

THE CYCLE OF IDEAS

In different rooms in different buildings in the same city the cleverest man in the world and the most enlightened man in the world began talking at the same time. The cleverest man in the world explained how the management of the budget, fiscal prudence and fruitful inequality based on merit could be achieved by adopting the ideas he proposed. The audience applauded loudly. The most enlightened man in the world told of the need for justice for all, for everyone to be equally free and for the even distribution of our common wealth. His audience listened in silence and his words quite literally froze in the air in front of him.

The cleverest man in the world was carried from the room on the shoulders of his audience and borne out into the street. His words were spread around the neighbouring streets. Talkers and listeners alike watched each others' faces light up as they shared his promises of prosperity and riches. People smiled and waved as he stepped into his large car and drove away.

The most enlightened man in the world stood still as his audience crept out in silence in small groups of two or three. They were slightly ashamed of one another. They tiptoed home and locked their doors behind them. The most enlightened man in the world was frozen to the spot. His words hung about him encased in frozen clouds in the frosty air. His skin was icy to the touch. Once everyone had left the building was closed up. Crooked pieces of wood were nailed across the windows and the door. Still he stood frozen. His words remained motionless in the icy air. He wore the same look of quiet benevolence as he had when he had been talking. Once the building was sealed, no-one visited it anymore.

For the following few days it was like a long public holiday. The government approved the words of the cleverest man in the world with rapture. Official decrees fluttered from the ministries agreeing wholeheartedly with everything the cleverest man in the world had said. The people reeled in the streets drunk on the possibility of their freedom. The few words spoken by the cleverest man in the world had created their freedom. The cleverest man in the world was feted wherever he went. They knew he was the cleverest man in the world because everyone wanted to hear everything he said. The intelligentsia sought his views on the meaning of life, the media sought his views on the prince's new wife, and the remainder sought his news from sunrise to night.

With freedom came the popular call for more choice. People demanded more opportunities to be more free. They insisted on everything staying open later, on wearing their clothes brighter and having their fun louder. The staid poetry of the adverb was lost as people sought the economy of bigger, bolder, brasher adjectives to describe their shiny new lives. No-one thought of the people who were required to work longer hours to make these things possible.

Then it was heard that the cleverest man in the world considered greed to be good. And the people struck themselves in the face and asked how they could have been so

stupid: of course greed was good. If people were greedy they would make more than they needed and so there would be more excess to share with other people. In this way everyone could become a little richer and have the chance to be a little greedier again. This creation of excess would lead to an excess of happiness and wealth for all.

Unfortunately, in practice many of the richest and greediest people decided that they did not want to share their excess with anyone else. The pursuit of greed became its own reward. And so there grew the first sign of division. A plate was smashed by a waitress in a restaurant when a rich patron would not pay a tip. This tiny piece of news alarmed everyone for reasons none of them could explain. The waitress was sacked. One month later she could still not find another job.

The excess of production had caused inflation. No-one could understand why. An excess ought to have made things cheaper. However, the rich and the greedy wanted to buy expensive trinkets to soak up their excess money. It became important to show their friends that they had spent a lot of money on their goods. And so prices stayed high. As a result there were some things reserved for the very rich and there were other things left for the very poor. No-one thought to compensate the poor for the injuries they suffered when their substandard goods broke: when they fell off broken chairs, crashed cheap cars, or were poisoned by mass-produced eggs. It was decided that that was the risk they took. What did they expect when they bought poor quality items? If they wanted safety they would have to learn to be greedy.

There grew a new understanding of property. The cleverest man in the world mentioned to someone at lunch that the greedy must be reassured that they could keep their property and the fruits of their labour. If they were not reassured they would not be greedy and no-one else would ever have the chance to become equally rich. And so, property was protected before all else. It was agreed by everyone that anyone who worked for an entrepreneur should be considered to be owned by that entrepreneur: the shaping of the employee was considered to be part of the entrepreneur's labour. With this stratification of society, nothing could have been more obvious. The greedy were known to make all the wealth and therefore it was only sensible that they should control everyone else.

Over time it became clear that the greedy would never share their wealth. So, those who were not rich worked for the rich people, hoping to get closer to the scraps from the table or to steal an idea and become magically rich themselves. No-one studied at university anymore and so all of the faculties closed down. Technical schools were opened for those who would work in industry or who would advise the rich. There was no call for culture anymore because it did not increase production nor generate wealth.

In time people began to forget how to talk to each other. Without a culture, without education and without the understanding of art which only schooling can bring, there was a growing frustration among the displaced because they were unable to articulate their feelings. At the same time they both desired the riches that were dangled in front of them and yet they felt that they lacked something important in their lives. Incidents of servants and employees revolting against their owners increased. More people were

made unemployed and so they took to stalking the opulent streets like feral cats – hissing at each other in their foreshortened vocabularies. On the pavements they scratched at each other and spoke only of their wants: meanwhile they were watched from the cars which drove past and which were full of people who spoke only about their money.

The streets became more regularly deserted as they filled with the misery of the unemployed and the indigent. The displaced became more frightening to the dwindling band of the affluent with the result that few people would walk the streets after dark, keeping instead to their cars and their gated mansion blocks.

When someone mentioned this phenomenon to the cleverest man in the world they mentioned that the displaced had begun “to seem more threatening and to shout louder”. The cleverest man in the world responded that the displaced had, more accurately, begun to shout more and more *loudly*. There was an adverb, he said, because the loudness of the hissing was attached to a verb and therefore took the adverb *loudly*, he said, and not the adjective *louder*.

His interlocutors fell silent. They said they did not understand what he had said. They asked him what the answer was to their spiralling inflation and the roving bands of beggars on the streets. He said he did not know the answer. They fell silent again.

When news of this event spread out among the people they all fell silent too. The displaced sensed that something had changed behind the gated walls of the affluent mansion blocks.

All stood still. Eventually people began to creep back out into the streets. No-one spoke. Some were bloated and fat in their gaudy clothes; the others were painfully pinched and thin in their colourless fastenings. Each looked at the other. They turned their faces away from the cleverest man in the world.

Unable to articulate their feelings they continued to move about the surreally still streets in silence.

One by one people came to the building where the most enlightened man in the world stood frozen to the spot. The entrance to the building was opened up and the crooked pieces of wood were removed. Slowly the room where the most enlightened man in the world had waited in suspension was filled again. The people’s bellies were empty and their hearts were heavy.

Together they waited silently. Eventually their breath and possibly even the warmth of their common desperation began to thaw out the most enlightened man in the world. He remained still. Finally his words began to melt out of their icy shells so that they could be heard again.

Let us let go of our riches, they said, and understand that it is better to be equal and to be free from want than to break our society down into classes based on greed and a mindless love of money.

The audience listened attentively. They nodded their heads and said that this must be so.