

## INTRODUCTION

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# Ideas as Historical Forces

*On résiste à l'invasion des armées; on ne résiste pas à l'invasion des idées.*

(Invading armies can be resisted; invading ideas cannot be.)

VICTOR HUGO'S ESSAY ON NAPOLEON III'S 1851 COUP  
D'ÉTAT, *THE HISTORY OF A CRIME*

Arguably the three most powerful men of the twentieth century never lived to see it. Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and Charles Darwin could hardly have imagined the forms of wealth, revolution, and science that would emerge in their names during the decades after 1900 or the ugly dogmatism, pseudoscience, and staggering brutality. It would surprise them no less to find that their names were familiar to every well-educated person in a world of billions. Had each of them lived only a few decades longer, they might have seen inklings of this. What they could not have guessed was that their formative role in modern history would only grow with time.

Smith, Marx, and Darwin were not kings or military commanders. Nor were they political leaders or religious prophets. They were intellectuals. Their field of effort and the origin of the influence they exerted after their deaths lie in the realm of ideas. The ideas they articulated in the hands of followers, detractors, and many others provided the radioactive substance of transformation. It is impossible to talk about the rise of modern economics and the capitalist system—a system that profoundly changed the nature of the world and that is now fully global—without referring to Adam Smith. Marx set loose ideas that sought to destroy this system, that became the inspiration for revolutions and wars that swept away entire societies, changing and also ending the lives of many millions of people. And Darwin? His thought redefined the

universe of living things and their relation to human beings, while both radically weakening the explanatory power of religion and radicalizing its reactive response to modernity.

Needless to say, these are not minor developments. They must be considered essential to the “modern,” however defined. Moreover, the conflicts and debates that led to these developments, and the struggles over them, are far from over. If the past two hundred years have revealed anything, it is that engagements over fundamental ideas—those elemental to the building of institutions, to changes in governments and the organization of society, to concepts like individualism and human rights—have not at all receded and show no prospect of an end. The battle over free markets and government power can hardly be called settled. The collapse of the Soviet Union has not erased state control from the globe and turned the world democratic by default. Modern biology has not destroyed fundamentalist religion. The confrontations waged over these primary matters have a continuing history to them that is still lived—in extreme as well as moderate form, today as much as a century ago. No group, nation, or party has definitively won the battle of ideas.

Contemporary society, in short, has been built over time from the materials of thought. We live within institutions and under political systems created and shaped by ideas that often began in the imagination of major thinkers. When first made public, many of these seemed in their time to be so original, sometimes so daring, that they were dismissed as implausible or even dangerous. For a great many of us, meanwhile, it is easy to assume that the society we inhabit has long been in place and sits on firm foundations. We are not quite prepared to accept that fundamentally new ways of looking at the world might come to reshape the reality we inhabit. But they have. Indeed, they are largely the source of our social existence and even a fair part of our beliefs about it. By this is meant not only grand theories about economics, history, and life but ideas concerned with liberty, the individual, the role of religion, education, and, not least, the nation-state. Concepts about these and similar institutions are often called by other names: policies, principles, schemes, plans; but they all come back to basic, underlying philosophies about the nature of society and how it should work. Ideas, therefore, are

not mere mental substance. Operating through leaders, the public, interest groups, and ordinary individuals, they are a determining factor in the creation of social reality.

We are hardly the first to argue such a position. One of the twentieth century's great economists, John Maynard Keynes, completed his most ambitious work, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, with these pointed words:

The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas. . . . [S]oon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil. (1936/2009, 383)

We agree with Keynes in most respects. But as we inhabit a later time and have seen a good deal more of history unfold, we would amend his conclusion in a significant way. We would emphasize that economists and political philosophers, important as they are (and as close to Mr. Keynes's heart as they undoubtedly were), do not compose the entire taxonomy of thinkers who have delivered us to the present. We should not leave out the ideas from such pivotal domains as science and religion, for example. And in this book, we do not. Nor do we ignore the dangers that Keynes refers to, meaning dangers that have come from extreme and often violent interpretations of key ideas.

Our title states that "four big ideas" shaped the modern world. At the risk of being accused of oversimplification, we want to emphasize that we are speaking here in broad, all-encompassing terms. It should be apparent from what has already been said that we will be dealing not only with single concepts and beliefs but whole systems of thought that have touched every level of social experience. Taken together, these can

be grouped into four encompassing themes than can be summarized as follows.

From Adam Smith came the idea that individuals should have the freedom to make all essential decisions affecting their material and moral lives, and that if they were allowed to do so, the resulting society would be the most efficient, prosperous, and free. This was a very big idea that opposed both communal tradition and the prevailing forms of authority in his time.

Humanity had dreamed of universal equality long before Karl Marx came along. What Marx did, however, was to show that utopian dreams were insufficient to bring this about. An egalitarian world would arrive as the result of “scientific laws” governing history, but for this to happen revolutionary parties based on the solid material interests of the downtrodden majority would have to be organized. Only then would inequality and injustice be vanquished forever.

Charles Darwin turned the idea of evolution into a true scientific theory, one that came to give all life a secular history and that, through the essential mechanism of natural selection, was applied by others to a great many aspects of society and, more recently, to human behavior and culture. This was hugely controversial in his time and continues to be so because it raises such difficult questions about our purpose on Earth. Darwin insisted that these issues have to be faced through open inquiry, not denied or evaded as his enemies in his time and ours claim.

And the fourth “big idea”? Modern democracy first came into being through the efforts of the founders of the United States, most of all those we have chosen to discuss, Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. It was these two brilliant but also flawed men, more than any others, whose fierce debates set the patterns for how to imagine, implement, and institutionalize this new political system that, in various shapes, would come to influence so much of the world.

These define our four “big,” thematic ideas: freedom, equality, evolution, and democracy. We are concerned not only with each of them in and of themselves but also with the forms of reaction that rose against them. These, too, are critical to understand. We are aware, of course, that the thinkers we have chosen were not the sole inventors of each thematic idea or the only ones to have written important works about

them. But as we will explain, they were far and away the most influential. Indeed, it is an integral part of our effort to show how complex and many-sided their thoughts were, how they have spawned many followers, and how they have been resisted and fought over time and again, down to the present.

Our intent, then, is to pursue a different type of intellectual history. In simple terms, we wish to show that ideas have been among the primary forces behind modern history during the past three centuries. Ideas, that is, do not merely matter; they matter immensely, as they have been the source for decisions and actions that have structured the modern world. We offer, therefore, an interpretation of history that begins with this premise. It is one we feel is amply shown by an examination of the choices and motives of leaders, in the past and present, but still more by tracing the particular influences of ideas themselves and the specific ways in which they have been the agents of historical events. The untold number of human lives that have been bettered and saved, but also imprisoned and annihilated, in the name of one or another political philosophy, theory of history, concept of national destiny, or other vision convinces us that a more direct approach to understanding the power of ideas is warranted. The chapters that follow take up some of the most influential thinkers and concepts that shaped the twentieth century and that are now shaping the twenty-first century. Our aim has been to synthesize what is known about these thinkers and concepts into a coherent set of discussions about their diverse, long-term impact.

There is a venerable debate between “idealist” and “materialist” explanations of history. Do new ideas cause social, political, and economic change, or is it the reverse, that such ideas are products of their time period? Erudite philosophers who eschew crude generalizations have debated this issue for more than a century. We do not propose to do so. Rather, we take the position that ideas have often come before material changes that they then help explain and propel. Adam Smith’s economics turned out to further the cause of capitalist development and to explain it even though he did not realize that the Industrial Revolution was about to transform the world. Marx wanted to cause change, and his ideas certainly did. Darwin, who was more modest, feared that his ideas would change much, and he was right. We are far from wanting

to use such examples as evidence for a single, dogmatic interpretation of history. At the same time, it seems irrefutable to us that certain ideas have indeed shown transformational power over the span of the last few centuries. This is not a unique perspective; important analysts in the social sciences and philosophy have also adopted it (Nisbet 1980; Hirschman 1977; Berlin 2013).

The first set of ideas we have chosen had their birth and early maturation during the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European Enlightenment and its expansion into the nineteenth century. These are necessary choices. The Enlightenment was a critical period for the birth of modernity, an era of deep separation from all that had gone before, a period of enormous creativity and destruction, most of all in the realm of thought. It was when, in the words of Jonathan Israel, one of the period's most knowledgeable students, everything known became available for questioning, skepticism, and, in many cases, rejection and replacement (Israel 2001, 2006, 2011). Not every received idea was attacked; not all forms of authority and privilege were challenged. But many of the most fundamental concepts about the nature of human beings and society were indeed contested, placed in doubt, and then, over time, supplanted. If earlier upheavals of the social order sought their legitimacy in theology, law, and tradition, from the eighteenth century onward such changes were powered by ideas that were secular and that looked to found society and its institutions on concepts presumably anchored in an evidence-based, reason-led "scientific" understanding of man and the universe.

To state things plainly: it was in the late seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries when most of the fundamental ideas of modernity were born.

And it was in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries when these ideas were tested, expanded, and institutionalized but also brutally resisted. Among them are to be counted the ideas of democratic freedom, economic self-determination, individual liberty and equality, and religious tolerance, as well as those of communism, nationalism, racial "science," and violent revolution. The Enlightenment, that is, brought forth the terms for both its fulfillment and its own annihilation—a Counter-Enlightenment, which came frighteningly close to destroying

it in the twentieth century and which has been revived in different forms in the 2000s. Inasmuch as liberal democracy can be considered a product of Enlightenment thought, so can trends that eventually led toward its opposite, totalitarian communism and fascism, and more recently a reaction rooted in religious beliefs.

We do not, in other words, present the development of ideas as a straightforward march to enlightened progress. Such is no more in evidence today than in the 1930s or the 1890s. Nor have we ignored criticisms of Enlightenment thought that seek to point out other troubling elements: its relationship to colonialism, its misguided utopianism, its mechanization of and disenchantment with the natural world, its emphasis on abstract and instrumental reason, and the powers of rational and bureaucratic control it supposedly set loose upon humanity.

We agree with some of the criticisms of the Enlightenment but hardly all, and the reader will see why in the pages that follow. We are strong supporters of the conclusion that real, concrete progress has taken place, that many of the restrictions on freedom and life existing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—the institution of slavery, disenfranchisement of women, religious intolerance, constraints on free expression, the ability of the authorities to come to your house at any time of their pleasing and do just about anything they liked—have been eliminated in most democratic states, along with a great many cruel practices that used to be common such as drawing and quartering, public hangings for petty crimes, and others. No less, the Enlightenment created standards by which its own legacy could be measured. In the United States, for instance, there was originally the great gap between stated ideals of liberty (“we the people”) and actual limits to such liberty when the Constitution was adopted. Along with the constitutional acceptance of slavery there was an acceptance of the laws of various states that denied voting rights to those without property as well as to most Blacks, Native Americans, and women. Over time, however, through great struggles that kept on referring back to the original ideas of the Enlightenment, these limits have been removed. Had the original impetus of these ideas not been present, the struggle for improvement would have been far more difficult, perhaps even impossible. We can still see in parts of the world where Enlightenment ideas are rejected



that the freedoms and rights accepted as commonplace in democracies are far from being practiced.

Nor can we overlook the legacy of the Enlightenment in the enormous scientific advances and technological innovations made possible by the new freedom of thought. These are now so taken for granted that it is easy to forget how gradual and often resisted such advances were before the eighteenth century.

But for all its eventual progress, the twentieth century also saw epic revolutions, wars, genocides, and suffering on a monstrous scale, as the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment battled for supremacy in many parts of the world. This may seem a crude or mythic way to put things, as if two great colossi had fought for the soul of humanity. Historians, however, have themselves often described these events, and the twentieth century as a whole, as representing the period of “great ideological struggle.” We certainly agree, though we also take care to show that the reality was immensely complex, not least on the plains of thought where it all began. It is also our view that much of the conflict never ended. It would be exceedingly foolish, that is, to believe that such struggles are over. The new century will continue to see large-scale struggle in the realm of ideas, though its precise forms and its principle actors will no longer be exactly the same. Such is yet one more pressing reason why it remains imperative to comprehend and analyze ideas, for they are as much involved in the making of the present and future as they were in the past.

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### THIS BOOK

Accepting, then, that specific ideas have been key forces behind events in modern history provides the principal theme of our book. The chapters that follow each take up one key domain of idea-making and trace its origins, invention, rhetoric, logic, and relevance to debates going on today. For this, we have drawn on the work of many excellent authors and specialists in each area. Our effort is not one of original scholarship but of synthesis built around our theme.

We have structured the book in a straightforward manner. Part 1, including chapters 1–4, examines the thought of the three authors already



mentioned, Smith, Marx, and Darwin, as well as the invention of modern democracy in the thoughts of Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton and the often bitter debates they had about how to construct the new United States. Their views were essential to the creation of the world's first large-scale democratic republic based on Enlightenment thinking. Studying these, however, also reveals deep conflicts within Enlightenment thought that remain unresolved and a source of instability in that same republic and elsewhere in the world.

Part 2 then turns to key ideas, less tied to single authors, that rose to combat the Enlightenment, those that have rejected the very core of its liberalism and free thought as well as much of, if not all of, its science. With chapter 5, we meet the Counter-Enlightenment, whose specific and varied forms of reaction grew through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reaching a peak in the phenomenon of fascism.

In chapters 6 and 7 the subject turns to fundamentalist religion in Christianity and Islam, which have seen a surging influence in many parts of the globe during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. We have chosen to focus on these two religions, in particular, because they are both the largest and the most widespread internationally in terms of their adherents. These two faiths have also produced the most far-reaching versions of what we refer to as "fundamentalist," a term we use to designate a set of characteristics that includes strict, literal interpretation of Scripture, a claim to the one pure and true faith, and denial of worth and legitimacy to all other beliefs. The religious "turn" in general but specifically in its fundamentalist forms, it is now evident, has produced a deep reaction against liberal modernization whose ultimate political impact and potential for further violence is still far from clear.

Finally, in a concluding chapter, we summarize the major findings of the book and take up the matter of their implications. It should come as no surprise that our principal theme of posing ideas as primary historical forces brings with it some major implications for scholarship and teaching. This applies to both the humanities and the social sciences. Our discussion of these implications is brief and straightforward but also strongly worded. It is our feeling that too much is at stake to pedal lightly.

Readers will inevitably ask why we have chosen to speak of “ideas” and not “ideologies.” Mainly it is a matter of focus and clarity. Though originally an Enlightenment term itself, coined by Count Destutt Tracy in his book on political economy (1817) to signify a “science of ideas,” the meaning of “ideology” later underwent many adaptations. For Karl Marx, as we will see, ideologies were reflections of the class positions of those who expounded them, and thus, rather than being independent ideas that influenced society directly, they were by-products of various economic classes in conflict with each other. This is ironic, since the history of his own ideas in creating a whole new kind of society proves the exact opposite: first came the ideas, then the resulting political programs, and only after that the creation of an entirely novel social form. Karl Mannheim, whose *Ideology and Utopia* (1936) tried to overcome this particular Marxist bias, essentially failed. He, too, felt that ideas were a product of the social situation from which they emerged and thus were ideologies, incapable of acting as forces that could produce change. In the mid- and late twentieth century, Daniel Bell and Francis Fukuyama defined “ideology” to mean political ideas and policies that had become obsolete, particularly those on the left of the political spectrum (Bell 1960; Fukuyama 1992).

We accept none of these ways of understanding with regard to the ideas we discuss. First of all, we insist that these ideas are major influences on their own, indeed influences of primary importance. Obviously they were somewhat a product of their times, but the most important among them have enormous originality and have been able to ultimately transform societies by generating whole sets of belief systems and programs. Whereas “ideology” has come to suggest a fixed worldview that is self-referential and even inescapable, a kind of mental prison from which believers cannot exit, the ideas we are studying were anything but this. Moreover, applying “ideology” to such concepts as liberal democracy, free trade, religious fundamentalism, or biological evolution does not seem to us especially helpful or illuminating. It serves more to confuse the matter with appeals to what we have just described.

Second, we reject any notion that the ideas we are looking at are obsolete or have lost their power. We do not deny that they have produced different kinds of interpretations, conflicting schools, both acceptance

and resistance—on the contrary, such is precisely the point. This degree of argument and controversy continues today. Consider the example of Darwinian evolution and the battles that continue to be waged over it, battles that have lost none of their vehemence or complexity. The very fact that such ideas remain so contemporary in their impact, so much a part of sociopolitical reality, is the reason why we believe they need to be studied and understood by a wide array of people. For this it is necessary to take the valuable work of many scholars who have written about them and put this work into a more general context that shows how the transcendent power of these ideas has spread and continues to be pervasive today. The notion that somehow powerful ideas have ceased to strongly influence the present, or will do so in the future, is dangerously wrong. In the twenty-first century, ideas that run counter to the Enlightenment are, if anything, growing once more in power. While they may not yet be as coherent or persuasive as liberal democracy, they are generating their own political realities. To understand this, we need to look at the source of these ideas, too, and take them seriously, even if we do not find them congenial.

The term “idea,” therefore, takes us back to the importance of particular concepts and their creators, concepts that are not at all static but have been altered over time by different spokespeople and schools of thought that claim a common origin. For an example, we might return to Marxism, which was originally conceived as a “scientific” model that would free humanity but was turned instead into something that denied the possibility of such freedom and worked entirely against the Enlightenment liberalism that made possible Marx’s own analysis and career. Ideas, that is, suggest a far more dynamic universe of thought than does “ideology.” This is a universe where individuals can be the leaders or followers of an intellectual credo, even its “victims” in a sense, but may modify its principles (to the point of altering the Founders’ intentions) in order to try to seize the historical moment.

This leads us to the need to say something about “responsibility.” In our perspective, there is a great deal of inescapable complexity here. For example, while it is wrong to say that Marx was the sole dark father of Stalinism, Maoism, and the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge, it is also evident that his writing acted to help inspire communism and its abuses.

Adam Smith was by no means the only Enlightenment philosopher to praise markets and legitimize capitalism, but his ideas regarding “self-interest” and the “invisible hand” came to be exploited by those favoring a rigid free market system that allowed tragedies such as the Irish potato famine of the 1840s and 1850s to be so devastating and the Great Depression of the 1930s to persist as long as it did. As for Darwin, we can hardly ascribe to him the multitude of positive and negative creations that have come from selective application of his principal theory. Linking Darwinian evolution directly to the Holocaust, for instance, by way of “unfitness” and “inferior races” makes no more sense than blaming Adam Smith for the Great Depression. And yet there are connections in both cases that cannot be avoided.

What the reader will see repeatedly in the pages that follow is that powerful concepts like “mode of production,” “invisible hand,” “natural selection,” and “true religion” have been appropriated by others and given enormous force and utility. Often later thinkers stretched and deformed these ideas into rationales for certain types of political or economic action, government policy, racial laws, educational systems, and so on. Some of these impacts have been hugely beneficial; some have been the opposite. In short, we can and indeed we must credit the profound order-making force, emotional draw, and problematic universalism of the thought that emerged from the pens of Smith, Marx, Darwin, and the others we have examined.

In short, we agree with Victor Hugo’s quote cited at the start of this introduction. The powerful ideas that we will be studying may be fought against, they may be distorted, and they may be repressed, but in the end, they survive and continue to impact the world.

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## THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Our book is not an attempt to say anything new about the Enlightenment, a topic so richly studied and debated for over two centuries and recently rethought in a most profound way by Jonathan Israel. Anything that we might add could only seem superficial. But as it forms a central point of reference for every chapter, we are obliged to at least summarize clearly our understanding of it and to ask why it has produced such varying responses, from adoration to virulent hatred.

Immanuel Kant wrote his well-known short essay, “Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?” (An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?), in 1784 as a direct response to a query posed by Prussian clergyman and official Friedrich Zöllner. In a footnote to one of his essays, Zöllner had written: “What is enlightenment? This question, which is nearly as important as ‘What is truth?’ should be answered before one begins to enlighten.” Kant did not merely provide a response but a call to arms: “Enlightenment is man’s exit from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to make use of one’s intellect without the direction of another. . . . ‘*Sapere aude!* (Dare to know!)’ . . . ‘Have the courage to make use of your own intellect!’ is hence the motto of enlightenment” (Kant 1784/2006, 17). Free thought, rather than dependence on received tradition or official texts, was a better guide to understanding the natural and social worlds. Such understanding could liberate people from past constraints on progress and make them better individuals—that is, more creative and ethical. Kant meant to free humanity from religious dogma and to convince his readers that the new science and moral philosophy he championed would bring an enlightened, rational society.

Politically, the desired outcome was what came to be called classical liberalism. This term has been considerably obscured by its use in contemporary American political discourse. There, “liberalism” means something closer to what the Europeans call social democracy, a position that believes government should be active in pursuing political and social change for greater equality but without taking over too much of the economy that is best served by open and free market forces. Economically, this has meant direct involvement in markets and limiting the power of private wealth. But originally, the Enlightenment liberalism that flourished in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had very little if anything to do with such intentions; it was a call for freedom, tolerance, and democracy. Later, in the nineteenth century, after the ideas of Adam Smith had taken hold, this kind of liberalism was given an economic sense as well, such that the core concept of freedom was extended to mean minimal government control over the free market. True Enlightenment liberalism is well expressed in the American Constitution (1787) and Bill of Rights (1791) and in the French “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens” (1789). The legitimacy

given to slavery in the Constitution, as well as the Reign of Terror in the French Revolution, sullied those ideals. Yet they remained intact for a growing portion of the United States and Europe, and they ultimately came to guide a major share of political and legal action in democracies everywhere. Indeed, by the late twentieth century, they had spread as ideas if not always as institutionalized facts throughout the world and attained enormous importance in promoting individual liberty, as well as human rights.

Freedom of thought and expression, including freedom to practice any religion, are inherent in classical liberal thinking. So is personal liberty as defined by John Locke, that is, the freedom to choose where one lives, what work one does, and with whom one associates. Government's task is to safeguard security and property rights but to interfere as little as possible to do this. Impartiality of laws, transparency of government, and the right of all citizens to participate in choosing those who govern and make laws will guarantee the preservation of a just and liberal order (Locke 1690/1980). As put by Stephen Holmes, who has given us an excellent history of reactionary responses to the Enlightenment:

Concerning equality, the liberal attitude is traditionalism turned upside down. In traditional societies, as liberals understood them, inherited inequalities were accepted, while new economic inequalities [particularly those that made successful commoner entrepreneurs rich] were unwelcome. Liberals wanted to reverse this pattern, banning aristocracy while considering new inequalities of wealth as perfectly legitimate. (1993, 3–4)

As far as economies were concerned, both free markets and the security of property from arbitrary confiscation were liberal. Unjustified taxation and, later on, constraint by either monopolistic practices or traditional privileges were to be eliminated, while barriers to trade were to be minimized and put to use only on a highly selective basis. In other words, the economics of liberalism were those recommended by Adam Smith.

Enlightenment liberalism also embraced the huge transformation that natural science brought to human knowledge. This meant accepting several key principles: first, the mechanization of the natural world,

whose truths could be revealed not through religious texts but through close observation, experiment, and mathematical explanation; second, ordinary human experience was an inadequate guide to understanding nature, so that scientists were free to test and accept findings that might contradict “common sense” or existing explanations; third, the removal of scientific thought as much as possible from emotional and ideological passions; and finally, the acceptance of the idea that science ought to be a disinterested force for good and the improvement of mankind, even if it contradicted traditional ideas (Shapin 1996).

For a great many Europeans in the eighteenth century, this was powerful medicine. Actual, hard truth about nature and the world could no longer be gained from existing and older sources; it now had to be established and proved. All prior understanding, including sacred teachings, was available for testing and falsification. Certainly there was an ultimate order to the universe, but it was an order man could fathom and discover (Baker 1975). Furthermore, the reality of discovery meant scientific knowledge would advance and thus always be partial. The “truth” of one era could well be amended, improved, even replaced by the era that followed. Science thus brought the promise and the threat of remaking human knowledge about the universe, challenging divinely ordained certainties, placing human beings at the center of truth. The exchange of discovery for revelation proved to be an enormously profound transformation, one that added fully to a desacralization of the social and political spheres (Gellner 1992, 80–84). One measure of how profound this transformation became, and how unsettling, is that it continues to generate enemies in many parts of the world, including not least of all in the United States.

This continued opposition, in other words, is itself an element in the legacy of Enlightenment thought. While it has diminished in some parts of the world, in others it has expanded and remains very much alive where antiliberalism has had a long and successful history, even (but should we be surprised?) within a number of nations where modern science was born. Where political antiliberalism and science clash, as we will see in the chapters on Darwin, on fascism, and on fundamentalist religion, science itself has been attacked, along with its



commitment to free thought and insistence on questioning received ideas. Such attack, moreover, has not in the least been confined to religious fanatics or worshipers of spiritual truths.

Indeed, it is not only Enlightenment ideas that were originally formulated by intellectuals. At every step of the way, opposition to these ideas has depended just as much on thinkers who have made their position known through books, essays, speeches, and more recently various modern media. This theme will come up repeatedly in our book as well: intellectuals have always been the inventors and key agents for the Counter-Enlightenment as well as the Enlightenment itself. We will propose, in fact, that Immanuel Kant's hope for reason and freedom to prevail remains as contested and uncertain as ever. The conflict between supporters and enemies of these ideas continues, as it has since the late eighteenth century, to be the key struggle of our present and our future.