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INTERPRETING THE ENLIGHTENMENT: METAPHYSICS, CRITIQUE, AND POLITICS

IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE TERRORIST ATTACKS OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, amid the intellectual retrenchment consonant with the unending “war against terror,” the Enlightenment legacy has become—more than ever before—a contested terrain. Human rights is often used as an ideological excuse for the exercise of arbitrary power; the security of western states has served as a justification for the constriction of personal freedom; and, with flags flying, Christian fundamentalists have called for the defense of western “values.” The best of them—political liberty, social justice, and cosmopolitanism—are rooted in the Enlightenment, and they retain their radical character. But not only the right is distorting them. These values have also come under assault from important intellectual representatives of the left: anarchists, communitarians, postmodernists, half-hearted liberals, and authoritarian socialists. Intellectual and political disorientation has been the result. Ideas long associated with reactionary movements—the privileging of experience over reason, national or ethnic identity over internationalism and cosmopolitanism, the community over the individual, custom over innovation, myth over science—have entered the thinking of the American left. Its partisans have thus become increasingly unclear about the tradition into which they fit and the purposes their politics should serve. The collapse of intellectual coherence on the left reflects the collapse of a purposeful politics from the left. Reconstructing such a politics depends upon appropriating the Enlightenment to meet new conditions.

Conservatives have, ironically, been more clear-sighted. In the past, they deplored the “nihilism” of the Enlightenment¹: its devastating assault on communal life, religious faith, social privilege, and traditional authority.

1. John Ralston, *Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

Conservatives, and those even farther to the right, consistently rejected Enlightenment concerns with individualism, dissent, secularism, reform, and the primacy of critical reflection. This differentiated them from the left. If many leading conservatives now insist upon the importance of “reason” in chastising radical reformers in the West and the advocates of Islam in the Orient, indeed, their “cultural” appropriation truncates the radical spirit of the Enlightenment and its critical ethos.² The defense of western civilization by conservative intellectuals is, unsurprisingly, mixed with anti-Enlightenment and anti-modern prejudices. They obsess about sexual license and the decline of family values, “radical” reformers and the loss of tradition, tolerance for divergent life-styles and the erosion of national identity. Their “west” is not the “west” of the Enlightenment. Those conservatives most concerned about the coming “death of the west,” in fact, sound like their forefathers who feared “the age of reason” and later the destruction of privileges associated with an obviously white and Christian world.³ Discussion of the Enlightenment has subsequently become skewed to the right where, instead, it should be treated as the razor that divides “left” and right.” The radical moment has dropped out. If there is any legitimacy to claims concerning the increasing irrelevance of fundamental political distinctions, indeed, here lies the historical source.

With its emphasis upon autonomy, tolerance, and reason—no less than its attack upon received traditions, popular prejudices, and religious superstitions—the Enlightenment was generally recognized as the foundation for any kind of progressive politics. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, however, dramatically undermined that perception. Published in 1947, written in a period marked by the previously unimaginable slaughter of two world wars, the emergence of mass culture, bureaucratic states, and what Daniel Rousset called “the concentration camp universe,” this book was an interdisciplinary experiment. Neither a work of history, anthropology, sociology, nor politics, it instead combined these disciplines to remarkable effect and turned the accepted notion of progress upside down. The scientific method of the Enlightenment, according to the authors, may have

2. Note the huge anthology in which essays deal with everything from “civil science” to “philosophical sex” without any concern for the political legacy of the Enlightenment. Cf. *Enlightenment, Passion, Modernity: Historical Essays in European Thought and Culture* edited by Mark S. Micale and Robert Dietle (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).
3. Patrick J. Buchanan, *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2002).

originally intended to serve the ideals of human liberation in an assault upon religious dogma. Yet the power of scientific reason ultimately wound up being directed not merely against the gods, but all metaphysical ideas—including conscience and freedom—as well. “Knowledge” became divorced from “information,” norms from facts, and the scientific method, increasingly freed from any commitment to liberation, transformed nature into an object of domination, and itself into a whore employed by the highest bidder.

“Instrumental reason” was seen as merging with what Marx termed the “commodity form” underpinning capitalist social relations. Everything thereby became subject to the calculation of costs and benefits. Even art and aesthetic tastes would become defined by a “culture industry”—intent only upon maximizing profits by seeking the lowest common denominator for its products. Instrumental rationality was thus seen as stripping the supposedly “autonomous” individual, envisioned by the philosophes, of both the means and the will to resist manipulation by totalitarian movements. Enlightenment now received two connotations: its historical epoch was grounded in an anthropological understanding of civilization that, from the first, projected the opposite of progress. This gave the book its power: Horkheimer and Adorno offered not simply the critique of some prior historical moment in time, but of all human development. This made it possible to identify enlightenment not with progress, as the philistine bourgeois might like to believe, but rather—unwittingly—with barbarism, Auschwitz, and what is still often called “the totally administered society.”

Such is the picture painted by *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. But it should not be forgotten that its authors were concerned with criticizing enlightenment generally, and the historical epoch known as the Enlightenment in particular, from the standpoint of enlightenment itself: thus the title of the work. Their masterpiece was actually “intended to prepare the way for a positive notion of enlightenment, which will release it from entanglement in blind domination.”⁴ Later, in fact, Horkheimer and Adorno even talked about writing a sequel that would have carried a title like “Rescuing the Enlightenment” (*Rettung der Aufklärung*).⁵ This reclamation project was never completed, and much time has been spent speculating about why it wasn’t. The reason, I believe, is that the logic of their argument ultimately left them with little positive

4. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), xvi.

5. Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* 20 Bde. hrsg. Alfred Schmidt und Gunzelin Schmid Norr (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1989) 17: 873, 884.

to say. Viewing instrumental rationality as equivalent with the rationality of domination, and this rationality with an increasingly seamless bureaucratic order, no room existed any longer for a concrete or effective political form of opposition: Horkheimer would thus ultimately embrace a quasi-religious “yearning for the totally other” while Adorno became interested in a form of aesthetic resistance grounded in “negative dialectics.” Their great work initiated a radical change in critical theory, but its metaphysical subjectivism surrendered any systematic concern with social movements and political institutions. Neither of them ever genuinely appreciated the democratic inheritance of the Enlightenment and thus, not only did they render critique independent of its philosophical foundations,⁶ but also of any practical interest it might serve.

Horkheimer and Adorno never really grasped that, in contrast to the system builder, the blinkered empiricist, or the fanatic, the philosophe always evidenced a “greater interest in the things of this world, a greater confidence in man and his works and his reason, the growing appetite of curiosity and the growing restlessness of the unsatisfied mind—all these things form less a doctrine than a spirit.”⁷ Just as Montesquieu believed it was the spirit of the laws, rather than any system of laws, that manifested the commitment to justice, the spirit of Enlightenment projected the radical quality of that commitment and a critique of the historical limitations with which it is always tainted. Empiricists may deny the existence of a “spirit of the times.” Nevertheless, the various of a given historical epoch can generate an ethos, an existential stance toward reality, or what might even be termed a “project” uniting the diverse participants in a broader intellectual trend or movement.⁸

The Enlightenment evidenced such an ethos and a peculiar stance toward reality with respect toward its transformation. Making sense of this, however, is impossible without recognizing what became a general stylistic commitment to clarity, communicability, and what rhetoricians term “plain speech.” For their parts, however, Horkheimer and Adorno believed that resistance against the incursions of the culture industry justified the extremely difficult, if not often opaque, writing style for which they would become famous—or, better, infamous. Their esoteric and academic style is a far cry

6. Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* trans. Frederic Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 116.
7. John C. Gagliardo, *Enlightened Despotism* (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, 1967), 20.
8. Peter Gay, *The Party of Humanity: Essays in the French Enlightenment* (New York: Norton, 1954), 112.

from that of Enlightenment intellectuals who debated first principles in public, who introduced freelance writing, who employed satire and wit to demolish puffery and dogma, and who were preoccupied with reaching a general public of educated readers: Lessing put the matter in the most radical form in what became a popular saying—“Write just as you speak and it will be beautiful”—while, in a letter written to D’Alembert in April of 1766, Voltaire noted that “Twenty folio volumes will never make a revolution: it’s the small, portable books at thirty sous that are dangerous. If the Gospel had cost 1,200 sesterces, the Christian religion would never have been established.”⁹

Appropriating the Enlightenment for modernity calls for reconnecting with the vernacular. This does not imply some endorsement of anti-intellectualism. Debates in highly specialized fields, especially those of the natural sciences, obviously demand expertise and insisting that intellectuals must “reach the masses” has always been a questionable strategy.¹⁰ The subject under discussion should define the language in which it is discussed and the terms employed are valid insofar as they illuminate what cannot be said in a simpler way. Horkheimer and Adorno, however, saw the matter differently. They feared being integrated by the culture industry, avoided political engagement, and turned freedom into the metaphysical-aesthetic preserve of the connoisseur. They became increasingly incapable of appreciating the egalitarian impulses generated by the Enlightenment and the ability of its advocates—Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Thomas Paine, and Rousseau—to argue clearly and with a political purpose.¹¹ Thus, whether or not their “critical” enterprise was “dialectically” in keeping with the impulses of the past, its assumptions prevented them from articulating anything positive for the present or the future.

Reclaiming the Enlightenment is an attempt to provide the sequel that Horkheimer and Adorno never wrote in a style they refused to employ. Its chapters proceed in a roughly parallel manner and, given its interdisciplinary character, this book also has no intention of pleasing the narrow specialist in

9. Cited in *ibid.*, 36.

10. Stephen Eric Bronner, “Critical Intellectuals, Politics, and Society” in *Imagining the Possible: Radical Politics for Conservative Times* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 73ff.

11. For the *philosophe*, “it was part of his new self-image as representative of society at large and of his pragmatic approach to affairs of the mind that he adhered to no academic protocol but wrote in whatever form would attract the widest interest, be most appropriate to the subject of the moment, and act with best narcotic effect on the official censors of church and state.” Leonard Krieger, *Kings and Philosophers, 1689–1789* (New York: Norton, 1970), 155–56.

any particular field. In contrast to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, however, what follows is not a collection of “fragments”—the subtitle that was dropped from the first English translation—and its “positive” appropriation rests upon a view of tradition that links theory and practice.¹² Little sympathy is wasted on meta-theory for its inability to deal with historical conflicts or even that the classic work by Horkheimer and Adorno is different from the postmodern works it inspired¹³: its intention, which was to criticize the Enlightenment from the standpoint of enlightenment itself, is not congruent with the result. The present volume considers the actual movements with which enlightenment ideals, as against competing ideals, were connected. It thus highlights the assault undertaken by the philosophes against the old feudal order and the international battle that was fought—from 1789 until 1939—¹⁴ between liberal and socialist forces imbued with the Enlightenment heritage and those forces of religious reaction, conservative prejudice, and fascist irrationalism whose inspiration derived from what Isaiah Berlin initially termed the “Counter-Enlightenment.”¹⁵ Without a sense of this battle, or what I elsewhere termed the “great divide” of modern political life, any discussion of the Enlightenment will necessarily take a purely academic form.

Dialectic of Enlightenment never grasped what was at stake in the conflict or interrogated its political history. Its authors never acknowledged that different practices and ideals are appropriate to different spheres of activity or that only confusion would result from substituting the affirmation of subjectivity, through aesthetic-philosophic criticism, for political resistance. Horkheimer and Adorno were no less remiss than their postmodern followers in ignoring the institutional preconditions for the free exercise of individual capacities. Striking indeed is how those most concerned about the “loss of subjectivity” have shown the least awareness about the practical role of genuinely democratic as against reactionary pseudo-universalism and the institutional lessons of totalitarianism.

12. Note the more extensive discussion in Stephen Eric Bronner, *Ideas in Action: Political Tradition in the Twentieth Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 1ff.

13. Daniel Gordon, “On the Supposed Obsolescence of the French Enlightenment” in *Postmodernism and the Enlightenment: New Perspectives in Eighteenth-Century French Intellectual History* ed. Daniel Gordon (New York: Routledge, 2001), 206

14. Arthur Rosenberg, *Democracy and Socialism: A Contribution to the Political History of the Past 150 Years* (New York: Knopf, 1939).

15. Isaiah Berlin, “The Counter-Enlightenment” in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Viking, 1980), 1ff.

Enlightenment values are still not hegemonic or establishmentarian. Authoritarianism is still rampant, most inhabitants of the world still suffer under the strictures of traditionalism, and earn less than \$2 per day. The Enlightenment was always a movement of protest against the exercise of arbitrary power, the force of custom and ingrained prejudices, and the justification of social misery. Its spirit was the expression of a bourgeois class on the rise against the hegemonic feudal values of the established society and its political ideals are still subordinate to those of traditionalism and authoritarianism in most of the world. There should be no mistake: though the philosophes were responding primarily to the world associated with “throne and altar,” the ideals of these thinkers remain relevant for even for nations without a feudal past like the United States. Western nations still carry the scars of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and class inequality.

Enlightenment thinkers evidenced anticipatory insights, speculations, and contradictory views on an extraordinary variety of issues. The less systematic the thinker, it is possible to assume, the more perverse the ways in which his or her ideas could be appropriated. Enlightenment thinkers, however, were rarely endorsed or embraced by conservative or fascist political movements: it is hard to imagine a bust of Locke or Voltaire sitting on the desk of Mussolini. The philosophes had their most profound impact on the Left: Locke and Kant influenced all manner of liberals, socialists, and anarchists. Beccaria, Holbach, and Adam Smith were deeply committed to moral development and social reform. Thomas Paine is among the founders of modern internationalism. There is hardly a genuinely democratic regime that is not indebted to Montesquieu. Enlightenment philosophers would inspire generations of those languishing under the weight of despotism and dogma. The extent to which their political contribution is forgotten is the extent to which the contemporary left will constantly find itself intellectually reinventing the wheel.

The Enlightenment privileged a critical reflection on society, its traditions, its ideologies, and its institutions. Its spirit was opposed from the beginning, both in terms of style and content, by the type of fanaticism evidenced yesterday by secular totalitarians and today by religious fundamentalists. Just as there is a spirit of the Enlightenment, there is a phenomenology of the anti-Enlightenment. The language of both has—often unwittingly—carried over into the modern age. A lack of awareness about the past, however, has undermined the ability to make sense of the present. Arguing that the Enlightenment with its emphasis upon civil liberties, tolerance, and humanism was—for example—somehow responsible

for the “Terror” of the French Revolution or twentieth-century totalitarianism indulges the pseudo-dialectical sensibility without looking at political history, movements, or institutional practices. The entire political landscape is distorted by this view: its revision alone justifies the popular academic reinterpretation of the enlightenment legacy.

Understanding the current clash between secularism and religious fundamentalism in the present, no less than the most profound political conflicts of the past, calls for first recognizing that the “Counter-Enlightenment” was not some “dialectical” response to the success of the Enlightenment but an immediate response, born of fear and loathing, against everything associated with its spirit. Perversions of the original impulse still go unacknowledged. Enlightenment values run directly counter to the exercise of arbitrary power no less than the censorship, collectivism, and conformism of authoritarian or totalitarian regimes of both the left and the right. It was also not that the Enlightenment somehow blended with its opposite, the Counter-Enlightenment, but that—from the first—two traditions confronted one another. The hatred between them only intensified in the aftermath of the age of democratic revolution and the epic battle would culminate in Auschwitz: it was a battle lost by the partisans of the Enlightenment and won by its enemies.

This work does not treat the Enlightenment as a transhistorical anthropological dynamic, or a disembodied set of epistemological propositions, but rather as a composite of views unified by similar political ideals and social aims. As against contemporary critical theorists and postmodernists, they were clear about the basic values underlying their enterprise. The philosophes shared a fundamental concern with constricting the exercise of arbitrary institutional power and expanding the realm of individual autonomy. This connection between politics and ethics is growing weaker. Enough understand “experience” and intuition as enough in resisting power. But they are not enough. Indeed, since “Western civilization is essentially political, and politics has been its vital center throughout the modern period, . . . to restore ethical values means to revive political theory, and to achieve this what is needed is a return to the ideas of the eighteenth century, to pick up the threads where they were then dropped or broken off.”¹⁶

That is the purpose behind this particular appropriation of the Enlightenment. Excellent research has been done on the tradition deriving from

16. Alfred Cobban, *In Search of Humanity: The Role of the Enlightenment in Modern History* (New York: George Braziller, 1960), 27.

Spinoza and lesser-known figures of the period concerned with fostering gender and racial equality as well as radical understandings of democracy and community: it is even legitimate to distinguish between the “radical” and the “conservative” or “moderate” Enlightenment.¹⁷ But this is better done in hindsight. It was ultimately the “liberal” element that inspired progressive movements for suffrage, abolition of the slave trade, civil liberties, and progressive labor legislation during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The point was to highlight the rule of law and introduce constraints upon the arbitrary exercise of institutional power. These concerns made uncomfortable even “enlightened” monarchs like Frederick the Great who insisted that “the passions of rulers have no other curbs but the limits of their power.” They also inspired virtually every major intellectual representative of the socialist labor movement from Eduard Bernstein to Rosa Luxemburg as surely as the best among the Bolsheviks, and libertarian anarchists like Gustav Landauer, Victor Serge, Augustin Souchy, and Murray Bookchin. The concerns of these radical heirs of the Enlightenment, if not always their solutions, retain their relevance.

Again: the political spirit of the Enlightenment crystallized around the principles connected with fostering the accountability of institutions, reciprocity under the law, and a commitment to experiment with social reform. Not in imperialism, or racism, or the manipulation of liberty, but in these ideals lies the basis of Enlightenment universalism. Democracy remains an empty word without it. Enlightenment universalism protects rather than threatens the exercise of subjectivity. It presumes to render institutions accountable, a fundamental principle of democracy, and thereby create the preconditions for expanding individual freedom. Such a view would inform liberal movements concerned with civil liberties as well as socialist movements seeking to constrain the power of capital. Reciprocity can be understood in the same way: it, too, underpins the liberal idea of the citizen with its inherently democratic imperative—against all prejudice—to include “the other” as well as the socialist refusal to identify the working person as a mere “cost of production.” The Enlightenment notion of political engagement, indeed, alone keeps democracy fresh and alive.

Ideals such as these provide an enduring foundation for opposing contemporary infringements on individual rights and dignity by new global

17. Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); also, Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981).

forms of capitalism, the imperatives of the culture industry, and parochial biases of every sort. They constitute the radical quality of the Enlightenment, and its “positive” moment beyond the prejudices of its particular representatives. Too many on the fringes have been forgotten like the proto-socialist Mably or the proto-communist Morelly and, until the appearance of *Radical Enlightenment* (2001) by Jonathan Israel, even major intellectuals like Spinoza have not received the political recognition that they were due. But this volume is concerned with something other than uncovering the past. Its intent is instead to reinvigorate the present, salvage the enlightenment legacy, and contest those who would institutionally freeze its radicalism and strip away its protest character. Such an undertaking is important, moreover, since their efforts have been remarkably successful. Enlightenment thinking is seen by many as the inherently western ideology of the bourgeois gentleman, the *Vernunftrepublikaner* of the Weimar Republic, or characters like the “windbag” Settembrini who endured the sarcasm of totalitarians and the boredom of philistines in *The Magic Mountain* (1924) by Thomas Mann.

Reclaiming the Enlightenment views its subject less as a dead historical artifact than as the necessary precondition for developing any form of progressive politics in the present. Understanding the Enlightenment, in this way, calls for opposing current fashions and conceits. Despite the existence of superb classic studies on the Enlightenment,¹⁸ the general trend of scholarship has tended to insist upon eliminating its unifying cosmopolitan spirit—its ethos—in favor of treating diverse national, religious, gender, generational, and regional “enlightenments.”¹⁹ There is indeed always a danger of reifying the “Enlightenment” and ignoring the unique and particular moments of its expression. Edward Gibbon was a very different historian than Hume; Goethe criticized the theory of color advanced by Newton; Hobbes understood the state differently than Montesquieu; Voltaire and Rousseau differed over the social role of the theatre; the atheistic materialism of the Baron

18. Note in particular, Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* trans. Fritz C. A. Koellen and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951).

19. “The Enlightenment has exploded. Coming under the immense weight of new scholarship, since the mid-Seventies, it has been fragmented into a plethora of Enlightenments. To the dismay of word processor spell-checkers, the plural form of the English term is currently used almost as often as the singular. In German, *Aufklaerungen* is making a parallel entry. The French, whether by grammatical chance or by prophetic common wisdom, have always had *les lumières* in the plural mode.” Fania Oz-Salzberger, “New Approaches towards a History of the Enlightenment: Can Disparate Perspectives Make a General Picture?” in *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch fuer deutsche Geschichte* Bd. XXIX (Gerlingen: Bleicher Verlag, 2000), 171.

d'Holbach had little in common with the idealism of Kant. Different individuals in different circumstances produced different perspectives on reality. Nevertheless, what unified them made the cumulative impact of individual thinkers and national intellectual trends far greater than the sum of the parts.

Extraordinary was the way in which the philosophes evidenced a common resistance to parochial beliefs and the arrogance of power. By simply deconstructing the "Enlightenment", the forest gets lost for the trees. Radical tendencies within it like anti-imperialism thus often come to be seen either as historical anomalies or as simple interests of this or that thinker.²⁰ It also becomes easy to forget that even before 1789, the anti-philosophes of the Counter-Enlightenment were busy "reconciling and uniting their enemies well beyond their extreme differences, attributing to them common aims and common ends. Tautology aside, there is much truth to the claim that the Counter-Enlightenment invented the Enlightenment."²¹

If there was no "Enlightenment," but only discrete forms of intellectual activity falling loosely under its rubric, why should the political enemies of this international trend have been the same? These representatives of church and tradition—who so vigorously opposed democracy and equality, revolution and reform, cosmopolitanism and internationalism, skepticism and science—formed a "Counter-Enlightenment International" even before the French Revolution.²² Academic historians have attempted to interpret the Enlightenment as a series of internal debates around important intellectual "flashpoints."²³ They have highlighted what the Enlightenment had in common with its enemies like the Church;²⁴ and the resentment of its lesser known against its more famous representatives.²⁵ They have also

20. Introducing the general category of "Enlightenment" is a practical necessity for understanding the plurality of particulars. Its existence is implicit in any study of the period or any other equally general concern like eighteenth-century thought. This often becomes evident, apparently against the intentions of the author, in an otherwise fine study where it is argued that: "A study of Enlightenment anti-imperialism offers a richer and more accurate portrait of eighteenth century political thought . . . and simultaneously . . . that 'the Enlightenment' *as such* and the notion of an overarching 'Enlightenment project' simply do not exist." Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 3, 264.

21. Darrin M. McMahaon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 32.

22. *Ibid.*, 106ff.

23. Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3.
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24. Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932).bb

emphasized the different connotations behind the terms Enlightenment, *Aufklaerung*, *lumieres*, *Illuminismo*.

Nowhere is the political conflict between the Enlightenment and the Counter-Enlightenment, however, given center stage: it is as if the revolutionary quality of Cezanne were to be appreciated without referring to the most famous aesthetically conservative artists of his time. Perhaps in our apolitical age the primacy of such apolitical interpretations only makes sense. But the implications are clear: insofar as the savage political conflict between different ideologies is ignored, especially since it plays such an important role in understanding contemporary politics, the Enlightenment will be turned into a lifeless object of interest only to historical connoisseurs. The ability to evaluate its failings and those of its most important representatives is also, thereby severely compromised.

There weren't many saints among the philosophes. Even the most anticipatory form of philosophy retains residues, reactionary assumptions, and prejudices, from its historical context. Some figures of the Enlightenment look better than others with references to the stupidities of their time. But there is no comparing the views on women, religious minorities, and civil liberties of the philosophes with representatives of the Counter-Enlightenment who opposed every progressive measure to improve the condition of women, sought to keep Jews in the ghetto, and feared democracy and social reform like the plague. Usually ignored is the question concerning what it was reasonable to expect from these intellectuals in their own historical context. It is impossible to excuse Voltaire for his anti-Semitism, but that is because other of his contemporaries, like Lessing or Montesquieu, held more egalitarian and sophisticated views. Rousseau and Kant can be condemned for their support of the death penalty precisely because others like Beccaria and Voltaire understood its barbarity. But it is foolish simply to introduce an abstract standard of what is currently considered politically correct. Indeed, by reducing ideas to the prejudices of their usually white, male, and western authors, many supposedly progressive historical interrogations of the past actually wind up tossing the historical context by the wayside.

Confronting such biases in progressive terms is furthermore possible only from the standpoint of the Enlightenment with its liberal and socialist inheritance. There is little of organizational or ethical importance that the Counter-Enlightenment or the present assortment of "post-enlightenment"

25. Robert Darnton, "The High Enlightenment and the Low-life of History in Pre-Revolutionary France" in *Past and Present*, 51 (1971), 81–115.

philosophies has to offer the struggle of the excluded and exploited. Viewing the Enlightenment as irremediably tainted by anachronistic prejudices only casts a plague on all houses. No need exists to compare the views of the philosophes and the fanatics: both are prejudiced with regard to race or sex or sexual practice and that is that. Forgotten is that the former can be held to their own ethical standards of progress while the latter cannot because they rejected those standards in the first place. This little volume seeks to illuminate not simply the “differences,” but the *qualitative* differences between essentially progressive movements that embraced the political implications of the Enlightenment and essentially reactionary movements that resisted it.

Movements often show their weakness by the way in which they, whether consciously or unconsciously, appropriate the thinking of their adversaries. This is particularly true of the contemporary left. Enough “liberals” now suggest that liberal regimes must rest on a homogeneous national community with shared cultural values; others influenced by postmodern ideology view universal concepts as complicit with domination and as a threat to their particular identities; “western” ideas no less than the philosophies generating them are strenuously contested by self-styled radical anti-imperialists whose “nonwestern” beliefs are associated with indigenous religious traditions and romanticized visions of an organic society.²⁶ There are still those who laud the liberal heritage, often without admitting its complicity in the violence produced by capitalism, and others like Neil Postman who properly emphasized the importance of “building a bridge” to the eighteenth century in order to recapture its lost humanism.²⁷ But the more fashionable interpretations suggest that the Enlightenment has lost its relevance,²⁸ or that its importance was always overrated in comparison with the salacious and anti-authoritarian popular literature of the time.²⁹

The Enlightenment may not have produced the best of all possible worlds and, admittedly, the importance of ideas and intellectuals is often overestimated. But the philosophes surely shaped the progressive political discourse

26. Rajani Kannepalli Kanth, *Breaking with the Enlightenment: The Twilight of History and the Rediscovery of Utopia* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1997), 94ff.

27. Neil Postman, *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century: How the Past Can Improve Our Future* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).

28. John Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and Culture at the End of the Modern Age* (London: Routledge, 1995).

29. Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Bestsellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: Norton, 1995). For an excellent critique see Thomas Munck, *The Enlightenment: A Comparative Social History 1721–1794* (London: Arnold, 2000), pgs. 76ff and *passim*.

of modernity. Even their enemies have manipulated their line of argument. Too much time is now spent in abstract discussion of the tension between “liberty” and “equality” especially since, in general, right-wing movements—ranging from hard-line conservatives to old-fashioned totalitarians to the new supporters of fundamentalism—have had no trouble attacking both. It is true that establishmentarian elites employ the notion of rights to defend capitalist property relations and keep subaltern groups in their place. But it is also true that such an undertaking requires transforming what might be termed the protest character of the Enlightenment into a set of unassailable legal claims that benefit elites.

Democratic society was initially understood as an experiment that developed hand in hand with the liberation of the critical spirit. But the belief still persists that Enlightenment thinkers were preoccupied with finding a single absolute truth that explains all of reality, and the character of correct conduct in all circumstances.³⁰ Many radicals are also repulsed by the anti-populist sentiments and the toleration of religion exhibited by major representatives of the Enlightenment, their acceptance of the state, their sexist and racist prejudices, their elitism and their euro-centrism, their scientism and their eradication of subjectivity in the name of universal abstractions. That various philosophes harbored such beliefs is irrefutable; that the enlightenment ethos is reducible to them, however, is unsustainable.

What has been called the Enlightenment may no longer seem particularly radical: its most important values seem to have been realized.³¹ Indulging in this belief, however, would be a mistake. The 11th of September only highlights what should already have been obvious: the need remains for an unrelenting assault on religious fanaticism not merely of the Islamic variety, but of the sort promulgated by “born again” Christians, biblical literalists, Protestant sects intent upon converting the Jewish infidels, and all those who would bring their revealed certainties—contested by others with other revealed certainties—into the mainstream of public life. The Enlightenment may have had a transforming impact upon religion itself.³² But its

30. Isaiah Berlin, “Giambattista Vico and Cultural History” in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Vintage, 1992), 51; also, Alisdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 6.

31. Robert Anchor, *The Enlightenment Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 58.

32. David Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

mainstream institutions fought against what Sir Karl Popper termed the “open society” virtually every step of the way. Every concession to the march of progress made by religion was the product of unremitting pressure by its opponents.

Reason is not the enemy of experience. Nothing is more foolish than to confuse a reactionary pseudo-universalism with the genuinely democratic universalism that underpins the liberal rule of law, the constraint of arbitrary power, and the free exercise of subjectivity. Probably no group of intellectuals, in fact, was more aware of the contributions offered by different cultures than the philosophes who prized the early agricultural societies that never encountered Christianity like the Amer-Indians and who looked with such respect at Tahiti, the Near East, and the Orient. Their information about these exotic regions was admittedly suspect, much of it was completely half-baked, and the philosophes often romanticized their subjects. But, still, they looked to these cultures as a source for new experiences and, generally speaking, the sympathy they extended to them was genuine. Skepticism concerning the inflexible claims of national and religious dogma links the Enlightenment with a political undertaking intent upon making society more democratic, more cosmopolitan, and more experimental.

Just as the philosophes saw science not merely as an ordering device but as a self-critical method that could be used in the fight for liberation from outdated prejudices and dogmas, their view of aesthetics called upon individuals to expand the realm of their experience. Rousseau was not alone in claiming that “the education of man begins at birth.” Diderot called for the enjoyment of sexuality for its own sake and, though the Abbé Prévost may have warned against the dangers of unbridled passion and disrespect for superiors, his *Manon Lescaut* had the opposite effect: it also helped forge the image of America as a land without “the arbitrary laws of rank and convention.”³³ Voltaire satirized the man who would understand the world through reason alone; and Kant understood aesthetic experience as a form of “purposeful purposelessness.” The philosophes were not colorless academics or puritanical reformers, but individuals who gloried in their eccentricities and who sought not merely to educate their minds, but also to educate their sentiments and sensibilities.

Illuminating the spirit of the Enlightenment, the best that it had to offer, is the place to begin. But this involves envisioning a loose assemblage

33. Anchor, *The Enlightenment Tradition*, 51.

of intellectuals as an international intellectual movement intent upon changing the world—ideologically, politically, socially, and economically. It means viewing the democratic revolutions in England, the United States, Europe, and beyond as part of a single undertaking. This requires a shift in interpretive perspective. Especially when the salience of the Enlightenment can no longer be taken for granted, when its values have come under attack from both the right and the left, more is necessary than analyzing a few thinkers or some abstract philosophical propositions about history, nature, and “man.” It is a matter of presenting the Enlightenment as an overarching political enterprise and a living tradition—not merely in its ideas but in the actions it inspires.