



"The Enlightenment, the Beginning of a More Rational Age"

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Abstract:

*This paper aims to refute the statement that Eric Hobsbawm made in 1997, when he stated that "The Enlightenment was a conspiracy of dead white men in periwig to provide the intellectual foundation for western imperialism". The paper proves how the enlightenment had a positive value to improve the social and human conditions in the West. This paper addresses how the enlightenment thinkers' main purpose was to challenge old ideologies, **taboos and** values that humans held. The European Enlightenment served to eradicate many social evils that existed for many years. **The paper points out** how beneficial the enlightenment was to West societies. Furthermore, it depicts how human progressed in the West through the use reasoning, based on common sense and new scientific discoveries. The paper also argues how the enlightenment helped to eliminate ideas that belong more to a Dark Age. It also argues how new approaches of reasoning, and new knowledge helped the natural rights of humans, and challenged old religious idea, slavery, and the need for more political freedom, and legal reforms in society.*

The Enlightenment, the Beginning of a More Rational Age

The purpose of this paper is to refute and disprove the statement that Eric Hobsbawm made in 1997, when he stated that "The Enlightenment was a conspiracy of dead white men in periwig to provide the intellectual foundation for western imperialism". The first

issue that one has to take into account is that most of the time, when a group of men try to come with new ideas to lead and enlighten the rest of men in any given society, there will be others who oppose to the new and challenging ideas. The first issue that must be considered here is the true purpose of the Enlightenment. The enlightenment main purpose was to challenge old ideologies that people had. In addition, the Enlightenment served to break with social taboos and dark ideas that people were dragging throughout the years; in fact, in Italian the Enlightenment was called Illuminismo, and in French Lumieres (Outram 1). Even the word speak per se, in both languages the meaning is to be able to think and reason in an individualistic way rather than follow old traditions. The beginning of this way of thinking was heavily influenced by the 17th-century philosopher René Descartes who challenged other philosophers with his notorious phrase, "I think, therefore, I am".

In this phrase, Descartes clearly conveys how he was able to think as an individual man; therefore, this capacity of thinking as an individual person was what allowed him to challenge other ancient philosophers who held old ideologies and beliefs. This same method is the one that later philosophers continue to follow to challenge old erroneous beliefs. This method of reasoning was the most important element that humans needed during this period, so they could come out of darkness, and challenge irrational beliefs and taboos that people had.

Moreover, The Enlightenment helped both men and women to think in a more critical way, and also helped them to analyze and refute the

absurdities that people were making during this period. The Enlightenment also helped to ameliorate the humans rights around the world, and eradicate false ideas that humans had on religion, slavery, gender and other issues concerned to society. The Enlightenment, instead of a conspiracy of white men with periwig, was a challenge to old beliefs and ideologies that people had lived with for many years. Many Enlightenment thinkers viewed the world from different lenses. A main factor that must be considered when one tries to interpret the comment that Hobsbawm wrote on the Enlightenment thinkers is that he was an advocator of Karl Marx; therefore, his main philosophical foundation was Marxism, which is a philosophy that preaches against imperialism and capitalism. As a result of his Marxist's ideology, Hobsbawm was against the Enlightenment. Taking into account that Hobsbawm was influenced by the Marxist philosophy, one can expect him to differ from the Enlightenment philosophers. In fact, most people who embrace the Marxist philosophy, tend to advocate Marx doctrines, and end up attacking most philosophers from the enlightenment period. Clear examples of this can be observed in countries like Cuba, the former Soviet Union, and other communist countries that have adopted the Marxist philosophy; and as a result, they refute all other philosophers, advocating Marxism. In the following quote, one can observe how Hobsbawm tries to discredit the enlightenment thinkers, "But the only criterion which allows us to judge rather than merely to record the consequent descent into barbarism, is the old rationalism of the Enlightenment"(Hobsbawm, 1994). In this quote, one can observe that his goal in this article is to attack the enlightenment and to depict its writers as barbaric. However, what he failed to analyze is that thanks to the enlightenment, people have made a tremendous progress in societies around the world. In addition, it is even more irrational to assume that the enlightenment was the end of the

rational period . On the contrary, today many societies are still evolving in different ways, and the enlightenment was a major contribution and the key factor for this evolution.

During the enlightenment, it was unthinkable or irrational to conceive a woman president of a country; however, this taboo has changed, since there have been many female presidents in different countries such as Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, Ellen Johnson in Liberia, Dilma Rousseff in Brazil, Cristina Fernandez in Argentina, and Park Geun-hye in South Korea. However, it is relevant to mention that it was during the enlightenment period that a great pioneer stepped forward and wrote in defense of women rights; this woman was Mary Wollstonecraft with her most famous book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Published in 1792. In this Vindication, Wollstonecraft professed and defended the rights that women must have in society. In addition, she challenged the old taboos that society has been dragging, favoring one gender over the other. Among some of the quotes that she wrote to challenge men and encourage women to take part in social issues was the following, " "It is in vain to expect virtue from women till they are in some degree independent of men." Chapter IX line 4. In this line, Wollstonecraft shows that women must seek their own independence from men.

She conveys the idea that a woman must not be clinging to a man in an affective or materialistic way. Therefore, the above proves that the enlightenment was more than just a white men conspiracy to expand the foundation for Western Imperialism, because not only men were part of the enlightenment, but also women gave contributions to the improvement of society.

It is also relevant to mention that it was also Mary Wollstonecraft who viewed female education as an integral contribution of the advancement in society. According to Wollstonecraft, women play an important role in educating children, and they serve to adorn

their husband. In addition, Woll stone craft said that women should receive a level of education that matched their social standards, so they could be both "ornamental figures and intellectual companions for their husbands". Nevertheless, it is common sense that she was also limited on this aspects, because she considered that women should be ornamental companions for their man.

Slavery, Another Controversial Issue during The Enlightenment

Even though slavery was a human trade for the profit of the white man, during the Enlightenment, some white men also wrote against the irrational and brutal act of slavery. A clear example was the French philosopher Marie- Jean Antoine Nicolas who wrote an essay accusing the injustice of slavery. He explains how slavery deprive black slaves from freedom and from owning their own children. Marie- Jean Antoine argues how the white men brought the blacks from Africa with the excuse that they were saving these men from death and prison, but ironically, they put them to live in slavery, depriving them from all human rights that a man can have. Consequently, he tries to explain that it was even worse to take them out of Africa and put them to live in the worst inhumane conditions that a man can dwell. Furthermore, he compares that the crime the slave owners were committing was the same as the crime the slave did before being a slave. Marie-Jean used enlightenment ideas to attack the brutality and inhumanity that the white men were committing during the slave trade. He clearly conveys the idea that if those black Africans committed a crime in Africa, they didn't have to be condemned to be slave for the rest of their lives. (Williams,309-310).

Another controversial issue that Marie-Jean Antoine also argues is how the black children who were born in the plantations, automatically belong to the master.

Ironically, even though these children have not committed any crime, they were also deprived from freedom and were condemned to be slaves for the rest of their lives too (Williams, 311). Furthermore, he explains how the white men used the excuse that slaves were needed to work in the plantation to produce the goods needed for the consumers; however, he argues that this was a good excuse for those who were profiting from the brute man. Marie-Jean explicitly accuses the legislators of transforming and violating the law that should protects human rights. He accuses them of infringing the law, of making the law in such a way that it protects the interests of the white men who own the slaves. In his essay, he condemns the immoral acts that the legislators are making in the nation. Furthermore, he clearly denounces that the slave has lost his right and the politicians in power, violate the rights of black slaves, so they can profit from them. In the same way that human trafficking is condemned today, Marie- Jean accused the injustice of trafficking blacks with the purpose of enslaving them. He challenged those in power, so they could put the idea of the enlightenment into practice and take action to abolish slavery, which was definitely a cruel act upon black men.

In addition to Marie Jean Antoine, another European thinker who dared to challenge most absurdities committed by the tyrannical governments during the Enlightenment period, was Baron de Montesquieu with his Complete Work *The Spirit of Laws* published in 1748. In chapter I "In What Manner the Laws of Civil Slavery Are Relative to the Nature of the Climate" , he wrote, " The state of slavery is, in its own nature, bad. It is neither useful to the master nor to the slave, because he can do nothing through a motive of virtue; nor to the master, because, by having an unlimited authority over his slaves, he insensibly accustoms himself to the want of all moral virtues, and from thence becomes fierce, hasty, severe, choleric, voluptuous, and

cruel". In this chapter and the rest of the others pertaining to this book on slavery, Montesquieu argues the ineffectiveness that slavery causes for humanity. He also argues on the origin of the Right of slavery, accusing the government that allows this brutal act. In addition, he addresses the fact that some people sell themselves to a master, to whom they will give service; however, since this is a voluntary act, that is a mutual agreement between both parties, the slave and the master, then, this is permitted because both men will benefit from each other (Montesquieu, Chapter VI).

Even though most enlightenment thinkers were in Europe, America also experienced a small group of enlightenment thinkers. One of the greatest enlightenment thinkers in America was Benjamin Franklin who was also one of the first men who organized an association to abolish slavery in North America. Franklin joined a group of Quakers in Pennsylvania to fight for the freedom of slaves. Furthermore, He understood that blacks should be liberated and that slavery was unfair. A significant quote that Franklin wrote on the abolition of slavery was that "slavery is such an atrocious debasement of human nature, that its very extirpation, if not performed with solicitous care, may sometimes open a source of serious evils" (Franklin, Benjamin). Franklin understood that slavery degrades a man and humiliates him; as a result, he proposed to eliminate it, so all men be treated equal. Moreover, to show his compassion and to serve as an example, Franklin freed the two slaves he had. However, when observing the white thinkers in America, we cannot say the same about Thomas Jefferson who was also considered a very intelligent man by many. Ironically, the man who wrote the constitution of the United States, not only had slaves, but he had sons who were his slaves, and he sold the mother of his sons who he denied were his. To analyze the true meaning of the enlightenment on slavery, one has to take a close look at the

paradox of Thomas Jefferson who wrote in the constitution of the USA that all men are created equal, however, he did not serve as an example on what he preached. According to an article in the New York Times with the name of "The Monster of Monticello, when Jefferson wrote the constitution, he had close to 175 slaves. Therefore, it is ironic that a president of a nation who wrote that "all men are created equal", had slaves who were born in the USA, and were destined to be slaves from birth till death. Nevertheless, the brutal and unjust act of slavery during the enlightenment period was understood by many American thinkers such as Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, and James Madison who said, "We have seen the mere distinction of color made in the most enlightened period of time, a ground of the most oppressive dominion ever exercised by man over man". Even in this quote, Adams uses the phrase "the most enlightened period", conveying that the white man should not use his level of intelligence to abuse from those who lack the minimum level of education and submit them to eternal slavery. Consequently, the above proves how some enlightenment thinkers were against slavery, and they dared to challenge the authority to abolish it. Once again, one cannot assume that what Eric Hobsbawm said is a fact, since the evidences mentioned above prove the contrary.

The enlightenment lasted for many years, and the intellectuals who took part on it, differed in many ways. Even today, centuries after the Enlightenment period took place, intellectuals from different countries and sciences continue to differ in many political, religious and scientific ways. Consequently, how can one expect the enlightenment thinkers to agree on all aspects concerning to society if after so many years of human evolution, humans are still in conflict because of similar conflicts and issues that were of concern during the Enlightenment period.

The Enlightenment Served to Challenged Old Religious Beliefs

Religion was one of the most important and shocking topics that the Enlightenment thinkers discussed during this period. In his philosophical dictionary published in 1770, Voltaire argued how religious people can commit horrendous crimes as a result of their fanatic beliefs. To assert his points of views, Voltaire gives examples of events such as the burghers of Paris killings, and the killing of King Henry III and Henry IV of France, and others who were killed by religious fanatic (Kramnick, 118). Voltaire also argues how fanaticism causes judges to order the death of those who think in a different way from them. He further explains how fanaticism affects the mind in such a way that has not remedy, and those who fall into this trap, will be willing to kill whoever contradicts them. Voltaire uses a tremendous critical thinking approach by stating that a man will confess that he will join to God by killing others (Kramnick, 118). This same philosophical ideas that Voltaire wrote centuries ago, can be applied today to the terrorists who kill innocent men, women and children in the name of Allah. Even right now in Iraq, a group of fanatic Islamic extremists that go by the name of ISIS have killed more than 500 Yazidis, and have buried some of them alive in a mass grave. In addition to this barbaric act, member of ISIS have kidnapped the wives and children of the men they have killed. Ironically, all of these massacres are because these people refused to convert to the Islamic religion.

Another issue that Voltaire criticizes is superstition. He argues how the church priests condemn superstitions, but ironically, they also believe in superstition. A very relevant point that Voltaire explains is how different religions view other religions as superstitious; however, they are not able to see their own superstitious ideas. In addition, Voltaire proclaims that humans lack tolerance, and it is this lack of

tolerance what makes them act like monster in many occasions. He argues how among all religions, the Christians should be the most tolerable of all; however, they are the least tolerable of all. Of course, there is no doubt why he made this statement, since Christians are supposed to follow Christ and according to all the events that are said about him, he was a perfect man who tolerated everything. Therefore, it is very ironically how most of those who follow Christ, do not tolerate other religions; let alone, they tolerate those who are atheists.

However, the work of challenging religion during the Enlightenment period, cannot only be accredited to Voltaire, since other philosophers like Bayle, Locke, Montesquieu, Hume, and Jacques Rousseau, among others also published essays and articles challenging religion through the use of reasoning. But during the enlightenment Period, there was a champion who challenged religion in such a way that he ended up in prison for some time. This great challenger and philosopher was Thomas Paine, who became most famous for his pamphlet *The Age of Reason*. Paine used reason and logic to challenge all the arbitraries religious beliefs that humans have been practicing. In one of his famous quotes he expresses, "When I am told that the Koran was written in Heaven and brought to Mahomet by an angel, the account comes too near the same kind of hearsay evidence and second-hand authority as the former. I did not see the angel myself, and, therefore, I have a right not to believe it". In this statement, Paine clearly argues how humans should base their beliefs on evidence and not on invisible thing. In a similar way, Paine challenged Christianity when he said, "Jesus Christ wrote no account of himself, of his birth, parentage, or anything else; not a line of what is called the New Testament is of his own writing. The history of him is altogether the work of other people; and as to the account given of his

resurrection and ascension, it was the necessary counterpart to the story of his birth. His historians having brought him into the world in a supernatural manner, were obliged to take him out again in the same manner, or the first part of the story must have fallen to the ground". However, the Age of Reason alone, takes a few pages and this paper is limited to a few pages; therefore, it is recommendable to read Paine for further insights. There is no doubt that Thomas Paine used logic and a very deep level of reasoning to unmask and challenge the traditional beliefs that people have been passing from generations to generations.

Finally, the statement that Eric Hobsbawm made, that "The Enlightenment was a conspiracy of dead white men in periwig to provide the intellectual foundation for western imperialism", is just his personal opinion, since the above proves the contrary. It is also irrational to think that all intellectuals in any society or country will agree upon all social issues, because people hold different values and opinions, but those who are able to prove the true for the benefit of humanity, will be more credible and people will tend to follow them more, and such is the case of those philosophers who wrote in defense of the struggling and the oppressed classes.

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