

The Enlightenment Paradox: Progress, Domination, and the Unresolved Tensions of Modernity

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Abstract

The Enlightenment, as the foundational intellectual project of Western modernity, championed reason, individual rights, scientific progress, and secular governance as pathways to human liberation. Yet the same movement simultaneously generated ideological frameworks that legitimated colonialism, capitalist exploitation, racial hierarchy, and disciplinary social control—a paradox that remains unresolved at the heart of contemporary political and philosophical thought. This article examines the Enlightenment's dual character as both a catalyst for emancipation and a source of domination, tracing this tension from the canonical writings of Kant, Locke, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot through the critical interventions of Adorno and Horkheimer, Foucault, and postcolonial theorists including Chakrabarty, Said, and Spivak. Employing a qualitative methodology grounded in critical philosophical analysis, historical hermeneutics, Frankfurt School ideology critique, and Foucauldian genealogy, the article finds that Enlightenment universalism consistently masked particular structures of class, colonial, and capitalist domination under the rhetoric of reason and progress. These findings demonstrate that the Enlightenment's emancipatory ideals and its complicity in structures of power are inseparable dimensions of a single, internally contradictory legacy. The article concludes that a genuinely progressive modernity requires neither wholesale rejection nor uncritical celebration of Enlightenment thought, but a reflexive, pluralistic, and historically accountable re-engagement with its unresolved tensions.

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Introduction

The Enlightenment, broadly situated within the 17th and 18th centuries, stands as one of the most consequential intellectual movements in Western history. Defined by its commitment to reason, empirical inquiry, and the liberation of humanity from ignorance and superstition, it fundamentally restructured European—and eventually global—political, social, and philosophical life. Kant (1996) famously defined

Enlightenment as humanity's emergence from self-imposed immaturity, a condition he attributed not to a lack of reason but to a lack of resolve in using it independently of external authority. This call for intellectual courage—Kant's *sapere aude*, or “dare to know”—became the movement's defining rallying cry, encapsulating its faith in rationality as both a personal and collective emancipatory tool (p. 11). The Enlightenment was not, however, a unified doctrine; it was a diverse and often internally contradictory constellation of ideas that produced some of modernity's most enduring achievements and, as subsequent critics would demonstrate, some of its most troubling concealed assumptions.

Emerging primarily as a response to the intellectual authority of religious dogma and the political tyranny of absolute monarchy, Enlightenment thinkers sought to apply systematic rational thought to every dimension of social life—from governance and law to education, economics, and individual morality. In political philosophy, John Locke's articulation of natural rights proved foundational. Locke (1988) argued that individuals are endowed by nature with inalienable rights to life, liberty, and property, and that legitimate government derives its authority not from divine mandate but from the consent of the governed (p. 297). This contractual model of political authority effectively displaced the theological basis of monarchical rule and provided the conceptual architecture upon which modern democratic governance would be built. Locke's influence extended far beyond academic philosophy; his ideas permeated the constitutional thinking of the American founders and resonated throughout the revolutionary movements of the 18th century.

Alongside political philosophy, the Enlightenment generated a powerful critique

of religious intolerance and institutional orthodoxy. Voltaire (1994) wielded satire and argumentation with equal force against what he saw as the irrational tyranny of the Church, championing freedom of thought and expression as prerequisites for civilized society (p. 16). His polemical writings helped cultivate a culture of secular skepticism that challenged the Church's monopoly over truth, education, and public morality. Similarly, the monumental project of the *Encyclopédie*—edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert and published between 1751 and 1772—sought to systematize and democratize human knowledge across all fields of inquiry. Diderot (1992) conceived of the *Encyclopédie* not merely as a reference work but as an instrument of intellectual revolution, designed to change the common way of thinking by making the fruits of rational inquiry accessible to an educated public (p. 6). Taken together, these contributions fed directly into the political upheavals of the era: the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789 both drew heavily on Enlightenment ideals of natural rights, popular sovereignty, and secular governance.

The Enlightenment's legacy, however, is far more ambivalent than its celebratory self-image suggested. While it championed reason, science, and individual rights—yielding genuine advancements in democratic governance, human rights discourse, and technological innovation—it simultaneously harbored contradictions that would generate significant critical scrutiny in later centuries. Outram (2005) notes that the Enlightenment's universal claims were frequently undermined by the particular social and political contexts in which they were produced, raising difficult questions about who exactly was included in the category of the rational, rights-

bearing subject (p. 1). Rousseau (1997), despite his affiliation with Enlightenment ideals, already sensed these tensions. While Locke emphasized the protection of individual property and natural rights, Rousseau articulated a more communal vision through the concept of the social contract, arguing that genuine freedom required the subordination of individual will to a collectively determined general will (p. 301). Together, Locke and Rousseau established the twin poles of liberal political thought—individual liberty and collective self-governance—whose tension remains constitutive of modern democratic theory.

It is in this critical spirit that later Frankfurt School thinkers revisited Enlightenment rationality with a more skeptical lens. Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) advanced a sweeping and provocative argument in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: that the very rationality the Enlightenment celebrated as humanity's liberation had become a new instrument of domination. Rather than freeing human beings from myth and superstition, Enlightenment reason—in their analysis—reduced the natural world to an object of technical manipulation, reduced human beings to units of economic utility, and ultimately reproduced forms of control more total and more insidious than those it had displaced (p. 94). Their critique was directed in particular at the conjunction of Enlightenment rationality with capitalist production and colonial expansion, both of which mobilized the rhetoric of progress and civilization to justify exploitation on a massive scale. The Enlightenment's universalist language, they contended, functioned ideologically: it presented the interests of a particular class and civilization as the interests of humanity as a whole, producing what Marxist tradition calls

false consciousness—a systematic distortion of social reality that serves to legitimate existing structures of power.

Foucault (1984) extended and complicated this critique through a genealogical approach to Enlightenment rationality and its institutional expressions. In his reading of Kant's "What is Enlightenment?", Foucault acknowledged the continuing relevance of Kant's question while simultaneously subjecting Kant's answers to sustained scrutiny. Foucault drew attention to the paradox embedded in Kant's own formulation: the distinction between public reason—free, unrestricted exercise of rational judgment in the open intellectual sphere—and private reason, which Kant defined as the use of reason within one's institutional role, where obedience to authority is required. This distinction reveals an inherent contradiction at the heart of Enlightenment liberalism: the same framework that proclaimed rational freedom as universal simultaneously demanded that the individual subordinate reason to institutional discipline in the domains of military service, clerical office, and civic duty. Kant's vision of rational despotism—in which an enlightened sovereign could simultaneously command obedience and permit intellectual freedom—only sharpened this tension.

Foucault (1984) ultimately reframed Enlightenment not as a historical period or a fixed philosophical doctrine but as a critical attitude—an ongoing practice of interrogating the present and questioning the limits of the thinkable. Drawing on Charles Baudelaire's conception of modernity as the transfiguration of the present moment through creative self-fashioning, Foucault suggested that the truly Enlightened stance is one of perpetual critical reflexivity: not the application of a given rationality to

the world, but the continuous questioning of the conditions under which any particular rationality establishes itself as authoritative. This reinterpretation transforms Enlightenment from a settled inheritance into an unfinished and inherently contested project. Foucault's (1977) broader genealogical work—particularly his studies of the prison, the clinic, and the asylum—documented in meticulous historical detail how Enlightenment categories of reason, normality, and progress were institutionalized in disciplinary regimes that classified, surveilled, and corrected populations (p. 67). Far from being liberatory, these institutions reproduced power through the very language of rationality and humanitarian reform.

The Enlightenment thus presents itself to modernity not as a solved problem but as a persistent and productive contradiction. As a foundational project of modernity, it simultaneously generated the emancipatory ideals upon which democratic societies and human rights frameworks were built, and supplied the intellectual legitimation for structures of domination—colonial, capitalist, disciplinary—that belied those very ideals. This article examines the Enlightenment as the site of this tension: a movement that was at once a catalyst for human progress—advancing reason, science, and individual rights—and a vehicle for ideological distortion, encoding hierarchies of race, gender, class, and civilization within the ostensibly universal language of rational humanity. By tracing the movement's ambitions and its critics from Kant, Locke, and Voltaire to Adorno, Horkheimer, and Foucault, this article argues that the unresolved tensions between emancipation and control, between universal claims and particular interests, remain among the defining problems of contemporary political and social thought.

Statement of the Problem

The Enlightenment occupies a paradoxical position at the heart of modernity. On the one hand, it furnished the foundational concepts upon which modern liberal democracy, universal human rights, and scientific rationalism are built. On the other hand, critical theory has demonstrated that the same project simultaneously generated the ideological frameworks that legitimated colonialism, racial hierarchy, capitalist exploitation, and disciplinary social control. This contradiction—between Enlightenment as emancipation and Enlightenment as domination—constitutes one of the most consequential and least fully resolved problems in the intellectual history of modernity, bearing directly on how contemporary societies adjudicate conflicts over sovereignty, recognition, justice, and the terms of the social contract.

Despite substantial scholarship from both Enlightenment-affirmative and Enlightenment-critical perspectives, the relationship between these two dimensions remains theoretically underexplored. The result is a polarized scholarly landscape in which the paradox at the center of modernity tends to be dissolved rather than sustained and analyzed. This article addresses three specific tensions: between the Enlightenment's universalist aspirations and the systematic exclusions of women, colonized peoples, and the working poor from the rational subject whose rights it proclaimed; between reason as liberation and reason as domination, as the Frankfurt School's critique of instrumental rationality demonstrates (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002); and between Enlightenment as a discourse of freedom and its institutions as engines of disciplinary power that normalize, classify, and regulate populations (Foucault, 1984).

Objectives of the Study

This article is animated by the conviction that the Enlightenment's dual character—its simultaneous function as a vehicle of liberation and a source of ideological domination—must be held together rather than resolved in favor of one dimension at the expense of the other. To that end, it pursues three objectives. First, to critically reconstruct the Enlightenment's core philosophical commitments—reason, individual rights, secularism, and scientific progress—as articulated by Kant, Locke, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot, situating these within their historical and political context. Second, to examine the critical tradition's challenge to the Enlightenment's self-understanding, focusing on Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) dialectical critique of instrumental reason and Foucault's (1984) genealogical analysis of disciplinary power, and to analyze how the concept of false consciousness reveals the ways in which ostensibly universal Enlightenment ideals functioned to naturalize structures of domination along lines of class, race, gender, and civilization. Third, to assess the contemporary relevance of these unresolved tensions, evaluating the extent to which the Enlightenment's emancipatory resources remain recoverable for a critical theory of modernity.

Research Questions

This article is organized around one central and three subsidiary research questions. The central question asks: how does the Enlightenment function simultaneously as a catalyst for human emancipation and as a source of ideological distortion, and what does this dual character reveal about the foundational tensions of modernity? The subsidiary questions ask, respectively: in what ways do the Enlightenment's universalist claims systematically exclude colonized peoples,

women, and the economically dispossessed? How does Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of instrumental reason illuminate the relationship between Enlightenment rationality and structures of social domination? And to what extent do the Enlightenment's internal tensions—between individual liberty and collective governance, between emancipatory idealism and colonial praxis—represent permanently unresolved contradictions, and what resources, if any, does the tradition itself provide for a critical response?

Methodology

This article employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in critical philosophical analysis and historical hermeneutics. Rather than generating new empirical data, it systematically analyzes primary philosophical texts and foundational theoretical works to examine the Enlightenment's dual legacy of emancipation and domination. The primary sources include canonical Enlightenment writings by Kant, Locke, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot, alongside the major critical texts of Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) and Foucault (1984). Secondary scholarship, including Hamilton (1992) and Outram (2005), provides contextual and historiographical grounding.

The analytical framework draws on two complementary critical traditions. First, the Frankfurt School's ideology critique is applied to interrogate the ways in which Enlightenment universalism masked particular structures of class, colonial, and capitalist domination—a mode of reading indebted to the tradition of immanent critique, which evaluates a body of thought against its own declared standards (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). Second, Foucault's genealogical method is employed to trace how Enlightenment rationality was institutionalized in disciplinary regimes that produced, classified, and regulated

subjects. Together, these approaches allow for a dialectical reading that neither simply affirms nor wholesale rejects the Enlightenment, but holds its emancipatory and dominating dimensions in productive analytical tension.

Results and Discussion

The Enlightenment as a Force for Progress

The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement that championed reason, scientific inquiry, and secular thought as central to human progress. Hamilton (1992) identifies several core principles shared across the movement: reason, empiricism, science, universalism, progress, individualism, freedom, the uniformity of human nature, and secularism (pp. 21–22). These principles intertwined throughout the evolution of intellectual thought and contributed significantly to the emergence of the social sciences in the 19th century (Hamilton, 1992, p. 22).

Hamilton (1992) provides a structured typology of the Enlightenment, identifying it as simultaneously a collection of characteristic ideas, an intellectual movement driven by philosophers and reformers, a network of interconnected intellectuals corresponding across national boundaries, and a belief system or worldview embodying the spirit of the age (p. 22). Urban centers such as Paris, Edinburgh, and London served as hubs of Enlightenment activity, while the publishing industry played a crucial role in disseminating Enlightenment thought to wider audiences.

Hamilton (1992) traces the Enlightenment across three generations of thinkers. The first generation—Voltaire and Montesquieu—was deeply influenced by the pioneering work of Locke and Newton. The second generation, including Hume, Rousseau, Diderot, and

d’Alembert, combined anti-clericalism with rigorous scientific reasoning. The third generation—Kant, Smith, Condorcet, and Ferguson—applied Enlightenment principles to epistemology, economics, and political economy (p. 24). Kant’s motto *sapere aude* captured the movement’s intellectual spirit: the courage to seek knowledge through independent reason.

One of the most influential products of Enlightenment thought was the *Encyclopédie*. Diderot (1992) conceived of it as an instrument of intellectual revolution—a project designed to change the common way of thinking by making the fruits of rational inquiry accessible to an educated public (p. 6). Hamilton (1992) notes that Diderot described the project as a society of men of letters and artisans, highlighting its inclusivity of both theoretical and practical knowledge, aligned with Kant’s definition of Enlightenment as humanity realizing its potential through the use of the mind (p. 27). Enlightenment thinkers actively challenged traditional social structures and religious doctrines, replacing theological authority with empirical observation and rational thought (Hamilton, 1992, p. 29).

Despite their advocacy for reason and progress, Enlightenment philosophers were not consistently radical in their approach to social hierarchy. Hamilton (1992) notes that many prominent figures, including Voltaire and Montesquieu, were part of the intellectual and social elite, whose writings often focused on broad theoretical concerns rather than the immediate hardships faced by the working classes (p. 31). Consequently, while the Enlightenment introduced transformative ideas about political and social organization, it did not always translate into direct advocacy for widespread social equality, including the equality of men and women.

Nevertheless, women played a meaningful, if constrained, role in Enlightenment intellectual life. During the late 18th century, salons became vital centers of intellectual exchange in France, where women facilitated and shaped philosophical discourse. These gatherings provided women with greater social mobility and the ability to influence intellectual debates, even as male philosophers largely failed to challenge traditional gender norms in their formal writings (Hamilton, 1992, p. 34). The Enlightenment's emphasis on modernity, science, and anti-clericalism thus operated alongside significant internal contradictions regarding gender, class, and social inclusion (Hamilton, 1992, p. 36).

The Enlightenment's impact on the early social sciences was profound. Its leading thinkers applied principles of natural science to medicine, agriculture, and industry, promoting scientific methods as tools for challenging religious dogma and political oppression (Hamilton, 1992, p. 40). This movement gave rise to a secular intellectual class independent of traditional institutions, and contributed to the emergence of professional scholars who could sustain themselves through writing and public discourse (Hamilton, 1992, p. 42). The Enlightenment also directly influenced the revolutions that transformed late 18th-century societies—the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789—which marked the decline of feudalism and paved the way for capitalist societies and democratic governance (Hamilton, 1992, p. 47).

The Enlightenment's emphasis on reason played a crucial role in driving scientific and technological progress by promoting empirical observation, skepticism, and rational inquiry. Bacon (2000) laid the foundations for the scientific method, which prioritized

experimentation and systematic observation over religious dogma and superstition (p. 56). This shift enabled groundbreaking discoveries in physics, medicine, and engineering, fostering advancements such as Newton's (1687/1995) laws of motion, which revolutionized mechanics and laid the groundwork for modern physics (p. 12).

The Critique: Enlightenment as False Consciousness

Enlightenment rationality, while promoting ideals of progress and liberty, also played a role in masking capitalist exploitation by legitimizing economic inequality under the guise of reason and natural law. Locke (1988) justified private property as a fundamental right, arguing that individuals have a natural claim to resources they cultivate through labor (p. 85). Marx (1887/1990) argued that this reasoning obscured how capitalism enabled the accumulation of wealth by a privileged few at the expense of the working class, reinforcing false consciousness and preventing workers from recognizing their oppression (p. 176). Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) further contend that Enlightenment reason, instead of liberating individuals, became an instrument of domination, as rationalization and efficiency were used to justify capitalist exploitation and colonial expansion (p. 94). This contradiction reveals how Enlightenment ideals, while advocating for freedom and equality, often ignored the economic structures that perpetuated systemic inequality and class domination.

The concept of false consciousness, as developed by Marx and Engels, refers to the ideological deception that prevents the working class from recognizing their oppression under capitalism. The Enlightenment, often heralded as an era of reason and progress, paradoxically

functioned as a tool that upheld bourgeois interests by promoting ideals that masked economic exploitation. Locke and Smith championed individual liberty and free markets, which, while seemingly universal, ultimately reinforced bourgeois hegemony by legitimizing private property and capitalism (Marcuse, 1964, p. 112). The Enlightenment's emphasis on rationality and meritocracy obscured class struggle, making it appear as though social hierarchies were natural and just rather than constructed mechanisms of control. The ruling class utilized these principles to justify their dominance, convincing the proletariat that their subjugation was a result of personal failure rather than systemic inequity (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 87). Consequently, Enlightenment ideals, instead of liberating all, functioned as an ideological apparatus that sustained bourgeois rule by instilling a false sense of autonomy and progress.

Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) argue that the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason ultimately led to instrumental rationality—a form of thinking that prioritizes efficiency and control over genuine human liberation. Instead of fulfilling its promise of progress and freedom, Enlightenment reason became a tool for domination, reducing human relationships and nature to mere objects of manipulation (p. 4). This shift toward instrumental rationality facilitated the rise of capitalist exploitation and bureaucratic control, as seen in the ways industrial societies rationalized oppression through economic and technological means. Marcuse (1964) observes that under capitalism, reason is no longer a means for critical thought but a mechanism for maximizing productivity and reinforcing existing power structures (p.

158). Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) extend this argument to authoritarian politics, suggesting that the rationalized systems of oppression in fascist and totalitarian regimes represent the logical culmination of Enlightenment instrumental reason rather than a departure from it.

Enlightenment ideals also contributed to modern systems of control, including colonialism and technocracy. The belief in universal reason and the superiority of rational civilization justified European imperialism, as colonial powers framed their domination as a civilizing mission over supposedly inferior societies (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 93). This logic allowed for the exploitation of colonized peoples under the guise of spreading Enlightenment values such as democracy and scientific advancement. The rise of technocracy—the governance of society by technical and scientific experts—can similarly be traced to the Enlightenment's emphasis on rational planning and efficiency. Bacon (2000) and Comte promoted the idea that society should be managed through scientific methods, a notion that later influenced bureaucratic and corporate systems that prioritized technological control over democratic participation (Marcuse, 1964, p. 142). In both colonialism and technocracy, Enlightenment rationality became a tool for domination, justifying hierarchical structures that suppress autonomy under the pretense of progress and order.

Foucault (1977) argues that Enlightenment reason, rather than solely promoting liberation, also became a mechanism of power and surveillance, structuring modern disciplinary societies. He explains how reason was used to develop institutions—such as prisons, schools, and hospitals—that categorize, regulate, and normalize individuals through surveillance

and control (p. 199). The Enlightenment's emphasis on scientific knowledge and rational administration led to the rise of bureaucratic systems that classify people based on deviance, productivity, and social utility. This shift gave rise to what Foucault (1977) calls panopticism—a model of power in which individuals internalize surveillance, disciplining themselves without direct coercion (p. 201). Enlightenment reason therefore did not simply challenge traditional authority but restructured power in more insidious ways, embedding control into everyday life through the guise of progress and rationality. By transforming knowledge into a tool of governance, the Enlightenment laid the foundation for modern biopolitics, where state and institutional power regulate bodies and populations in increasingly systematic ways.

Postcolonial scholars argue that the Enlightenment was deeply Eurocentric, as its ideals of reason, progress, and universalism were used to justify imperialism and the subjugation of non-European societies. Chakrabarty (2000) and Said (1978) highlight how Enlightenment philosophy framed European civilization as the pinnacle of human development, relegating colonized peoples to a state of backwardness that needed correction through imperial rule (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 5; Said, 1978, p. 8). This perspective allowed European powers to impose their political, economic, and cultural systems on colonized nations under the pretense of bringing civilization and rational governance. Spivak (1994) critiques how Enlightenment discourse silenced indigenous knowledge systems, portraying European ways of knowing as the only legitimate form of reason (p. 76). While the Enlightenment is often celebrated for advancing ideas of liberty and human rights, postcolonial

critiques reveal that these ideals were selectively applied, serving as ideological tools to rationalize colonial domination and cultural erasure.

Scholars debate whether Enlightenment ideals can be reclaimed without reproducing their oppressive tendencies, with some arguing for a critical rethinking rather than outright rejection. Habermas (1987) contends that the Enlightenment's core values—reason, democracy, and human rights—can be salvaged through reflexive modernity, where reason is self-critical and aware of its historical complicity in domination (p. 42). Postcolonial and critical theorists, however, warn that without fundamentally restructuring how these ideals are applied, reclaiming them risks reinforcing their Eurocentric and exclusionary tendencies (Spivak, 1994, p. 89). Ultimately, reclaiming Enlightenment ideals requires transforming them into inclusive and pluralistic frameworks that recognize diverse histories and perspectives rather than imposing a singular, universalist vision of modernity.

Conclusion

The Enlightenment stands as one of modernity's most consequential intellectual projects, shaping contemporary values, institutions, and political life in ways that remain deeply contested. Its core commitments—reason, democracy, and human rights—represent an ongoing, unfinished legacy that continues to animate struggles for human freedom. Yet this affirmative reading cannot be sustained without confronting the movement's darker dimensions. Enlightenment universalism frequently functioned as ideological cover for colonial expansion and the systematic suppression of non-Western knowledge traditions, while its

rationality was institutionalized in disciplinary regimes that embedded power within the very structures ostensibly designed to liberate.

The Enlightenment's central paradox lies here: its simultaneous promise of emancipation and production of exclusion. In seeking to dismantle feudal and religious authority, it frequently erected new mechanisms of domination—capitalist, colonial, and disciplinary—that privileged particular groups under the guise of universal progress. This is not a contradiction that can be resolved by choosing one side of the legacy over the other. Rather, it demands a reflexive and pluralistic engagement: preserving the Enlightenment's emancipatory resources while fundamentally rethinking the exclusions encoded within its universalist claims.

A genuinely progressive modernity must therefore treat the Enlightenment neither as a fixed inheritance to be defended nor as a discredited project to be abandoned, but as a critical ethos—one that remains productive precisely because its tensions are unresolved. The Enlightenment's true legacy is not a set of answers but a disciplined willingness to keep asking the hardest questions about reason, power, and human freedom.

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