

Секция «Философия. Культурология. Религиоведение»

From the Enlightenment to Revolution.

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The Enlightenment is a period in the 17th and 18th centuries characterized by dramatic changes in society, philosophy, science and politics. The Enlightenment put an end to the old view of the world based on medieval culture and brought forth a new modern way of seeing the world.

Immanuel Kant defined enlightenment, as “enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity.” Key to understand this definition is to understand what Kant means by immaturity. He says that immaturity “is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! Have courage to use your own understanding!”[1] Basically, the idea is for an individual to think for himself and herself. This can be interpreted as intellectual autonomy.

Furthermore, he explains that the sources of immaturity are laziness and cowardice. This implies that a person can only be enlightened if he or she can have the “freedom to make public use of one’s reason in all matters,”[1] because Kant believes that what is needed for enlightenment is freedom. A person must show that freedom to reason in public in order to be enlightened.

Using Kant’s definition of enlightenment, the question is whether either Rousseau and or Marx are figures from the Enlightenment.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau is without a doubt a key figure of the enlightenment. However, he goes a step further in using Kant’s definition by using reason to explain his position. He believes that the enlightenment does not go far enough, because the focus on arts and sciences do not promote knowledge and understanding. On the contrary, they promote tyranny and inequality and seduced man from his natural and noble state, therefore decreasing his freedom.

In the Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality, Rousseau emphasizes that man is naturally good and has been corrupted by society’s institutions.[2] He diverges from other thinkers of the Enlightenment by emphasizing feelings and the evils of society. Rousseau’s ideas can be seen as counter-enlightenment. Rousseau’s believed that reason was the source of corruption for man because it took the individual away from its natural and noble state. Society’s institutions are holding man back.

One can argue that Karl Marx’s ideas are based on some of Rousseau’s ideas. Marx believed that what one does make he or she feels less like himself or herself. Like Rousseau, Marx makes the point that society’s institutions impoverish the individual. However, unlike Rousseau, who saw society’s institutions as stifling the individual, Marx believed that through a person’s labor he or she becomes more estranged from himself or herself.

This is a belief that the more a worker works, the more he feels outside himself or herself. Work takes away the worker freedom because “he feels at home when he is not working,

and when he is working he does not feel at home.”[3] The individual becomes like an animal instead of being truly human with the capacity to be creative and have foresight. Capitalism brings about oppression and the person needs to free himself /herself from it.

In the Communist Manifesto, Marx argues, “human thought was determined by social and economic forces, particularly those related to the means of production.” The result is class struggle between the ruling elites and the oppressed. Marx concludes that capitalism would be replaced by communism in which the ruling elites would be replaced by the working class through revolution.[4]

Marx takes a step further from enlightenment ideas with his argument for revolution, which is needed for the person to fully realize the ideals of freedom and equality. He is more of a materialist than an idealist and believes that certain economic conditions will give genesis to the working class, resulting ultimately in socialism.

The Enlightenment created an intellectual revolution in Europe; new ideas were put forth and new views of seeing the world. Freedom, liberty and equality took a center stage. Rousseau, living at the height of the Enlightenment became one of its main figures, even when diverging from other thinkers of the time. Marx as a figure of the 19th century expands some of the ideas of the Enlightenment to argue for the emancipation of the working class.

Литература

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