

*Out of Our Minds: What We Think and How We Came to Think It.* Felipe Fernández-Armesto. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019. ISBN: 9780520331075.

In *Out of Our Minds*, Felipe Fernández-Armesto proposes that the human capacity for generating ideas and taking steps to realize them explains how human societies have changed from Paleolithic forager bands to the present population in the billions. To explain these changes in the human condition over 250,000 years or more, Fernández-Armesto argues that ideas are the cause; they are “the starting point of everything else in history” (IX). While some will find the singular focus in *Out of Our Minds* on ideas a less convincing explanation for historical change than transdisciplinary approaches that include the natural world, this work is an insightful investigation into our mental creativity, where it came from, and how it has affected our history.

Fernández-Armesto casts the foundation for ideas in imagination, a kind of emergent property born from the conjunction of memory and anticipation, an unintended beneficial consequence of evolution. While natural selection endowed us and other animals with the abilities to know the objective past and future, (consider simply the extraordinary abilities of your cat or dog), only humans have imagination, the ability “to see what is not there” (20). Imagination together with abstract language allowed ideas to flourish and shape our world. Fernández-Armesto’s approach to this challenging conceptual framework is primarily historical. The sciences, natural and social, with their focus on “impersonal forces”—evolution, climate, demographics, economics, etc.—sit mostly in the margins. Rather, ideas are described here as something almost miraculous, untethered from evolutionary drives in *Homo sapiens* to survive, reproduce, and cooperate. “Almost everything we do starts in our minds,” Fernández-Armesto explains, “with reimagined worlds that we then try to construct in reality” (27).

Fernández-Armesto’s focus on ideas departs from the transdisciplinary approach of other scholars and public intellectuals who have recently provided a big picture approach for educated

non-academic readers on the question “why is the world the way it is?” Among those best known to us in the world history business, perhaps, are Jared Diamond (*Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, 1997); Robert Wright (*Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny*, 2000); Yuval Harari (*Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, 2015); and David Christian (*Origin Story: A Big History of Everything*, 2018). While Fernández-Armesto argues that ideas drive history within a context and limitations defined by the natural world, Diamond, Wright, Harari, and Christian explain changes and continuities by placing humans squarely in the processes of natural history. For the latter authors, “ideas” are enmeshed in explanations with transdisciplinary roots in genetic and cultural evolution—Wright’s nonzero sum cooperation, Harari’s fictions, Christian’s collective learning—and in the material world—Diamond’s environmental and geographical basis for inequality. Fernández-Armesto acknowledges these “impersonal forces,” but holds ideas apart as the engine of historical change. His thesis is two-pronged: “ideas, rather than impersonal forces, make the world” (27). He shouts from the pages that “we have ideas because we think them up, not thanks to any force outside ourselves” (31). From the Paleolithic to the present, the chronological emergence of those ideas shapes the contours of this erudite, interpretive history.

From the foraging era forward, *Out of Our Minds* is periodized not unlike a traditional approach to Western Civilization with a vibrant thread of world history running through it: the birth of agriculture and first civilizations, the Mediterranean of the Greeks and Romans, the emergence of universal religions and philosophies across Asia, Medieval Europe, the shift in innovation from China to Europe represented by the Renaissance, Scientific Revolution, and Enlightenment, and the waxing and waning of the hegemonic European moment in world history during the early modern and modern periods. While the historical chronology will be familiar to

readers, the command of material is astonishing. The interpretive insights are original and delivered in an elegant and precise narrative punctuated with beautifully succinct turns of phrase, self-reflective windows into Fernández-Armesto's thinking, and more than a few moments when you may reach for a dictionary.

Following the explanation in chapter one on how human imagination generates ideas, chapters two and three discuss the foundation of human ideas in the eras of the Paleolithic, Neolithic, and first civilizations. The astoundingly influential emergence and development of the universalist world religions and philosophies are the topics of chapters four and five. The bodies of ideas that ushered in the modern world—the Renaissance, Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment—occupy chapters six and seven. The final three chapters delve into the certainties and uncertainties of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A prospect on the future of ideas concludes the book.

Fernández-Armesto emphasizes human agency through ideas as the root cause of the most significant changes in human history. He reminds us that at some point in the deep past, predecessors of *Homo sapiens* developed the idea of the supernatural and thus enlivened humanity with a skeptical attitude toward the material world which early humans first attempted to shape through symbolic art, rituals, and shamanism. Why did our ancestors continue then to live as foragers for some 240,000 years? “Because they liked things as they were ...” Fernández-Armesto oversimplifies, but, faced with climatic instability (76), some foragers, avaricious leaders among them, adopted agriculture, “an idea people thought of, not an involuntary twitch or an inescapable response” (81). Like agriculture, according to Fernández-Armesto, the first civilizations were an idea before they were a reality. Once realized, the environment of city life and expanding states produced new sets of ideas that had a long reach in human history: divine

kingship, binary cosmologies and monist universals, writing, codified law, immortality, and an illusory material world.

In the discussion of the first universalist faiths and philosophies, Fernández-Armesto does not focus on sages' biographies but on the new ideas which continue to influence our lives: morality, ethics, monotheism, creation narratives, linear time, rationalism, empiricism, skepticism, and political theories like democracy and the ancient forerunner to fascism, legalism. The superiority of ideas over impersonal forces in shaping human history is particularly emphasized in the discussion of the Renaissance, Scientific Revolution, and Enlightenment. Fernández-Armesto suggests that a materialist interpretation cannot account for the waves of human creativity from the 1300s to the 1700s when the Little Ice Age and Black Death diminished productivity and more than decimated the European population. Regardless of the desperate material conditions, he argues, ideas proliferated and prevailed: humanism, Machiavellian realism, inductive reasoning, political liberty, economic freedom, and Romanticism, just to name a few.

Fernández-Armesto casts the story of ideas in the modern period as a dynamic juxtaposition of certainties and uncertainties. Nineteenth-century ideas—an inevitable trajectory of progress, scientism, nationalism, evolution, Marxism, militarism—appeared as immutable certainties anchored by the laws of nature. Abandoning reason for explanations based on “vast impersonal forces,” Fernández-Armesto argues, led to the disastrous consequences of political violence, entrenched racism, eugenics, and the early twentieth century's horrific global wars and genocide. In a wonderful chapter devoted to the first decade and a half of the twentieth century, Fernández-Armesto argues that nothing undermined nineteenth-century certainties more than Einstein's theory of relativity and the cultural environment of relativism created by new ideas in

philosophy, mathematics, linguistics, anthropology, psychology, and art. The remainder of the twentieth century is characterized by the epistemological tug-of-war between ideas of certainty and uncertainty and the collapse of objectivity. How do we find our feet amid competing ideas: existentialism, eastern philosophies, reasserted Christian and Islamic fundamentalism; Keynes's welfare state versus Hayek's conservatism; the beneficial promises of technology and the moral conundrums they raise? Fernández-Armesto answers that a healthy acceptance of uncertainty fuels our creative thinking as we search for answers. False certainty is a death knell; so too is a homogenized global culture. He sees the growing interconnectedness of human societies not as a path towards a critical mass of evermore creativity that will lead to change, as do Christian and Wright, for example, but as the loss of the cross-cultural fuel that has generated the most significant creative thinking in human history. Pluralism, he argues, acceptance of a spectrum of human values, is essential for peace and cooperation in a multi-cultural world and is the best way to avoid our own demise.

*Out of Our Minds* is rich in content and interpretive brio that will appeal to general readers interested in the history of ideas. World historians will find *Out of Our Minds* thoroughly engaging, and useful for their teaching, especially for provoking thoughtful arguments on historical causality with graduate students and advanced undergraduates.

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