

Dark Matter

Brian Ridley

The credit crunch and the staggering amount of national debt planned inspires us to ask 'What is economics, an art or a science?' Surely not the latter or, if so, what a poor science it must be not to have predicted the current financial turmoil. But no worse, perhaps, than the science of the environment, where there is little consensus about global warming and its origin, except among its lay aficionados. There is a common feature here — the complexity of the system — of global economics on the one hand and of global climate on the other. So if the study of climate counts as a science, which of course it does, economics must surely be a science, even though in both cases the power of gut feelings is not inconsiderable. That power is very evident in the promotion of overviews — Keynesianism, monetarism, carbon dioxide the culprit — which, being gut feeling, rather tilt the balance in favour of art, in spite of those impressive differential equations and those sophisticated computer algorithms. It is a dark matter to all but the deeply insightful minds of our intelligentsia, who see the cause of the credit crunch as originating in the internal contradictions of American capitalism (indeed of any kind of capitalism) and the cause of global warming in mankind's profligate need for energy. If so, we are doubly fortunate here in the UK in having a government who not only agree with this analysis, but are eager to solve the problems by abolishing capitalism altogether and teaching people to enjoy the undoubted virtues of living in the dark. Think of the savings in the National Health Service with power cuts replacing those of overpaid surgeons; think of the benefits in making that defining feature of the present administration, keep-in-the-dark education, truly in the dark.

The government has made a promising start by nationalising the odd bank, but there is a long way to go. Subsidising the building of wind turbines is a subtle part of the whole scheme. Capitalists, non-British at that, own the conventional power stations and nuclear plants that produce our energy. What better way of reducing their grip than to invent an ineffective form of energy that no self-respecting capitalist would invest in, and then to demonise the production of real energy? If physics can invent the concept of dark energy to solve its cosmic problem, what is to deny the concept of renewable energy in the context of UK's need? And the demonising of real energy can be safely left to those intellectuals whose practice at demonising America will stand them in good stead.

Whatever the results of the dark-energy policy of the present government, future generations, probably living abroad, will have plenty of reasons to look back on this time as a dark age. It scarcely needs remarking that we live in a levelling period. In education, media studies are considered more relevant than classics; physics, chemistry and biology are economically collapsed into 'Science'. In TV quizzes, commonly regarded as highbrow, the categories of questions such as 'Music' and 'Arts and Books', test knowledge not of the rich cultural heritage of music, art and literature, but instead of modern pop and who married whom last year. We live in the dark age of the common man, whose tastes dominate everything. Apart from those tastes, his lot has improved immeasurably over the years, at least in the West. He is free; he lives in a democracy; his health and well-being are looked after; he is not allowed to starve; he is surrounded by technological miracles. He does not ask how it all came about. If taught, he would be told that it is his inalienable right. In the current system it is unlikely he would be told the truth. The fact is that man has been raised from savagery and servitude to the present bountiful level by the thoughts and actions of countless individuals of genius. It has not happened by magic, nor has it been the action of a mysterious force called human rights. It has come about through the sweat and labour of men and women endowed with talent beyond the norm. Such are the elite of humanity.

It is truly a dark age that regards egalitarianism with more favour than the encouragement of talent and genius. Grammar schools are denigrated as élitist. Of course they are! That is their point. In the real world there is no such thing as equality. Individuals with talents far above the common level will always exist; but in the present inimical climate, those living amongst us today are likely to drop out of public life in favour of merely looking on. Can this explain the dearth of talent so evident in parliament, in our financial institutions, the BBC and in local government? Or perhaps they have emigrated, as they did in the brain-drain of the last dark age. Or, like the Rosicrucians of the 17th century, who opted for secrecy in the threat of the Inquisition, they have formed a powerful secret society in the face of the prevailing anti-élitism, dreaming of Holy Blood and Holy Grail. Or maybe they are exactly those deeply insightful intellectuals we have mentioned before. Dark matter, indeed!

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