

# From the Executive Director

John Roskam

John Gray, the British philosopher recently wrote in the *New Statesman*:

In the history of ideas as in history as a whole, our view of the past is prone to a kind of optical illusion in which we mistake what is closest to us for the dominant feature of the landscape.

He's right. What he describes is related to the tendency which assumes that because things are the way they are now, that they have always been that way, and that they will continue to be that way.

Economists understand this, and are notorious for warning against such thinking. The Australian economy hasn't always boomed. (By definition) unemployment, inflation, and interest rates haven't always been at record low levels. A few years ago Sydney was not only the country's 'international city'. Its potential for growth was unlimited.

It was the city in which everyone (supposedly) wanted to live. No longer. In August 2006 New South Wales had the highest level of unemployment of the mainland states, and its economy was in deficit. The resource-rich states of Western Australian and Queensland were allegedly the 'old economy'.

A feature of the modern world is its emphasis on 'forces' and 'movements'. There are 'forces' of globalisation and market liberalisation; and liberation movements, religious movements, and environmental movements. Forces and movements don't take account of the acts of individuals. And the reason for this is that viewing history as only forces and movements is consistent with the Marxian and neo-Marxian framework for the teaching of history. People are removed from history and replaced with uncontrollable and unstoppable forces and movements.

The point of trying to establish that something is uncontrollable and unstoppable is that therefore it is inevitable—and the inevitability of communism is that ideology's main claim to fame. (This issue is the something that has tended communist theorists some confusion. If communism is inevitable, is there any point in agitating for it.)

Marx held that history was determined by class struggle. Authors like Jared Diamond have argued that history is the outcome of environmental factors. Others nominate technological change as the driver of history.

A consequence of all of these views is that history is only forces and movements. Day-to-day politics doesn't matter and politicians are irrelevant.

Even a moment's thought shows this not to be the case. The history of the twentieth century is riddled with examples of individuals and small groups which pushed nations back and forth, in and out of totalitarianism. The Bolshevik revolution in 1917 was not caused by the grand sweep of history, but a small group intent on constructing a state of their choosing.

Focusing on forces and movements rather than the actions of individuals propelled by belief and intention doesn't assist in understanding modern politics. Political actors are becoming *more* not *less* important.

The cover story of this edition of the *IPA Review* is intended to be more than just interesting. It is intended to demonstrate that politics matters.

All of Australia's 13 biggest mistakes was the product of a deliberate decision - sometimes by an individual, sometimes by a group. Most often the people responsible for the decision were politicians. In every case an alternative was available. History could have been different.

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The views of Louis XIV on Karl Marx have been lost to history.

