



What Have We Done With The Enlightenment?

Scientifically, the Enlightenment was inaugurated by Copernicus and Newton...and culminated with the likes of Darwin and Maxwell. Philosophically, the Enlightenment was inaugurated by Bacon, Descartes, Locke, and Spinoza...then carried through A. Smith, G. Leibniz, D. Hume, I. Kant, T. Paine, A. Schopenhauer, K. Marx, J.S. Mill, F. Nietzsche, C.S. Peirce, G. Frege, and M. Weber to the modern era.

Studying these twenty towering minds is crucial to cultivating an understanding of the development of mankind's wisdom (and the attendant progress of human society). All of them played a vital role in the Enlightenment—each in his own way. To fail to understand any one of them is to have an incomplete picture of the evolution of knowledge. Indeed, it is necessary to procure an understanding of every one of these men in order to have a full understanding of the Enlightenment...and our present state of knowledge.

We may also pay tribute to freethinkers like Galileo, Bacon, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Jefferson, Diderot, Thoreau, and Emerson: other iconoclasts that stood up to the establishment during the Enlightenment, paving the way for further progress.

Upon surveying these pivotal figures, the first thing that may be noted is that none of them were religious; most of them were deists. The contributions of all these thinkers were largely a matter of counteracting the forces of dogmatism—and thus taking a stand against the power of religion, tradition, aristocracy, and entrenched vested interests. They were one and all champions of free-thought, promoting a secular approach via a process of critical analysis, free inquiry, individual autonomy, intellectual integrity, and VOLITIONAL creative thinking (i.e. the antithesis of religiosity). All such things contributed to the deliberate forging of civil society by counteracting the modus operandi of cult activity (institutionalized dogmatism).

Tragically, most people in America today not only haven't learned about ALL of these figures, they are utterly oblivious to the achievements of MOST of them. Most people here in America have, at best, a vague grasp of Copernicus and Newton, have heard of Marx yet don't understand him, and roughly "get the gist of" Darwin. (There are perhaps sporadic inklings of the insights of Descartes and Locke as well.) But that's about it.

This is a shameful state of American education, and does not bode well for the legacy of progress we've been left. Such ignorance is responsible for the appalling (and dangerous) paucity of erudition that now plagues our society. Certainly, it accounts for the egregiously low caliber of contemporary public discourse. An indication of lack of intellectual curiosity that precipitates this yawning ignorance is the following fact:

In the MIBY section of this website, I've listed what I've surmised to be the 20 most important books of the last decade (for the layman to read)—in the interest of general edification. In a well-educated society, most of the population would surely have read (and taken away vital understanding from) most—if not all—of these books. Why? Because they are important resources for understanding our world.

Alas, the vast majority of the American population has read NONE of these books—a small minority perhaps one or two of them. It is no wonder, then, that we find ourselves with the grave societal dysfunctions with which we're now afflicted. Most people simply don't UNDERSTAND even the most important matters of the day—because they don't do anything by which they would garner the requisite knowledge. That is to say, most people have not cultivated for themselves even the most fundamental understanding of the world in which we find ourselves: elementary sociology, basic macro-economics, rudimentary philosophy, the scientific method, the key points of American history, etc. Why? They don't do the sort of things that would accomplish that task. They don't even CARE about engaging in such things.

Alas, most Americans have not exposed themselves to the great thinkers of the Enlightenment enumerated above, and are utterly oblivious to the profound insights offered by the best minds of today: Dan Dennett, Peter Singer, Joe Stiglitz, Noam Chomsky, Ron Dworkin, Amartya Sen, Anthony Appiah, Andrew Bacevich, Naomi Klein, Michael Mann, Stuart Kauffman, Richard Posner, Douglas Hofstadter, Martha Nussbaum, Gordon Wood...

They're too busy watching Oprah...or Regis & Kelly...or CNBC...or Reality TV...or devoting a colossal amount of attention to the latest celebrity scandal—who's doing what in their personal life, who's fucking who, and what are they wearing? Where is each public official putting his penis, seems to be a major topic of concern. This is a resounding testament to the egregiously skewed priorities of American pop

culture. Any matter that is assigned the appendix “-gate” that does not involve a malignant abuse of power (an issue relevant to the weal of society) should be none of the general public’s concern.

Behold the great pedagogic writers of our day: Naomi Klein, James Carroll, Timothy Ferris, Richard Dawkins, Steven Pinker, Bart Ehrman, Michael Shermer, Paul Krugman, Joseph Stiglitz, Gore Vidal, Chris Hedges, Thomas Frank, Joseph Ellis, Sean Wilentz, Tony Judt, Ron Suskind, Anthony Appiah, Jeffrey D. Sachs, Susan Wise Bauer... How many people take the time to read the works of such figures? Not many. In a decently educated nation, such authors would be common reading amongst the rank and file. People would talk about their books around the water cooler and at cafes and over dinner at home. In such a well-informed society, how much better would our elected officials be? How much better would our quality of life become? To what degree would injustices be mitigated... even precluded?

Alas, we Americans don’t read important works. Instead we watch sports and inane television programs. Listen to political pundits, self-help gurus, and other professional charlatans who make careers out of hawking fatuous drivel to credulous audiences. Taking the time to read Karl Popper, Eleanor Roosevelt, Richard Hofstadter, John Rawls, John Maynard Keynes, E.O. Wilson, or C. Wright Mills isn’t even on most people’s radar. We’re too busy with Facebook, Reality TV, and gossip mags to bother taking the time to edify ourselves. We all know who Donald Trump is; few know who Alan Turing was. Many of us revere TV diva Oprah, yet few are aware of what Eleanor Roosevelt said and did.

Americans are a peculiar lot. Even now, in the 21st Century, 8 in 10 Americans consider religion to be a fairly important part of life. Compare this with less than half of Canadians and Britons... and a very small portion of Scandinavians, Germans, French, Swiss, Belgian and Dutch (i.e. the developed nations whose societies are, in general, healthier than the U.S.) Religiosity is, in general, inversely proportional to the health of a society, as is clearly demonstrated in the Muslim world. Meanwhile, Poland is currently the most Catholic nation, and is fairs the worst of the nations of Western Europe. Though correlation doesn’t equal causation, there is certainly a direct causal link between societal progress and predominance of secularity.

Many people here in the U.S. seem to be somewhat oblivious to the connection between secularism and the progress that has been made in our society. Many people don’t notice that almost all improvements have come NOT from religion, but from free-thought. #

Alas, we Americans are more concerned with what a public official is doing with his penis than with the merit of the policies he proposes. We can name the entire cast of [insert hit TV show here], but would have difficulty saying what Alan Turing did...or what Eleanor Roosevelt accomplished...or what, exactly, Thomas Paine said. We're too busy with citing scripture to notice that democratic principles derive not from any holy book. We're so preoccupied with the petty that we've forgotten that all progress in civil rights has transpired because we started becoming more SECULAR. (One can't find calls for a genuine democracy in a single line of any sacred text...nor any basis for universal human rights. Why? These are SECULAR insights, not the result of following religious doctrine more stringently.)

But do we have enough time to become even marginally erudite?

One doesn't have to read the entire Critique of Pure Reason to understand the categorical imperative. One doesn't have to read every word of Spinoza's Ethics to know what he stood for. Reading Rawls' Theory of Justice cover to cover isn't necessary to grasp his main themes. Not everyone can be expected to tackle such monolithic tomes in their (very limited) spare time—the window of leisure they may have between laundry and cooking dinner. However, responsible citizens should be expected to take the time to become moderately informed on matters other than which public figure is putting his penis in whom.

On masonscott.org, I've also listed what are most likely the 20 most important books to read from the 20th century. Unsurprisingly, few have read more than one or two of them; many people aren't familiar with ANY of them. We should be ashamed of this wanton ignorance. Yet we seem perfectly content to while our time away engaging in spurious activities. Naturally, we persist in electing imbeciles to high public office, year after year after year. Why? Because many of us don't have even a basic understanding of the most important matters of the day. (Do people STILL think that trickle-down economics WORKS? Are some people REALLY under the impression that democratic society is based on points made in the Bible? Is it possible to believe that a zygote is a full-fledged human? Can one take seriously the claim that Ronald Reagan "won" the "Cold War"...while improving "the economy"? How staggeringly oblivious does someone have to be to entertain such notions? The same people, it seems, who are credulous enough to read their holy books and take them literally.)

Like mindless sheep, people flock to church in order to feel good, not to THINK. We watch sporting events, go to the mall to purchase the next trendy outfit, meet at the local lounge for a beer and banal banter, watch vacuous chit-chat on "talk shows",



read books about how to be happy and get rich, indulge in another inane memoir, immerse ourselves in an echo-chamber of ideological commentary, go shopping yet again for even more consumer products we don't really need, maybe watch the evening news...and then we'll go to sleep.

Each night, we climb into bed, smug in our complacency...just like the night before. We may be well aware of what the weather might be like tomorrow...yet we're none the wiser when it comes to things that really matter.

The next morning, we wake up and do it all over again: just another day of the same vapid routine, the same petty concerns, the same insipid interactions. After all, we have a Facebook page to update, the next episode of the Reality TV to follow, another scandalous story to read in the popular tabloid rag...and church to attend. We may be horrifically ignorant, but at least we remain magnificently fashionable...and in the good graces of our deity.

"Thomas Paine? Immanuel Kant? Who's that? In Style magazine has never featured pictures of them; they can't be THAT important. Plus, I have another passage in my sacred scripture to memorize and recite."

We are a nation of thoroughly distracted, well-amused idiots—blissfully ignorant, perpetually gratified, and appropriately dressed. What have we done with the Enlightenment? We've named an airport after Ronald Reagan, forgotten about Thomas Paine, and allowed plutocrats to destroy our economy. We buy chic clothes and wait for trickle-down economics to someday happen. We attack foreign countries and neglect the disenfranchised rabble here at home. We are barely literate, yet fantastically entertained.

Bravo.