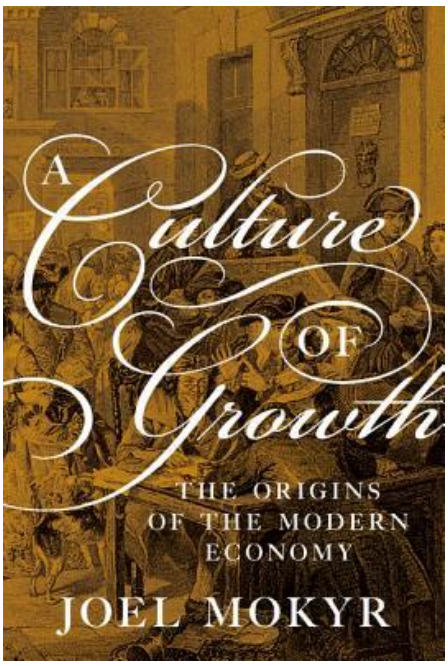

A Culture of Growth: The Origins of the Modern Economy

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During the late eighteenth century, innovations in Europe triggered the Industrial Revolution and the sustained economic progress that spread across the globe. While much has been made of the details of the Industrial Revolution, what remains a mystery is why it took place at all. Why did this revolution begin in the West and not elsewhere, and why did it continue, leading to today's unprecedented prosperity? In this groundbreaking book, celebrated economic historian Joel Mokyr argues that a culture of growth specific to early modern Europe and the European Enlightenment laid the foundations for the scientific advances and pioneering inventions that would instigate explosive technological and economic development. Bringing together economics, the history of science and technology, and models of cultural evolution, Mokyr demonstrates that culture--the beliefs, values, and preferences in society that are capable of changing behavior--was a deciding factor in societal transformations.

Mokyr looks at the period 1500-1700 to show that a politically fragmented Europe fostered a competitive "market for ideas" and a willingness to investigate the secrets of nature. At the same time, a transnational community of brilliant thinkers known as the "Republic of Letters" freely circulated and distributed ideas and writings. This political fragmentation and the supportive intellectual environment explain how the Industrial Revolution happened in Europe but not China, despite similar levels of technology and intellectual activity. In Europe, heterodox and creative thinkers could find sanctuary in other countries and spread their thinking across borders. In contrast, China's version of the Enlightenment remained controlled by the ruling elite.

Combining ideas from economics and cultural evolution, *A Culture of Growth* provides startling reasons for why the foundations of our modern economy were laid in the mere two centuries between Columbus and Newton.

A Culture of Growth: The Origins of the Modern Economy Details

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From Reader Review A Culture of Growth: The Origins of the Modern Economy for online ebook

Hadrian says

This book has an intricate and intriguing argument, so my review will be a tad longer than usual to include all of the necessary details.

One predominant strand of economic thought, called New Institutional Economics, examines the role of social norms and legal rules (collectively known as institutions) that are the basis for economic activity. This starts with the major papers by Robert Coase, and includes things like transaction costs, property rights, modes of governance, hierarchical structures, and more recently includes work by Douglass North and Daron Acemo?lu.

That being said, there still is the question of the explosion of growth that began with the First Industrial Revolution in the 18th century. Growth after this period was based on technological innovation and scientific research, not just accumulation or modest improvements in efficiency. What led to this happening? What sort of institutions led to this?

Mokyr starts with the idea of a 'culture of growth' - culture being a set of beliefs about the natural environment and humans' relationship with it. He focuses more on the culture of a small intellectual elite - not so small as to be only a few dozen people, but several thousand scientists, philosophers, engineers, and so on.

He places the environment for ideas and 'culture' as a market- innovators persuade 'buyers' to accept their new ideas, and profit by means of an improved reputation and other incentives (access to new areas, research, connections with other innovators). Ideas compete - some win out, some go extinct. This market, like many other markets throughout history, was prone to market failures - in this case, a political elite's distrust of what is new.

Mokyr also treats the change in cultural beliefs almost like Lamarck treated evolution - individuals inherit their beliefs from their parents, but they can choose alternate beliefs. They can change beliefs from being persuaded, from conformity, or a host of other factors. From the 16th century onward, this included such heterodox beliefs as the earth going around the sun, Protestantism, and so on. Most important among these were the beliefs that human progress was possible, that it could be achieved, in the quantification of knowledge, and that research and knowledge could be applied to improve the economic conditions of society.

Mokyr supposes that the market for ideas in Europe was a relatively unique institutional arrangement. It was not the only historical place to have a market for ideas, nor was it the only place to experience an outgrowth in scientific knowledge (the golden age of the Arab caliphate or Song China were other alternatives). But this was one which encouraged intellectual innovation that led to an outgrowth in 'useful knowledge', and continued to go on like this. How?

Part of this comes from the 'Republic of Letters', a distributed and loosely-organized community for the transmission and distribution of knowledge. Intellectuals, scientists, writers, and so on, where able to share, disseminate, and discuss their discoveries and ideas across a wide geographical area, without undue exclusion or taboo. This arrangement worked largely from the political and religious chaos that had gripped

Europe over the previous centuries, and the resulting arrangement of a variety of states with a variety of political actors. States were small enough, and borders were porous enough, that monarchs or organized religion could not unduly intervene. The 'Republic' also benefited from the printing press, postal services, and a wide array of patrons - merchants and the rising urban middle class, who could at the very least afford to buy their books.

The effects of this institutional arrangement went beyond the first industrial revolution and more towards the accumulation of scientific knowledge for the next two centuries and the continent's industrialization. There may have been another burst of discovery and growth in the early 19th century without this Republic and the new approach to scientific discovery, but it may have fizzled out.

An intriguing idea, and an interesting set of historical circumstances. There is some discussion of China and the 'Needham question', and there is not really enough discussion of why some of the main 'intellectual entrepreneurs' were concentrated in Britain. And of course the question of the Great Divergence between Western Europe and the rest predicated on colonial spoils.

Still an intriguing book.

Allan says

Emphasizes the importance of the Scientific Revolution to the long-term success of industrialization. Altered my view of things, although I think there is more merit to Allen's British Industrialization in Global Perspective (2009) than Mokyr does.

Diego says

Joel Mokyr continua con el tren de ideas The Gift of Athena y An Enlighted Economy explorando los origines de la revolución industrial. Esta vez lo hace desde el punto de vista de los cambios culturales que se dan en Europa entre 1500 y 1700, aproximadamente entre el descubrimiento de América y la publicación de Philophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica de Newton.

En este periodo se establecio una red intra-continental de cientificos y filosofos "La república de las letras" en la que el conocimiento de sus integrantes se difundia y permitia ser replicado y mejorado con el tiempo. Este proceso eventualmente llevo al nacimiento de las academías de ciencia como la Royal Society en Inglaterra. De acuerdo a Mokyr los origines de la ilustración y despues de la revolución industrial se encuentran en la naturalza libre del flujo de información de esta comunidas, de la naturaleza abierta de la ciencia de la época y el surgimiento de la concepción practica del conocimiento, el conocimiento como vía para mejorar las condiciones materiales de las sociedades y la riqueza de los estados.

El libro hace una revisión profunda de la los trabajos desde Bacon hasta Darwin en occidente y de filosofos Chinos del siglo X con el proposito de contratar la evolución cultural y cientifica Europea vis á vis con la ocurrida en China (los últimos dos capitulos). Es una lectura recomendable para complementar el entendimiento sobre los origines de la gran divergencia que hasta nuestros tiempos comienza a revertirse.

Kathleen says

A well-researched analysis of interrelated factors leading to the Enlightenment, Industrial Revolution, and modern growth. The academic writing style makes for a convincing but dry read.

Adora says

A deep dive into the cultural shifts that allowed the Industrial Revolution to occur. While reading, you'll instinctively draw contemporary parallels to today’s computer/internet revolution. Five stars for depth of content, but 1 star for organization.

Fabian Il. says

Simply great

Franz says

Focusing on the years from 1500-1700, Mokyr traces the influences foreshadowing the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. One crucial key was the writings of Francis Bacon, whose explanation of how knowledge can be discovered through close observation of nature and by conducting experiments to discover Nature's secrets, guided and inspired subsequent tinkerers, scientists, and mathematicians.

One question that Mokyr explores is why the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries occurred in the Western Europe, which led to the the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution, and not elsewhere, especially China, which was about equal to Western Europe in technology, wealth, and cultural attainments in 1500. His answer is complex. He emphasizes the contingent nature of the rise and eventual domination of much of the world by Europeans, that the outcome could have been much different. China and other areas of the world could have achieved the sort of advancements had their situations been somewhat different. The circumstances in Europe encouraged the communication among the educated elite, which Mokyr calls the Republic of Letters, that spread the the scientific, technological, and philosophical discoveries and innovation widely throughout Western Europe. Aiding in spreading these ideas was the fragmentation of Europe into different nations with different political divisions and levels of tolerance for radical ideas. China, being more centralized politically and culturally, lacked much of this, especially the questioning of ancient canonical authors such as Confucius. In the West, respect for Aristotelian science declined as new discoveries contradicted its claims. Galileo, Hooker, Newton, Boyle, Descarte, Leibniz, and numerous others won the struggle in the market of ideas. Communication by letters and books, aided by the printing press (the Chinese had already developed movable type in the 11th century, but ultimately its advantages were partially compromised by the enormous number of Chinese written characters), helped produce an atmosphere of open discussion and debate. Discoveries made by Galileo in Italy could be explored by Descarte in France and further improved by Newton in England. Writing in the common scientific and philosophical language of Latin aided in the spreading new ideas widely regardless of political boundaries and religious commitments of the different thinkers.

While discoveries during the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries contributed to the ideas of the Enlightenment, such as the autonomy of the individuals to choose their own political and religious beliefs, the gradual growth of tolerance to different viewpoints, and subjecting ideas to tests that to judge their efficacies, there was a lag of about a century before applying scientific principles for practical purposes had any influence on the Industrial Revolution. The early years of the Industrial Revolution depended on practical men inventing new marvels such as the steam engine based on trial-and-error experience rather than on scientific principles. Once scientific principles were combined with practical experience, the Scientific Revolution really took off in the 19th century and accelerating in the 20th century.

Although the subtitle of the book is "The Origins of the Modern Economy", I found little in the book that I thought relevant to economics. Mokyr imagines that economic concepts such as incentives and markets played a role in which ideas survived and which were forgotten. He does take a kind of Darwinian approach in the sense that the most useful ideas tend to be the ones that survive based on incentives.

Although somewhat repetitious, the book contains a wealth of ideas and does try to explain why the West arose economically and technologically while the rest of the world didn't. Mokyr doesn't automatically assume that the West was somehow superior than the rest of the world. He implies the the West was just lucky.

Toh Ting says

In this book, Mokyr explores how cultural changes in Europe during the Scientific Revolution is different from past events, and how these changes led up to the Industrial Revolution. He talks about the how cultural evolution leads up to the Industrial Enlightenment. In particular, he argues that the change in the beliefs of a group of intellectual elites under the Republic of Letters led to the success of a competitive market for ideas. The common Baconian belief by the RoL that knowledge should be used to better human lives led to competition and open contest of knowledge. The adoption of the idea of progress and Puritanism also led to to the Industrial Enlightenment, where theory meets practice.

I had to read this book and do a review for one of my modules. The idea proposed by Mokyr is a refreshing one and I like how he manages to link culture to economics. He is also quite specific in the kind of culture he is looking at and provides a coherent and consistent argument throughout the book. His comparison of China to Europe instead of Britain made the whole idea less Eurocentric as well, and he doesn't disprove alternative theories brought up by other economists and historians. This also serves the double-edged effect of making his thesis less strong though, because it is hard to get a grasp of the main argument when you bring in all other theories and say they play a part here and there. The points get pretty messy. And the book is pretty repetitive at some points I feel? The lead up to the book was also pretty draggy, and it was so hard for me to carry on.

Oh he had a nice witty twist at the end of his book about this book contributing to the market for ideas, which I thought was really cool.

Paul Fulcher says

Hadrian's review (https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...) does the book far more justice than I can, so

just some brief thoughts.

Joel Mokyr reminds us that the British Industrial Revolution from the late 18th Century "unleashed an phenomenon never before even remotely experienced by any society," namely **sustained** technological progress leading to worldwide economic growth.

In this book he looks not at the what, how and where of these events, but rather the why and argues that their origins lie in the European Enlightment in the period *"roughly speaking between the first voyage to America by Columbus and the publication of Principia Mathematica by Newton."*

His methodological innovation is to look at the importance of culture on economics and in particular his concept of the market place for ideas in Europe between 1500-1700 and the key role played by *"cultural entrepreneurs"* who transform beliefs and ultimately behaviours in the same way that today's tech entrepreneurs might hope to change our transport, shopping and communication systems.

Mokyr's two featured cultural entrepreneurs are Isaac Newton and Francis Bacon, and he places much emphasis on the latters inductive and empirical approach to science vs. the Hobbesian approach in the UK, and even the more top down deductive approach of the Cartesians, although his particular ire is reserved for the Jesuits and their opposition even to mathematical concept of infinitesimals (he cites Kingsley Amis's The Alteration as an example of an alternative history where the reformation didn't take place and the industrial revolution consequently failed to happen).

Mokyr's ideas are interesting and his treatment wide ranging but unfortunately his writing style doesn't match his erudition, the odd good line apart (*"belief in predestination was doomed from the start"*). In part this is he, as a good academic, avoids easy answers and gives a balanced and detailed view of what is a complex topic, but even allowing for that his arguments can feel rather tortuous and repetitive, and not at all well organised: for example, the existence of the Republic of Letters is key to his history from the outset but he only defines his view of the term on page 186.

Mokyr has little time for those who argue that scientific advances had little to do with the industrial revolution, arguing that even if the theories developed didn't lead directly to innovations in production, they provided an important cultural backdrop. But then it is inconsistent that he himself seems dismissive of any part of learning other than applied sciences. He argues somewhat convincingly that the relegation of studies of the Classics was a key advance (and a difference between Europe and China), as a by-product of replacing the veneration of the wisdom of the ancients for an optimistic view of scientific progress, but extends this, less compellingly to an implicit dismissal of music, literature and indeed even pure mathematics. Indeed he argues:

"In societies dominated by a small, wealthy, but unproductive and exploitative elite, the low social prestige of productive activity meant that creativity and innovation would be directed toward an agenda of interest to the elite. The educated and sophisticated elite focused on efforts supporting its power such as military prowess and administration, or on such topics of leisure as literature, games, the arts, and philosophy, and not so much on the mundane problems of the farmer in his field, the sailor on his ship. Or the artisan in his workshop. The agenda of the leisurely elite was of great importance to the lovers of music in the eighteenth century Hapsburg lands, but was not of much interest to their farmers and manufacturers. The Austrian Empire created Haydn and Mozart, but no Industrial Revolution."

Finally, and given the depressing change of political views on migration, multiculturalism and globalisation in 2016, it is notable that quoting Cipolla, he observes *"throughout this centuries the countries in which*

intolerance and fanaticism prevailed lost to more tolerant countries the most precious of all possible forms of wealth: good human brains"

Robert Stevenson says

Too much tautology, what does culture the word mean, how does the author use the word. This discussion is 10% of book. And the narrative of book is after a culture discussion non-existent and comes across as ODTAA (one damn thing after another) history book.

Kenric Nelson says

Outstanding history of the Enlightenment and its impact on Europe. I found the insights about the Republic of Letters particularly valuable.

Matthew says

An excellent synthesis of Mokyr's previous work. It's written in a way that might appeal to a nonacademic, but make no mistake, it is noted and cited in a way that might be unappealing to a casual reader of economic history.
