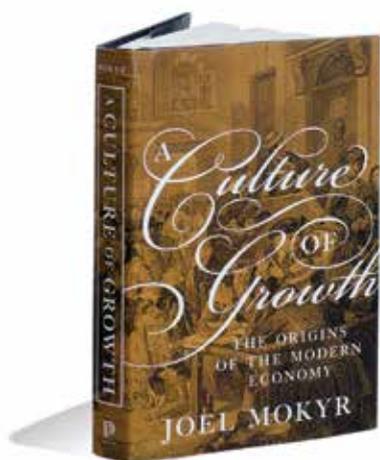


Culture at the Roots of Growth



Joel Mokyr

A Culture of Growth

The Origins of the Modern Economy

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Joel Mokyr's *A Culture of Growth: The Origins of the Modern Economy* gives culture center stage in the rapid economic growth and industrialization brought about by the first Industrial Revolution and ongoing and self-reinforcing in Western Europe ever since. It is a certain type of culture that is the reason growth-inducing change occurred in Europe and not, say, in China, the author insists. What this culture means, and what made it different in Europe, is the topic of this provocative analysis.

Mokyr proposes that the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution were not exogenous developments, but were a consequence of a change in attitudes (which he sums up as “culture”) in Western Europe. This occurred over roughly two centuries, between 1500 and 1700, a period that brought about a change in beliefs about people's ability to use science to control their destiny and, especially, the natural world.

The Enlightenment, taking off in the late 17th century and lasting through the 18th, encouraged a quest for “useful knowledge”—that is, science and technology—that resulted in permanent and sustained command

over the forces of nature.

Nudging this process were two prominent figures, Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton, who changed thinking in Western Europe and then the world. “The true and legitimate goal of the sciences is to endow human life with new discoveries and resources,” wrote Bacon. His and his followers' impact on the Enlightenment was instrumental in bringing about the conviction that “natural inquiry” through experimentation is essential for economic growth and human well-being. Newton's contribution was to demonstrate that the “rules”—the mathematical regularities—of nature could be identified, thereby unlocking the mysteries of the natural world. Both Bacon and Newton altered thinking in their time because competition in the marketplace of ideas allowed their ideas “to be distributed and shared, and hence challenged, corrected and supplemented,” says Mokyr.

But how did these cultural changes come about and spread in the period of fundamental change in Europe? How did the Enlightenment turn into the Industrial Revolution, which in turn was the starting point of sustained growth? Mokyr paints a backdrop of improved navigation and shipbuilding that opened Europe to new products and new ideas (early globalization), and the printing press, which lowered the cost of communication and increased the benefits of literacy. These developments opened minds to new ideas and new ways of thinking elsewhere and reduced attachment to old ideas. These changes were also helped by the absence of a single central authority in Europe, individual freedom, the enforcement of property rights, and competition in the marketplace for both material goods and ideas. Among other things, the new ideas led to advances in science and technology that we now call the Industrial Revolution. And all of that led to sustained economic growth.

Mokyr then shows that although looking at why something happened is useful, so is analyzing why

it did not. He uses the example of China as a counterpoint to Europe's rapid development of a culture of growth. Although China had previously been at least as technologically advanced as Europe, if not more so—and certainly more literate—it had produced nothing like the Industrial Revolution. Mokyr attributes slow progress in China to factors such as veneration of classical Chinese literature, a centralized government that discouraged competition among regions, the selection of administrators for plum government positions based on knowledge of Chinese literature rather than of science and technology, and the relative unimportance of competition compared with Europe. These provided incentives that fostered success in other areas of Chinese culture but did not stimulate the ideas and actions associated with an industrial revolution. Mokyr concludes, “It seems wrong to dub the Chinese experience a ‘failure.’ What is exceptional, indeed unique, is what happened in eighteenth-century Europe.”

These developments reduced attachment to old ideas.

This book is the latest example of Mokyr's ability to explicate complex issues, illustrating his big-picture thesis with a myriad of fascinating details. He writes with clarity—enjoyable for the general reader as well as for the specialist in economic history. *A Culture of Growth* is a must-read for anyone interested in how Western society got where it is today and what this implies for the spread of technology in the global economy of the future.

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