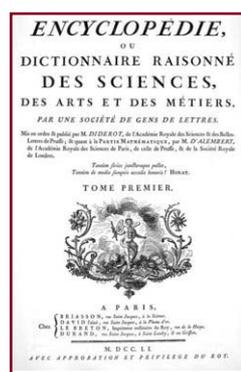




Philosophy, Equality and Slavery

*By the eighteenth century, slavery had become the root metaphor of Western political philosophy, connoting everything that was evil about power relations. Freedom, its conceptual antithesis, was considered by Enlightenment thinkers as the highest and universal political value. Yet the political metaphor began to take root at precisely the time that the... enslavement of non-Europeans... was increasing... to the point that by the mid-eighteenth century it came to underwrite the entire economic system of the West, paradoxically facilitating the global spread of the very Enlightenment ideals that were in such fundamental contradiction to it. [Susan Buck-Morss, 'Hegel and Haiti' *Critical Inquiry* 26/4 (Summer, 2000): 821.]*

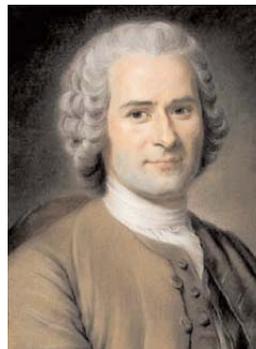
The 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire has brought reflection and general condemnation of the moral evil of slavery. Many of the ideals that underpin these moral judgments derive from what academics refer to as the 'Enlightenment'. This term captures the perceived progress of reason during the seventeenth and, in particular, the eighteenth century in Europe



and North America. In this article I first explain the importance of the French *Encyclopédie* as a symbol of the Enlightenment and as influencing real world politics via the French Revolution. Then I elaborate on why these real-world developments help to explain the philosophical insights of the Enlightenment, before briefly summarizing the views of some British Enlightenment philosophers. The main section of this article then turns to the thought of Immanuel Kant, the greatest philosopher of the Enlightenment, but also the one who best exemplifies the malign influence of slavery on the thinking of the greatest minds of the period.

The term 'the Enlightenment' captures an intellectual climate but it has been considered meaningful at least in part through two important products of eighteenth-century French history. First is the

Encyclopédie, an undertaking of 70,000 articles and roughly 20 million words that adopted a rationalist approach to science, medicine, history and ethics and that was published between 1751 and 1766. The main editors were Diderot and d'Alembert but the most famous contributor was probably Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose discussion on inequality has inspired social reformers ever since.



The publication of the *Encyclopédie* is often highlighted to suggest its influence on the second major French contribution to the continued relevance of the Enlightenment, namely the French Revolution. The fact that the eighteenth century culminated in the overthrow of the *ancien régime* and the general spread of democratic ideals partly explains why the moral and political philosophy of the period has provided a foundation for thinkers in the West until the present day.

Even a philosopher with relatively conservative views such as Hegel raised a toast every year on the anniversary of the French Revolution, and its manifesto of 'liberty, equality and brotherhood' is still a phrase associated with democratic progress today.



Having explained some of the historical reasons why the 'Enlightenment' is viewed as a coherent project rather than a vague collection of like-minded thinkers, it is necessary to explain why these events capture the ideals of the movement. Earlier philosophers had discussed concepts such as rights, democracy and, above all, human freedom, but the intellectual climate of the 1700s, perhaps uniquely, emphasized these ideals. For this reason, the Enlightenment is assumed to provide the foundation for moral progress in the modern world. More specifically, the important idea that all human

beings have *equal moral worth* was first advanced by Enlightenment philosophers, in particular Immanuel Kant.

But as the quote at the top of this article emphasizes, the Enlightenment project was coterminous with the expansion of slavery. While we must be careful in causally linking or directly blaming



Enlightenment philosophers for slavery, their writings have been strongly condemned by more recent social theorists. For example, the two most influential Enlightenment figures in Britain, John Locke and David Hume, clearly

held that black Africans were inferior to Europeans. Locke was a shareholder in the Royal African Company and authored the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina in which ‘every freeman’ was allowed to have ‘absolute power and authority over his negro slaves’. In his discussions on human nature, Hume suggested some natural differences according to national character, going so far as to state



I am apt to suspect the negroes to be naturally inferior to whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation.

Of all the Enlightenment philosophers, however, Kant is the most influential in contemporary moral philosophy. His influence stems mainly from his idea that all persons are owed respect and ought not to be treated in humiliating ways. One way to think of this ideal is that all persons have equal moral worth. Human rights law, and indeed modern liberal morality, clearly derives from Kantian arguments that we all share a basic moral status that governments and, indeed, other individuals cannot violate. As modern philosophers put it, Kant’s thought is characterized by its *universalism*. That is to say that, for Kant, ethical principles should be consistent and rational, which requires that they apply equally and rationally to all persons.



Unfortunately, however, even Kant was not immune to a European inability to perceive non-Europeans



as equal human beings. He denied that non-Europeans had the same status as Europeans, and to do so he was led to suggest an essential intrinsic difference between Europeans and non-Europeans, particularly native Americans and Africans. Indeed, Thomas

McCarthy, an influential philosopher, has recently argued: ‘In fact, it seems to have been Kant who first introduced the idea of explaining racial differentiation by postulating in our original ancestors a fund of four germs or seeds, each of which contained... one set of racial characteristics’.

So while Kant is arguably the greatest influence on modern moral universalism and the ideal of human equality, he is also one of the most important sources of race-based differentiation within humanity. His view was that different races had different inherent capacities: ‘in short, this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that he was stupid.’ While this may be Kant’s most notorious statement on human racial difference, it is hardly unique. Indeed, this quote derives from a larger work, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, that seeks to explain a four-fold differentiation of humankind based on four ‘races’.

A common response to these sorts of quotes is to wonder whether Kant’s thought and the Enlightenment more generally necessarily requires hierarchical differentiation among human beings. Some critical theorists insist that racist differentiation is at the very heart of the Enlightenment project—defining moral agents in terms of a rational thinker that was idealized as male, white and privileged. Others insist that Kant was inconsistent in applying universal values. Modern Kantians of course reject the idea of racial differentiation (and hierarchy) among humans by emphasizing the inconsistency between Kant’s notion of biologically inferior races and his assumption that human beings are rational agents worthy of respect. A contemporary example shows why this inconsistency is not just an academic or philosophical dispute: while the US Declaration of Independence of 1776 declared it ‘self-evident’ that all men were created



equal, this truth was denied to slaves and of course women. To the extent that we are inspired by these

ideals today, we accept it as 'self-evident' that they must apply equally to all human beings.

Whatever the connection between Kant's philosophy and his views on human races, the fact that he was led to make such arguments shows just how far the experience of European slavery affected European social and intellectual life. So while we ought to continue to build on Kant's insight that all persons are owed equal concern and respect, we should also remember that the slave trade's legacy is not limited to economic inequalities between Africa and Europe



(and North America). The European experience of African slavery and American colonization served as the original source of racialized—and indeed racist—thinking. That men of the intellect of Locke, Hume and Kant were not immune to such thinking suggests that apologies for slavery are not simply about the causes of global economic inequality, but about the failure to universalize the human experience to all persons.

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Resources

The **University of Michigan's** website (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/>) is a collaborative project designed to make accessible to teachers, students and other interested English-language readers translations of articles from the *Encyclopédie*.

The **Yale University** website (www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/states/nc05.htm) has the text of the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina,

The government **Abolition of the Slave Trade** website (www.direct.gov.uk/en/slavery/DG_065970) gives information on the anniversary of the 1807 Abolition of the Slave Trade Act and discusses the 'issues for today'—tackling the legacies, including modern-day poverty, inequality, discrimination, racism and contemporary slavery in all its forms—as well as giving details of events to mark the bicentenary around the country.

The full text of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** can be found on the UN website. (www.un.org/Overview/rights.html) The Real Histories Directory also has a number of resources that can help in teaching about equality and human rights, particularly in relation to the subject of slavery. The UNESCO publication **All Human Beings... Manual for human rights education** (<http://portal.unesco.org/education/>) provides basic documentation, specific teaching materials and some practical exercises for the classroom. Attention has been paid to making human rights principles meaningful to children's daily lives and experiences. Active teaching methods, an inter-disciplinary approach and the learning of values, attitudes and skills alongside knowledge are promoted in the text. **Citizenship and Democracy in Schools: diversity, identity, equality** (www.trentham-books.co.uk/) is divided into three parts and, in the first part, the moral and legal requirements of the Human Rights Act and the Convention on the Rights of the Child are placed at the centre of the Citizenship agenda. Produced by Oxfam, **Developing Rights: Teaching about Rights and Responsibilities for Ages 11-14** (www.oxfam.org.uk/coolplanet/teachers/devrights/index.htm) examines young people's own concerns in terms of rights issues, allowing pupils to discover how young people can claim their rights around the world. **Human rights in the curriculum: History**, (www.amnesty.org.uk/books_details.asp?BookID=55) an Amnesty publication, encourages students to consider slavery, child labour, the struggle for women's rights and the Holocaust from a human rights perspective.

If students are interested in the issues of modern-day slavery, **Anti-Slavery International** (www.antislavery.org/) is the world's oldest international human rights organisation and the only charity

in the United Kingdom working exclusively against slavery and related abuses. It has both contemporary and historical material essential to anyone researching slavery. The Citizenship Foundation and the Church Mission Society have collaborated to produce a resource pack for Citizenship, History and Religious Education called **Ending Slavery: an unfinished business**. It can be downloaded from the Citizenship Foundation website (www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk/main/resource.php?s324) The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has also published the findings of joint research with the University of Hull and Anti-Slavery International into slavery in the modern world and the forms of slavery that exist in the UK. The findings are available from the **JRF website** at www.jrf.org.uk/KNOWLEDGE/FINDINGS/socialpolicy/2035.asp

For a different viewpoint on slavery and other topics, **New African Perspective** (<http://newafricanperspective.blogspot.com/>) is a blog posted by UK-based Africans determined to put an Africanist and humanist perspective on societal-based issues, while **Talking Race** (www.multiverse.ac.uk/attachments/TalkingRaceSite/index.html) is a website for student teachers about 'race' and ethnicity, where a number of teachers from various cultural backgrounds discuss issues to do with 'race' and ethnicity. **The Real Histories Directory's** Events pages (www.realhistories.org.uk/diary.php) have details of lectures, discussions and debates taking place many concerned with the slave trade, abolition and its legacies.

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The Real Histories Directory

The **Real Histories Directory** (www.realhistories.org.uk) has been created as a resource tool for teachers, parents, pupils and the wider community to support them in their teaching and learning about cultural diversity in the UK. The website helps you to locate **resources** in your and other LEAs, such as storytellers, dual language books, culturally diverse toys and relevant **events** taking place in the UK. There are also items of **news** that may be of particular interest to schools and teachers.

You can also submit resources that you would like to include in the directory free of charge by visiting the site, clicking on 'Submit an entry' and following the on-screen instructions.

As well as the varied resources available, each month a new **Topic of the Month** is added with suggestions for using the Directory in the classroom and at home.

We are interested in hearing your views on our Topics and the Real Histories website. You can email comments and suggestions to: realhistories@runnymedetrust.org.