

What Is/Was the Enlightenment?

Was the Enlightenment the high point in the history of ideas, bounded as it was at either end of the eighteenth century by the lives of two philosophers: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)? Was it the exclusive property of the great Continental thinkers—the *philosophes* like Montesquieu (1689-1755), Diderot (1713-84) and Voltaire (1694-1778)? Where do the Englishman John Locke (1632-1704) and the Scotsmen like David Hume (1711-76) and Adam Smith (1723-90) fit in? Was it a coherent intellectual program that came to an end or a series of debates that continue to resonate today?

The ideas that define the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century include reason, progress, liberty, equality and civic virtue. It was a time that brought into being the altogether novel ideas that human affairs should be guided by the light of rationality rather than by faith or superstition and supported by science rather than by religion or tradition. The hallmark of the era was a belief in the power of reason to change society and liberate the individual from the restraints of custom and arbitrary authority.

Twentieth-century scholars were the first to enlarge the physical boundaries of the Enlightenment beyond Europe to include such Americans as Jefferson (1743-1826) and Franklin (1706-90). Both were deeply influenced by Enlightenment ideals, and now are considered great contributors to the “Age of Reason.” After all, those ideals were put into practice in the documents that created our nation: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Recent research has found evidence that Enlightenment thought touched the “fringes” of Europe—Italy, Greece, the Balkans, Poland, Hungary and Russia—through newspapers, pamphlets and books. It reached all social classes, not just the educated elite. Reactions to the Enlightenment varied greatly from region to region, from men to women, and from white people to indigenous peoples.

For those who see the Enlightenment as a historical work still in progress, its ideals have gone global, with notions such as human rights—at the heart of Enlightenment thought—becoming a rallying cry for the oppressed around the world. For Americans, the language of natural law, of inherent freedoms and of self-determination is so tightly woven into the fabric of our nation’s political discourse that we often forget how truly revolutionary the Enlightenment was—and still is today.