

## **A Postmodern Critique of the Age of Enlightenment**

**Dr. Nariman LARBI**

Faculty of Arabic Letters & Arts  
- University of Mostaganem, Algeria.

### **Abstract**

Postmodernity is the leading resistance to any hegemonic theory, and the belief in a progressive motion of the world, which claims for false coherence and universal applicability. Pivotal to the postmodern understanding of society is the belief that the Enlightenment's totalizing principles; the appeal to positivism and experimentation in science, to rationality promoting explanation and progress, and the ability to represent reality, have been fatally undermined. The present paper attempts to provide the historicity of such disillusionment towards the modern enterprise which was supposedly to hail progress and better the human condition. The reliance on the major thinkers that both constructed the multidisciplinary revolution of the Age of Enlightenment will be provided along with the opponents and critics of such a project. The paper also attempts to evaluate and call into doubt the ineluctable progress of reason which sounds tragically paradoxical after Auschwitz and Hiroshima. It polemically sheds light on the fact that modernity not only failed to grant a level of social and political well-being within social formations, through the application of science and technology, but it also made the Holocaust and the atomic bomb possible. The project of rationality and emancipation was extended to the point where it appeared to coincide with its own destruction.

**Key Words:** Age of Enlightenment, Francis Bacon, John Locke, Postmodernism, Stephen Bronner, Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer, Thomas Hobbes,

### **Introduction**

Postmodernism is essentially that movement which grew out of a reaction against Modernism, the roots of which find their impetus in the revolutionary age of the Enlightenment. The latter was basically a multidisciplinary revolution which rejected tradition and authority in favor of a reliance solely on rational thinking as well as empirical reasoning. In contradistinction to Modernism, Post-modernism breaks away from the modernist belief that contemporary Man could reach a sustained order and control of the

world understanding through the reliance on reason and science. The Modernist positivist heritage of the primacy of human reason leaves room now to non-scientific, human values and the sentimental agency. Mary Klages (2001) pontificates in this regard that:

Modernity is fundamentally about order: about rationality and rationalization, creating order out of chaos. The assumption is that creating more rationality is conducive to creating more order, and that the more ordered a society is, the better it will function (the more rationally it will function). (para. 12)

Postmodernism was coined and used in the 1870s with different connotations, and its usage differed from a field onto the other. It was first used in the Art field by the English painter John Watkins Chapman who suggested that: "any art that went beyond impressionism, the revolutionary new art style of the period, would be definable as 'postmodern painting' " (Stuart, 2001, p. viii). At a similar accordance, J. A. Cudden postulates that post-modernism is:

A general (and sometimes controversial) term used to refer to changes, developments and tendencies which have taken place (and are taking place) in literature, art, music, architecture, philosophy, etc since the 1940s or 1950s. Post-modernism is different from modernism, even a reaction against it (1999, pp. 689-690).

As an ideology, postmodernism started to emerge right after the Second World War, by the time of the Berlin Wall was erected. It came with the disillusionment to the Modern Enterprise which promised positivism, progress and a general emancipation to the horrors and digression of human values to the detriment of economic, political and geographical

enlargement by the colonial rule. The major events that stressed the turning point against modernism are the Holocaust and the Atomic Bombs of the 40's and the 50s.

### **The Demise of Modernity and the Distrust towards the Enlightenment Project**

The history of human kind witnessed two major radical changes. The first one was the industrial revolution, a breakthrough in history which is termed the age of Enlightenment through which the spirit of the time started to meet a sense of modernization; the first criterion of which is that of rational and empirical thinking from science into the accommodation of politics to logical reasoning; i.e., an urge for a democratic, or rather an egalitarian system on which people could aspire to a better living. The second criterion witnessed a shift in economy from the agrarian mode to the industrial one. It is a multidisciplinary revolution which sought a break from the traditional absolutism of the past politics on the one hand, and on the other, it also sought progress and advance when it comes science under the belief of grasping the functioning of the world natural phenomena would provide not only a better understanding of it but also a sense of control and order thereafter.

The second grand turn in history is that which followed the more than two centuries modern span, and that is pinned under the term postmodernism. As a term, *Post/Modernism*, as in *after/après-modernism*, and the post, according to Lyotard, refers to “something like *conversion*: a new direction after the preceding one” (Cited in Harvey, 1990, p. 72). Accordingly, the *conversion* means the postmodern view upon the carbonized optimism that modernism offered and that reason and science could no more be relied on for solving the problems of existential problems of humankind, on the contrary it brought its own destruction (WWI & WWII) *linear chronology* is replaced with post-historical viewpoint (p. 72).

Postmodernism, as an ideology, however, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* attempts to classify it ideologically as “a complex set of reactions to modern philosophy and its presuppositions, rather than any agreement on substantive doctrines” (Audi, 1995, p. 634), theoretically or philosophically, “it is basically a rejection of foundationalism, existence of structure of knowledge and epistemic justification, essentialism (metaphysical theory that objects have essence and appearance) and objective realism (objects exist independently of our perception and experience)” (p. 634). Postmodernism is very ambiguous since it defies classification for it is more as a time-period than an official ideological movement, and yet it is considered as a turn of thinking process, the theorists of which differ amongst themselves, for some of them conceive of it as a threat and others as the final solution to the problems that the modern enterprise inflicted upon humanity.

Postmodernism, addresses an evaluation of the Enlightenment project, measuring this modern enterprise which took place at the disillusionment witnessed by the 1950's; shortly after the Second World War. The optimism of the modern spirit started to dissolve with regards to the enthusiasm that the age of Enlightenment brought forth. An age which sought progress and advance in a form of a multidisciplinary revolution. A revolution that has been paved the way to thanks to the major philosophers who advocated a radical change in the social, economic and scientific platforms for the sake of order and equality amongst the subjects. Some of these ideological precursors; Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke,<sup>1</sup> - key major thinkers - all of whom contributed into the transmogrification of the modern, seventeenth-/eighteenth- century spirit. They believed in two elements; that of empiricism; based on the human observation and rational deduction of the natural phenomena for a more controlled mechanistic view of the world. For these radical thinkers,

---

<sup>1</sup> See Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum* (1620) ; Thomas Hobbes' *The Leviathan* (1651); John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) and *Two Treatises on Government* (1690).

they conceived the world as a predictable functioning machine which could be grasped and better controlled.

This sense of advocated rational reasoning was even sought to be accommodated to the socio-political platforms for they conceived the world and the problems it brings about in a pragmatic and principled way to the extent of offering a new system or program which would safeguard the individual's freedom and social rights. Hobbes and Locke favored the exertion of a new political order which ensure the pursuit of self-interest such as the possibility of an economic self-emancipation as well as, and most importantly freedom through a secured 'social contract'. Locke's wrote: "where is there is no law, there is no freedom" (2007, p. 50). The latter is about a mutual trustworthiness between the subjects/individuals and the state who agree on stipulating the required laws on which they would all live by. They embraced a liberal philosophy with the fervent believed in the supreme value of the state and the law as the institutional basis as well as the only order-making means for the individual exercise of liberalism and a secured freedom.

Francis Bacon on the other hand was preoccupied with the empirical observation on the natural phenomena where he calls for a *novum organum* (which forms the title of his essay) a new thinking spectrum based on logic which emphasized experimentalism and inductive scientific methods in order to reach and gain knowledge in contrast to the conventional pre-acquired knowledge of religious beliefs and prejudices that are conceived of as being mythical. It is, otherwise explained, an invitation to using one's own deductions taking into account a logic experimental reasoning as Emmanuel Kant's claim that it's more of an intellectual self-liberation through the use of reason and thus constructing one's own deduction, i.e., freedom of the intellect is to rely on the intellect and only the intellect without

a previous influence or guidance.<sup>2</sup> Bacon believes that induction could discover the most important causes or laws of natural phenomena, and that, through rational, practical knowledge; Man could establish his dominion over the earth and thus relieve his condition.

The new social order, or rather what Hobbes advocated and preached as the 'social contract', inspired by Locke's and Bacon's empirical logicism, was first presented in his *Leviathan* (1651) - which is one of the most influential works on political theory in European history - suggesting the accommodation of politics to empirical reasoning. *The Leviathan* consists of a structure of a set of laws which binds the individual freedom simultaneously while providing him the security he needs for a peaceful and egalitarian condition. He argues for a possible coexistence and cooperation of both the social and political orders which lead to the foundation for the State. Hobbes argues that the human nature as being evil - hence the naming of the book, *Leviathan*; which is the biblical term for satan - meaning that *the world of becoming* involves individuals struggling amongst themselves for power and the taking of the fellow's advantages. Otherwise explained, he perceives society as being a group of selfish individuals that should unite under common agreement in order to serve and ensure their liberalism as well as to maximize their safety while protecting themselves from one another by enforcing the laws of the State.

Hobbes also suggests that the social contract should be between the subjects and the sovereign and that to preserve one's life, everyone is to renounce their natural rights in favor of the sovereign. His notion on sovereignty is a rational exchange based on mutual consent; the subjects sign a contract for they want the security they hope for and authority is therefore created in order to enforce the terms of that social contract as agreed upon previously. The

---

<sup>2</sup> For more on Immanuel Kant's description of the Age of Enlightenment, see his essay entitled; *An Answer to the Question: 'What is the Enlightenment?'* (1784).

creation of authority by which Hobbes resolved at his time and while a monarchical system veiled upon later led to the formation of what is now called a state.<sup>3</sup>

Hobbes inspired many politicians along the course of history, among them Thatcher who adopted his claim, to paraphrase her in a discourse she gave that there is no such a thing as society, only individuals cooperating for the grand good.<sup>4</sup> The grand good being the state's security, be it economic or of other domains. Other thinkers such as Voltaire who advocated Religious Tolerance and Rousseau who was inspired by Hobbes *Leviathan* (1651), who noted on another form of democracy, appealed to a republican system which led to the awareness of the subjects, and the execution of King Louis XVI which took place at the end of the eighteenth century; 1793, France being the first state which put a decisive end to the absolutist monarchical system of the age. It has been celebrated worldwide for this move, especially in England, where the romanticists cherished on such a move.

It was an age where not only the socio-economic platform which moved from an agrarian mode of economy into an industrial one, but also an age where the practice of the Church and its intervention was put as far away as possible from the ruling of social matters. Religion and any abstract/spiritual exertions as well as any former knowledge of the world were put into evaluation relying on only rational reasoning and empirical thinking whereby a pragmatic approach was better conceived than a pre-acquired set of systems which served a Man who belongs to a remote/previous period of time. A new economic, socio-political system serving a new kind of Man at a newly created rational world is how to frame the age (Bronner, 2004, p. 70). An age, the characteristics of which are parallel to optimism and enthusiasm since it promised a better living condition; equality, a better economic status,

---

<sup>3</sup> According to Hobbes, humanity is better off living under the circumscribed freedom of a monarchy rather than the violent anarchy of a completely equal and free life; using this reasoning, Hobbes argued for unquestioning obedience to authority.

<sup>4</sup> Confer: An Interview with Thatcher for Sunday Times, 1981.

reducing the hardship of life ... etc, and yet as any other movement, it takes time; decades if not a whole century to measure its validity and success.

According to Stephen Bronner, both of Locke and Hobbes called for the limitation of the individual's freedom simply for the sake of ensuring the security of one another, hence the creation of a scheme which calls for social and economic order. They believed that:

as soon as authority ceased to defend the fundamental rights of human life, the members of society could break the contract and overthrow the ruling government ... both Hobbes and Locke thought of the state in terms of a utilitarian device which supported law through sanctions and regulated the competition of the market. They both identified the public realm with the State and the private realm with the interplay of particular interests and personal property. (2004, pp. 43-44)

The Age of Enlightenment certainly, as its name suggests, shed the light of truth and reason against the darkness of ignorance, false myths, and superstitions of human thought. It puts reason at the centre of human understanding and exhorts, thereby, the individual to use a rational reasoning to operate on the daily matters. The thinkers of the Age argued that reason could be found only by the observational empiricism, through logic and common sense. The function and aim of Reason was to oppose the non-rational thinking that existed all along the previous centuries. Reason was considered the primary source for legitimacy and authority (Cited in Porter, 2001, pp. 2-3). The promotion of democracy with the notion of liberalism were key goals to the Enlightenment's thinkers, Liberalism was; 'the central political theory of the Enlightenment. Its method was the critical deployment of "reason" and its goal was bettering the conditions of social life and expanding "freedom"' (2004, p. 41)



Liberalism, henceforth, started to be enrooted with its central principles that are in accordance to the constant appeal for the equality of rights and popular sovereignty, alongside the conception of an economic/market platform as a rational economic mechanism.

The Enlightenment believed in the power of rationalism and gave the power to Man's rational reasoning to triumph on the inevitability of historical progress. They conceived that Man could monitor and control the world, or at least his social environment with the application of reason. They believe that ideology and social/economic exploitation are rooted in social and political ordered institutions bearing in mind that injustice is the product of social action based on irrational forces, superstition, as well as political tyranny.

As much as the Age of Enlightenment alongside the Age of Reason appealed for a renovation in the social spirit and governmental status, the ideologies that the Ages supported were somehow too optimistic and delusional at a certain extent. The Enlightenment came to be negatively criticized by many such as the German sociologists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer underlying that the Baconian scientific reason with the aim to subject nature to human needs has been transformed into a complete rationalization of reality, into what is also called, hyper-rational momentum.

The principle scientific pillars of the Age of Enlightenment; that is, empiricism and rational reasoning, has led either meaningfully or not to the deconstruction of values and the dehumanization of Man's spirit and humane agency that is proper to the human being. The results from such a scientific process of thinking, has produced nothing but capitalism in western democracies and twentieth century political tragedies (such as the World Wars, atomic bombs, and the Holocaust). Modernity henceforth has carried soiled its own deconstruction by the seeds of hyper-scientific spirit and a relentless quest for the liberal egalitarian state through the relentless quest of instrumental rationality. On the one hand, the

myths and superstitions that veiled over the pre-modern period have been triumphed upon and yet it fell back into a further tragic myth, that of individualism and equality under instrumental reason (Horkheimer & Adorno, trans 1979, p. 10).

Over the last centuries, the over-control and use of positive scientific and technological pursuits and advances in all platforms, the resulting aftermath of such a progressive spirit and mantra led to the destruction of the environment, the extermination of certain categories of human beings for their ethnic or religious pertinance, and the development of war technologies that could end humankind's very existence. Reason failed to keep the world under its control and guarantee progress and history witnessed the exhaustion of the Enlightenment positivistic progressivism and the limits of the scientific rationalism.

Critics of the Enlightenment therefore revise the age in terms of the price of progress, the costs of alienation and reification, as well as the damages inflicted by science and technology to nature and society. These thinkers nevertheless viewed the Age of Enlightenment from a highly tangible or materialistic spectrum, leaving aside the cultural and humanistic transmogrifications that took place at the detriment to hyper rational progressivism of the Age of Enlightenment. Adorno and Horkheimer's position and critique of the Age of Enlightenment was denounced as being biased and limited by not only Vincenzo Ferrone but also by Stephen Bronner. Ferrone analyses the development of the Enlightenment's historical discourse and suggests that the Age should be regarded as a cultural matter and a historical world that must be rebuilt. For him, Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialektik der Aufklarung* (1969) failed to consider the historical Enlightenment with its cultural and chronological context and is rather based on an abstract idea of the Enlightenment.

Moreover, the Italian scholar sketches that the nationalisms and those philosophies of history that veiled upon eighteenth and nineteenth century are products of the confident enthusiasm of the Age of Enlightenment, the consequences of which were not only at the detriment of viewing history in its relentless continuity and inevitable progressive status, such an idea as dominated and manipulated by the idea of historical progress of humankind's evolution which regarded the past in terms of accomplishment. Ferrone goes further on victimizing the proponents of the Enlightenment as being misled by the idea that the age as a historical, social, and political movement has been manipulated and misinterpreted.<sup>5</sup>

Stephen Bronner on the other hand, also criticized Adorno and Horkheimer's critique or rather imaging of the Age of Enlightenment as being arbitrary and single-sided, he claimed that in their essay "a genuine historical analysis is never undertaken" as their role is limited to evaluating the Enlightenment's connection with technological rationality (Bronner, 1994, p. 84).

For both of Ferrone and Bronner, Adorno and Horkheimer's critique is a form of a tangible evaluation of the Enlightenment whereas it was supposed to be taken from a culturally enlightening viewpoint. Instead, their essay emphasized the hyper-rational side of its evolution; science and technology were given priority to the cultural side of the movement. The result was that liberalism and socialism emanated from such a rational movement politically and scientifically speaking, it brought Man to thinking themselves as humanized beasts due to the naturalistic movement that preceded the ideological movement of the twentieth century. Technological advances brought the formation of the atomic bomb that was used in the later world wars. The two German sociologists as well as the American political scientist and philosopher contributed much in the distortion of history, mainly from

---

<sup>5</sup> See: Alice Mandricardo: *The End of History in English Historiographic Metafiction*, chapter two, 2008.

a postmodernist viewpoint. Adorno and Horkheimer denied the possibility of a universal history. They employed an *inverted historicism* to confront various enlightenment versions of the philosophy of history with their teleological assumptions (Bronner, 1994, p. 184).

## Conclusion

By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the optimism once held started to shatter into a more realistic account and evaluation. A system which promised progress and an end of hardship is now nothing but a mere enhancer of poverty on the one hand, and on the other; another phenomenon came to be grasped in that the dehumanization of Man took place due to the mechanization that the age brought forth. An age which endeavored at economic progress and geographical amplification, things which took place only at the extent of, and to the detriment of the *Other*; where colonialism is implied since it witnessed a major taking of the *Other's* lands, exploiting their natural resources in a disguised robbery. The Age of high reason, accordingly, was disillusioned upon by the nineteenth century, early twentieth century, a period of transition that took place from the industrialized mode into a hyper modern spirit. A disillusionment which brought forth more hardship than it ever existed before. Some issues that appeared due to the process of industrialization are child labor, domestic disruption, and colonial imperialism amongst other issues. The Empiricism which paved the way for scientific advance, another theory of the 1860's - Darwin's Theory - added up to the extra-dehumanization of man as well as, and more importantly, to the fall of religious sustenance. A new stream of ideological conflicts thereafter came between *the Darwinians* and *the Creationists*.

By the late twentieth century, precisely throughout the 1970s onward, the modern enterprise started to collapse under the belief that the models of the Enlightenment started to be exhausted, regarding the terrors such as the World Wars that the age inflicted upon the world, the tenets of the age such as the progressive belief that the phenomenal world could

be grasped and controlled through rational thinking and Empirical observation/reasoning constitutes the roots of the desolation of our postmodern condition. Such criteria and the belief in their ability to end the world's crises are now nothing but a mythical conception that created a tragic myth of its own production that could not be released from now. A new reactionary movement termed; postmodernism, started to build its impetus from countering the enthusiasm and mythical absolutist beliefs of the world's functioning and pace that belong to the modernist spirit.

Postmodernism is, according to Patricia Waugh (1992), a critique of the Enlightenment; 'a mode of counter-Enlightenment' (p. 16). It is viewed as a solid historical and cultural reaction to the shortcomings of modernity, i.e., the Enlightenment enterprise. For postmodernists, the Enlightenment's project of pursuing a rational, scientific understanding of the natural and social world has proved to be an impossible fantasy and even a dangerous one; the world is too complex and too multi-faceted and wide-ranging to be understood through a single totalizing theory, all master narratives have, henceforth, decayed and ceased to be validated.

## References

- Audi, Robert. (1995), *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Benjamin, Walter. (1972-1989), *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* (1950) in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, Engl. trans. (2009), *On the Concept of History*, New York: Classic Books America.
- Bronner, Stephen Eric. (1994), *Of Critical Theory and its Theorists*, Oxford: Blackwell.

- Bronner, Stephen Eric. (2004), *Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Toward a Politics of Radical Engagement*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Butt, Ronald. (1981), *An Interview with Margaret Thatcher for Sunday Times*, London: No. 10 Downing Street. Retrieved from <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104475>
- Cuddon, J, A. (1999), *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, London: Penguin.
- Harvey, D. (1990), *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Horkheimer, Max & Adorno, Theodor, W. (1969), *Dialektik der Aufklarung, Philosophische Fragmente*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, Engl. trans. Jephcott, Edmund. (1979), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London: Verso.
- John Locke. (2007), *The Second Treatise of Civil Government in Two Treatises on Government*, Minneapolis: Filiquarian Publishing LLC.
- Kant, Immanuel. (2009), *An Answer to the Question: 'What is the Enlightenment?' (1784)*, London: Penguin.
- Klages, Mary. (2001), *Postmodernism*, Colorado University, Department of English. Retrieved from <http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/~sflores/KlagesPostmodernism.html>
- Mandricardo, Alice. (2008), *The End of History in English Historiographic Metafiction*.
- Porter, Ray. (2001), *The Enlightenment*, New York: Palgrave.
- Sim, Stuart. (1999), *Derrida and the End of History*, Cambridge: Icon Books.
- Waugh, Patricia. (1992) *Practicing Postmodernism: Reading Modernism*, London: Edward Arnold.