

Southport Pips

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WAS THE ENLIGHTENMENT A GOOD IDEA?

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“The Enlightenment” (<https://www.britannica.com/event/Enlightenment-European-history>) is a convenient label for intellectual developments in the West in the 17th and 18th centuries. Its main driver was the desire to replace medieval modes of thinking, based on tradition and religion, with a way of looking at the world based on reason.

Ideas that arose from the enlightenment include:

- Natural rights: the intellectual root of the movement for the abolition of slavery.
- The *Social Contract*.
- The idea that governments require the consent of the governed, rather than deriving authority from God.
- The modern scientific method.
- Toleration of different religions and sects, atheism and non-mainstream lifestyles.
- The replacement of revenge and punishment as the basis of justice with an approach based of reform and rehabilitation.
- The benefits of an educated population.

Steven Pinker makes the case that much of what we consider “good” about the world today, in comparison with the past, is due to these changes in ways of thinking. However, some people attack this view using a number of different critiques:

1. The enlightenment didn’t add anything important to existing European civilisation which was based on Judaeo-Christian ideas.
2. The so-called benefits of the enlightenment are either not important or do not exist.
3. The enlightenment is responsible for the evils manifest in the last century – fascism, communism, deadly world wars, racism and the destruction of the environment.

The 1st critique is often advanced by conservatives, especially those who emphasise what we owe to traditional ideas of morality that predate the Enlightenment and which we get from the Bible and other religious traditions. The 2nd is often made by left wingers, particularly post modernists. Some of these go so far as to question whether science itself has any objective basis, and deny or minimise such advances as the increase in life expectancy and in material wealth. Criticism 3

effectively acknowledges that the enlightenment is a real thing, but considers it, overall, a bad thing. This argument is advanced by both left wingers and right wingers, depending on which particular set of bad things they wish to place at the door of the enlightenment.

The Enlightenment was succeeded by a counter-reaction, generally referred to as the *Romantic* movement. This emphasised an anti-rational world view, mysticism, mythology, religion (including the Anglo Catholic movement in England and evangelical revivals in the US) and nationalism. The Fascist and Nazi movements have their roots in the Romantic movement and owe little to the Enlightenment. Marxism is a more difficult case. Marx attempted to derive his ideas from a rational analysis of economics, which is in line with enlightenment thinking because it is based on reason; and to that extent Marxism, and totalitarian governments that followed a Marxist ideology, could be “blamed” on the Enlightenment. However, in practice, Marxists favoured violent revolution rather than waiting for the economic inevitability of the collapse of capitalism to work itself out. The rhetoric of Marxists contains a lot of emotional language which owes little to rational argument and they have allied themselves with nationalist movements in the Third World.

Left wing criticism of the Enlightenment considers it a product of economic forces that gave rise to the contemporaneous Industrial Revolution. This gives rise to the postmodernist notion that science is not only (obviously) influenced by social and political forces but is entirely a social construct. Furthermore, the evils of imperialism, capitalism and industrial pollution are entered on the debit side of the Enlightenment.

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References

Enlightenment Now: A summary

<https://rootsofprogress.org/enlightenment-now>

Yoram Hazony’s critique of the Enlightenment

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-dark-side-of-the-enlightenment-1523050206>

A left wing critique of the enlightenment and Pinker

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/steven-pinker-s-ideas-are-fatally-flawed-these-eight-graphs-show-why/>

Videos

Stephen Pinker’s “Enlightenment Now”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zkPOHB2rRkc>

Jordan Peterson and Ben Shapiro on the attack!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJ97WKJPup0>

Peterson v Pinker

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kUuURByaXc>

What Was the Enlightenment?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9AL0TUHuuM>