

Collegio Carlo Alberto

UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI TORINO

Inauguration Ceremony A.Y. 2020-21

Inaugural Lecture

“Attitudes, Aptitudes, and the Emergence of the Modern Economy”

by Joel Mokyr

October 21, 2020

An account of the event by Gregory Viscusi

Why did Europe sprint ahead of the rest of the world in the middle of the last millennium, and what lessons does that hold for technological and economic progress in the future ?

That was the question asked as the Collegio Carlo Alberto inaugurated its 2020-21 academic year with a lecture from Northwestern University professor Joel Mokyr.

The answer, Mokyr laid out in an hour-long presentation that took his audience around the globe and covered history, science, culture and economics, comes down to one word: knowledge. Or more precisely, a unique blend of attitudes – in other words, culture – and aptitudes – think skills – that developed partly by chance in an otherwise un-remarkable continent.

Due to Covid restrictions, the Nov. 10 inauguration was held on-line, which the Collegio’s President Giorgio Barba Navaretti called “a pity and a contradiction.” Collegio Carlo Alberto, a Turin-based teaching and research institution, is a joint initiative of the University of Turin and the Compagnia di San Paolo, the foundation that controls Italy’s largest bank.

Before Mokyr spoke, a minute of silence was held for Samuel Paty, the French middle-school teacher murdered after showing his students cartoons during a class on free speech.

So how did Europe, which Mokyr described as an “ignorant, impoverished, violent wasteland” around the year 1000, leap ahead of the Chinese and Islamic worlds, which at the time were much more literate and sophisticated?

There was an element of chance, Mokyr argued. The Black Death left a fragmented continent that encouraged competition between political entities. China’s warring regions might have gone that route, but were soon unified. The Ottoman Empire eventually dominated the Muslim world. Efforts by Charlemagne and Charles V to unify Europe luckily failed.

With competition came skepticism. Thanks to the Arabs, Europeans had access to classic Greek and Roman texts. But they began to realize the ancients hadn’t gotten everything right. In 1509, Niccolò Leonicensi wrote “The Errors of Pliny”. Francis Bacon and Galileo also wrote books disproving the

knowledge of the ancients. Even the bible came in for questioning. Heresy trials became pointless and died out.

“Sacred cows were being slaughtered left, right and center,” Mokyr said. “The traditionalists resisted but the moderns won this thing hands down.”

Meanwhile, voyages of discovery brought Europeans into contact with new technologies and new crops. Europeans might have been bigoted racist slaveowners but they never hesitated to adopt goods and ideas other countries. “Neophilia,” or love of the new, swept the continent.

In 1400, China was probably still ahead of Europe in domains ranging from shipbuilding to metallurgy. But when the Jesuits arrived in 1582, Europe’s advance was already notable.

China might have still had better artisans. But Europe had another advantage. Rather than tool away alone, Europe’s artisans were sought out by scientists who believed in practical applications for their work.

René Réaumur (1683-1757) was a mathematician but was interested in steel, ropes, pesticides, paper making, and weather forecasting, making him a typical “industrial enlightenment man.” James Watt’s inventions saw the day because he had iron-master John Wilkinson to turn them into reality.

And while European states may have competed and even gone to war, there was a free flow of ideas and books across the continent.

Will progress continue? We certainly need it, Mokyr insisted, to deal with environmental and health challenges that have been revealed by the Covid epidemic. But the lesson of history is that technical advances also require liberty and mobility, tolerance and dissent, as well as a free press and the rule of law.

Nuclear weapons show the need for institutions to keep pace with technological change, and the trends in recent decades are not encouraging with freedom and human rights in retreat around the world, he said.

Although Mokyr ended on that somber note, Naveretti was inspired to suggest that “skepticism, openness, neophilia” should be the Collegio’s new motto.

Gregory Viscusi is a freelance writer and television commentator who has reported on European politics and economics for three decades for leading U.S. media such as Bloomberg News, Dow Jones, and France24.