

## THE ERA OF LIBERAL HUMANISM

Critics of the Enlightenment argued that it produced the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. Having rejected God and eaten fruit from the tree of knowledge, human beings define their own criteria of good and evil and try to reshape the world to conform to their ideals. In so doing, they eliminate or reduce to slavery millions of the world's peoples. In his book *Memory and Identity*, Pope John Paul II wrote: "If a man can decide by himself, without God, what is good and what is bad, he can also determine that a group of people is to be annihilated". By rejecting Christ, the European Enlightenment "paved the way for the great historical catastrophes of the 20th century".

But while they greatly influenced the deistic founders of the American Revolution like Jefferson, Franklin, Madison, Washington and Adams, the ideas of the Enlightenment thinkers did not actually gain hegemony throughout Europe in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The opponents' arguments prevailed. They said that, in holding humankind to be naturally good, the Enlightenment ignored the evidence of human nature. It also mistakenly held every problem to be resolvable by reason, ignoring the key role of emotions, and it thought that problems would be solved by science and technology, ignoring the possibility that they could be put to evil uses. Last, but not least, by maintaining that secularism was the way forward, it also ignored humankind's need for religion.

In a sense, many critics of the Enlightenment are critics of philosophers and intellectuals generally. The latter are seen as bookish, ivory tower dreamers who cannot take people as they are but wrongly imagine that human nature can be changed for the better. But such an argument itself denies the reality of human development from the primitive era. Every demand for change can be dismissed as utopian fantasy. As Kant argues, ideas of reason conflict with the claims of experience precisely because that is what ideas are meant to do. The task of reason is to deny the claims of experience as final and to widen the horizon of our experience by providing ideas that experience ought to obey. Instead of ideals being measured by whether they conform to reality, it is reality that should be measured by whether it lives up to our ideals.

Historically, what happened was that the French Revolution, which appeared to uphold some Enlightenment principles, in its later stages betrayed its tolerant, sceptical, rational, open-minded ideals. Hegel blamed the Enlightenment for the guillotine and the bloody excesses of the Revolution, thus laying the groundwork for the criticism that the Enlightenment had sacrificed love, spirituality and

tradition at the altar of reason and absolute freedom. Napoleon implemented a few rational reforms such as increased educational opportunities and religious toleration, but he turned the clock back when he stamped out constitutional government, reinstated slavery, had the Pope crown him emperor, restored Catholicism as the state religion and glorified war and territorial conquest.

Nationalism, imperialism and militarism developed during the 19th century as the ruling ideas. Liberal thinkers in Europe, anxious not to defend autocratic monarchies and empires, latched on to nationalism as the political embodiment of 'liberation' and 'self-determination'. After all, the entire basis of the Enlightenment was the liberation of the individual from traditional beliefs. But in most western societies nationalism was initially a romantic, militaristic, closed, exclusive ideology which subsumed the individual into the 'nation' and stressed the differences between 'nations', rather than an open and inclusive philosophy that promoted the essential unity of humankind, despite their differences. Irish nationalism was a perfect example. Partly in order to justify its claim that Ireland was a distinct nation, it stressed an exclusivist, Gaelic, Catholic vision of Irishness that increasingly alienated Protestants on the island.

So what happened was that an anti-Enlightenment emerged in opposition to the Enlightenment ideals. Whereas the latter advocated freedom, tolerance and autonomy, reason, science, education, a common humanity, universal rights and peaceful progress, the counter-Enlightenment advocated community, tradition, religion, a spiritual dimension, a suspicion of science and education, an emphasis on instinct and feelings, divisions between people on grounds of culture, language, ethnicity, religion etc., and a belief in force and war as purging and liberating characteristics of the human condition. It was these counter-Enlightenment ideas that were eventually followed through in all their brutal logic by the totalitarian regimes of the early 20th century.

The betrayal of the Enlightenment was spearheaded by a man who is often seen as an important part of it – Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78). It would be truer to say that he was the herald of this Counter-Enlightenment, for he championed the opposite of many of its basic tenets. Rousseau, on the contrary, believed that civilisation and its institutions were themselves instrumental in the corruption of men and their alienation from nature, purity, equality and spontaneous human feeling – artificial man had enslaved natural man. This is the meaning of his famous declaration at the beginning of the *Social Contract* (1762) that "man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains". Rousseau was a thinker who was fervently anti-intellectual. In *Freedom and its Betrayal* (Pimlico, 2003, p41) Isaiah Berlin

describes him as 'the greatest militant lowbrow in history, a kind of guttersnipe of genius', and says his heirs include petit bourgeois dictators like Hitler and Mussolini.

We can see it in his first major work, the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* (1750) in which he argued that the institutions of civil society had corrupted mankind. Science and the arts are the worst enemies of morality. The theme was further developed in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1754), where he maintained that mankind originally lived in a condition of natural simplicity, and morality sprang from an innate goodness, but the development of agriculture, technology and private property created strife, envy, conflict and exploitation. In the *Social Contract* (1762) he was therefore concerned to emancipate the individual from a corrupt and unequal society and bring him back to a condition of equality as close as possible to the state of nature.

In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau contends that the interests of the individual and the state are one and the same, and it is the state's responsibility to implement the 'general will', a phrase which is repeated in the French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. Since freedom consists in obedience to the general will, those who do not obey must be 'forced to be free'.

This is a totalitarian vision because it argues that freedom is actualised in the pursuit of an absolute collective purpose. It is in effect saying that people generally do not know what they truly want and what is in their best interests, and therefore it is the duty of the state and its agencies to give them what their real self truly wants. It knows better what you are, what you want and what will liberate you. Berlin calls this a great perversion of liberty and says that Rousseau is more responsible for it than any thinker who ever lived. Hence the paradox that Rousseau, who claims to have been the most ardent and passionate lover of human liberty was actually one of the most sinister and most formidable enemies of liberty in the whole history of modern thought.

Other anti-Enlightenment thinkers included Edmund Burke (1729-97), Johann Gottfried Herder and Joseph de Maistre. Burke was a complex figure who opposed British imperialism in Ireland and India and supported the American War of Independence. Yet his whole thesis in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) is anti-Enlightenment. In a famous passage he writes: "We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would be better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages". Fallible reason

is no substitute for time-trusted habits and traditions. He even suggests that “there is a natural instinct in the unthinking man” who accepts and endorses the institutions and practices into which he is born”. Reason is thus made subservient to instinct, custom and even prejudice. Indeed, prejudice is a feeling which transcends reason: “When our feelings contradict our theories...the feelings are true, and the theory is false”. He even concludes that prejudices are wise and men of understanding, “instead of exploding general prejudices, employ their sagacity to discover the latent wisdom which prevails in them”.

Burke also opposed the separation of church and state pursued by the revolutionaries. For him this was a repudiation of the divine gifts of government, society, and religion. “We know, and it is our pride to know, that man is by his constitution a religious animal; that atheism is against, not only our reason but our instincts; and that it cannot prevail long”. Without the warm cloak of custom, tradition, experience, history, religion, and social hierarchy – all of which radical man would rip off – man is shivering and naked. Free man from all mystery, demystify his institutions and his intellectual world, and you leave him alone in a universe of insignificance, incapacity, and inadequacy. The demystification of institutions removed the awe and respect with which Burke believed they should be viewed.

Similarly, Burke dismisses the idea of ‘natural rights’ which he says are ‘pretended rights’ and are ‘morally and politically false’. For him, rights were not universal but particular to each society and handed down by our forefathers. He claimed that his view of rights was the traditional British view. In *Magna Carta* and in the 1689 *Declaration of Right* there is no mention of ‘the rights of man’. Instead, rights are regarded as a patrimony or inheritance. Burke defined rights as “an entailed inheritance derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity; an estate specially belonging to the people of this kingdom without any reference whatever to any more general or prior right”. We receive and transmit our privileges “in the same manner in which we enjoy and transmit our property and our lives” (i.e. by legal and genetic inheritance). Such an analysis implies that people who have no bequest of democracy or liberty from their ancestors have no automatic right to them. “Freedom is not so much a right that is a necessary part of being human but an inheritance that is handed down to the British people as a piece of property might be”.

Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) was born in Prussia and attended the University of Königsberg, where he became a student of Kant but was drawn instead to the philosophy of Johann Georg Hamann, a patriotic Francophobe who

championed emotions over reason and faith in a god over philosophy. Herder rejected the Enlightenment ideal of universal, rational standards in favour of the unique and particular in a specific time and place. He attached great importance to the nation and to patriotism and maintained that "there is only one class in the state, the Volk, (not the rabble), and the king belongs to this class as well as the peasant". Each nation should feel deep inside itself and proudly proclaim its singularity, derived from its distinct geography and climate, language, customs and traditions. Although he was not a nationalist in the modern sense, Herder was the intellectual father of modern nationalism, a term which he himself coined. He rejected the philosophes' cosmopolitan model of modernity, which he believed is the shedding of all that makes us most human, and asserted that to belong to a given community is a basic human need no less natural than that for food or drink. Some scholars have indeed seen Herder's ideas as containing the roots of Nazism.

In the 20th century what happened in many countries was a sacralisation of politics. This is particularly true in the ideologies of nationalism, fascism and Soviet communism. As I said earlier, Irish nationalism was initially closed and exclusive. Pearsian Irish republicanism went even further down this road and sacralised the Irish nation. It was no coincidence that the Easter Rising occurred at Easter. Republicanism would herald the resurrection of the Irish nation just as God resurrected Jesus. Bobby Sands compared himself to Christ.

Fascism was in fact a form of secular religion, in which worship of the state, the party and the leader represent a flight from reality into the realm of an emotional and mystical ideology. Indeed, fascism has been described as a classic case of a modern political religion. Mussolini talked of achieving a 'collective harmony' in which the individual is fused with the community in a joyful union.

Arguably, too, Soviet Communism was a political religion. Like religion, it posited an ideal, perfect reality. Lenin's utopian vision was of a socialist paradise without exploitation and alienation, to be implanted in Russia's backward society. Like all religions, Soviet Communism was irrational, dogmatic and based on faith rather than science. Just like Christianity and Islam, it had its Holy Books which were treated as Holy Scripture, namely the writings of Lenin, Mao, Marx and others – all of which were far from scientific. Stalin threw scientists into the Gulag, just as the Catholic Church imprisoned Galileo and others. The Communist Party acted just like the Church in medieval Europe. Just like that Church, the Communists tortured and killed those who refused to adopt the official faith. Just like the Church, the Communists promoted the belief that governmental authorities were all-knowing,

all-powerful and sanctioned by God, and the idea that refusing to bow to authority was a sin.

Just like the medieval church, the Communist Party promoted the idea of charismatic leaders and saints, people whose total devotion to the Communist cause was a good and holy thing and entitled them to be worshipped. The difference was that the Communists substituted Communist leaders like Mao and Stalin for the saints. The Communists even revived the bizarre medieval practice of worshipping the dead bodies of the saints; they built massive mausoleums in which they placed the embalmed bodies of their dead leaders and forced their people to worship them.

In short, the Enlightenment was betrayed in the 19th and early 20th centuries by a divisive and destructive nationalism, aided and abetted by ideologies which were sacralised by a large dose of political religion.

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The horrors of the early 20th century have reawakened the western world to the values and ideals of the 18th century philosophers. Since 1945 many of their principles are now enshrined in law. We have international organisations which promote our common humanity. Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”.

Europe, once the site of painful divisions and murderous conflicts, is now the continent that embodies tolerance and mutual respect. We have come to realise that, as the Irish proverb states, it is in each other’s shadow that we flourish. The major problems we face - climate change, overpopulation, poverty, exploitation, prejudice – are the responsibility of all of us.

Of course, counter-enlightenment values haven’t gone away, you know. As Sam Harris puts it, the world is simply ablaze with bad ideas, many of them connected with religion. One of the basic themes of this survey is that religion in one guise or another has been the greatest threat to Enlightenment over the last two and a half thousand years. Each time progressive values had a chance of gaining hegemony, they were crushed by religious or quasi-religious forces. Arguably, again, religious belief is resurgent on a global scale, encompassing Christianity and Hinduism as much as Islam. Richard Dawkins has declared that “the enlightenment is under threat. So is reason. So is truth. So is science”. Some people believe they will be rewarded in paradise if they kill themselves and others. Some clerics declare that

floods and earthquake are God's punishment on politicians who support gay rights. Some teachers and some politicians are convinced that the earth was created 6,000 years ago. Northern Ireland's health minister does.

What of Europe? Once the site of painful divisions and murderous conflicts, it has been in recent decades the continent that embodied tolerance and mutual respect. The major problems – climate change, poverty, overpopulation, exploitation, prejudice – were seen as the responsibility of all of us. The young, who are generally well educated and globalist in their outlook, enjoyed the freedom of moment that the EU offered them.

Yet in Europe, too, reaction is on the march. Resurgent right-wing populist groups are shouting anti-immigration and Eurosceptic slogans across much of the continent. In France, the far right **National Front** won 6.8 million votes in regional elections in 2015 – its best ever result. The National Front have been a significant political force in France since the 1980s. Its leader, Marine Le Pen, currently leads in presidential election polls ahead of next year's elections.

In Greece and Hungary, neo-Nazi members of **Golden Dawn** and **Jobbik** have attacked migrants, Roma and their political enemies, and at the same time been able to gain parliamentary representation. In the last national elections, Golden Dawn won 7 percent of the vote, and Jobbik won 20 percent.

The candidate of the **Freedom Party** of Austria (FPÖ) came within 31,000 votes (less than 1%) of winning the presidency in May. Austria's fascists have been the most electorally successful in Europe.

The **AFD Party** in Germany made an unexpected surge in local elections held in three states in March 2016, and in one state it picked up around a quarter of the votes. And while it did not win any of the three states outright, it has sent a clear message to Germany's political elite.

What of the UK? The rightward trajectory is clear from recent votes. In the 2010 general election, parties of the left and centre (Labour Lib Dem, SNP and Green) received 16 million votes, while those of the right (Tories, UKIP and BNP) received only 12 million. In the 2015 election, however, the left and centre vote fell to 14.3 million while the right rose to over 15 million. In the referendum, the left and centre represented largely by the remain parties received 16.1 million, while the right received 17.4 million. For the first time in 60 years the combined parties of the right outnumbered the others.

In the EU referendum, most prominent progressives – whether politicians, trade unionists, economists, intellectuals or media figures – were in the ‘Remain’ camp. The ‘Leave’ camp was dominated by the right and the far right, including the DUP in Northern Ireland. A week before the vote, the *Financial Times* rightly stated that a British vote to withdraw from the EU would be nothing less than ‘a grievous blow to the post-1945 liberal world order’ that would strike at ‘the coherence of the west’. It contrasted the liberalism of ‘Remain’ with the ‘pinched nationalism’ of Brexit. The Brexit result is a triumph for ethnic English nationalism, arrogance, racism and neoliberalism. These counter-Enlightenment values have been fostered by a poisonous combination of self-serving demagogic politicians, right-wing newspaper proprietors, and blighted centenary commemorations of Britain’s perceived greatness in World Wars, fostering nostalgia for a ‘great’ British past.

It is always easier to promote simple certainties over complex realities. That is what referendums do. Attlee described them as only too often ‘the instrument of Nazism and fascism’. Hitler held four between 1933 and 1938, all resulting in massive majorities for his policies of leaving the League of Nations, abolishing the presidency, the incorporation of the Rhineland and Union with Austria.

Simplification, repetition and misrepresentation were the mantras of the leading Brexiteers, and restricting immigration and the prospect of independence were stressed as the two basic issues. “We want our country back” was a constant slogan of Little Englanders. The referendum has revealed a deeply divided Britain, especially in terms of class, age and region.

Scotland, which voted 62% to 38% to remain, will seek a second referendum on independence and all the signs are that the vote will be a nationalist victory the next time.

Northern Ireland also voted 56% to 44% to remain, partly because the majority have been happy to have closer links with the Republic and do not want the return of a ‘hard border. This is likely to happen if it is to be heavily policed in order to keep EU migrants who have entered the Republic from moving into the UK. Once again, Ireland could prove to be Britain’s backdoor. The majority of unionists, however, voted for Brexit, even though they would hardly feel secure with the break-up of the UK that might result from it. Brexit could therefore prove to be a blessing for Irish nationalists. Unionists should be careful what they wish for.

The Brexit result has dealt a savage blow to Liberal Humanist values, and there is much to be done to restore their dominance in Europe.