

Post-Enlightenment Society

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Post-Enlightenment Society

What we are losing and what lies ahead



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For the three of you

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Introduction and the concept of Enlightenment

This essay argues that we are witnessing a paradigm shift in the history of mentalities and culture. We are observing the end of the second Enlightenment era and the beginning of the Post-Enlightenment Society.

The term 'Post-Enlightenment Society' seems to be justified because the few societies that are still committed to the ideals of the Enlightenment are in a state of self-dissolution or find themselves on the edge of global insignificance. Moreover, this term does not imply that a majority of the world's population lived in societies guided by Enlightenment ideals until recently. That was never the case.

The Post-Enlightenment Society is a historical epoch or a form of society in which the achievements and ideals of the Enlightenment are no longer effective as guiding principles. Instances, structures and ideas that owe their genesis to the Enlightenment will not disappear completely overnight, but they will lose their primacy. In moments of critical decision-making, society will no longer rally firmly behind these values.

The Post-Enlightenment Society is best understood in terms of the absence or erosion of Enlightenment ideals. This is why Enlightenment needs to be narrowed down. In the *Historical Dictionary of Philosophy* alone, the corresponding article fills 15 pages.¹ The following use of the term Enlightenment therefore does not claim to do justice to all facets of the phenomenon or even all analytical or hermeneutic interpretations.

This essay understands the essence of the Enlightenment as the always unfinished cultivation of a way of life that strives for objectivity and normative justification. This form of life is incomplete because it is subject to immanent self-criticism. The reason for this is the realization that one never or only rarely fully lives up to one's own expectations. It is a form of cultivation because the potential for rational self-discipline is inherent in human beings, but can only unfold through nurturing and support. Humans are gifted with reason. Unfortunately, they have little affinity to use this talent.

¹ Article "Aufklärung". In: Joachim Ritter (ed.): *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Volume 1 A-C. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1971. pp. 620–635.

At the same time this exit of man from his self-inflicted immaturity and the endeavor to overcome the determination of nature and tradition by means of reason is also the core substance of humanism. Rationality enables autonomy. Autonomy enables responsibility and, in sum, the dignity of a being capable of morality arises. Ideals such as maturity and objectivity have far-reaching consequences for social and political organization. However, they are not bound to any cultural morphology. Enlightenment is a civilizational project that is compatible with many cultural forms and ways of life. The only binding commonality is the principle of rational justification striving for objectivity.

It is a system of thought closely linked to the historical and systematic development of democracy, the separation of powers, and human rights. However, there is neither a necessary nor a sufficient connection.

As an individual act, Enlightenment can manifest itself at any place and at any time, at least in theory. A critical mass of individuals striving for Enlightenment may necessarily give rise to demands for democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Unfortunately, this does not automatically imply the realization of these principles. The causalities are controversial. From the perspective of historical materialism, bourgeois freedom is not the result of Enlightenment, but rather the consequence of productivity increases in the social substructure. It was the economic change from feudalism to capitalism that brought about the ideas of the Enlightenment, not the other way around. Of course, the materialist interpretation of history is not necessarily a refutation of the idealism of the Enlightenment. A dialectical interlocking of the forces can also still be defended. However, it is important to note that none of the possible interpretations can be proven to be necessarily right or wrong.

It is of central importance for this essay that all mentioned achievements can also be conceived and realized without the essence of the Enlightenment as defined above. Law can be reduced to positive law, which is why it is possible for the worst dictatorships to call themselves a constitutional state. Science orientation can be reduced to feasibility, mechanics and efficiency. This is why theocracies can also push ahead with the construction of atomic bombs, even though the physical explanation of the world is diametrically opposed to their own dogmas. Democracy can be reduced to majority law. This is exactly what happens in so-called illiberal democracies, such as Hungary, Poland or Turkey. Even human rights, the declaration of which is inextricably linked to the history of the Enlightenment, are currently being reinterpreted. China in particular is aggressively promoting an understanding of human rights which in their core include the right to economic development. Liberal civil rights and

liberties, on the other hand, are being neglected. In the communist one-party state of China, it is not the bourgeois who is in danger, but the citizen.

For this reason, many interpretations of the current crisis fall short. They speak of the death of democracies or of a war against science.² In reality, however, only those forms of democracy, science or society that are rooted in the principles of the Enlightenment are in danger. The driving force behind the current erosion lies in deeper layers. The pursuit of objectivity and rational justification are either declared impossible, normatively discredited or simply ignored. For example, we are not primarily in a crisis of democracy. Rather, it is the case that “an erosion of enlightened culture has taken place, affecting the way in which democracies ‘function’”.³

Enlightenment is not, however, a *culture* in the sense of an arbitrary expression of customs and traditions. Nor should it be understood as a diffuse, emancipation-friendly attitude. Rather, the essence of the Enlightenment consists of a feat of self-discipline or submission to the principle of rational justification and the greatest possible objectivity. Following this definition, it becomes clear to what extent erosion pervades all social and political structures. This process is omnipresent and leads to what will be called a Post-Enlightenment Society in the following.

This is not about advocating a historical-philosophical model. Ever since humanity became aware of its own history, there have been different models for interpreting it. A rough distinction can be made between chaotic, teleological and circular models. Those who interpret world history as chaos deny the existence of any kind of structure. Teleological models assume that human history is heading towards a final state. This can be both utopian and apocalyptic in the truest sense of the word. Social reformist theories, such as communism, saw the end of history in the creation of a perfect society. Religious beliefs interpreted the end as the last judgment. The historical image of the modern Enlightenment understood human history as a never-ending quest that, despite all setbacks, was heading towards greater freedom and humanity in the long term. Circular models, as represented by Plato among others, understand history as a cycle of processes of development and decline. Even the most just kingship eventually mutates into a tyranny, which is then overthrown and replaced by a just aristocracy. Unfortunately, the few good people

2 See: Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt: *Wie Demokratien sterben: Und was wir dagegen tun können*. DVA Verlag, Munich 2018.

3 Michael Hampe: *Die dritte Aufklärung*. Nicolai Publishing & Intelligence GmbH, Berlin 2018. p. 9.

who want to serve the common good gradually develop into selfish oligarchs who are also overthrown. This is followed by a phase of just democracy which, however, also mutates. The result is the rule of the mob, in which everyone is only interested in personal advantage and loses sight of the common good. Out of this chaos comes the call for the strong man and the cycle begins again with the sole rule of a righteous man or a tyrant.

This essay is not intended to take sides in the dispute between historical-philosophical models. The matter is decided by physics alone. The history of our entire planet will end in five billion years at the latest with the apocalyptic collapse of our solar system. It remains questionable whether humanity will remain in chaos until then, experience a steady rise to the better, a final self-destruction or a circular succession of good and bad phases remains.

The central concern of the essay is to defend the following theses:

1. The project of Enlightenment was and is the noblest thing that mankind has ever produced.
2. It is an elitist minority project that is dependent on favorable framework conditions which it cannot guarantee itself.
3. The Post-Enlightenment Society is a return to the authoritative standard models of humanity, accompanied by the technical possibilities of modernity.
4. For the current generations, the decline of Enlightenment values will be an irreversible reality

The point is to show that we are not observing the crisis of individual social instances, but the demise of a way of life. Of course, nothing would be less enlightened than to present one's own convictions as unquestionable knowledge. This essay is an essay in the original meaning of the word. It is a polemic, borne by the fading hope that I am wrong.