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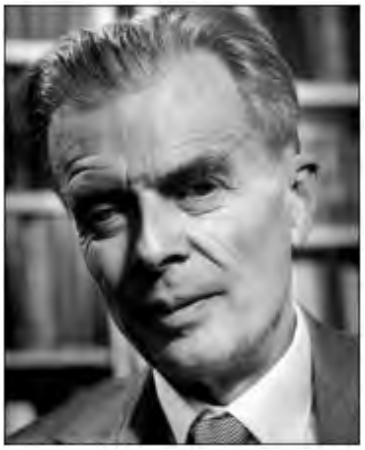

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Why every era needs its Aldous Huxley

- Richard Horton

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Aldous Huxley saw science-and its claims to be the catalyst for human progress-as a means to concentrate political power in the hands of a ruling minority. Corruption, despotism, and spiritual degradation were the logical consequences of a science-based culture, or so Huxley argued. In his 1947 book, *Science, Liberty, and Peace*, Huxley took aim at the post-war triumph of science. "Science", he wrote, "is one of the causative factors involved in the progressive decline of liberty and the progressive centralisation of power". How? By providing the political class with "instruments of coercion". Science had changed our species irreversibly: "Man as a moral, social, and political being is sacrificed to *homo faber*, or man the smith, the inventor and forger of new gadgets." "The chief consequence of progressive science", he went on, "is a chronic social and economic insecurity". Huxley challenged "the dogma of inevitable progress". The propaganda that embeds this "myth of progress" into our everyday conversation justified "monstrous tyrannies" in the name of a promised, but imaginary, future. Values are treated as illusions-unobservable, unquantifiable epiphenomena. "Science does not even profess to deal with [human] experience as a whole, but only with certain aspects of it in certain contexts." And scientists themselves are "capable of the most dangerously irrational prejudice".

It's hard to take Huxley's views seriously today. Immediately after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, perhaps his attitude to science was permissible, even understandable. But look at science today. Science's contribution to the betterment of human life is seen everywhere around us-from discoveries that deliver life-transforming medicines and vaccines to technologies that power hospitals and health systems. But every era needs its Huxley, someone who can strip away the sensationalism of science, question assumptions, and provoke self-criticism. That 21st-century Huxley is John Gray, a philosopher who has made the scrutiny of scientific hubris his life's mission. In his latest book, *The Soul of the Marionette*, Gray dons the mantle of Huxley in its most extreme colours. Subtitled, *A Short Inquiry into Human Freedom*, Gray resurrects Huxley's claim that science is linked to the loss of human liberties. Gray laments our "ruling faith in science". He begins by conducting an autopsy on the accepted orthodoxy of science's history- "The scientific revolution was, in many ways, a by-product of mysticism and magic. In fact, once the tangled origins of modern science are unravelled,

it is doubtful whether a 'scientific revolution' occurred." According to Gray, the concept of Enlightenment ignores a disquieting truth about human beings-namely, that our species seeks darkness not enlightenment, that we cannot live without evil, violence, and barbarism. Scientists might believe they can create a "higher species" through the creation of ever more reliable knowledge. But they forget that since darkness and evil are endemic among us, the idea that we can escape our own flawed identities is a dangerous falsehood. Scientists claim, so Gray suggests, that "scientific knowledge can be the instrument of human liberation". But there is no civilisation on Earth that has successfully used knowledge to grow, flourish, and survive. Quite the contrary. Civilisations are born, prosper for a time, and finally implode, usually through conflict or environmental catastrophe. "Sudden extinction of ways of life is the human norm." Knowledge has no guaranteed protective efficacy in the face of human stupidity. What characterises the world is chaos and transience. The idea that science is the most reliable method for acquiring knowledge and thereby improving human society is nothing but a comforting fable. The scepticism that science celebrates has "produced a paralysing condition of uncertainty". "Reason", Gray concludes, "has the effect of weakening illusions that are necessary to civilisation".

Our species will not be able to master our planet by understanding its natural processes. There are no universal principles to live our lives by. Human life is beset by "irresolvable contradictions". There is no prospect of creating a new world or a new humanity. Our ultimate weakness is that we are "too feeble to tolerate doubt". "The success of science may come from the fact that its practitioners inhabit a small corner of the universe that is not chaotic." The paradox we may have to accept is that "the upshot of scientific inquiry will be that the human mind cannot function without myths and fantasies".