

# SUMMARY

## HOW MUMBO JUMBO CONQUERED THE WORLD

FRANCIS WHEEN



# **Summary of “How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World” by Francis Wheen**

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Learn about the short history of modern delusions.

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# Introduction

In September 1784, a Berlin magazine asked German intellectuals to answer the question, “What is Enlightenment?” Of those intellectuals, the philosopher Immanuel Kant rose to the challenge and answered, “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without direction of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolve and courage to use it without another’s guidance. *Sapere aude!* Dare to know! That is the motto of enlightenment.” Kant believed that humanity was on the verge of a revolution of thought. Suddenly, Enlightenment became both an ideology and an attitude; it was a “presumption that certain truths about mankind, society, and the natural world could be perceived, whether through deduction or observation, and the discovery of these truths would transform the quality of life.” When it comes to Enlightenment, the many diverse thinkers all agree on one idea: that knowledge is indeed power. For 200 years, the philosophies set forth by the Enlightenment largely dominated society with secular democracy, the understanding of the natural world, and the transformation of historical and scientific study. Today, however, we are moving further away from these ideas. For instance, a British prime minister who styles himself as a progressive modernizer defends the teaching of creationism rather than evolution in school biology. And according to Wheen, humane values of the Enlightenment have been abandoned and betrayed. But why does it even matter? Well, when we look at history and examine politicians like Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, we see just how destructive their policies and how successful their ideologies would be.

# The Rise of Neoliberalism in Politics

One of the most obvious examples of mumbo-jumbo is the political idea that only aims to keep the rich on top; meanwhile the poor only fall deeper into poverty in a never-ending cycle. But why is this? Simply put, the adoption of *neoliberalism*. Regardless of your political beliefs, mainstream Western politics has pushed this belief that free markets are the path to economic prosperity, not government intervention.

This idea rose to popularity in the 1980s when “supply-side” economics began to take over Western economies. However, supply-side economics was simply a disguise for the unfavorable “trickle-down” theories which stated that if the rich get richer, then the wealth would trickle down within the society to the lower and middle-class people. This philosophy teaches us that economies thrive when the rich get richer and is far better at redistributing wealth than the government. However, neoliberal policies that entered the UK and US in the 1980s have become anything but prosperous.

In the years following the end of World War II, the UK created a welfare state in which they set up a social safety net to prevent future economic disasters. But in 1980, Milton Friedman met with Margaret Thatcher to promote his new book *Free to Choose* in which he advocated for “the elimination of all government interference in free enterprise, from minimum wage to social welfare programs.” Friedman then cited the economies of Japan, South Korea, and Malaysia to prove that prosperity was dependent on allowing the “invisible guiding hand” of the free market to hold the tiller. He also expressed that what happened in the UK would influence what happens in the US and that Thatcher’s election, “could mark the turning away from the welfare state back to the free-market economies of the nineteenth century.”

Soon after Thatcher was applying Friedmanite principles, she began restricting the money supply and cutting public spending. As a result,

inflation rose from 9 percent to more than 20 percent during her first year. Additionally, interest and unemployment rates surged, bringing the unemployment rate from 5.7 percent to 13.7 percent. Britain's manufacturing industry also became battered by the recession. The news of Thatcher's economy failed to reach the United States and Americans became distracted by the emergence of the old Hollywood actor and hero, Ronald Reagan.

Reagan entered the presidential primaries of 1980 promising to improve the economy by cutting taxes, increasing defense spending, and still balancing the budget by 1983. Reagan devised the plan using the formula of Arthur Laffer, a colleague of Milton Friedman at the University of Chicago. Laffer created the "Laffer Curve," which demonstrated how a government could increase its revenue by *reducing* tax rates. By reducing rates, the rich would no longer attempt to seek out tax-dodging rules, and the lower rate would stimulate economic growth. As a result, national revenue would continue to expand. His plan became known as "Reaganomics" and was not exactly popular among economists.

For example, Professor Patrick Minford advised Margaret Thatcher that the Laffer Curve was nonsense. Similarly, Reagan's Republican rival George Bush mocked supply-side theories as "voodoo economics." However, just a few months later, Bush accepted the bid to become Reagan's running mate, and in 1981, the duo began working their voodoo magic. Reagan slashed tax rates from 70 percent to 50 percent, and later, to 28 percent. "Tax cuts for the rich were central to the supply-side superstition." So what were the results? During Reagan's eight years in the White House, the federal deficit soared from \$900 billion to more than \$3 trillion.

Furthermore, by the start of 1981, a recession was already underway and unemployment rose above 10 percent for the first time since the 1930s. Wage levels dropped as jobs were moved offshore to cheaper labor markets like China, affecting the middle and working-class citizens of America.

# The Rise and Mumbo-Jumbo of Self-Help Books

Ever wondered when the self-help phenomenon took off or why it became so successful? As neoliberal economic policies began destroying the economies of the United States and the United Kingdom, more people than ever found themselves out of work and severely depressed. How could they get back on their feet? How could they create success in their own lives? Enter: self-help books. Millions of people were desperately seeking new avenues of success and self-help books were the way to get there.

When it comes to these books, however, many best-selling books simply sell ideas that everyone already knows; many are hardly groundbreaking. Disguised with metaphors and inspiring language, self-help books have been successful at making millions of dollars without publishing any original thoughts. For example, take a look at the original self-help superstar, Tony Robbins, who created a \$480 million business telling people that life is like following the recipe for chocolate cake! In his best-selling title, *Unlimited Power*, Robbins simply states that to be successful and learn a new skill, you should follow the example set by someone else. In other words, follow their recipe. Haven't teachers been teaching us this concept since grade school?

So how did Robbins' ideas become so successful? You see, success in the modern world isn't just about the words you use, it's how you present them to make them more appealing. Of course, Robbins isn't the only successful self-help guru that has successfully monetized seemingly average ideas. Other self-help gurus like Deepak Chopra make a whopping \$20 million a year by selling books and hosting spiritual retreats. His ideas, however, are far but rational. For instance, Chopra claims that aging is a "learned process" that we adopt by watching other people age. He believes success can be based on the same principles; in other words, you can get rich by following in the steps of those who are already rich.



Therefore, followers of Chopra mistakenly believe that they need to continue buying his books to learn his tips and tricks for finding success. Clearly, his premise of “learning from the rich” means that he has created a business off seemingly ordinary ideas. Nonetheless, Chopra has earned a celebrity following, including names like Michael Jackson and Hillary Clinton who only help push Chopra’s bogus ideas.

# The Mumbo-Jumbo Surrounding End of History Theories

The rhetoric of self-help gurus and enthusiasts has proven to be incredibly successful, so it's no surprise that other areas, like academics, have adopted the same style. For instance, academics who attempt to educate society about the "end of history" have risen to fame because of the way they present their ideas, not because their ideas have any real merit. As a whole, theories surrounding the end of history are grounded in appealing to the emotions of people, not facts.

For example, let's take a look at Francis Fukuyama, the scholar who published his best-selling book *The End of History and the Last Man* in 1992. In the book, Fukuyama discusses the theory of Western neoliberal capitalism and how it is both the dominant and final political force in the world. At the time the book was published, Western media was largely interested in the many analyses regarding the end of the Cold War; however, Fukuyama was able to captivate society based on his ideas regarding how little has changed sociopolitically since as early as 1806. He even went so far as to argue that Nazism and Communism had little influence on the way the world functions.

Of course, Fukuyama isn't the only author to present such a drastic end of history idea. In 1996, Samuel Huntington published a best-selling book titled *The Clash of Civilizations* in which Huntington claimed that future conflicts would be based on cultural differences versus political and economic differences. To support his argument, Huntington breaks up humanity into seven or eight civilizations. For instance, he labels Greece as a Slavic-Orthodox civilization whereas most people would argue Greece is a Western Civilization. He makes the argument, however, because of Greece's military dictatorship in the 1960s and 70s. On the other hand, he doesn't explain what makes Spain a westernized country despite its decades-long ruling under the dictator, Francisco Franco.

All in all, “end of history” and “clash of civilization” theories attract media attention by using colorful language and rhetoric aimed to get people interested and buy into their ideas. However, these theories are all a bunch of mumbo-jumbo that aren’t based on facts or reality.

# The Dangers of Poststructuralist Ideas

Since the rise of post-structuralism in the 1980s, people have been questioning its ideas and concepts, wondering exactly what post-structuralism means. By the early 1990s, post-structuralism had become widely accepted in the field of academia and began its insertion into society through humanitarian departments across the United States and Europe. So what is post-structuralism? Simply put, post-structuralism is based on the concept that meaning isn't stable. In other words, ideas and concepts are constantly changing as they evolve with the times. This argues against the structuralist idea that meaning is the result of material factors like social context.

If you're still confused, let's explain further. Post-structuralism believes that every system of thought or organization is subject to infinite interpretation as if each is a text that is meant to be read and interpreted in many ways. For example, concrete fields like chemistry should be studied and understood in the same way we study fictional texts. To further their ideas, post-structuralists purposely use complex language with ambiguous meanings, like "hegemony," "signification," and "knowledges" in the plural. By using vague terms like this, poststructuralists can interpret the world however they want. So what's the danger behind such a vague concept?

Well, opening the world up to infinite interpretations has proven to be quite dangerous. For example, take French philosopher Paul De Man, who wrote anti-Semitic articles in the 1940s. Poststructuralist, Jacques Derrida, openly and controversially defended the work of De Man, stating that his writing could be open to more than one interpretation. This meant that while his work could be seen as anti-Semitic, it could also be seen as being *against* anti-Semitism.

Today, post-structuralism has created a dangerous world in which history has become overly analyzed and overinterpreted. Another example of this is that of David Irving, the best-selling historian who began analyzing the

Holocaust as if it were a text that could be interpreted in several ways. One of those ways was interpreted as if the Holocaust never even happened. This controversial interpretation led to post-structuralists claiming that particular tragedies, like the Holocaust, were the exception to the rule of their philosophy.

# The Danger of Progressive Politics

In 1997, leftist British politician, Tony Blair, led the Labour Party to victory after campaigning for nuclear disarmament and the reversal of Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal economic policies. However, after becoming elected as the Labour leader, Blair's economic policies suddenly became the same as Thatcher's. Blair began taking the Labour party in a different direction, even going so far as calling it "New Labour," and began adopting new positions and policies that went completely against the ideas based on his campaign.

For example, Blair promised to raise income taxes on the rich to pay for public infrastructure. However, he also cleverly implied that he would only reduce them if he could. Soon, Blair's New Labour party began backing all the policies surrounding the free-market they once opposed in the 80s. This change led to Blair's adoption of a new political position known as the "third way." In other words, third-way parties are those that use language that appeals to both the right and left wings while calling their values "progressive." In 1994, Demos turned to a marketing company to research the issues important to young voters; thus, the third-way political position began.

The results found that British youths were uninterested in core socio-economic needs; instead, they were interested in concepts surrounding "connectedness," "empathy," and "sexuality." These findings allowed the Labour party to structure their rhetoric and language around these concepts and move toward "progressive" values that were largely abstract versus concrete. Shifting the rhetoric allowed Blair to appeal to both parties as he argued contradictory policy positions, like claiming that "entrepreneurial zeal" will produce "social justice." While his policies seemed progressive at first, he was actually backing the same neoliberal ideas as the Conservatives before him; the idea that a free-market will lead to a distribution of wealth that is equal for all.

# Where to Go From Here

Now that you've learned all about how mumbo-jumbo has conquered the world, where do we go from here? Well, before we can change the future, we must look to the past. History teaches us that civilizations have always evolved through the sharing of ideas and cultures. Even something as simple as the existence of food was created through the sharing of cultures. For example, when you think of fish and chips, what place do you think of? You likely think of Britain as the dish has long been a part of classic British cuisine. However, the dish would have never been possible without the existence of cultural interchange.

You see, potatoes were brought to Europe from the Americas in the sixteenth century, and Europeans adopted the Jewish community's tradition of frying fish. So fish and chips came from the mixture of several cultures and ideas! Similarly, we can say the same for the neoconservative dichotomy of "Islam vs. the West." However, the West has been adopting the ideas of Islamic people for centuries. For example, the West only experienced the Enlightenment of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries because of the Islamic world's vast knowledge in mathematics and astronomy that they shared with the people of Europe in the Middle Ages.

The founding fathers of the United States were also inspired by the Enlightenment philosophy of reason. Because of this, they separated church and state which allowed for both the freedom of religion without persecution as well as the right to live without religion at all. By founding the country on these principles, the founding fathers hoped to foster the people's right to free thought and rational debate and create a tolerant society. This philosophy was adopted in opposition to the irrational and oppressive governance of Europe.

In other words, the government of the USA was founded on principles that challenged the irrationality of Europe's. Therefore, we must challenge

irrational policies and the mumbo-jumbo of today's society by challenging whatever emerges; otherwise, humanity will be doomed to suffer the consequences.



# Final Summary

As we move into a modern society, we become increasingly ruled by fear and irrational philosophies. Unfortunately, what began with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan's "trickle-down-theories" has now become a detriment to economies as their influences have infiltrated into more than just politics. Because of their policies, self-help gurus came on the rise to help pull people out of the depths of their depression and unemployment. Ironically, their "get-rich schemes" hardly offer anything new or of value. From there, books regarding the end of history began to dominate the market as authors capitalized on rhetoric that would gain the interest of the masses. Next, Wheen discusses the dangers of progressive politics and post-structuralism in which language is manipulated and vague to become open to interpretation. At the end of the day, Wheen believes that if humanity ever wants to save themselves from a dark reality, then cultures must learn from one another and embrace each other's differences.



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