6

Building Pyramids

THE AGRICULTURAL REVOLUTION IS ONE of the most controversial events in history. Some partisans proclaim that it set humankind prosperity and progress. Others insist that it led to perdition. This was the turning point, they say, where Sapiens cast off its intimate sym nature and sprinted towards greed and alienation. Whichever direction the road led, there was no going back. Farming enabled populatio increase so radically and rapidly that no complex agricultural society could ever again sustain itself if it returned to hunting and gathering 10,000 before the transition to agriculture, earth was home to about 5–8 million nomadic foragers. By the first century only 1–2 million fora remained (mainly in Australia, America and Africa), but their numbers were dwarfed by the world's 250 million

The vast majority of farmers lived in permanent settlements; only a few were nomadic shepherds. Settling down caused most people' shrink dramatically. Ancient hunter-gatherers usually lived in territories covering many dozens and even hundreds of square miles. 'Hom entire territory, with its hills, streams, woods and open sky. Peasants, on the other hand, spent most of their days working a small field or and their domestic lives centred on a cramped structure of wood, stone or mud, measuring no more than a few dozen feet – the house. T peasant developed a very strong attachment to this structure. This was a far-reaching revolution, whose impact was psychological as mu architectural. Henceforth, attachment to 'my house' and separation from the neighbours became the psychological hallmark of a much m centred creature.

The new agricultural territories were not only far smaller than those of ancient foragers, but also far more artificial. Aside from the use of fire, hunter-gatherers made few deliberate changes to the lands in which they roamed. Farmers, on the other hand, lived in artificial islands that they laboriously carved out of the surrounding wilds. They cut down forests, dug canals, cleared fields, built houses, ploughed furrows, an fruit trees in tidy rows. The resulting artificial habitat was meant only for humans and 'their' plants and animals, and was often fenced off by wa and hedges. Farmer families did all they could to keep out wayward weeds and wild animals. If such interlopers made their way in, they w out. If they persisted, their human antagonists sought ways to exterminate them. Particularly strong defences were erected around the h the dawn of agriculture until this very day, billions of humans armed with branches, swatters, shoes and poison sprays have waged relen against the diligent ants, furtive roaches, adventurous spiders and misguided beetles that constantly infiltrate the human domicile.

For most of history these man-made enclaves remained very small, surrounded by expanses of untamed nature. The earth's surface about 200 million square miles, of which 60 million is land. As late as AD 1400, the vast majority of farmers, along with their plants and a clustered together in an area of just 4.25 million square miles – 2 per cent of the planet's Everywhere else was too cold, too hot, too dry, otherwise unsuited for cultivation. This minuscule 2 per cent of the earth's surface constituted the stage on which history unfolded.

People found it difficult to leave their artificial islands. They could not abandon their houses, fields and granaries without grave risk of loss. Furthermore, as time went on they accumulated more and more things – objects, not easily transportable, that tied them down. Ancient f might seem to us dirt poor, but a typical family possessed more artefacts than an entire forager tribe.

The Coming of the Future

While agricultural space shrank, agricultural time expanded. Foragers usually didn't waste much time thinking about next month or next s Farmers sailed in their imagination years and decades into the future.

Foragers discounted the future because they lived from hand to mouth and could only preserve food or accumulate possessions with Of course, they clearly engaged in some advanced planning. The creators of the cave paintings of Chauvet, Lascaux and Altamira almos intended them to last for generations. Social alliances and political rivalries were long-term affairs. It often took years to repay a favour o a wrong. Nevertheless, in the subsistence economy of hunting and gathering, there was an obvious limit to such long-term planning. Par saved foragers a lot of anxieties. There was no sense in worrying about things that they could not influence.

The Agricultural Revolution made the future far more important than it had ever been before. Farmers must always keep the future in must work in its service. The agricultural economy was based on a seasonal cycle of production, comprising long months of cultivation fo short peak periods of harvest. On the night following the end of a plentiful harvest the peasants might celebrate for all they were worth, b week or so they were again up at dawn for a long day in the field. Although there was enough food for today, next week, and even next m had to worry about next year and the year after that.

Concern about the future was rooted not only in seasonal cycles of production, but also in the fundamental uncertainty of agriculture. villages lived by cultivating a very limited variety of domesticated plants and animals, they were at the mercy of droughts, floods and pesti

Peasants were obliged to produce more than they consumed so that they could build up reserves. Without grain in the silo, jars of olive c cellar, cheese in the pantry and sausages hanging from the rafters, they would starve in bad years. And bad years were bound to come, later. A peasant living on the assumption that bad years would not come didn't live long.

Consequently, from the very advent of agriculture, worries about the future became major players in the theatre of the human mind. W farmers depended on rains to water their fields, the onset of the rainy season meant that each morning the farmers gazed towards the ho sniffing the wind and straining their eyes. Is that a cloud? Would the rains come on time? Would there be enough? Would violent storms seeds from the fields and batter down seedlings? Meanwhile, in the valleys of the Euphrates, Indus and Yellow rivers, other peasants mo with no less trepidation, the height of the water. They needed the rivers to rise in order to spread the fertile topsoil washed down from the highlands, and to enable their vast irrigation systems to fill with water. But floods that surged too high or came at the wrong time could dest fields as much as a drought.

Peasants were worried about the future not just because they had more cause for worry, but also because they could do something a They could clear another field, dig another irrigation canal, sow more crops. The anxious peasant was as frenetic and hardworking as a h in the summer, sweating to plant olive trees whose oil would be pressed by his children and grandchildren, putting off until the winter or t following year the eating of the food he craved today.

The stress of farming had far-reaching consequences. It was the foundation of large-scale political and social systems. Sadly, the dili peasants almost never achieved the future economic security they so craved through their hard work in the present. Everywhere, rulers sprang up, living off the peasants' surplus food and leaving them with only a bare subsistence.

These forfeited food surpluses fuelled politics, wars, art and philosophy. They built palaces, forts, monuments and temples. Until the l era, more than 90 per cent of humans were peasants who rose each morning to till the land by the sweat of their brows. The extra they p fed the tiny minority of elites – kings, government officials, soldiers, priests, artists and thinkers – who fill the history books. History is something that very few people have been doing while everyone else was ploughing fields and carrying water buckets.

An Imagined Order

The food surpluses produced by peasants, coupled with new transportation technology, eventually enabled more and more people to cra first into large villages, then into towns, and finally into cities, all of them joined together by new kingdoms and commercial networks.

Yet in order to take advantage of these new opportunities, food surpluses and improved transportation were not enough. The mere fa can feed a thousand people in the same town or a million people in the same kingdom does not guarantee that they can agree how to di land and water, how to settle disputes and conflicts, and how to act in times of drought or war. And if no agreement can be reached, strife even if the storehouses are bulging. It was not food shortages that caused most of history's wars and revolutions. The French Revolution spearheaded by affluent lawyers, not by famished peasants. The Roman Republic reached the height of its power in the first century when tr fleets from throughout the Mediterranean enriched the Romans beyond their ancestors' wildest dreams. Yet it was at that moment of ma affluence that the Roman political order collapsed into a series of deadly civil wars. Yugoslavia in 1991 had more than enough resources inhabitants, and still disintegrated into a terrible bloodbath.

The problem at the root of such calamities is that humans evolved for millions of years in small bands of a few dozen individuals. The millennia separating the Agricultural Revolution from the appearance of cities, kingdoms and empires was not enough time to allow an in mass cooperation to evolve.

Despite the lack of such biological instincts, during the foraging era, hundreds of strangers were able to cooperate thanks to their sha However, this cooperation was loose and limited. Every Sapiens band continued to run its life independently and to provide for most of it needs. An archaic sociologist living 20,000 years ago, who had no knowledge of events following the Agricultural Revolution, might well concluded that mythology had a fairly limited scope. Stories about ancestral spirits and tribal totems were strong enough to enable 500 p trade seashells, celebrate the odd festival, and join forces to wipe out a Neanderthal band, but no more than that. Mythology, the ancien would have thought, could not possibly enable millions of strangers to cooperate on a daily basis.

But that turned out to be wrong. Myths, it transpired, are stronger than anyone could have imagined. When the Agricultural Revolution opened opportunities for the creation of crowded cities and mighty empires, people invented stories about great gods, motherlands and joint stoc companies to provide the needed social links. While human evolution was crawling at its usual snail's pace, the human imagination was astounding networks of mass cooperation, unlike any other ever seen on earth.

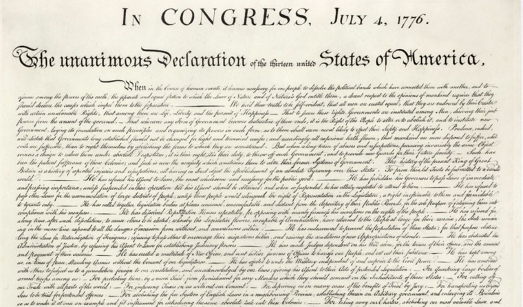
Around 8500 BC the largest settlements in the world were villages such as Jericho, which contained a few hundred individuals. By 70 town of Çatalhöyük in Anatolia numbered between 5,000 and 10,000 individuals. It may well have been the world's biggest settlement at During the fifth and fourth millennia cities with tens of thousands of inhabitants sprouted in the Fertile Crescent, and each of these held sw many nearby villages. In 3100 BC the entire lower Nile Valley was united into the first Egyptian kingdom. Its pharaohs ruled thousands of miles and hundreds of thousands of people. Around 2250 BC Sargon the Great forged the first empire, the Akkadian. It boasted over a m subjects and a standing army of 5,400 soldiers. Between 1000 BC and 500 the first mega-empires appeared in the Middle East: the Late Empire, the Babylonian Empire, and the Persian Empire. They ruled over many millions of subjects and commanded tens of thousands o

In 221 BC the Qin dynasty united China, and shortly afterwards Rome united the Mediterranean basin. Taxes levied on 40 million Qin for a standing army of hundreds of thousands of soldiers and a complex bureaucracy that employed more than 100,000 officials. The Roman Empire at its zenith collected taxes from up to 100 million subjects. This revenue financed a standing army of 250,000–500,000 soldiers, a network still in use 1,500 years later, and theatres and amphitheatres that host spectacles to this day.

16. A stone stele inscribed with the Code of Hammurabi,

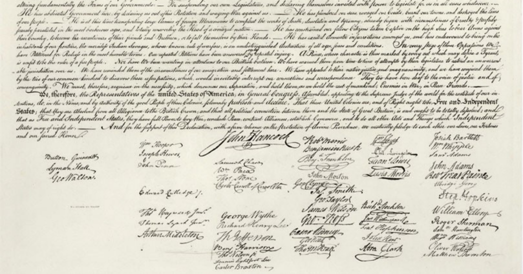
© DeAgostini Picture Library/G. Dagli Orti/The Bridgeman Art Library.

Impressive, no doubt, but we mustn’t harbour rosy illusions about ‘mass cooperation networks’ operating in pharaonic Egypt or the R Empire. ‘Cooperation’ sounds very altruistic, but is not always voluntary and seldom egalitarian. Most human cooperation networks have geared towards oppression and exploitation. The peasants paid for the burgeoning cooperation networks with their precious food surplus despairing when the tax collector wiped out an entire year of hard labour with a single stroke of his imperial pen. The famed Roman amp were often built by slaves so that wealthy and idle Romans could watch other slaves engage in vicious gladiatorial combat. Even prisons concentration camps are cooperation networks, and can function only because thousands of strangers somehow manage to coordinate actions.



IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,



17. The Declaration of Independence of the United States, signed 4 July 1776.

Declaration Stone Engraving, courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., "Charters of Freedom."

All these cooperation networks – from the cities of ancient Mesopotamia to the Qin and Roman empires – were 'imagined orders'. The so
that sustained them were based neither on ingrained instincts nor on personal acquaintances, but rather on belief in shared myths.

How can myths sustain entire empires? We have already discussed one such example: Peugeot. Now let's examine two of the best-k
of history: the Code of Hammurabi of which served as a cooperation manual for hundreds of thousands of ancient Babylonians; and the
Declaration of Independence of 1776 which today still serves as a cooperation manual for hundreds of millions of modern Americans.

In 1776 BC Babylon was the world's biggest city. The Babylonian Empire was probably the world's largest, with more than a million s
ruled most of Mesopotamia, including the bulk of modern Iraq and parts of present-day Syria and Iran. The Babylonian king most famous
Hammurabi. His fame is due primarily to the text that bears his name, the Code of Hammurabi. This was a collection of laws and judicial
whose aim was to present Hammurabi as a role model of a just king, serve as a basis for a more uniform legal system across the Babylo
and teach future generations what justice is and how a just king acts.

Future generations took notice. The intellectual and bureaucratic elite of ancient Mesopotamia canonised the text, and apprentice scr
continued to copy it long after Hammurabi died and his empire lay in ruins. Hammurabi's Code is therefore a good source for understand
ancient Mesopotamians' ideal of social

The text begins by saying that the gods Anu, Enlil and Marduk – the leading deities of the Mesopotamian pantheon – appointed Hamr
make justice prevail in the land, to abolish the wicked and the evil, to prevent the strong from oppressing the It then lists about 300 judge
given in the set formula 'If such and such a thing happens, such is the judgment.' For example, judgements 196–9 and 209–14 read:

196. If a superior man should blind the eye of another superior man, they shall blind his eye.
197. If he should break the bone of another superior man, they shall break his bone.
198. If he should blind the eye of a commoner or break the bone of a commoner, he shall weigh and deliver 60 shekels of silver.
199. If he should blind the eye of a slave of a superior man or break the bone of a slave of a superior man, he shall weigh and deliver of the slave's value (in
209. If a superior man strikes a woman of superior class and thereby causes her to miscarry her fetus, he shall weigh and deliver ten of silver for her fetus.
210. If that woman should die, they shall kill his daughter.
211. If he should cause a woman of commoner class to miscarry her fetus by the beating, he shall weigh and deliver five shekels of sil
212. If that woman should die, he shall weigh and deliver thirty shekels of silver.
213. If he strikes a slave-woman of a superior man and thereby causes her to miscarry her fetus, he shall weigh and deliver two shek silver.
214. If that slave-woman should die, he shall weigh and deliver twenty shekels of

After listing his judgements, Hammurabi again declares that

> These are the just decisions which Hammurabi, the able king, has established and thereby has directed the land along the course of trut
> correct way of life . . . I am Hammurabi, noble king. I have not been careless or negligent toward humankind, granted to my care by the g
> with whose shepherding the god Marduk charged

Hammurabi's Code asserts that Babylonian social order is rooted in universal and eternal principles of justice, dictated by the gods. The
hierarchy is of paramount importance. According to the code, people are divided into two genders and three classes: superior people, co
and slaves. Members of each gender and class have different values. The life of a female commoner is worth thirty silver shekels and th
slave-woman twenty silver shekels, whereas the eye of a male commoner is worth sixty silver shekels.

The code also establishes a strict hierarchy within families, according to which children are not independent persons, but rather the p
their parents. Hence, if one superior man kills the daughter of another superior man, the killer's daughter is executed in punishment. To
seem strange that the killer remains unharmed whereas his innocent daughter is killed, but to Hammurabi and the Babylonians this seem

perfectly just. Hammurabi’s Code was based on the premise that if the king’s subjects all accepted their positions in the hierarchy and ac accordingly, the empire’s million inhabitants would be able to cooperate effectively. Their society could then produce enough food for its distribute it efficiently, protect itself against its enemies, and expand its territory so as to acquire more wealth and better security.

About 3,500 years after Hammurabi’s death, the inhabitants of thirteen British colonies in North America felt that the king of England w treating them unjustly. Their representatives gathered in the city of Philadelphia, and on 4 July 1776 the colonies declared that their inha were no longer subjects of the British Crown. Their Declaration of Independence proclaimed universal and eternal principles of justice, w those of Hammurabi, were inspired by a divine power. However, the most important principle dictated by the American god was somewh from the principle dictated by the gods of Babylon. The American Declaration of Independence asserts that:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable ri among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Like Hammurabi’s Code, the American founding document promises that if humans act according to its sacred principles, millions of the able to cooperate effectively, living safely and peacefully in a just and prosperous society. Like the Code of Hammurabi, the American D Independence was not just a document of its time and place – it was accepted by future generations as well. For more than 200 years, A schoolchildren have been copying and learning it by heart.

The two texts present us with an obvious dilemma. Both the Code of Hammurabi and the American Declaration of Independence clai universal and eternal principles of justice, but according to the Americans all people are equal, whereas according to the Babylonians pe decidedly unequal. The Americans would, of course, say that they are right, and that Hammurabi is wrong. Hammurabi, naturally, would he is right, and that the Americans are wrong. In fact, they are both wrong. Hammurabi and the American Founding Fathers alike imagin governed by universal and immutable principles of justice, such as equality or hierarchy. Yet the only place where such universal princip the fertile imagination of Sapiens, and in the myths they invent and tell one another. These principles have no objective validity.

It is easy for us to accept that the division of people into ‘superiors’ and ‘commoners’ is a figment of the imagination. Yet the idea that a are equal is also a myth. In what sense do all humans equal one another? Is there any objective reality, outside the human imagination, are truly equal? Are all humans equal to one another biologically? Let us try to translate the most famous line of the American Declaratio Independence into biological terms:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable that amo are life, and the pursuit of happiness.

According to the science of biology, people were not ‘created’. They have evolved. And they certainly did not evolve to be ‘equal’. The id is inextricably intertwined with the idea of creation. The Americans got the idea of equality from Christianity, which argues that every pers divinely created soul, and that all souls are equal before God. However, if we do not believe in the Christian myths about God, creation a what does it mean that all people are ‘equal’? Evolution is based on difference, not on equality. Every person carries a somewhat differe code, and is exposed from birth to different environmental influences. This leads to the development of different qualities that carry with t different chances of survival. ‘Created equal’ should therefore be translated into ‘evolved differently’.

Just as people were never created, neither, according to the science of biology, is there a ‘Creator’ who ‘endows’ them with anything. a blind evolutionary process, devoid of any purpose, leading to the birth of individuals. ‘Endowed by their creator’ should be translated si ‘born’.

Similarly, there are no such things as rights in biology. There are only organs, abilities and characteristics. Birds fly not because they h fly, but because they have wings. And it’s not true that these organs, abilities and characteristics are ‘unalienable’. Many of them underg mutations, and may well be completely lost over time. The ostrich is a bird that lost its ability to fly. So ‘unalienable rights’ should be transl ‘mutable characteristics’.

And what are the characteristics that evolved in humans? ‘Life’, certainly. But ‘liberty’? There is no such thing in biology. Just like equ and limited liability companies, liberty too is a political ideal rather than a biological phenomenon. From a purely biological viewpoint, the difference between the citizens of a republic and the subjects of a king. And what about ‘happiness’? So far biological research has faile with a clear definition of happiness or a way to measure it objectively. Most biological studies acknowledge only the existence of pleasure more easily defined and measured. So ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’ should be translated into ‘life and the pursuit of pleasure

So here is that line from the American Declaration of Independence translated into biological terms:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men evolved differently, that they are born with certain mutable characteristics, and that a these are life and the pursuit of pleasure.

Advocates of equality and human rights may be outraged by this line of reasoning. Their response is likely to be, ‘We know that people a biologically! But if we believe that we are all equal in essence, it will enable us to create a stable and prosperous society.’ I have no argu that. This is exactly what I mean by ‘imagined order’. We believe in a particular order not because it is objectively true, but because belie enables us to cooperate effectively and forge a better society. Imagined orders are not evil conspiracies or useless mirages. Rather, they way large numbers of humans can cooperate effectively. Bear in mind, though, that Hammurabi might have defended his principle of hie using the same logic: ‘I know that superiors, commoners and slaves are not inherently different kinds of people. But if we believe that the enable us to create a stable and prosperous society.’

True Believers

It's likely that more than a few readers squirmed in their chairs while reading the preceding paragraphs. Most of us today are educated t such a way. It is easy to accept that Hammurabi's Code was a myth, but we do not want to hear that human rights are also a myth. If pe that human rights exist only in the imagination, isn't there a danger that our society will collapse? Voltaire said about God that 'there is n don't tell that to my servant, lest he murder me at night'. Hammurabi would have said the same about his principle of hierarchy, and Tho Jefferson about human rights. Homo sapiens has no natural rights, just as spiders, hyenas and chimpanzees have no natural rights. But don't t that to our servants, lest they murder us at night.

Such fears are well justified. A natural order is a stable order. There is no chance that gravity will cease to function tomorrow, even if peop believing in it. In contrast, an imagined order is always in danger of collapse, because it depends upon myths, and myths vanish once pe believing in them. In order to safeguard an imagined order, continuous and strenuous efforts are imperative. Some of these efforts take t of violence and coercion. Armies, police forces, courts and prisons are ceaselessly at work forcing people to act in accordance with the i order. If an ancient Babylonian blinded his neighbour, some violence was usually necessary in order to enforce the law of 'an eye for an in 1860, a majority of American citizens concluded that African slaves are human beings and must therefore enjoy the right of liberty, it to bloody civil war to make the southern states acquiesce.

However, an imagined order cannot be sustained by violence alone. It requires some true believers as well. Prince Talleyrand, who b chameleon-like career under Louis XVI, later served the revolutionary and Napoleonic regimes, and switched loyalties in time to end his working for the restored monarchy, summed up decades of governmental experience by saying that 'You can do many things with bayon rather uncomfortable to sit on them.' A single priest often does the work of a hundred soldiers – far more cheaply and effectively. Moreov matter how efficient bayonets are, somebody must wield them. Why should the soldiers, jailors, judges and police maintain an imagined o which they do not believe? Of all human collective activities, the one most difficult to organise is violence. To say that a social order is maintained by military force immediately raises the question: what maintains the military order? It is impossible to organise an army solely by coercion. some of the commanders and soldiers must truly believe in something, be it God, honour, motherland, manhood or money.

An even more interesting question concerns those standing at the top of the social pyramid. Why should they wish to enforce an imag if they themselves don't believe in it? It is quite common to argue that the elite may do so out of cynical greed. Yet a cynic who believes i unlikely to be greedy. It does not take much to provide the objective biological needs of Homo sapiens. After those needs are met, more money can be spent on building pyramids, taking holidays around the world, financing election campaigns, funding your favourite terrorist organisation, or inve the stock market and making yet more money – all of which are activities that a true cynic would find utterly meaningless. Diogenes, the G philosopher who founded the Cynical school, lived in a barrel. When Alexander the Great once visited Diogenes as he was relaxing in th asked if there were anything he might do for him, the Cynic answered the all-powerful conqueror, 'Yes, there is something you can do fo Please move a little to the side. You are blocking the sunlight.'

This is why cynics don't build empires and why an imagined order can be maintained only if large segments of the population – and in large segments of the elite and the security forces – truly believe in it. Christianity would not have lasted 2,000 years if the majority of bis priests failed to believe in Christ. American democracy would not have lasted almost 250 years if the majority of presidents and congress to believe in human rights. The modern economic system would not have lasted a single day if the majority of investors and bankers faile believe in capitalism.

The Prison Walls

How do you cause people to believe in an imagined order such as Christianity, democracy or capitalism? First, you never admit that the imagined. You always insist that the order sustaining society is an objective reality created by the great gods or by the laws of nature. Pe unequal, not because Hammurabi said so, but because Enlil and Marduk decreed it. People are equal, not because Thomas Jefferson s because God created them that way. Free markets are the best economic system, not because Adam Smith said so, but because these immutable laws of nature.

You also educate people thoroughly. From the moment they are born, you constantly remind them of the principles of the imagined o are incorporated into anything and everything. They are incorporated into fairy tales, dramas, paintings, songs, etiquette, political propag architecture, recipes and fashions. For example, today people believe in equality, so it's fashionable for rich kids to wear jeans, which we working-class attire. In medieval Europe people believed in class divisions, so no young nobleman would have worn a peasant's smock. be addressed as 'Sir' or 'Madam' was a rare privilege reserved for the nobility, and often purchased with blood. Today all polite correspo regardless of the recipient, begins with 'Dear Sir or Madam'.

The humanities and social sciences devote most of their energies to explaining exactly how the imagined order is woven into the tape In the limited space at our disposal we can only scratch the surface. Three main factors prevent people from realising that the order orga lives exists only in their imagination:

a. The imagined order is embedded in the material world. Though the imagined order exists only in our minds, it can be woven into the m reality around us, and even set in stone. Most Westerners today believe in individualism. They believe that every human is an individual, worth does not depend on what other people think of him or her. Each of us has within ourselves a brilliant ray of light that gives value ar to our lives. In modern Western schools teachers and parents tell children that if their classmates make fun of them, they should ignore i themselves, not others, know their true worth.

In modern architecture, this myth leaps out of the imagination to take shape in stone and mortar. The ideal modern house is divided i small rooms so that each child can have a private space, hidden from view, providing for maximum autonomy. This private room almost has a door, and in some households it may be accepted practice for the child to close, and perhaps lock, the door. Even parents may be

enter without knocking and asking permission. The room is usually decorated as the child sees fit, with rock-star posters on the wall and c
on the floor. Somebody growing up in such a space cannot help but imagine himself 'an individual', his true worth emanating from within r
than from without.

Medieval noblemen did not believe in individualism. Someone's worth was determined by their place in the social hierarchy, and by w
people said about them. Being laughed at was a horrible indignity. Noblemen taught their children to protect their good name whatever t
Like modern individualism, the medieval value system left the imagination and was manifested in the stone of medieval castles. The cas
contained private rooms for children (or anyone else, for that matter). The teenage son of a medieval baron did not have a private room
castle's second floor, with posters of Richard the Lionheart and King Arthur on the walls and a locked door that his parents were not allow
open. He slept alongside many other youths in a large hall. He was always on display and always had to take into account what others s
Someone growing up in such conditions naturally concluded that a man's true worth was determined by his place in the social hierarchy
what other people said of

b. The imagined order shapes our desires. Most people do not wish to accept that the order governing their lives is imaginary, but in fact
person is born into a pre-existing imagined order, and his or her desires are shaped from birth by its dominant myths. Our personal desir
become the imagined order's most important defences.

For instance, the most cherished desires of present-day Westerners are shaped by romantic, nationalist, capitalist and humanist myth
been around for centuries. Friends giving advice often tell each other, 'Follow your heart.' But the heart is a double agent that usually tak
instructions from the dominant myths of the day, and the very recommendation to 'Follow your heart' was implanted in our minds by a co
of nineteenth-century Romantic myths and twentieth-century consumerist myths. The Coca-Cola Company, for example, has marketed D
around the world under the slogan, 'Diet Coke. Do what feels good.'

Even what people take to be their most personal desires are usually programmed by the imagined order. Let's consider, for example,
desire to take a holiday abroad. There is nothing natural or obvious about this. A chimpanzee alpha male would never think of using his
order to go on holiday into the territory of a neighbouring chimpanzee band. The elite of ancient Egypt spent their fortunes building pyram
having their corpses mummified, but none of them thought of going shopping in Babylon or taking a skiing holiday in Phoenicia. People toda
a great deal of money on holidays abroad because they are true believers in the myths of romantic consumerism.

Romanticism tells us that in order to make the most of our human potential we must have as many different experiences as we can. V
open ourselves to a wide spectrum of emotions; we must sample various kinds of relationships; we must try different cuisines; we must l
appreciate different styles of music. One of the best ways to do all that is to break free from our daily routine, leave behind our familiar se
go travelling in distant lands, where we can 'experience' the culture, the smells, the tastes and the norms of other people. We hear again
the romantic myths about 'how a new experience opened my eyes and changed my life'.

Consumerism tells us that in order to be happy we must consume as many products and services as possible. If we feel that somethi
or not quite right, then we probably need to buy a product (a car, new clothes, organic food) or a service (housekeeping, relationship the
classes). Every television commercial is another little legend about how consuming some product or service will make life better.

Romanticism, which encourages variety, meshes perfectly with consumerism. Their marriage has given birth to the infinite 'market of
experiences', on which the modern tourism industry is founded. The tourism industry does not sell flight tickets and hotel bedrooms. It sel
experiences. Paris is not a city, nor India a country – they are both experiences, the consumption of which is supposed to widen our hori
our human potential, and make us happier. Consequently, when the relationship between a millionaire and his wife is going through a ro
he takes her on an expensive trip to Paris. The trip is not a reflection of some independent desire, but rather of an ardent belief in the my
romantic consumerism. A wealthy man in ancient Egypt would never have dreamed of solving a relationship crisis by taking his wife on h
Babylon. Instead, he might have built for her the sumptuous tomb she had always wanted.

18. The Great Pyramid of Giza. The kind of thing rich people in ancient Egypt did with their money.
© Adam Jones/Corbis.

Like the elite of ancient Egypt, most people in most cultures dedicate their lives to building pyramids. Only the names, shapes and siz pyramids change from one culture to the other. They may take the form, for example, of a suburban cottage with a swimming pool and a evergreen lawn, or a gleaming penthouse with an enviable view. Few question the myths that cause us to desire the pyramid in the first p

c. The imagined order is inter-subjective. Even if by some superhuman effort I succeed in freeing my personal desires from the grip of th order, I am just one person. In order to change the imagined order I must convince millions of strangers to cooperate with me. For the im order is not a subjective order existing in my own imagination – it is rather an inter-subjective order, existing in the shared imagination of and millions of people.

In order to understand this, we need to understand the difference between ‘objective’, ‘subjective’, and ‘inter-subjective’.

An objective phenomenon exists independently of human consciousness and human beliefs. Radioactivity, for example, is not a myth emissions occurred long before people discovered them, and they are dangerous even when people do not believe in them. Marie Curie discoverers of radioactivity, did not know, during her long years of studying radioactive materials, that they could harm her body. While s believe that radioactivity could kill her, she nevertheless died of aplastic anaemia, a disease caused by overexposure to radioactive mate

The subjective is something that exists depending on the consciousness and beliefs of a single individual. It disappears or changes if particular individual changes his or her beliefs. Many a child believes in the existence of an imaginary friend who is invisible and inaudibl of the world. The imaginary friend exists solely in the child’s subjective consciousness, and when the child grows up and ceases to belie imaginary friend fades away.

The inter-subjective is something that exists within the communication network linking the subjective consciousness of many individua single individual changes his or her beliefs, or even dies, it is of little importance. However, if most individuals in the network die or chang beliefs, the inter-subjective phenomenon will mutate or disappear. Inter-subjective phenomena are neither malevolent frauds nor insignificant charades. They exist in a different way from physical phenomena such as radioactivity, but their impact on the world may still be enormo history’s most important drivers are inter-subjective: law, money, gods, nations.

Peugeot, for example, is not the imaginary friend of Peugeot’s CEO. The company exists in the shared imagination of millions of peop believes in the company’s existence because the board of directors also believes in it, as do the company’s lawyers, the secretaries in th office, the tellers in the bank, the brokers on the stock exchange, and car dealers from France to Australia. If the CEO alone were sudde believing in Peugeot’s existence, he’d quickly land in the nearest mental hospital and someone else would occupy his office

Similarly, the dollar, human rights and the United States of America exist in the shared imagination of billions, and no single individua threaten their existence. If I alone were to stop believing in the dollar, in human rights, or in the United States, it wouldn’t much matter. T imagined orders are inter-subjective, so in order to change them we must simultaneously change the consciousness of billions of people not easy. A change of such magnitude can be accomplished only with the help of a complex organisation, such as a political party, an id movement, or a religious cult. However, in order to establish such complex organisations, it’s necessary to convince many strangers to c with one another. And this will happen only if these strangers believe in some shared myths. It follows that in order to change an existing order, we must first believe in an alternative imagined order.

In order to dismantle Peugeot, for example, we need to imagine something more powerful, such as the French legal system. In order the French legal system we need to imagine something even more powerful, such as the French state. And if we would like to dismantle will have to imagine something yet more powerful.

There is no way out of the imagined order. When we break down our prison walls and run towards freedom, we are in fact running int spacious exercise yard of a bigger prison.