

Saggi

What is Enlightenment Today?¹

Che cos'è l'Illuminismo oggi?

LUIGI CARANTI

Università di Catania, Italy

luigi.caranti@unict.it, ORCID 0000-0003-4637-9792

Abstract. This paper examines the meaning of Enlightenment in the contemporary “post-truth” era. Starting with examples of mass credulity and misinformation, it argues that contemporary obscurantism differs from that faced by eighteenth-century thinkers because it is generated not by a lack of information but by an overabundance of information combined with echo chambers and the rejection of scientific authority. The paper revisits Immanuel Kant’s classic conception of Enlightenment as the individual’s emergence from self-incurred immaturity through the courageous use of one’s own understanding. It then considers Marina Garcés’ proposal, strongly influenced by Kant, of a “new radical Enlightenment.” While acknowledging the relevance of Kantian critical reason for a new Enlightenment, the paper argues that Kant’s framework is insufficient to address the structural conditions that undermine public discourse today. In particular, growing economic inequality and the influence of wealth over public debate distort democratic deliberation and weaken the corrective power of rational argument. The paper concludes that a contemporary Enlightenment must move beyond Kantian reliance on free public reasoning by confronting the material inequalities that undermine democratic legitimacy and by reimagining political strategies to restore trust, equality, and democratic participation.

Keywords: Kant, Enlightenment, post-truth era, democracy, economic inequality.

¹ In accordance with the journal’s editorial guidelines, Kant’s quotations are cited using the title (as given in the English translation adopted) of the volume, followed by the page number. The latter corresponds to the page numbering of the *Akademieausgabe*.

Riassunto. Questo saggio indaga il significato dell'Illuminismo nell'era della "post-verità." Partendo da esempi di credulità di massa e disinformazione, si sostiene che l'oscurantismo contemporaneo si differenzia da quello del XVIII secolo perché generato non da mancanza di informazione, bensì da un suo eccesso, combinato con il rifiuto dell'autorità scientifica. Il saggio riprende la concezione kantiana classica dell'Illuminismo come emancipazione dell'individuo da una condizione di auto-inflitta immaturità. Analizza poi la proposta, ispirata a Kant, di un "nuovo Illuminismo radicale" da parte di Marina Garcés. Pur riconoscendo la rilevanza della ragione critica kantiana, il saggio sostiene che il quadro concettuale di Kant sia insufficiente ad affrontare le condizioni strutturali che minano il discorso pubblico odierno. In particolare, la crescente disuguaglianza economica e l'influenza della ricchezza sul dibattito pubblico distorcono la deliberazione democratica e indeboliscono il potere correttivo dell'argomentazione razionale. Il saggio conclude che un Illuminismo contemporaneo deve andare oltre la fiducia kantiana nel ragionamento pubblico e libero, affrontando le disuguaglianze materiali che minano la legittimità democratica e ripensando le strategie politiche per ripristinare fiducia, uguaglianza e partecipazione democratica.

Parole chiave: Kant, Illuminismo, età della post-verità, democrazia, disuguaglianza economica.

1. A new obscurantism

On October 8th 2023, when all major media outlets worldwide had reported the news of Hamas' attack on Israel, the sales manager of a medium-sized Italian newspaper, "La Verità," noticed a trend that could have cost him his job. No fewer than 2,500 people (10% of the total) canceled their digital subscriptions in less than 24 hours. It was the largest and fastest decline in subscriptions in the newspaper's history. The sales manager wondered what could have happened and started a quick survey of the comments from readers identifiable through a regular account, and randomly sent emails to those who had canceled, begging for an explanation. After a while, it became clear that about 2500 people had left because they thought that Hamas' attack was nothing but fake news. Being 'La Verità' a far-right newspaper, it is hardly a surprise that some of its usual readers seized the opportunity to spread some anti-Semitic comments and denounced a new Jewish plot to fuel self-pity and attract sympathies.

Stories of people's credulity in the famous 'post-truth' era obviously abound, but let us pick a few cases as spectacular as representative:

- 1) the 2015 Jade Helm 15 conspiracy theory, with large groups of people in Texas (35% of the registered republicans and 50% of Tea Party supporters, including the then-governor Greg Abbot), convinced that

a military training by U.S forces, publicly announced beforehand, was in fact a secret attempt by the federal government to “take over Texas.”²

- 2) the “Pizzagate” that went viral during the 2016 United States presidential election campaign, based on the false belief that the New York City Police Department (NYPD) had discovered but kept secret a pedophilia ring linked to members of the Democratic Party. The supposed pedophiles would meet at the Ping Pong Comet pizzeria in Washington, DC. People who bought the story gathered at the doors of the pizzeria, and one fired a rifle inside the restaurant to break the lock on a door to a storage room.³
- 3) The story spread by Bolsonaro supporters before the 2018 election that supporters of the opposition Workers’ Party (PT) would use pacifiers with a phallic shape to induce homosexual inclinations in male children.⁴

More recently, we have the phenomenon of acts of hybrid war through hostile propaganda and here the award undoubtedly goes to Russia with news spread through socials of Ukrainian leadership Nazi sympathies, NATO plans to ‘invade Moldavia’ before the key elections of a few months ago, European citizens suffering cold during winter because their governments stopped buying Russian gas (this is literally what Uzbeks are told by official media at home, reports an Uzbek student of mine).

Finally, Trump’s return to the US presidency added the most interesting dimension to the phenomenon. Republican members of the parliament, who were in the building during the January 6th insurrection, called for the prosecution of those responsible to the full extent of the law in the immediate aftermath. Most of them, however, now have a different posture. When Jack Smith, the prosecutor in charge of determining responsibilities related to the insurrection, was called before the House Judiciary public committee, Rep. Ben Cline lamented the lack of solid evidence that Trump intimidated actual and potential witnesses. Trump’s invoking the ‘death penalty’ against one witness and addressing those involved in his criminal case with the warning: “If you go after me, I’m coming after you!” was evidently not enough for Cline. History has to be rewritten, no matter the costs in personal consistency. Some version of Cline’s denialism is now the official position of the GOP. In a recent VA-07 Republican candidate forum, the moderator asked whether January 6th was an

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jade_Helm_15_conspiracy_theories.

³ <https://time.com/4590255/pizzagate-fake-news-what-to-know/>

⁴ <https://g1.globo.com/fato-ou-fake/noticia/2021/10/28/e-fake-que-pt-distribuiu-mamadeiras-eroticas-para-criancas-em-creches-pelo-pais.ghtml>

insurrection or an attempt at redress of grievances. Here are the answers: State Sen. Bryce Reeves: "So my personal belief was it wasn't an insurrection." Yesli Vega: "It was actually a group of Americans exercising their 1st Amendment rights, and as a result of doing that they've been persecuted, shamed, forced out of their jobs, forced to retire, and listen, the double standard is sickening." Derrick Anderson: "No, it was not an insurrection." Gina Ciarcia: "I resent it being called an insurrection because it was not, and I also think Ted Cruz saying that it was a 'violent act of terrorism' was also completely inaccurate, and he should never have said that at all." David Ross: "So, January 6th was not an insurrection; I think January 6th was an attempt for redress of grievances."⁵

The post-truth era, namely, the era in which objective facts are less influential than appeals to emotion and private beliefs in shaping public opinion – a disposition obviously enabled and amplified by social media – is undoubtedly the new face of obscurantism. If scarce information for common people, absence of opportunities to exchange ideas, and a-critical acceptance of established knowledge were the targets of the Enlightenment, anyone who would want to revive its spirit today is confronted with excessive information for people, discussion groups turned into echo-chambers, and a-critical refusal of science.

2. Kant's Enlightenment and the new obscurantism: opposition or complicity?

Indeed, one natural way to think of Enlightenment today, to decipher what kind of disposition is closest to the reformist and at times revolutionary spirit of *les philosophes*, is to say that while they were facing obscurantism and tradition, today we face a news bulimia, echo chambers and epistemic bubbles that challenge the results of science and target expert opinion as systematically infected by particular interests. Beyond the surface of obscurantism's new faces, however, on a closer analysis the enemy is always the same: self-inflicted credulity. Indeed, the remedy also appears to be similar: exercise of a critical capacity in questioning received knowledge. After all, this is how Kant famously defined 'Enlightenment':

Enlightenment is the human being's emergence from his self-incurred minority. Minority is inability to make use of one's own understanding without direction from another. This minority is self-incurred when its cause lies not in

⁵ All quotes are taken from this article: <https://virginiapoliticalnewsletter.substack.com/p/was-it-an-insurrection-or-not>

a lack of understanding but in a lack of resolution and the courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude!* Have courage to make use of your own understanding! is thus the motto of enlightenment.⁶

Notice that Kant saw the Enlightenment more as a disposition than as the endorsement of a particularly enlightened view. It is the effort of each individual to think for him- or herself. It is the attitude of using one's own reason, mainly understood as a tool of scrutiny that does not stop before *any* form of authority. We know, incidentally, that Kant was quite extreme on this because, unlike contemporaries who were after a definition of Enlightenment, he thought that even religion was a legitimate target of doubts and criticism. But the point I want to emphasize here is that, for Kant, the movement he was living with and, to a good extent, championing was not about substituting one comprehensive view for another. Unlike past instances of self-proclaimed "overcoming of darkness," in which a metaphysical or moral doctrine replaced another, this time enlightened people were not supposed to embrace a particular creed. They were not required to reject what the past generation had thought was an enlightened way of thinking, but which, by the new standards, was just another instance of darkness. They were asked merely to adhere to a critical disposition. Also notice that the ultimate authority of this critique seems to be the individual. The overcoming of a self-inflicted condition of minority is supposed to happen through the use of *your own* understanding, not through passive reliance on what supposedly enlightened philosophers now say, not even on what science says, despite its spectacular epistemic successes already in Kant's time. For Kant, unlike many other contributors to the debate on the essence of Enlightenment, the point was not the acceptance of a scientific view of the world that would overcome religious dogma.

Another aspect of Kant's account, perhaps the most shocking and revolutionary, is that for him enlightenment does not seem to presuppose much knowledge and is far from restricted to learned people. Even common human beings can be enlightened, provided that they think for themselves. When Kant says that he feels that he is not living in an enlightened age but merely one of enlightenment, he does not mean that the masses are still ignorant but are progressing.⁷ On Kant's story, as Samuel Fleischaker correctly notes, the opposite of a state of enlightenment is not a state of ignorance – a lack of information – but an emotional weakness, a

⁶ Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?," 35.

⁷ Of course, at the end of the 18th century very few who could produce written works and thus be an active part in the "public use of reason" and yet a critical attitude at least in receiving information was arguably open to all.

disposition of passivity that will not be cured by an increase of the things one knows.⁸

Let us now return to the incredible stories of people's credulity from which we started. As I said, one way to address the question of what Enlightenment is *today* is to say that we have new forms of irrationality and credulity, but the tool we should adopt is still the one indicated by Kant. And yet this does not seem to work. These people were doing the opposite of accepting mainstream knowledge. They were clearly rejecting it by exercising their critical minds. The stories of mass misperception we recalled are, or appear to be, more stories of incredulity than of passive reception of traditional views. The whole point was to reject conventional knowledge and use common understanding, free from the yoke of the politically correct, mainstream media, and established moral and religious authority. The 'awakened believers' were all but 'lazy and cowardly' because they had the guts to reject the official story given by the 'guardians'. They also shared their thoughts with others through social media. Thus, they appeared to satisfy Kant's requirement that we must communicate our thoughts to others for reciprocal check and correction, because there is no such thing as isolated thinking. Finally, how difficult it is not to find in the no vax rhetoric an echo of what Kant says in the *Conflict of the Faculties* about immature people who attribute a sort of 'magic power' to experts in medicine?⁹

In sum, if not Kantian heroes, these gullible people all seem to have taken Kant's story about thinking for themselves very seriously. Does that mean that Kant's notion of Enlightenment is at best ineffective to face the new obscurantism and at worst its unexpected source of inspiration? In what follows, I am going to explain why this is not the case, at least not as profoundly as it seems, but I will also be signaling that if we stick to

⁸ Fleischaker, *What Is Enlightenment?*, Frederick Beiser makes a similar point when he notes that a fundamental principle of the *Aufklärung* was that "individuals should think for themselves, that they should accept a belief only when it agrees with their own critical reason" (4). While it is evident that Kant endorsed this radical principle in the 1780s, it is less clear that he still upheld and abided by it in the 1790s. According to Beiser, Kant appears to change his mind about the right of rebellion after the French Revolution. Indeed, he uses some *Reflexionen* from the 1780s to show that Kant was then in favor of it. Kant would argue against the same rights in the 1790s merely to convince the new Prussian government that they could leave freedom of the press because the *Aufklärer* posed no threat to the established political authority. In general, it is undeniable that in the 1790s conservatives in Germany looked at the main principle of the Enlightenment exposed in the 1784 essay as a great danger. Reason, let alone the reason of common people, should *not* be considered as the ultimate authority that judges the legitimacy of power.

⁹ Kant, *Conflict of the Faculties*, 30-31.

Kant's notion of Enlightenment, we will not be able to counter the prejudices of our time.

3. Kantian tools for a new Enlightenment

At a closer look, what goes on with conspiracy theories, echo-chambers and epistemic bubbles is not what would come out of an application of Kant's *motto*, at least if properly understood. When Kant invites us to think for ourselves, he is not saying that we should reject any authority or expert opinion we encounter. He is simply saying that we should measure the credentials of any statement and of the authority that presents it to us. There are fields in which we can make the call entirely on our own. In moral and religious matters, this is certainly the case because a) morality is open to any common understanding and a layman knows what the moral law requires as well as a professor of moral philosophy does and b) revealed religion is ultimately under the scrutiny of morality because if there are practices and dogmas in a religion that clash with the moral law, they have to go. This is the whole point of including religious matters, despite the skepticism of some of his fellow *Aufklärer*, among the topics about which we have the possibility, in fact the duty, to exercise our critique. This was also the point in *What is Enlightenment?* of denying that the clergy could lock in the interpretation of a religion once and for all and impede future generations from having their own, possibly better (read: more in line with the universal moral law) understanding of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and so on. But, of course, this means that we have to think for ourselves *guided by universal principles* that are not 'up to us' to establish. Even if enlightenment is a disposition and not a doctrine, Kant's faith that the exercise of one's own understanding will lead to something good, to an enlightened position, rests on the fact that at least in areas like morality and religion our critique is supposed to arrive at a pre-established end: the moral law as it is already inscribed in our reason.

Of course, Kant's examples suggest that the duty to think for yourself does not stop at moral issues but also extends to epistemic ones, in fact, to empirical matters in which the motto seems ridiculous. Kant admonishes us not to trust doctors blindly, and we all know what it meant a few years ago to have people during a pandemic who thought they knew better than official medicine. How can I think for myself in matters that require a lot of knowledge, proper training, and experience? Similar things could be said about the other two examples Kant gives. One is the officer in the army who says, "do not argue but drill," and the other is that of the tax official who tells you to pay without, again, arguing. Military strategy but

also economics seem to be pristine examples in which one should not think for oneself, not because of fondness for passivity and lack of courage, but because, like medicine, these are fields in which you need to be knowledgeable in order to say anything meaningful. While this is quite evident in the case of military strategy, it applies also to taxation. Of course, there is a moral question about how much it is fair to tax people, but there is also a technical question of how much it is *efficient* to tax people that cannot be solved merely by appeal to the moral law or to the UPR.

What Kant seems to mean, or better must mean, in these cases is that even when a lot of knowledge is required and therefore you cannot help but rely on the opinion of experts, you have a duty to check the credibility of the sources. More importantly, you have the duty to do so by measuring this credibility against something more demanding than your private or partisan standards. These standards have to be acceptable in principle to all. Here Kant's emphasis on the necessity that the individual be the ultimate judge of any thesis he is asked to believe is mitigated or perhaps simply complemented by what he says in the third critique about the necessity to think "in the position of everyone else" and "in accord with yourself."¹⁰ When you think for yourself, you need to be able to step outside your role, your position, your tradition, your cherished beliefs and evaluate whether these rest on values or norms of epistemic validity that others, at least in principle, would be able to accept. This entails that when you make a public use of your reason, you gain freedom because you can argue about everything, including religious dogma. You also shoulder constraints, however, because you are supposed to utter ideas that could be accepted even by those who are not part of your group. Notice that these constraints are far from being satisfied when you merely find some official external source (e.g., a scientific paper that supports your position). You must be able to accept the hard truth that science advances through a confrontation between discordant opinions among which it is often possible to find one that suits your prejudices. Hence, shouldering constraints for a proper public use of reason includes assessing whether there is a prevailing opinion among scientists (yes, numbers count not only in politics) and accepting that, no matter how fallible we are and remain, one should adopt precisely that stance.

In addition, you may not contradict yourself. Surprisingly, Kant says this is the maxim hardest to follow. One would think that only very sloppy people fall into contradiction. And yet, on second thought, this is precisely what passive minds are most inclined to. If you receive a doctrine without the vigilant attitude Kant preaches, then possible contradictions

¹⁰ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 295.

within the doctrine will not be noticed or perhaps will be noticed and discarded as your problem of understanding, not a problem in the theory. This phenomenon is actually very common. People endorse human rights and then disregard the basic rights of immigrants, proclaim themselves as defenders of Christianity and suggest seeing empathy as a sin. Unfortunately, this is not an absurdity made up for illustrating the point. MAGA people and evangelical preachers such as Ben Garret or John McPherson have recently suggested dumping empathy: "Empathy should be struck from the Christian vocabulary,"¹¹ Elon Musk reiterated the point, stating in a podcast that "the fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy."¹² Similarly, you may praise freedom of expression and a) threaten to cut public funding to universities that do not align with views dear to the executive, b) ban books and textbooks because they cite unwelcome theories, c) use executive authority to exercise pressure on the media to remove critical voices. Also, you may remind all human beings of the genocide your people have been victims of and commit one against another. You may appeal to evidence-based cases in which being vaccinated led to serious harm for the individual and then disregard empirical evidence that a) explains why that happened and b) shows how statistically an innumerable number of people were saved from the vaccines.

The human ability to triumphantly ride over contradictions is spectacular, and Kant is absolutely right that the maxim of consistency is probably the one that, if practiced rigidly, would require a revision of our beliefs perhaps more profound than that deriving from the application of the first two maxims.

Be that as it may, it is now clear that the rules Kant spells out for a proper use of our understanding complement and clarify his famous *motto*. It should be something like the following: "Think for yourself on moral, religious and empirical matters and when you do it adopt standards of acceptability that are sharable by people even most distant from you, having faith that our common rationality will always provide a space in which we do not talk past each other. And while you are at it, try to avoid contradictions." This is not the motto for conspiracy people; it is, in fact, the most effective cure for their condition. This is not what creates echo chambers; it is rather what allows people to free themselves from them. It is not a justification for weirdos who want to replace experts even when they are evidently needed, but the best cure for those who believe their

¹¹ This statement is from a 2025 podcast episode of *Stronger Men Nation* featuring pastor Josh McPherson. See also <https://x.com/tompawnbadi/status/1882115502061068777>

¹² Elon Musk made this statement during an interview on *The Joe Rogan Experience*.

gurus over and above people who are serious about certain topics, despite their obvious fallibility.

4. A new radical Enlightenment?

Not accidentally, a return to Kant is also what the Catalan philosopher Marina Garcés, in her *New Radical Enlightenment*, seems to suggest. Garcés notes that we live in a world that is “radically anti-enlightenment,” especially in the “authoritarian impulse” that – she thinks – is often misinterpreted as populism, in the “defensive and offensive identities,” in the “fascination with the pre-modern” of which contemporary politics and society continually provide striking examples, from the waving of rosaries to the suspicion of vaccines.¹³ These factors are all based on a “voluntary credulousness” of the masses, victims of “enlightened illiteracy” due to the vast amount of indistinguishable information readily available. Her pamphlet proposes a new radical Enlightenment that “resumes the fight against credulousness and affirms the freedom and dignity of human experience in its capacity to learn from itself,” taking us “back to the roots of the Enlightenment, as an attitude and not as a project, as a refutation of dogmas and the powers that benefit from them.”¹⁴

The echo of Kant is evident and explicitly acknowledged. Here and there, however, Garcés tries to distance herself from Kant and the Enlightenment he lived, which would be a “concrete historical project of the European ruling classes, tied to the development of industrial capitalism through colonization.” She instead wants “a planetary Enlightenment, more geographical than historical and more global than universal.” In other words, purge Kant of his sins of Eurocentrism, universalism, rationalism, and perhaps racism, and reconstruct a global reach for this enlightened radicalism by including voices around the world that have so far never been properly heard.

It should be recalled that the notion of “radical enlightenment” was coined in 1981 by Margaret C. Jacob, who, in her essay by that title, found the seeds of the movement in the underground of pantheists, Freemasons, and republicans whose voice went by and large unnoticed in the history of philosophy, defeated by the prevalence of compromise between philosophers and sovereigns. Under the same title, in 2001, Jonathan Israel defined the proliferation of anonymous clandestine manuscripts of a subversive and/or materialist nature. It thus seems that Garcés positions herself within

¹³ Garcés, *New Radical Enlightenment*, 7.

¹⁴ Garcés, *New Radical Enlightenment*, 8.

a revisionist perspective. But while the scholars just cited backdated in time the beginning of the phenomenon, and reshaped its origins and fundamental assumptions, she seeks to transform it from a doctrine into an attitude for our days, which would coincide with what Kant defined as critique, boosted by the contribution of all those voices so far scarcely heard.

To return to our original question (what is Enlightenment today), we need to ask whether Kant or Garcés really provide effective tools for facing the post-truth era, the return of authoritarianism, and the degeneration of the public sphere in a state of nature in which rage and loudness are the rule of the game. Let's start with Garcés and apply Kant's rule for proper thinking, centered on avoiding contradiction, to her proposal. On the one hand, Garcés tells us that ordinary people today, perhaps more than in the past, are ignorant and anti-enlightened. Recall the "voluntary credulity" of the masses, victims of "enlightened illiteracy" due to the vast amount of indistinguishable information made available by the socials. On the other hand, she wants the masses to free themselves from this condition on their own. She does not want the work that Kant reserved for the elites to start the process of enlightenment of the public. The process, as Kant imagined it, was one of fortunate enlightenment of some rulers (e.g., Frederick the Great) that allowed freedom of expression *among scholars* ("few independent thinkers") in the public use of their reason. This would eventually "disseminate the spirit of a rational valuing of one's own worth and of the calling of each individual to think for himself" in the masses. Also, she does not seem to view favorably the idea that certain universal principles and standards of epistemic validity are to be recognized by the masses as they enlighten themselves. After all, these standards are not generated by the radically democratic, decentralized, and bottom-up procedure that Garcés defends. Thus, one cannot help but wonder: how can the gullible and illiterate masses, without any guidance and any pre-established cognitive or moral principle, become this radically critical and enlightened entity that will save us from barbarism?

5. Kant's cure: promises and limitations

What about Kant? Is it enough that he had at least a more consistent story to tell about how the masses can free themselves from the yoke of immaturity? Can we revamp his definition of Enlightenment once we learned that his *motto* is not 'anything goes as long as you think for yourself' and deal with it to address our contemporary issues? Hardly so. What Kant misses is that this elites-led process of enlightenment through rational discourse, freedom of the press and collective trial and error only works on

two main conditions: 1) the public is not under the impression that what the elites say is at best self-interested and at worst a sophisticated attempt to play them; 2) the public debate is not rigged by material forces that either impede that certain issues enter the political agenda or, if they do, shape and steer them to their advantage. The “unforced force of the better argument,” to use a famous Habermasian expression, will prevail, as Habermas knows very well, only if participants in the public sphere maintain a minimal degree of trust and if we are not too distant from an ideal speech condition.¹⁵ The tragedy of our times, however, is that the free public debate, on which everything rests, may be compromised by the manner in which some groups influence it. As we shall see in some detail later, money has many creative ways of influencing public opinion, and the current levels of inequality assign an incredibly unequal share of political influence to the wealthiest group. The consequence is that many ordinary citizens living in liberal democracies feel that public debate is structurally impotent or rigged to address their deepest concerns. They see governments shift from left to right and vice versa, while their condition of exclusion and the progressive erosion of their social and economic status steadily advance.

Let us try to illustrate this with an example. In France, where the centrist and Macronist Bayrou was recently ousted in a vote uniting both the extreme right and the extreme left, the proposal by Gabriel Zucman (a student of Thomas Piketty) to tax 2% of net assets exceeding 100 million euros was rejected. We should reflect on the fact that an advanced democracy, with a tradition of welfare and redistribution, is at pains to introduce what appears to be a minimal operation of social decency, given the difficult condition of French national debt and deficit and the way in which inequality (in France and elsewhere) has evolved in the last 20 years.¹⁶ Let’s recall some numbers, mostly drawn from the latest Oxfam report (2026).

¹⁵ The quoted phrase recurs in several works by Habermas, including *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* and *Faktizität und Geltung*. It can be seen as the motto of a normative conception of democracy, namely the deliberative model. This model is often adopted by theorists who appear less aware than Habermas himself of the possible distortions that may affect deliberation. In his reconsideration of the Enlightenment project in “The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of Its Voices” (1996), Habermas argues that the task today is not to abandon reason – as postmodernism invites us to do – but rather to reconstruct it in terms of communicative rationality. Within this framework, a democratic public sphere is essential, since it allows citizens to engage in rational discussion aimed at identifying the “better argument” and at freely accepting, for the right reasons, the laws that regulate their political community. At the same time, Habermas is well aware that communication among individuals can be distorted by power, money, and strategic action. One form of distortion that has become increasingly central – and whose scale Habermas could not fully anticipate – is the current level of economic inequality, both globally and within liberal democracies in particular.

¹⁶ Zucman and the EU tax observatory that he directs tried at the European level, after his proposal was rejected by the French Parliament during the discussion preceding France’s 2026

It is common knowledge that global economic inequality has grown enormously. In 1996, the wealth of the 500 richest people accounted for 6% of global GDP; today, it accounts for 40%. Perhaps less well known is that this trend is not sparing liberal democracies, even those in Europe, which have traditionally been more open to redistribution and welfare. In the very unequal United States, the wealthiest 1% of the population owned 35% of the national wealth in 2007; by 2018, the percentage was not much different. In Italy, however, the share of GDP held by the richest was about 17% in 2007, but over the next 10 years it increased to nearly 25%. Similar trends can be observed in France, the UK, and to a lesser extent Germany.¹⁷

Less known (at least among the general public) is that this peak of inequality is, among other things, the result of specific political decisions. Between 2007 and 2015, corporate taxation decreased by a considerable 0.5 percentage point of GDP, while taxes on income from dependent labor increased by roughly the same percentage. While taxes on high incomes and wealth have fallen, those on middle- and lower-income brackets have increased.¹⁸

What do these figures tell us? That the exponential increase in inequality is also due to 'democratic' choices. It seems the wealthiest have found a way to convince democratic public opinion that it was right to lower their taxes, perhaps with the worn-out argument that everyone would somehow benefit from their becoming richer: the infamous, and disastrous, trickle-down economy. The difficulty in accepting the Zucman tax, which would amount to nothing more than restitution for what the rich have not paid in taxes due to irrational fiscal policies, suggests that the wealthy are so politically influential that they manage to pass laws that benefit them and disadvantage the poorer population. American political scientists like Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page have shown that, in the last three decades, the U.S. Congress has never passed a measure that was against the interests of the wealthiest, while it has passed many that benefited them, such as measures that stopped taxing the very wealthy and high-income individuals. It is always good to remember that only a few decades ago, in the certainly not socialist United States, the very rich were taxed 80% on their income, and a severe inheritance law mitigated the

budget law. The tax would now be on the wealth of individuals over US\$1 billion. Raising the threshold shields the proposal from the charge that it would harm innovation which hardly depends on the initiative of very few individuals objectively not interested in bettering their economic condition.

¹⁷ All these data can be found in the 2025 Report of the G20 Extraordinary Committee of Independent Experts on Global Inequality. See: https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202511/g20-global-inequality-report-full-and-summary.pdf

¹⁸ See on this the 2025 and 2026 Oxfam Inequality Report.

passing of undeserved advantage from one generation to the next. Then, from the late seventies on, things began to turn very rosy for the wealthiest part of an already very unequal society. Think of the Estate law that is now half of what it had been for thirty years. Or think of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 that significantly reduced the corporate tax rate, further lowering the effective tax burden on the wealthiest households, who own a significant portion of business wealth. While public opinion favors higher taxes on the wealthy and corporations, policies such as the 2017 tax cut and existing tax code structures contribute to these trends. The lesson to learn is that even when public opinion manages to voice its preferences, they are far from becoming legislation. Our democracies are becoming oligarchic, in fact plutocratic systems, and as such, despotic.

But sometimes public opinion does not even have a chance to formulate the 'right' preference. Is it acceptable that a successful entrepreneur earns and possesses not significantly more than a teacher, a police officer, or an employee, but *monstrously* more? What justifies the idea that a citizen can become wealthy without limits, just by being talented and/or lucky enough? The undeniable difficulty in establishing when 'more' becomes 'too much' certainly does not. A rough estimate is possible, as demonstrated by some recent studies.¹⁹ I suspect that behind the justification that many people (unfortunately not only the super wealthy) would give lies an idea of merit and freedom as widespread as indefensible: freedom of enterprise and hard work provide an absolute right to any measure of wealth one can accumulate. It doesn't matter if this harms crucial aspects of communal living, such as the promise of having roughly equal power to influence democratic decisions. The left of recent decades, not by chance in a constant crisis of identity, has told us that we should not be against wealth but against poverty. Meaning: we don't care about inequality, as long as no one is poor. What a spectacular act of self-sabotage.

Thus I submit that the current structural condition of injustice, generated by the return to levels of economic inequality reminiscent of the Jazz era, is generating a sense of distrust and disenchantment of the low-middle class in our democratic societies, from unemployed young people to underpaid state employees, from people who 'did not go to college' and ended up in the losing side of globalization to working class people living side by side with non-integrated immigrants whom they perceive (most of the time wrongly) as a threat. Politics today seems unable to shape a dream that could end this condition. We are in a vicious circle of increasing inequality and corresponding suffering of low-middle classes in our societies that targets not the real problems but things like woke culture or

¹⁹ Ali, Caranti, "How Much Economic Inequality is Fair in Liberal Democracies?"

immigrants, something which in turn leads to more inequality and more rage and distrust. Nobody can articulate a new democratic dream of peace and *widespread* prosperity. In this stall, it is no surprise that autocratic or perhaps tyrannical figures advance. Their intrinsic appeal is that they are against the system, or so they say. Their contradictions, false promises, reliance on factual inaccuracies, and embarrassing theories that would have cost a political career in times less extreme than ours are perceived as reassuring proof that the guy is not part of the usual mainstream politics that has constantly failed common people.

Why do I claim that Kant cannot make sense of this, that he does not have the resources to pull us out of the impasse that is eroding Western civilization? It is not that I believe that structural measures of redistribution are alien to him, despite the famous line in *On the Common Saying* regarding the compatibility of the republic with the utmost levels of economic inequality:

But this thoroughgoing equality of individuals within a state, as its subjects, is quite consistent with the greatest inequality in terms of the quantity and degree of their possessions, whether in physical or mental superiority over others or in external goods and in rights generally (of which there can be many) relatively to others. Thus the welfare of one is very much dependent upon the will of another (that of the poor on the rich); thus one must obey (as a child its elders or a wife her husband) and the other directs; thus one serves (a day laborer) and the other pays him, and so forth.²⁰

Ironically, powerful resources against a reading that sees Kant as a forerunner of the minimal state can be found precisely within the above passage, if one reads it in the proper context.²¹ If one has to take seriously Kant's idea that economic independence (to own means sufficient to avoid blackmailing power on my choices) is an essential component of active citizenship, then it is possible to mount an argument on Kantian grounds for a structural dispersion of private ownership *as required by political equality*.²² Something reminiscent of Rawls' preference for a property-owning democracy over welfare capitalism. Kant's rooting the dignity of all human beings in our common humanity may be compatible with temporary restrictions of full political equality due to contingent circumstances of passivity (again de facto subjection to a blackmailing power of

²⁰ Kant, *On the common saying*, 291-292.

²¹ A similar argument is to be found in Ripstein. *Force and Freedom*. For a recent critical assessment of the ways in which one can find in Kant a justification of some form of the welfare state see Davies, *Kant on welfare*. See also Sánchez Madrid, *Kant on Social Suffering*.

²² For the extended argument see Ali, Pinzani, "Taking Economic Inequality Seriously."

others), but is certainly more aligned with a condition in which we pull out passive citizens from that very condition, so that their equal moral worth finds its public recognition in the equality of their political rights. Certainly, Kant does not seem to look favorably on social and political conditions that distribute wealth and opportunities to future generations, shaped by what Rawls would later call a social lottery. Kant makes this point clear in a passage perhaps insufficiently mobilized by interpreters who resist the idea that he is a hardcore libertarian:

Having the resources to practice such [for the poor] benevolence as depends on the goods of fortune is, for the most part, a result of certain human beings favored through the injustice of the government, which introduces an inequality of wealth that makes others need their beneficence. Under such circumstances, does a rich man's help to the needy, on which he so readily prides himself as something meritorious, really deserve to be called beneficence at all?²³

What worries me about Kant's account of Enlightenment is rather the absence, to my knowledge, of any awareness of the phenomenon to which we referred above: huge economic inequalities easily translate into appalling unequal political influence. The free public debate, on which everything rests, may be compromised by the way in which some groups influence it. Marx said that the dominant ideas in any historical period are those of the dominant class, and Gramsci famously elaborated on this with his illuminating notion of hegemony. I do not know whether they are entirely right, but even people like Habermas who rely on a free and unobstructed discourse as key to the well-functioning of a democracy were aware that the force of the better argument can emerge only if there are at least roughly equal forces that impede one group from steering the discussion in the direction that suits its interests.

Notice that the problem is not merely that rich people can fund campaigns so that their preferred candidate or party wins. Indeed, we know that rich people and big companies often fund competing candidates to ensure that whoever wins will have to respond to them to some extent. And this is another phenomenon that would explain why radical measures to fight excessive inequality are rarely even discussed. More importantly, the way in which money influences public discourse certainly does not stop at campaign financing. Thomas Christiano famously distinguished three basic mechanisms, in addition to campaign financing. It is perhaps important to recall them: 1) money as gatekeeper, 2) money as means for

²³ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 454.

influencing public and legislative opinion, and 3) money as independent political power. The distinctive characteristic of the first mechanism – money as gatekeeper – is that money sets the agenda for collective decision-making: “the interests and points of view of the affluent segments of society will be better represented in political campaigns than those of the less well off.”²⁴ Money can also be used to influence public opinion, as happens with the second mechanism. The addressees are now citizens, not politicians or candidates. Money is used to highlight and boost (through advertising, for example) specific messages and to support the activities of lobbyists, think tanks, and intellectual activity in general. Finally, through the fourth mechanism, money does not operate in the process of collective decision-making, but as an independent constraint. Imagine a government doing something to pursue a democratically chosen aim, e.g., fair fiscal policies (the Zucman tax, for example). Affected large corporations can, for example, decrease (or threaten to decrease) investments in that country, thereby increasing unemployment and popular discontent with the government.²⁵

Perhaps a personal anecdote here may illustrate the point. I was asked to write a piece for an Italian newspaper (*Il Sole24ore*) on the Zucman tax, given my interests in economic inequality. I wrote it and said what I think: that the tax is only a first step, yet a significant one. I also said that it is perhaps time to overcome the widespread idea that private property is untouchable even when the size of economic inequality alters democratic procedures and violates political equality. The newspaper’s answer was that these ideas were “too militant.” Perhaps it is not an accident that the newspaper is owned by the Italian association of entrepreneurs, but it would be a mistake to believe this is nothing but a defensive move by those who are interested in keeping these ideas from being publicly discussed. This “no principled limit to inequality” ideology is clearly something even progressive minds often subscribe to. As Gramsci would put it, it is a piece of the current hegemony: those who dominate have managed to convince the dominated ones that the basic rules that govern us are by and large just. But if democracies are backsliding because their public opinion is no longer able to correct, in fact even to articulate, our problems, is a philosopher who had so much faith in freedom of the press and in the self-correcting capacity of rational debate still a credible guide?

²⁴ Christiano, “Money in Politics,” 246.

²⁵ This is precisely what large investment funds are currently doing in Faria Lima – the Brazilian Wall Street – against the Lula government. Thanks to Alessandro Pinzani for this example. For an empirically informed analysis of how the richest 10% of the population in the USA have managed to avoid legislation against their interests in the last three decades see Gilens, Page, “Testing Theories of American Politics”; Gilens, Page, *Democracy in America?*

An orthodox Kantian might still say: yes! If the distortion you denounced is real, but scholars like you remain free to diagnose and discuss it in the public arena, then public opinion will, sooner or later, receive it, and elites will be forced to make room for the necessary reforms. Unfortunately, this reply seems to beg the question. If material conditions influence how public opinion is shaped, then one cannot expect the better argument to emerge. In fact, it does not, and people are left with the alternative between obeying and further growing anger and distrust in traditional channels of political representation. I do not have the solution to break the vicious circle. I am only saying that freedom of the press and the public use of reason may be insufficient tools against democratic backsliding and that unbounded material inequalities rig the democratic procedure and violate political equality.²⁶

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to shape the best answer Kant could give to the obscurantism of our times. I have suggested that while only a superficial understanding of Kant's notion of Enlightenment can make him an accomplice of the decadence of the public discourse that social and other forces have generated, Kant's resources remain insufficient to hit the material precondition that disables a 'normal' solution of our problems through free debate and consequent political reforms. Perhaps to be enlightened today is mainly to become aware of the evident shortcomings of rational discourse. Reason may not be limited only in its ambition to know but also in its ability to improve our political reality. Sometimes change comes from unexpected events that expose the system's intrinsic injustice, or from the collapse of the *modus vivendi* on which it rests. It is hard to predict, obviously. Kant shaped a view in which people can really exit their state of immaturity and think for themselves without falling into the folly and rage to which social media have reduced the public sphere. However, he is perhaps not the best guide to understanding how we can get out of the bottle, given that the voices of scholars and intellectuals are far less powerful than those of those with immense resources to shape public opinion. One thing is certain: Enlightenment did not come merely with the promise of emancipation from immaturity. It also came with a strong commitment to equality, popular sovereignty, and freedom from oppression. Enlightenment today is mainly about finding new means, beyond

²⁶ A more detailed version of this argument is available in Ali, Caranti, "How Much Economic Inequality is Fair in Liberal Democracies?"

what Kant suggested, to ensure that liberal democracies stop their back-sliding and resume the march toward the realization of those ideals. Less faith in rational debate, more political imagination and courage to win the hearts of disenchanted people. This would be my *motto* for the enlightenment we need today.

References

- Ali, Nunzio, and Luigi Caranti. "How Much Economic Inequality Is Fair in Liberal Democracies? The Approach of Proportional Justice." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 47, no. 7 (2021): 769–88.
- Ali, Nunzio, and Alessandro Pinzani. "Taking Economic Inequality Seriously: Kantian Views." In *Kant and the Problem of Politics: Rethinking the Contemporary World*, edited by Luigi Caranti and Alessandro Pinzani, 87–110. London: Routledge, 2022.
- Beiser, Frederick C. *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: The Genesis of German Political Thought, 1790–1800*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Christiano, Thomas. "Money in Politics." In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Philosophy*, edited by David Estlund, 241–57. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Davies, Luke J. "Kant on Welfare: Five Unsuccessful Defences." *Kantian Review* 25, no. 1 (2020): 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S136941541900044X>.
- Fleischacker, Samuel. *What Is Enlightenment?* London: Routledge, 2013.
- Garcés, Marina. *New Radical Enlightenment*. London-New York: Verso, 2024.
- Gilens, Martin, and Benjamin I. Page. *Democracy in America? What Has Gone Wrong and What We Can Do About It*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.
- Gilens, Martin, and Benjamin I. Page. "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens." *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 3 (2014): 564–81.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *Faktizität und Geltung: Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats*. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1992.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1981.
- Habermas, Jürgen. "The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of Its Voices." In *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-*

- Century Questions*, edited by James Schmidt, 399–425. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.
- Kant, Immanuel. “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” In *Practical Philosophy*, translated and edited by Mary J. Gregor, 11–22. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Kant, Immanuel. “The Conflict of the Faculties.” In *Religion and Rational Theology*, translated and edited by Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni, 233–327. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Edited by Paul Guyer. Translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Kant, Immanuel. “The Metaphysics of Morals.” In *Practical Philosophy*, translated and edited by Mary J. Gregor, 353–603. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Kant, Immanuel. “On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, but It Is of No Use in Practice.” In *Practical Philosophy*, translated and edited by Mary J. Gregor, 273–310. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Oxfam Italia. *Nel baratro della disuguaglianza: Come uscirne e prendersi cura della democrazia*. Report Davos, 2026.
- Ripstein, Arthur. *Force and Freedom: Kant’s Legal and Political Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. (vedi nota sull’editore sopra)
- Sánchez Madrid, Nuria. *Kant on Social Suffering*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025.
- Schmidt, James, ed. *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.
- Zucman, Gabriel. *A Blueprint for a Coordinated Minimum Effective Taxation Standard for Ultra-High-Net-Worth Individuals*. EU Tax Observatory, 2024. <https://gabriel-zucman.eu/files/report-g20.pdf>.