

INTRODUCTION

Colas DUFLO, Professor in French Literature, Paris Nanterre University

Introduction – What is Enlightenment?

What is Enlightenment? In a famous text published in 1783, philosopher Immanuel Kant gives an answer to this question that reads like an assessment, 32 years after the publication of the first volume of the *Encyclopaedia* guided by Diderot and D'Alembert. "Enlightenment, he says, is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity." The immaturity in question is a child's one, the one who needs a master to tell him what to think, a leader to tell him what to do, a priest to tell him which God he must adore and which moral principles he must follow.

Reaching the age of majority is achieving a degree of autonomy that allows thinking and acting for oneself. This autonomy implies the use of one's own logic and endeavour to absorb the wisdom it has at its disposal for this logic to be informed, for one's thought to be free and one's will to be enlightened in its choices. This emancipation, which is the true maturity, is not straightforward. It is much more comfortable to be a minor, to let others think and decide for us, to never question our own prejudices, to remain in quiet ignorance rather than to work towards enlightened freedom.

Enlightenment isn't a state of being, it's a fight. It is the Enlightenment struggle, a path to freedom, an effort to reach and help everyone else reach intellectual maturity. It will be our guiding theme throughout this introduction to the history of literature and of 18th ideas' MOOC.

Part 1 – An 18th-century-ist MOOC

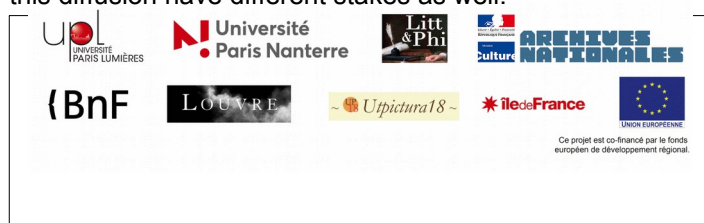
Over the weeks of this MOOC we will witness a desire for emancipation from the old framework, sometimes expressed aesthetically, sometimes through ideological struggles, and often both, inextricably linked.

In the 18th century, places where good society and well-known writers met to exchange freely were called salons, often instigated by women interested in literature and who had a significant role in promoting intellectual life.

Since we are hosted in the salons of the Soubise's hotel, a beautiful mansion built in the 18th century in the heart of the Marais and now part of the National Archives, we put each week of this MOOC in a different salon, which will allow us to address different themes in literature, thought and history. I will do a more detailed presentation at the end of this first week.

Part 2 – Historical setting

First, however, it was important to leave room for history in this first salon, because the Enlightenment is a European phenomenon, but it did not develop in the same manner or with the same chronology in different European countries. In England, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy and Portugal, the historical, political, religious, economic and cultural contexts are considerably different and so literature and ideas do not develop in the same way, do not spread in the same way and both this development and this diffusion have different stakes as well.



MOOC « 18th century:
the Enlightenment's fight »

In France, since it is essentially an introduction to French literature that is involved here, the 17th century with the reign of Louis XIV, ending in 1715, bequeaths to the 18th century a geographical and institutional framework that is one of a centralised state, a government form which is an absolute monarchy and a single religion, because since the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, France is in theory entirely Catholic.

Therefore, we will first offer you a quick historical reminder of the three great reigns of the 18th century: the end of Louis XIV's reign, Louis XV's reign, which began with the important period of the Regency because Louis XV was only a child when he became king, and finally Louis XVI's reign.

Finally, the last years of the century, from the 1789 Revolution onwards, are the ones that really change history, a captivating time that sees the transition from an old world to a new world.

Throughout this whole period, several issues travel through the century and are crucial to understand how the French Enlightenment's ideas developed and spread. That is what we will study in the second part of this week.

The 18th century is marked by religious conflicts. First because the Protestant question has not quite disappeared, even if Protestantism is banned, but also and above all because within the Catholic Church, an internal conflict about what is called "Jansenism" has significant impacts on French society. The 18th century is also marked by economic hardships. Louis XIV's reign leaves a never-ending crisis, and absolute monarchy is constantly torn between upholding old frameworks and a desire for reform. Economy, and this is new, comes under debate and would even wish to be considered as a new science. Finally, the Enlightenment does not develop in a bubble. It needs readers; it needs books. The absolute monarchy has built a system that both encourages writers and the so-called "library", that is, publishing, and at the same time, in a somewhat contradictory way, tries to control them by implementing a censorship policy. And it is necessary to clarify these elements to understand in which frameworks writers produce their works.

In the third and last part of this week, to literarily conclude this inevitably more historical content, we will study, with the help of three major works, how writers took charge of their immediate political history, in their works and each in their own way. And for our three examples, how these works are critical readings of Louis XIV's reign. We will start with Fenelon's *Adventures of Telemachus*, a pioneering work published in 1699 and read by many throughout the 18th century, and Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, which satirically records the end of Louis XIV's reign and the Regency, and finally the *Memoirs* of the Duke de Saint-Simon, the memorialist par excellence, so to speak, who we often forget is fully an 18th-century writer because of the place he grants to the story of Louis XIV's reign.

Happy listening and reading!