



# TOWARDS THE END OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT?

*Posted on August 1, 2023 by Pierre Valentin*



Has our Enlightenment faded? The French Enlightenment postulated the existence of a rational, autonomous individual, whose freedom would stop only at the frontier of that of others (Article 4 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man). More generally, they defended critical thinking and rationalism. Where do we stand today with this ambitious project, which aimed to help the individual free himself from all constraints? Which of these ideas have been preserved, and which have not?

One of the core elements of the French Enlightenment project is individual emancipation, understood as the embodiment of "negative" liberty. Modern negative liberty, unlike "positive" liberty, no longer subordinates freedom to any good, but conceives it as the pure absence of constraints. To put it another way, if the individual is to become freer than before, he or she must emancipate himself or herself from unchosen intermediary structures, institutions and associations (such as the Church, the family, or possibly the nation).

### **The May 1968 Revolution: When Autonomy became Enjoyment**

The ideological revolution that was [May 68](#) maintained this notion of negative freedom, but subjected it to a double movement that would no doubt have surprised many heralds of the Enlightenment. Firstly, as Jean-Pierre Le Goff demonstrates in detail in *Mai 68, L'héritage impossible*, "pedagogical" educational experiments of all kinds began here, and had at their ideological heart the extension of this emancipatory project to children. The *soixante-huitards* seized on the liberal malaise surrounding education (whether or not to actively inculcate children with ideas in order to perpetuate the culture of the Enlightenment) to take a radically "neutral" and seemingly more coherent stance. Nothing will be "imposed" on schoolchildren anymore; and from this point of view (provided we believe that such a will can actually be put into practice), the durability of the Enlightenment project becomes dramatically more complicated.

Secondly, "cold," quasi-stoic rationalism gave way to "hot" hedonism, and the freedom of the cost-benefit calculator was suddenly transformed, with the advent of the baby-boom generation, into the freedom of "unfettered enjoyment." The absence of constraints meant the end of any notion of discipline or self-control, making 1968 both the apotheosis of student activism and the beginning of its end, since you had to be able to get up on time for a demonstration if you wanted to fight for anything (Although Twitter now makes it possible to reconcile a lack of individual discipline with the desire to "militate" for a cause.). The inability to postpone gratification (i.e., to put off enjoyment until tomorrow),

which "the Thought of 1968" and consumer society bequeathed to their children, made any long-term collective project unlikely.

What's more, this eulogy of the enjoying-subject was bound to raise its share of contradictions. As Deleuze wrote: "Far from presupposing a subject, desire can only be achieved at the point where someone is divested of the power to say, I." Absolute *jouissance* dispossesses the subject, particularly over the long term, of all self-mastery, and thus of any real free will. As Chesterton put it: "Giving in to temptation is like giving in to a blackmailer; you pay to be free, and end up all the more enslaved for it." The contemporary figure of the "addict"—the man dominated by his impulses and passions—is one of the paradoxical fruits of this conception of freedom.

### **The Advertising Revolution: When Consumerism "Buried" the Man of the Enlightenment**

Advertising played a particularly paradoxical role here; born of capitalism's need for accumulation, itself a product of liberal modernity, it nevertheless increasingly focused on this second type of individual. In recent decades, advertising has clearly made less and less reference to factual information (which the rational-autonomous individual could sort out at will by calculating his preferences), preferring instead to present the masses with feelings, impressions, through a play of associations of ideas. Blocks of text extolling the "objective" and comparative merits of products (how crazy that sounds today!) have given way to images of dancing iPod silhouettes from the 2003-05 period.

What kind of "factual information" would this offer the rationalist consumer? In other words, contemporary advertising has "buried" the man of the Enlightenment in every sense of the word, both as an observation—it realizes that he no longer exists—and as a project—it has largely worked towards his disappearance by arousing his passions.

### **The Postmodern Revolution: From Critical Rationalism to the Critique of Rationalism**

This rational individual was based on the example of Descartes, whose first act in his *Meditations* was to question the reality of his senses and the external world, and then gradually rebuild his certainties with the use of his abstract reason alone. This first critical moment was taken up and radicalized by the postmodern movement, which, in an astonishing reversal, turned it against reason itself.

In *Penser, c'est dire non* (Thinking is Saying No), Jacques Derrida describes the philosopher Alain as "a Descartes who, wanting to be more faithful to Cartesianism than Descartes himself, constantly wants to recommence, once and for all, the gestures that Descartes deemed it sufficient to make." Inspired by this approach, Derrida would assert: "what matters... what is interesting, philosophically, is not that thought refuses this or that, this rather than that, it is that it is refusal itself, and that it is in itself refusal." This leads him to make the comparison between the "yes" of the head that the individual makes when falling asleep and the "no" of waking up: "To think is therefore to say no, because to think is to be awake." Note that in this scheme, the will to say "yes" to anything—in short, to be able to rebuild after the first critical moment—is equated with sleep, itself historically associated with death...

In a similar vein, Michel Foucault (in his lecture, "Qu'est-ce que la critique?") wishes to retain from the Enlightenment the "principle of a permanent critique and creation of ourselves in our autonomy." Critical of this point of view, and lamenting the political consequences of the rejection of the Enlightenment by a growing part of the Left, academic Stéphanie Roza in *La gauche contre les Lumières* asserts: "The left has learned the hard way how much it can go too far. Its limits, which must not be crossed on pain of political self-destruction, are defined by the contours of the legacy of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, which was its original crucible." Without passing judgment on the substance of this analysis (for at present, the Left that explicitly rejects the Enlightenment does not win many elections), it's worth noting that by formulating things in this way, Roza opens himself up to an obvious reproach. Indeed, if the Enlightenment and the French Revolution are conceived first and foremost as critical movements, is it a betrayal of their heritage to criticize them?

A few decades later, the "woke" movement in which our Western societies are increasingly immersed calls for a "critical awakening of consciences." This unlikely synthesis of Marxism and postmodernism is distinguished by its quasi-explicit praise of pure negation and an inability to formulate its political project positively; we need to "deconstruct" the whole world, "fight against" certain stereotypes, be "anti-racist/sexist" and so on. In addition to the amusing semantic parallel (we "wake up" early in the morning, thanks to the "lights" of this new dawn), Wokeism retains from the Enlightenment, above all, individual emancipation, while specifying that this requires the destruction of the "rationalist/patriarchal/racist system." To put it another way, the negative freedom of this movement now sees the Enlightenment and rationalism themselves as constraints.

And yet, for centuries now, we have been called upon to eradicate them.

---

Pierre Valentin, a graduate in philosophy and political science, will be publishing *Comprendre la Révolution Woke (Understanding the Woke Revolution)* with Gallimard. This article appears through the kind courtesy of [La Nef](#)

---

**Featured:** *La beauté est dans la rue (Beauty is in the street)*. A poster from May 1968.

---

