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Enlightenment, Age of

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As a historical epoch, “The Age of Enlightenment” comprises the crucial developments of Western civilization in the 18th century. In France, which is considered the cradle of the Enlightenment, this period included the time from the death of Louis XIV (1715) until the coup d’état of Napoleon Bonaparte (1799). But Enlightenment was spread also over Europe, involving a range of developments in Germany, Britain, Scotland, and Russia, and crossed even further over the Atlantic to influence the substantial events in the history of North America. The founding fathers of the United States were devoted followers of either British or French Enlightenment thought.

The Enlightenment is generally known as a broad social, political, cultural, and intellectual movement, which had been the culmination of a longer period, initiated by the Renaissance and Humanism of the 14th and 15th centuries and followed by Reformation and the natural philosophy and science revolutions of the 16th and 17th centuries. This latter era as a whole, including the Enlightenment as its pinnacle, is described as “The Age of Reason.” At the same time, the Enlightenment marked a new beginning. New ideas and approaches to old institutions set the stage for great revolutions to come. Politically, this period included the revolutions both in France (1789–1799) and America (1763–1793). In terms of social development of humanity, the Enlightenment marked the decisive turn to modernity, with its ideals of liberté, égalité, fraternité, all destined to have been split up into the opposite ideologies of capitalism and socialism; these too are the emanations of the Enlightenment, with their shared goal to transform the human world, even though pursued by radically different means of liberal democracy versus social revolution. In terms of cultural and intellectual paradigms, the Enlightenment marked the advent of the reign of rationality, science, education, and progress. The movement’s intention was to lead humanity out of a long period of irrationality, superstition, and tyranny of the Dark Ages (the Middle Ages). Individualism, freedom, and change replaced community, authority, and tradition as core European values. In fact, the Enlightenment intellectuals themselves were those who coined the name for their era and project. They believed that human reason could be employed in order to build a better world. However, the Enlightenment was the age [p. 818 ↓ ] of reason, which could not eliminate faith as such, despite all its efforts; rather, it replaced the religious faith with the secular faith in reason itself.
The essence of the Enlightenment in such a sense was best formulated by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) in his famous short essay titled “Was ist Aufklärung?” (1784), who gave the motto of enlightenment as “Sapere aude! Have courage to use your own intelligence!” However, Kant made a distinction between the “Age of Enlightenment” and the “enlightened age,” while associating the former with the public and the latter with the private spheres of human life. The full triumph of the Enlightenment principles he could see only in the public.

Intellectually, philosophy can be said to represent the heart of the Enlightenment. The philosophy of the Enlightenment had continued in the belief in a rational, orderly, and comprehensible universe and put forward the claim for a rational and orderly organization of the state and knowledge in a way expressed in the doctrine of Deism. The idea of universal rational order, either found in nature or made in human society, can be seen as the core of this philosophy. Thus, rationalization, standardization, and the search for universal unities are the hallmarks of the Enlightenment. This idea, as applied to social and political order, found its many ways of expression in the “rationalization” of governments in England, Austria, Prussia, and, in particular, in the ideals of the American Declaration of Independence, the Jacobin program of the French Revolution, as well as the American Constitution of 1787. The figure who had become the icon of the age owing to his best representation of such a line of thought was the elitist French philosopher François-Marie Arouet Voltaire (1694–1778). Voltaire had personally served as a counselor to several European rulers in order to achieve the enlightened state of governance. According to him, freedom and tolerance are the companions of human reason. His slogan “Écrasez l'infâme!” directed at the traditional Catholic Church and its followers, may serve also as a battle cry against all kinds of human stupidities and for the ideal of a rational society. Voltaire believed in the republic of scholars and in the primacy of ideas in historical evolution. Ideas were for him the motive force. Thus, he became the prophet of progress, which also is the gradual assertion of reason. Voltaire and his rationalistic followers have put much hope in the powers of reason to solve all human problems. One of the most optimistic of them was the Marquis de Condorcet (1743–1794), who in his posthumously published work *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1795) provided what can be regarded as the most radical advocacy of human progress based on the power of reason and science in the history of thought. Nonetheless, it was Jean-Jacques
Rousseau (1712–1778), the second important Enlightenment philosopher next to Voltaire and his chief adversary, who started to oppose in many respects such overly constructionist prospects, while inclining more to naturalism, which would, eventually, lead to the Romantic movement. Whereas Voltaire insisted on the supremacy of the intellect, Rousseau emphasized the emotions; whereas Voltaire emphasized social, Rousseau emphasized natural forces. The Romantics represented a sort of internal declination within the Age of Enlightenment, which from Rousseau to German thinker J. W. von Goethe (1749–1832) adopted the naturalistic intuition of self-organization and evolutionary forces. The Romantics intuited the unhappy opposition between the naturalness of self-ordering of nature and the artificiality of rational ordering imposed on an organic world. Rousseau even went so far as to advocate a return to primitive simplicity. The modern dualism of culture versus nature has been born with Rousseau, who also applied it to the sphere of education in his famous novel Émile (1762).

The idea of universal rational ordering was also implemented in the domain of human knowledge and science. The group of intellectuals calling themselves “Encyclopédistes” came up with the idea to bring together all scientific knowledge of all fields in one comprehensive multivolume edition. From this publication, they expected the regeneration of humanity. Denis Diderot (1713–1784) and Jean le Rond d'Alembert (1717–1783) sought the liberation of the mind and education of humanity via the spread of knowledge. Under the editorship of these two, The Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers was published in 17 volumes between 1751 and 1765. The aim of this Enlightenment project was to provide information on every sphere of knowledge and to promote the application of science in industry, trade, and the arts. Encyclopédie can be seen as a true manifesto and epitomizing of the spirit of the Enlightenment. In this spirit Baron D'Holbach (1723–1789) wrote his Systèm de la Nature (1770), in which he firmly asserted that explanations of nature should not be sought in traditional beliefs or the [p. 819 ↓] “revelations” of the Bible, but through the application of scientific method. The Enlightenment thinkers replaced the universalism of theology with the universalism of scientific conceptions.

Such an approach supported the empirical understanding of human nature in the Enlightenment. Etienne Bonnot de Condillac (1715–1780), the most important French Enlightenment empiricist, believed that moral reasoning was susceptible to the same exactitude as geometry and also identified the association of ideas as the key to the
study of human nature. Even though Rousseau and the Encyclopédistes succumbed to the idea of a “noble savage,” according to himself as well as to Voltaire and many others, there is no such thing as godly created nor naturally given unchanging human nature. Rather, it is substantially and almost completely the product of culture and education, as if humans could mold themselves in an arbitrary way. However, there is a problem with human beings here, since the science suggests the doctrine of determinism, effective also in the social realm. Human beings are not exempt from determination even by their biological makeup, and if we accept the naturalist empirical view that human beings are organized systems of matter, as J. O. de La Mettrie (1709–1751) did claim in his work *L’Homme Machine* (1747), and that our minds are formed as a result of experiences, then we may try to explain human behavior in terms of cause and effect. If we knew enough about the biological makeup of an individual, his early childhood experiences, and the social and historical circumstances he was born into, then perhaps we could predict all of his actions. From this point of view, the idea of free will or the ability to choose is simply the result of or ignorance of all of the causal factors. Thus, the idea of determinism, both natural and social, sometimes understood in a very mechanistic way, gave rise to social engineering and started the reign in the realm of anthropology for centuries to come. This has been regarded as the epitome of a scientific approach to human nature, knowledge of which has had to serve as the guidance for rational human action and the building of the rational social order.

The legacy of the Enlightenment can be seen in the set of ideas centralized around rationality and freedom: To be rational is to be free to pursue the scientific truth wherever it may lead us, and to be free is to be rational in the practical pursuing of individual ends and rights. Liberal democracy has been proposed as the best political framework for such a combined application of reason and freedom. However, the history since the 18th century, and in particular the history of the 20th century, has shown that reason is not always the sufficient guarantee of freedom, and vice versa. Without any charge of antihuman intentions placed against the Enlightenment thinkers, it is historical evidence that the atrocities committed in the post-Enlightenment era have also been backed by both the ideologies of rationality and emancipation. It seems as if the Enlightenment has missed some important point in the nature of human nature. The unbound reason can be dangerously intolerant itself, so the problem unresolved has remained, whether reason can be directed from within or not. Furthermore,
another problem has remained open, namely how reason can avoid its inclinations to uniformity and preserve diversity. It seems that liberation from tyrannies of blind dogmas and traditions could not save humanity completely from new rationalistic trappings. Thus, there have been many controversies over the interpretations of the “Enlightenment project.” Already in the 18th century and later in the 19th century, the movement of counter-Enlightenment had appeared (particularly in Germany), but only more recently, later in the 20th century, did it become evident that the main currents of Western civilization have their roots in the Enlightenment. Undoubtedly, the Enlightenment occupies a central role in the justification of the movement known as “modernism” as well as the era known as “modernity.” However, the substantial critique of such trends, based on the failed Enlightenment concept of instrumental rationality, was initiated by philosophers, such as the Germans T. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, in their book *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (1944). Furthermore, at the turn of the 20th century, a cultural and intellectual movement of “postmodernism,” drawing on such philosophers as Nietzsche and represented by the radical critic of the Enlightenment Foucault (1926–1984) and many others, started to invoke the terms “postmodernity” and “post-Enlightenment.” This has brought up the controversy of whether the legacy of the Enlightenment is to be preserved and continued or rather reassessed and abandoned. It is by no means clear whether humanity is to turn to the search for completely new ideals, or to return to the pre-Enlightenment era, or perhaps attempt a New Enlightenment, in the style of the “New Age” movement. There are some, such as German philosopher J. Habermas (b. 1929), who [p. 820 ↓] consider the Enlightenment project unfinished and suggest its completion under some revisions. Thus, judging the Enlightenment shows that it can be both praised and blamed for many things to which it has given an impetus for arising in the modern world.

**Enlightenment versus Postmodernism**

Among the most dynamic and most alarming developments of postmodern culture has been the growth, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom, of what could be called the “skinhead” culture. Beginning in the early 1980s in both countries, this cultural phenomenon was a direct refutation of the cultural and enlightened norms of the day. Its causes were deeply rooted by fears of unemployment among unskilled,
White youths and of large-scale, largely non-White immigration, which White youths feared would submerge them and their way of life. It was caused too by a fear that rising technology would marginalize them, since they did not have the skills needed to compete in an increasingly technological world.

The fact that many immigrants, especially from Pakistan and India, were skilled in modern technology, especially computer science (information technology at its highest level) only served to exacerbate the racism that was a blatant part of the youth ideology. Anti-Semitism was also an important part of their beliefs.

According to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the skinhead culture was a British import to the United States. The uniform spread as well: usually T-shirts, very close haircuts (hence the term “skinheads”), jeans or overalls, and heavy workboots, which were used as weapons in fights. Their music, called “oi” music, was loud and reflected their racial prejudices. Once such song “The Voice of Britain,” as noted by Bill Buford in Among the Thugs, described Jews: “They're the leeches of the nation/but we're going to stand and fight.” In America, skinhead music as well was overtly racist and nationalistic. In England, the skinheads adopted the Manchester United Soccer Club as their favorite team (although Manchester played absolutely no role in encouraging this development). On both sides of the Atlantic, the skinheads also brought their hatred to bear on sexual minorities, including lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered, and the intersexed.

The tendency of the skinheads to resort to violence was a fact that was not lost on the organizers of the extreme right wing, such as Tom Metzger of the American White Aryan Resistance (WAR), who attempted to use their free-floating hatred to groom skinheads as the new storm troopers of the White Supremacy movement. Metzger founded WAR in 1983. The ADL noted that, “On November 12, 1988, skinheads from the Portland, Oregon, group East Side White Pride, attacked three Ethiopian immigrants with a baseball bat and steel-toed boots. One of the immigrants—Mulugeta Seraw—was killed. Investigation into the murder resulted in three convictions and revealed close connections between the skinhead gang and White Aryan Resistance. The jury ultimately awarded $12.5 million in damages to the Seraw family ($5 million from WAR; $3 million from Tom Metzger; $4 million from John Metzger; $500,000 from two of the murderers). Upheld on appeal in April 1993, the judgment was one of the largest civil verdicts of its kind in United States history.”
Although the lawsuit effectively brought an end to any large-scale organizing that Metzger was able to do, he continued in his role as a leader of the extreme right in the United States. In an update in March 2002, the ADL noted that there were lessons Metzger felt that could be learned from the Palestinian terrorists.

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