Talk/Read/Talk/Write:  The Age of Enlightenment Debate

Directions:

1 minute – discuss the question and jot down your thoughts.

5 minutes - read the article keeping the question in mind. Circle the key terms and underline the key ideas.

2 minutes - discuss your thoughts with your shoulder partner.

4 minutes - write your conclusions in the space provided.
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Consider the Question: Was the Age of Enlightenment a curse or blessing to mankind?

Critique of the Enlightenment:
According to some critics, the Enlightenment brought change all right—a change for the worse:

• Enlightenment science passes itself off as a disinterested search for the truth about nature, but in fact, by disenchanting Nature of her mysteries, nature becomes nothing more than a "standing reserve" of natural resources to be exploited.

• The Enlightenment political narrative is cast as a story of the movement toward freedom and democracy, but in fact, the modern state develops systems of control and bureaucratic administration that extend greater and greater control over the individual.

• Enlightenment economics glories in overcoming local and political obstacles to the free flow of labor, capital, and goods, but the enclosure of common lands and the improvements in agricultural production in 18th century England empties villages of their ancient inhabitants, and fills the cities with rootless workers who must turn their labor into a living wage.

• Western countries glory in spreading enlightened religion, knowledge and technology to the backward native cultures, but this sense of the West’s enlightened superiority becomes an alibi for conquest and subjection of native peoples and cultures.

Finally, while Enlightenment thinkers promised a steady progressive improvement in manners, morals, technology, and general social well-being, the 19th and 20th centuries experienced unprecedented levels of state sponsored violence and economic exploitation.