The British Enlightenment

Lecture notes

- There are different interpretations and definitions of ‘enlightenment’. All really comes down to the same point however i.e using reason.
- OED – A European intellectual movement of the late 17th and 18th centuries which emphasises reason and individualism over tradition. Was heavily influenced by 17th century philosophers such as Locke and Newton. Prominent enlightenment figures were people such as Kant, Voltaire, Adam Smith.
- Wicki – Says the same thing except that it spread across western Europe to the United States. Also that its purpose was to reform society using reason to challenge ideas grounded by tradition and faith and to instead advance knowledge by using science. Promoted scientific thought, scepticism and intellectual interchanges.
- Peter Gay stressed the enlightenment as a ‘rational revolution’ linking 17th and 18th century thoughts to modern times.
- Scholars have linked the enlightenment to rational attitudes, more scientific worldview liberties and rights of a person (freedom of speech for example) and a higher regard for social equality and democratic processes.
- Limitations of the term Enlightenment – The term itself is quite vague. Difficulty to define such a large movement that spanned much of Europe not just Britain. There is no like consensual belief of the movement – doesn’t have a man manifesto or special document.
- Peter Gay argued that the enlightenment started in France, as Paris was one of the leading places for intellectuals at the time.
- Historians disagree over the chronology and boundaries of the Enlightenment.
- Many like Bertrand Russel have tried to trace the enlightenment many dating it to Isaac Newtons principia mathematica (1687). Therefore dating the enlightenment back to the scientific revolution.
- Jonathan Israel – argues that after 1650 that everything was being to be questioned in the light of philosophic reason thus signalling the start of the enlightenment.
- Some see it starting in England after restoration 1660 and ending at time of French Revolution (1789).
- In England key influencers on enlightenment include philosophies from Thomas Hobbes (1588 – 1679) and John Locke responsible for many scientific theories.
- John Locke (1632 – 1704) wrote about toleration, education and argued that the church should be a separate institution.
- Gay approached enlightenment by approaching by tracing its cultural achievements putting focus on arts, museums, elite salon culture.
- John Locke – ‘An essay concerning Human Understanding’ (1690) writes about reducibility and how man can improve through education, self improvement and mental application. He also wrote the influential two treatises of Government (1690).
- How Enlightenment in England was also linking to factors such as freedom and criticisms of absolutism which link in to English patriotism and even economic policies such as laissez faire.