Dr. Belmerabet Fatiha

Lecture One: The Age of Reason/ Enlightenment

1.1. Introduction

For centuries, European monarchs held absolute power, justifying their authority through the belief in the divine right bestowed upon them by God. However, in 1689, England enacted the Bill of Rights, which curtailed the monarch's authority and reduced their power. In contrast, other European countries continued to have monarchs who wielded supreme power without such limitations. In the mid-1700s, a movement known as the Enlightenment emerged, introducing novel concepts about governance. This period marked a time of questioning established practices and beliefs, although untested alternatives were yet to be fully embraced. Furthermore, advocating for these new ideas carried risks and uncertainties.

1.2. The Age of Enlightenment Defined

The Age of Enlightenment, also known as the Enlightenment or the Age of Reason, was a significant philosophical movement that shaped European intellectual thought during the 18th century. It revolved around the central belief that reason should serve as the primary basis for authority and legitimacy. This intellectual shift promoted various ideals such as liberty, progress, tolerance, fraternity, constitutional government, and the separation of church and state. The Enlightenment emphasized the scientific method and encouraged the critical examination of religious traditions. Many of the fundamental concepts underpinning modern democracies, including civil society, human and civil rights, and the separation of powers, originated from the Enlightenment. Additionally, the empirical sciences and academic disciplines we recognize today, including the social sciences and humanities, owe their roots to this era. These developments coincided with and were influenced by European exploration, colonization of the Americas, and the rapid expansion of European influence in Asia and Africa. Some historians consider this period as the "European Moment in World History," characterized by an extended phase of European dominance over other parts of the world, often accompanied by tragic consequences.

1.3. Enlightenment Beginning

The exact commencement of the Age of Enlightenment is a topic of debate among scholars. Two commonly proposed starting points are the early 18th century (1701) or the mid-17th century (1650). Traditionally, historians have placed the period of enlightenment between 1715 and 1789, spanning from the beginning of Louis XV's reign until the French Revolution. The Enlightenment can be traced back to the mid-17th century, marked by significant works such as Descartes' Discourse on Method, published in 1637. In France, some attribute the beginning of the Enlightenment to Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica*, published in 1687. Descartes' philosophical shift from relying on external authority to prioritizing internal authority is seen by certain historians and philosophers as a crucial turning point that signifies the onset of the Enlightenment. Regarding its conclusion, many scholars consider the last years of the 18th century, often citing the French Revolution of 1789 or the onset of the Napoleonic Wars (1804–15), as the endpoint of the Enlightenment.

1.4. Enlightenment Expansion

The Enlightenment had its beginnings in various European countries, each with its own unique focus. In France, it was closely associated with radical anti-government and anti-Church sentiments. In Germany, the Enlightenment reached the middle classes and took on a spiritualistic and nationalistic character that did not pose a threat to established governments or churches. The responses of governments to the Enlightenment varied. In France, the government was hostile towards Enlightenment thinkers, leading to struggles against state control and instances of imprisonment or exile. Meanwhile, the British government largely disregarded the leaders of the Enlightenment in England and Scotland.

The Scottish Enlightenment, which emphasized liberal Calvinism and Newtonian philosophy, played a significant role in the further development of Enlightenment ideas in the transatlantic context, particularly in the Americas. In Italy, the decline in the Church's power created a fertile period of intellectual exploration and invention, including scientific discoveries. In Russia, the government actively promoted the arts

and sciences in the mid-18th century, leading to the establishment of the first Russian university, library, theater, public museum, and independent press.

Notably, several American figures, most notably Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, played a major role in disseminating Enlightenment ideas in the New World and influencing thinkers in Britain and France. The cultural exchange during the Age of Enlightenment was significant, with ideas flowing in both directions across the Atlantic.

In terms of reference works that systematized scientific knowledge during the Enlightenment, universal encyclopedias took precedence over technical dictionaries. These encyclopedias aimed to compile all human knowledge into a comprehensive reference work. The most famous among these works is Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, ou *dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, published in 1751.

1.5. Ideals of Enlightenment

In the mid-18th century, Europe experienced a significant surge in philosophical and scientific movements that challenged established doctrines and beliefs. Leading the philosophical movement were influential figures such as Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who advocated for a society based on reason rather than faith and Catholic doctrine. They called for a new civil order founded on natural law and promoted scientific inquiry based on experimentation and observation. The political philosopher Montesquieu introduced the concept of a separation of powers in government, an idea that greatly influenced the authors of the United States Constitution.

Two distinct lines of Enlightenment thought emerged during this period. The radical Enlightenment, inspired by the philosophy of Spinoza, championed democracy, individual liberty, freedom of expression, and the rejection of religious authority. On the other hand, a more moderate variety, supported by thinkers like René Descartes, John Locke, Christian Wolff, and Isaac Newton, sought a balance between proposed reforms and existing systems of power and faith.

Science played a pivotal role in Enlightenment ideals, with many writers and thinkers of the time having scientific backgrounds. They believed that scientific progress would pave the way for the demise of religious and traditional authority, fostering free speech and independent thought. Enlightenment science emphasized empiricism, rationality, and the pursuit of progress, aligning with the overarching principles of the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment is widely regarded as the foundation of modern Western political and intellectual culture. It brought about political modernization by emphasizing democratic values, the establishment of liberal democracies, and the development of fundamental concepts. Enlightenment thinkers shaped European liberal thought, including the recognition of individual rights, the natural equality of all people, the separation of powers, the artificial nature of political order (resulting in the distinction between civil society and the state), the belief in representative political power based on the consent of the people, and a liberal interpretation of the law that allows individuals to do anything not explicitly prohibited.

In the realm of religion, Enlightenment-era interpretations emerged as a response to the religious conflicts that had plagued Europe in the preceding century. Enlightenment thinkers sought to limit the political power of organized religion, aiming to prevent another era of intolerant religious warfare. New ideas such as deism (belief in a Creator God without reference to religious texts) and atheism gained prominence, although the latter had fewer followers. Many, like Voltaire, argued that without a belief in a punishing God, the moral order of society could be destabilized.

Universal encyclopedias, rather than technical dictionaries, served as prime examples of reference works that systematized scientific knowledge during the Age of Enlightenment. The goal of these encyclopedias was to encompass the entirety of human knowledge in a comprehensive reference work. The most famous of these works is Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert's Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers.

1.6. Historical Phases of Enlightenment

1.6.1. The Early Enlightenment: 1685-1730

The Enlightenment drew upon important intellectual precursors in the 17th century, including Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes from England, René Descartes from France, as well as key figures of the Scientific Revolution such as Galileo Galilei, Johannes Kepler, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. The roots of the Enlightenment are commonly traced back to 1680s England, a period marked by the publication of Isaac Newton's "Principia Mathematica" (1686) and John Locke's "Essay Concerning Human Understanding" (1689). These works provided the scientific, mathematical, and philosophical foundation for the significant advancements of the Enlightenment.

Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher, encapsulated the spirit of the era in his essay "What Is Enlightenment?" (1784), with the motto "Dare to know! Have courage to use your own reason!" This sentiment encouraged individuals to challenge established beliefs and rely on their own rationality.

Locke argued that human nature was changeable and that knowledge was acquired through accumulated experiences rather than accessing an external absolute truth. Newton's theories in calculus and optics became influential metaphors in the Enlightenment, representing precise measurement and illumination.

The Enlightenment was not a homogeneous movement but rather had distinct regional variations such as the French Enlightenment, the Scottish Enlightenment, and the English, German, Swiss, or American Enlightenment. Individual Enlightenment thinkers often had different approaches and perspectives. For instance, Locke differed from David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau had contrasting views with Voltaire, and Thomas Jefferson's ideas diverged from those of Frederick the Great. However, these differences and disagreements emerged within the shared Enlightenment themes of rational inquiry and the belief in progress through dialogue.

1.6.2. The High Enlightenment: 1730-1780

During the High Enlightenment, the focus was on the dialogues and writings of French intellectuals known as *philosophes*, including Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Buffon, and Denis Diderot. This period can be characterized as a "chaos of clear ideas," as described by one historian summarizing Voltaire's "Philosophical Dictionary." The central belief was that everything in the universe could be understood and explained through rational analysis. A significant publication of this time was Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (1751-1777), a monumental compilation of human knowledge authored by leading thinkers of the era.

The High Enlightenment was marked by enlightened despots such as Frederick the Great, who sought to unify, rationalize, and modernize Prussia amidst prolonged conflicts with Austria. It was also a time of enlightened revolutionaries, including Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson, who drew inspiration from Locke's essays and framed the American Revolution through the lens of Enlightenment ideals in the "Declaration of Independence" (1776).

Religious innovation and reformation were prominent during this period. Christians attempted to reconcile their faith with reason, while deists and materialists argued that the universe operated independently without divine intervention. Locke and the French philosopher Pierre Bayle advocated for the separation of Church and State. Secret societies like the Freemasons, the Bavarian Illuminati, and the Rosicrucians gained popularity, offering individuals new avenues for fellowship, esoteric rituals, and mutual assistance. Coffeehouses, newspapers, and literary salons emerged as vibrant spaces for the circulation of ideas.

1.6.3. The Late Enlightenment and Beyond: 1780-1815

The French Revolution of 1789 represented the culmination of the High Enlightenment's aspiration to dismantle traditional authorities and reconstruct society based on rational principles. However, the revolution ultimately descended into a period of violent terror, revealing the limitations of its own ideals. This turbulent phase paved the way for the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte a decade later. Despite its

shortcomings, the revolution's goal of egalitarianism garnered admiration from early feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft, who was the mother of Mary Shelley, the author of "Frankenstein." Furthermore, the revolution served as a source of inspiration for the Haitian war of independence and influenced Paraguay's first post-independence government with its radical inclusivism regarding race.

While the Enlightenment's rationality gave way to the fervor of Romanticism in the 19th century, the influence of Enlightenment thinkers on subsequent intellectual movements remained significant. 19th-century Liberalism and Classicism, as well as 20th-century Modernism, owe a substantial debt to the ideas and philosophies that emerged during the Enlightenment. The legacy of the Enlightenment continued to shape and inform subsequent intellectual, artistic, and political developments throughout history.

1.7. Impact

The Enlightenment had a far-reaching impact, resulting in a multitude of books, essays, inventions, scientific discoveries, laws, wars, and revolutions. The American and French Revolutions, in particular, were directly influenced by Enlightenment ideals, with the former representing the height of Enlightenment influence and the latter marking the beginning of its decline. Subsequently, the Enlightenment gave way to the rise of 19th-century Romanticism.

Some European monarchs expressed interest in the political ideas put forth by Enlightenment thinkers and became known as enlightened despots. These rulers, including Frederick II of Prussia, Joseph II of Austria, and Catherine the Great of Russia, sought to use their absolute power in a just and enlightened manner. They implemented reforms aligned with Enlightenment ideals.

While Enlightenment philosophers advocated for the equality of men, many held traditional views about women. Rousseau, for instance, claimed that women were created to please men. However, there were women who pursued Enlightenment ideas without challenging traditional gender roles, and there were others who actively

advocated for women's rights. In France, wealthy and talented women hosted social gatherings called salons, where the era's leading thinkers and artists participated in discussions and idea exchanges on an equal basis. Salons provided women with educational opportunities that were otherwise unavailable to them. Marie Thérèse Rodet Geoffrin was one of the most admired salon hostesses, attracting guests such as Voltaire, Montesquieu, painters, musicians, playwrights, and scientists. These salons served as platforms for discussions on women's rights and social issues, calling for education and advocating for equal rights. Early women reformers demanded that the fundamental human rights espoused by Enlightenment thinkers be extended to women as well. In 1791, French writer Olympe De Gouges declared, "Woman is born free and lives equal to man in her rights." Since the Enlightenment, women have been striving for equal political, economic, and social rights, continuing the fight for equality.

References

- "Age of Enlightenment." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_Enlightenment. Wikipedia CC BY-SA 3.0.
- "The Gentleman's Magazine." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gentleman%27s_Magazine. Wikipedia CC BY-SA 3.0.
- "Empiricism." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empiricism. Wikipedia CC BY-SA 3.0.
- "Scientific method." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scientific_method. Wikipedia CC BY-SA 3.0.
- "Reductionism." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reductionism. Wikipedia CC BY-SA 3.0.
- "Cogito ergo sum." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cogito_ergo_sum. Wikipedia CC BY-SA 3.0.
- "800px-Gentleman's_Magazine_1731.JPG." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_Enlightenment#/media/File:Gentleman%27s_Magazine_1731.JPG. Wikipedia Public domain.
- "Encyclopedie_de_D'Alembert_et_Diderot_-_Premiere_Page_-_ENC_1-NA5.jpg." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_Enlightenment#/media/File:Encyclopedie_de_D%27Alembert_et_Diderot_-_Premiere_Page_-_ENC_1-NA5.jpg. Wikipedia Public domain.