing to pursue.

Then suddenly, around the late 1960s, there is a transformation towards a conditional view of science. Science may no longer be the way to solve a problem because science may actually be the problem.

I identify this transformation with the northern summer of 1969, when man first lands on the Moon, and those famous words, 'One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.' Those are words straight out of the Enlightenment textbook. This is going to benefit the entire species. In our battle against Nature, this is a step forward.

Six weeks later what do we get? Woodstock. Woodstock is by and large an event attended by university educated people. These are the people JFK wanted to go to university to become rocket scientists. America had panicked in the late 1950s, thinking that the Russians were winning the race for science. So there was a massive increase in higher education spending, which allowed the Woodstock generation to go to university. In the *Woodstock* movie, there is a lovely bit where a kid's being interviewed about the rain that is drenching the festival. He says words to this effect: 'Man, it's the CIA up there in the clouds, they're seeding the clouds, sending the rain down.' It's an outburst of superstition and unreason from the pre-Enlightenment age. Later, people start to believe conspiracy theories about the Moon landing that are entirely unreasonable. It is, if you like, the dawn of the Endarkenment, and it happens around the world for different reasons. Can you identify that point in Britain?

Brendan O'Neill: Absolutely, yes. I think there is a moment sometime in the twentieth century, which builds up to and explodes in the 1960s among the children of the bourgeoisie who suddenly turn their back on the Enlightenment and start embracing environmentalist ideas, neo-Malthusian ideas, and anti-progress ideas, or what some refer to as the anti-Industrial Revolution. Not only are we seeing the replacement of reason with unreason but the replacement of freedom with unfreedom. One of the key aspects

of the Enlightenment was liberty. Some of the great thinkers of the Enlightenment wrote about science, some of them wrote about morality, and some of them wrote about religion—but what they all had in common was the conviction that freedom is absolutely essential to the human condition and the improvement of the human condition.

Go right back to the 1680s and John Locke and his letter concerning toleration—one of the early documents of the Enlightenment. It was supposed to be a private letter to a friend but his friend published it, and Locke had to hide from all these angry people. What he argued in this letter that caused such controversy was that we have to tolerate people who have different beliefs to ours, and we have to respect freedom of conscience and freedom of thought. Except for Catholics—Locke was a bit funny about Catholics. (But Catholics in England then were like Islamists today. They were a bit loopy so that's understandable.) However, Locke basically argued for freedom of conscience and freedom of thought, so at the start of the Enlightenment it's all about freedom of the mind and allowing people to believe what they want to believe. Locke said you just can't force someone to stop believing something—that's tyranny. And then later in the Enlightenment, you get the argument that not only should you be allowed to think what you believe but you should also be able to say it. So you get Spinoza who wrote, 'Every man should think what he likes and say what he thinks.' I can't think of any politician these days who would stand up and say that without a million caveats, 'Don't offend this group' or 'Don't risk national security' or 'Don't undermine public morality.' Every freedom is nowadays constantly checked with these rights and responsibilities and balances and so on. Spinoza's essay on freedom of speech, published 350 years ago, is still to my mind the best thing written about freedom of speech. Then there are people like Thomas Paine who basically said, 'When opinion is free in matters of religion and politics, truth will prevail.' Basically, if we are free to speak what we think, everything will be fine. That was the amount of trust they had in freedom. Then you get to later Enlightenment thinkers like John Stuart Mill who is all about

freedom of speech and freedom of people to say what they think and feel. Now you have an explicit turn against that in the past three to five decades. This is a real shift away from the Enlightenment belief in freedom towards a new conviction that freedom is actually dangerous and a problem. The two things that underpin the Enlightenment thinkers' devotion to freedom was, first, their belief that tradition shouldn't weigh heavily on humankind, that we should be able to work out for ourselves through public debate and discussion what is true and right. You can't be told what is true and right by some expert. Mill makes that point explicitly, and so does Spinoza—they both say the only way you can know if something is a good idea or a bad idea is if you subject it to public discussion. The second thing that drove them was a trust in the public, a trust in ordinary people's ability to hear ideas and to work out for themselves, independently, whether those ideas were interesting or rubbish. Those two things are missing now. Trust in the public is gone, and we now live under nanny states or nudging states that think we are all irrational and will turn into racists instantly if we get rid of section 18c. They just think we're automatons who suck in ideas and act on them in a very irrational way. They don't trust us and think we need tradition and authority or new forms of authority to guide us through life, to tell us what our consciences should be. You are right—we are seeing a shift from reason to unreason, and just as scarily, we are seeing a shift from freedom (one of the essential values of the Enlightenment) to a public distrust and promotion of unfreedom with restrictions on free speech, free thought, and so on.

Nick Cater: I think the connection between freedom and progress is quite concrete. John Stuart Mill said that if you shut down an idea or stop someone from talking, then you are 'robbing humanity.' You just don't know whether an idea is going to blossom into a good idea or not. You have to let all ideas collide.

One of the most challenging strands of the Scottish Enlightenment for me is the notion of the equality of ideas. You are allowed to think and say whatever you want, and are tested in

the marketplace of ideas. The market decides whether it is a useful idea or not, and then ideas build on one another and it leads to progress. As soon as you shut down debate, you limit your chances of progress.

Brendan O'Neill: That's absolutely right, and I think the question of how progress happens and what value is attached to progress is really important. What we are seeing in terms of the rise of the Endarkenment is a real diminishing of the values of the Enlightenment, belief in reason, belief in scientific method, belief in freedom—all those things are being wound back. As a consequence of that, we are also seeing the downgrading of economic growth and economics and of exploiting Nature. If Bacon said what he said now, he would probably be arrested or certainly branded a climate change denier and denied a platform in universities and newspapers. That's because we're also losing faith in economic progress and in big economics and in the idea that humankind should create a world of plenty. That's one of the ideas that follows from the Enlightenment really being called into question today.

Another interesting thing we are seeing today is the return of the idea of scarcity, the idea that the resources on Earth are finite. I really don't believe that. It sounds crazy to say that the resources on Earth are not finite because the Earth is a certain size and has a certain amount of stuff in it, but what the Enlightenment showed and what Bacon and others showed is that the usefulness of resources is determined by us, not by Nature. Coal for many centuries was completely useless except as jewellery for rich Roman women. It's only our level of development that allowed us to realise its potential and transform it into a useful resource. The same with uranium. Uranium was just nonsense for ages and ages, but then we discovered through technology and science that it could do wonderful things.

Nick Cater: This leads us to our biggest mistake. We have abandoned the spirit of progress in favour of the spirit of sustainability. The exciting idea that emerges from the Enlightenment is that there is no

limit to progress. Natural resources may be finite, but the resource that matters most is the human mind, and the mind is always capable of finding better or more productive ways to do things. There may be setbacks, but the overall trend in human achievement is upward. There seems to be no limit to what humans might achieve eventually.

And yet we are now seeing the return of the Malthusian philosophy, which holds that there are finite limits to the way we operate. The suggestion is that the planet can only carry a certain number of people, and that we can't exploit Nature indefinitely.

In Australia and in America—particularly in Australia—we have the onset of deep green environmentalism. By that I mean the dogma that holds that human beings are not at the top of Nature's tree, but somewhere on the lower branches. In fact, we probably have fewer rights than the tree frog. The idea of the biosphere and biodiversity has taken hold quite strongly: that man cannot command Nature, he just has to meekly fit in. This is quite a foreign idea, and only came in here in the 1970s. It took very strong hold here and in America, less so in Europe where I think you get a far more pragmatic green spirit developing.

Brendan O'Neill: Yes, and it's really true to connect the idea of scarcity with the decline of Enlightenment thinking because the most striking thing about Thomas Malthus, the original population scaremonger, not that many people have read his thesis on population published in 1798, is that it's a direct response to the French Revolution and it's not a coincidence that it was published in that year. He spends about two-thirds of it talking about the French Revolution and only one-third on the nonsense science he made up about the scarcity of resources and the number of people the planet could hold and so on. It was very much a reaction to progress (I know you are more of a Scottish Enlightenment person and I'm more of a French Enlightenment person)—that it was moving too far and too fast and the French people have gone mad, so I have to come up with a new theory that will say, 'Stop, or everyone is going to starve to death.' So it was explicitly a reaction against the

Enlightenment. Later, in the 1840s–50s, there was a really interesting period when Karl Marx does a really good critique of Malthus and he says Malthus' arguments were a libel against the human race, that they naturalise poverty because they said there were a certain number of resources and if you use them all up, people will starve. Marx accused Malthus of naturalising poverty, treating it as part of the natural world. Malthus was wrong because when he was writing, there were about 980 million people on planet Earth and he said we couldn't feed them all. Well, now there are more people than that in China alone, and China has lifted 250 million people out of poverty over the past 20 years. No one in China starves to death anymore. So Malthus was completely wrong. What you can see in that Marx versus Malthus clash is an early example of progressives taking on environmentalists. The arguments I have today against environmentalists who say there are only a certain number of resources, and if we use them up we will perish, have been had before the Enlightenment, during the Enlightenment, and towards the tail end of the Enlightenment. It's important that we continue to have these arguments and remind people of the ambition, the hope, and the sense of progress and daring that informed the Enlightenment, which made man see Nature as a tool for improving the human condition rather than as something we should be enslaved by.

Nick Cater: One more point of difference between the spirit of progress and the spirit of sustainability is in this attitude to social change. I spoke about how in the Enlightenment spirit, all these things—scientific, technological, industrial and social progress—went together and all moved forward in harmony. More recently, a new idea has taken hold that the only progress that matters is social progress—all the rest is incidental. In fact, other forms of progress—economic, industrial, etc.—are seen as militating against social progress.

Social progress has become the chief public policy aim of the progressives, and everything else is secondary. Inevitably, they tie themselves in knots because you get to the point where you can't actually do any of the things you want to do because you have run

out of money. In any case, it's not handing out money or setting up schemes or government programs that is going to work, but giving people the opportunity to earn a living and be part of the economy. Yet progressives almost always outsource responsibility for social progress to the state. Which brings us to another troubling phenomenon—the growth of the state. How does this fit into our argument?

Brendan O'Neill: Well, I think what we have absolutely seen over the last few years is the unwieldy growth of the state and the spread of the state into more and more areas of life, even into the internal moral lives of the citizens. One of the key arguments of the Enlightenment, and it's right there in Locke very early on in his letter on toleration, is that there are some things the government should do and some things the government shouldn't do. The aim of his letter, as he says, is to 'settle the bounds' between what governments should and shouldn't do. They should concern themselves with outward things, by which he means infrastructure, protecting people from crime, protecting private property—those outward, useful things that governments should do. They should never concern themselves with what he called 'inward' things, by which he meant our beliefs, our consciences, our thoughts, how we speak, how we interact with our fellow citizens, and so on. It is set in very religious terms—Locke is a believer in God. He talks about man's soul and the importance of protecting man's soul from interference from others. But it is basically an argument for liberty, an argument for, as he would call it, the 'magistrate,' but as we would call it, the state, to stay out of people's lives and to stay out of our moral lives. He even says, and this is something the nanny state should bear in mind, that people should be allowed to become ill. He asks in his letter that if a man is behaving in a way that is likely to make him sick, should the state step in and help him? He says no, because people should be so free and so in control of their own lives that they should be allowed to let themselves fall into disrepair. That is the extent to which he said these are the bounds that need to be settled between individual liberty, or what he calls

the care of the soul, and what the magistrate or state can do. This has been completely lost and it has been another winding back of the Enlightenment because now what we have is the ever-increasing encroachment of the state into every aspect of our lives—how well we are, what our physical bodies are like, what we can eat, what we can drink, whether we can smoke, where we can smoke, and even what we can think and say.

The Enlightenment, as Kant and others said, was really about encouraging people to take responsibility for their own lives and to grow up. Kant says all these guardians have made it seem extremely dangerous to be mature and in control of your life. They have constantly told you it is extremely dangerous, and this is the term they use, to 'run' your own life. He says you have to ignore them and you have to dare to know, you have to break free. This is exactly what we need to say now because what we have is the return of these guardians, no longer religious pointy-hatted people but instead the chattering classes and the greens and nanny-staters who are convincing us that it is extremely dangerous to live your life without expert guidance, without super-nannies telling you how to raise your children, without food experts telling you what to eat, without anti-smoking campaigners telling you what's happening to your lungs. I think we need to follow Kant's advice and tell these guardians to go away and to break free of that kind of state interference.

Nick Cater: I think that is right. There was great excitement with the collapse of the Berlin Wall because it felt that we had won the argument that the state was worse at trying to organise the economy than the free market. We won that argument but we are yet to win the argument that individuals are better at organising their own lives than bureaucrats in Canberra. We have now this huge and unmoveable 'blob' of the state that just sits over everything, and its role is to make rules about what we should and shouldn't eat. Today, I was looking at the great war on formula milk, that now there is almost a prohibition movement that wants to ban formula milk altogether, that this is being aided, abetted, and in some cases, driven by this massive state bureaucracy.

Brendan O’Neill: One very important point that Mill makes in relation to all this is that even if people are a bit stupid and make the wrong decisions when they are running their lives, it is preferable to being told what to do by the state or by experts. He says this is preferable because they are using their ‘moral muscle,’ as he calls it. They make a decision, they make a choice, and they learn from it. Mill says the only way you can become a morally responsible citizen is by having freedom of choice because it is only through this process that you can take responsibility for your life. He says if someone else is telling you how to live and what to do and how to think, then you are no better than an ape who is following instructions. Spinoza much earlier makes the same point. He says you are no better than a beast if you are told what to think and what to say. He says the only way you can become a man is if you are allowed for yourself to determine what your thought processes should be, how you should live, and so on.

The irony of today is that we have these states that think they are making us more responsible by telling us not to do this or not to do that, but in fact, they are robbing us of the ability to become responsible citizens. The only way you can become a responsible citizen is by being free, by making a choice, and by using your ‘moral muscles’ to decide what your life’s path will be.

Nick Cater: Amid all this, I think you and I see a ray of hope in information technology. Rupert Murdoch pointed out that the digital age is bad news for autocrats. The information flow is not easily stopped by tyrants, and sure enough, we can see this at work around the world.

But you and I also see rays of sunshine in the way the democratisation of knowledge made possible by the Internet is challenging the authority of the expert class right across the board. I remember people said Wikipedia would never work. There are now two types of encyclopaedia—*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which is written and published by experts, and Wikipedia, which is just this kind of crazy thing where everyone chucks in their sixpenny worth. But guess what? Wikipedia is right more often than it’s

wrong, and now with the system that has developed with footnotes and following sources, you know that if you start a Wikipedia search, you can get to something pretty meaty and useful very quickly. I think the challenge to dogma on climate change would not have happened without the Internet, without the ability of people to get together in this kind of university of the people and try to work out the facts. The expert class would tell you that the Internet is full of idiots chucking rubbish about, and of course there are a lot of idiots on the Internet, just as there are in real life. But it's a global marketplace for ideas and these get whittled and the best ones survive. So I see a ray of hope there. Do you?

Brendan O'Neill: Yes, I think that's right, and it's important to remember that one of the most terrifying things that happened to the pre-Enlightenment elites was the invention of the printing press. Nothing shook them like this event because prior to that, they controlled ideas. They were the only people who published books by having monks write them out. Most people couldn't read, they never saw a book, they were just told what was in books by a priest on Sundays, often in a language they didn't understand. The elites responded to the invention of the printing press by trying to clamp down on it and crush it. If you read the arguments of the levellers, who were the most radical people in the English Civil War, one of their key arguments was we have to free the printing press, to have the right to print without the state's authority. John Milton makes the same argument in his great pamphlet, saying we need freedom of the press. He says the printing press is one of the greatest things man has ever created because, for the first time ever, you don't need someone else's say-so to publish your ideas.

I think the invention of the Internet takes that a stage further and that's why it is so terrifying to a lot of governments—not just to governments but also to, for instance, the chattering classes, the liberal elites, and sections of society who are a bit scared of the Internet because what you have here is the printing press gone crazy. People can now publish their ideas on their phone instantly. I could sit here and write something down and it is published

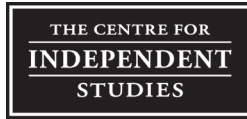
instantaneously. There are no more guards at all. You don't even need to have a machine anymore, you can do it from the palm of your hand. So I think in the Internet, there is real potential to rattle the world in a similar way to the printing press.

My only concern would be that much of the Internet is shaping itself around the Endarkenment. I agree with you that it is a potentially useful tool for recovering the ideas of the Enlightenment, democratising knowledge, spreading ideas, and so on, but because the Internet has emerged in an era in which progress is undervalued, we are seeing it mould itself around the Endarkenment. I think Twitter is a good example of that. I think the reason Twitter was invented is that we live in a world where there is no longer a barrier between public and private, and everyone likes to spout off what they think, even if it's just a prejudice or something stupid. So you can see the Internet shaping itself around some of the problems that exist in society, but having said that, having this kind of extremely universal, extremely accessible device can only be a good thing. One of the wonderful things about the American Revolution was the production of all these newspapers, which people just handed out on street corners—all containing more radical ideas than the last one, all stirring up the populace. Some of them even knowingly published lies just to stir up the populace to go and kill some Brits. So the sharing of information, the sharing of daring ideas—the Internet absolutely has that covered.

Nick Cater: It's the pooling of intelligence too, isn't it, because at every stage of progress minds have to connect. Thomas Edison had 20 people in his shed trying to work on the light bulb and get it to work. During the Scottish Enlightenment, they just loved to sit around in the salons in Edinburgh and Glasgow drinking red wine from Bordeaux—they had one bottle a day and two bottle a day and three bottle a day men. From Glasgow it was a day and half by coach to Edinburgh, but they would make the journey just to exchange ideas. Now we can do this all the time with people around the

world. Early days, but I can see the signs of knowledge and ideas spreading across the globe very quickly, everyone is enriched, and human intelligence generally moves on. Are we being too optimistic?

Brendan O'Neill: No, I think that's fair. I think we need more optimism because we are surrounded by pessimism. We are surrounded by misanthropes, by people who think everything humans do is destructive. The creation of new cities is described as leaving an eco-footprint on the planet. People will always look at the downside. They will talk about the pollution in China and not mention the fact that China has lifted so many people out of poverty—and that more than half of humankind now lives in cities, which is just extraordinary. We need to be more upbeat about the great achievements we have made so far and the potential for us to go even further. The space of time between the invention of flight and man walking on the Moon was about 50 or 60 years, a short period of time for such an extraordinary achievement. One of the Wright brothers said that for generations, thousands of years, mankind looked enviously at the birds, thinking if only we could fly like those birds, if only we could find a way to do it. We defy Nature, which forgot to give us wings, so we invent them anyway and 50–60 years later we get to the Moon. So when people say it is not possible to do this, you are too ambitious, you've gone too far, you need to slow progress down, I think it's worth reminding them of facts like that. The leaps forward humankind has made in the past are just breathtaking and the potential to make more is really great.



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The Age of Endarkenment

Humans have never had it so good. We are wealthier, happier and more comfortable than any previous generation, thanks to the march of science and technology. So why have we become so gloomy about the modern world and so pessimistic about the future? Why have we convinced ourselves that Earth's bounty is about to run out? Why have we lost faith in the capacity of mankind to find solutions to our problems?

In this publication, **Nick Cater** and **Brendan O'Neill** discuss what happened to the ideals of the Enlightenment and the spirit of progress that created the modern world.



Nick Cater is the Executive Director of the Menzies Research Centre, a columnist for *The Australian*, author of *The Lucky Culture*, and a former CIS Visiting Fellow.

Brendan O'Neill is the editor of *spiked* magazine, a columnist for *The Big Issue*, and author of *Can I Recycle My Granny and 39 Other Eco-Dilemmas*. He was also a scholar-in-residence at The Centre for Independent Studies in 2014.

