

# Reasons to be fearful

**By Ian Bell**

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**Book review:** *How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered The World – A Short History Of Modern Delusions* by Francis Wheen (Fourth Estate, £16.99)

**W**hen the age of reason ended, most people were too stupid to notice, or too busy believing claptrap. Francis Wheen, fortunately for us, was not among them. His journalism has long been a rearguard action against the collective retreat into fantasy and superstition, political or religious. Here he administers a purgative dose to all those who peddle cultural snake oil.

How did we get to the 21st century more or less intact as a species while giving credence to so much utter tosh? You name it and, these days, someone believes it. Faith and gullibility are now interchangeable. Cults are rife, homicide in the name of belief commonplace, and sheer fantasy a “core value”. America has loosed a born-again bonehead on the world while Britain entertains an effortlessly sanctimonious premier who has yet to master the commandment that covers fibbing. And neither Bush nor Blair is the worst of it.

Wheen believes that we entered the dark ages in 1979, when Thatcher shed the carapace of decency and the Ayatollah Khomeini replaced the CIA’s tame psychopath in Iran. It is a useful thesis – the darkness at noon still lingers – but entirely arguable, much like the kick-off times for the renaissance or the industrial revolution. Thatcher did not spring from nothing; like Reagan, she had intellectual ancestry in the “vast right-wing conspiracy” that has been on a mission from God since Marx first threw down the gauntlet. Khomeini, equally, spent a very long time plotting his deviant theocracy before the Shah’s little empire imploded. It is difficult to carbon-date this virus.

Wheen is acute, for all that, in diagnosing its nature. How did we get from the optimism of the Enlightenment to an era in which New Age twaddle and Old Testament tyrannies predominate? In large part, says Wheen, because “the Imam and the grocer’s daughter” represented “two powerful messianic creeds” with much in common, but creeds whose conflicts now menace the peace of the world and the emancipation wrought by the Enlightenment revolution.

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As a biographer of Karl Marx should, he begins his own assault on quackery with an analysis of ideologically-driven economics. This is appropriate, since no other modern phenomenon has so completely combined the appearance of intellectual plausibility with voodoo superstitions. What is the greatest myth of the age, after all? That “the market” is rational. Why is the myth sustained? Because it makes possible any degree of greed and offers an excuse for any sort of anti-democratic behaviour.

“You can’t buck the markets,” Thatcher said, muddling her consonants. “You must roll back the state,” said her mentor, Friedrich Hayek. Even the semi-comatose US President Ronald Reagan could articulate his driving political belief. “What I want to see above all,” he said, “is that this remains a country where someone can always get rich.” What the rest of us saw was boom, bust, fraud, a “rolled-back” state exerting itself to crush miners and air traffic controllers, the rich getting vastly richer, and what When calls “crackpot schemes” to levy a poll tax or privatise the planet.

The point in all this is the sleep of reason. When adduces evidence from what he calls the “can-do literature” that litters the bookshop carousels of international airports. They may as well be alchemical texts for all the rational advice they contain, but “executives” across the world gobble them up. This audience, in turn, blends seamlessly with the dopes who have made Deepak Chopra a vastly rich, if entirely unintelligible, “guru”. His teachings are gormless rubbish, yet a supposedly serious corporation like Atlantic Richfield had him on the payroll for years “to teach employees how to find their inner space”. (Between their ears, presumably).

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