



# The Return of the Anti-Enlightenment

BY CATHY YOUNG

*A reading of Voltaire's tragedy "L'Orpheline de la Chine" in the salon of Madame Geoffrin.*

**T**his past July, *Tablet*, a center-right online magazine that covers Jewish life but also general culture and ideas, ran an essay by journalist and author Liel Leibovitz titled “It’s the Liberalism, Stupid.” Its point was to challenge the common view that the excesses of modern American progressivism, including identity politics and speech suppression, are rooted in rejection of liberalism. The real villain, Leibovitz argues, is liberalism itself—and not just liberalism as understood in American political discourse (i.e., support for a strong domestic role for government) but in a broader sense that includes small-government conservatism; that is, the classical liberalism ushered in by the Enlightenment. Leibovitz concedes that this idea seems preposterous to most people given “the many bounties” of the Enlightenment era, “from stable democracies to lifesaving science,” but this rosy view, he insists, ignores the vices of the liberal order.

Once consigned to marginalized extremists, this root-and-branch rejection of Enlight-

enment liberalism is gaining ground on both sides of the political spectrum. It’s a worrying trend for anybody who cares about freedom, and it’s rooted in bad history and even worse reasoning.

In Leibovitz’s narrative, the Enlightenment replaced the once-prevailing view that humans are capable of both great good and great evil and therefore need moral instruction and tradition to keep them in line with the notion that humans are born good and that evil comes only from oppressive and corrupt institutions; instead of tradition and faith, society should be held together through the social contract. We did all right as long as liberalism was held in check by still-potent forces of tradition—mainly family and religion—but those forces began to lose ground in the modern era, allowing radical individualism to triumph. The result: plummeting birth rates, broken homes, and “detached and uprooted people” who turned lonely, quarrelsome, and paranoid. “Call it woke culture if you’d like, but it’s nothing more than the Enlightenment’s apotheosis,” Leibovitz concludes.

Leibovitz’s snark-laden critique of Enlightenment liberalism is so shoddy that one may question whether it warrants a response.

(Among other things, Leibovitz dubiously ascribes to Benjamin Franklin a belief in the innate goodness of the noble savage and conflates the Hobbesian concept of a social contract in which people irrevocably “sign away a host of [their] innate rights” to the state with the Lockean principle—espoused in the Declaration of Independence—that legitimate government requires ongoing consent of the governed.) And yet this essay, which appeared in a mainstream intellectual magazine, is part of a larger trend of explicitly anti-liberal, anti-Enlightenment rhetoric in conservative quarters.

This conservative attack is matched by an increasingly visible strand of progressive discourse that is stridently hostile to the Enlightenment and the liberal tradition. This discourse ranges from serious critiques to muddled polemics. Thus, when Kyle Rittenhouse was acquitted in the shooting of three people during the 2020 riots in Kenosha, Wisconsin, on the grounds of self-defense, a piece by journalist Barrett Holmes Pitner on the leading left-of-center website, *The Daily Beast*, used the occasion to attack the Enlightenment philosophy of John Locke and its role in the American Founding. Locke’s

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formula of life, liberty, and property as fundamental rights, wrote Pitner, not only excuses the use of deadly force to protect property but also originally served to validate slavery as a form of property ownership. In the process, Pitner erroneously argues that Locke attempted to justify the institution of slavery in his seminal work, *Second Treatise of Government*.

In an age of widespread concern that liberal democracy is increasingly embattled around the world, the twin attacks on Enlightenment liberalism from the right and the left—and not just from the fringes—represent a worrying trend.

### PINING FOR THE ANCIEN RÉGIME

While anti-liberal discourse on the right is not new, it gained a new prominence with the success of the 2018 book *Why Liberalism Failed* by University of Notre Dame political scientist Patrick Deneen. Deneen's indictment of liberalism is far more sophisticated and civil than Leibovitz's diatribe, but it makes essentially the same argument: that Enlightenment liberalism, with its emphasis on personal autonomy, leads to the dissolution of communal and familial bonds, atomization, moral nihilism, political alienation, and the hollowing out of culture and education. "Liberalism has failed—not because it fell short, but because it was true to itself. It has failed because it has succeeded," Deneen wrote in the book's introduction. Provocatively, he was upfront about the fact that he was blaming the Founding Fathers for liberalism's pernicious effects in the United States.

The following year, the religious conservative magazine *First Things* published several broadsides against Enlightenment liberalism and old-style American conservatism overly attached to liberty, individual autonomy, tolerance, and pluralism. Perhaps most notable among them was the essay "Conservative Democracy" by U.S.-born Israeli political scientist Yoram Hazony, author of the controversial 2018 book *The Virtue of Nationalism* and the intellectual leader of the national conservatism

## “ Individual autonomy protects religious liberty, too. ”

movement. Like Deneen, Hazony proclaims the failure of liberalism. But where Deneen offers only vague and localized alternatives, Hazony proposes an alternative version of democratic government that explicitly repudiates the liberal Enlightenment tradition based on reason, "the free and equal individual," and "obligations arising from choice." Instead, the core values of conservative democracy include state-sponsored majority religion and immigration restrictionism, while individual freedoms are embraced only if they are rooted in national tradition and customs. Interestingly, Hazony wants to reclaim the American Founding for conservatism, mostly by enlisting some of the Founders into conservative ranks. He does this by reducing the Lockean roots of the American Revolution to some mere "Enlightenment-rationalist phrases in the Declaration of Independence."

Hazony and Deneen, it should be noted, are among the more moderate critics of the Enlightenment on the right. A more radical strain of illiberalism can be found in the Catholic integralists, such as Harvard law professor Adrian Vermeule. They advocate that conservative Catholics in America should work toward a political order in which the state is spiritually subordinate to the Catholic Church and is based on its tenets and values. One might argue that this is a purely utopian project in the United States today, where the population is only one-fifth Catholic. But a less narrowly sectarian version of religious authoritarianism—one of "a public square re-ordered to the common good and ultimately the Highest Good," in the words of conservative Catholic Sohrab Ahmari—has far broader

conservative appeal. And the fact that integralists have been enjoying something of a revival in mainstream conservative venues (as Ave Maria University professor James M. Patterson documented on the Law and Liberty website last year) is startling by itself.

### ROLLING BACK THE CLOCK

One paradox of right-wing critiques of the Enlightenment is the frequent claim that modern progressivism is an extension of the Enlightenment's radical individualism. In a 2019 article (also in *First Things*) denouncing pro-liberty conservative David French for his attachment to pluralism and individual autonomy, Ahmari wrote: "The movement we are up against prizes autonomy above all, too; indeed, its ultimate aim is to secure for the individual will the widest possible berth to define what is true and good and beautiful, against the authority of tradition." The logical terminus of this quest, according to Ahmari, is to require full universal acceptance of each individual's choices: thus, people with traditional religious views must assist in same-sex weddings as bakers or florists and allow sexually active gays to hold posts in religious groups on college campuses. Conservatives who prioritize individual freedom, Ahmari argues, have no defense against that logic. In reality, of course, there is a strong counterargument that individual autonomy protects religious liberty, too, and in fact French has consistently championed it.

Today's left-wing progressivism prizes individual autonomy and self-determination only in some circumstances, such as the right to live according to one's sexual orientation or gender identity. Its general attitude toward these values tends to be quite negative. Indeed, classifying people by racial, ethnic, and sexual identities is at the core of the current progressive worldview, which rejects universalism as an imposition of white European (and patriarchal) values on people who are not straight white males. Moreover, the view that individualism, rationality, objectivity,

and other Enlightenment values are attributes of “whiteness” or “white supremacy culture” is fairly common in social justice circles and has been included in “anti-racist” training workshops. The irony of how this view overlaps with arguments long made by actual white supremacists is lost on them.

Direct attacks on the Enlightenment have proliferated on the left, focusing mainly on the idea that Enlightenment-based philosophy and science have been complicit in, and fatally tainted by, racism. In *Intellectual History Review*, Dutch historian Devin Vartija describes a postmodern or postcolonial critique of the Enlightenment as a claim that “the Enlightenment is fundamentally compromised by its association with European colonialism, that Enlightenment universalism is a sham because ‘the rights of man’ are really ‘the rights of white men.’”

The *Daily Beast* article pinning America’s racial injustices on Locke is a crude example of such a critique, but there has been no shortage of far more sophisticated versions—including the work of the recently deceased Jamaican American philosopher Charles W. Mills and the 2018 *Slate* article by journalist Jamelle Bouie asserting that appeals to the Enlightenment as a beacon of freedom, progress, and humanism must reckon with its dark side. To these critics, the Enlightenment and its thinkers are guilty not only of justifying slavery and colonial oppression but of creating scientific racism and racial classification. “Race as we understand it—a biological taxonomy that turns physical difference into relations of domination—is a product of the Enlightenment,” writes Bouie, arguing that racism arose in response to the fundamental contradiction of the era: thinkers who espoused liberty but also justified slavery had to come up with a way to classify enslaved people as subhuman.

### THE ENLIGHTENMENT’S DARK SIDE

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and its legacy have a dark side. From the beginning, Enlightenment liberalism often had trouble dealing with people who did not fit into its paradigm of the autonomous rights-bearing individual, either because they were not included (women, blacks, and other minorities) or because they refused to join (religious and cultural traditionalists). Some Enlightenment figures, such as Immanuel Kant and Thomas Jefferson, rationalized the treatment of nonwhite people as lesser beings. Others, such as the Jacobins of the French Revolution—the Enlightenment’s misbegotten spiritual children—dehumanized aristocrats and “fanatical” peasants who were strongly attached to their Catholic faith. The American republic did far worse than the French republic when it came to race relations—partly because France’s racial problem was relegated to colonies abroad—but it did far better when it came to religious and political pluralism.

Yet it is worth noting that the Enlightenment was not nearly as monolithic as the critiques often imply. Pro-Enlightenment narratives, such as that of linguist and psychologist Steven Pinker in his 2018 book *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*, sometimes lapse into the same error. Even in one country—France—its exponents included deists, theists, believers in “natural religion,” and a handful of atheists. The Age of Reason was also the age of sentiment as well as the age of intense interest in the study of human nature and passions. In some ways, as cultural

historian Peter Gay argued in his seminal 1966–1969 study *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, the Enlightenment was “a revolt against rationalism” as well as a rejection of religious anti-rationalism. And while Enlightenment thought generally affirmed the personal and spiritual autonomy of the individual, it also extolled family, domestic happiness, and civic virtues, not radical individualism.

Enlightenment attitudes toward race and slavery were at least as complex. Pseudoscientific rationalizations for racial subjugation and exploitation coexisted with trenchant critiques of those practices, which went back to a much earlier time and had been traditionally justified on the grounds of religious sanction, legal norms, or economic interest. Denis Diderot, the French Encyclopedist, was one of many Enlightenment philosophers who were fiercely anti-colonialist and anti-slavery. He was among the authors of *A History of the Two Indies*, the bestselling (and at one point banned) work edited by Abbot Guillaume Raynal, which scathingly indicted the Europeans’ conduct in the Americas, coastal Africa, and Asia. Indeed, Vartija argues, far from using race to reconcile human rights and chattel slavery, these thinkers’ advocacy of human rights was partly inspired by revulsion at the inhumanity of the slave trade and colonialism. Likewise, University of Maryland historian Holly Brewer asserts in *Aeon* magazine that “slavery’s origins were in absolutism, not liberalism” and that “liberalism arose in reaction to slavery.” The Enlightenment’s assault on the idea that a person’s place in society was divinely ordained at birth, says Brewer, ultimately provided the impetus for slavery’s abolition.

It is true that the Enlightenment spirit of scientific exploration also led to attempts at racial classification, which played a role in the rise of scientific racism in the 19th century. But Vartija makes a strong case that such classification by Enlightenment figures, including Comte Georges-Louis Leclerc de

Buffon, the naturalist and precursor of evolutionary theory, did not rely on the concept of races as fixed categories, did not necessarily assume white racial superiority, and did not seek to justify racial oppression.

Sometimes, anti-Enlightenment broadsides from both right and left are little more than ad hominem attacks, and inaccurate ones at that. Locke has been accused of hypocrisy and collusion in slavery because he briefly owned stock in the slave-trading Royal African Company (which was given to him as payment) and supposedly authored the 1669 Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina, which enshrined and strengthened slavery. Yet the extent of Locke's role in drafting the constitutions in his capacity as secretary to the Lords Proprietors of Carolina is very much disputed. Reviewing the evidence in the *American Historical Review* in 2017, Brewer notes that Locke not only rejected and condemned slavery in his seminal work, *Two Treatises of Government*, but justified the Glorious Revolution of 1688 partly on the grounds that the king it overthrew, James II, was an advocate for slavery.

Meanwhile, from the right, Hazoni has derided Locke, along with Spinoza, Kant, and Descartes, as childless bachelors wedded to a vision of the free, atomic individual because of their blinkered perspective. Yet not only did Locke regard the family as an institution essential to civil society and to the development of the individual, he was also a practicing pediatrician who often advised friends on child rearing. Hazoni is assailing a cartoon version of Locke, just as he is assailing a cartoon version of the Enlightenment.

## THE ILLIBERAL CYCLE OF LEFT AND RIGHT

The current Enlightenment wars, it turns out, are not entirely new. A 2000 article by Boston University political scientist James Schmidt in the journal *Political Theory*, "What Enlightenment Project?," examines familiar

critiques: from the right, that the Enlightenment is too preoccupied with the autonomous individual at the expense of family and community; from the left, that the Enlightenment's concepts of freedom and human rights are Eurocentric and racially exclusionary. But the arguments have become much more acrimonious, extreme, and prominent.

During the 20th century, both fascists and communists often framed their arguments as rejecting or transcending Enlightenment liberalism. Before that, both the American Progressive Era reformers and the Confederate pro-slavery secessionists often framed their agendas as repudiations of Enlightenment liberalism. Liberalism was derided as outdated or mistaken, misunderstanding human nature, or as being concocted as a tool of oppression. These anti-liberal arguments produced some of the worst horrors of the modern era.

Because liberal democracies are defined by their Enlightenment legacy, attempts to find good alternatives to classical liberalism have tended to flounder. From the right, Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed*, which stresses that liberalism's positive gains must be preserved, doesn't really propose programs or solutions other than to nurture cultural enclaves outside the liberal consensus (he cites the Amish as an example). Ironically, the ability to do that depends on liberal pluralism. From the left, Charles Mills's critique of the Enlightenment's "racial contract" urges using the Enlightenment's own intellectual tools to cleanse liberalism of racism.

Such critics of the Enlightenment thus reveal how deeply immersed we all are in Enlightenment ideas about morality: it's difficult for them to explain their critiques without resorting to liberal principles. To do otherwise implies such a repulsive vision for the world that it's almost indefensible, and many of its own advocates recoil from it.

But in recent years, openly authoritarian solutions have gained more mainstream acceptance in both camps. On the right, it's Hazoni's calls for conservative democracy

and religious diktat, Ahmari's insistence that acceptance of Trump's populist leadership should be a conservative credential, and the nationalist right's love affair with foreign illiberal figures such as Hungary's Viktor Orbán. On the left, it's a push to drive "wrongthink" out of academic, cultural, and corporate institutions, as well as an increasing number of calls for the use of government power to curtail the expression of what the left considers to be bad ideas. This includes renewed support for hate speech bans to proposals for an "anti-racist constitutional amendment" and a federal "department of anti-racism" to enforce it. It can also be seen in a revived flirtation with communism and apologia for the Soviet empire.

One could argue about "both-sides-ism" and endlessly debate which brand of authoritarianism poses more danger. In the meantime, the two reinforce each other in a vicious cycle, with each side pointing to the other's authoritarian excesses to justify its own abandonment of liberal tolerance in the battle against the evil enemy.

Whatever the flaws of Enlightenment liberalism, we should not forget that what it rebelled against was not just tradition steeped in warm human bonds but an oppressive order based on political, religious, and social tyranny—and that attempts to replace it with something better have repeatedly led to new forms of tyranny. When we get past the caricatures, the Enlightenment is complex enough to contain multitudes. Before we declare it a failed experiment or an instrument of oppression, we should understand its legacy and how inseparable it is from vast leaps of moral progress.

Efforts to erode those foundations have produced evils that pale in comparison to complaints about secularization, individualism, and free markets. Attempts to produce a new and improved anti-Enlightenment political philosophy have so far failed to show that they aren't just repeating the same mistakes—with the same potential for catastrophic consequences. ■