



Garry Kasparov shows that modernity is not passé

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When was the last time you heard anybody have anything good to say about “modernity”? Garry Kasparov, former world chess champion turned champion of freedom and still a leader of the Russian opposition against Putin, came to town this week, courtesy of the Montreal Economic Institute, to remind us that sending a message can be more important than winning.

Kasparov’s positive references to modernity are jolting today, in an age that no longer remembers the lessons of the European Enlightenment.

He grouped Putin’s Russia together with the Iranian theocracy and Islamic State, calling them dictatorships that limit individualism and free enterprise, seeking to crush them in opposition to the Enlightenment values of modernity and freedom.

After becoming, in 1985 at age 22, the youngest ever undisputed world chess champion, he dominated the sport for two decades, also achieving the then highest-ever world chess rating.

In 2005, he retired from chess to create the Russian social movement United Civil Front and then the anti-Putin political coalition The Other Russia. After nearly a decade of opposition activity, during which he was several times arrested and beaten, Kasparov left Russia in 2013, after the Russian police called him in once again for questioning.

His friend Boris Nemtsov had warned him, “You enter the courthouse as a witness and you leave as a suspect.” Nemtsov, another well-known Russian opposition figure, was himself murdered in February this year, on a major Moscow bridge in direct view of the Kremlin, provoking global outrage.

Chess taught Kasparov his political values. These values are epitomized in the ancient Greek concept “agonizomai,” which referred to the striving for athletic excellence in the Olympics. It did not mean a contest with others, but rather “self-contest.” It means the striving to find new self-challenges, which Kasparov continually sought in his chess career.

The idea of the “postmodern” world bereft of anchors and values, and which has superseded “modernity,” is oversold. It comes from experiences like the need to abandon the notion of a career in favour of a succession of shorter-term employment situations that do not lead up a ladder of achievement to a visible goal.

As a result, people lose perspective. The danger is that they end up chasing their own tail, imprisoned in dead ends of their own subjective self-reflection.

That is how “late modernity” (rather than “post-modernity”) threatens the loss of faith in progress at every level, from the individual to the social. But without perspective, you do not know where you have come from or where you are going. No perspective means no progress.

At the individual level, modernity means individual initiative and search for individual responses to individual challenges. That is what Kasparov learned from chess, and it is why he says he continues to devote so much time to organizing and teaching chess to young people.

Kasparov’s talk in Montreal was like a coda to his own political evolution. This evolution achieved its final expression with his Milton Friedman Prize keynote speech last year at the Cato Institute in Washington, nearly 40 years after having started out as a Young Pioneer in the Soviet Union.

The skills he learned from chess were decision-making, risk-taking, achieving under pressure and responding to new challenges: skills transferable from chess to life. Modernity is not over so long as there are people like Kasparov to remind us how to give ourselves direction.