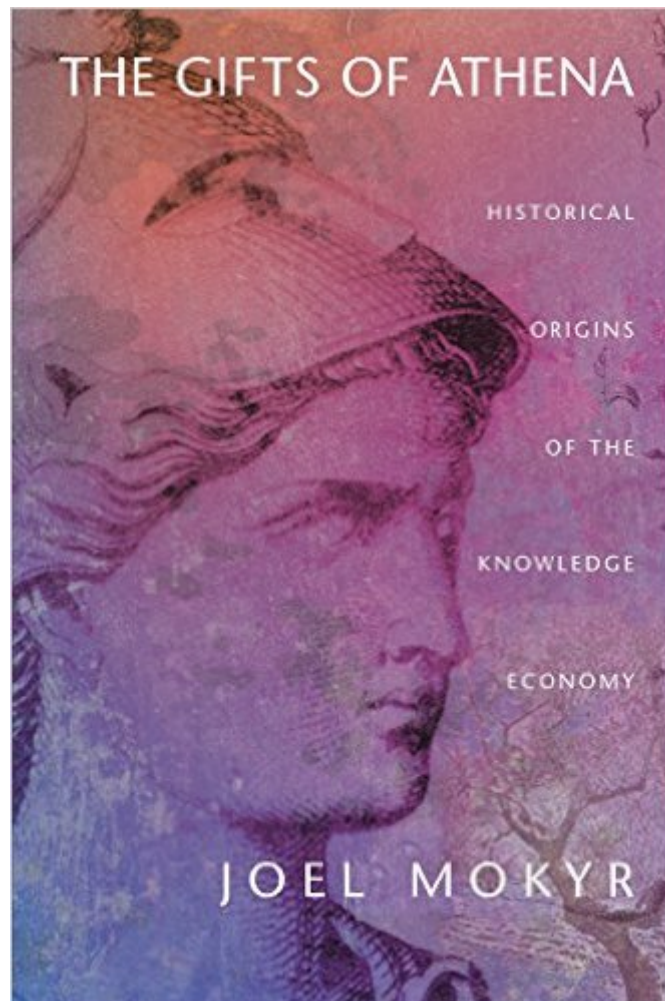


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# The Gifts Of Athena: Historical Origins Of The Knowledge Economy



## Synopsis

The growth of technological and scientific knowledge in the past two centuries has been the overriding dynamic element in the economic and social history of the world. Its result is now often called the knowledge economy. But what are the historical origins of this revolution and what have been its mechanisms? In *The Gifts of Athena*, Joel Mokyr constructs an original framework to analyze the concept of "useful" knowledge. He argues that the growth explosion in the modern West in the past two centuries was driven not just by the appearance of new technological ideas but also by the improved access to these ideas in society at large--as made possible by social networks comprising universities, publishers, professional sciences, and kindred institutions. Through a wealth of historical evidence set in clear and lively prose, he shows that changes in the intellectual and social environment and the institutional background in which knowledge was generated and disseminated brought about the Industrial Revolution, followed by sustained economic growth and continuing technological change. Mokyr draws a link between intellectual forces such as the European enlightenment and subsequent economic changes of the nineteenth century, and follows their development into the twentieth century. He further explores some of the key implications of the knowledge revolution. Among these is the rise and fall of the "factory system" as an organizing principle of modern economic organization. He analyzes the impact of this revolution on information technology and communications as well as on the public's state of health and the structure of households. By examining the social and political roots of resistance to new knowledge, Mokyr also links growth in knowledge to political economy and connects the economic history of technology to the New Institutional Economics. *The Gifts of Athena* provides crucial insights into a matter of fundamental concern to a range of disciplines including economics, economic history, political economy, the history of technology, and the history of science.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Partly because it is too wide-ranging to settle on any sound-bite answer, this is one of the better books around to examine the question of the sources of the West's technological and economic supremacy. In "The Gifts of Athena", Joel Mokyr sets his sights on three objectives: First, to establish that expanding knowledge has been the engine driving the world's expanding economy over the last few centuries, rather than the other way around. Second, to explore the factors that control the discovery and application of new knowledge, so as to get a better grasp on why the Industrial Revolution took place in Europe, and why England might have led the way. Finally, to speculate on what I found to be a startling question: what's to prevent the explosive expansion of technology to which we have become accustomed from falling into stagnation, as lesser periods of innovation have done throughout history? He accomplishes the first objective handily. Apparently some economists believe that the Industrial Revolution must have been driven primarily by economic forces (new means of capitalization and rising demand) rather than by the availability of science, because of the multi-century lag from Kepler and Newton to the economic blastoff. But Mokyr argues that there was a necessary intermediate stage, the "Industrial Enlightenment", which structurally altered the relationship between "what-is" and "how-to" forms of knowledge, as well as making both forms radically more accessible to artisans, entrepreneurs, and the general public. His explorations of the other two questions are fresh and illuminating, but a bit picaresque. There's no overarching theory here and, except for parts of the chapter on adoption of new technology by households, little quantitative rigor.

This is a book that should be read by anyone interested in knowledge and its role in economic growth. "The Gifts of Athena: Historical Origins of the Knowledge Economy," is a sweeping and comprehensive account of the period from 1760 (in what Mokyr calls the "Industrial Enlightenment") through the Industrial Revolution beginning roughly in 1820 and then continuing through the end of the 19th century. The book (and related expansions by Mokyr available as separate PDFs on the Internet) should be considered as the definitive reference on this topic to date. The book contains 40 pages of references to all of the leading papers and writers on diverse technologies from mining to

manufacturing to health and the household. The scope of subject coverage, granted mostly focused on western Europe and America, is truly impressive. Mokyr deals with 'useful knowledge,' as he acknowledges Simon Kuznets' phrase. Mokyr argues that the growth of recent centuries was driven by the accumulation of knowledge and the declining costs of access to it. Mokyr helps to break past logjams that have attempted to link single factors such as the growth in science or the growth in certain technologies (such as the steam engine or electricity) as the key drivers of the massive increases in economic growth that coincided with the era now known as the Industrial Revolution. Mokyr cracks some of these prior impasses by picking up on ideas first articulated through Michael Polanyi's "tacit knowing" (among other recent philosophers interested in the nature and definition of knowledge).

This is an interesting book devoted to the importance of knowledge in the formation of modern industrial economies. Mokyr has several goals. The first and most important is to illuminate the origins of the modern industrial economy. Others are to illustrate the impact of modern economy, particularly its knowledge based elements, on modern life, to discuss barriers to the acquisition and dissemination of new and useful knowledge, and to discuss differences in economic behavior between firms and households. The quality of the book is somewhat uneven, possibly because this book is based on prior essays and lectures that Mokyr has prepared in the last decade. While the book certainly has a strong theme, the individual chapters don't always cohere. The initial part of the book is devoted to the thesis that a key, perhaps the key, feature leading to the genesis of the Industrial Revolution, was the birth in Western Europe of interest in "useful knowledge." This is not science per se, or engineering per se, but an amalgam of both driven by a desire to use knowledge of the natural world in ways that manipulate the natural world to human advantage. For Mokyr, the scientific revolution of the 17th century is a necessary precursor to the Industrial Revolution but the foundation of the Industrial Revolution is the Enlightenment's dedication to science, rationalism, its insistence that human activity can improve the lot of humanity, and its insistence on public dissemination of useful knowledge through publishing and education. The quintessential example of this crucial aspect of the Enlightenment is the Great Encyclopedia, dedicated to disseminating the best practices in virtually all areas of human activity.

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