CHANGE AGENTS FOR THE CULTURAL PARADIGM SHIFT FROM MEDIEVAL TO EARLY MODERN*

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Change Agents for the Cultural Paradigm Shift from Medieval to Early Modern (circa 1453-1604)
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The “Renaissance” (widely bracketed from the mid fifteen to the early seventeenth centuries) was a time of massive disruptions with intellectual life moving in almost equal and opposite directions from newly unearthed ancient texts to startling discoveries about the physical world made possible by the invention of new instruments of observation and measurement such as the telescope and newly practiced scientific method. This period was truly a Reactionary Revolution. But if I were pressed for a single date when the medieval period approached its end and the early modern period began in earnest, I would say the big shift started on May 29, 1453 in Constantinople [modern Istanbul, Turkey].

- Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, finally falls to the Islamic Ottoman Turks on May 29, 1453.

1. Greek scholars from Constantinople are forced to move westward with primary ancient texts, grammars and linguistic methodologies. Nearly all of these texts were preserved by Islamic scholars in vast libraries for almost a thousand years. Many other ancient “pagan” texts were destroyed by the early zealot Christians. Newly evolving text studies made possible by this influx from the East informed Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk and the first professor of theology at the newly founded University of Wittenberg [made famous later by Hamlet’s reference to studying there] to declare that the official Catholic Latin Bible of St. Jerome (translated from a half forgotten Greek into its official Latin form in 382) was filled with errors from a scholar’s perspective and totally unavailable to the German speaking populace of his country – that illusive “common man” who would play such an enormous role a few hundred years later in the political revolutions in England’s North American colonies and France.

2. Cut off from the flow of goods by the Ottoman conquests from the East through the Silk Road – Europeans needed to find new trade routes preferably in the other direction across the Atlantic. Portugal and Spain hit the Mexican / South American Jackpot instead and almost overnight transformed Europe into what we now call a “dollar economy.” Trade goods that could produce money revenue were necessary to compete with the free gold flooding into Europe from those once poor cousins of Spain and Portugal. This is the first domino which would “trade people for sheep” as More puts it in his “Utopia” in England.

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http://cnx.org/content/m16044/1.1/
and result in a massive population displacement and movement to cities that continue to this day in every “economically developing” country on the globe.

Note: The population of London in Chaucer’s and Henry V’s time (1404) was approximately 25,000 and hadn’t changed much in the previous 200 years. In the next two hundred years, by 1604 the end of Elizabeth’s reign and at Shakespeare’s zenith, it was well over a quarter of a million and climbing rapidly.

Here is a contemporary view in the early seventeenth century with Shakespeare’s Globe in the center left foreground:

![Figure 1](http://cnx.org/content/m16044/1.1/)

- First Western use of movable type – Guttenberg’s Latin Bible to Caxton’s publishing of Thomas Malory’s “Morte Arthur” in early modern English prose occurs.

This is not that revolutionary at first since one of the first books it prints is a Latin Bible that is made to look as much as possible like a copied manuscript (see illustrations below:

A page from a medieval hand-written manuscript (1200’s):
Figure 2
A page from Guttenberg’s first printed Latin Bible (c. 1460’s):
Figure 3
The movable type printing press, however, would soon prove to be the principal weapon of mass destruction (WMD) first of the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church and then of monarchies across Europe.

- Vernacular language development and wide explosion of book production and literacy fuels the Protestant revolution by providing a means for wide dissemination of catechetical information and the bible itself in the vernacular—[Note: Before the Reformation took over in England people were executed for the crime of possessing a Bible translated into English. After the reformation, people were executed for possessing rosary beads, statues of saints and even figurations of Jesus on the cross.]

- Christopher Columbus and his pathetic three tiny ships accidentally “encounter” the Caribbean Islands on his way across the Atlantic to the sources of spices in India and Southern China. Although he is a Neapolitan Italian, he claims all of this territory in the name of the expedition’s sponsors, the king and queen of Spain – Ferdinand and Isabella. In a return voyage he will “discover” the coast of Brazil, which he is certain is the location of the original Garden of Eden. (I have been there, and he may have been right on that score.) He also decides that it is his heavenly ordained prerogative to “save” for Christ and “enslave” any of the natives that he can capture. To his dying day, Columbus believed that he had reached Asia. In art historical terms 1492 is a very important date because everything from the Americas before that date is designated “Pre-Columbian” and virtually everything after that date is affected in some way by this European amalgamation.

- Transformation of Europe by the other-than-gold “gifts” from the New World “Indians” from 1492 to this day. For specific references you should read Jack Weatherford’s book, “Indian Givers: How the Indians of the Americas Transformed the World.”

- Massive Transformation of the New World by the migration of Old World Europeans to it.

- Henry VII (a.k.a. the Duke of Richmond) ascends to the English throne after the end of the War of the Roses – 1485. The year modernity is born. His claim to the throne is that he is a very effective accountant – versus his lineage rights that are sub-marginal at best.

- Thomas More’s Latin “Utopia” 1515 expresses a desperate hope for a reverse shift from massive national capital formation back to Medieval notions of Common-wealth.

- Elizabeth, the First ascends to the throne – the illegitimate daughter of the son of that illegitimate king, Henry VII, in 1558. Her reign, however converts the tiny islands of Great Britain into a super-power by the time of her death in 1604, completing my time-frame for this transition to early modernity.

- The Polish mathematician Nicolaus Copernicus publishes his theories that the Earth is not the center of astronomical motion (or importance to God’s universe for that matter) in 1530’s, and Tycho Brahe and Giordano Bruno, along with Galileo’s observations with the telescope and other scientific method experiments prove him correct by the early 1600’s.

\[1\text{http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/permanents/gutenberg/html/4.html}\]
Before the Great Paradigm Shift from Medieval to Modern – pre 1550’s:

Pre-Copernicus-Galileo view of the universe with Earth as its center and God and His Heavens located directly above our heads beyond the sphere of the fixed stars. This construct held sway for over a thousand years and is often referred to as the Ptolemaic Cosmology after the Roman Egyptian astronomer Claudius Ptolemaeus who lived around 120 A.C.E.

Ptolemy’s cosmology is also referred to as the medieval world view. Note the angels looking down protectively upon us:

![Figure 4](http://cnx.org/content/m16044/1.1/fig4.png)

This illustration of the Earth-centered universe with its nine spheres and four elements [earth, air, fire and water] was drawn by a Portuguese cartographer in the 1550’s.

After the Great Paradigm Shift from Medieval to Modern – post 1600’s:

Post-Copernicus-Galileo view of the expanding into infinity universe is captured in a snapshot of our Milky Way Galaxy taken this year from the Hubble satellite telescope:
Figure 5

Our [Earth’s/Man’s] actual place in the universe has yet to be re-established by modern science. And new philosophy calls all in doubt, The element of fire is quite put out, The sun is lost, and th’earth, and no man’s wit
Can well direct him where to look for it.

John Donne 1611

Through the miracle of contemporary electronic media see through the Hubble Space Telescope itself by clicking here: www.spacetelescope.org\(^2\).

POST-SCRIPT: Also try to imagine what the modern world would have evolved into if all of the math, science and even mercantile calculations required Roman numerals instead of Arabic numbers and the “zero” had not yet been invented. The creation of Western culture needed all of its creators from the Norse and Greek myth writers, through the Judaic, Christian and Islamic leaders to the wealth producing merchants and its heretical scientists – who risked their actual and eternal lives in pursuit of the verifiable truth of God’s creation.

\(^2\)http://www.spacetelescope.org/