

The Enlightenment

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I. What was the Enlightenment?

Over two centuries ago, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote an essay entitled 'Was ist Aufklärung?' [What is the Enlightenment?]. For Kant, the Enlightenment represented an age when human consciousness was liberated from ignorance and error, culminating in a full understanding of nature as well as the human self.

As a great turning point in the struggle for human rights, The Enlightenment turned philosophy into a vehicle for social and political reform. It was an international phenomenon with a political and ideological dynamic whose core values derived from the scientific revolution, and the liberalism of the 17th century.

The main figures of the Enlightenment were from the major European countries and from British North America. They ranged from the Isaac Newton and John Locke, whose works provided many of the key stimulants for the Enlightenment, to David Hume and Edward Gibbon in England, François Marie Arouet Voltaire, Charles-Louis de Secondat Montesquieu, Denis Diderot, Jean le Rond d'Alembert, Jacques Turgot and Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat Condorcet in France, the Swiss-born Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Germans Paul-Henri Thiry d'Holbach, Kant and Johann Gottfried von Herder, and the American Benjamin Franklin. Slightly less influential but important figures included Julien Offray de La Mettrie, Claude Adrien Helvetius, Jeremy Bentham, the Italian Cesare Beccaria, the systematizer of political economy Adam Smith, as well as a number of other Scots, and the first makers of a constitution providing civil liberties--- Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Sam Adams, and Alexander Hamilton. They shared the broad perspective of criticizing the ancient regime, of striving to emancipate humanity through knowledge, education and science, from superstition, theological dogma, and clerical control. The Enlightenment's chief and linked targets were feudal absolutism and religious dogmatism. As Diderot wrote in 1771, the characteristic spirit of the century, as visualized by the philosophes, was liberty.

For sections of the Enlightenment, there was a commitment to republicanism, tolerance, and experimentation. Despite limitations it was universal in its rhetoric, and this enabled wider masses of the "third estate" a new sense of their rights and their dignity. Emphasizing separation of Church and state, Liberalism proposed secular responses to the sufferings of the people, in opposition to organized religion and its claims. It tried to replace prejudice and force by reasoned responses to grievances. While liberalism was firmly committed to bourgeois class power, it was also to initiate a

concern with constraining the arbitrary exercise of power of the state. Liberalism in England was produced in response to royalist absolutism as well as democracy. For the Whigs led by the Earl of Shaftesbury, it was necessary to forge an alliance with former Cromwellians and even former Levelers, while ensuring that political power was retained by the bourgeoisie. The political theory put forward by Locke, one of Shaftesbury's associates, identified the public domain with "political society" or the state and the private domain with the interplay of particular interests and private property in "civil society." And the state should engage in only the most important tasks and essentially leave "civil society" to run its course. He made certain abstract assumptions about human nature, identified them with the rising bourgeoisie, and drew the consequences for politics, namely, the fact that protection of property was the reason for forming the state. He acknowledged the right of people to resistance if the executive power overstepped its limits. But by making a distinction between express consent and tacit consent, he created a separation between the bourgeoisie and the subaltern classes. But all citizens were to retain the rights to "life, liberty, and property", which would later receive a slightly different expression in the American Declaration of Independence as the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness". Locke also anticipated Montesquieu in making a case for the separation of powers. However, the universalist claims were elided by the exclusion of the propertyless, of atheists, Catholics and women. Despite the exclusion of Catholics and atheists from full citizenship, however, Locke, in his 'letter on toleration,' argued in favor of toleration as the prudent way to deal with differences and dogmatism. Locke was actually quite moderate and he ultimately separated the rights of the bourgeoisie and the rights of wage-workers. But his liberalism was couched in terms acceptable to the radicals whom Shaftesbury wanted to bring into alliance (e.g., former Levelers), and therefore was capable of being interpreted as arguing that grievances of the weak and exploited demand rational adjudication, failing which revolution becomes legitimate.

The Enlightenment was also deeply influenced by Rene Descartes and Newton, and the idea that scientific method should be applicable to all walks of life developed. Newton established the dynamic view of the universe in place of the static one that had dominated ancient and medieval Europe. This transformation, combined with his atomism, showed that Newton was in unconscious harmony with the economic and social world of his time, in which static feudal hierarchy was giving way to dynamic capitalism and individual enterprise. Indeed, the most immediate effect of his ideas was in the economic and political field. Through Locke and Hume, these ideas were to create the general skepticism of authority and of a divinely constituted social order, while strengthening belief in laissez-faire. The war of words between Catholics and various shades of reformed churches brought the bible into question, assisted by the growth of critical scholarship. Uncritical acceptance of the letter of the bible was giving way to increasing questioning of revealed religion. Pierre Bayle, an unorthodox Huguenot, wrote a Dictionnaire that gave prominence to such questions.

II. A Science of Man

Central to the Enlightenment was a search for a Science of Man, analogous to the science of nature. La Mettrie and other materialists, who denied the existence of an independent soul, wanted to develop a science of physiology to understand man. Locke, Helvetius and others sought to understand the thinking process. Giambattista Vico and Gibbon were concerned with history. Montesquieu and Hume were among those who thought the important thing was to analyze the political and economic laws governing the relationships between society and the individual. Hume expressed this most clearly in his desire to create a science of politics and to be the 'Newton of the moral science'.

The developments in astronomy, cosmology, and physics had destroyed the harmonies of geocentric

universe. The earth had ended up as a tiny planet displaced from the center of the universe. The new mechanical philosophy of the scientists saw nature as a network of particles governed by mathematically expressible universal laws. This was a massive triumph of investigation and conceptualization through a procedure whereby experimentation and first-hand experience, and the regularity of nature would be used to reveal the laws of human existence as a conscious being in society. The Enlightenment stress on humans mastering nature had a dual characteristic. On one hand, it meant a confidence in human progress through science. On the other hand, it also meant, when extended too far, a non-recognition that humans are part of the natural world, and a potential for damaging the environment. Voltaire emphasized in his *Lettres philosophiques*, that Newton's achievement truly demonstrated that science was the key to human progress. In England, the fact that the bourgeoisie was well entrenched in power meant an ideological compromise with religion, admirably expressed in Alexander Pope's epitaph on Newton ("God said, Let Newton be! And All was Light"). Robert Boyle, a founder of modern chemistry, created by his Will the Boyle lectures, designed to prove that God and Christianity were compatible with the new science. This was a firm rejection of consistent materialism. But in the continent, a more radical program of critique was developed, based on an assumption about the human capacity for progress.

Christianity had characterized humans as irremediably flawed due to the 'original sin'. Enlightenment dismissed such an approach as unscientific, and argued also that passions like love, desire, pride and ambition were not necessarily evil. 'Private vice', it was argued, could provide 'public benefits'. Helvetius and Bentham developed a psychological approach whereby enlightened social policy should encourage enlightened self-interest to ensure the greatest good of the greatest number. The Scottish political economist Adam Smith developed similar ideas in the case of economics. To change humankind, it was necessary and possible to educate them. From Locke onwards, the Enlightenment therefore sought to develop better education.

III. Some Major Figures

Voltaire, one of the two most influential philosophes, sought to introduce the English philosophy of empiricism in France. In 1762, Voltaire took up defense of toleration when a Protestant, Jean Calas, was tried and inhumanly tortured for allegedly killing his son to stop him from converting to Catholicism. In 1763 he published *A Treatise on Tolerance*. He condemned state imposition of religious doctrines and campaigned for the right to choose one's religion, and held that secular values should take precedence over religious values.

A nobleman and a member of Bordeaux parlement [feudal courts], Montesquieu's defense of the rights of parlements may have been inspired by feudal resistance to the centralizing tendencies of absolutism. But his defense of the separation of powers, notwithstanding his motives, contributed to a critique of absolutism and the defense of liberty. His major work on political theory was *Spirit of the Laws* (1748).

Rousseau, the Geneva born writer and the most influential of all Enlightenment personalities, was a champion of the idea of liberty, who argued, in the early essay, the *Discourse on Inequality*, that government was the result of social contract, and that the contract was flawed, since people had lost their liberty, and the wealthy and powerful members of society tricked the majority into a bad form of socialization. In 1762 he published his *Social Contract*, arguing for government being based on the equality of all citizens. Much has been made of the fact that he had admirers among the counter-revolution, but certainly, there were no admirers of the *Social Contract* at Koblenz, one of the centers of counter-revolution. Moreover, Rousseau's concept of the 'noble savage' and his critique of any linear concept of progress, indicated his belief that not the aristocrats, but the ordinary people

were important, their lives, their rights mattered, and 'progress' that ignored them was not acceptable as real progress. His comment that men must be forced to be free has given rise to one current of thought, according to which he was a statist. Rousseau was prepared to use state power to attack gross inequalities, which went against the English liberal tradition.

Gotthold Lessing in Germany, argued for religious tolerance in his most famous work is *Nathan the Wise* (1779), loosely modeled after Moses Mendelssohn, a prominent Jew who was part of Haskalah [Jewish Enlightenment]. Lessing published Mendelssohn's *Philosophical Conversations* in 1755. Mendelssohn provided new translations of the bible with commentaries for his fellow Jews. He also campaigned for their rights. His *Jerusalem* (1783) was a powerful plea for freedom of conscience, hailed by Kant.

Beccaria's *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764) radically changed the European outlook on justice and the penal system. He argued that judicial punishment should not be used as vengeance, but to protect society. The book was published in six editions within a year and a half, and translated rapidly into most European languages. Voltaire wrote an anonymous preface for the French edition. His powerful campaign had the effect, in a number of countries, of improving prisons, reducing the number of crimes for which people were sentenced to death, and abolishing torture and mutilation (at least within the European countries themselves).

IV. The *Encyclopédie* and other Radical Works

The most significant product of the Enlightenment was certainly the massive encyclopedia planned and executed by Diderot, d'Alembert and their friends. The *Encyclopédie* was in fact the collective effort of over 100 French thinkers. This was not a neutral work. It was clearly planned in such a manner that, for example, religion would come under sharp attack, being aligned not with philosophy but with superstition. The division of knowledge in the *Encyclopédie*, particularly d'Alembert's theoretical preface, was responsible for the later classification of human sciences into human and natural sciences, as well as the division between natural and mechanical sciences. Diderot, the main figure behind the work, wanted to give all people the ability to increase their knowledge, thereby giving them the ability to challenge the power of the ruling elite. Robert Darnton's studies (Darnton 1979 and 2006) show what the reading public wanted. At one level, it confirms the idea that the Enlightenment had greater appeal. Thus, the cheap pirated editions of the *Encyclopédie* sold over 25000 sets in 1776-1789. The trade in banned books shows how a host of people – printers, booksellers, peddlers, and mule drivers – took great risks because of the profits involved. Catalogues of the Swiss publishers show a mix of philosophy and obscenity (particularly political pornography attacking the feudal elite and the crown). There were plenty of philosophe tracts, some major ones, often popularizations, which show the penetration of philosophe ideas among the reading public at large.

Among other works, it is necessary to mention the presently nearly forgotten socialist and communist utopians, Mably and Morelly. Mably had a belief in natural human equality, and his idea of equality went beyond civil and political to socio-economic equality. He proposed the abolition of private property so that people's antisocial or egotistical instincts would not overcome their inclinations to sympathy and altruism. Morelly wrote *The Code of Nature* (1755), a utopian work. He was opposed to ownership of such private property that could enable one to exploit others. It has sometimes been suggested that Morelly was a pseudonym used by Diderot or Francois-Vincent Toussaint.

V. The Enlightenment and Revolution

There had existed from Edmund Burke onwards, a conspiracy theory that the Enlightenment had conspired to bring about the French Revolution. This is no longer held by any serious historian. Yet the Enlightenment certainly played a more complex role in the Atlantic Revolutions. The American Enlightenment began from the 1690s, and culminated in the 1730s. Apart from the European Enlightenment, the Americans also had a strong influence of the Puritans in their Enlightenment. Puritan colleges played an important role in the development of new thinking. A desire for new knowledge led people to push for developments in science as well as politics. Explorations and their reports formed one way in which the Americans participated in the scientific community. At the same time, such explorations had the motive of gathering, classifying and systematizing knowledge about the colonies. A different and important kind of contribution to the scientific community came from Franklin and his experiments on electricity, showing that all electricity was one, rather than there being different types of electricity. Franklin was convinced that new scientific discoveries like electricity should be put to use for the improvement of human life. Franklin was also a major political figure in the American colonies, and was a member of the Committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence.

The most influential aspects of the American Enlightenment were political developments. The ideas of the American Enlightenment led to America's independence and the principles of the United States Constitution. Through Enlightenment ideals people began to think that a ruler had to be held accountable to higher laws. The ideas of James Harrington, Locke, Hume and others were translated by American political thinkers and leaders like Jefferson, Samuel Adams, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams and James Madison to debate the nature of representative government and the rights of states, and of individuals. The Bill of Rights, like the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, is a fundamentally Enlightenment document.

The Enlightenment, especially through Rousseau and Tom Paine, created an egalitarian political culture. But the ideas of leading philosophers could not have found such widespread acceptance without the work of lesser people, who worked in philosophical societies, scientific academies, Masonic lodges and salons, diffusing Enlightenment ideas to wider audiences. Working in these institutions caused the creation of a relatively democratic culture. Such social spaces also created new internal politics. In the Masonic lodges, for instance, studied by Jacob (1991), constitutional practices, derived from the English tradition, were normalized. In the Masonic movement it is possible to see how a relatively large number of members came together, and where philosophers and their followers met with men of commerce, government and the professions.

Among the difficulties of seeing the French revolution as deriving from the ideas of the Enlightenment was the fact that most surviving philosophes, like Guillaume Thomas François Raynal, Jean-François, Marquis de Saint-Lambert, Jean-François Marmontel, and André Morellet rejected it. However, there were some people who made a clear effort to bridge the gap between the Enlightenment and the revolution. Gary Kates' (1985) study of the Cercle Social suggests Enlightenment was the ideological arm of the Girondins. On the intellectual wing it had a printing press, published several journals, and immersed itself into educational projects. Condorcet was close to the Cercle Social, Roland and Brissot central to it. As Brissot put it, they wanted to develop rational political institutions based on the ideas of the Enlightenment. The Girondins included some of the most militant enemies of priest-craft and superstition in the best spirit of the Encyclopedists. They were instrumental behind the creation of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. Behind all these efforts was the belief that human nature can be changed by education. But this was hardly a Girondin monopoly. Robespierrest Jacobins equally wanted unity, and wanted the state to educate children. But there were problems with the whole approach. All the revolutionaries wanted unity,

but they were divided in their ideas. There was not enough space for democratic dissent. Kates argues that the Girondins were not a bourgeois party, but the party of Enlightenment. But there does not seem any contradiction between the two. Their program included a free market economy and a minimum of government regulation. Their idea that reason should be extended to the popular masses was an idea of extending bourgeois hegemony in a changed situation, when the common people were able to express their ideas, hopes and fears openly.

The Montagnards led by Robespierre, with their veneration for Rousseau and his concept of the General Will, had little use for most other philosophes. Whether their interpretation of Rousseau was correct or not is still a burning question. But Blum's (1986) impressive study shows that Robespierre was authentically faithful to Rousseau, if in a narrow, rigid and unnuanced manner. Any attempt to set up a polar opposition between the Enlightenment outlook of the Girondins and the anti-Enlightenment outlook of the Jacobins fails, for the counter-position between the ideal of peace espoused by the philosophes and the crusading war of the revolution, ignores the reality that it was Brissot who wanted revolutionary war, while Robespierre opposed it despite a period of isolation. Thus the philosophes did influence the revolution, but because neither the philosophes nor the revolutionaries are homogeneous, the influence needs to be studied in a disaggregated manner. At the same time, we can also see that there did exist an overall thrust which can be called bourgeois, but it was the ideology of a pre-revolutionary bourgeoisie, preaching not the ideas of revolution but reform. After all, so did the majority of the members of the Estates General at first.

VI. The Enlightenment: Extension or Rejection?

The universalism of the Enlightenment was however flawed. Class, gender and race provide three major areas of criticism. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (A Vindication)*, written as a sustained polemic with Rousseau's views on women as expressed notably in *Emile*, was an attempt to turn the Enlightenment discourse about reason and progress to a critique of the limitations of the Enlightenment and to broaden its scope. Wollstonecraft belonged to the left-wing English circles, and had previously written a rejoinder to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Her work is therefore a liberal feminist one. The rational liberal individual on inspection turned out to not include women. The democratic ideal of citizenship was not easily extended to women. Despite the seeming universalism of *A Vindication*, its subjects are not all women. Wollstonecraft actually had in mind almost exclusively a very restricted group of chiefly middle-class women. In making her case, Wollstonecraft is not basically breaking with Rousseau's central moral position; she is simply demanding that it be extended to women. In all other respects—in her extreme endorsement of independence over all other possible values of life, in her insistence that moral autonomy is the measure of one's humanity, or in her passionate faith in education as a means of achieving such autonomy —she is picking up explicitly from Rousseau.

In *Emile*, Rousseau had rejected the possibility of women's civil, economic and psychological independence because he held that women had a supposedly insatiable sexual appetite, and independence would make it possible for them to exercise that appetite in a licentious manner. Women's emancipation would be a step backward for rational and egalitarian progress – that is, women were excluded from his scheme of reason and equality. This was where she debated Rousseau, asserting:

- As men's and women's common humanity is based on their God-given reason, then there could not be two sets of virtues, one for men and another for women. Women were as capable of reason as men.

- Since men and women are equally possessed of reason they must be equally educated in its use, so that they could make rational choices.
- Since women and men have equal worth, they must also have equal rights. Though she had in mind bourgeois women, the principle could subsequently be extended.

Pateman (1988) has broadened the scope of the feminist critique by arguing that the entire social contract theory was founded on an 'original contract' made by brothers, literally or metaphorically, who, after overthrowing the rule of the father, then agree to share their domination of the women who were previously under the exclusive control of one man, the father.

In the same way, the Enlightenment was in practice a class bound project. Yet however bourgeois the Enlightenment project, seeing *égalité* as a property-based legal right rather than as a social condition of fulfillment, even that proclamation was possible only as an act of revolution overcoming the feudal order, where fixity of social status and superstition, absolutism and religious hierarchy had been central. Marxism clearly sought to radicalize Enlightenment rationality, extending its concept of equality and progress not to certain privileged sectors but to the whole of humanity. Marx built on Enlightenment idealism (in its continuation in Hegel), to create its opposite, historical materialism. Marxism sought to see history in terms of class structure, and to argue that progress does not end with the coming to power of the bourgeoisie, but extends forward till the emancipation of all humanity. This does not mean that Marxist view of historical materialism denies all power to other categories like gender and race. Marxist practice repeatedly demonstrated that. The influence of Marxism was evident in the first International's support to the abolition of slavery by the U.S. government under Abraham Lincoln. Marx and Engels supported the Indian revolt of 1857. It was the Communist International, that sought to relate the class struggle of the proletariat to the struggles for national liberation in the colonies.

Classical Marxism began developing a concept of women's liberation that, while perhaps not complete from a contemporary viewpoint, went well beyond anything liberal feminism of the 19th century had to offer. By linking the struggle for socialism with the struggle for women's emancipation, it redefined not just women's liberation but also socialism. But the point about class struggle cannot be minimized, or reduced to one among many factors. Marx extends the universalism of the Enlightenment by seeking to create a society of associated producers, where the denial of humanity will be overcome, and the coerced alienation of production will be ended.

Finally, the Enlightenment has been criticized for being Eurocentric. Yet this is only partly true. The radical heirs of the Enlightenment extended its scope. The French Revolution did extend human rights to blacks during its radical phase.

Rightwing attacks on the Enlightenment began with resistance to revolution, democracy or simple toleration, and was pushed forward by among other institutions the Catholic Church. Racists who tried to view world history as a battle between Aryans and Jews, like Houston Stewart Chamberlain likewise rejected the Enlightenment. With the Russian Revolution, and Marxism claiming globally the mantle of the radical Enlightenment, attacks on the Enlightenment sharpened further. The Nazi "revolution" not only used massive repression to smash the proletariat, but also proclaimed the rejection of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment. This denial paved the way for the Holocaust. It is worth remembering that Nazism was a conscious opposite of the democratic principles of the 1848 revolution, principles which were inspired by Lessing's views. Rightwing attacks on Marxism and the Russian Revolution broadened, even in the academic field, during the Cold War, to include the French Revolution and the Enlightenment. By associating violence exclusively with revolutionaries, or by ascribing to Rousseau the fatherhood of 'totalitarian democracy', it becomes possible to gloss over sustained upper class violence and rightwing

curtailments of democracy. Academic histories, by ignoring the acute political conflict between different ideologies, turn the Enlightenment into a dead past, of interest only to specialist historians. In reality there is no comparison between the Enlightenment and the anti-Enlightenment. Voltaire's anti-Semitism can be condemned only because the Enlightenment condemned anti-Semitism. Kant can be criticized for supporting the death penalty because of Beccaria's campaign against it. The Counter-Enlightenment does not offer any progressive alternative for the present. If progressive forces today can oppose Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay prison, or the jailing of political dissenters across the world, their weapons were forged by the Enlightenment.

A different critique of the Enlightenment again is that presented by a tired left that accepts capitalism as permanent, rejects the vision of continuing universal progress, and therefore finds it necessary to pour ridicule on such beliefs of the Enlightenment as progress, humanism, and universalism. This critique of the Enlightenment, basing itself on relativism, demands that the values of the Enlightenment must be seen as values of the West, and denies the right of people across the world to adopt those values in the name of multiculturalism. The alleged colonialism or Euro-centrism of the Enlightenment becomes a weapon to deny the right of the oppressed of the non-Western world to demand rights on any universal bases. In particular, it rejects all metanarratives, debunks the significance of both liberal values of civil rights and the socialist stress on class struggle. At the same time, Enlightenment ideologies are attacked in the name of some of the ideologues whose affinities, or in certain cases open espousal of, the most reactionary politics of the late 19th and 20th centuries are not in doubt. Nietzsche, who invoked the superman and who detested democracy and socialism; Heidegger, who sympathized with the Nazis, joined them in 1932 and remained with the party till 1945, are among those who are positively evaluated. Post-modernists like Lyotard have expressed the belief that Marxism, like the Enlightenment in general, culminated in Stalinism because of its "totalizing" impulses.

Postmodernist social theory, and postmodernism in general, exists for the most part in social science and humanities departments in Universities, reflecting the retreat from public political practice into a purely academic and unreal world. They represent little more than a return to a thin sort of idealism, consigning materiality and the economic base to the garbage bin and claiming that what is "real" is actually constructed by language. There goes with this a privileging of the notion of "difference". So in place of the unity created by class, what is left is political action based on "differences" in identity. As a result, the idea of progress is simply thrown out. The extreme right and the postmodern left agree that Stalinism (equated with Marxism) should be seen as the main problem, and behind it the Enlightenment, while playing down capitalist brutality, all the way to whitewashing supporters of Nazism or trivializing it. Postmodernism's critique of the Enlightenment also appropriates many of the themes of racism. Its emphasis that "essentialism" must be rejected is useful as a reminder that human identities are socially constructed. But post-modernist "anti-essentialism" tends to repudiate social determinants. If race is treated as an "identity" detached from a particular mode of production, then racism can become an eternal feature of human society. Yet here too, it was the Enlightenment that created the possibility of understanding such categories historically and resisting exploitation and oppression based on them.

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