



The Enlightenment

By Amy Elizabeth Robinson

The Enlightenment was a period in history named not for its battles, but for its ideas. Still, the intellectual and cultural changes it introduced certainly contributed to many political revolutions around the world.

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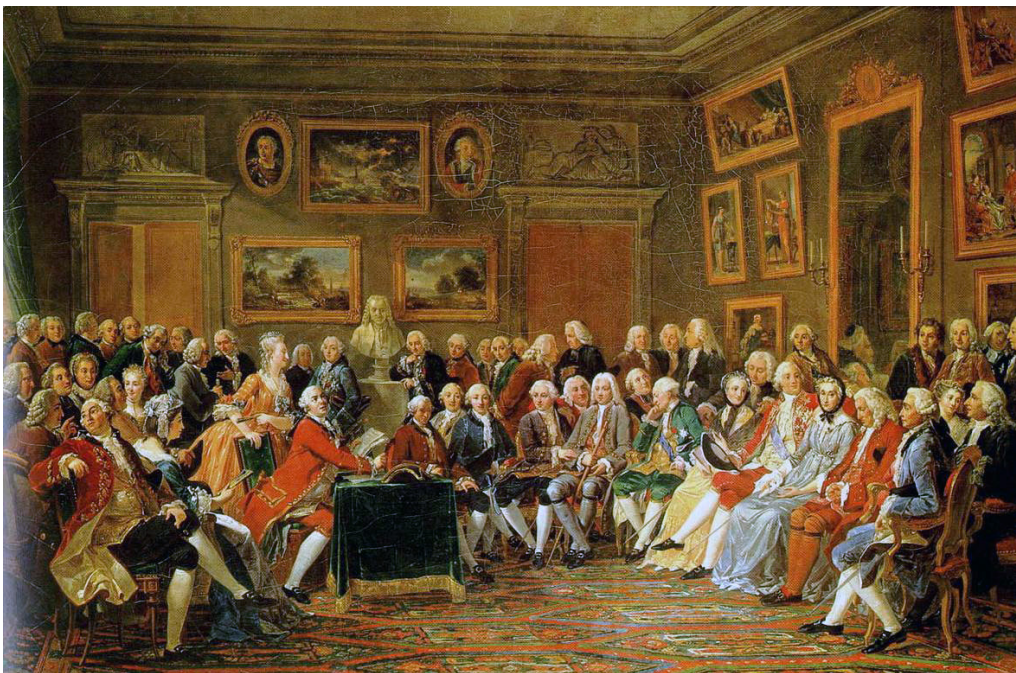


Between the late seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries, there was a period of rapid intellectual change that came to be known as the Enlightenment. Thinkers, writers, artists, political leaders, and also new groups of “ordinary” people drove this major cultural and intellectual movement. They believed they were finally shining the “light” of reason on the natural and human worlds. In 1784, German philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote that an “enlightened” understanding should start with the command: “*Dare to know!*”

The Enlightenment shook the foundations of European intellectual life, but that wasn’t all. It also had social, economic, and political consequences across the globe. To understand the role of the Enlightenment in world history, we need to look both at its ideas and their social setting. These were not sudden, light-bulb-above-your-head ideas. They emerged from ongoing discussions among a variety of people. Enlightenment thinkers, writers, and artists—often called *philosophes*—were particularly active in Europe and European settler colonies. However, they were connected to growing networks that criss-crossed the globe. Novels, newspapers, and travel literature spread new ideas, and a sense of connection with others. Goods, information, and people moved more swiftly across the oceans. This growing connectedness, combined with a daring openness to change, made Enlightenment ideas the fuel that would power many revolutions.

What was so enlightening about the Enlightenment?

The Enlightenment started as a scientific and intellectual movement. But it was soon a political movement, with economic and cultural significance as well. Historians always have trouble describing it, but of course they still try. Eric Hobsbawm describes Enlightenment thinking as “not that of a system but of an attitude and a passion.” Margaret Jacob says it was “a new cultural style of open-mindedness, investigation, and satire.” Dorinda Outram talks more about eighteenth-century social context, and the rise of a “public sphere.” Not all Enlightenment thinkers agreed about everything, but they *were* devoted to lively study, critique, and conversation. They met at public lectures, salons, coffeehouses, and new lending libraries, where they could cast “light” on questions that had lurked in darkness for centuries.



[Salons were gatherings of people who discussed the new ideas emerging with the Enlightenment.](#) This portrait by Lemonnier, c. 1755, depicts a reading of one of Voltaire’s works in the salon of Marie Thérèse Rodet Geoffrin. Public domain.

As a scientific and intellectual movement, the Enlightenment had roots in the Scientific Revolution. In 1687, Isaac Newton's *Principia* had introduced "rational mechanics" into the study of mathematics and astronomy. Following Newton, Enlightenment thinkers believed that a "natural law" could be discovered underneath all aspects of life. But they did not think that people could discover this law if they only learned from religious texts and leaders. Rather, it would be found by examining the world around them.

As a political movement, some historians trace the Enlightenment to the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688. That's when King James of England, Ireland, and Scotland was deposed and replaced by his daughter Mary and her husband William of Orange. William was the *stadtholder* (ruler) of the Dutch Republic, a flourishing economic and intellectual center. People in the Dutch Republic and in the new British constitutional monarchy of 1688 were already trying out new forms of government. Although they still had monarchs, both had representative parliaments, a tradition of "rights," and more religious freedom than most other European states. Soon after the Glorious Revolution, the philosopher John Locke published *Two Treatises of Government* (1690), arguing that government should be formed through a contract between people and their ruler, rather than through ideas of religious hierarchy or divine will.



Plate 12 from The First Book of Urizen (1794).
William Blake, public domain.



"Albion Rose," from *A Large Book of Designs* (1793-96).
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For many Enlightenment thinkers and artists, slavery became not only an ethical issue, but also a metaphor for different sorts of oppression and liberation. Radical artist William Blake used the theme frequently in his work.

The Enlightenment had economic, ethical, and religious aspects, too. In the 1690s, Locke was a shareholder in the Royal African Company, which was profiting from the enslavement of Africans. He argued that slavery was okay if it resulted from "just war" (meaning the war was justified). After all, he believed firmly in the right to private

property, and enslaved people were considered property. But Locke *rejected* the idea that there were any intrinsic differences between humans from different places, with different religious beliefs or skin tones. Over the course of the eighteenth century, most Enlightenment thinkers took Locke's lead and emphasized a sense of shared humanity.

Yet African enslavement kept growing. Profits from this trade contributed to the growth of European port cities and new industrial centers. Enlightenment thinkers increasingly struggled with the fact that the apparent "progress" of the world around them depended on the horrible violence of slavery. Locke's hypocritical position—of expressing one thing, but profiting economically from the opposite—became harder to maintain. Religious groups like the Quakers, and *philosophes* like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith, called for the abolition of slavery. "From whatever aspect we regard the question," wrote Rousseau, "the right of slavery is null and void...The words slave and right contradict each other, and are mutually exclusive" (*The Social Contract*, Book I, Chapter IV).

The Enlightenment and historical "progress"

Who could participate in the networks that made up the Enlightenment, and who could benefit from them? More and more people may have been involved in the conversation, but there were still voices that had trouble being heard. Many *philosophes* believed that women, children, working people, and people from colonies or conquered territories were less developed than white European men, and not ready for full inclusion. Enlightened educational and social institutions were supposed to "prepare" these people to become better, more "reasonable" citizens of modern states. Most abolitionists believed slavery should end only gradually.

The idea of women having a *political* voice was almost nonexistent. One of the eighteenth century's most revolutionary thinkers, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, still believed that the goal of women's education should be to please men. The English intellectual Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792. It was a groundbreaking call for universal education, but it was based on the idea that educated women would make better mothers and teachers of children. This, she believed, was their primary role as citizens. And even at the end of the century, French revolutionaries declared the "rights of man and of the citizen," rather than universal human rights. These perspectives reflected popular ideas about development and difference.

Scottish Enlightenment philosophers William Robertson and Adam Smith believed that societies moved through

specific stages of development. This was part of the "natural law" they believed they were discovering. First, people were hunters, then they were pastoralists, then they began to own land privately and farm. Finally, they invented money, goods could move around, and people could engage in commerce and trade. The pace of invention and the accumulation of wealth in Europe just seemed to confirm these beliefs. "Everything in the universe," wrote the Comte de Mirabeau, a leader of the French Revolution, "is commerce." In *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Smith



Portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft by John Opie, c. 1797. Public domain.

presented his vision for a functioning global economy. It depended, among other things, on free trade. Like most Enlightenment thinkers, Smith believed that if confining institutions and “prejudices” were abolished, and humans were given the freedom to make economic decisions, a common good would naturally arise. This idea was called *laissez-faire*, or “let it happen”.

Smith agreed that humans weren’t there yet, though. He believed modern states should provide public services and education when market mechanisms could not. But his “enlightened” ideas about free markets really took off. They became the intellectual foundation for the expansion of modern capitalism as a system of production and distribution. Ideas about private property, human development, and commercial “progress” were also used to justify colonial occupations and conquest.

So was the Enlightenment really that revolutionary?

Historians disagree about whether the Enlightenment just made small changes, or if it was truly revolutionary. Yes, it provided new tools for examining the world, and expanded a sense of shared humanity. But there was little immediate change to social and economic inequality, despite all the talk. European Enlightenment *philosophes* were typically white, male, and well-off, and benefited from the rapid changes happening around them. They had a reason to want to *reform* existing institutions without turning everything upside down. Other people, usually further outside this circle, had less to lose. Calls for radical and even revolutionary change grew louder as more people saw the widening gap between what the Enlightenment said it stood for, and what was actually happening.

Who were these rebels pushing the Enlightenment to become more radical? “What was most vigorous” in Enlightenment debates, historians Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker say, “did not come from any single national experience.” They argue that a transnational, multiracial working class—meeting on ships and in port cities across the Atlantic—played an important role in demanding radical change. They call this a “universalism from below.” Olaudah Equiano, who had been both an enslaved laborer and a sailor, became a leading voice in the abolitionist movement.

Another abolitionist, French playwright Olympe de Gouges, wrote a Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen in 1791. “The mothers, daughters, and sisters who represent the nation demand to form a national assembly,” she declared, making it clear that women had been excluded from France’s Enlightenment vision. In Latin America, Enlightenment thinkers like José Antonio de Alzate y Ramirez criticized William Robertson’s ideas about indigenous history and the “natural”



Portrait of Olaudah Equiano, from the frontispiece to The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, the African (1789). Public domain.

development of societies. Alzate y Ramirez rejected the rigid “natural laws” supposedly “discovered” by faraway philosophers. Instead, he said that local scholars had a better grasp of Amerindian society. He helped to lay intellectual foundations for Latin American independence movements in the nineteenth century.

But despite these widening demands for liberty, wealthy and influential bourgeois elites continued to hold the power. In some ways, modern states actually acquired more power over people’s everyday lives, through mapping, taxation, education, and the regulation of labor. “Citizenship” was a powerful rallying cry for political participation, but it also left people out. Even revolutionary pamphleteers¹ like the American Thomas Paine, author of *Rights of Man* (1791) could be overly cautious. Paine feared the power of “popular disquietudes [anxiety]...the desperate and the discontented” who, “by assuming to themselves the powers of government, may sweep away the liberties of the continent like a deluge [flood].”

So the Enlightenment left a complicated legacy, both liberating and imposing limits on change. Perhaps it is best to think of it as a *process*, rather than a single thing. Even today, whether you examine microscopic cells in a science classroom, write a novel in a café, or carry a protest sign in the street, you may be engaging in a process of “enlightened” thought and critique.

¹ A pamphleteer was someone who made their ideas and opinions public by distributing small booklets called pamphlets. Basically a seventeenth century blogger.

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