The Concept of the Enlightenment

A PARTICULAR AND FRAGMENTED PROJECT?

It is often claimed that the Enlightenment project, which originated in the 18th century, is under threat today, that it is a Eurocentric, i.e. not a universal project, that it essentially served as a justification for colonization and ultimately led to the domination and destruction of nature and humanity. What are we to make of these serious accusations? And what is the state of the Enlightenment today?

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In order to find at least some answers to the questions posed at the beginning, I will first discuss the *concept of the Enlightenment* with reference to Kant and the encyclopedists. I will then *highlight* the *implicit consequences* that arise from the constitutive elements of the Enlightenment. The third step leads to the *socio-historical reality* and social conditions of the Enlightenment in the 18th century. With the question of what the *dark sides* of the Enlightenment consist of, we jump into modernity. Finally, I will attempt to outline roughly what the state of the *Enlightenment is today*, in the 21st century.

THE CONCEPT OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

The Enlightenment is outlined here with reference to three key concepts: independent thinking (rationality), freedom, and equality. The first concept is linked to Kant's exhortation: sapere aude, "have courage to use your own understanding!" (Kant 1992, p. 1). Think for yourself instead of letting others do it for you, and thereby eliminate your self-imposed immaturity. However, this requires one condition: it must be possible to make thinking public. "Yet how much and how correctly would we think if we did not think as it were in community with others to whom we communicate our thoughts, and who communicate theirs with us!" (Kant 1968; McClear o.J., p. 16).

But how can people begin to think for themselves and publicly? By becoming part of a process in which the public, and not isolated individuals, enlightens itself. This

process is possible because there are some who have accomplished the difficult task of enlightening themselves and are now spreading the "new spirit" around them. These outstanding personalities are the scholars. Diderot summarizes the qualities of the enlightener, whom he calls a *philosophe*, into two fundamental personality traits: He is guided by reason *(raison)*, that is, he weighs his judgment, examines the reasons for it, and orients his thinking toward the truth. And he possesses social-interactive skills *(qualités sociables)* to engage in contact and exchange with society (société) and people of intellect (personnes d'esprit) (Diderot 1756, p. 511; Robertson 2020, p. 380f).

IMPLICATIONS OF THE CONCEPT OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Kant's demand for independent thinking presupposes *freedom*. According to him, freedom is "a pure rational concept, which for this very reason is transcendent for theoretical philosophy, that is, it is a concept such that no instance corresponding to it can be given in any possible experience ..." (Kant 1991, p. 221).

This concept of freedom cannot be derived from observation or from "perceiving the ways of the world" (Kant 1991, p. 216). Just because it cannot be derived empirically, it forms the basis of *unconditional* moral laws that confront our concrete "sensibly affected" (Kant 1991, p. 221) actions as imperatives. "Moral personality is therefore nothing other than the freedom of a rational being under moral laws ... those he gives to himself (either alone or at least along with others) ..." (Kant 1991, p. 223). Freedom in this transcendental sense is what constitutes the person. "Now, what serves the will as the objective ground of its self-determination is an end, and this, if it is given by reason alone, *must hold equally for all rational beings*" (Kant 1997, p. 427; discursively. A.K.). Self-determination based on reason is thus neither limited in time nor place, nor to race or gender. It is a condition of the possibility of being human, and is therefore universally valid, and not a Eurocentric singular concept. I cannot go into detail here about the resulting problem of exclusion, namely that not all humans are persons. This is developed in a differentiated manner by Gutmann (Gutmann 2010, p. 8 and the mediation via law, p. 19f).

What characterizes *thinking*? On the one hand, it refers to the *how*, the ability to organize one's thoughts, put them into context, examine them from different perspectives, and finally communicate them to others in a form that is accessible to them. The second aspect of thinking concerns the *what*, the totality of our knowledge and skills. This element of thinking describes one of the aims of the encyclopedia, namely to present human knowledge in its order and context. In addition to the how and the what, there is a third aspect: thinking requires a certain *ethical attitude*, which Diderot called *probité* (integrity) (Diderot, No. 13).

SO MUCH FOR THE THEORY – NOW FOR THE REALITY

The addressees of the Enlightenment were, generally speaking, the public or la société. Communication took place partly orally, for example in salons or academies (Kaiser 1989, pp. 133/134); in the 'republic of scholars', "a virtual community of scholars" (Robertson 2020, p. 374), however, it was predominantly written, especially via print. The Enlightenment therefore required an audience that was able to read. This greatly reduced the size of the "public." It is estimated that the percentage of those who were able to read and understand more complex texts was approximately 10% to 15% of the population at that time (Kaiser 1989, 30f). However, this limitation began to break down in the last third of the 18th century with the reading societies (Ruder 1989, 53ff): people actually read together and thus realized the Enlightenment through discussion and collective criticism, including its interactive and communicative aspects. The reading societies also partially remedied the fact that not everyone had sufficient reading skills. It was sufficient if the reader had the relevant ability. It is assumed that this increased the readership per book to about 10 people. In addition to the book market, a wide range of magazines emerged that appealed to a heterogeneous audience and had a broad impact (Kaiser 1989, pp. 18-20). This ranged from Schlözer's *Stats-Anzeigen* or Schubert's *Deutsche Chronik* to general consumer magazines such as Wieland's *Teutscher Merkur* to very specific target-group-oriented magazines, such as *Die Hofmeisterin* for women.

THE DARK SIDES OF ENLIGHTENMENT

A brief look at some socio-historical aspects of the 18th century already reveals the first cracks in the concept of the Enlightenment: it was not everyone, but only the educated and the rich who were the target audience of the Enlightenment, even though there were attempts at popular education, such as Becker's *Noth und Hilfsbüchlein* (Kaiser 1989, p. 116ff). But the criticism goes even deeper. Above all, the principle of rationality that pervaded the Enlightenment was attacked on the basis of the connection between reason (raison), science, and the demystification of the world.

Reason now serves only "as a general tool suitable for the manufacture of all other tools, rigidly purposeful, as fateful as the precisely calculated handling in material production, the result of which eludes all calculation for human beings" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2022, p. 36/37). However, a counterargument can be constructed against this. Reason, as embodied by science and scientific laws, does not convey values. But precisely because of "... the absence of purpose in the laws governing the universe, science forces us to take responsibility for the welfare of ourselves, our species, and our planet" (Pinker 2018, pp. 394/95). The humanism thus promoted by science "... is becoming the de facto morality of modern democracies ..." (Pinker 2018, p. 395). But even this positive view of science is only possible under the premise that it is based on probity, on social and human responsibility.

Another line of criticism comes from the experience of colonialism. Rationality has also discovered the human body and, as D'Alembert explains, has enriched our knowledge of how we can protect, heal, and develop our bodies. However, according to Foucault, the same insights also made it possible to view the body as an object, to domesticate it, to prepare it for specific tasks, and to exploit it (Foucault 2014, p. 174ff). Visible signs of this include slavery in the wake of European colonization. However, two things should be kept in mind: on the one hand, prominent representatives of the Enlightenment, such as Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, Condorcet, and Helvetius, spoke out decisively against slavery (cf. Robertson 2020, p. 764f). On the other hand, however, colonization was driven by economic and power-political motives of the European states. In this context, recourse to Enlightenment served primarily as an ideological justification pattern to consolidate the influence of the European states through acculturation, especially of the native elites. Jules Ferry's colonial policy is a prime example of this: "I repeat that the superior races have a right because they have a duty. They have a duty to civilize the inferior races" (Ferry 1885, transl. by A.K.).

WHAT IS THE SITUATION WITH THE ENLIGHTENMENT TODAY?

To answer this question, I would like to revisit the most important characteristics of Enlightenment that have been developed so far and examine how each of them is constituted. What about *thinking*, understood as the ability to deal with information independently? Specifically, this includes, for example, the ability to obtain information and select from it that which is objectively relevant to the matter at hand. This implies distinguishing important information from unimportant information – exposing fake news as such – and relating it to each other in order to obtain a coherent, complex answer to one's own question. This work process takes place both on the cognitive level, i.e., the level of content, and on the metacognitive level. One could even say that the former does not work effectively if it is not controlled metacognitively. Our studies on metacognition and learning showed that adults' metacognitive skills are not in good shape: almost half (49.7%) of the representative sample was unable to control information processing metacognitively (Kaiser et al. 2009, p. 152).

Who are the people today who, like the *scholars* and *philosophes* of the 18th century, contribute to informing the public, criticizing society, and suggesting directions for good action? These are primarily journalists and experts, Wikipedia, and, in a very specific way, YouTubers or influencers. In a sense, Wikipedia and YouTubers could be described as the digital encyclopedists of our time. Both provide information about facts, explain technical procedures and craft processes, and impart practical knowledge. There is virtually no aspect of everyday or professional life for which there is not some explanatory video on YouTube. The situation

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is more complicated when it comes to influencers and YouTubers who work in a similar way. In an economic context, they are product marketers, some of whom work independently with their own products, which are sometimes questionable, and some of whom are tied to companies. In the political sphere, they are ideologically fixed, partisan opinion makers who do not shy away from false statements and lies.

The actions of the remaining groups, experts and journalists, are built on a bias that jeopardizes Enlightenment. Experts primarily follow a (formally) logical-instrumental rationality applicable to scientific explanation, as paradigmatically reflected in the Hempel-Oppenheim schema: derivation of the event from general premises given certain boundary conditions. However, a problem arises precisely with the premises. Depending on how far one goes "up," normative statements also creep in. They then have an indirect (!) effect on the immediate level of explanation. For example, conclusions by medical experts on abortion, contraception, or euthanasia are influenced by respective normative elements in the premises, which sometimes remain implicit. This is especially true in the humanities and social sciences. In addition, these disciplines are confronted with socially taboo topics, which have become more evident in Germany and especially in the US. These include, for example, the actions of the Netanyahu government in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, or, more recently, in the US, issues related to diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI), gender, slavery, or climate change. Here, politicians, driven by their agenda, and the institutions concerned, such as universities, exert pressure on scientists not to research certain topics at all, or at least not to address certain aspects of the topic. These forms of direct or indirect censorship also affect journalists, especially when the owners of a newspaper or TV station impose corresponding normative guidelines. And they extend further to the micro level, for example, to movie theaters, with attempts to prevent the screening of taboo-breaking documentaries such as *No Other Land* or *The Encampments*.

What characterizes thinking?
In addition to the **HOW** and the **WHAT**, there is a third aspect: **ETHICAL ATTITUDE**

PRESERVE THE FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENTS OF ENLIGHTENMENT

What is the state of *public discourse*, which was seen in the Enlightenment as a space that enabled thinking? Public (Publicum or society) was understood on the premise of truth-oriented communication – which is how *probité* could also be interpreted – and the validity of the better argument – as an element of rationality. This presupposed being open to the arguments of others. However, in late capitalist democracies social discourse is becoming increasingly depersonalized and is instead taking place on anonymous platforms controlled by algorithms. These algorithms work in two ways: with regard to the individual, they provide information that matches the information pool previously queried by the person concerned *(filter bubbles)*. And with regard to communication groups, their likes, and rankings, the algorithms are designed to deliver the messages preferred within a communication group *(echo chambers)* (Stark/Stegmann 2020, p. 15). These groups hardly talk to each other anymore. It does not seem an exaggeration to say that they are at war with each other, a "cultural war," as James Davison Hunter notes in an interview with Politico 05/20. In view of this situation, one must ask whether Habermas' reference to the premise of "the truth-oriented search of citizens" (Habermas 2022, 25f) is not invalidated in the face of culturally, socially, and politically divided societies. Ultimately, Marx's XI thesis on Feuerbach comes to mind: instead of merely interpreting the world differently, it must be changed. In my opinion, this could be achieved in two ways under the auspices of Enlightenment – and is already happening to some extent: on an *individual level*, where individuals learn in school or further education to acquire skills for dealing with information in an open and verified manner. This includes, for example, metacognitive skills, control over the disclosure of personal information, and access to tools for verifying the truthfulness of information. In addition, the defense of enlightenment must take place in a *systemic way*, in which resistance is organized and carried out. In the field of civic education, this includes acquiring skills for initiating and building *grassroots movements*, as well as providing *public and financial support* for media, libraries, and movie theatres that do not bow to authoritarian demands but instead ensure objective, carefully researched information and critical perspectives in the spirit of Enlightenment. And it includes even *legal regulations* such as the European Digital Services Act (DSA). Presumably, this is the only way to preserve the fundamental elements of Enlightenment in the form of the liberal constitutional state – separation of powers, freedom of expression, independence of the courts, gatekeepers, watchdogs, and the press. Otherwise, "democracies die," as Levitsky (2018, p. 24f) vividly describes. And with them, Enlightenment dies.