

through the application of a reason tempered by experience and experiment, would eliminate prejudice, ignorance, superstition, and intolerance. At the same time it would be hard to understand the work of Marx, particularly in what is called his Young Hegelian period up to about 1850 (and one so important for certain central concepts of sociology, such as alienation and ideology), without drawing a connection between his version of critical rationalism and that of the Enlightenment *philosophes*, for the latter informs and underpins his early writings too. We shall not examine Marx's work in this chapter, but it is important to bear in mind that many of the ideas that he developed as a young student and philosopher in Germany prior to 1845 were directly influenced by the central ideas of the Enlightenment.

Before looking at the content and context of the key ideas of the Enlightenment, let us set them out in a concise form here. They make up what sociologists call a 'paradigm', a set of interconnected ideas, values, principles, and facts which provide both an image of the natural and social world, and a way of thinking about it. The 'paradigm' of the Enlightenment — its 'philosophy' and approach to key questions — is a combination of a number of ideas, bound together in a tight cluster. It includes some elements which may even appear to be inconsistent — probably because, like many intellectual movements, it united people whose ideas had many threads in common but differed on questions of detail. As a minimum, however, all the *philosophes* would have agreed on the following list:

- ① *Reason* — the *philosophes* stressed the primacy of reason and rationality as ways of organizing knowledge, tempered by experience and experiment. In this they took over the 'rationalist' concept of reason as the process of rational thought, based upon clear, innate ideas independent of experience, which can be demonstrated to any thinking person, and which had been set out by Descartes and Pascal in the seventeenth century. However, the *philosophes* allied their version of rationalism with empiricism.
- ② *Empiricism* — the idea that all thought and knowledge about the natural and social world is based upon empirical facts, things that all human beings can apprehend through their sense organs.
- ③ *Science* — the notion that scientific knowledge, based upon the experimental method as developed in the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, was the key to expanding all human knowledge.
- ④ *Universalism* — the concept that reason and science could be applied to any and every situation, and that their principles were the same in every situation. Science in particular produces general laws which govern the entire universe, without exception.
- ⑤ *Progress* — the idea that the natural and social condition of human beings could be improved, by the application of science and reason, and would result in an ever-increasing level of happiness and well-being.

- 6 *Individualism* — the concept that the individual is the starting point for all knowledge and action, and that individual reason cannot be subjected to a higher authority. Society is thus the sum or product of the thought and action of a large number of individuals.
- 7 *Toleration* — the notion that all human beings are essentially the same, despite their religious or moral convictions, and that the beliefs of other races or civilizations are not inherently inferior to those of European Christianity.
- 8 *Freedom* — an opposition to feudal and traditional constraints on beliefs, trade, communication, social interaction, sexuality, and ownership of property (although as we shall see the extension of freedom to women and the lower classes was problematic for the *philosophes*).
- 9 *Uniformity of human nature* — the belief that the principal characteristics of human nature were always and everywhere the same.
- 10 *Secularism* — an ethic most frequently seen in the form of virulent anti-clericalism. The *philosophes*' opposition to traditional religious authority stressed the need for secular knowledge free of religious orthodoxies.

It would be possible to add other ideas to this list or to discuss the relative importance of each. However, the above list provides a good starting point for understanding this complex movement, and for making connections between its characteristic concerns and the emergence of sociology. Each of these central ideas weaves its way through the account that follows, and all form part of the new social sciences which emerged in the nineteenth century.

2 WHAT WAS THE ENLIGHTENMENT?

A simple answer to this question would separate out at least eight meanings of the Enlightenment: ✓

- 1 A characteristic bundle of ideas (as in the list at the end of Section 1).
- 2 An intellectual movement.
- 3 A communicating group or network of intellectuals.
- 4 A set of institutional centres where intellectuals clustered — Paris, Edinburgh, Glasgow, London, etc.
- 5 A publishing industry, and an audience for its output. ✓
- 6 An intellectual fashion. ✓
- 7 A belief-system, world-view, or *Zeitgeist* (spirit of the age). ✓
- 8 A history and a geography. ✓

All of these are overlapping aspects of the same general phenomenon, and they remind us that it is ultimately futile to try to pin down a single definitive group, set of ideas, or cluster of outcomes and consequences, which can serve as *the* Enlightenment. There were many aspects to the Enlightenment, and many *philosophes*, so what you will find here is an attempt to map out some broad outlines, to set some central ideas in their context, and to indicate some important consequences.

In its simplest sense the Enlightenment was the creation of a new framework of ideas about man, society and nature, which challenged existing conceptions rooted in a traditional world-view, dominated by Christianity. The key domain in which Enlightenment intellectuals challenged the clergy, who were the main group involved in supporting existing conceptions of the world, concerned the traditional view of nature, man and society which was sustained by the Church's authority and its monopoly over the information media of the time.



A traditional world-view

These new ideas were accompanied by and influenced in their turn many cultural innovations in writing, printing, painting, music, sculpture, architecture and gardening, as well as the other arts. Technological innovations in agriculture and manufactures, as well as in ways of making war, also frame the social theories of the Enlightenment. We have no space to explore such matters here, except to point out that the whole idea of a professionalized discipline based

on any of these intellectual or cultural pursuits was only slowly emerging, and that as a consequence an educated man or woman of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment saw him or herself as able to take up any or all of them which caught his or her interest. The notion that Enlightenment knowledge could be strictly compartmentalized into bounded domains, each the province of certificated 'experts', would have been completely foreign to Enlightenment thinkers. The 'universalism' which thus characterized the emergence of these ideas and their cultural counterparts assumed that any educated person could in principle know everything. This was in fact a mistaken belief. Paradoxically, the Enlightenment heralded the very process — the creation of specialized disciplines presided over by certificated experts — which appears to negate its aim of universalized human knowledge. Such a 'closing-off' of knowledge by disciplinary boundaries occurred earlier than anywhere else in the natural sciences, those models of enlightened knowledge so beloved of the philosophes. The main reason for this was that science produced specialist languages and terminologies, and relied in particular upon an increasingly complex mathematical language, inaccessible to even the enlightened gentleman-philosophe. Denis Diderot (1713–84), a key figure in the movement, noted perceptively in 1756 that the mathematical language of Newton's *Principia Mathematica* is 'the veil' which scientists 'are pleased to draw between the people and nature' (quoted in Gay, 1973b, p.158).

However much they might have wanted to extend the benefits of enlightened knowledge, the *philosophes* helped the process by which secular intellectual life became the province of a socially and economically defined group. They were the first people in western society outside of the Church to make a living (or more properly a vocation) out of knowledge and writing. As Roy Porter has put it, 'the Enlightenment was the era which saw the emergence of a secular intelligentsia large enough and powerful enough for the first time to challenge the clergy' (Porter, 1990, p.73).

In the next section, I want to locate the Enlightenment in its social, historical, and geographical context.

2.1 THE SOCIAL, HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

When we use the term 'the Enlightenment' it is generally accepted that we refer to a period in European intellectual history which spans the time from roughly the first quarter to the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Geographically centred in France, but with important outposts in most of the major European states, 'the Enlightenment' is composed of the ideas and writings of a fairly heterogeneous group, who are often called by their French name *philosophes*. It does not exactly correspond to our modern 'philosopher', and is perhaps best translated as 'a man of letters who is also a freethinker.' The *philosophes* saw themselves as cosmopolitans, citizens of an enlightened intellectual world who valued

the interest of mankind above that of country or clan. As the French *philosophe* Diderot wrote to Hume in 1768: 'My dear David, you belong to all nations, and you'll never ask an unhappy man for his birth-certificate. I flatter myself that I am, like you, citizen of the great city of the world' (quoted in Gay, 1973a, p.13). The historian Edward Gibbon (1737–94) stressed the strongly European or 'Euro-centric' nature of this universalistic cosmopolitanism: 'it is the duty of a patriot to prefer and promote the exclusive interest and glory of his native country; but a philosopher may be permitted to enlarge his views, and to consider Europe as a great republic, whose various inhabitants have attained almost the same level of politeness and cultivation' (quoted in Gay, 1973a, p.13). Gibbon even composed some of his writings in French, because he felt that the ideas with which he wanted to work were better expressed in that language than in his own.

The Enlightenment was the work of three overlapping and closely linked generations of *philosophes*. The first, typified by Voltaire (1694–1778) and Charles de Secondat, known as Montesquieu (1689–1755),¹⁶ were born in the last quarter of the seventeenth century: their ideas were strongly influenced by the writings of the English political philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) and the scientist Isaac Newton (1642–1727), whose work was fresh and controversial whilst both *philosophes* were still young men. The second generation includes men like David Hume (1711–76), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), Denis Diderot (1713–84), and Jean d'Alembert (1717–83), who combined the fashionable anti-clericalism and the interest in scientific method of their predecessors into what Gay calls 'a coherent modern view of the world'. The third generation is represented by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Adam Smith (1723–90), Anne Robert Turgot (1727–81), the Marquis de Condorcet (1743–94), and Adam Ferguson (1723–1816), and its achievement is the further development of the Enlightenment world-view into a series of more specialized proto-disciplines: epistemology, economics, sociology, political economy, legal reform. It is to Kant that we owe the slogan of the Enlightenment — *sapere aude* ('dare to know') — which sums up its essentially secular intellectual character.

Of course there is a danger in applying the term 'the Enlightenment' too loosely or broadly, to the whole of intellectual life in eighteenth-century Europe, as if the movement was one which touched every society and every intellectual élite of this period equally. As Roy Porter emphasizes in an excellent short study of recent work on the Enlightenment, the Enlightenment is an amorphous, hard-to-pin-down and constantly shifting entity (Porter, 1990). It is commonplace for the whole period to be referred to as an 'Age of Enlightenment', a term which implies a general process of society awakening from the dark slumbers of superstition and ignorance, and a notion certainly encouraged by the philosophes themselves, although it is one which perhaps poses more questions than it resolves. Kant wrote an essay 'Was ist Aufklärung?' (What is Enlightenment?), which actually says 'if someone says "are we living in an enlightened age today?" the answer would be, "No: but ...

we are living in an Age of Enlightenment”'. The French *philosophes* referred to their time as '*le siècle des lumières*' (the century of the enlightened), and both Scottish and English writers of the time talked about 'Enlightened' thinking.

Certainly the metaphor of the 'light of reason', shining brightly into all the dark recesses of ignorance and superstition, was a powerful one at the time: but did the process of Enlightenment always and everywhere have the same meaning? One recent historical study of Europe in the eighteenth century has suggested that the Enlightenment is more 'a tendency towards critical inquiry and the application of reason' than a coherent intellectual movement (Black, 1990, p.208).

In fact, if we look at such indicators as the production and consumption of books and journals, the Enlightenment was a largely French and British (or more properly Scottish) intellectual vogue, although one whose fashionable ripples extended out to Germany, Italy, the Habsburg Empire, Russia, the Low Countries and the Americas. But its centre was very clearly Paris, and it emerged in the France of Louis XV (1710–74), during the first quarter of the eighteenth century.

By the last quarter of the eighteenth century, Enlightenment ideas were close to having become a sort of new intellectual orthodoxy amongst the cultivated élites of Europe. This orthodoxy was also starting to give way to an emergent 'pre-Romanticism' which placed greater emphasis on sentiment and feeling, as opposed to reason and scepticism. However, the spirit of enlightened and critical rationalism was quite an influential factor in the increasing disquiet about how *ancien régime* France was being run, which began to set in after about 1770 (Doyle, 1989, p.58). It helped to encourage a mood of impending disaster which led inexorably towards the French Revolution of 1789, a topic to which we shall return in Section 5. If we need to find a historical end to the Enlightenment, it could be said to be the French Revolution — but even that is a controversial notion.

Although the Enlightenment was in reality a sort of intellectual fashion which took hold of the minds of intellectuals throughout Europe, rather than a consciously conceived project with any institutionalized form, there is one classic example of a cooperative endeavour among the *philosophes*: the great publishing enterprise called the *Encyclopédie*.

2.2 THE *ENCYCLOPÉDIE*

In order to explain the influence of this massive publication, it is worth reminding ourselves that by the mid-eighteenth century French was the language of all of educated Europe, except for England and Spain (and even in those two countries any self-respecting member of the educated élite would have had a good knowledge of the language). As a Viennese countess put it, '... in those days the greater part of high society in Vienna would say: I speak French like Diderot, and German ... like my nurse' (Doyle, 1989, p.58).