

History 102

6 March 2017

The Age of Intellectual Domination

Tradition is a term that dominated over thousands of years, since very early on in people's civilizations across the world. What is old and has been practiced is the best way and the only way to live life. This was the attitude so many people had and ruled with. And the people complied (the ones who didn't often exiled or executed). Tradition was an extremely strong aspect of society, but an even bigger thing put it on its heels in the late 17th and 18th centuries: the Enlightenment. This intellectual movement was led and influenced by many people, including philosophers like Locke and Newton and more specifically Kant, Voltaire, and Condorcet. These three men had distinct opinions on Enlightenment, a movement that pushed reasoning, knowledge discovery, and individualism – and threw tradition out the window. These men radicalized society and were trailblazers, and had similar and different viewpoints on enlightenment as a whole. These authors also contribute into my personal opinions on what defines enlightenment.

Immanuel Kant discusses his views and definitions of enlightenment in the primary document “Modern History Sourcebook: Immanuel Kant: What is Enlightenment?, 1784” He believes “Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why so great a portion of mankind” have prolonged tradition for so long (Immanuel Kant: What is Enlightenment?). Furthermore, what he means by this ‘laziness and cowardice’ is that mankind has settled into appropriation of

stagnation in ideological ways, because why think for yourself if someone else already has? Why put in the work (mentally and physically) to challenge ideas or create new ones when one already exists that everyone follows? The ‘cowardice’ side to this is fear, which has been a tactic that has controlled and further stagnated society since the creation of mankind. Rooted in our beings, fear is a tactic so easy to feel and use that it prevented people of this time to push the envelope and create new ideas and explanations for the evolving world. Tradition ensued for fear of shame, punishment, exile, death, things imparitive to a person of that time’s livelihood. In contrast, these things must be eliminated in Kant’s definition of enlightenment, as he states: “For this enlightenment, however, nothing is required but freedom... It is the freedom to make public use of one’s reason at every point” (Immanuel Kant: What is Enlightenment?). Kant, in his definitions of what hinders and allows for enlightenment, helps contribute to how I define enlightenment. I very much agree with the fact that fear and lack of motivation are the driving factors against enlightenment, and that freedom is a key factor in becoming enlightened. I see fear prevent people from developing their own reason and discovery of knowledge in modern day. People are afraid to speak their thoughts or ideas to peers, teachers, and classmates because they are afraid it pushes social norms and traditionally wide held views. The people I do see speak out and develop their own ideas are truly free: from societal standards, free from fear, and free from laziness. I think you have to be fearless to be enlightened, as most people are afraid to push the boundaries of their thoughts and worldviews.

Condorcet was renaissance man, holding many specialties as a mathematician, aristocrat, and an Academy of Sciences official. He offered great insight and opinion into the world of Enlightenment along with Kant and Voltaire (who was a friend of his). One passage that well represents his views on the standards of enlightenment comes from the primary document

“Modern History Sourcebook: Condorcet: The Future Progress of the Human Mind”. In it he states: “We shall indicate particularly the most likely and most imminent progress in those sciences that are now commonly believed to be almost exhausted. We shall point out how more universal education in each country, by giving more people the elementary knowledge that can inspire them with a taste for more advanced study and give them the capacity for making progress in it” (Condorcet: The Future Progress of the Human Mind). Here he believes education is a driving factor for enlightenment. The full education of a person (past basic levels in adolescence) is necessary for one to broaden their knowledgeable capacities. This is a radical idea as education in that time (and for a long time in history) was so limited to so many. Unless you were a white male with good social and/or economical standing in society, you were not educated past a basic or novice level. Even if you were a white male, a lot only received basic education and missed out on higher levels. This explains why tradition held for so long and limited enlightenment: so many were not educated, and not educated to the full extent. This builds on my definition of enlightenment as I agree with Condorcet and believe education is essential for enlightenment. I think you need to know all of the world’s knowledge, concepts, and ideas before creating your own or discovering further ones. I think this is how society and technology advance as well. Change is vital for advancement and enlightenment, and education brings this change as it moves us away from tradition and stagnation, where history and ideas were cut off at a certain point of what everyone was educated with to control societies and limit their advancement.

Voltaire was the third main leader and was outspoken in his theories on enlightenment. One aspect of his definition of enlightenment was power and omnipotence. He changed the view on what was the most powerful thing in society, switching traditional standards of power to

newer, enlightened ones. In the primary document “The Philosophical Dictionary of Voltaire” he states: “I SUPPOSE that the man who reads this article is convinced that this world is formed with intelligence, and that a little astronomy and anatomy suffices to make this universal and supreme intelligence admired. Can he know by himself if this intelligence’ is omnipotent, that is to say, infinitely powerful? Has he the least notion of the infinite, to understand what is an infinite power?” (Voltaire: Power, Omnipotence). This was a new, trailblazing view of power that aided in defining enlightenment. Power is what ruled and controlled society and its people throughout history since the beginning of time. This was defined by power through money, land, status, hierarchy, and power over people through psychological and physical forces. However, Voltaire switched this traditional view of power into power intelligence and human intellect. He believed proving reason through extended thought was a driving factor towards enlightenment. I not only agree with this but admire his expression of this idea. Power can be a horrible and detrimental thing: it has caused death, torture and tragedy historically and limited knowledge and freedom of humankind. So I agree that a shift in what kind of power is truly infinite is a key factor on the route to enlightenment. The power to think, learn, and reason is what (in my opinion) allows for true enlightenment.

Kant, Condorcet, and Voltaire’s conceptions of enlightenment hold similarities and differences, specifically in the pinpoints of their definitions I have previously discussed. They hold similarity in that all three believe freedom is required for enlightenment in some way: Kant in freedom from fear and laziness, Condorcet in freedom to higher education, and Voltaire in freedom of defining your own power. All believe that a freedom is necessary to open up the doors of what enlightenment requires, like knowledge and reasoning. However these principles of each man do have differences as they all hold emphasis on different concepts for

enlightenment: Kant focuses on the stripping of fear and laziness, Condorcet on systematic education, and Voltaire on intellectual power.

All three men and their ideas and works on enlightenment radicalized society in the late 17th and 18th century. The power of the mind is exponential, and these trailblazers helped unmask its true power in a time where the mind and what it can discover was unnoticed and unappreciated. They helped to change the way the world viewed tradition, something that was all most people had ever known. Tradition was the most powerful aspect of society in the centuries before the revolution that was the Enlightenment. They also help to collectively define my definition on what it means to be enlightened, which is something that has changed and will change in the future. Part of enlightenment I believe is change, as the concept itself pushes boundaries and social norms of the times before its being. I think that my definition of enlightenment would be incomplete without the aspect of change. Change is what advances and enriches us in so many ways, and makes possible all of the elements of enlightenment that Kant, Condorcet, and Voltaire have discussed. Education, intellect, new ideas, and human ingenuity are impossible without change. Change of ideas, change of power, discovery, so much more. Change is something that so many people are afraid of, and I think it is the things that scare us that are the most necessary in our lives.

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