

CONCLUSION: MODERN DEBATES

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Part 1 – The birth of opinion

Let us hold an assessment of the Enlightenment struggle. What we can see, first of all, is a formidable intellectual and literary effervescence where the debate on ideas is not only nestled in philosophical traits, but also irrigates Romanesque production. All this is supported by the remarkable dynamism of publication. It's worth remarking that without noteworthy technical change, the production of novels strongly increased over a century and profited from the newest genres, the conquering intellectuals and was in constant evolution like the economy or history but also Romanesque writing.

The latter exemplarily succeeded through its resort to fiction and to pushing the limits of the remit of strict surveillance on the expression of ideas under the Ancient Regime. So much so that reflection conquered slowly but surely new territories. And with the development of circulation methods, and notably newspapers, emerged public opinion which was notably more and more sensitive to the evolution of society in its political dimension. The first newspaper in France was created in 1777. It was called *Le Journal de Paris* and it capped off a whole century of press development and of interest in what we called at the time "the news" and what qualified later as "current affairs".

Part 2 – Enlightenment in the plural form

This doesn't mean that Enlightenment was reduced to a simple opposition between progressives and reactionaries, between philosophers and conservatives. What's mostly remembered is a big dispersion of positions and competition among all levels, between different sensitivities, which even divided from within. It refrained from using too monolithic notions and making analysis too complex. For example, it's too easy to talk of a united religious front since there were important noteworthy differences between Jansenists and Jesuits, and that's without talking about divisions within different branches of the Jansenist movement.

But most importantly, all these religious sensitivities did not necessarily have a solid position against the most offensive of forms in the Enlightenment struggle. They ended up developing themselves by taking account of new methods of circulating ideas. Next to the great novels which literary history has preserved, there's a whole Christian production of enlightening novels which demonstrated a real philosophical acculturation. The novel, which was seen as dangerous, is now recognised as a useful weapon in well-intentioned hands.

What's more, texts written by apologists resorted to fashionable formats and genres. We no longer count the dictionaries in favour of religion which take the opposite stance of the most symbolic dictionaries of the critical state of mind of the Enlightenment. For example, a thinker like the Abbot Bergier, who responded to Rousseau, Voltaire, and d'Holbach appeared, at the end of the century, as a true thinker wanting to beat philosophers at their own game. Incidentally, he attracted the attention of everybody, including philosophical adversaries, for his integrity in the debate. And despite a more sensitive anti-philosophical line at the end of the Ancient Regime, he participated in the new enterprise of the *Encyclopédie méthodique* to the point of appearing, within its hierarchy, as a more or less orthodox theologian.

Similarly, philosophers did not follow a uniformed strategy and rivals accepted responsibility for making progress during the century. It was, incidentally, one of Voltaire's refrains which deplored the lack of unity within the philosophical movement. In his own words, he wished for "unity among brothers".

This is one of the reasons for his aggressivity towards Rousseau, who ostensibly broke with the philosophers with his *Letter to M. D'Alembert on Spectacles* in 1757. But Rousseau was unclassifiable. Voltaire was equally worried about the rise in influence of atheists like d'Holbach. One might similarly say that there was hardly any unity in the political philosophy of the Enlightenment, despite a united opposition to absolutism, a word made fashionable thanks to Montesquieu.

But according to Montesquieu, the balance of power had nothing to do with egalitarianism and the idea of "social contract" according to Rousseau. These ideological notions would not cease to split with the advancement of the century and would clash under the Revolution.

Conclusion – The spirit of the Enlightenment

To conclude, this variety of positions makes an assessment on the Enlightenment more complex than what posterity retained by reading about its legacy at the dawn of the Enlightenment, whether it be delighted about it or lament it. The Enlightenment was filled, before anything else, with tensions, which were not all resolved. In France, it is both a period which marked the end of Catholic counter-reform and a ferocious anti-religious critique, meaning we have a very different outlook according to the point of view we adopt. This is where ideological tension which continued to shape the historiography of the Enlightenment comes from.

The most prominent example is slavery. The 18th century in Europe and singularly in France was both a period of economic development founded on the treaty of black slaves and a moment of intense critique of human trafficking. The two positions coexisted and battled, clouding a unilaterally favourable or unfavourable study of the Enlightenment. A wish for emancipation competes with the notion of man still largely marked by the idea of inequality.

The Enlightenment's legacy is not unequivocal nor limited to partisan slogans. If there's a legacy to be had, it's before anything else that of debate, change; that's to say the willingness to submit to critical opinion and reasonable or rational critique, at any rate, which does not abdicate this freedom of thought which is like a standard and an ideal of the time. It would be futile to say that it was never achieved.