

### Chapter 3 – The Enlightenment

Imagine you are working in a Soviet factory in the 1930's. Suddenly the workers stop working and they start to sing a hymn. Not to God but to 'electricity'. They sing as follows:

Electricity can do anything. It can dispel darkness  
and gloom. One push of a button and clickety-click  
out comes a new man. <sup>1</sup>

What would be your response? Now almost all of us use electricity. I do, particularly when I'm making toast, but singing to it sounds odd. Or does it? The famous Russian revolutionary Trotsky wrote that "Such is the power of science, that the average human-being will become an Aristotle, a Goethe, a Marx. And beyond this new peaks will rise."<sup>2</sup> How exactly can electricity and science make people perfect? To understand this bizarre phenomenon we need to understand the 18<sup>th</sup> century movement known as the Enlightenment.

What was it like to live in pre-revolutionary France? In many ways French society resembled the Hindu caste system of present day India. At the very top of the hierarchy were the cardinals and bishops of the Roman Catholic Church. During the *ancien regime* the church was unrivalled in terms of its social, economic and spiritual power. The first order, or estate, of the realm owned nearly 10 per cent of all land in France and income from land, property and tithes totalled over 150,000,000 livres a year. At the same time aristocratic cardinals and bishops paid almost no tax and enjoyed considerable privileges that boosted their status and lavish living. We should not be surprised to learn that many people envied this pecuniary advantage.

The second caste or estate, was comprised of the nobility. French aristocrats enjoyed extensive rights and benefits. The legal privileges of the nobility included immunity from severe punishment and exemption from many forms of taxation. Other aristocratic perks included the sole right to carry a sword, occupy a special pew in church, and extensive hunting rights. Only aristocrats could become high-ranking officers in the army; indeed many aristocrats believed that they were members of a military caste. French nobles were legally entitled to receive tithes from the hard-pressed peasants.

Whereas the first two castes, the clergy and the nobility, made up less than half a million people between them, the third estate – the common people – represented the other 25 or so million inhabitants of France. This third caste enjoyed no privileges and advantages at all. They were forced to provide both cash and hard labour for the first and second castes. Their lives were not comfortable and leisure-focused.

The prevalent worldview of pre-revolutionary France can be referred to as 'Cosmic Toryism'. Each person has been assigned their station in life and justice requires that each person should remain faithful to their 'calling'. Peasants must knuckle down and embrace a life of unremitting toil and hardship. Aristocrats must abandon themselves

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from *Pandora's Box* BBC 2, 29<sup>th</sup> July 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

to idle luxury and occasional military activity. Priests must administer the sacraments and provide solace for immortal souls. The Neoplatonic philosopher, Plotinus (AD 204-70), communicated the very essence of Cosmic Toryism when he wrote:

Thus, every man has his place, a place that fits the good man, a place that fits the bad.... As the actors of our stages get their masks and their costume, robes of state or rags, so a soul is allotted its fortunes, and not at haphazard but always under a Reason...All is just and good in the universe in which every actor is set in his own quite appropriate place.<sup>3</sup>

From a pagan perspective the peasant has the onerous burdens of hard labour and thin gruel because she or he has been allotted this humble rung on the ladder. The pagan, platonic tradition has always maintained that karma 'maketh the man'. When Plotinus wrote that everything happens 'under a Reason' we should be very clear as to what he meant. Consider this passage in the *Enneads*:

It is not an accident that makes a man a slave; no one is a prisoner by chance; every bodily outrage has its due cause. The man once did what he now suffers. A man that murders his mother will become a woman and be murdered by a son; a man that wrongs a woman will become a woman, to be wronged.<sup>4</sup>

Why do peasants lead lives of intense drudgery, misery and abject poverty? Cosmic Toryism has a very simple answer. They deserve it! For that is their station. Why do aristocrats enjoy privileges and lives of ease and comfort? They deserve it! For that is their station. Unfortunately the Roman Catholic Church of this period reinforced many of these prejudices; priests and clergy often proclaimed Cosmic Toryism from their pulpits. At the end of the day the teaching of Jesus can be boiled down to the simple mantra. "Know your station and keep to your station."

The sixty to seventy years preceding the French Revolution are generally known as the period of the Enlightenment. The light of human reason was beginning to penetrate the darkest corners of Europe. This was the time when men and women became aware of their scientific and technological advances; a time when enlightened folk longed to break the shackles that enslaved humanity in ignorance, superstition and tradition.

Enlightenment thinkers believed passionately in the perfectibility of the human-being. Christians and Jews believe that people are fallen and corrupted by sin. In the dawn of human history men and women broke covenant with God and this rebellion against the creator ushered in the litany of wicked and heinous deeds that have befouled the planet. In the biblical perspective humans are not able to perfect themselves. They are not autonomous and innately good. We could say that the Enlightenment embraced Pico's contention that man is a miracle with considerable glee and gusto! As a miracle, man can furnish his own salvation. There is absolutely no need for God's help or grace.

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<sup>3</sup> Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen Mackenna (London: Penguin Books, 1991) p.154-155.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.148.

The Marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794), past chairman of the French Legislative Assembly, wrote his famous *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* in which he lucidly articulated the idea of human perfectibility as the seal on Enlightenment faith. It will be instructive to outline the Marquis' philosophical perspective.

Condorcet begins with a typically Renaissance setting. Humans are engaged in a titanic struggle with nature. We could say that men and women are immersed in a massive punch-up with the natural elements. Nature attacks people with storms, icy roads, poisonous snakes and threadbare harvests. Simple, primitive people are terrified by nature's caprices. They hide in caves and whisper rude words at 'nature'. At this stage of the struggle humans are naked and defenceless. A betting person would place a firm bet on 'nature' to win the fight.

Many of us are familiar with a typical Arnold Schwarzenegger film. At the beginning of the movie Arnold is happy and relaxed. He is enjoying life. And then somebody upsets Arnold. For example criminals might kidnap his daughter or threaten to kill him. Arnold is no longer happy. Arnold is upset. Arnold begins to fight back against the perpetrators of vile and cowardly deeds. There is always the classic scene in the film where Arnold 'tools up'. This technical term refers to that moment when Arnold acquires vast numbers of grenades, Uzi sub-machine guns, rocket launchers and Kalashnikov rifles. Before 'tooling up' Arnold is vulnerable and defenceless. After 'tooling up' Arnold has become a 'pocket battleship'.

For Condorcet 'critical reason' is the infallible guide to both the conquest of nature and a golden future. Science and Technology will transform weak, timid humans into dynamic superheroes. Without science and technology we are defeated time and again by the enemy – 'nature'. Tooled up with powerful reason and technology, our formidable opponent 'nature' becomes submissive and compliant. Here is how another Enlightenment thinker, Sebastian Mercier, expressed the same idea:

Where can the perfectibility of man stop, armed with geometry and the mechanical arts and chemistry? <sup>5</sup>

The movement of future progress described by Condorcet can be compared to the advance of the whole of humanity on an open plain. In the front rank, ahead of the ignorant masses, the scientific elite are dashing forward at a speed that is continually increasing. The main sections of humanity lag behind because they have been deceived by idle aristocrats and a decadent clergy. But the forward thrust of the great scientists and engineers is of such Herculean power that it pulls the whole of mankind along with it. And as they advance in time, women and men become ever healthier, happier, more acute in their thinking, more equal in wealth and opportunity, more humane and loving in their moral behaviour.

For Condorcet, critical reason, is the means by which man finds salvation! At the beginning of the battle humans are unenlightened, filled with every conceivable superstition. They are defenceless and vulnerable. There are two formidable enemies – nature and religion. At the end of the struggle both nature and religion have been

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<sup>5</sup> Cited by Goudzwaard *Capitalism and Progress* (Toronto: Wedge, 1978) p.49.

decisively defeated. Nature surrenders all her secrets and becomes friendly and cooperative. Purveyors of superstition and religion have vanished. It is important to understand that leading Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire, Diderot and Condorcet were hostile to the Christian religion. They were profoundly secular thinkers in the sense that humans should absorb themselves completely in this age.

Enlightenment men and women were profoundly optimistic about the future. A perfect world was just around the corner. Joseph Priestley (1733-1804), English economist and philosopher wrote that:

Whatever was the beginning of this world, the end will be glorious and paradisaical, beyond what our imaginations can now conceive.....Nature will be more at our command; men will make their situation in this world abundantly more easy and comfortable. <sup>6</sup>

The Enlightenment logic is simple. If humans are innately good and if progress can create the perfect human-being, then utopia is no longer a fanciful dream. Unleash the powerful forces of science and technology and a golden future beckons. Streets will be paved with gold and good-humoured citizens will share their last loaf of bread with hungry strangers. Cat burglars will retire from their thieving and transmogrify into sensitive and loving citizens. Wealthy merchants will spontaneously share their loot with tramps and gypsies. Hardcore criminals like Jimmy 'The Weasel' Fratianno and Vincent 'The Chin' Gigante will abandon vice and devote their lives to befriending and helping homeless teenagers. William Godwin (1756-1836), father of anarchism, described the golden future in the following terms:

There will be no war, no crimes, no administration of justice, as it is called, and no government. Besides this, there will be neither disease, anguish, melancholy, nor resentment. Every man will seek, with ineffable ardour, the good of all. Mind will be active and eager, and yet never disappointed. <sup>7</sup>

For Godwin, faith in human goodness is so radical and all-encompassing that political institutions will vanish. Judges, police officers, and politicians will seek alternative modes of employment as human virtue bursts into its full maturity.

Stoic thinking had a considerable impact upon 18<sup>th</sup> century conceptions of paradise. The Stoic worldview can be summarised in the following terms. In the beginning there was a golden age which lasted at least 36,000 years. This golden age was characterised by spontaneous virtue and communal property. Selfishness did not exist. Preoccupation with property and rights was completely absent. Each person enjoyed their work and nobody exploited their neighbour. Cosmic Tories would have felt extremely ill-at-ease in this cooperative milieu! Hierarchy and caste were unknown. And then something went badly wrong!

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<sup>6</sup> Cited by Carl Lotus Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932) p.145.

<sup>7</sup> William Godwin, *Enquiry concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*, 3 vols. (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1946), vol. 2, p.528.

Stoics maintained that this golden age came to an abrupt end because some people infringed the institution of communal property. Greedy individuals erected fences and put up signs which declared – “Get off my land.” This introduction of private property unleashed the spirit of Cosmic Toryism and led to the emergence of rigid castes and classes. The winners became aristocrats and the losers became peasants. Peasants lost their rights to enjoy the fruits of their honest toil. Coercive governments were introduced and their principal task was to protect private property.

Stoics held that it was impossible to return to this golden age. A return to this lost paradise was beyond the powers of men and women. Stoic sages are relentlessly austere individuals who dedicate their energies to the eradication of passions and longings. Grimly they accept their fates, supremely indifferent to pain and suffering. Stoicism is a byword for pessimism and resignation. Stoics are not cheerful and frivolous companions.

What is the significance of all this for our understanding of the Enlightenment? Reverse the Stoic understanding of history and we shift the golden age from the past and project it into the future. Nostalgia is replaced by passionate longing for the future. The golden age image is transformed from dream into blueprint, and shifts from paradise lost to paradise regained. Stoics were men and women who fatalistically accepted their lot. They acquiesced to the harsh realities of life. They allowed the present to crush the future. In contrast Enlightenment thinkers were spellbound by their own astonishing potential. Present sufferings can be abolished as progress marches ever onwards. A poignant illustration of this theme can be clearly seen in the epitaph of the French utopian thinker Saint-Simon (1760-1825). His pupils engraved this pithy summary of all Enlightenment thought on his tombstone: “The golden age does not lie behind us, but ahead of us.”<sup>8</sup>

How have these ideas of perfectibility, innate goodness and future utopia influenced the way ordinary people conduct their lives? Imagine we have a time machine and we go back to Paris in the year 1794. What might we see? During the ‘Great Terror’ nearly 1400 men and women were guillotined by the French Republic. Some women were executed because they had shed tears over the deaths of their brothers and parents. One innkeeper was decapitated because he had allegedly sold bad wine and a general was condemned to death because he had surrounded himself with aristocratic officers. One woman was executed because she was heard saying – “Here is much blood shed for a trifling cause.” Many French people watched the executions of these enemies of the Republic, eating, drinking, laughing and laying bets on the precise order in which each batch of victims would lose their heads.

How can we make sense of these brutal and tragic events? In biblical teaching all of us are capable of performing the foulest deeds. All of us are tainted by sin. Even the most gentle and loving soul can commit outrageous crimes. Embrace the Enlightenment belief in perfectibility and innate goodness and we find a very different story. The vast majority of French citizens are virtuous and intrinsically good but they have been corrupted by a decadent and unenlightened society. Reform the society, eliminate the corruption and the perfect French republic will be born.

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<sup>8</sup> See Frank Manuel, *The New World of Henri Saint-Simon* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963).

Suppose you are living in pre-revolutionary France and your name is Jean-Paul. You come from the third estate and you are a peasant. Gradually you have slipped into decadent and dissolute ways. You drink cheap sherry and cultivate friendships with outlaws and n'er-do-wells. You discover that you have a knack for removing peoples' watches and wallets. You employ an army of ragamuffins to do your bidding. You become violent, vicious and mendacious.

And then the French revolution begins and a new society is born. Instead of a caste system based on tradition and superstition, you are immersed in a new and egalitarian society. A society firmly based in critical reason and the perfectibility of man. Clergy and nobility have been eliminated by the glorious revolution and all the secret admirers of the ancien regime have disappeared into the ether. What happens now? With alarming rapidity society is dechristianized. All the relics of the Christian past are dismantled and new secular themes are introduced. This is the beginning of a golden era and Jean-Paul responds appropriately. Virtue wells up inside him and he begins to discover the true joys of duty and civic responsibility. He marries a lovely girl called Marie and decides to adopt all the ragamuffins he had previously exploited. Now he is living in Marseilles, surrounded by his adoring wife and children. He has become the perfect model citizen. Supremely moral, rational and patriotic. In the passage of time foreign people come to France and are stunned by the utopian French way of life. By 1904 all the nations in the world have become secular republics.

The Dutch economist Bob Goudzwaard has explained the intimate link between Enlightenment thought and the ideology of revolution in his book *Capitalism and Progress*.

How does an ideology of revolution come into being?

(1) Such an ideology starts from the general assumption That man by nature is not evil but good, and that consequently The evil that does exist in the world should not be attributed To man himself but to the social order and its structures which Force him to do wrong. (2) If this is the case, then the following step is readily taken, namely, that the most dangerous Enemies of man and his happiness are those persons who have Identified themselves with the existing social order and who make every effort to preserve it. They are the enemy because in doing this they constitute, consciously or unconsciously, the real obstacle to the future happiness of the whole of mankind. (3) The conclusion of the argument is simple: the enemy of the people must be eliminated, no matter how painful the elimination, since salvation can break through in society only if this barrier is removed. Their shed blood can even be looked upon as a kind of guarantee that the world's redemption will indeed be forthcoming. They are the scapegoats whose lives must be sacrificed so that all humankind can have freedom and life in abundance.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Bob Goudzwaard, *Capitalism and Progress*, (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1979) p.52.

The spirit of the French Revolution has spawned many other revolutions in the two centuries which separate us from that bloody time. We have witnessed the Russian revolution which declared that the death of all capitalists would herald a new and perfect order. Hitler and Goebbels informed us that the death of Jews and other 'undesirables' would guarantee a Germanic paradise (Third Reich). Under the terrifying revolutionary programme of the Cambodian dictator Pol Pot, anyone who was considered to be a member of the educated classes was brutally murdered. In all these scenarios we find a common theme. Reform the society by eliminating the enemy and a golden age will be born.

And all this brings us back to Trotsky and electricity. The Enlightenment spawned the pervasive belief that humans can perfect themselves without God. Perhaps we could even say that humans can create the perfect society by killing the right people!