

SPECIAL ISSUE: ENLIGHTENMENT IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Enlightenment and Its Fortunes in China's Modernization

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西方启蒙运动核心理念是科学理性，它虽然促进了现代性的发展，但自身却包含了一系列的悖论，如是与应当的悖论、必然与自由的悖论、普遍性与历史性的悖论等。启蒙理性对中国的消极影响是造成了对科学方法万能的迷信，以及对西方经验和政治原则的迷信，从而使中国的自由主义者不能处理好西方现代文化和本土传统文化的关系，以及启蒙的现代性理想与现实政治客观需要的关系，同时也不能合理鉴别和扬弃西方现代性中的合理因素与不合理因素。启蒙的真正价值是反思批判精神，因此启蒙是一项不断破除迷信和教条的未竟事业。

关键词：启蒙 理性 科学 现代性

The central concept of Western Enlightenment is scientific reason. It catalyzed the development of modernity, but itself contains a series of paradoxes: between "ought" and "is," between necessity and freedom, between universality and historicity, and so on. The impact of Enlightenment reason on China was negative in that it generated a superstitious belief in the omnipotence of scientific method and in Western experience and political principles. Consequently, Chinese liberals were unable to handle the relationship between modern Western culture and traditional local culture and the relationship between the ideals of Enlightenment modernity and the objective requirements of real-life politics. At the same time, they were unable to identify the rational and non-rational elements in Western modernity or to develop what was useful and discard what was not. The real value of the Enlightenment lies in its spirit of reflective criticism. It is, therefore, an unfinished business in terms of eliminating superstition and dogma.

Keywords: Enlightenment, reason, science, modernity

I. Formulation of the Problem

The role played by the Enlightenment in China's modernization is a highly controversial and very important topic. It can be divided into "ought" and "is." In terms of "ought," the question

is what role Enlightenment ought to play in the process of China's modernization, and in terms of "is," the question is what role it actually plays. For in the Western experience, modernity is to some degree the product of Enlightenment thought, or, one might say, Enlightenment thought reflects the fundamental requirements of modernity. The great historical mission of the Chinese nation since the nineteenth century has been to achieve modernization, so the question of how we see the fate of the Enlightenment in China's modernization is highly relevant to the way we advance the cause of modernization.

All major social and political issues are inevitably full of controversial ideas, and these two questions have always been hotly debated by Chinese intellectuals. On the first question, there are broadly three views. The first view is that modernity evolving in the West over the past few centuries is universal. For China, modernization means Westernization, that is to say, learning from Western values and institutional models. Therefore, the Enlightenment thought represented by liberalism should be used to inspire and enlighten the Chinese people and guide China's modernization. Liberals represented by Hu Shih fall into this category. The second view holds that modernity is divided into capitalist and socialist. Enlightenment thought reflects only the needs of capitalist modernity. Though socialism will carry forward the rational elements of capitalism, there is a fundamental difference between the ideals of socialism and those of the Enlightenment. Therefore, if China is to follow the path of socialist modernization, it must be guided by Marxism rather than Enlightenment thought. The Chinese Communists represented by Mao Zedong stand for this view. The third view holds that modernity is pluralistic. Each nation's modernity will inevitably bear the marks of its own tradition. The modernity of one's own country can only be truly developed if it is combined with rather than divorced from tradition. Hence, China's modernization cannot simply be guided by Enlightenment thought; it must be guided by new traditions that blend Enlightenment thought with tradition, as do Neo-Confucianism, New Legalism, New Taoism, etc. All of these fall into the third category.

Related to these three views are three different perspectives on the role Enlightenment has actually played in the process of China's modernization. The first view holds that the imperialist aggression that started in the nineteenth century meant that the task of saving the nation from extinction overwhelmed the task of inspiring and enlightening the people. Consequently, Enlightenment thought was not properly disseminated and feudal thought remained deep-rooted; we suffered the consequences of this in the form of Cultural Revolution and the lengthy delay in establishing constitutional democracy. The second view believes that the May Fourth Movement accomplished the anti-feudal mission of the Enlightenment. However, the particular conditions and environment of China's modernization process determined that a modern political system constructed on the basis of Enlightenment ideals would fail in China and the Enlightenment political program would not be feasible. This was borne out by the political practice of the early Republican period. The third view that the Enlightenment of the May Fourth Movement was too radical and too hard on Chinese

tradition, leading to a rupture between tradition and modernity. As a result, not only were the fine elements in traditional Chinese culture not carried forward and developed, but subsequent political life headed toward the wrong path of radicalism.

Since the nineteenth century, Chinese history has witnessed a mighty upsurge accompanied by diverse and complex political ideas. Our categorization of the varying views of the role of the Enlightenment in China's modernization is a simplified one. There are actually many specific differences among these views, reflecting the different orientations and conflicts of different varieties of political thought. In a general sense, however, these three views can stand as types. The conflicts between them have permeated Chinese history since the nineteenth century and have continued into contemporary Chinese society. This fact in itself has a profound meaning. In fact, it indicates how we should understand Enlightenment itself, how we should understand modernity, how we should understand the relationship between tradition and modernity, and how we should treat Enlightenment. We will inevitably encounter these basic issues throughout the course of China's modernization.

II. Enlightenment and Modernity

Correctly understanding Enlightenment is an important prerequisite for handling it correctly. However, the Enlightenment movement, at its outset, was not a unified intellectual movement. Norman Hampson observed that "There does not seem to me much point in attempting any general definition of the movement. Such a definition would have to include so many qualifications and contradictions as to be virtually meaningless."¹ If one looks at the intellectual situation in countries like Britain, France and Germany in the 17th and 18th centuries, people who were later regarded as Enlightenment thinkers included liberals who advocated individual freedom and rights, socialists who emphasized the equality of man, democrats who promoted popular sovereignty, rationalists who celebrated reason and rationalism, empiricists who stressed subjective perceptions, romantics who stressed emotion, and so on. It can thus be seen that the Enlightenment movement was from the outset an intellectual movement suffused with conflicts and tensions that existed not only among thinkers of different intellectual tendencies, but also within the thought of the same thinker. An example is Rousseau, who was not only one of the greatest French Enlightenment thinkers but also the most influential critic of the movement. The complexity of the intellectual situation also influenced later researchers, so that different scholars have different perceptions of the Enlightenment. As Norman Hampson comments, "Within limits, the Enlightenment was what one thinks it was."²

As a matter of fact, in the German Enlightenment, as early as the late 18th century the theologian and education reformer Johann Friedrich Zöllner thought that "in the name of Enlightenment, much confusion had been wrought in the hearts and minds of the citizenry."

1 Norman Hampson, *Enlightenment*, "Preface," II.

2 *Ibid.*

He published an article in December 1783, in which he posed the important question: “What is Enlightenment?” He observed that: “‘What is Enlightenment?’ This question, which is almost as important as what is truth, should be answered before one begins enlightening! And still I have never found it answered.”³ It was this very question that elicited the responses of Moses Mendelssohn and Immanuel Kant and provoked nearly a decade of heated debates among German thinkers. The scholars in this debate differed in their understanding of Enlightenment. For instance, Mendelssohn differentiated the concept of “culture” from that of “enlightenment.” In his view, culture “appears to be more oriented toward practical matters: (objectively) toward goodness, refinement, and beauty in the arts and social mores; (subjectively) toward facility, diligence, and dexterity in the arts and inclinations, dispositions, and habits in social mores... Enlightenment, in contrast, seems to be more related to theoretical matters: to (objective) rational knowledge and to (subjective) facility in rational reflections about matters of human life, according to their importance and influence on the destiny of man.”⁴ Nor was this all: Mendelssohn also saw a tension within the Enlightenment itself. “The enlightenment of man can come into conflict with the enlightenment of the citizen. Certain truths that are useful to men, as men, can at times be harmful to them as citizens.”⁵ Karl Leonhard Reinhold wrote of “the Enlightenment in a narrow sense as the application of the means that lie in nature to elucidate confused concepts into distinct ones.”⁶

Of course, among the numerous discussions, Kant’s response is the most influential and most representative. His best-known definition of Enlightenment is: “Enlightenment is mankind’s exit from its self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to make use of one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. Self-incurred is this inability if its cause lies not in the lack of understanding, but rather in the lack of the resolution and the courage to use it without the guidance of another.”⁷ Obviously, the Enlightenment goal Kant was expecting was to cultivate maturity in man. Taken together with his statement in *The Critique of Judgment*, that “Emancipation from superstition is called Enlightenment,”⁸ we can readily see that people who have thus attained maturity are not blindly superstitious and can use their reason autonomously to make judgments and decisions. Surely, people of this kind

3 Quoted from James Schmidt, “What is Enlightenment? A Question, Its Context and Some Consequences,” in James Schmidt, *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, p. 2.

4 Moses Mendelssohn, “On the Question: What is Enlightenment?”, in James Schmidt, *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, pp. 56-57.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 58.

6 Karl Leonhard Reinhold, “Reflection on Enlightenment,” in James Schmidt, *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, p. 69.

7 Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question, What Is Enlightenment?”, in James Schmidt, *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, p. 61. Here “intellect” (*Verstand*) can also be interpreted as “understanding.” The understanding or intellect of which Kant speaks is the faculty through which the subject synthesizes the object of sensory perception to form knowledge of the natural sciences. It corresponds to the scientific concept of reason in this article.

8 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, p. 136.

are neither fostered by guardians or creators, nor enlightened by the torchbearer high above, but rather self-trained while bravely making use of their reason. In this process, the only condition is freedom. “For Enlightenment of this kind, all that is needed is freedom. And the freedom in question is the most innocuous form of all: freedom to make public use of one’s reason in all matters.”⁹ In order to explain “the freedom to make public use of one’s reason,” Kant distinguished between “public use of reason” and “private use of reason.” “By the public use of one’s own reason I mean that use which anyone may make of it as a man of learning addressing the entire reading public. What I term the private use of reason is that which a person may make of it in a particular civil post or office with which he is entrusted.” He believes that “the public use of man’s reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men; private use of reason may quite often be very narrowly restricted, however, without undue hindrance to the progress of Enlightenment.” “Now in some affairs which affect the interests of the commonwealth, we require a certain mechanism whereby some members of the commonwealth must behave purely passively, so that they may, by an artificial common agreement, be employed by the government for public ends (or at least deterred from vitiating them).”¹⁰

To further illustrate the difference between the two ways of using reason, Kant presented some examples. For instance, “a clergyman is bound to instruct his pupils and his congregation in accordance with the doctrines of the church he serves, for he was employed by it on that condition. But as a scholar, he is completely free as well as obliged to impart to the public all his carefully considered, well-intentioned thoughts on the mistaken aspects of those doctrines, and to offer suggestions for a better arrangement of religious and ecclesiastical affairs... In view of this, he is not and cannot be free as a priest. He is acting on a commission imposed from outside. Conversely, as a scholar addressing the real public (i.e. the world at large) through his writings, the clergyman making public use of his reason enjoys unlimited freedom to use his own reason and to speak in his own person.”¹¹

The three scholars’ discussions of Enlightenment show that they all understand the meaning of Enlightenment differently. Mendelssohn emphasizes the importance of rational knowledge (mainly science) and the power of reason (the power to apply scientific theory).¹² Reinhold highlights the importance of clear concepts in the process of deductive reasoning, while Kant puts the emphasis on the use of reason and the condition of freedom. One reason why Kant is considered the most important liberal thinker is probably his emphasis on freedom; but the freedom he talks about is chiefly freedom of thought and speech in the academic sense rather

9 Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question, What Is Enlightenment?”, in James Schmidt, *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, p. 62.

10 The various Chinese translations of this section differ greatly and are hard to understand. We have thus reorganized and retranslated this part on the basis of the English translation of Kant’s essay.

11 Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question, What Is Enlightenment?”, in James Schmidt, *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, p. 63.

12 Moses Mendelssohn, “On the Question: What is Enlightenment?”, in James Schmidt, *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, p. 57.

than the political freedom discussed by French Enlightenment thinkers. In fact, compared to the radical attitude of French Enlightenment thinkers, with their bold calls for political reform, German Enlightenment thinkers were generally quite cautious or even conservative in their politics.

Despite the differences in their understanding of Enlightenment, these three figures have one thing in common: they all emphasize the centrality of reason in the Enlightenment movement. The eighteenth century called this epoch the “Age of Reason”; Max Weber later termed the period starting from the Enlightenment the “Age of Disenchantment” and saw rationalization as a basic characteristic of modern society. All these views reflect this distinctive feature of enlightenment. Hence, notwithstanding people’s divergent understandings of reason and the varying accretions attached to Enlightenment,¹³ it is still possible for us to set aside the differences and locate the highest common factor, i.e. to see Enlightenment as a process of rationalization.

If we look at the actual course of the Enlightenment in Europe, the main targets of criticism were originally Christian theology and ecclesiastical domination; the aim was to emancipate people from the mental fetters of religious obscurantism and ecclesiastical control. As for its role in constructing Western modernity, or its relation to modernity, that is a rather complex issue.

Logically, once Enlightenment thinkers raised the banner of reason, they could not stop at criticizing religion. Inevitably, they had to extend the spearhead of their criticism beyond religion to all existing authorities: social order, political system, and social mores. This is because once reason, this new authority, was established, it became a highly revolutionary element in modern society, one that must of necessity reject any other authority. It required that “everything must justify its existence before the judgment seat of Reason, or give up existence.”¹⁴ In fact, this is what the majority of Enlightenment thinkers actually did. Though a few of them avoided criticizing the existing social and political order due to timidity or political considerations, this does not mean that they did not have their own social and political ideals. Once the goal of rational man was established, a corresponding new set of social and political relations was required. Enlightenment in this sense would certainly bring about the consequence of its own modernity, and Enlightenment thought would certainly contain the ideals of its own modernity. The only thing is that owing to the great differences among Enlightenment thinkers in terms of social position, knowledge structure and life experience, plus the complexity of reason itself, the ideals of modernity were also very

13 For instance, Michel Foucault once said: “Enlightenment is an event, or a set of events and complex historical processes, that is located at a certain point in the development of European societies. As such, it includes elements of social transformation, types of political institution, forms of knowledge, projects of rationalization of knowledge and practices, technological mutations that are very difficult to sum up in a word” (Michel Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?”, in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Du Xiaozhen, p. 537).

14 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works of Marx and Engels*, vol. 3, p. 391.

different for different people. This is an important reason for the formation of various trends of political thought in the Enlightenment. Those trends that embody the new social ideals can be said to reflect a certain pursuit of modernity, unlike feudal approaches that attempted to preserve or restore traditional society; but each intellectual trend may capture only certain elements of modernity and overlook others. Conflicts of ideals largely reflect the conflicts within modernity.

However, in the real world the growth of modernity is not simply decided by the pursuit of intellectual modernity or the theoretical logic of enlightenment thinkers. In fact, their reasoning is generally rather loose and problematic. In the strict sense, modernity is in reality the product of synergy between various factors and powers (including various schools of thought). Therefore, modernity as it took shape in Western society is necessarily a product of its historical environment. In the Western experience, modernity embodied a series of fundamental characteristics of industrial society, such as a means of production characterized by mechanization, a high degree of division of labor, private property rights, free market, etc.; social relationships and structures characterized by contractual relationships, personal freedom, equal rights, a high degree of specialization, and interdependence; political forms embodying democracy, constitutional government, the rule of law and the nation-state; and an ethos containing the elements of secularization, rationalism, individualism, self-awareness, subject consciousness, consciousness of rights, etc. Of course, opinions differ on how these features should be summed up. Besides, despite the fact that these features of modernity result from the synergy of various factors, we should note that liberalism plays a more important role in their development than other intellectual trends. However, which of these are rational and which are not; which should characterize every modern society and which are only local products—this has been controversial right from the start.

III. The Paradoxes of Enlightenment Reason

The Enlightenment's advocacy of reason was undoubtedly a heavy blow to theology and religious belief, as it was to the authority of the church and the feudal order. It emancipated the mind, raised the status of science, encouraged progress in science, culture and education, and promoted social and political reform and the development of modernity. However, certain basic concepts embraced by the Enlightenment were called into question by some from the very beginning. Likewise, modernity, as the outcome of the Enlightenment, also incurred criticism from the outset. These questionings and criticisms not only revealed the conflicts and limitations of Enlightenment thought and the tensions and disadvantages of Western modernity, but also advanced the development of Enlightenment itself and encouraged further mental and social renewal.

As the central concept of the Enlightenment, the significance of reason was closely related to the concept of "nature," and the currency of "nature" was largely the result of the rise of

natural sciences. Prior to this, reason was often related to the power of reasoning in formal logic, particularly inductive logic. However, as natural sciences made great strides and their reputation grew, “Reason changed from the methods of formal logic to those of the natural sciences, and the laws of reason became identical with the laws of nature.”¹⁵ It seemed to Hankins that “The Enlightenment was in large part created by this shift from reason as the perfect intelligence to reason as the law of nature.”¹⁶ The outcome of this transformation was a confusion between natural sciences and the humanities and the rise of scientism.

According to John Wellmuth, scientism is the belief “that science, in the modern sense of that term, and the scientific method as described by modern scientists, afford the only reliable natural means of acquiring such knowledge as may be available about whatever is real.”¹⁷ Scientism of this kind shifts the scientific method used to study natural phenomena to phenomena in the humanities, attempting to establish a science of man or moral science that would be as accurate as natural sciences. Condorcet clearly expressed this spirit in his *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of Human Mind*: “It was not long before this method [The method of understanding expounded in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* by John Locke—Author’s note] was adopted by philosophers in general, in treating of morals and politics, by which a degree of certainty was given to those sciences little inferior to that which obtained in the natural sciences, admitting only of such conclusions as could be proved.” “In the same manner, by analyzing the faculty of experiencing pain and pleasure, men arrived at the origin of their notions of morality, and the foundation of those general principles which form the necessary and immutable laws of justice.”¹⁸

The laws of nature revealed by natural sciences have universal characteristics; similarly, Enlightenment reason, which had adopted the methods of natural sciences, was also considered to be universal. Therefore, Ernst Cassirer held that “The eighteenth century is imbued with a belief in the unity and immutability of reason. Reason is the same for all thinking subjects, all nations, all epochs, and all cultures.”¹⁹ This concept of reason led to the outcomes described by Roger Hausheer as: “Despite their many differences, the thinkers of the French Enlightenment held in common a stock of fundamental presuppositions which went almost wholly unchallenged: that human nature is the same in all times and places; that universal human goals, true ends and effective means, are at least in principle discoverable; that methods similar to those of Newtonian science, which had proved so successful in bringing to light the regularities of inanimate nature, should be discovered and applied in the field of morals, politics, economics, and in the sphere of human relationships in general, thus eradicating vice and suffering and what Helvetius termed ‘interested error.’ What all these

15 Thomas L. Hankins, *Science and the Enlightenment*, p. 6.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

17 Quoted from Guo Yingyi, *Scientism in Chinese Thought, 1900-1950*, p. 16.

18 Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat Condorcet, “Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of Human Mind,” in *Reason and Enlightenment—A Post-Modern Classic Anthology*, ed. Jiang Yi, p. 19.

19 Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Enlightenment*, p. 4.

rationalist thinkers shared was the belief that somewhere, by some means, a single, coherent, unified structure of knowledge concerning questions of both fact and value was in principle available.”²⁰

However, the concept of reason exhibited in scientism of this kind produced at least three paradoxes in Enlightenment thought, as follows.

The first can be called “the paradox of ‘is’ and ‘ought.’” Natural science is the branch of learning that reveals the laws of nature, and these laws, as Hankins puts it, “were purely descriptive... They revealed what is, but not what ought to be.”²¹ However, Enlightenment thinkers attempted to establish precisely the kind of moral science that could deduce “ought” from “is”; that is, to move from the “is” of the basic facts of human nature, such as man’s innate hopes for happiness or inclination to pleasure, to logically deduce the “ought” of moral or even political rules. These rules, like the rules or laws of nature, were innate in natural human nature and could be discovered by reason. “If, they implied, the good was the right, the right the true, and, as scientific inquiry was demonstrating, the right was also the natural (since nature manifestly conforms to reason), so the natural must be the good. If this was so, then it seemed clear that what was evil was what was unnatural. Use reason to distinguish the natural from the unnatural, they argued, and you will have at once distinguished good from evil.”²² Obviously, the attempt of Enlightenment thinkers to build a bridge between “is” and “ought” failed. According to Hume, One cannot derive an “ought” from an “is.”²³ The “is” of human nature is complex and multifaceted. One cannot deduce such moral rules as “helping others,” “serving society” or “dedicating oneself to one’s country” simply from the natural requirements of the pursuit of happiness. Furthermore, the selfishness innate in man is even more incompatible with these norms.

The second paradox can be called “the paradox of freedom and necessity.” The aim of natural science is to reveal the various necessary or objective laws of the natural world. This scientific concept is directly opposed to the theology of an omnipotent God and the preeminence of the divine as compared to the human. To oppose religion, the France’s materialist Enlightenment thinkers proceeded from the perspective of scientism and considered man to be a purely physical being,²⁴ a machine wholly subject to the necessities of natural law.²⁵ Hence they affirmed the rationality of human nature and human desires and rejected the suppression of the human by the divine and the power of God to rule mankind. But it was this that made Holbach arrive at the logically valid conclusion that man “is not a free agent in any one instant of his life.”²⁶ This conclusion and the ideal of freedom pursued

20 Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, p. 15.

21 Thomas L Hankins, *Science and the Enlightenment*, p. 7.

22 Geoffrey Hawthorn, *Enlightenment and Despair: A History of Social Theory*, p. 13.

23 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, vol. 2, pp. 509-510.

24 Holbach, *The System of Nature*, vol. 1, p. 11.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 69. For the idea of considering man as a machine, see also La Mettrie’s *Man a Machine*, pp. 13-74.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 177.

by Enlightenment thinkers obviously constitute a paradox. The very same Holbach also explicitly asserts in *Natural Politics* that true liberty should be the life of any social being with reason and is the inalienable right of human nature.²⁷ In fact, Enlightenment thinkers' use of science to combat religion involved throwing off clerical oppression to realize human freedom. However, the worship of science and the laws of nature subjected man completely to the necessity of natural law, leading to the loss of freedom. This paradox is the inevitable result of the rational view of scientism in Enlightenment thought.

The third paradox can be termed "the paradox of universality and historicity," that is, the paradox between the universal nature of Enlightenment reason and the historical character of the human affairs it needs to deal with. Such universality finds its classical expression in the doctrine, then current, of natural law "according to which the nature of things possessed a permanent, unalterable structure, differences and changes in the world being subject to universal and immutable laws. These laws were discoverable in principle by the use of reason and controlled observation, of which the methods of the natural sciences constituted the most successful application." "According to this doctrine, all genuine questions were in principle answerable: truth was one, error multiple; the true answers must of necessity be universal and immutable, that is, true everywhere, at all times, for all men, and discoverable by the appropriate use of reason, by relevant experience, observation and the methods of experiment, logic, calculation."²⁸ Nevertheless, human affairs usually take place in a given historical context and thus possess historicity. It is precisely this historicity that results in different nations, civilizations and eras being immensely different in terms of values, customs and habits, modes of action and social systems, and makes possible social reform and the progress of civilization. The universalism of Enlightenment reason plainly contradicts this, for if we admitted that human society was subject to the permanent and immutable laws of nature, then the existence of these differences would be inconceivable and the continuous progress of human civilization would not be possible.

In fact, the paradox of universality and historicity is also reflected in the works of Rousseau and Montesquieu. The clash between the two is evident in Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men* and *The Social Contract*.²⁹ Montesquieu writes of "the belief that to each society belong its own peculiar customs, moral outlooks, modes of life on the one hand, and the belief in justice as a universal and eternal standard on the other."³⁰ Nevertheless, they were not explicitly aware of the existence of such a paradox. It was Kant who came early to this realization. In his famous essay on enlightenment, he requires that people "in all things have the freedom to use their reason" on the one hand, while on the

27 Holbach, *Natural Politics*, p. 241.

28 Isaiah Berlin, "Introduction," *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, p. 194.

29 Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men* embodies clear historical dialectics. *The Social Contract*, on the other hand, reflects the ahistorical, universalist methods of argument of the school of natural law.

30 Isaiah Berlin, "Introduction," *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, p. 17.

other he sees the paradoxical fact that “Only one who is himself enlightened, is not afraid of shadows, and has a numerous and well-disciplined army to assure public peace [Frederick the Second, King of Prussia—Author’s note], can say: ‘Argue as much as you will, and about what you will, only obey!’ A republic could not dare say such a thing.” On this, he says ruefully, “Here is shown a strange and unexpected trend in human affairs in which almost everything, looked at in the large, is paradoxical. A greater degree of civil freedom appears advantageous to the freedom of mind of the people, and yet it places inescapable limitations upon it. A lower degree of civil freedom, on the contrary, provides the mind with room for each man to extend himself to his full capacity.”³¹

This paradox discovered by Kant is quite thought-provoking. According to the logic of Enlightenment reason, freedom is a natural right to be upheld at all times and places. However, when this kind of logical requirement is put into effect in the real world, greater freedom may actually become an obstacle to the realization of freedom. Conversely, less freedom may become a condition for the steady progress of freedom. Here the theoretical logic of the universality of Enlightenment reason is relentlessly mocked by the logic of history. In fact, this paradox is the common problem and chronic malady of all universalist political and moral theories. When immutable and universally applicable principles, values and patterns are put into practice, either the ideals burst like bubbles or the results are the opposite of what we expected. This is particularly so where the right conditions do not exist or the historical environment is very different. The brilliant exposition in Engels’ *Anti-Dühring* incisively reveals the dilemma of Enlightenment universalism in the real world.

“We saw in the ‘Introduction’ how the French philosophers of the eighteenth century, the forerunners of the Revolution, appealed to reason as the sole judge of all that is. A rational government, rational society, were to be founded; everything that ran counter to eternal reason was to be remorselessly done away with. We saw also that this eternal reason was in reality nothing but the idealised understanding of the eighteenth century citizen, just then evolving into the bourgeois. The French Revolution had realized this rational society and government. However, the new order of things, rational enough as compared with earlier conditions, turned out to be by no means absolutely rational. The state based upon reason completely collapsed. Rousseau’s *Contrat Social* had found its realization in the Reign of Terror, from which the bourgeoisie, who had lost confidence in their own political capacity, had taken refuge first in the corruption of the Directorate, and, finally, under the wing of the Napoleonic despotism. The promised eternal peace was turned into an endless war of conquest. The society based upon reason had fared no better. The antagonism between rich and poor, instead of dissolving into general prosperity, had become intensified by the removal of the guild and other privileges, which had to some extent bridged it over, and by the removal of the charitable institutions of the Church....Trade became to a greater and greater extent cheating. The “fraternity” of the revolutionary motto was realized in the chicanery and rivalries of the

31 Immanuel Kant, *Essays on the Critique of Historical Reason*, p. 30.

battle of competition. Oppression by force was replaced by corruption; the sword, as the first social lever, by gold. The right of the first night was transferred from the feudal lords to the bourgeois manufacturers. Prostitution increased to an extent never heard of.... In a word, compared with the splendid promises of the philosophers, the social and political institutions born of the 'triumph of reason' were bitterly disappointing caricatures."³²

It should be noted that some features of the highly ironic picture of the real world presented by Engels arise from the absence of conditions conducive to the realization of the principles of Enlightenment ideals, whereas others are the products of modernity consequent upon Enlightenment. However that may be, these facts all show that the attempt of these universalist ideals to establish the kingdom of reason with everlasting justice were weak and futile, strongly tinged with irony, in the face of the logic of history. In fact, Enlightenment thought's practice of shifting the methods and beliefs of the natural sciences to the "ought" domain of politics and morals, as well as its implicitly "universalist" way of thinking, was not only of no avail in terms of establishing rational ideals, but also constituted the cognitive source of almost all dogmatism since the Enlightenment.

IV. The Fortunes of Enlightenment in China's Modernization Process

As a historical event, the European Enlightenment, as Hankins has said, "ended with Condorcet."³³ As a cause, however, it did not end. There are two reasons for saying so. One reason is that even in the contemporary West, the mature condition of man that Kant idealized has never been completely realized, the task of rational reflection on human life proposed by Mendelssohn remains unfinished, and Reinhold's goal of training rational men is still distant. Moreover, many of the concepts put forward by Enlightenment thinkers were and are subject to constant reflection and critique. The other reason is that as a component of the mission of modernization, the task of disseminating Enlightenment to the non-Western world is a long way from being completed. If we firmly believe that the replacement of traditional agrarian society by modern industrial society is the inevitable path for countries worldwide, then doing away with the traditional concepts and modes of action that impede modernization and cultivating new ones that meet its requirements is a historical mission that non-Western countries must carry out. In the sense that the majority of non-Western countries have not yet completed the construction of modernization, the Enlightenment must shoulder this historical mission for our planet. The task is arduous and the road ahead is long.

However, non-Western Enlightenment has from the very beginning been faced with a more complex predicament than that encountered by the West. The tasks it has to accomplish and the conditions for their accomplishment are often very different from those of the West. As a result, the complexities and difficulties of Enlightenment in these countries generally cannot

32 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works of Marx and Engels*, vol. 3, pp. 643-644.

33 Thomas L. Hankins, *Science and the Enlightenment*, p. 197.

be compared with those encountered by the West. In general, the non-Western Enlightenment differs from its Western counterpart in the following ways.

First, Enlightenment thought is a component of the Western cultural tradition. The non-Western cultural tradition usually differs greatly from that of the West. Therefore, the spread of Enlightenment thought in non-Western countries inevitably brings about intense cultural conflicts, conflicts that render the Enlightenment mission and the modernization process exceptionally difficult. Furthermore, although the scientific rationality advocated by Enlightenment thought has greatly encouraged the advance of science in non-Western countries, the belief in universalism that it entails can easily make Enlightenment thinkers in these countries largely reject their own cultural tradition and dogmatically copy Western culture and the Western experience of modernization. This leads to a dilemma for the modernization process due to a lack of acculturation. Therefore, how to appropriately integrate modern Western culture with traditional local culture and set out on a path of modernization that conforms to the realistic circumstances of one's own country will always be a pivotal issue in the question of whether the Enlightenment mission will succeed in non-Western countries.

Second, the West's Enlightenment thought and the consequences of modernity it has generated include both rational and non-rational elements: both elements that reflect the universal requirements of modern society and ones that reflect the local requirements of Western society. As a result, the question of how to identify the rational and non-rational elements and the universal and local elements in Enlightenment thought and Western modernity, and how to develop what is useful and discard what is not, is a thorny problem and a difficult task for the enlightenment process in non-Western countries.

Third, in their modernization process, non-Western countries often confront military, economic, political, and cultural pressures from the West, intermingling, in a tension-filled process, the dual missions of learning from Western Enlightenment thought and resisting the oppression of the Western powers. Furthermore, internal conflicts in these countries are often far more serious and complex than in the West, giving rise to a clash between the objective requirements of real-world politics (for instance, the need for "strong government") and the political ideals of Enlightenment thought. Hence, handling the relationship between the ideals of Enlightenment modernity and the objective requirements of real politics is also a significant issue in non-Western countries' modernization process.

Modern Chinese Enlightenment thought started with the late Qing reform movement, but the true enlightenment movement was the May Fourth New Culture Movement. It should be noted that the values of "democracy" and "science" advocated by the May Fourth Movement reflected both the basic essence of Western Enlightenment thought and some of the fundamental requirements of modernity. Of course, the movement played a significant role in promoting emancipation of the mind and spreading scientific knowledge and modern ideas. However, the worship of science and the scientism thus generated also led to a series of evils. Hu Shih has some lines that reflect people's worship of science in those days. He said, "For the last thirty years or so, there has been a name which has acquired an incomparable position of

respect in China; no one, whether informed or ignorant, whether conservative or progressive, dares openly slight or jeer at it. The name is Science.³⁴ What Lin Yu-sheng calls the “‘Scientism’ of modern China” involves inappropriately exaggerating the role of science in the process of Enlightenment and regarding it as the key to solving all problems in China or even the world. Such scientism uses forced arguments to show that science can know anything that can be known (including the meaning of life). The essence of science lies not in its subject matter but in its method. Therefore, the advocates of scientism believe that promoting the application of scientific method in every possible realm is very necessary for both China and the world.³⁵ This view was fully revealed in the famous debate on science and metaphysics. The representative of the natural sciences, Ding Wenjiang, boiled the question of a value-related outlook on life down to the issue of knowledge of truth and falsehood and emphasized that the scientific method is universal, thus making the same old mistake of the Western Enlightenment in confusing natural sciences with the humanities. Hence, while boosting China’s scientific development, the scientism of the May Fourth era also caused several problems, as shown below.

First, the directions and ways of thinking embodied by scientism and those embodied by traditional Chinese culture are poles apart, leading to the prevalence of a “radical antitraditionalism” (in Lin Yu-sheng’s words³⁶). Different scholars have different views on the difference between Chinese and Western cultures. I think that what Gao Xudong expressed as the difference between the tree of life and the tree of knowledge quite accurately grasps the fundamental features of each.³⁷ The two trees in fact correspond to the two categories often called the spirit of the humanities and the spirit of science. As regards direction, the former searches for meaning and values while the latter investigates facts and truth. In terms of thought, the former relies mainly on the logic of the humanities, the latter on formal logic. The higher value ascribed to the humanities as compared to the sciences in traditional Chinese culture was indeed unfortunate for scientific progress. Hence, it seemed to the Enlightenment thinkers who earnestly hoped to make their country rich and strong that they could only achieve their goals by doing away with this tradition and vigorously advocating the West’s scientific spirit. In the eyes of some proponents of Enlightenment in the May Fourth era, the reason for China’s backwardness was that Chinese culture lacked a scientific spirit, such that “We aren’t as advanced as them in any aspect of culture.... They’ve got everything we have, but we don’t have a lot of what they have.... the things we think are best aren’t as good as theirs, but the things we think are bad are a thousand times worse than their worst.”³⁸ In consequence, the movement

34 Hu Shih, “Preface to Science and Outlook on Life—Debate on Science and Metaphysics,” in Geng Yunzhi, ed., *Collected Polemic Works of Hu Shih*, vol. 2, pp. 1460-1461.

35 Lin Yu-sheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Antitraditionalism in the May Fourth Era*, 1988, p. 301.

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 14-137.

37 Cf. Gao Xudong, *The Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge: A Thematic Comparison between Chinese and Western Cultures*, pp. 1-8.

38 Chen Xujing, “Answer to Mr. Wu Jingchao Concerning Total Westernization,” in Geng Yunzhi, *Collected Polemic Works of Hu Shi*, vol. 2, p. 1497.

advocating complete rejection of traditional Chinese culture was quite popular among liberal Enlightenment thinkers in the May Fourth era, so that they were unable to carry on the splendid heritage of Chinese traditional culture in a rational way that would have achieved a reasonable integration of modern Western culture with indigenous culture.

Second, scientism's excessive emphasis on objectivity, necessity and universality meant that some of China's Enlightenment liberals failed to treat Western culture dialectically. They were unable to distinguish between the rational and non-rational elements and the universal and local elements in Western modernity and so took the path of advocating total Westernization. In their eyes, modern Western culture was established on the basis of scientific reason, just like natural sciences, and so had objective truthfulness and universal validity. All the values reflected in Western modernity were universal values. Hence, Chen Xujing, an upholder of total Westernization, asserted that "The Western culture of the present day is world culture."³⁹ Under the sway of this type of cognition, he even disagreed with Chen Duxiu's criticism of Western militarism and of imperialism and capitalism. He saw science as the "mastermind" behind all modern European culture. Militarism, like imperialism and capitalism, was created or at least promoted by science. Even though we may feel militarism, imperialism and capitalism are a bad thing, the fact that they have free rein all over the world means that we need to make use of them in order to guard against and combat them. He wrote, "If we oppose militarism, imperialism and capitalism on the grounds that they have produced a good many evils, then we should also give up Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science for they, too, have created not a few evils... To enjoy the gains of science, we should be prepared to suffer the losses when Mr. Science loses his temper."⁴⁰ Clearly, in the eyes of the Enlightenment liberals who advocated wholesale Westernization, Western modernist culture, whether good or bad, was characterized by necessity and universality. It was not up to us to select the good and leave the bad; we had to swallow it whole. This indicates that such people not only failed to see the particularity of Western culture, that is, its local nature; they were also unconscious of being engaged in the framework of scientific determinism.

Third, scientism exaggerated the spirit of universalism, leaving some of the Enlightenment liberals unable to take a historical attitude towards sociopolitical phenomena. They were divorced from the specific conditions and actual needs of Chinese society, and took a dogmatic approach to the political principles established by Western Enlightenment thought and the political experience of Britain and the United States, regarding these political principles and experiences as universal truths like those of natural sciences, and demanding their immediate and unconditional implementation in China. The liberal Enlightenment advocates represented by Hu Shih frequently took the democratic constitutional experience (what Hu Shih termed "kindergarten politics") of Great Britain and the United States as a universal law or value. They believed that what worked in Britain and the US would definitely work in other countries,

39 Chen Xujing, *The Way Out for Chinese Culture*, p. 101.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

particularly China, and that institutional models that had achieved a certain effect in Britain and the US would do likewise in China. They failed to see that whether a specific institution can achieve ideal results depends on a series of specific conditions; if these conditions are not present or the actual conditions are the opposite of those desired, it will not only be impossible to achieve the desired results, but may produce the opposite effect. Chinese liberals, under the sway of Enlightenment reason and the spirit of universalism, often lacked this awareness of conditions and processes as well as of development and change (that is, historicist awareness). Therefore, they found proceeding from national conditions and actual needs tiresome, preferring instead to proceed from universal principles or truths. Thus, they were unable to handle the relationship between the Enlightenment ideal of modernity and the objective requirements of the real politics of their own country or to deal with the complex relationship between the twofold mission of China's modernization process: the fight against imperialism and the fight against feudalism. This is also the fundamental reason why Chinese Enlightenment liberals, despite their many positive functions, could not lead China's revolutions (neither the Old Democratic nor the New Democratic Revolution) and modernization, in the historical process of the last hundred years. Instead, they have always been marginalized politically.

The fate of Enlightenment liberals in the Chinese revolution has been described as "the supremacy of national salvation over Enlightenment," but in my view, this explanation is rather far-fetched since it implies a certain assumption: the Enlightenment did everything right, but for chance reasons (national salvation) its work was interrupted and the right things it did were not continued. Admittedly, the enlightenment cause did indeed get a lot right, and national salvation (or anti-imperialism) did exert some influence on enlightenment. However, we should realize that the scientism of Western Enlightenment reason left China with a paradoxical twofold legacy: it promoted the emancipation of the mind (mainly from the fetters of feudal thought), but created a new kind of superstition, i.e. a superstitious belief in the omnipotence of scientific method and in Western experience and political principles. This twofold legacy has lasted till the present day. On the one hand, the task of emancipating the mind from feudalism is not yet finished, and on the other, these new superstitions are still current. Both aspects have hindered the progress of China's modernization.

V. The Quintessence of the Enlightenment Spirit and the Present Mission

As a matter of fact, the concept of reason in the scientism of Enlightenment thought was, from the very beginning, subjected to criticism by some insightful thinkers of the time. For instance, the difference between the physical and the spiritual world and between natural sciences and the humanities which confused the Enlightenment thinkers was clarified by Giambattista Vico, an Italian thinker of the Enlightenment era, who revealed the difference between the two spheres of knowledge. For Vico, the "external" natural sphere and the "internal" human world of morality, arts, language, the mind and the emotions were distinct.

Therefore, the research methodology and nature of the knowledge formed in each sphere were also different. According to Isaiah Berlin, it was Vico who first separated natural sciences and the humanities: “Thereby he started a great debate of which the end is not in sight.”⁴¹ Another example is Kant’s distinction between theoretical reason and practical reason; in fact, he saw that scientific method or scientific reason (the intellect) was helpless before “ought” questions. In his *Critique of Judgment*, too, he indicated the diversity of reason. Hume, Hamann and Herder, living in the same period as Kant, all questioned the Enlightenment idea of reason. Hume was the first thinker to discover the logical gulf between the “is” (fact, science) and the “ought” (values, morals). Hamann explicitly pointed out the flaws in Kant’s idea of reason, i.e. Kant’s failure to recognize the position of tradition (and customs and beliefs) and language in the genesis and application of reason.⁴² Herder criticized the Enlightenment concept of universal reason. In the nineteenth century, Marxism should be considered the greatest influence on the Enlightenment idea of reason. The concept of practice, materialist dialectics and the idea of historical materialism of the founders of Marxism as well as their critique of Enlightenment reason vigorously promoted reflection on Enlightenment reason. With the twentieth century, yet more thinkers became involved in critical reflection on the Enlightenment idea of reason, as in the discussion of the logic and method of the humanities by Dilthey, Rickert, Cassirer, Ricoeur, Foucault, and so on; Gadamer’s critique of the Enlightenment idea that reason is free of prejudice; Western Marxists’ critique of instrumental reason and advocacy of value reason; the impact of Wittgenstein’s language game theory on the traditional idea of reason; Popper’s critique of the inductive reasoning of the positivist scientific method; Hayek’s critique of constructivist rationalism; Simon’s demonstration of bounded rationality, etc. These reflections and critiques constantly corrected the errors of the Enlightenment’s scientific concept of reason, so that people gradually became aware of the limitations of scientific reason, the diversity of forms of reason and the historicity of reason itself. This greatly advanced people’s understanding of reason and many related issues. We can see this as the re-enlightenment of the Enlightenment.

The fact is, the real value of the Enlightenment lies not only in its spirit of reason tinged with scientism, but, more importantly, in its spirit of reflective criticism and its questioning of superstition and dogma. Foucault has pointed out that “the thread that may connect us with Enlightenment is not faithfulness to doctrinal elements, but rather the permanent reactivation of an attitude—that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era.”⁴³ He offers an incisive explanation of the nature and content of this critique: “Criticism indeed consists of analyzing and reflecting upon limits.” “Criticism is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value, but rather as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and

41 Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, p. 131.

42 Johann Georg Hamann, *Metacritique of the Purism of Reason*, in James Schmidt, *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, pp. 157-174.

43 Michel Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?” in *The Foucault Reader*, p. 536.

to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying.”⁴⁴ For Foucault, the historical event of the Enlightenment did not succeed in realizing Kant’s ideal of casting off the state of immaturity. We are still immature now. However, Kant’s critical inquiry into the present and the self as he reflected on enlightenment is still meaningful. Nevertheless, we can see from the above discussion that the critique Foucault emphasizes is actually a kind of historicist criticism rather than the universalist critique provided by Enlightenment reason.

Actually, Marxism is the true heir to the Enlightenment spirit. The historical materialism and dialectics it advocates are themselves critical. Its critical spirit rejects any superstition, and its practical philosophy opposes any dogma. Hence, it is open, advances with the times, and has the ability to be self-critical. The historical materialist critique of Marxism is, in a sense, a perpetual dialogue between history, the present and the future; it is a continual reflection on what we already have and what we expect to achieve further. Given that our existing understanding is always limited and human understanding always needs to be improved, and that the real situation is always imperfect and humankind must always move toward transcendence, reflection and criticism are human activities that will never come to end, and Enlightenment will likewise be unfinished business, the business of doing away with superstition and dogma.

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⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 539.

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