The Radical Enlightenment

Freemasonry
Illuminati
Adam Weishaupt (1748-1830)
Thomas Paine (1737-1809)
*Common Sense* (1776)
The *Treatise of the Three Impostors* (1719)
Julien Offray de la Mettrie (1709-1751)
Baron d’Holbach (1723-1789)

Today’s lecture concerns the “radical” Enlightenment—that is, that handful of *philosophes* and philosophies that were part of the Enlightenment but who existed on its more extreme or radical fringe. This includes Freemasons and their more politically-radical offshoot in Bavaria known as the Illuminati; proponents of republican government as opposed to enlightened absolutism or even constitutional monarchy; and finally atheists and materialists.

The Freemasons were an all-male secret fraternal organization that was dedicated to enlightenment, to civic virtue, social charity, and equality among its members. Indeed, the Masons sought to make abstract Enlightenment ideals like reason, equality, self-governance, freedom of conscience, and religious toleration* concrete in their meetings, which were held in Masonic “lodges”. Theoretically, Masons did not discriminate on the bases of social or professional standing. All members were considered equal within the Masonic lodge: from the common man to the wealthy noble; but at the same time the lodges usually only admitted well-to-do artisans and merchants. Members were required to profess belief in a Supreme Being, but their specific theological beliefs were not considered important; that is, the Masons practiced religious toleration within the lodges.

Masons were primarily concerned with the moral improvement of their members and of society. They also represent a space in which the Third Estate could participate in civil society. Indeed, through Masonry the bourgeoisie, or middle class, found a way that it could participate in the new enlightened political culture. In France especially, the growing bourgeoisie, who were rapidly acquiring wealth and economic power, was nevertheless precluded from the political sphere—they were still members of the Third Estate, after all and their political participation was restricted. Excluded from politics, this middle class began to meet in non-political, or social spaces—recall salons, cafes, taverns—and in Masonic lodges. The cosmopolitan and egalitarian lodges provided a social space in which bourgeois morality and liberty might be realized independently of the political sphere. Thus

* Recall your reading of Lessing’s *Nathan the Wise*, or the parable of the three sons that was a plea for religious toleration. The author of that story, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who also wrote today’s reading *Ernst and Falk*, was in fact a Freemason.
the lodges constituted a form of bourgeois morality and egalitarian social organization opposed to the hierarchical social order of the *Ancien Régime*. Indeed, they represented a kind of republic in miniature—the Masons adopted such republican practices as majority-rule elections for Masonic officials, governance of each local lodge by a national Grand Lodge, constitutions that governed the administration of the lodges, and a philosophy of equality and meritocracy. The Masons were not overtly politically, but did subscribe to republican forms of government within their lodges. They did, however, inspire offshoot secret societies that were more overtly political. One such group was the Illuminati.

The Illuminati were a politically-radical secret society inspired by the Freemasons. The professor of canon law Adam Weishaupt founded the Illuminati in 1776 in the German kingdom of Bavaria. They espoused a kind of anarcho-utopian political order in which there were no rulers or states. Weishaupt believed that by organizing a secret society, training its members in their anarcho-utopian ideas, and then secretly infiltrating governments throughout Europe, the Illuminati could bring about their vision of a society free of rulers and states.

Weishaupt and his followers were inspired by the organization of the Masons, but they also joined Masonic lodges in order to recruit Masons into their own organization. The Illuminati were a decidedly fringe movement with few followers, but their place in the popular imagination of the eighteenth-century was much greater than their actual significance. Indeed, some contemporary writers—the most notable being the Jesuit priest and anti-philosophe Augustin Barruel—had claimed that the Illuminati and other secret societies had engineered the French Revolution, and in fact all manner of conspiracy theories exist today concerning the Illuminati, which was in fact suppressed and abolished by the Bavarian government in 1785. While the Masons adopted democratic and republican forms of government within their lodges, they also advocated obedience and loyalty to the rulers of their respective states—that is, they did not actively foment rebellion or revolution. This was of course not true of the Illuminati. As such, the Illuminati represent a much more overtly political and radical organization than the Masons.

The Freemasons and the Illuminati were secret societies dedicated to realizing certain enlightened and republican ideals, the former within the space of the lodge, the latter by infiltrating European governments and bringing them down from the inside. But there were also open supporters of republican government who did not seek to realize their political ideas through membership in secret societies. Perhaps the most notable republican was the Englishman Thomas Paine*

A republic is a form of political organization in which citizens and their representatives, rather than monarchs or hereditary rulers, govern the nation. This

* Please see the class lecture from 22 October 2009 for more in-depth biographical information about Thomas Paine.
was in fact a radical idea during the Enlightenment, when many supporters of enlightened absolutism and constitutional monarchy could still be found. Paine’s *Common Sense*, published only 2 days before the Thirteen British colonies would declare their independence from Great Britain, was perhaps the most articulate and popular expression of republican government penned during the eighteenth century. It was in fact a fierce call for American independence from Great Britain, written by a native Englishman. It also included arguments against hereditary monarchy and nobility in general; claimed the natural equality of all people and pointed out how aristocratic social orders and monarchies violate this equality; and proposed a distinction between and offered definitions and delineated the proper roles of, society and government,

In addition to being a political radical and a republican, Thomas Paine was also an atheist, another hallmark of the radical Enlightenment. You know that the while the Enlightenment was fiercely anti-clerical, and that while Enlightenment thinkers famously rallied against religious intolerance, superstition, and fanaticism, only a handful of the *philosophes* were in fact atheists. Hume famously commented that there was a lack of atheists in England, and I think this points to the fact that even during the Enlightenment, atheism was still something of a radical position. But there were of course deists, dissenters, and other heterodox believers. Sometimes these figures were referred to as atheists, but they were not in fact.

It is important to note that I am using the term “atheist” to refer to those individuals who actively assert that there is in fact no God. It is important to keep this in mind during the Enlightenment—sometimes religious heretics and heterodox believers who simply had a different conception of God than orthodox believers were referred to as atheists. Additionally, those thinkers hostile to organized and institutional religion were sometimes chided as atheists. The most notable example of this use of “atheist,” to refer to someone hostile to organized religion or orthodox religious beliefs came to light in the controversy surrounding the anonymous pamphlet *The Treatise of the Three Impostors*. This was a pamphlet that appeared during the early eighteenth century that claimed that the founders of the three “religions of the Book,” Moses, Jesus, and Mohamed, were in fact impostors who had corrupted natural religion by exploiting the ignorance of the people. While the *Treatise* attacked organized religion and instead advocated a natural religion akin to deism, its opponents nevertheless reviled it as an “atheistic” text. Indeed, recall that in his own entry on “Atheism” in the *Philosophical Dictionary*, Voltaire recounted that “atheist” was often used as an epithet rather than an accurate description of someone’s beliefs. In fact, Catholics and Protestants often accused each other of being atheists simply because they didn’t agree on every jot and title of Christian doctrine.
Nevertheless, bona fide atheists did in fact exist during the Enlightenment. Perhaps the two most notorious atheists were Julien la Mettrie* and the Baron d'Holbach. La Mettrie was a French philosopher who applied Thomas Hobbes’ notion of the mechanistic universe to man himself; man was a machine and every bodily function was a result of matter in motion. Of course there was no room for spiritual or metaphysical explanations in la Mettrie’s philosophy. If everything was a result of the organization and behavior of matter, with no extra-material or supernatural variables at play, this suggested that everything must be matter. There were no souls, minds, or Gods at work in the universe. Or if there were, they must be understood as matter. This was pretty radical even for Enlightenment standards, and got la Mettrie run out of not only France, but the Netherlands as well. He took refuge in Friedrich the Great’s Prussia where he eventually died.

Baron d'Holbach was a German nobleman and atheist who mercilessly attacked organized religion and posited, like la Mettrie, that the material world was the only that existed. His System of Nature (1770), which recounted his materialistic philosophy, became known as the atheist’s bible, for it rejected any supernatural or metaphysical explanation for natural phenomenon and mocked religious belief. God, according to d’Holbach, was superfluous and in fact contrary to Reason and to common sense. Proving that atheism was a fringe position in Enlightenment Europe, such luminaries as Voltaire and Friedrich the Great distanced themselves from, and indeed, attacked, d’Holbach’s ideas.

* Please see the reading assignments for 6 October 2009, specifically la Mettrie’s Man a Machine for a primary source exposition of la Mettrie’s views on human nature and their relationship to his atheism and materialism.