

POLI 342: MODERN WESTERN POLITICAL THOUGHT

SESSION 2– THE POLITICS OF ENLIGHTENMENT (1685-1815)

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SESSION OVERVIEW

- Welcome to session 2 of this course: The Politics of Enlightenment. Under this session, we discuss the Enlightenment as an intellectual movement which covered the whole Europe and America, but it actually began in France after the death of Louis XV. You will know that Enlightenment was the period which sought to enhance human understanding and enthrone reason as the sovereign guide in human affairs. The session, I explore the definition of enlightenment to delineate its core boundaries. I also examine the key political ideals of enlightenment and dilate on enlightenment and human nature. The session further examines the basic axioms of enlightenment and outline its sources of inspiration. The session ends with an examination of the attitude of the enlightenment thinkers on religion and the laws of nature. I entreat you to relax and enjoy the journey into the land of the enlightened thinkers.

SESSION OUTLINE

This session covers the following topics:

- Definition of Enlightenment
- Political Ideals of Enlightenment and Their Attitude Towards Human Nature
- The Basic Axioms of Enlightenment
- Attitude of the Enlightenment Thinkers Towards Religion and the Laws of Nature.



TOPIC ONE
DEFINITION OF
ENLIGHTENMENT

Introduction

- Enlightenment as an intellectual movement covered the whole Europe and America, but it actually began in France after the death of Louis XV.
- It was the period which sought to enhance human understanding and enthrone reason as the sovereign guide in human affairs.
- The successors of Louis XIV were not able to maintain the same level of authority in France even though theoretically they enjoyed the Divine Right to rule.
- All authority- intellectual, religious, and secular came under attack.

Introduction (cont'd)

- Enlightened thinkers were radicals who wanted to get to the root of things.
- It's writers brought the conception of natural law, created the foundation of modern sociology, developed utilitarianism anticipated socialism and gave democratic theory its most profound formulation ever.
- They believed in the inevitability of human progress.
- They regarded the human body as a machine.
- The springs of human behaviour were the desires to seek pleasure and avoid pain.

Introduction (cont'd)

- European politics, philosophy, science and communications were radically reoriented during the course of 18th century” (1685-1815) as part of a movement referred to by its participants as the ***Age of Reason***, or the ***Enlightenment***.
- Enlightenment thinkers in Britain, in France and throughout Europe questioned traditional authority and embraced the notion that humanity could be improved through rational change.
- The Enlightenment produced numerous books, essays, inventions, scientific discoveries, laws, wars and revolutions.
- The American and French Revolutions were directly inspired by Enlightenment ideals and respectively marked the peak of its influence and the beginning of its decline.

Introduction cont'd

- The Enlightenment's important 17th-century precursors included
 - the Englishmen Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes,
 - the Frenchman Renee Descartes and the key natural philosophers of the Scientific Revolution, including Galileo, Kepler and Leibniz.
 - Its roots are usually traced to 1680s England, where in the span of three years [Isaac Newton](#) published his “**Principia Mathematica**” (1686)
 - [John Locke](#) - “**Essay Concerning Human Understanding**” (1689)
 - The two works that provided the scientific, mathematical and philosophical toolkit for the Enlightenment's major advances.

Definition of Enlightenment

- In his famous essay *What is Enlightenment?* of 1789, Kant defined what was to be enlightened as “to be enlightened was to ‘dare to know’”.
- Enlightenment was an enquiry into the means of knowing itself-epistemology.
- Kant regarded the whole of the eighteenth century thought as a revolt against ignorance and superstition.
- There were great intellectual battles, e.g. Biblical criticisms (the measurement of the Noah’s ark and how it could contain all animals mentioned in Genesis).

TOPIC TWO

POLITICAL IDEALS OF ENLIGHTENMENT AND THEIR ATTITUDE TOWARD HUMAN NATURE

Political Ideals of Enlightenment

- Passions were implanted by nature gave human life its vital motion.
- Reason directs passion in every human being.
- They believed in the following:
- institutionalism,
- civil liberties,
- abolition of slavery,
- gradualism and moderation,
- morals and politics,
- peace and internationalism,
- social and economic progress,
- justice and rule of law,
- toleration of others ways of doing things, where one is born could impact on him/her,
- freedom of opinion and association,
- the balancing of powers of government and
- division of political authority.

Man and his world

- Locke argued in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) that there was nothing particularly mysterious about how the human mind came to know what it did in fact know.
- Sensory perception was a full and sufficient cause of the mind's understanding of the world outside of itself.
- Theology was still important but they argued that God's purpose for the world, was to be found in the world (that is why God made man in his own image by giving him natural reason).
- Lockean epistemology took the injunction 'know thyself'
- Knowing thyself implied understanding how what the human mind contains actually got there.
- Epistemology was the royal road to political science and to sociology.

Enlightenment and Institutions

- All men receive a gift of reason at birth.
- Natural reason might work automatically in a world which was perfectly natural.
- The world's circumstances prevents most men's reason from working properly.
- Enlightened thinkers pointed out just how unnatural most of the world's institutions and practices were.
- Irrational institutions and practices perverted natural reason.
- Irrational institutions and practices were the habits of deference to aristocratic superiors and adherence to Catholic superstition.
- Most men had to be taught how to use their reason all over again
- The improvement of the world's institutions and the improvements of its inhabitants world have to proceed together.
- Locke argued that at birth, the mind was a blank sheet (*tabula rasa*), waiting to receive the impressions of the outside world.

The Human Nature

- Enlightened thinkers' view of human nature was both pessimistic and optimistic.
- This position was similar to the Christian view that human life was lived between the polarities of good and evil.
- The conclusion that what was good about men came from themselves and what was bad about them came from society did not follow from Lockian premises.
- Hume argued in the second Volume of his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1740) that there was no reason in principle and in practice, to believe that our impressions of good and evil both come from the society.
- They sought after the rational principles of ethical conduct.

The Human Nature (cont'd)

- They also conceded that there were a variety of admissible ethical conduct in practice.
- They posit that human nature is very much the same in all times and places.
- The natural could not be found anywhere but in the minds of the thinkers.
- The natural man was a primitive man.
- Comparative sociology made a theory of history possible.
- The natural man more often meant man as he was meant to be.
- Can we find out what man was meant to be?

The Human Nature (cont'd)

- Can man ever realize his potentials?
- If we can distil out the basic constitution of man from the multifarious manifestations of his nature in the world, then we can infer from human nature what the social and political institutions of humanity ought to be like.
- Critics have argued that the enlightened thinkers were not interested in uniqueness of given examples of social existence but in uniformity of human nature.

The Human Nature (cont'd)

- This was a step towards materialism.
- Just as actions of physical bodies in the universe depend on the circumstances in which they move, so the conduct of human beings is bound to vary with the conditions on the social and political world in which they find themselves.-Newton's law of motion.
- The rational principles of human conduct could be generalized.

TOPIC FOUR

THE BASIC AXIOMS OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Basic Axioms of the Enlightened Thinkers

- All men had the same sensory equipment for dealing with the world,
- All men possessed a kind of natural reason or common sense,
- All men possessed certain elementary rights by nature,
- All men sought pleasure and avoided pain,
- All men would react to the same physical and social environment in the same way, etc.
- These axioms brought some intellectual order into those human phenomena which had always been a tendency to attribute to the obscure workings of divine providence, or to pure chance.

The Source of Inspiration of Enlightened Thinkers

- The inspiration for the enlightenment was Newtonian and Cartesian, and the rationalism of the seventeenth-century science.
 - Newton and Descartes tried in their different ways to judge all human knowledge claims in the court of mathematics.
 - Mathematical truths were thought to be ideal truths and any other branch of knowledge with pretensions of scientific rigor must necessarily imitate mathematical procedures.
 - Mathematics is one science in which it could be truly be said that an argument was either true or false.
 - In the enlightenment, everybody wanted to be the Newton of the social sciences. Thus:
 - Find the axioms of human nature,
 - Deduce from them in the approved Newtonian manner,
- In the process, the science of man became a possibility.



TOPIC FOUR
ATTITUDE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT THINKERS
TOWARDS RELIGION AND THE LAWS OF NATURE.

The Enlightenment and Religion

- The major enemy of the enlightenment was the revealed religion.
- Christian Theology had always emphasized that God was a rational God.
- Newtonian physics showed rational men what God's rationality actually meant.
- God was a transcendent watchmaker who created a mechanical universe whose laws were God's laws.
- The universe worked automatically.
- God therefore had no intentions of interfering in his own creation.
- Why then will God break his own laws?
- Was he not satisfied with what he had made?
- God meant rational men must find out things about the universe and how he ordered it.

The Enlightenment and Religion (cont'd)

- He did not mean to deceive them.
- God breaking his own laws is what Christians call a miracle.
- To Christians, the miraculous happens from time to time, is a proof that God continues to reveal Himself bit by bit and from time to time.
- God of miracles moves in mysterious ways and therefore there is the need for special people to interpret.
- Men to not have direct access to divine knowledge.
- The Church must therefore exist to tell the truths about God's creation.

The Enlightenment and Religion (cont'd)

- Any teachings which is at variance with what the Church has to say must at best be mistaken or at worst telling deliberate lies.
- Hence the case for censorship.
- If God never broke his laws, then there was no need for a special agency to interpret His purpose for the world.
- Natural Church was therefore deism stripped of all its supernatural trimmings.
- We can find out all we need to know from the creation of God.
- This is what informed Voltaire to conclude that he did not believe in God but agreed with Him.

Laws of Nature

- God established laws for the physical universe.
- He must have established similar laws for the human universe too.
- Moral causes ought to work in analogous to Newton's Laws of Motion (Constitution of the universe).
- There ought to be its equivalent moral constitution.
- Locke's version of Natural Rights became a cliché which fitted into Newtonian model.
- Rational men knew that the enjoyment of their natural rights implied a duty to respect the same rights in others.
- For so long as this was true, there was going to be harmony on earth.