

## ENLIGHTENMENT, THE

The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement that originated in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe and America giving birth to the vision of an “age of reason” not only for Western civilization, but for humanity as a whole. It thus was one of the first movements to pursue a global vision by propagating the entrepreneurial, self-relying and free world citizen or cosmopolitan as the basic ideal to aspire to in order to create wealth, peace and liberty for the largest possible number of people and to overcome religious disputes.

### Definitions

The most famous definition of *Enlightenment* is that of German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804): “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of reason, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. *Sapere Aude!* ‘Have courage to use your own understanding!’—that is the motto of enlightenment” (Kant 2010 [1784], p. 1).

In the West, this vision was put into place through a variety of economic, political and societal approaches such as the scientific and technological revolutions; the development of entrepreneurial capitalism and person-centered humanism; the emancipation of women; as well as through the corresponding public discourses of rationalism and liberalism. Philosophers,

scientists and politicians like Denis Diderot, Voltaire, Adam Newton, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Locke, Benjamin Franklin, Adam Smith, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and Thomas Paine propagated public education, independent and critical mass media and democracy to increase social participation and justice by providing equal chances, making society thus more open and productive. Artists like Gotthold Ephraim Lessing or Johann Wolfgang von Goethe insisted upon religious and cultural tolerance. The Enlightenment also laid the foundations for the separation of state and religion, and thus for the institution of the modern laicistic state. The respective ideas found expression in the American Constitution of 1776 and in the French Revolution of 1789 which proposed liberty, equality and brotherhood as ideals to pursue by the means of the rule of law and cultural and social pluralism. In 1948, these principles inspired the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the General Assembly of the United Nations, and since then most of the differing attempts to theorize and implement forms of international and global government.

As the interweaving ideology underlying all these aspects which together constituted (and still drive) modernity as we know it, the Enlightenment stays until today at the center of the modern Western mindset and of the knowledge societies produced by it. Insofar as it gave origin to most of the characteristics which defined modernity throughout the past two centuries, the Enlightenment remains the embodiment of four core features which are still at the center of contemporary post-industrial societies: (1) technological modernization, (2) secularization, (3) pluralization, and (4) multiculturalization. They are kept together by the practice of public rational critique as demystification, i.e., by Enlightenment as an ethics and politics of public discourse specific to democratic communities (Jürgen Habermas).

## Non-Western notions

But seen on a global level, another stream of no less importance was related to non-Western notions of Enlightenment, mainly to experiential religious and spiritual currents, for example in the Buddhist and Hinduist civilizations, within non-Western mysticism and in ancient and contemporary natural religions and cultures. Their understanding of “Enlightenment” often goes back to the dawn of human history and is thus in many ways older than the Enlightenment propagated by the West. Enlightenment here mainly describes a state of mind of individuals and groups, which is characterized by an ultimate insight into the essence of the world and the human being, sometimes also by a spiritual union of the individual with the collective and of the human being with the cosmic order. Insofar as this state of mind is in most relevant traditions described as a “higher” state of consciousness that has to be achieved through different stages of learning and practicing, Enlightenment as a *state* and as a *stage* of mind must be discerned.

Taken as a whole, the term *Enlightenment* comprises three meanings historically closely connected with each other: (1) the - mainly Western - utopia of a open, participatory and free society, driven by technology and a rational, secular and tolerant mindset, (2) a stage of development (i.e., the epoch of modernity) of Western civilization, (3) a specific state of mind of individuals or groups.

In the epoch of globalization, there is a tendency that the different—but in many regards complementary—notions of Western and non-Western Enlightenment that during the imperialistic phases of Western expansion were often in conflict are becoming increasingly

interweaved into each other in the framework of cross-civilizational economic, political and social processes. The result is that on the one hand some observers describe an increasing competition between Western and non-Western notions of Enlightenment, which seem to form part of the “clash of civilizations” as described by Samuel P. Huntington and other theorists. On the other hand, there are attempts towards new forms of integrative notions particularly by parts of the global civil society, that try to develop a more transcultural concept of global Enlightenment appropriate for the 21st century.

### Proto-spiritual origins of the enlightened mindset

It has been often overseen though that such attempts have a long history mainly in the West, based (1) on the proto-spiritual origins of Western Enlightenment itself, which were subsequently removed in the process of its unfolding, and (2) on the always existing criticisms directed against the sometimes one-sided application of secularization and modernization. As Michel Foucault has pointed out, “the conditions under which mankind can escape from its immaturity, (in Kant’s approach) are at once spiritual and institutional, ethical and political” (1984, p. 35). And as W. J. Hanegraaff, Helmut Reinalter and Lorenzo Ravagli have shown, “secular religion”—including the Templar tradition since the 12th century, Freemasonry, and experiential Christian currents—played a decisive role in forging the contextual political implications of Enlightenment. The critical re-appropriation of these pluri-dimensional, i.e., simultaneously secular and spiritual characteristics of Enlightenment, may become a bridge between its rational and spiritual traits within globalization, and thus a platform for globalized

approaches for the future.

Since the 1980s, the discussion about how to move the ideas of Enlightenment forward into the age of globalization has ignited a vivid debate between modernists and postmodernists if Enlightenment is an unfinished project that can be further developed and adapted to globalization by working on a meta-cultural ethics of discourse and communicability, as well as on the idea of world citizenship (Habermas); or if its adaption requires overcoming most of its basic features by “deconstructing” its foundations and moving towards an “aesthetics of the Self” oriented rather towards basic traits of the Greek civilization than to modernity (Foucault) or towards an alleged “other” of the implicit Eurocentrism and Logocentrism (i.e., one-sided rationalism) of Enlightenment that has still to be defined (Jacques Derrida).

#### Present and future trajectories

In the global era, the rise of an epoch of competing modernities (Martin Jacques) in which different civilizations like the West, China and India will be technologically similarly evolved, but will cultivate different ideas of what a good life is according to their differing cultural backgrounds, has questioned the notions of progressive rationality and humankind as posed by Kant and the classical Enlightenment, since they were obviously meant for the whole of humanity presumably without appropriate knowledge of its productive differences and diversity. Is there an African Enlightenment? Or is there a specific Latin American Enlightenment, tied to liberation theology? Additionally, scholars like Wei Zhang have posed the question, “Can China answer Kant’s question of what is Enlightenment?” Since this question is closely connected with

democracy and liberty, human rights, personal freedom and pluralism, it becomes a core issue of democratization and government in theory and practice also for new superpowers like China and India.

Further, a large part of what Enlightenment traditionally was may be absorbed—and continued—during the coming decades by consciousness research, neurobiology and biotechnological projects like the “decade of the mind” and the anthropological, ethical, and philosophical (normative) dimensions implicit in them.

As U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton announced in a *Foreign Affairs* contribution of November-December 2010, the future of Enlightenment as a basic form of thought of political freedom and democracy may evolve towards “leading through civilian power”—that means towards making Enlightenment “from below,” i.e., through contextual politics of cultural psychology and worldview supremacy—the new political and democratic power strategy of the West by the means of the arising global civil society. This view departs from the assumption that supremacy in the 21st century will not consist merely in military and economic power, but due to the new open information technologies like the Internet increasingly in the supremacy of worldviews of freedom and individual empowerment, i.e., of the original ideas of Enlightenment, which may define the Western global dominance of the future not anymore through military and economic, but increasingly through cultural and ideological supremacy. Accordingly, there is a new rise of Enlightenment as a secular, rational, proto-spiritual and pluralistic endeavor, conceived as the main alternative to the global “turn of religion” as a metaphysical, nonrational, confessional, hierarchical and monistic worldview. The battle between these different forms of global development may co-shape the destiny of

globalization. Also, Enlightenment today is conceived less ideologically and more pragmatically by civil society liberatory movements, for example in the form of liberation technologies like mobile phones, democratically conceived computer-ownership or unconditioned Internet-access for everybody that empower individuals across the world by granting them access to global networks, the respective knowledge and thus to qualification.

Currently, attempts are made to mitigate the impact of competing modernities on globalization through the renewal of the concept of Enlightenment as a lead term allegedly pointing towards a new world ethos or global ethics (Hans Kueng). In order to achieve a more balanced and integrative concept of Enlightenment needed for that purpose, many theorists suggest that the origins of the term should be revived, and an idealistic secularism or a secular spirituality should be established both by the most evolved societies of the West and the developing countries of the East and South (Habermas). But not only the main term of Enlightenment is under scrutiny, so are its constituent parts and subterms. In the framework of globalized migration processes, there is for example a vivid discussion if the notion of tolerance should be replaced by the notion of hospitality (Derrida) in order to overcome its implicit contradiction of devaluating the one that is being tolerated, typical for the inner contradictions of Western Enlightenment between aspiration and reality.

But while it seems to be obvious to most observers that there has to be some kind of integrative development of the term in order to reach out to the different cultures of the world that constitute globalization, it remains open if the potentially arising global connotations of enlightenment will be able to transform the secular traits of the lead cultures of the West to an equal extent as the often religious and collectivistic traits of non-Western civilizations towards a

globally enlightened civilization of empathy and mutual trust, as trend researchers like Jennifer Gidley or Jeremy Rifkin dare to predict. Also, to which extent the American and European civilizations may continue to function as worldwide homogenizers towards such a global enlightenment by proposing an enlightened lifestyle as role model of a good life is disputed. Another related question is, if the modern role model of an enlightened lifestyle centered on self-reliance, individualism and entrepreneurial freedom as well as on economic liberalism, human rights and political democracy is appropriate to non-Western cultures and religions, and to which extent it can be subject to compromise. If it is plausible what Alvin Toffler predicted for 2010–2050: that China, India and Brazil will forge alliances and Muslim immigration into Western countries will change the cultural and ideological landscape, it cannot be excluded that the “medium” concept of Enlightenment may change in non-expected ways. It is disputed however what this may imply for the so far still globally prevailing Western interpretations of the term, and what kind of emerging global Enlightenment might exactly be taking shape as a result.

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***See also*** Reason; Rationalism; Individualism; Secularization; Modernity; Science; The Western Mind; Democracy; Liberty; Human Rights; Global Government; Secular Religion

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