

Ugly, Thorny Things

By JOSEPH EPSTEIN

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I get most of my notions about the world and how it works less from experience than from books. Almost all my interesting discoveries, my Eureka moments, have been found in other writers' pages. I've been reading "The Letters of George Santayana," for instance, and, in a letter from his student days in Germany, Santayana notes the complete incapacity of the Germans for boredom. Bouncing the bottom of my palm off my forehead, I exclaim, "Of course." Suddenly I understand the ability of the Germans to spend 14 or more hours listening to Wagner's Ring Cycle, or thrill to Goethe's "Faust." I had another such moment while reading James Buchan's "Crowded with Genius," a book about the 18th-century Scottish Enlightenment. The moment came with these two sentences: "The 18th century had more ideas about the past than it had facts: archeology and philology were infant sciences. (The 21st century has more facts than ideas.)" Eureka! The relation between facts and ideas appeared to me in an entirely new light. Not only have the past 50 or so years been largely bereft of grand ideas, but much of the best intellectual work of the period has been devoted to eliminating the major ideas, or idea systems, of the previous 100 or so years: notably, Marxism and Freudianism, with Darwinism perhaps next to tumble. The lesson seems to be that the accretion of new facts tends to undo ideas.

Analytical philosophers can make a 10-course meal about what constitutes a fact and what an idea. But everyone has the roughly correct notion that a fact is a discrete entity, an action or event or occurrence or thing that has what we like to think of as objective reality upon which most people can agree. An idea is a coherently formulated thought or opinion usually based on the discovery of a pattern itself based on facts. Yet it would seem that the more facts that are known, the less likely is the pattern that supports the idea to hold up.

The point (I don't say it is a fact or an idea) is that the more facts one has at one's command, the less is inspiration for ideas likely to arrive. Imagine the impressive ignorance of facts Rousseau required to come up with his two most famous ideas, those of the Noble Savage and of the Social Contract. Marx had Engels in Manchester supplying him with many of his facts for "Das Kapital," but given all the additional factual knowledge we have since acquired about industrial relations and the true interests of the working classes, it seems doubtful that even the always rage-ready Marx would be able to believe in the class struggle with the same certitude. Or, presented with the wretches of Enron, price-rigging, industrial spying and other corporate malfeasance, would Adam Smith still wish to argue on behalf of his Invisible Hand?

The most fertile ground for the formation of ideas, in other words, is one relatively barren of facts. As facts add up, ideas tend to go down. Facts, bloody damn facts, get in the way of conjecture, speculation, delightful mental footwork of all kinds. Facts, we say with a shrug, are facts.

Facts are ugly, thorny things. Ideas are velvety and suave, and bring comfort by suggesting that our understanding of -- and hence control over -- the world is on the rise. Ideas can be immensely seductive. What a beautiful idea it is, for example, to bring

democracy to Araby! And then arise the obdurate facts of rancorous tribalism to destroy the seduction.

Ideally, the accrual of a vast number of new facts ought to make for richer, more complex ideas. But it hasn't seemed to work out that way. The addition of facts made possible by powerful new technology has allowed astronomers to describe the universe with more precision but has not rendered many persuasive new ideas. In physics, the leading new idea of string theory is apparently in the flux of controversy, and in some quarters is thought to be to physics what postmodernism has been to literature: a useless and time-costly detour.

In an ideal world, facts would reinforce and enrich ideas. This ideal world, you may have noticed, hasn't quite arrived. Ours remains an age chiefly of fact-finding. For now facts appear to test ideas and almost everywhere find them wanting. "Just the facts, ma'am," Sgt. Friday used to say on the old television program. He didn't ask for the lady's ideas, you will recall, and maybe, like the good sergeant, a clear statement of the facts is all we, too, can hope for, at least for the present.

Mr. Epstein is the author, most recently, of "Friendship: An Exposé" (Houghton Mifflin, 2006).