

## Book Review

Joanna Picciotto.

Labors of Innocence in Early Modern England.

Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010.

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

In a short and very useful book, *What Is Medieval History* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010), John H. Arnold offers an excellent introduction to medieval history. He explains to neophytes and the casually interested what medieval history is, what medieval historians do and why any of it could possibly matter to anyone living in the twenty-first century. Toward the end, he offers this: “medieval history matters if for no other reason than that it is ‘good to think with’.” He then adds that knowledge of medieval history provides us with an alternative to modern thinking—either as a form of “anti-modernity” or, from another perspective, as a prelude to modernity. For those of us with a European background or who are affected by Western civilization, it furnishes us with a way to understand this heritage. The development of modernity, after all, did not arise *ex nihilo* and cannot be fully appreciated without some knowledge about the ways in which earlier forms of thought are “implicated—explicitly or tacitly—in various important intellectual arenas.” Most of us, of course, will try to get along without such knowledge, but we are poorer for it.

This is not to say that a journey through the “history of ideas” is adequate for all purposes. Inquiries into what people thought (and, before the recent interest in “social history,” we usually meant mostly the wealthiest, brightest and therefore most well documented people) captures only the surface of social reality. Rather like the attention paid to whitecaps on the ocean or waves crashing on the shores, the study of great minds and great books gives credit only to the immediately observable and well preserved. So, just as oceanography requires knowledge of tides and currents to comprehend the full force of the seas, likewise a comprehensive history of humanity demands knowledge of evolving technologies and patterns of political economy if we are to examine and explain the evolution of our species.

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John H. Arnold and Joanna Picciotto are more interested in ideas and therefore in ideology than they are in the mode and social relations of production and distribution of the material aspects of social life, which ideas and ideologies serve to legitimize. That said, ideas and ideologies are not unimportant. They explain and justify social history to

the people who experienced it, and they are vitally important if we are to benefit from their achievements and mistakes. They help us to know what we think, but they are crucial to knowing how we think.

While sharing a keen interest in intellectual history, Joanna Picciotto's study of early modern England differs from Arnold's. Hers is a substantial scholarly project and not an immediately useful 127-page handbook (without notes and index). Hers is much larger (over 870 pages) and it focuses on a shorter timeframe and a more compressed geography. Its subject is England in the seventeenth century. So, the question obviously arises: "Of what possible interest could it be to anyone with a demonstrable interest in public sector innovation in the twenty-first century?" The answer is the same as to the original question ... only more so.

Learning about what people thought and did in the past, and particularly in times of transformative change, gives us access not only to complexities and imponderables that rival our own, but also to the germs of the beliefs and behaviour that underlie and embody the contemporary human project. These germs, it is true, are often expressed in arcane prose that is more complicated than the simple declarative sentences which normally turn up in contemporary politicians' speeches, organizational charts and policy proposals. It is also true that it can some effort to work our way through the frequently subtle and sophisticated ideas and ideals that are available for our consideration. They may not closely resemble contemporary declarations from newspaper editorials and politicians' speeches; yet, for the persistent, the germs are there and available for our consideration and deliberation—if we are not wholly preoccupied with whatever tasks concern us from day to day.

Early modernism as it evolved in England is the seed ground of much of our current intellectual bounty. If compelled to place it in chronological brackets, we might get away with saying that it is commensurate with the decades between the birth of Francis Bacon (1561) and the death of John Locke (1704) or perhaps Isaac Newton (1727), allowing for a certain ambiguity at either end and realizing that any such attempt to define an era is arbitrary, if not utterly capricious. Nonetheless, early modern England would have to include such worthies as Francis Bacon, Gerrard Winstanley, Thomas Hobbes, John Milton and John Locke. Picciotto's account, however, is no simple rehearsal of the lives of the greats—both famous and infamous.

She has themes to explore including concepts and categories such as labour and innocence and the relationship between the two. It is a novel approach to the emergence of early bourgeois society. It connects the Adam of the *Old Testament* to the scientific revolution and the flourishing of "the Enlightenment" in insightful ways that many of us, for whom this chunk of human history is not a specialty, may not previously have considered. Her opening comments on the importance of scientific objectivity, an essential element of our own high regard for science and technology, are engaging. "The

concept of objectivity,” she says, “suggests that we place our trust in the perspective of the innocent eye.” We wish to believe that the credibility of experts in any field from particle physics to public policy depends largely on their qualities of intellectual independence, non-partisanship and respect for the truth, whatever it might be revealed to be. “The question raised by objectivity is how innocence, traditionally understood to be a state of ignorance, ever came to be associated with epistemological privilege.”

In the myth of *Genesis*, after all, Adam and Eve lost their innocence by eating from the tree of knowledge. If innocence was bliss, it was also an absence of understanding, perhaps even of self-consciousness. Animals, we now saw, are “innocent” creatures which are, for example, generally exempted from legal and moral culpability for living according to their natures (especially if they are fortunate enough to live in whatever wilderness remains and not become annoyingly feral in urban developments or at family picnics), even though those “natures” may be “red in tooth and claw.” Picciotto, however, makes the case that the seventeenth century witnessed a “conversion of the original subject of innocence, Adam, into a specifically intellectual exemplar ...[u]sed to justify experimental science, an emergent public sphere, and the concept of intellectual labour itself. So, the “innocent Adam,” she continues, was used to generate two of the founding myths of modernity:

The state of nature from which popular sovereignty was derived and the assumption of a visible and palpable nature ontologically prior to—and radically different from—humanity’s ‘fallen’ experience of it.”

The anthropological rehabilitation of Adam as a necessary preliminary to fixing a research agenda for the natural and social sciences marks a metaphysical shake-up of enormous proportions, and I do not claim to do justice to Picciotto’s argument here. These few quoted remarks, however, should give evidence of the germ she has identified and the consequences of a “reorientation” of the curious human mind toward nature and, for traditionalists, the God that punished the loss of innocence so harshly.

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A good deal of the book revolves, as it must, around competing interpretations of Christian lore and doctrine, and about such practical matters as the proper path to redemption and salvation—whether through divine grace, good works or, for the unreconstructed Calvinists lurking in the background, the peculiarities of predestination. Throughout the connection among innocence and the honest labour of Adam on the one hand and both the theological consequences of Adam’s banishment and the political

implications of the Hobbesian state of nature are teased out in a particularly fascinating way, as are the origins of both doctrines of natural rights and the appearance of modern science. The conjunction between the innocent Adam and the Baconian commitment to the scientific method as a means to reclaim both human and intellectual progress and what D. H. Lawrence would eventually call “the dreary theme” of the “perfectibility of man” three centuries later when capitalism, democracy and technology has worked their secular miracles.

In the early modern era, however, the link between labour and intellect was genuinely revolutionary. For Plato, work was the domain of inferior people, and philosophy and statecraft were to be reserved for his metallurgical elite (men of gold) and their armed enablers (men of silver). Likewise, Aristotle regarded work to be a curse and only those of independent wealth were able to pursue the finer arts and sciences. To link intellect and labour in a commonwealth, a community of worker-intellectuals was a blow to any aristocratic ideology. In the dramatics of the seventeenth century, with the Civil War, the Commonwealth and the Restoration and the Glorious Revolution defining by decades and degrees what has famously been labeled “the world turned upside down,” Picciotto delves into both religious and secular belief to weave a complicated and often contested tale. What begins with quarreling over the meaning of Adam—the sovereign labourer with the gift of dominion over the Earth and its creatures, and God’s own taxonomist—leads to the establishment of the Royal Society to pursue “innocent knowledge” is a remarkable venture.

Along the way, we are treated to efforts to rehabilitate Adam, Eve and to dispose of “original sin.” Through him, experimental scientists, artists and political reformers alike were represented as embodying the ideal of the public intellectual whose collective task it was to bring such labors together within the context of Protestantism and what would soon form a recognizable, work-based, achievement-oriented “protestant ethic.”

*Labors of Innocence in Early Modern England* is not a seamless tapestry, however, for history is never tidy. So, there is ample room and ample consideration given to sceptics and rationalists as opposed to experimentalists whose critiques revealed the limits of empirical inquiry—not least the passion with which Picciotto’s favourite, Milton, embraced politics as contrasted with disinterested science. Yet Milton, too, promoted reforms that anticipated a “Baconian vision of paradisaical restoration,” the synthesis of mind and work intended to achieve unparalleled human advancement. The age of progress was begun.

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Picciotto works, of course, largely in the domain of texts and ideas. There are other elements in play, some of which have been classically expressed by historians from R. H. Tawney to Christopher Hill and, of course, the magisterial Max Weber. Still, even at approaching 900 pages, her contribution is incomplete, as any such effort must be. Still, when matters of religion, philosophy, science and politics are advanced in the context of early modernism, it is a dull mind indeed which does not see intimations of the public sphere today.

Whether scanning Milton's *Areopagitica* for advice about how to manage academic freedom in increasingly corporatist educational institutions, or hints about how to protect political dissenters in an emerging national security state, complete with e-mail hacking devices and vast data storage systems holding the digitalized biographies of everyone who ever posted a mean word about a meaner politician, the fact remains that the inspiration for much of what we call freedom today hails from the tumultuous time and place of seventeenth-century England. It was there that Hobbes and Locke presented their differing views about what "the state of nature" really entailed; and what it entailed was the life story of the composite Adam, his progenitors and progeny, whose innocence we can contrive to make the theoretical basis of Bills and Declarations of Human Rights ever since.

The fact that we still have not sorted out what these rights include, whether they are social declarations of freedom from state-sponsored abuse or from ignorance, disease and misery is not something for which we can hold English thinkers and writers of four centuries ago accountable. Our current confusion is all our own. By tracing our musings back to their origins in the political, theological and scientific questions of early modernism, and giving us some extraordinary cultural insights to think about and to think with, Joanna Picciotto has given us a great gift. Whether many of us will choose to work with it to our common benefit is another matter.

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