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## **Why It's Absurd To Pretend The Enlightenment Is Responsible For Racism**

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June 6th, 2018

The ongoing argument over whether the Enlightenment is a good thing is hardly a new facet of American political life. Defenses of the Enlightenment have been written over and over in the past several decades, by various defenders of the liberal order and Western civilization.

Here is an excellent essay on the topic from Walter Olson, writing two decades ago in the pages of Reason, that might as well have been written today. Here is a criticism running earlier this year in the *Wall Street Journal* that might well be read as a response to Olson. This is not a new argument, but an old one with a new generation of participants.

More recently in book form, Jonah Goldberg's "Suicide of the West" seeks to defend "The Miracle" brought about by the Enlightenment, and Stephen Pinker's "Enlightenment Now" presents a broader defense of Enlightenment values and the world they helped create. Both authors are concerned about what they see as populist, nationalist, and religious forces pushing back against what they see as a strain of thought overwhelmingly beneficial to humanity.

I recently sparked Twitter reaction by disagreeing with, then mocking, two comments from Slate's Jamelle Bouie in response to a review of Goldberg's book, where he claimed "To put it bluntly: racism is an enlightenment idea, whose foundations were laid by key thinkers like Locke and Kant."

Several smart commentators weighed in on both sides of this debate, including Reason's Cathy Young and Quillette's Claire Lehmann:

To the best of my knowledge:

1. Yes, "scientific racism" (science-clad arguments that the races are biologically distinct & that Africans in particular are inferior) originates w/the Enlightenment, but in many ways it simply gave a scientific gloss to already existing attitudes.

"Enlightenment thinkers held views which we would call racist & which reflected the moral norms of their day" has a vastly different meaning than "Enlightenment thinkers INVENTED racism." The former is intellectually defensible, the latter is just postmodernist bullshit. As a result we might guess those who rise to the top today are likely to be the least essential.

And the best representatives of (identity) databases to be the least individually authoritative.

It is at best insufficient and at worst inaccurate to settle on a definition of *the* Enlightenment, for the obvious reason that there was not just one. The Enlightenment(s) manifested differently in France, England, Scotland, and Spain, and there were differences of opinion within each country, particularly with regard to religion, which had a critical role to play in the American founding.

The point is, generalization about what is referenced here is not careful or responsible. (I assume that's one of the reasons Goldberg expressly limits himself to a very specific "Miracle.") In this case, Bouie specifically cited Locke and Kant as the inventors of the basis for the "enlightenment idea" of racism. I think that's very silly.

Contemporary defenders of the Enlightenment shouldn't overgeneralize: the Enlightenment, however it is defined, is not an unalloyed good. But if that's the mistake some defenders of the Enlightenment make, Bouie did the opposite: he made a broad statement about Locke and Kant being the intellectual founders of racism, and followed it up with a lengthy article at Slate arguing the point, and suggesting both Pinker, Goldberg, and Jordan Peterson (oddly) are "whitewashing" the Enlightenment.

Bouie could have made an interesting argument by simply noting that intellectual movements have good and bad in them, and analyzing Pinker and Goldberg's comments regarding racism in an argument for more balance. But he does not. Instead, he writes: "Divorced from its cultural and historical context, this 'Enlightenment' acts as an ideological talisman, less to do with contesting ideas or understanding history, and more to do with identity. It's a standard, meant to distinguish its holders for their commitment to 'rationalism' and 'classical liberalism.'"

Bouie projects issues of identity onto his caricature of the entirety of the Enlightenment. It isn't really an argument against the Enlightenment as such, it's an argument against the people who like the Enlightenment, because they are modern political enemies. Bouie opposes the things he ascribes to the Enlightenment that hinder his political project in the modern day — particularly unfettered power over our lives and minds. So while he acknowledges there is more than one Enlightenment, he nonetheless engages in an extended well-poisoning exercise, not an argument on the merits. The putative fruits of the Enlightenment — chief among them America — are fruits of a poisoned tree.

This is particularly indefensible given the Eurocentric view such a belief requires. Racism is not limited by the biological veneer some European Enlightenment-era thinkers gave it, and the strongest support for that veneer came later, as Goldberg's book argues, during the heyday of Charles Darwin. Indeed, the most recent scholarship about Locke has focused on how he was perhaps more opposed to slavery than previously thought. Professor Holly Brewer's lengthy journal article on the topic is here. From the abstract:

Those policies did not emerge from Locke, but instead from those he argued against: the Stuart kings. To understand the origins of slavery, we need to pay more attention to how various laws and policies enabled it across the empire, to who was behind those policies, to who profited the most from those policies via customs on imported staple crops, and to how those policies were initially rationalized. Slavery was created in legal pieces—pieces written, approved, and rationalized in hierarchical political contexts by Charles II and his brother James II. They had

origins in older feudal law, with new innovations to make them more capitalist—but the larger rationale was in principles of absolutism and the divine rights of kings. There are powerful connections between monarchy, oligarchy, lordship, and slavery; all emphasize hereditary status.

It took force to implement and get access and control enslaved labor and collect taxes; the power of empire was critical to each part of slavery's development. When Locke had real power in the 1690s on the Board of Trade, he helped to reform Virginia laws and government, objecting especially to royal land grants that had rewarded those who bought 'negro servants.'

I will present no such defense of Kant, because his record on such matters is far more voluminous as a thinker who engaged with "scientific racism" in the late eighteenth century. But the question is: should Kant and Locke count as the founders of racist thought, when it is clear so many other historical figures shared their sins, and when their ideas contained within them a profound new argument for equality?

We can cite a litany of philosophers and political figures to this end. Matthew Sears made the case in The Washington Post earlier this year that we ought to go all the way back to Aristotle to find the father of scientific racism. The truth is there is nothing new under the sun, just different justifications for similar ideas. The late Bernard Lewis, in his "From Babels to Dragomans," writes of hatred of the other as based "at once by blood, by place and by cult" as "going back to the beginnings of human life":

Let me begin with a proposition that may seem outrageous: to hate the other, the outsider, the one who is different, who looks different, sounds different, smells different; to hate, fear and mistrust the other is natural and normal – natural and normal, that is to say, among baboons and other gregarious animals, or in the more primitive forms of human existence, such as forest tribes, cave-dwellers and the like. Unfortunately it survives into later forms of human development. It survives in even the most advanced and sophisticated civilised societies.

It is, and we should not disguise this from ourselves, a very basic human instinct, not just human, but going back beyond our most primitive ancestors to their animal predecessors. The instinct is there, and it comes out in all sorts of unexpected situations. To pretend it does not exist and that it is some sort of ideological aberration cannot lead anywhere useful.

Lewis describes the evolving perspective on race and "the eternal problem of the other" as going through periods of transformation based on differences in cultural perception, naturalization, and the capacity of civilizations to assimilate. He goes on to note the example of Locke, whose famous essay on toleration, published in 1689, says: "Nay, if we may openly speak the truth, and as becomes one man to another, neither Pagan nor Mahometan, nor Jew, ought to be excluded from the civil rights of the commonwealth because of his religion."

#### A Pseudo-Scientific Justification for Hatred

Unmentioned are the Catholics, who presented the real threat in seventeenth-century England. But if this is the attitude toward tolerance, why does racism and anti-Semitism flourish in Europe? As Lewis frames it, precisely because Western Europe found a new justification for what they already believed: a reason-based scientific justification for hatred. Lewis again:

In unenlightened times and places people are content to give way to their instincts; in some societies it is seen as normal, even as lawful, to enslave a defeated enemy and take his women as concubines. In enlightened times and places it is necessary to find rationalization and justification for such behavior...

Modern racism, in its origins, is an attempt to justify the enslavement and exploitation of Black Africans by enlightened Europeans and Americans; anti-Semitism is the response of the secularized Christian, no longer able to use theological arguments, against the emancipated Jew. Both provide examples of the new and modern hatred—no longer primitive, not yet civilized, but rather an attempt to provide a civilized rationale for primitive instincts.

As Lewis describes it, this newly refined form of racism was sought out due to the need for a rational basis for ancient tribal beliefs about identity, which required hatred of the other. “Something that looked philosophical, better still scientific, was needed to justify and ideologies exploitation on the one hand, and primitive hatred on the other,” Lewis wrote, going on to describe this “modern form of hatred” as “the deliberate revival of old instinctive hatreds... rationalized and disseminated in terms acceptable to what is believed to be the enlightened opinion of that time and place.” You can read more from Lewis on race and slavery [here](#).

#### How Racism Got New Clothes After the Age of Empire

What of all the racism that thrived prior to the births of Locke and Kant? Historian Jacques Barzun places this cultural shift in Europe in the late fifteenth-century and early sixteenth:

The fine barbarians in Tacitus were used as models in Luther’s Germany to stimulate resentment against the foreign authority of Rome, and these two attitudes, favoring the Indian and the German, combined to change the western peoples’ notion of their origins. For a thousand years they had been the sons and daughters of the ancient Romans. Now the idea of different ‘races’ replaced that of a single, common lineage. The bearing of this shift is clear: it parallels the end of empire and the rise of nations. Race unites and separates: We and They. Thus the English in the 16th Century began to nurse the fetish of Anglo-Saxonism, which unites them with the Germanic and separates them from the Roman past...

The conviction moreover grew that the character of a people is inborn and unchangeable. If their traits appear odd or hateful, the theory of race justifies perpetual enmity. We thus arrive at some of the familiar prejudices and hostilities of our time. ‘Race’ added the secular idea of inborn difference to the theological one of infidel and Christian.

Racist assumptions, ethnolinguistic assumptions of inferiority or superiority, are as old as mankind. Racism, as a label for such beliefs in popular use, is barely a century old. Modern divisions based on race are only slightly older, popularized by Charles Darwin’s contemporaries. But we can and should recognize ideas that are as old as history.

Whether that is Aristotle’s designation of some men as having the soul of slaves, or the Spanish declaration in the sixteenth century that the conquered peoples of the Americas were “men without reason,” and therefore requiring governance, or the view of the Abbasids that the Umayyads must be overthrown because they believed the Arabs were a racial caste apart (the same reason the African slave trade persists to the modern day on the fringes of the Islamic world), this view has always been with us.

In China, Japan, India and elsewhere, similarly racist segregations, separations, and hierarchies were ever-present—because they are part of human nature, not requiring the views of Locke and Kant as their foundation. Recall Euripides’s “Iphigenia at Aulis,” where Iphigenia, set to be sacrificed by her father Agamemnon so that the fleet can sail for Troy, refuses rescue, saying to her mother:

If Artemis is minded to take this body, am I, a weak mortal, to thwart the goddess? Nay, that were impossible. To Hellas I resign it; offer this sacrifice and make an utter end of Troy. This is my enduring monument; marriage, motherhood, and fame — all these is it to me. And it is but right, mother, that Hellenes should rule barbarians, but not barbarians Hellenes, those being slaves, while these are free.

From 410 B.C. to the Mississippi grand dame of a plantation in the 1800s, the ideas are not so different.

### The Enlightenment Also Disrupted Racism

Whatever your perspective on the defects of Enlightenment ideas or thinkers, it is this perspective on human history—that some men were born to rule and others to be enslaved—that Enlightenment ideas ultimately disrupted and eradicated. One of the more under-appreciated aspects of the Constitution is that it bans titles of nobility, and that is not by accident. As John Ferling argues in his 2015 book “Whirlwind,” the English Enlightenment ideas contained within the American Revolution had the seeds of the destruction of all these worldly evils:

Ideas are powerful, and no idea that flowered during the American Revolution was more potent than that of human equality. The sense that no one was greater than others, that all men were created equal, came to be, in the words of one historian, ‘the single most powerful and radical ideological force in all of American history.’

To believe that racism was an Enlightenment invention, as opposed to the Enlightenment offering scientific rationalization for an element of human nature, displays incomprehension of everything the ideas of Locke achieved and meant. “Enlightenment thinkers held views which we would call racist, which reflected the moral norms of their day, and they tried to justify that through reason as they did so many other things” has a vastly different meaning than “Enlightenment thinkers invented racism.”

The Enlightenment contains multitudes. Some Enlightenment figures like Voltaire were decidedly anti-Catholic. Some Enlightenment figures were priests. This is blind man and the elephant territory. If you’re looking for the historical context to prove the Enlightenment was actually about “X,” there’s enough to advance just about any argument.

From the perspective of the modern Left, the Enlightenment is an impediment to creating a political order based around making equality relative to identity.

Some religious and traditionalist arguments against the Enlightenment are based on the belief that it doesn’t produce a political order that will adequately sustain toleration, freedom, or the protection of human life. But from the perspective of the modern Left, the Enlightenment is an impediment to creating a political order based around making equality relative to identity—

which can be used to forcibly impose subjective, and dangerous, notions about rectifying historical injustice.

Yet there's a reason the Enlightenment has come to mean something in contemporary terms that is broadly, if not entirely, positive: because the benefits of reason, toleration, and capitalism have dramatically outweighed its defects, and because we discarded so many troublesome things ("race science," phrenology, and much of eugenics) that were explored to dangerous effect through the lenses of the Enlightenment.

If the Enlightenment contained seeds of societal destruction, it also contained ideas that kept those seeds from bearing fruit, such as a core societal belief in religious toleration that was crucial to the West resisting fascism and communism. The West survived most of the considerable horrors of the last three centuries with basic freedoms intact, plus post-Enlightenment scientific and economic progress—a miracle so staggering that it is difficult to argue correlation is not causation.

The impulse that came out of Locke's empiricism led to wonderful things like understanding taxonomy and breeding on such a granular level that Norman Borlaug could start splicing genes in plants so that a billion people in the last 40 years didn't starve to death. The bulk of the Enlightenment was set against the monarchical "we know some men are born to lead and answer only to God, and others are born with the soul of a slave" idea, and instead asserts that every man is king and slave alike. This is the seed from which blooms not just revolution, but ordered liberty.

### How to Square Equality with Difference

Much of this comes back to the fact that the issue of the Enlightenment influencing the American founding is an explosive one for the modern Left. Abraham Lincoln's explicit argument was sincerely persuading Americans to finally square the circle of "all men are created equal." This argument is utterly mystifying to many on the modern Left, despite it being one of the most well-documented rhetorical debates in American history.

This argument is really an effort to take down anything underpinning the obstacles to power in the current political order.

This is why identity politics leftists argue against the Enlightenment: not due to a greater historical understanding, but to create a narrative useful for specific contemporary political ends. This argument really isn't about the Enlightenment in the end. It is an effort to take down anything underpinning the obstacles to power in the current political order.

Those opposed to the Enlightenment from the religious or traditionalist perspective also rarely stop to consider that tentative agreement with the modern Left about the past doesn't change their diametrically opposing views on the question of how the Enlightenment should inform the future.

Building on successes, rather than dwelling on failures, is generally the sign of a healthy culture. While noting how the Enlightenment's excuses for racism may have affected slavery is a legitimate question and a worthwhile academic exercise, stating that the Enlightenment thinkers

are responsible for racism's founding is foolish. Racism is not an exclusively Western phenomenon. The foundations are much deeper. They exist in the human heart.

That is why it's so predictably sad that the most important thing about the Enlightenment today is whether you stand with it or against it online: what matters most is if you are part of the tribe, or part of the other.