

Transcript

Thinking about freedom

Dan Taylor:

Hello, I'm Dan Taylor, and I'm a Lecturer in Social and Political Thought at The Open University. Often, when we consider important concepts in politics like freedom, we turn to the philosophers of the 'Enlightenment'. People like John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire and Immanuel Kant. But what was the Enlightenment, and why does it matter?

In a nutshell, the Enlightenment was an intellectual movement in Europe over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It emphasised the power of reason and science to understand the world. Custom, tradition and superstition were swept aside. Philosophers from across Europe began to talk a lot about liberty – that human beings have a right to be free. John Locke argued for free speech, toleration of most religious beliefs, and representative government. In his view, we all have a basic natural right to life, liberty and private property.

These ideas changed the modern world. They inspired revolutions in America and France. As one Enlightenment philosopher, Kant, put it, Enlightenment was humanity's emergence from 'self-incurred immaturity'. It was time to be courageous, to have the courage to use our reason. 'Sapere aude', Kant said: dare to know.

But look beneath these revolutions, and countries like Britain, France and the United States were rapidly expanding the slave trade. Between 1525 and 1866, over 12 million Africans were forced onto slave ships and transported across the Atlantic to North America, South America and the Caribbean. While the philosophers of the Enlightenment had a lot to say about freedom, they rarely talked about slavery, at least of the kind of the slave trade. Many key thinkers, like Kant, published views that we would now call racist. Others, like John Locke and Thomas Hobbes, owned shares in slave plantations. John Locke even drafted the constitution of Carolina, in what is now North America, in which slavery was justified and rebellion forbidden.

We seem to have a paradox then. On the one hand, we have a set of important philosophers like Locke and Kant whose ideas about freedom are important, influential and widely read today, particularly in the liberal tradition. They underpin modern ideas about democracy, government through the consent of the governed, and human rights. But who, at the same time, didn't extend these ideas of freedom to Black Africans, and, in some cases, seemed to support rather than oppose slavery. Some would argue that these thinkers were simply products of their time and are of little interest today, except for historians. But others would argue that they had important things to say about freedom against tyranny, and that it is neither fair nor realistic to expect them to live up to twenty-first century standards, particularly when we consider the world they lived in.

Let's get to grips with this challenge for understanding freedom. You're going to hear from two professors with different perspectives. Both will argue that the context matters. First off, we're going to hear the UK's first professor of Black studies, Kehinde Andrews, someone who has written widely on racism, colonialism and black radicalism. Kehinde, could you tell us why the context matters for understanding Enlightenment philosophers and their ideas of freedom?

Kehinde Andrews:

Basically when we think about something like the Enlightenment, the defence usually is — Look, these are obviously racist people — Rousseau, Locke, Voltaire, Kant. It's pretty obvious, like you can go and find very clearly, they talk about racial hierarchy, they talk about people not being human beings, they justify slavery to different extents, right? I mean, it's really bad, like, they're not just a little bit racist, you can find the kind of architecture of racism within all of these key philosophies. And the defence usually is, 'yes, they were racist, but that's separate from their moral philosophy, you know, someone like Immanuel Kant gives us this Critique of Pure Reason, and this is a wonderful thing. So why would we throw the baby out with the bathwater?', effectively. But it's just a completely wrong way to think about it, right. All of these thinkers of the Enlightenment, it is white supremacy in a very real way. Like, it's not a coincidence that, like, all of them, Locke, Rousseau, etc., all had these beliefs that Europe was superior, that whiteness was better, that Black people were inferior, and had varying theories about what that meant. That's not a coincidence. That's actually the kind of basis of the premise of where they come from.

Dan Taylor:

So, Kehinde is arguing there that we cannot cherry-pick some parts of Enlightenment ideas of freedom that seem modern and progressive, while ignoring the racist views that appear elsewhere in, say, Locke or Kant. We will hear some examples in a moment. Kehinde again, on why the historical context also matters.

Kehinde Andrews:

The Enlightenment can't happen in the fifteenth century, or even in the sixteenth century, and it only really starts in late seventeenth, eighteenth century, because prior to that, the idea that Europe was ahead, the idea that Europe was the place where knowledge came from, was frankly farcical. This wasn't the case, right? 'By 1492, when Columbus sailed the ocean blue', Europe is behind most places, like it's just coming out of the Dark Age, where somewhere like China has unbroken civilization for thousands of years. Africa, they couldn't just go in and colonise Africa at that point, they don't have the resources or the capacity, etc. And 1492 is an important year because that's when the Moors are kicked out of Spain and you know, we see the Islamic civilization, the Islamic Empire starts to crumble.

At this point, Europe is basically behind. And what happens is Columbus' voyage to the Americas sets off the largest genocide in human history, killing up to the midpoint, estimates about 65 million people in the Americas. That creates the space for the Atlantic system. That's a nice way for saying the slave trade, right? And it is the Americas through gold, silver, then tobacco, then sugar, then cotton. I mean, that's where Europe enriches itself, becomes the seat of power, becomes the seat of knowledge. And it takes a couple of hundred years. So the Enlightenment is only possible because of that barbaric colonial violence, which puts Europe at the top. So when someone like Kant or Locke, or any of them, who are saying like, 'look, Europe is a civilised place, Europe is the place where rationality comes from', that's only possible because of all that violence that created this world, right?

Dan Taylor:

That was Kehinde there arguing that we cannot separate the power of Europe in this period from the rise of slavery and colonialism. In his view, genocide and slavery made it possible for some Europeans to claim that Europe was the centre of human civilisation. In his book *The New Age of Empire: How Racism and Colonialism Rule the World*, Kehinde calls this white supremacy. He explains what he means in relation to the philosopher Kant.

Kehinde Andrews:

And so deeply seated in their ideas is this idea of white supremacy, right? We talk about someone like Immanuel Kant, who says that 'all the talents are in the white race, the white man is rational. And this is how we know about the world'. So all of these concepts like democracy, tolerance, freedom, human rights, the starting point of that is that whiteness is better, that whiteness is superior. The starting point from that, is that we are the people who can theorise them. And so I mean, in the book, I write a lot about Kant, I have a lot of Kant examples. Kant actually spends a whole big chunk of his time doing what he calls moral geography, which is just racist, it's just really dubious, dodgy racial science, where, you know, Africans are always at the bottom of this pyramid, and then white people are at the top. And there's all this hierarchy in between. And, you know, he believed it was because of climate. And because of that we were lazier, or we didn't have the same aptitude and, you know, parts of Kant where he's giving advice to slave owners and how best to beat us. Because in his philosophy, our skin is too thick for whips, so you shouldn't use a whip, you should use a split bamboo cane, apparently. This is Immanuel Kant, this is the person who apparently is giving us our human rights, which should really just make you pause, and think, there's something wrong here. And he spent like, there's just loads, like half of his work is this dubious racial theory, which is so completely nonsensical. And at the time, he says, look, you cannot separate my racial theory (what he calls moral geography) from his moral philosophy because, it's because he theorises that he is a superior being, that he can then theorise the moral philosophy. So the Critique of Pure Reason sounds universal, sounds nice, but it's actually deeply embedded in white supremacy. And what that gives us, is it gives us a set of rights that really justifies racism, like in a very real way.

If you think about the defence, often of the Enlightenment more broadly, is, well, you have all these great concepts. Even someone like Kant at the end comes out against slavery and colonialism, and the idea that, you know, we should be free to rule our own places, etc. But he does so in a way, and the Enlightenment more generally does so in a way, in a kind of similar way that I would say that you shouldn't poach gorillas and you should let gorillas have their own habitat. Like, you can say people shouldn't be slaves and not believe they're fully human beings. And that really is the universal rights we get from the Enlightenment, it kind of is that. And if you look at the world today, the poorest part of the world is black Africa, right, Sub-Saharan Africa. The richest part of the world is where white people live. And there is a hierarchy in between. So we've literally created the world in the image of white supremacy. And that cannot be separated from the ideas of rights, freedom and justice, which come from the Enlightenment. And it's not a coincidence, I would say.

Dan Taylor:

Kehinde's point there was that racist ideas underpinned the worldview of an Enlightenment philosopher like Kant. The essay that Kehinde discussed by Kant is called 'Of the different races'. Unfortunately, these ideas were not uncommon. Carl Linnaeus, the founder of modern taxonomy, who came up with a modern system to name all the different animals, plants and organisms then known, also divided human beings up into a similarly dubious hierarchy. So, some important Enlightenment thinkers did believe and argue for what we would now call white supremacy.

But does that mean that these thinkers have nothing to offer us today? Let's hear from a professor, Holly Brewer, who has carefully studied the history of the early United States and the British Empire, and who is leading a project on John Locke and slavery. Holly begins with a story about King James I of England (who was also James VI of Scotland), and a rather unusual lottery that took place ten years before John Locke was born.

Holly Brewer:

In 1622, James I had twenty men sitting around him, most of them noblemen, a few naval officers, just a couple of merchants. And in front of him, in front of all of them, in the middle of the table, was a ball with wax balls, and in each wax ball was a number. And before them as well was a map of the New World, of the Americas, with marks across it, showing latitude, and within each degree of latitude was a number. And each of them chose a ball with a number, and then their name was assigned to that latitude. And this was before England could completely even claim the Caribbean, right? 1622. They're having a lottery for the New World. And this isn't exactly capitalism, it's not certainly equality, it's not fair play. It's about power. So my point would be that, John Locke — we want to simplistically say, John Locke and capitalism can simply be equated, these ideas about democracy and rights. But in fact, we should be seeing a constant struggle over rights emerging even as capitalism emerged. So I would frame it slightly differently.

Dan Taylor:

So Holly is also arguing that the context matters. European countries like England were caught up in struggles for power and domination with external rivals, like neighbouring Spain and France, while also dealing with internal rebellion and unrest. Kings ruled without any accountability to Parliament. And early capitalist ventures, like those that established the slave trade, were often pursued with royal patronage and protection. This was a time of monopolies, not free markets. Ideas of freedom were very different.

Holly Brewer:

This was not a world where there was freedom of religion. This was a world where the king was the head of the Church. Where, especially after 1662, in the Restoration of Charles II to the throne of England, a new feast day was introduced, a new day of worship, and the Book of Common Prayer, whereby everybody who came to church was asked to swear absolute fealty to the king as God's anointed servant. So using that kind of language, and to his heirs after him, and you were binding your heirs after you. A passive obedience, even if you thought what the king was doing was wrong. This was explicit in the language of those sermons.

So it's in that world we should absolutely place John Locke. And he's very also troubled by how to respond to Charles II. So what we should remember as well is that he was a young man in his teens going to Westminster School, when Charles I was executed, which is only a block away. I think he must have attended the execution, or at least heard it, heard the crowds. There's no question in 1649. He was within literally — you can do it on a map, I've done it on the map, you can see it. And his father supported Parliament, his father fought for Cromwell, he wrote an ode to Cromwell in 1653. But by early February of 1660, he's terrified by the anarchy that controls the streets. There's three armies marching on London, and he writes — I quote this in one of my articles that I wrote — but he writes, 'I would fight if only I knew who to fight for, if my body would not simply become a carcass for other men's swords'. In other words, it had become meaningless by 1660, after Cromwell's death.

So in the face of anarchy, he chose monarchy. He clearly sided with the king in 1660. And in the 1660s, he's writing political works that are sympathetic to these ideas about divine right and power. And even in his role as a secretary and writing the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina. He's writing language, although I don't think he's responsible for it, but writing language about absolute power in terms of masters over slaves.

Dan Taylor:

That was Holly there arguing that Locke lived in a very illiberal, very unfree time. Holly also mentioned the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina. This was a legal document that set out the rules and form

of government for this new English colony in North America, in what is now most of the land between Virginia and Florida. This new government was very hierarchical, with slave-owners at the top, who were given absolute power of life and death over their slaves. Now, John Locke is believed to have written this document about a decade before he wrote his ground-breaking political works. Holly thinks he was just paid to write it, like a lawyer is paid to write a will. Others disagree. Over to Kehinde.

Kehinde Andrews:

I think when you're thinking about someone like John Locke, I mean, you have to kind of teach those ideas for what they are right? And the context is so important. You cannot have a legitimate, or surely a legitimate, sensible source of your idea of democracy, of freedom, from someone who profited from the enslavement of African people, from someone who justified slavery, from somebody who wrote the [Fundamental] Constitutions of Carolina, one of the most racist documents. Surely we will accept, that is not a source, a solid source, anyway, for ideas of rights, freedom, etc., I would have thought. The only reason that Locke and people like that have that pre-eminence is because we literally just ignore the darker side, right? Even think about the defence, I can already hear some people saying, 'he's a man of his time'. Well, at the time, there were plenty of people who thought these were terrible things, right? Mostly Black people. I'm sure the enslaved were like, 'nah, I don't think this is a great idea'. Like, let's take Locke's idea of representative. Well, he wasn't saying that we should be, like Black people, were part of that, right? There was actually within his idea of democracy, there's this idea of who can be a full human, and Black people just simply weren't fully human, right.

So the question you ask is, to what extent has that changed? Some ways it's changed, we can have votes in some sense. But actually in America even that's not always a hundred per cent the case. But certainly in terms of full participation, do Black people have full participation in the Americas? No, of course not. But should we be surprised when the architects of these ideas didn't think that we were fully human? I would probably say, not really, right. So we have to be really honest and open and say actually, I would say, this is John Locke, Voltaire, Rousseau, Kant, they're just not credible sources, if we want to have a proper expansive way that we understand race, freedom, etc, etc.

Dan Taylor:

That was Kehinde there with an important point about perspective. When we turn to Enlightenment philosophers and their ideas of human freedom, we assume that their perspective applies to all human beings. But as Kehinde argues, people like Locke and Kant didn't think that all human beings were equal. The challenge for us then is whether we can rescue and reclaim their ideas of freedom, and make them modern, or whether they are just not credible sources full stop. Over to Holly now on why we must not forget the context in which Locke and others wrote.

Holly Brewer:

The problem is that scholars, especially after World War II, tried to figure out where ideals of freedom, of equality, of government based on the consent of the governed, of modern science, etc, they looked in the past, they tried to figure out where these ideals came from. And they sorted out from vast troves of records, certain thinkers, certain writers, who they saw as more progressive, usually more enlightened. And they sought these out and published them and had students read them.

But what happened is later scholars came along and said, 'What about race and slavery? And how are these men implicated?' And essentially, here's how they framed the question: 'How in Enlightenment ideals could they justify colonialism and slavery?' And looked in those works, and only in those works for the origins of racism and slavery. So in other words, they took this preselected pile, and that's where they looked. And my point would be, they shouldn't have started with the preselected

pile, they should have started in its own time, with the works of thinkers who were actively justifying colonialism and slavery, and to whom in many cases scholars like Locke were responding. In other words, they were the ones saying, 'No, no, no, this shouldn't be this way. What can we do differently?'

Dan Taylor:

That was Holly there warning against cherry-picking the worst evidence. In her view, the way that the history of political thought is often taught means that we focus too much on certain key thinkers and not on the context they reacted against. Back to Holly who argues that we must recognise the power structure of the time. England was under an unaccountable king, Charles II, who imposed slavery in a way that made opposition very difficult.

Holly Brewer:

And it's not that they aren't tainted in the process, even engaging with that, especially as Locke was, an administrator for empire by the 1690s. He could have done more. I look at those records, and I think, well, couldn't he have done this, maybe at this point?

He was also working in a political context, in a power structure within limits. So for example, Charles II gave out fifty acres of land to any planter who bought a slave or indentured servant, by proclamation. So this wasn't approved by Parliament, it wasn't local law, it was the king saying, you get 50 acres of land if you buy a slave or indentured servant. Think about what that means. And then the right to vote depended on owning land. The right to have a seat in the appointed upper house depended on how many acres you owned. So in other words he was setting up a structure that supported larger estates and bound labour, especially slavery after the Restoration. And in Jamaica, it was even more crazy. In 1665, if you just promised – and you were a gentleman approved by the Royal Governor – if you just promised that you would purchase 100 slaves or indentured servants, you could get a 3000 acre – over the next seven years – you could get a 3000 acre contiguous estate, and the king gave it to you. This is the world to which Locke is responding. This is the kind of ideology about the rightness of larger estates and bound labourers and masters and lords, at which the king was the epicentre. Where, as sermons of the time pointed out, you're born a prince the son of a king, you're born a slave the son of a slave, you're born a freeman the son of a freeman, this is the kind of world that that Locke is responding to. So my point would be that these are fundamentally important questions that people like Ibram Kendi, and so many others, Charles Mills, have been asking, but in looking for answers only with Enlightenment scholars, they've been looking in the wrong place. And in fact, they've been missing some of the key reasons why we even should read them at all, which is that they're opposed to these ideas.

Dan Taylor:

So Kehinde and Holly do agree perhaps that the context matters, and that we shouldn't cherry-pick what material we use. But are there other alternative sources or political constitutions of the time that might be better guides for us today? Over to Kehinde.

Kehinde Andrews:

Before I wrote the New Age of Empire, I probably would have said, well, you know, you can still teach some of this stuff. Nah, the more I think about that, there are certain places which just aren't solid places to go, if you want to understand rights, freedom of speech, and all this stuff. And there are much better places to go. So, for example, the Haitian Revolution, for instance, the Haitian Constitution is probably the best document actually, if you want to look at humanity fully and look at really about a proper, expansive vision of rights, I would suggest you go to the Haitian Constitution, rather than anything that the Americans produced or the Enlightenment produced. Because this is the moment where people are actually claiming their freedom and putting that out to the world. So I

actually would honestly say, Locke, I'd just teach to say, this is why we don't do it. There's much better ways if we want to have a fully, a fully inclusive democracy.

Dan Taylor:

Over to Holly now on another Englishman who was taught by John Locke at university. He wrote a book in 1680 powerfully criticising slavery, having spent fifteen years as a minister in Barbados and Virginia, witnessing the cruelty of slavery first-hand.

Holly Brewer:

There's someone named Morgan Godwyn, who was a minister who spoke out openly against the slave trade, calling it a pact with the devil. Shortly before James II came to the Crown in February of 1685, he just disappeared. But all three of his mentors were prosecuted for sedition. I mean, this was not, and he said when he wrote it, he said, 'I know I'm taking my life in my hands by writing this, but I can no longer be silent'. So it's about acknowledging the power structures that existed then. And the world within which people started to articulate theories and alternative theories about how to challenge the ruling elite.

Dan Taylor:

That was Holly there on the dangers of openly criticising slavery in the time of Locke. Perhaps there is a risk of holding people like Locke, Kant or other Enlightenment philosophers to modern standards when they lived in a very different world. Holly explains.

Holly Brewer:

To some extent, the whole project assumes that we live in a quote unquote, 'Enlightened world', in a fully sort of democratic or whatever world. We don't. A lot of these older ideas and principles, and legal mechanisms from before the Enlightenment still exist, in terms of questions of ownership of land, etc. Even in England itself, where, what, the Crown owns some 20 per cent of land, where you got great aristocrats who own more than a million acres and whose land still goes by primogeniture. I mean, land in the title. I mean, we don't live in a fully modern world.

At this time, sedition was a crime. And sedition was defined as criticising royal policy. If royal policy was the Royal African Company, and promoting the slave trade, which the king's brother was in charge of, it was literally dangerous – it was dangerous to the point of potentially your life – to criticise it too openly. And we need to reconstruct all of these debates within that world and not put these thinkers on a pedestal. Of course not. They were living in that world, their ideas are of their time, their ideas are worth thinking through. They're really important because they're the basis of so many of our own, legally, ideologically. We also should be thinking about how we can move beyond them. And they're not, their hands aren't clean, I don't think any of them, and yet they were fighting against the most overt justifications for slavery and empire. In most cases, those identified as enlightened were identified for those reasons.

Dan Taylor:

In other words, we have to respect that the context in which Enlightenment philosophers wrote was very different from ours. It was much more dangerous to oppose the government of the day. While people like Locke may seem flawed by modern standards, their ideas about representative government and freedom – ideas which hadn't yet been put into practice – are useful for thinking about today. They help us understand the history of modern democracies.

Thanks to our speakers Kehinde Andrews and Holly Brewer for their fascinating insights into freedom, slavery and the Enlightenment.