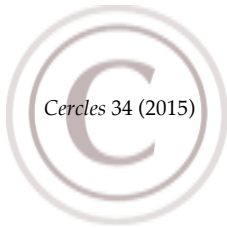


# ÉCHANGE(S) ET CHANGEMENT(S) AU SIECLE DES LUMIERES *CHANGE AND EXCHANGE(S) IN THE ENLIGHTENMENT*



## INTRODUCTION

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“What is Enlightenment?” Immanuel Kant answers the question in the very first sentence of his 1784 essay: “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity.” “*Sapere aude*” is his charge to readers to follow this programme of intellectual self-liberation, the tool of which is Reason. Enlightenment thus appears as a process of changing manners and ways of thinking. A three-day international conference was held at Le Havre University in June 2013, attracting scholars from France, Germany, Romania and the United States. They delivered stimulating papers that gave rise to thought-provoking exchanges, discussing the changes and revolutions that happened in Britain in the Enlightenment as well as the exchanges (whether commercial, political, cultural, familial, epistolary ...) they gave rise to. This collection of essays published in *Cercles* demonstrates the extent of international interest in the Enlightenment. In Professor Hermann J. Real’s words, “the colloque’s topic, *Change and Exchanges(s) in the Enlightenment*, could not have been more central to current Enlightenment studies” [REAL]. The following essays do not amount to any sort of exhaustive report but mean to raise questions. It is hoped that this collection of essays will stimulate further discussion and debate concerning the Enlightenment.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century brought vast changes to Great Britain. Britain became a world power, an empire on which the sun never set. But it also changed internally. Change came most spectacularly to cities with new theatres, coffee-houses, concert halls, pleasure gardens, picture exhibitions and shopping districts. People were linked to an increasingly global economy, as they shopped for various goods from around the world. The long reign of George III (1760-1820) saw both the emergence of Britain as a colonial power and the cry for a new social order based on liberty and radical reform. The sense that everything was changing was also sparked by a revolution in science and industry. Scientific progress pushed back the frontiers of the universe and was accompanied by an increased awareness of infinity. The Enlightenment launched into a quest for the unattainable limit. A new vision of the world and of man came forth in the Enlightenment, mainly due to the *Philosophes* and *Encyclopédie* claiming their faith in human reason and scientific, moral and social progress, releasing man from his fetters. And the period witnessed changes in aesthetic tastes: Burke, Diderot, Kant, discovered a new source of inspiration compounded of anxiety, wonder and awe experienced by man facing the immensity of the universe, hence developing the new category of the sublime. In literature the 18<sup>th</sup> century was a time of transition and of new beginnings: the appearance and swift success of the novel, the fascinating phenomenon of the popularity of the

Gothic novel in the last decades of the century, the proliferation of translations of English novels ... The rise in literacy helped change the literary market. Exchanges were also promoted by the fashion and taste for travelling, a central motif in 18<sup>th</sup>-century literature which provided the testing ground for the notion of identity together with numerous diaries, letters and travel books.

The Enlightenment ideas developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in several European countries and they still enlighten and influence our behaviours and ways of thinking because they are at the source of our identity. That is what Michel Foucault says about that event called the *Aufklärung* that has determined what we are, what we think and what we are doing today [FOUCAULT 562]. Secularity, manners, ethics, relationships with others, the individual, the risks of ethical abuse of science: numerous are the debates that make Enlightenment a topical matter. The question of the topicality of the Enlightenment arises in terms of impression as well as borrowing, filiation as well as inheritance. "Past, present and future are strung together, as it were, on the thread of the wish that runs through them" [FREUD 135]. The wish makes use of an event in the present to construct, on the pattern of the past, a picture of the future. The 18<sup>th</sup> century was engaged in issues that are also ours today. Our time incessantly flirts with the Enlightenment in a confusing and endless game of reflections and interplay. Regarded as the cradle of modern humanism, founding our modernity and the Republican social pact, the Enlightenment emerges behind all our pursuits and achievements, all the current issues of our world. The links with our age abound as Michel Delon rightly notes: « structures sociales, institutions, mentalités qui sont aujourd'hui les nôtres datent souvent de la Révolution » [DELON 20]. In that past that keeps haunting the present, the 18<sup>th</sup> century represents a privileged, golden instant that laid the foundations of the principles that were meant to (and did to some extent) change the established order and old patterns of life. This moment of grace witnessed the obliteration of tradition, the claim for freedom and happiness, the development of the individual. In the Enlightenment most of the essential tenets of our modern world fermented and took shape: tolerance and human rights (primarily male, admittedly, as Olympe de Gouges ineffectively tried to defend the "Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen), equality (according to Rousseau « être libre, n'avoir que des égaux est la vraie vie, la vie naturelle de l'homme. Les hommes naissent égaux »), political science, an obsessive taste for taxonomy and nomenclature (at work in *l'Encyclopédie*), the total separation of Church and State (after Locke's theory on religious tolerance), state secularism and the freedom of religious exercise, and at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century a new taste for Nature and the sublime, the celebration of passions as the driving-force behind every action and every creation.

But even more forceful than historical, economic or political links, is an enduring mood: echoes of a past century are still reverberating in our own present age. The sexual liberation that has challenged the western world since the 1960s also fuels interest in 18<sup>th</sup>-century libertinism and, owing to such blazing figures as Casanova or Sade, the connection with the

Enlightenment is established by means of eroticism and sensuality. And it goes even deeper, as the frantic chase of pleasure, the taste for short-lived gratification, also partook of a strong desire to break with a conformist fossilised society, to get rid of the laws and rules regulating social life. Libertinism was first, in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, release from religious beliefs, before it came to indicate independence from any restriction and limitation.

The craving for freedom, the longing for emancipation, extolling man's aptitudes and gifts, distinguished a changing and contrasted age. Energy and passion characterized the artist and the revolutionary alike, artistic creation as well as political action. They partook of a new vision of the world, where the notion of individuality developed and prospered: a man of passion and desire took the place of the rational man. Desire was valued as a principle of energy even though it could be feared as a form of disorder and misdirected imagination.

"*Aude*", such was the motto of the Enlightenment, a call for action, innovation, inventiveness, and liberation from prejudice, tradition and authority. The Enlightenment's *philosophes* and their followers shared a common belief that things and Man could change and should change. The era was impertinent and inquisitive, eager for knowledge, burning with curiosity, « curieux à la folie, que la curiosité dévore » [WALD LASOWSKI 44].

Experiencing a crisis of values, a crisis affecting society itself and the values on which it was founded, that era broke with past traditions and beliefs, everything previously set in tradition was questioned and replaced by new concepts. For Dorinda Outram, "Enlightenment was a desire for human affairs to be guided by rationality rather than by faith, superstition, or revelation; a belief in the power of human reason to change society and liberate the individual from the restraints of custom or arbitrary authority; all backed up by a world view increasingly validated by science rather than by religion or tradition" [3].

The Enlightenment imperative "*Aude*" promotes philosophical confidence and daring, exhorting man to think for himself. Being enlightened amounts to changing one's way of thinking, in order to judge and no longer prejudge. Such is the legacy that we should treasure: the Enlightenment represents thought in motion and even though its spirit might have been abused, it is nevertheless a fact that we do need such energy, such energetic, dynamic thinking. The Enlightenment, *Aufklärung*, is a thinking process, a never-ending cultural process. It is a reminder to ourselves that we are expected to grow continually and move forward discovering new truth and meaning in the world around us. Twenty-four centuries after Socrates, two centuries and a half after Kant, we badly need to re-learn the lesson.

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