Are We Doomed by the Legacy of the Enlightenment?

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The Enlightenment, or the "age of reason," refers to when man started utilizing logic to make discoveries, such as natural laws in the political, scientific, and social realms, by abandoning medieval thinking. The Enlightenment, which dates to the 18th century, was the single most important theoretical development of modern times. This conceptual development made it possible for Western civilization to prosper and stabilize, while enabling the comfortable living which is enjoyed by man today. Scholarly thinkers are convinced that the Enlightenment gave birth to the power of reason, a reason which enables people to accurately understand absolute reality. By critically thinking, humans can understand realistic statistics and a coherent moral system, which instruct them on how they should behave. Enlightenment helps provide the rights of individual freedom, emancipation, property, and the quest for happiness to every individual. The pioneers of the Enlightenment believed that human logic could defeat tyranny, superstition, and unawareness, thereby creating a better world.

There has been much debate over the Enlightenment and the construction of post aesthetics. The debate is ongoing as new accounts emerge and develop on how to come to terms with the legacy of the Enlightenment (Kyoung-Hoon 2002:32). Habermas suggested enlightenment was a continuous process that moved toward the prime of life, and his open action theory is an attempt to complete the incomplete project. Adorno's post aesthetic critically reenacts Kant's failed project of synthesizing the two lacerated domains of knowledge and morality. In the last twenty years, the postmodern discussion has dominated many intellectual fields of thought throughout the world. This has lead to philosophical debates over whether the tradition of contemporary society has ended. In the long run, the postmodern assault shaped many political and social theories. In addition, theoretical attempts were made to define the complex aspects of the postmodern trend. Proponents of Postmodern theory belligerently condemned traditional cultures and politics, whilst the supporters of the theory countered the debate by either attacking or ignoring it. Post modernity refers to the era that followed the modern era, in terms of the transformation that took place in the political, social, economic, and cultural realms.

According to Charalambos (2008:13) modernity is opposed to traditional societies, and it is characterized by novel innovations and dynamism. The theoretical characterization of modernization as being from darkness to enlightenment provided the reasoning for a system of knowledge that could discover tangible theoretical and practical models, upon which a system of thought and action could be built to facilitate the restructuring of the society. The construction of modernity lead to much suffering and desolation for its victims. The suffering originated with the oppression of peasants by capitalists, who also saw the segregation of women from the public domain. There were also genocides across the world that were perpetuated by imperialism and colonialism. Modernity also produced a few disciplinary practices and institutions that legitimized its mode of supremacy and control.

Postmodern theory argues that our high tech, media oriented society is producing a new postmodern society which represents a new stage in history (Adorno and Theodor 2002:24). Habermasian theory was developed by Habermas who introduced the concept of reconstructive science. This concept has two principles, which are to place the theory of science between philosophy and social science, and to create a gap between theory and empirical research. This model represents the threads of the world, namely personality, culture, society, and their functions. It is centered on the theory of social progression, starting from hominization to social formations. Habermas sub-divided these into primitive, traditional, modern, and contemporary formations.

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In addition, Habermasian theory follows the basis of rationalization which assumes a consensus and an abiding of law. This is a significant departure from Marxism, which emphasizes conflict between social factions. Argumentation is the main concern of Habermas in communication (Best and Kellner 2001:47). His argument is only concerned with individuals discussing whether a particular action is acceptable. Habermanism works on the level of logicality of products, procedure, and a rhetorical level of process. There have been debates over whether critical theory is applicable in a postmodern culture, bearing in mind its ideas are obsolete. Critical theory is a philosophically valid tool, just like any other in other fields of thought.

In today's world, the Marx school of thought, which postulates that parlance is the pivot that turns the decisive wheels of the economy into a predictable set-up for the future is not valid (Lincoln 2009:18). Though, the theory can be beneficial for social transformation, if it can embrace opposing extremes without insisting that judgment eliminates that contrast. Philosophers argue that at some point in history revolution was able to resolve the contradictions of class society. From reading the scholarly work of Adorno, though, one begins to believe that moments containing an absence of contradiction will never be in our midst. Considering the current state of the world, it can be argued that we are headed for disaster, but this is less likely if critique plays its role, which is to ensure a balance between negativity and positivity.

Post modernity and capitalism do not differ that much, based on the school of thought that capitalism feeds crises and subsequently restructures itself after the crisis is over, as though it undergoes a kind of metamorphosis (Ben 1996:56). It is apparent that certain social inequalities cannot be resolved by capitalism, because if it is left uncontrolled it increases the gap between poor and rich. This is false because of the supremacy that the drive for profit possesses as a value of social life. The idea of a public sphere where informed citizens deliberate, which enables the formation of rational public opinion that can guide political systems, is seen by many democratic logicians as central to strong democracies (Young 2000:19).

The most significant development of postmodern theory took place in France, where a series of cultural, theoretical, socioeconomic, and political events arose which have given new dimensions to the postmodern hypothesis. In the 1960s, a student and workers strike brought the country to its knees and resurrected the French revolution (Paul 2005:58). The student uprising lead to the politicization of tutoring in the university system, and lead to the critique of knowledge as a means of power and control. These contributed to the development of postmodern theory. It was in the course of these struggles that theories were developed that initiated the connection between knowledge and power, and it enabled the realization that power operates in small logical channels which are ubiquitous in personal and social existence. From this, a stagnant French economy underwent an amazing renewal to become one of the most successful and dynamic in the world.

France changed from an agricultural based society to an urban and industrial one (Habermas 2007:34). With prosperity, lifestyle changes were evident, and this stirred conflict between French tradition and new modern habits, a conflict that was both thrilling and scary. New social theories emerged to express the sense of dynamic change experienced in France during the post war era, these theories analyzed the novel form of mass culture, technology, and modernized urbanization. Across Europe sky-scrapers were erected, new forms of communication infrastructure were put into use, and shopping centers and mass culture created a dramatic change in every day life. Guy Debord criticized the new cultural images, spectacles, and commodities for having a pleasing and mollifying effect. This new culture and general transformation brought about capitalism and bureaucracy.

Postmodernists were drawn to gay, lesbian, and ecological movements as a response to capitalism and destructive ideologies, such as homophobia and racism (Christian and Marisol n.d: 62). Postmodernism calls for a democratic form of political struggle and involvement to address the multiple sources of power and subjugation that are irreducible to the misuse of labor, and in place of domination they proposed civilized alliances. A recent example is Egypt, where workers who are seeking a redistribution of wealth threatened to close down the Suez Canal, an act which could have become a global issue, as close to one tenth of global merchant goods pass through the channel. The political uprisings in Egypt are not international in scope, as they are organized nationally, though they have received support from Tunis and Syria, and are focused on a national goal. It can be equated to the 1989 turning point which saw the fall of the Berlin Wall and the leaders of communist countries fall one by one.

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In the Arab world today, leaders are being pushed out of office by force. A good example is the ousting of Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, and Tripoli has also seen the revolution reach its door step in the last couple of months. The Arab revolution is a better example, rather than organizing workforces on the basis of what they have in common. To date, the postmodern discussion has penetrated popular culture with scholarly articles on postmodern love, presidency, entertainment, and social networking, in regard to Youtube and Facebook, among others. The postmodern discussions showcase novel cultural, artistic, and theoretical perspectives which abandon modern practices. The new post modernity, at times, has been interpreted as negative and has regressed, that is, it lost traditional values, certainties, and stabilities (Lincoln 2009:53), and the valuable norms of modernity were defeated.

The legacy of the Enlightenment is that things have changed for the better, but in recent times it seems as though the world is headed for tougher struggles. For example, today as opposed to the past, people work less, but although the capitalist system does not exploit workers, it throws out the excessive workers, which leads to a rise in unemployment. This occurs mostly in the West, but also in industrializing nations like China and Brazil where pockets of traditional working classes still exist. Rationality, viewed by Habermas, is an outlook that attempts to give a reason for ones actions. The basis of the communicative action theory (Habermas 2007:24) is that humans are social beings who require social interaction to survive and thrive. To be a flexible contributor, one must first have attained a certain level of communicative competence, but having competence does not guarantee flexibility in argumentation. A valid claim must be offered to a participant to facilitate flexibility, and the subsequent grasping of the idea. Taking an idea from another assumes that all relevant information is put forward in an honest manner.

Reaching an understanding is the Telos of communicative rationality (Lincoln 2009:18). Though, the idea of reaching an understanding has a number of meanings, which include recognizing the correspondent's claims of comprehensibility as valid, truth, and right. Communicative rationality enables the development of a public sphere of reasoned deliberations through which public viewpoints are made that can warrant formal decision making. The majority of political theory theorists agree with Habermas in regard to the importance of critical communication for stronger democracies. Ideologies are not always important and neither are the political leaders, who think they are good for the people. Political judgments need not always be arbitrated by ideologies. There should be a point where an individual changes his or her mind, and realizes what he or she believed in was wrong. The postmodern culture has destroyed the foundation and values of Western society, in the sense that sociological and geographical centrality is lost, when the Western world claims moral superiority and rights over persons they consider uncivilized.

According to Charalambos (2008:16), postmodern culture is no longer an unproblematic ally of science. Postmodernism has seen the loss of identity, humanism, and community, whilst developing the rise of mass civilization, which erodes standards of traditional literacy. However, the society cannot reverse, and hence it must move ahead into a new world of science and technology. After World War II society saw the introduction of new modes of communication which have evolved into sophisticated tools of the modern world. This technology has made it possible to solve problems while easing the harshness of life, and has, to an extent, destroyed society's previous values. Cultural modernism enables pleasure-seeking, lack of social identification, deference, vanity, and a withdrawal from achievement, competition, and status.

The Postmodern age is a result of a rebellion against modernism in everyday life, the extension and living of a rebellious character, hyper individualism, and pleasure seeking lifestyles (Kyoung-Hoon 2002:14). Moral and cultural decay have contributed to tribulations in economics and politics. The problems are not the inadequacy of the governing institutions, but the meaning of society. The modern consumers' needs are based around instant gratification, consumption, easy credit, and hedonism, all of which undermine traditional values and produce a capitalist culture of contradictions. With regard to human archeological inquiries, two conflicting matrices of postmodern discussion have emerged. They include a predominantly positive valence and the negative discourse.

The positive valence suggests that technology and modernization make it possible to break an archaic past. These theories simulated the ideologies of affluent society with the belief that capitalism has overcome its tendency toward crisis to produce an almost perfect society. Positive culture proponents complemented this by insisting that liberating features such as pop culture and the new postmodern sensibility attack rationality and hermeneutics. Both theories responded to developments in modern-day capitalism. They focused on the production of new commodities to meet

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ever increasing demands, while fueling an abundant and affluent lifestyle. This was coupled with the development of credit plans, media, and commodity materialization to encourage gratification, and the adoption of new cultural forms and habits, which would eventually constitute post modernity. It should be noted that some theories opposed diversity, while others encouraged it. In the 1980s the postmodern discussion split among the supporters of cultural conservatives, and the proponents of the theory. The proponents advocated for more advancement in modernization through different academic fields, in terms of new political ideologies, modes of writing, and cultural values.

In the autumn of 2008 the world witnessed the onset of a global financial crisis, which has been the largest of our life time. This is an indication that neo-liberalization has failed and that capitalism is prone to failure, even with the most stringent regulations, and consequences to people's lively hood and lifestyles (Christian and Marisol n.d:37). These developments have sparked debates that critique the capitalist system. Neo-fascism could arise also, challenging the school of thought of critical thinking. It is possible that we have entered a new era of struggle which will see new theories arise to conform to the new challenges we face in the 21st century. Since we have lived in the Enlightenment era, we are the children of the Enlightenment legacy, whether we like it or not, as it has determined who we are today in terms of our thinking and our actions. It would be difficult to imagine how our lifestyle, and our world in general, would be without the Enlightenment. Though, the Enlightenment has been a major source of problems in the world today. Enlightenment creates a concern for competence because it gives people power while undermining morality. Over time, the legacy has undermined culture and tradition, without replacing them with any regard to reason.

The Enlightenment failed as its foundation was based on creating a new perfect world, instead of correcting the traditions of societies. According to Michael Foucault, every apparent victory of the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and reason have resulted in new, and even more sinister forms of domination and control. Two examples would be the Nazi deaths camps and the Soviet gulags. Enlightenment also perpetuated evils in the form of racism, slavery, and colonization. Alasdair MacIntyre believes the Enlightenment was both a foundation list and nihilistic. The Enlightenment helped wear away the traditional schools of knowledge and has lead to disenchantment.

In conclusion, the Enlightenment witnessed the shrinking of governments, increased tolerance, expansion of freedom, and commercial revolution, coupled with creativity. Furthermore, it lead to the Industrial Revolution seen in the 18th and the 19th centuries, and to the prosperity and opportunity which humans enjoy today. Regrettably, while the Enlightenment's legacy remains with us, the conventional culture has, to an extent, rejected the dreams which inspired the Enlightenment. Some scholars view the Enlightenment as a historical incongruity, merely an epigrammatic moment when a couple of theorists infatuated with reason, supposed that the perfect society could be assembled on common sense and open-mindedness. Though, in many ways, the Enlightenment has never been more active. For instance, the idea of human rights for subjugated individuals is very attractive.

In a nutshell, the legacy of the Enlightenment has doomed us. In the present day, morals, cultural habits, and norms have been disregarded, and if the 2008 financial crisis is anything to go by, it seems the world is headed for tougher times. Unemployment rates are increasing each and every day across the world. If the rates in the developing nations are any thing to go by, the world will be facing an up hill battle to resolve its problems. In the Arab world, enlightenment has caught up with politics in Egypt and Tunisia. It was hoped enlightenment would foster democracies where citizens could enjoy freedom in all aspects of life. Hopefully, they learn from the mistakes of their Western counterparts.

An enlightened individual is conscious of his own consciousness, above that of the communal. This type of consciousness is what concerns enlightenment. Therefore, living at this time is the easiest way to face reality, without gazing through colored glasses tinted by our pride or bigotry.

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