"Can We Write a Global History of the Enlightenment?"

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Can we write a global history of the Enlightenment? Historians are currently writing a global history of almost everything – and as a result, we see a proliferation of global histories of cotton and tea, opium and cod, but also of constitutions and war, statehood and religion. But Enlightenment? After all, as complex as the Enlightenment may have been, the story of its worldwide diffusion seems rather simple and straightforward: The Enlightenment was invented in Europe, and then spread around the world. Period.

The conventional story goes like this: The Renaissance, humanism, and the Reformation lay the foundations for the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. The Enlightenment was thus the original product of European culture, deeply embedded in the traditions of the Occident – as were the concepts of individuality, human rights, and rationalization. Over the course of the nineteenth century, so received wisdom has it, these ingredients of the modern were then exported to the rest of the world. “We, and all the world of the twentieth century,” as historian William McNeill triumphantly formulated in his *Rise of the West*, “are peculiarly the creatures and heirs of a handful of geniuses of early modern Europe.” This narrative is still very much present. This diffusionist view has led to discussions such as, Why did the emancipation of religious authority not develop outside the West. “The Enlightenment was a European phenomenon,” as Jürgen Osterhammel summarizes the prevalent view. “[It] had multifaceted effects around the world but originated only in Europe.”

But such an interpretation is no longer tenable. Recent scholarship has done much to challenge the Eurocentric account of the “birth of the modern world.” In particular, it has focused on the many different ways in which Enlightenment ideas were used, appropriated, changed, modified, and rearticulated around the world. Our attention has turned away from moments of first enunciation, of invention, and toward application. Why focus on use and not on origins? First, because historically, forms of use are more important than fetishizing the
moments in which ideas were first conceived. Little did it matter, for example, that gunpowder was originally invented in China – at least not in 1839, when it was put to use by British gunboats to destroy the fleet and fortifications in the port city of Canton, and dramatically weaken the Qing dynasty in the First Opium War.

Second, if we want to understand why particular ideas travel around the world, it is important to look closely at the conditions under which they are taken over. Again, it is use (not origins) that lets ideas (or goods) go viral, and to globalize. The traditional view had it that globalization was inherent in the things/ideas themselves. To be sure, not all things – the spread of Coca Cola, for example, was not the necessary result of an inherently superior drink, but the result of all kinds of forces (it is unlikely, for example, that it would have fared equally well had it been produced in Albania, and not in the United States). But surely, one might think, the Enlightenment was different: the discourse of eighteenth-century Europe relied on a language of universal claims – and for this very reason, as the standard interpretation goes, held worldwide validity. But was that really the case? Or was the Enlightenment not closer in kind to Coca Cola, at least as far as its spread was concerned? Surely, to make its claims valid in practice, and indeed to convince – and frequently force – people around the world to accept its claims, more was needed than the allegedly inherent power of reason. This implementation was the work of many different actors, operating under conditions of geopolitics and the uneven distribution of power, fed by high hopes and utopian promises, by threats and violence.

And third, a focus on origins would not allow us to see what changed through repeated use. As the Enlightenment was translated, appropriated, and reproduced, it was gradually transformed into something else. Or rather, it turned into something else. Historians have long given short shrift to such changes and alterations. They have called them vulgarizations, misunderstandings, dilutions, and so forth. But that misses the point – the
point that our understanding of Enlightenment even today owes much more than we think to this longer and continuous history, and to the changes that went with it.

So what could such a longer history of the Enlightenment, with an emphasis on use not origins, look like? First, we would have to look at Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, and at the way in which this was already an Atlantic debate, occasionally reaching beyond the Atlantic world. In some ways, one could say that the philosophical and political vocabulary of the Enlightenment was made globally. Engagement with Enlightenment propositions reached well beyond Western Europe. German discussions were particularly influential in Struensee’s Denmark, and in the Greek diaspora. In Russia, Tsar Catherine refashioned herself as “enlightened monarch,” intent to correct the “irrational” course of history. She promoted the sciences and the arts, attracted large numbers of cultural celebrities to her court and offered Diderot the chance to complete his encyclopedia in Russia when it was to be prohibited in France. “What astonishing times we live in!” exclaimed Voltaire; “France persecutes philosophy and the Scythians offer it their protection.“ But when Diderot came to Saint Petersburg for five months in 1773, he felt disappointed by his sponsor, who made no gesture toward realizing the political and social transformations that she herself had earlier called for. After the revolution in France, the window of opportunity for reforms in Russia had closed for good, and radical thinkers such as Radishchev and Novikov were imprisoned or sent to Siberia into exile.

From the beginning, discussions on Enlightenment were conducted within an Atlantic space, and the circulation of concepts and ideas followed a variety of trajectories. The American Declaration of Independence in 1776 was not only permeated with references to political texts of European origin, but was in itself a document of global reach, “an instrument, pregnant with our own and the fate of the world,” as Thomas Jefferson contemplated in retrospect. Throughout the following century, a wave of declarations of
independence referred to the United States as their model. The declaration of Philadelphia expressed in terms of political philosophy what the planters in Virginia and the merchants in New England had demanded in their own way when patriots dumped Chinese tea, brought over by ships of the East India Company according to the regulations of the Parliament in Westminster, into Boston harbor. The history of political ideas was thus supported and reinforced by a history of circulation of foods, of colonial orders and political experiments, of animals and botanical specimen, of emotions and sentiments--and of the lightning rod, invented by Benjamin Franklin 1752 and first subjected to a practical test a few years later in Philadelphia. The taming of light – in Christian cosmology lightning had been understood as punishment or prophecy by God – had wide repercussions: in the learned societies in Paris and London, in Western discussions about the authority of religion and nature, and on the roofs of beacons and town halls across the world. Benjamin Franklin himself emerged as a veritable figure of light, and his autobiography--for readers in Calcutta, Izmir, and Tokyo no less than in Europe--turned into one of the paradigmatic texts of the Enlightenment.

In Latin America, too, the works of European philosophers and social theorists arrived more or less synchronously. In cultural centers such as Lima or Bogotá, small groups of Creole “Enlighteners” (ilustrados) engaged with the ideas of European philosophers, but also mined the earlier works of indigenous elites in their quest to challenge crucial assumptions of European Enlightenment rationality, and the Eurocentrism of European theories about Latin America. They were part of intellectual networks within the Spanish colonial empire, but also had connections to Europe. Antonio Narino in Santafé de Bogotá, for example, translated the French Declaration of the Rights of Man as early as 1793 and produced the text on his own printing press. Francisco Miranda from Caracas got to know the works of the French philosophes during his military service in Spain, met George Washington and Thomas Paine in the United States, entered the French revolutionary army in 1792, and then lived in
England for a few years before returning to Latin America during the wars of independence. Incorporating intellectual networks such as these, the discussions in the various cultural centers of the South American continent developed in their own specific ways.

It is important to recognize that the widespread engagement with terms and ideas did not leave these ideas unaffected. Actors in different situations and moments mobilized concepts for their own concerns – sometimes with an impact that went beyond their local effects. The most powerful example of this kind of redefinition was the revolution in Haiti (Saint-Domingue) in 1791, merely two years after the fall of the Bastille. The most radical revolution of the Age of Revolution had many causes, chief among them structural conflicts in a slaveholder society and the transformations of the Atlantic economy. At the same time, the French Revolution and the symbolic power of the Declaration of the Rights of Man in 1789 were important reference points. The spokespersons of the rebellious slaves, and also the gens de couleur, frequently formulated their claims in the language of republican rights. As important as the transfer of ideas was, the rebellion was not just the distant and peripheral effect of the French Revolution, but had world-historical significance of its own. Most importantly, it reframed the parameters of the debate on human rights, as – the long history of enlightened critique of slavery notwithstanding – the Assemblée National in Paris had explicitly denied the extension of civil rights to slaves. The eventual transfer of the rights of man to the slave population challenged the assumptions of even the most radical writers of the Enlightenment. The notion of “humanité,” as it was employed in metropolitan France, had been based on a largely abstract concern with natural rights; only its refashioning in the Caribbean turned the appeal to “humanity” into the claim with universal reach as we know it today. The universalization of the rights of man – nothing less was at stake – was thus the result of the Enlightenment’s spread across the Atlantic.
The late eighteenth-century reference to Enlightenment ideas was not confined to the Atlantic world. European expansion set in motion a confrontation with the validity claims of Enlightenment propositions elsewhere as well. This was the case in Egypt, where Napoleon’s expedition served as a trigger for social transformations that harked back to inner-Islamic reform debates, but now were also legitimized by referring to the authority of the Enlightenment. In India, it was Tipu Sultan, the ruler of Mysore and arch-enemy of the British, who fashioned himself as an enlightened monarch: he was one of the founding members of the (French) Jacobin club in Seringapatam, had planted a liberty tree, and asked to be addressed as Tipu Citoyen.

If we move into the nineteenth century, we encounter the Enlightenment in places where it had not reached before, mainly in Asia. Historians for a long time have not taken these developments seriously, and have essentially closed the books on the Enlightenment in the late 1700s. Everything that came after was seen as derivative, as a copy, as a mere afterthought. Recent scholarship has shown, however, that such a view is problematic and deficient. Such a chronology is Eurocentric as it erases the vibrant and heated contestations of “Enlightenment” in the rest of the world. Crucially, these debates should not be seen as mere after-effects of a foundational moment. Instead, the series of reformulations of Enlightenment standards were part of its continuous history.

When, and where, did Enlightenment emerge as a crucial dimension of political debate? It is interesting to note that engagement with Enlightenment texts and ideas typically occurred in moments of local political crisis, and more specifically in moments in which societies were confronted with European imperialism and with the challenges of being integrated into the world economy. In such moments of domestic and external urgency, many reformers began to turn to Enlightenment concepts to stake out their claims. Let’s have a brief look at where, when, and how this happened.
In parts of India, in the context of the self-styled “Bengal Renaissance,” tenets of the post-Enlightenment reform era were discussed as early as the 1820s. Rammohan Roy (1772–1833), the most influential actor of a Bengali engagement with the West, fused different traditions in his project of social reform that made him a proponent of a “religion of reason,” as Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling called him. His quest for a modernization of Indian society drew from European philosophy and social theory. Most spectacular was his support of the colonial government and its prohibition of widow burning (sati), which he justified with reference to the “civilized nations on the surface of the globe.” In particular, his program of a democratization of knowledge met the ire of the traditionalists: against the customary privilege to read the classical texts passed on within a few Brahmin castes, Roy pleaded for translations and equal access for everyone. The Brahmins, he argued, had pulled the “dark curtain of the Sungscret language” over the country’s traditions.

In Egypt, Rifa al-Tahtawi was nominated the head of the translation bureau (Tercüme Odası) in 1841 and oversaw the publication of hundreds of European works in the Arabic language. In the Ottoman Empire more generally, reference to the tenets of the Enlightenment emerged as important elements of political discourse in the 1830s. From midcentury onward, Young Ottomans such as Namik Kemal legitimized their cause by reference to the works of Locke, Rousseau, and Montesquieu, which began to be translated by midcentury. Consequently, Kemal was named the “Voltaire […] of this nation” by Ottoman intellectual and journalist Ebüzziya Revfik in 1903. However, Kemal drew on a variety of intellectual resources in his quest for social and political reform. His version of Enlightenment was not a poor copy of French debates in the eighteenth century, but an original position responding to the exigencies of Ottoman society in the late nineteenth century.
As European imperialism reached East Asia only in the latter half of the nineteenth century, engagement with the Enlightenment occurred much later there. In the 1870s, the Japanese journal *Meiroku zasshi* introduced many crucial new terms such as *rights*, *freedom*, and *economy* to a larger public, while Fukuzawa Yukichi’s bestselling “Conditions in the West” discussed Western institutions, customs, and material culture. In Qing China, Yen Fu emerged as the most prominent translator – of works by Thomas Huxley, Adam Smith, Herbert Spencer, Montesquieu, and others – since the 1890s. In Korea, likewise, the movement for “Civilization and Enlightenment” (*munmyōng kaehwa*) emerged in the 1890s.

This longer history was part and parcel of a global history of Enlightenments. This was so particularly because the many reformulations and modifications changed and transformed what Enlightenment came to mean. True, “Enlightenment” in 1900 no longer was identical to what it had meant a century earlier. In the eighteenth century, the focus was primarily on individual consciousness liberated from religious fetters and state oppression. A century later, Enlightenment typically referred to collective and national projects of technical and material improvement. But such changes cannot be written off as dilutions and misunderstandings once the Enlightenment had lefts its European home. In fact, in Europe, too, Enlightenment gradually took on a new meaning in the nineteenth century. For example, the culture wars that pitted liberal states against the churches were represented as a “great battle” between the light of the Enlightenment and the darkness of the papal Middle Ages. And the European project of imperialism and colonization was framed entirely in a vocabulary of Enlightenment. In the guise of the civilizing mission rhetoric and international law, this newly understood Enlightenment – as a collective category, referring to material progress – was not much different from the Enlightenment as it was discussed in Japan, China, and Korea.
But this transformation was even more pronounced outside of Europe. The rhetoric of “Civilization and Enlightenment,” the potent slogan in Japan, Korea, and China, was widely employed in order to come to terms with the challenges of globality. The notion always encompassed a positioning in the world, such as in Fukuzawa Yukichi’s influential triptych of barbarism, semi-Enlightenment, and civilization. In many societies, the prevalent view held that Enlightenment was not specifically European, but a universal standard. Western societies may well appear superior at present, but that had not always been the case, nor would it be. “Europe which in terms of enlightenment had lagged behind us was now ahead of us,” the Korean newspaper *Hwangsŏng sinmun* declared in 1899.

This change in content was an effect of the longer, and global, career of the Enlightenment. Its ideas and tenets continuously changed as they were invoked by actors who used them, sometimes only strategically, to make their claims. They fused them with other strands of thought and thus created new and original formulations. And as a consequence of their global circulation, Europe was no longer the sole point of origin of Enlightenment ideas. From the 1890s onward, and after military victory over Russia in 1905 in particular, Japan emerged as the country that had most successfully combined Enlightenment projects with a sense of national culture. From then on, reformers in Egypt and Istanbul, Seoul and Bangkok increasingly flocked to Tokyo to see modernity with their own eyes, and to find a shortcut to Enlightenment.

**Further Reading:**