

DUSK OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

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For a long time in European history, the Christian worldview was dominant throughout the continent. Disagreements between denominations were many and often proved quite bloody, yet Europeans shared a set of common perceptions, a unified moral code, and a paradigm of society. However, as science and philosophy developed, this model became obsolete. It had too many white spots, noticed by curious minds, and too much authority, detested by those who preferred to make their own choices. The legacy of the ancients, revived during the Renaissance, offered suitable alternatives, and the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries did not increase the number of believers. A new era, one of knowledge and reason, came to replace the old.

The philosophers of the Enlightenment made an emphasis on the individual, rejecting Christian doctrine. Yet, in their pursuit of a new society, free from both church and state, they came up with their own brand of universalism. A fatal, often paralysing contradiction was embedded in the European consciousness: the idea of simultaneous adherence to liberty, equality, and humanity. From there, it only mattered how far one was willing to go. British Whigs mostly stopped at respectable classical liberalism. The French revolutionaries went further and embraced egalitarianism. And some groups, like the members of the First International in 1864, brought the idea to its logical conclusion: socialism.

The EUROPEAN CONSERVATIVE

Starting in the 18th century, a man of faith gave way to a man of reason—or, at least, that was the fashionable maxim. In truth, this turned out to be but a fancy name for a new short-sighted sort of idealism. Its concept of liberty was limited to the simple absence of oppression by the ruling elites. Its “natural rights” had nothing in common with reality, where laws were defined by customs and political will. Its wish for equality betrayed a profound misunderstanding of hierarchies and their role in human society, for if there is the freedom to grow and develop, there is no equality.

As for reason, it was—and remains—a common mistake to confuse it with universal truth. The former is a mechanism, a critical and analytical way of thinking that employs a logical method, allowing every step to be traced and tested. The latter expects everyone who presumably uses this mechanism to hold the same opinion, as if there can be no variety in perception or interpretation of facts. As a result, we are taught to trust the judgement of a scientist because he is a scientist, and not because his judgement is valid. While it makes practical sense to rely upon expert knowledge, given that it is impossible to learn everything in a lifetime, there is still a need to doubt and ask questions.

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In 1792, Thomas Paine, an Englishman by birth, an American by choice, and a Frenchman by the habit of mind, published the second volume of his *Rights of Man*. The book was met with great excitement, selling about one million copies; not only did it praise the Enlightenment values, but it made a direct connection between them and the welfare state. “When it shall be said in any country in the world, my poor are happy, my jails are empty of prisoners, my streets of beggars; the aged are not in want, the taxes are not oppressive,” he wrote of a utopia that had a lot in common with a communist dream. “The rational world is my friend, because I am the friend of its happiness: then may that country boast its constitution and its government.” He then proceeded to explain how he would

distribute his welfare payments; needless to say, his plan displayed no comprehension of economics or politics.

Like most political activists of past and present, Paine readily replaced logic with feelings. For a man who worshipped *reason*, he provided surprisingly few consistent arguments that had any connection to the real world. “[M]en are all of one degree, and consequently that all men are born equal, and with equal natural right,” he claimed, echoing the French thinkers who had come before him. This declaration remained a fantasy right until “natural rights” were secured by state enforcement. However, the bright minds of Continental Europe would not let themselves be slowed down by reality and its nuances: theirs was a search for a pure, universal reason that could replace religion. It was not freedom they sought but moral guidance; few of them had Voltaire's courage, wit, or healthy cynicism.

While English philosophers studied the principles of government and markets and the French concerned themselves with liberty and happiness, the Germans attempted to devise a doctrine encompassing every thought and being. Hegel, for one, invented absolute idealism, a system completely divorced from empirical evidence. He claimed there was an Absolute Truth that a human mind could comprehend; this was his explanation of God. After his death, his followers divided into two camps: conservative Old Hegelians, who were content with the state of the world, and Young Hegelians, convinced that it is not yet a utopia but can be turned into one. For some time in the 1830s and 1840s, Karl Marx counted himself among the latter group's members. His growing attachment to materialism eventually caused disagreement, but the basis remained. His was an attempt to reform society according to the abstract ideas of equality and happiness rather than to understand how it actually works. As it happens, reality proved to be far more complex and inconsistent than his theory would allow.

In this complexity lies the beauty of mankind. There are indeed some characteristics shared between humans, but there are also our differences and our conflicts—something not only inevitable but essential for both personal and national growth. In the words of historian and philosopher Oswald Spengler: “If there is such a thing as individualism in the

world, it is this of an individual defying the whole universe, his knowledge of his own unbending will, his delight in ultimate decisions and love of destiny even at the moment when it is breaking him." For without adversity, there can be no worthy achievements, no pride of accomplishment, and, thus, no improvement.

However, the patterns have been clear for some time. Spengler described them in his many works. "This evil sentimentality which lies over all the theoretical currents of the two centuries—Liberalism, Communism, Pacifism—and all the books, speeches, and revolutions, originates in spiritual indiscipline, in personal weakness, in lack of training imparted by a stern old tradition," he wrote in 1934. And he was right.

Western civilisation, especially Continental Europe, has fully embraced the universalism of the Enlightenment. The EU, complete with a supranational government, Court of Human Rights, and progressive propaganda, is ultimately built on its values of equality, humanity, and *pure reason*. The EU is a sterilised world of comfort and happiness, full of synthetic global citizens who dutifully respect all cultures but understand none—including their own. And how can they? Robbed of their spirit, taught to fight oppression wherever they spot it, they are losing connection to their roots.

The Enlightenment has given us the greatest possible gift: a legacy of critical thinking, questioning, and independence. It was once combined with passion and industry; in the two centuries that have followed, we have known no rivals but each other. We have built and created, waged wars, and crossed the oceans. Unfortunately, our civilisation is now growing old. In our twilight days, we seek security above anything else while younger, more vigorous forces rally at our gates. Even our taste for dystopian fiction betrays our fatigue, as we no longer dream of success but failure. The hopeful rebelliousness of Rousseau and Paine is gone as well; only its empty husk remains, annexed by the Twitter mob. That and dour Marxist materialism.

In 1974, Henry Kissinger, a remarkable diplomat and currently the oldest former member of a United States Cabinet, gave an interview, answering a question regarding pessimism in his writings. "As a historian, you have to be conscious of the fact that every civilisation

that has ever existed has ultimately collapsed,” he said. “History is a tale of efforts that failed, of aspirations that weren't realised, of wishes that were fulfilled and then turned out to be different from what one expected. So, as a historian, one has to live with a sense of the inevitability of tragedy.”

But then again, Kissinger was not just a historian. He was a secretary of state. And it was his duty to fight on, however grim the future looked. “It is probably true that insofar as I think historically, I must look at the tragedies that have occurred,” he continued. “Insofar as I act, my motive force, of which I am conscious, it is to try to avoid them.”

Our fire may have died out. Our glory may have faded. But there is still a precious little tinder burning inside the soul of the West. And there are still those who are willing to defend it.