

The modern age of unreason

Published: April 6, 2026, 7:00 am

Is the Enlightenment being reversed? Are we going backwards in our thinking? Will Trump take us back to the Stone Age, as he threatens, in the case of Iran? That thought has been troubling me. It is a large claim, but if it is right, then it goes to the heart of the crisis we now face.

The Enlightenment and neoliberalism

To understand the issue, we need to be clear that the Enlightenment and neoliberal thinking, which has become the hegemonic form of Western political-economic philosophy for the last 45 years, are not the same thing. They are not even close.

The Enlightenment, emerging in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was an intellectual and moral project. It asserted that reason, evidence and debate should replace deference to authority. It argued that all people have equal moral worth (although I am all too aware that early proponents had decidedly limited views on who might qualify for such treatment). It insisted that power must justify itself. From those ideas flowed democracy, human rights, the rule of law and the expectation of accountability. These things then underpinned the supposed Western ideals which were taught as the values of the society to which we were told we should at least aspire when I was young.

Neoliberalism, by contrast, is a much later political and economic doctrine. It is a late twentieth-century project that sought to reassert the primacy of markets, reduce the role of the state, and recast individuals as primarily economic actors.

The problem we face is not that neoliberalism is the Enlightenment. It is that neoliberalism has now contributed to the Enlightenment's failure, and has done so in several ways.

First, neoliberalism reduced the apparent richness of Enlightenment thinking (and I stress again that I am aware of its failings around issues such as equality) to a narrow economic caricature. Where the Enlightenment emphasised reason and human

flourishing (at least for some), neoliberalism substituted market logic and price signals. Human beings became consumers. Citizenship was hollowed out.

Second, neoliberalism stripped out the ethical core of the Enlightenment. The idea of equal moral worth, and respect for the "other", [as seen in the work of Adam Smith](#), **was subordinated to the idea of market value. Those without economic power were, in effect, treated as having a lesser claim on society.**

Third, neoliberalism weakened the institutions that the Enlightenment helped to create. Public services, democratic accountability, and the capacity of the state to act in the collective interest were all eroded in the name of efficiency.

Fourth, neoliberalism denied complexity. It insisted that markets could solve problems that are, in reality, social, political and ecological. In doing so, it allowed those problems to accumulate.

The consequence is that neoliberalism has not fulfilled the Enlightenment promise. It has undermined it.

And that failure has consequences.

From neoliberalism's failure to an Enlightenment backlash

When a dominant system fails, people look for alternatives. That is what we are now seeing. But instead of a return to the Enlightenment's core principles, the reaction is often in the opposite direction.

First, there is a retreat from reason. Complex problems are met not with deeper analysis, but with perpetually simplistic answers that are demeaning in scale.

Second, there is a retreat from equality. Hierarchies of belonging are reasserted. Some people are deemed more deserving than others.

Third, there is a retreat from accountability. Power now demands loyalty once more, rather than justification.

Fourth, there is a retreat from evidence. Belief is substituted for fact.

In other words, the failure of neoliberalism is not automatically producing a renewal of the Enlightenment. It is, in many cases, leading to its rejection. That is the real danger.

A new age of unreason?

The result is what I would describe as an age of unreason.

Public discourse is becoming more hostile, more polarised and less informed. Nuance is disappearing. Debate is being replaced by assertion. In that environment, the institutions and norms that depend on reason begin to weaken.

The warnings of [Thomas Hobbes](#) begin to sound less like history and more like a prognosis. **Hobbes suggested that without shared rules and mutual trust, life becomes “nasty, brutish and short.” His point was that social order is not automatic. It is constructed. And it can be lost. We should not assume that we are immune from that possibility.**

The normalisation of indifference

We can already see the consequences.

Policies that inflict harm are being normalised, deliberately.

People are being pushed back into danger of many sorts: social, economic, and also physical.

Communities are being displaced.

And all too obviously, war is treated as a viable option.

This reflects a deeper problem. Neoliberalism, for all its claims to rationality, embedded a profound indifference to care. It treated human needs as secondary to market outcomes.

When that indifference combines with more authoritarian political tendencies, it produces something darker: a politics that is willing to disregard human life altogether.

It is in this direction that we are travelling. That is why I have suggested that neoliberalism and fascism can converge in their outcomes, even if their origins differ. Both can produce systems in which human well-being is not the priority.

A crisis of choice

It would be comforting to think that this has simply happened to us, but it has not.

We have, collectively, made choices that have led us here.

We have accepted narratives that are convenient rather than true.

We have tolerated growing inequality.

We have allowed democratic institutions to weaken.

Of course, those choices are shaped by power. Some have far more influence than

others.

But the direction of travel is not inevitable. It has been chosen. And that means it can be changed.

What follows

If neoliberalism has contributed to the failure of the Enlightenment, then the task is not to abandon the Enlightenment. It is to recover it and develop it.

That means, first, restoring the role of evidence in public decision-making.

Second, it means rebuilding democratic accountability so that power is once again answerable.

Third, we must reassert the principle of equal moral worth in how we organise our economy and society, and this time, no one should be excluded.

Fourth, it is vital to recognise that markets cannot deliver these outcomes on their own. The state has a central role in shaping the conditions for human well-being.

Fifth, care must be placed at the centre of economic thinking, rather than being treated as an afterthought.

These are not abstract goals. They are practical necessities.

A future still open

There is, then, still the possibility of a different future, but it will not arrive by accident.

The Enlightenment was a project. It was made. It required effort, conflict and change. If it is now being undermined, that too is the result of human action, which means the response must also be deliberate.

We can continue down the current path, into greater division, greater instability and greater harm, or we can choose to reassert the values that made progress possible in the first place.

That choice is still open. But it will not remain so indefinitely. Trump and others are seeking to close doors. Will we engage in the struggle to keep them open?