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THE GREAT DIVIDE: ENLIGHTENMENT, COUNTER-ENLIGHTENMENT, AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The Enlightenment celebrated the intellect and its representatives provided a new understanding of the intellectual. In earlier times, of course, intellectuals questioned the strictures of religious and political tradition. Some of them even served as the conscience of their epochs. But the self-perception of the intellectual as both the critic and the reformer of society, as committed to a communal project of social change, is the legacy of what the philosophe Pierre Bayle first called the "republic of letters." Its citizens would endeavor to address popular audiences in addition to academic ones. They fervently believed that "the most fundamental ideas were necessarily applicable, communicable, effective, and socially relevant, and that there existed no valid pure idea to be thought or separable basic reality to be analyzed."[1]

Only in the more backward nations of Central Europe would the university serve as a primary site for Enlightenment intellectuals. The vanguard of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, the forerunners of the Enlightenment, began by attempting to liberate themselves from universities infused with Catholic dogma and dominated by the study of theology. They championed instead what soon became a growing set of independent institutions of secular orientation such as the Royal Society in London, the Academy of Science of Paris, the Academia della Scienza in Naples, and the Collegium Curosive in Germany. These societies made possible the exchange of ideas and they were gradually complemented by Masonic lodges, salons, taverns, coffeehouses, town meetings, public lectures, theatres, rudimentary libraries. This new amalgam created the context for the exercise of equality, discourse, tolerance, and "common sense." It constituted a "bourgeois public sphere" that would serve as the infrastructure for the democratic revolutions.[2]

1. Leonard Krieger, *Kings and Philosophers, 1689–1789* (New York: Norton, 1970), 153.
2. Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Tom Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).

This bourgeois public sphere did not emerge *ex nihilo*: it derived instead from a variety of traditions associated with the broader anthropology of enlightenment including the democratic legacy of the medieval free towns, the humanitarian trends inherited from the Renaissance, and the excitement of the scientific revolution generated by Galileo, Bacon, Descartes, and—above all Newton. Their insights made visible the invisible and provided the possibility for new investigations into nature through their discovery of its universal laws. These helped shape the secular belief in universal rights.[3] Beliefs of this sort were contested from the very beginning, however, by conservatives like Sir Robert Filmer. Such thinkers challenged the emerging liberalism of Hobbes and Locke in the name of the divine right of kings, ecclesiastical power, and the primacy of custom over reason. Raising this is important because it prevents identifying the new "civil society" of the seventeenth and eighteenth with what the incipient radicalism of the "bourgeois public sphere." The Enlightenment was, from the first, contested by a Counter-Enlightenment whose "anti-philosophes"—militant members of the clergy, half-educated aristocrats, traditionalist bourgeois, state censors, conservative parliamentarians, and street journalists—had fought the philosophes since the middle of the eighteenth century and "they burned with envy, anger, and incomprehension."[4]

All movements of the right ultimately are grounded in a politics of *reaction*, and the Counter-Enlightenment was no different. Its "anti-philosophes advocated an organic sense of nation, patriarchal authority, and what Edmund Burke termed "the spirit of religion" that rejected the ideal of humanity, the accountability of institutions, and the skepticism associated with science. Controversy fueled by divergent interests and ideologies undermined any consensus in this new sphere hovering between the state and the market. Not to recognize the existence of fundamental ideological and material conflicts reifies both the public sphere and civil society. Better to suggest that:

> Liberal and democratic movements were to be a part, not the whole, of the civil society spawned by the Enlightenment public sphere. Nineteenth century civil society would give birth to liberal, democratic, even socialist

3. Micheline Ishay, *Internationalism and Its Betrayal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 5–10.
4. Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 6.

> and feminist movements and associations, but it also produced nationalist, racialist and militaristic ones, foreshadowings of which were already visible in the precociously developed political public sphere of eighteenth-century England. From, say, Imperial Germany where right-wing populist associations like the Pan-German League and the Navy League produced a steady stream of chauvinistic and imperialistic propaganda, to the anti-Semitic diatribes of anti-Dreyfus newspapers and associations under the French Third Republic, it was obvious that the public sphere of nineteenth century civil society could take forms that were anything but liberal.[5]

Using the category of the "bourgeois" public sphere fruitfully calls for understanding it in relation to the political struggle between Enlightenment intellectuals and their reactionary opponents. Neither the philosophes nor their enemies were what the Germans still call "disciplinary idiots," with brains dulled by specialization. They were instead men of letters interested in philosophy, curious about the natural world, and ready to change society. The attempts on both sides to provide coherence, meaning, and logical justification were neither mechanical nor shallow. More was also involved than sophisticated forms of manipulating power. The philosophes were intent upon fostering engagement rather than lauding "ambiguity." But they were not driven by "legislative" and "totalizing" ambitions in some dictatorial sense. That was far more the case with the Counter-Enlightenment and its most important representatives like J. G. Hamann and Joseph de Maistre whom Isaiah Berlin correctly labeled "the Voltaire of the reaction."[6]

Viewing Enlightenment intellectuals as latent or manifest authoritarians reflects the political self-doubt plaguing contemporary progressive intellectuals, and coming to terms with this identity crisis thus calls for taking a new look at the "republic of letters." Institutions were lacking, of course, but it evidenced a unique form of sovereignty. The republic of letters provided a response both to a burgeoning nationalism and to a church that may have been "catholic" in name but whose intolerance for those with unorthodox or competing beliefs was legendary. The republic of letters inhabited by the

5. James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 273.
6. Isaiah Berlin, *The Magus of the North: J.G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism,* ed. Henry Hardy (London: John Murray, 1993); Isaiah Berlin, "Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism," in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Vintage, 1992), 91ff; Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (New York: Mentor, 1957), 116.

philosophes, in contrast, anticipated what is rapidly becoming an international civil society of progressive activists and intellectuals. There was no electronic mail and there were no computers, travel and communication were far more difficult, while censorship and costs and lack of libraries made books hard to come by. The "republic of letters" was an ideal, but it gained a measure of reality and its spirit reflected the great motto of the Enlightenment coined by Kant, *Sapere aude!*, or "have the courage to use your own reason."

A cosmopolitan community created the Enlightenment. It should not be identified with France, which is still often the case, since the first stirrings occurred in more economically developed states like England and the Netherlands, or in those with more radical democratic traditions like Scotland, while many of its principles were best realized—albeit in rudimentary forms—in the United States. It therefore only makes sense that the preoccupations of the Enlightenment and the role of the intellectual should have changed over time. Where it was originally a matter of providing scientific and metaphysical foundations for a new brand of liberal politics in the seventeenth century, which was so apparent in the thinking of Thomas Hobbes and Spinoza, it soon involved commitment to a more anti-foundationalist and interventionist spirit. But the transition occurred smoothly: it was, in fact, hardly noticeable except in retrospect. The new worldview also spread quickly. David Hume and Adam Smith fostered it in Scotland, Beccaria in Italy, and Jefferson, Franklin, and Thomas Paine in the United States. Lessing and Mendelssohn, Kant and Hegel, Schiller and Goethe embraced it in Germany. Even Spain, shrouded in the darkness of a feudal absolutism, experienced it through the remarkable group of intellectuals gathered around the philosopher-politician Olivares and the painter Goya. The new thinking extended to what was considered the "periphery" of Europe: its Eastern territories, Greece, and the Balkans.[7] It also crossed the Atlantic informing the struggle of Simon Bolivar and Jose de San Martin in Latin America and inspiring the uprising against slavery led by Toussaint L'Ouverture in Haiti.[8]

Fighting against a world dominated by monsters and saints, witches and gods, myths and prejudices, misery and privilege, custom and laziness, demanded a mixture of courage and clarity. The assault on metaphysics intro-

7. Franco Venturi, *The End of the Old Regime in Europe, 1768–1776: The First Crisis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).
8. C. L. R. James, *Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* 2nd Edition (New York: Vintage, 1963).

duced by the authors of *The Spectator*, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, prepared the way for the new egalitarian emphasis upon "common sense" offered by Thomas Paine. Utilitarianism, so boring in its shopkeeper mentality, nonetheless gave the individual a measure of respect by making clear that each was capable of discerning his or her interest and that social welfare was the primary aim of government. Lessing, Montesquieu, and Goethe challenged the church injunction against suicide. Most partisans of the Enlightenment were repulsed by slavery and the subordination of women plays a role in many of their works. Their privileging of persuasion over coercion, their vision of the fully formed personality, their interest in matters outside their immediate expertise and experience, their emphasis upon tolerance, all project an eradication of what is brutal and unjust in the name of a better society with a new set of human relations. Resistance undertaken in the name of progressive, liberal, and ultimately socialist ideals served to separate critical from affirmative intellectuals and place some thinkers often associated with the Enlightenment, such as Samuel Johnson and Edmund Burke, outside the tradition that they might otherwise seem to espouse. The result was what might be termed a *great divide* that separated intellectuals of the Enlightenment from those of the Counter-Enlightenment.

Enlightenment intellectuals were not pillars of political correctness. Organizations condemning slavery were formed. Salons may have accorded women a new public presence,[9] and the grosser expressions of anti-Semitism and even anti-Muslim attitudes were generally looked down upon. But the Enlightenment was still primarily a male, white, straight, and Christian world. In the United States, moreover, slavery was embedded in the national legislative process: Jefferson supported the idea that a slave is three-fifths of a person for purposes of representation, which won him the election of 1800, and Washington placed the national capital in slave territory. Admittedly, for such individuals, support for measures of this sort probably had less to do with their personal approval of slavery than with its political use to protect the economic base of the South: it remained the case into the twentieth century that no serious political career was open to Southerners

9. Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). Also note the fine discussion by Dorindra Outram, *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 80ff.
10. Note the excellent article by Garry Wills, "The Negro President" in *The New York Review of Books* (November 6, 2003), 45; it sets the stage for his book *Negro President: Jefferson and the Slave Power* (New York; Houghton Mifflin, 2004).

opposed to slavery or supportive of civil rights.[10] But that doesn't change the reality: it was what it was.

Still, it would be misleading to lump the philosophes together with their adversaries. The principles underpinning the critique of slavery, sexism, and exclusion of the other derived from the Enlightenment. Then, too, the political stance of its advocates on such issues was generally qualitatively different from those of the Counter-Enlightenment. It is instructive, for example, to consider the views on women and divorce expressed by arch-reactionaries like Justus Moeser or Bonald; the views on prejudice offered by Burke; the irrationalism of Hamann; the unyielding Christianity of De Maistre; the brutal anti-Semitism of the Abbé Bruelle; and the alternatives offered to cosmopolitanism, constitutionalism, and social equality by the rest of the reaction. It is also easy to forget the witch trials that cost thousands upon thousands of women their lives;[11] the slaughters attendant upon the Crusades;[12] the Inquisition, and the constant pogroms. Michel Foucault may be correct in his assertions that the Enlightenment in its time had little sympathy for the "unreasonable": the beggars, the petty criminals, and the insane.[13] In practical terms, however, the more progressive programs for improving the conditions of these groups were again inspired by Enlightenment principles and intellectuals of the Counter-Enlightenment would historically show even less interest in these groups and the reforms capable of bettering their lot.

Above all, however, it wrong to suggest that the prejudices of the philosophes somehow invalidate the ideals associated with their republic of letters. The logic of the Enlightenment suggested that citizenship should be open to everyone with a pen and an argument to make in the name of freedom. Sex, race, religion, property, and class, should—in principle—play no role in determining the ability of individuals to participate in the public realm and they should be able to pursue their private interests as they see fit. Kant's notion concerning the formal equality of all subjects, in fact, made possible a criticism of any such barriers to the public exercise of reason while the principles underpinning the liberal rule of law enabled suffragettes and

11. Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons* (New York: Meridian, 1975), 206ff.
12. Note the telling criticism by Francis Bacon, "An Advertisement Touching A Holy War" (1622–23) reprinted in *Logos* 1, no.2 (Spring, 2002).
13. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Random House, 1965); *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979).

civil libertarians as well as advocates of the excluded and insane to contest the existence of positive laws tainted by discrimination and regressive attitudes. It is only fair to note that:

> The Enlightenment public sphere assigned new importance to women as producers and consumers of culture, but often on the basis of values that served to justify their subordination. Its norms of openness and inclusion created new kinds of association, but also new forms of exclusion. For all this ambiguity, however, we continue to invoke the norms of openness and transparency preached by the Enlightenment public sphere even as we criticize its failure to live up to them. For that reason its legacy is more enduring than it seems, whatever its vicissitudes from the Enlightenment to our own day.[14]

"Enlightenment" was initially seen as depending upon the "courage" of the individual to exercise his or her intellect, question rather than obey and, according to the famous formulation, "leave behind his self-imposed immaturity." Contrary to popular opinion, however, Kant did not leave the individual subject hovering in the metaphysical stratosphere. It was clear to him no less than to the rest of the philosophes that summoning such courage becomes easier with the existence of liberal institutions and a "public" animated by civic interests.[15] That is why liberating the "public" not merely from dogma, but from the institutions and conditions that promote it, became the primary goal of Enlightenment intellectuals. The philosophes understood that the right to criticism is the precondition for the exercise of autonomy and, if not the pursuit of absolute truth, then the rectification of error. Thus, in contrast to thinkers of the Counter-Enlightenment like Burke and De Maistre, Kant and Paine would insist that no age can commit the future to a condition in which it would be impossible to extend knowledge or correct errors. [16]

Where the Enlightenment valued liberty, discursive persuasion, and the critical exercise of reason, the Counter-Enlightenment stood for obedience, coercive authority, and tradition. The former renders the future open and the latter closes it down. The rejection of closure underpinned the idea that

14. Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*, 275.
15. Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" in *Political* Writings, 55.
16. Ibid., 57–58.

freedom of speech is the precondition for all other freedoms. This makes it legitimate to interpret Kant in such a way that "the moment to rebel is the moment in which freedom of opinion is abolished."[17] When freedom of opinion is curtailed then correcting errors from the past and raising grievances in the present becomes impossible. Freedom of assembly and worship are also compromised once this basic freedom is violated. It is consequently no accident that partisans of the revolutionary bourgeoisie should have seen these freedoms as interconnected. The republic of letters rendered everything subject to criticism; nothing was sacred, least of all sacred things. It was this, perhaps above all, that placed the Enlightenment at odds with the Counter-Enlightenment whose thinkers, from the start, privileged obedience to traditional authorities. Thus, suggesting that the assault on orthodoxy by the philosophes was itself a form of orthodoxy "is largely a play on words: their toleration was not complete, but their commitment to the inquiring mind which knew no boundaries made their most self-confident pronouncements open to correction."[18]

Enlightenment intellectuals subordinated national customs and prejudices to the universal assumptions underpinning the critical exercise of the intellect and this the Counter-Enlightenment could not forgive. Its assault on the status quo would, indeed, take two very different forms. The term "intelligentsia" was coined amid the Decembrist Revolt in Russia of 1825,[19] though it became popular in Europe only during the 1860s and 1870s, while the term "intellectual" arose during the Dreyfus Affair about two decades later. The Enlightenment inspired both, but they are not interchangeable: the "intelligentsia" would have a more romantic, nationalistic, and revolutionary vanguard connotation than the liberal, rational, and reform-minded notion of the "intellectual." This difference provides a point of entry for understanding the difference between communists and socialists as well as, in a different way, between anarchists and reformists. The Counter-Enlightenment, of course, never really made much of a distinction between them: it would, however, evidence its own internal conflict between fascists and conservatives, apocalyptics and establishmentarians.

17. Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy,* ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1982), 48ff
18. Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment* 2 vols. (New York: Norton, 1977) 1: 86
19. Marc Raeff, *Origins of the Russian Intelligentsia: The Eighteenth Century Nobility* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1966), 148ff; Philip Pomper, *The Russian Revolutionary Intelligentsia* (Arlington, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, 1970), 40ff.

The Counter-Enlightenment was defined by what it opposed: it, too, was formed through an informal alliance of commentators living in any number of cities and in any number of nations that dealt with crucial "public" issues ranging from women's rights to capital punishment and penal reform, to censorship and poor laws. The quarreling that took place on either side of the barricades is less germane to what was at stake than academics might believe: quarrels occur in every family. Important is that both the philosophes and their adversaries saw themselves as families.[20] Both groups closed ranks when they felt under attack in the face of some *cause célèbre*,[21] such as the Calas Affair, which dealt with religious dogmatism and torture, or the attempt among partisans to censor Diderot's *Encyclopedia* in 1786. Both movements would also generate intellectual frameworks for their political successors among future generations.[22] The solidarity existing among supporters of the Enlightenment was no greater than among their opponents and intellectuals on one side were not necessarily "smarter" than those on the other. The "public intellectual," in short, emerged simultaneously on both sides of the barricades: crucial is not that this intellectual was attached to some special social stratum, or knew certain texts, or took an "objective" stance, but rather his or her particular *engagement* with the pressing issues of the day and embrace of a distinctive political project.

Sapere Aude! The question was whether to follow one's intelligence, wherever it might lead, or not: the critical confronted the affirmative intellectual. The difference between them has existential as well as material sources. The point is not merely that the critical intellectual stands for civil liberties, the mitigation of economic injustice, and cosmopolitan ideal while his affirmative counterpart embraces authority, tradition, and myth. It is also a matter of whether the intellectual will experiment with the new or remain content with things as they are. The affirmative intellectual can also

20. Gay, *The Enlightenment* 1:6

21. Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 19ff.

22. The famous essays on the intellectual history of the "Counter-Enlightenment" by Sir Isaiah Berlin remain as profitable now as at the time when they were written in making sense of the Enlightenment. But the elective affinity between counter-enlightenment ideas and right-wing political movements is radically underplayed in most of them, which helps explain his concern with rehabilitating—simply on the level of ideas—figures like Hamann and de Maistre. Useful as a corrective is the study by McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment*, and the anthology by Jean-Jacques Langendorf, *Pamphletisten und Theoretiker der Gegenrevolution 1789–1799* (Muenchen: Matthes & Seitz, 1989).

embrace civil liberties, economic reforms, and cosmopolitan claims. But that will be the case only once they have become customary: thus, the revolting spectacle of conservatives posturing about racial or gender equality when it was their predecessors who sought to maintain existing prejudices. What distinguishes the critical from the affirmative intellectual is therefore the belief in the possibility of reform and the commitment to progress. The former in keeping with the spirit of the Enlightenment, becomes their advocate while the latter, at best, resigns himself to them.

Enlightenment intellectuals therefore looked at history in a new way. They sympathized with the victims of witch trials, religious wars, and the Inquisition. More important, in contrast to their enemies, they highlighted the ways in which the past had failed the living. Existence for the bulk of humanity seemed no different than the state of nature so pitilessly described by Hobbes. None of the philosophes was astonished when Rousseau noted in the *Emile* that only half of all children would reach the age of adolescence. The pedagogic character of their enterprise was clear to them: they knew that most considered poverty and backbreaking labor the result of fate or the expulsion from paradise. Most surely would have agreed with Voltaire when in 1771, with a mixture of disgust and compassion, he wrote that "more than half the habitable world is still populated by two-footed animals who live in a horrible condition approximating the state of nature, with hardly enough to live on and clothe themselves, barely enjoying the gift of speech, barely aware that they are miserable, living and dying practically without knowing it."[23]

Transforming this vale of tears—not through prayer but through politics, not through reliance on experience but through innovation, not through received authority but the power of the intellect—provided the rationale for the Enlightenment. Its universal understanding of the citizen and the producer, which had such different implications, were both rooted in the burgeoning world of the commodity. If its partisans were often unaware of the genuinely radical implications of their thinking, however, this evidenced nothing more than the limits imposed by the historical context. The contempt of the philosophes for the *ancien régime* always broke through their willingness to work with it. Still, they weren't revolutionaries. Hardly anyone other than Jefferson spoke about revolution with relish. Only later, once the star of the Enlightenment had started to dim, did figures like Restif de la

23. Cited in J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth* (New York: Dover, 1978), 167.

Bretonne and Sebastian Mercier bring what they considered its revolutionary message to the masses who then made Rousseau their hero.[24] Outside the United States, where the unleashing of revolutionary energies was dampened almost immediately,[25] few philosophes sought political power. They were mostly pragmatic reformers, utilitarians concerned with highlighting self-interest and determining the "greatest happiness for the greatest number;" or moralists committed to educating the sentiments, eradicating prejudice, and lifting what Karl Marx later termed the "material level of culture."

Critical intellectuals assuredly exuded an air of elitism and arrogance as they trumpeted their doubts about popular traditions and their possession of scientific truths. If not many of them then much of their public belonged to the middle class of lawyers and office holders, the educated striving to make their reputation in literary academies and cultural circles. It was the position of this fluid middle class within the existing totality of social relations that provided the philosophes with their independence and sense of universal purpose. This was particularly the case in France where the connection of the middle class with other classes of superior and inferior status was simultaneously more organic and more problematic than elsewhere in Europe. A growing bureaucracy and the willingness of the crown to sell offices bound the middle class to the court while the emergence of a "nobility of the robe," based on the purchase of titles, connected it with the aristocracy and the court. In addition, the emergence of free professionals and merchants from the peasantry, artisans, and traders tied the middle class to what might be termed the "masses." Especially French intellectuals, insofar as they were products of this middle-class milieu, could thus view themselves as representative of universal interests in a fragmented society. They were neither professors like in Germany or clergymen relatively free from religious strictures like in England. Their very lack of an official status or particular social function, in fact, enabled the French to view themselves as free-lance intellectuals committed to the improvement of humanity.[26]

But this sense of purpose ultimately spread beyond France. Enlighten-

24. Roy Porter, *The Enlightenment* 2nd Edition (London: Palgrave, 2001), 44.
25. "What the royal charters and the loyal attachment of the colonies to king and Parliament in England had done for the people in America was to provide their power with the additional weight of authority; so that the chief problem of the American Revolution, once this source of authority had been severed from the colonial body politic in the New World, turned out to be the establishment and foundation not of power but authority." Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1964), 178.
26. Krieger, *Kings and Philosophers,* 174.

ment intellectuals saw themselves as an international vanguard—though not in the sense of a political party unaccountable to the masses—intent upon creating the intellectual and practical conditions by which the individual might emerge from his "immaturity" and humanity from its degradation and barbarism. There was nothing soppy or sentimental in speaking about "humanity" or what would later be understood as its fulfillment in the notion of "fraternity." Such ideals evidence themselves in dark times. Each of them, as Hannah Arendt noted in her lovely essay on Lessing, "has its natural place among the repressed and persecuted, the exploited and humiliated, whom the eighteenth century called the unfortunates, *les malheureux*, and the nineteenth century the wretched, *les miserables*."[27]

Enlightenment intellectuals sought to link their ideals with a practical assault on the privileges and prejudices of the *ancien régime*. All of them searched for the connections between fact and value, system and experience, reason and emotion; Rousseau would indeed consider the attempt to link principle and interest as a primary concern of *The Social Contract*. It became a matter of balancing the needs of the individual with those of society and, as this concern became more pronounced, the Enlightenment became more political as it journeyed from its beginnings in England to its mature phase in France.[28] Flexibility was thus the mark of Enlightenment politics.

Few of the philosophes were consistent in the regimes to which they extended support: but all were consistent in the values that they advocated within those regimes. Rousseau could project the vision of direct democracy, but also warn against the introduction of radical measures in the Kingdom of Poland. Kant envisioned an international federation of republics even as he insisted upon obeying the dictates of monarchs. Voltaire adapted his ideas on civil liberties, tolerance, and anti-clericalism to the changing political situations though his general concern with constraining the exercise of arbitrary power remained constant. And this was the case whether he was in Prussia dealing with the Frederick the Great, confronting the parochial asceticism of Rousseau in his attack on theater, or turning against his own bourgeois supporters in the name of the disenfranchised and excluded of Geneva.[29] The political practices of Voltaire and his comrades may have

27. Hannah Arendt, "Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing," in *Men in Dark Times* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1973), 20–21

28. Krieger, *Kings and Philosophers*, 153.

29. Peter Gay, *Voltaire's Politics: The Poet as Realist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 185–238.

been opportunistic, but their ideals were unambiguous. Enlightenment intellectuals were, for the most part, guided by a form of pragmatic idealism in addressing the issues of the day.

Authenticity during the Enlightenment may not have demanded the self-conscious *engagement* required by modern existentialists, but the philosophes were engaged in spite of themselves: they were apostles of resistance. Pursuing scientific truth pitted them against religious institutions, exploring the economic logic of an emerging capitalism pitted them against the aristocracy, castigating public prejudices pitted them against the "masses," and seeking to constrain arbitrary authority pitted them against all the forces of the *ancien régime*. Especially their preoccupation with the latter, which translated into compassion for the least fortunate and a belief in humanity, makes it ridiculous to suggest that the Enlightenment and its use of scientific reason somehow inherently fulfills itself in the thinking of the Marquis de Sade.[30]

He, too, may have refused to grant the validity of anything that cannot be rationally proved in the character of Juliette,[31] and —in keeping with various philosophes—this may have produced an unrelenting attack on metaphysics. But his reduction of people to instruments of appetite in works like *The 120 Days of Sodom* had far less to do with scientific rationality than with privileging an unconstrained egoism and what—in terms far cruder than Nietzsche—might be termed "the will to power." Sade's point was that, precisely because nothing moral existed in nature, all morality must be understood as hypocritical. But Kant, Vico, and Voltaire could all share the same initial assumption about nature and arrive at completely different conclusions about morality. Sade's emphasis upon "reason" and "science" was always a pose. The reduction of people to things is a political choice, not some prescribed implication of reason or science. Decisive instead was his belief that without God there is only license: not simply the outrageous sexual transgressions depicted in his writings, but his insistence that without an absolute there is only moral chaos is what made Sade a figure of such interest to contemporary postmodernists. The self-serving character of his argument is obvious in his case and, in philosophical terms, no better example exists

30. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), 94ff.

31. " . . . for all the pretentious philosophizing the Marquis de Sade injected into his novels, he was never more than a caricature of the Enlightenment whose heir he claimed to be." Gay, *The Enlightenment* 1:25

of being defined by what one nominally opposes. The importance of Sade's pseudo-philosophical pornography derives less from its iron logic than its arbitrary equation of freedom with license. His celebration of the coercive, the cruel, and the solipsistic runs counter to every value associated with the theory and practice of the Enlightenment. His work indeed reflects a situation in which:

> The growing doubt of human autonomy and reason has created a state of moral confusion where man is left without the guidance of either revelation or reason. The result is the acceptance of a relativistic position which proposes that value judgments and ethical norms are exclusively matters of taste or arbitrary preference and that no objectively valid statement can be made in this realm. But since man cannot live without values and norms, this relativism makes him an easy prey for irrational value-systems.[32]

Enlightenment thinking runs directly counter to that of Sade. All of the most important philosophes distinguished between pluralism and relativism. They sensed that, where the former requires an institutional framework with which to constrain power, the latter was merely the flip side of absolutism: it would serve the interests of the powerful and leave criticism unable to privilege freedom over intolerance[33] Enlightenment intellectuals, in this regard, never believed that everyone must embrace the same goals as they, let alone that everyone must somehow reach these goals by the same logical means. Such an interpretation is possible only when the Enlightenment is identified with some rigid and uniform rationalist philosophy. It was instead inspired by a belief in the need for shared principles that underpin the liberal rule of law and enable redress of grievances without resorting to violence.

This was certainly not the position of the Counter-Enlightenment. The philosophes may have been elitist but their elitism was social rather than political and, if it can be put this way, of an anti-authoritarian rather than an authoritarian sort. Intellectuals can be chastised as a social stratum removed

32. Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics* (New York, 1947), 4–5.

33. "Relativism, no matter how progressive its bearing, has at all times been linked with moments of reaction, beginning with the sophists' availability to the more powerful interests. To intervene by criticizing relativism is the paradigm of definite negation." Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York, Continuum, 1973), 37.

from the masses. But there is a something contradictory in speaking about an "organic" intellectual.[34] Not since the time of Socrates have intellectuals ever stood in a genuinely "organic" connection to the community. Populist criticism of this sort was common in the labor movement, and later many of the new social movements, but its modern formulation was provided by proto-fascist groups of the 1880s. And it is basically true. Critical intellectuals read books, debate, and value research. Those engaged in progressive causes seek to dispel prejudices and contest popular beliefs or, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, "rub society against the grain." There is no way around it: insofar as intellectuals abandon this endeavor they surrender their critical function while, insofar as they embrace it, their "organic" character becomes problematic.

Enlightenment intellectuals reflected the concerns of an era in which "society discovered that its fate was in its own hands" and "people began to trust in the power of the will with an optimism born of the triumph of intelligence, and they began to live and talk and look at things in new ways that questioned the whole of existence."[35] This atmosphere surely inspired intellectuals as varied as Benjamin Franklin, Rousseau, Thomas Paine, and Goethe to laud the "common sense" of everyday people. But the connection between intellectuals and the broader public should not be seen in mechanical terms. Enlightenment thinkers recognized that intellectuals can serve the masses with integrity only insofar as they resist compromising the knowledge they offer.

Self-styled demagogues of both the left and the right have always sought to exploit know-nothing populism and resentment at the exercise of the intellect. More telling, however, is the thinker who, through rational argument, seeks to privilege intuition or emotion in evaluating claims and rendering judgments—that is, the anti-intellectual intellectual. Such an intellectual usually has an affinity for the Counter-Enlightenment: its im-

34. Bound to the working class through both job and lifestyle, according to the great Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci, this new intellectual would foster "counter-hegemonic" values among the oppressed and exploited. That effort would build consciousness, overcome fragmentation, and perhaps even lead to the introduction of new institutions like soviets capable of making a vanguard party unnecessary. But forgotten is usually that the connection between the "organic" intellectual and the masses is mediated by the party and, while the attack on "hegemonic" ideas can take place with an eye on the interests of the exploited, Gramsci had little to say about the "organic" character of the intellectual when criticism of the exploited or their party would be demanded by conscience. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* ed. and trans. Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey Knowles-Smith (New York: International Publishers: New York, 1971), 3–24.

35. Daniel Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 487.

pressive array of thinkers ranges from Edmund Burke to Michael Oakeshott and, further on the right, from Joseph de Maistre to Martin Heidegger. Enormous differences exist between them. All believe, however, in the primacy of intuition over reason and experience over speculative critique. "The local takes precedence over the cosmopolitan and the particular over the universal." Any judgment incapable of making reference to the community is considered "abstract" by definition. The opinion of the "outsider" is always suspect since the value of an argument rests on the "authenticity" with which it is delivered and the "rootedness" of its author in a given group or tradition. Thus, putting it crudely, the task of the anti-intellectual involves a critique of the intellect and a derision of the "intellectual."

Contempt was already directed against the "intellectual" when Maurice Barrès first introduced the term in damning his liberal and socialist opponents during the Dreyfus Affair.[36] Intellectuals like Emile Zola and Jean Jaurès could decry the injustice accorded Dreyfus—the Jew—because, in keeping with the general tenor of the Enlightenment, they chose to place reason above experience, evidentiary truth above tradition, and a more universal sense of justice above the "honor" of the army and the supposed exigencies of the national "community." Barrès and his friends, Paul Bourget and Charles Maurras, by way of contrast, embraced the tradition of the Counter-Enlightenment. Their argument was simple enough. Their rejection of universal reason in favor of intuition and the logic of the particular supposedly enabled them to remain "rooted" in their community and stand in a more genuine experiential, or "organic," relation to the "people" than their adversaries. But there should no mistake: many on both sides of the barricades were indeed intellectuals. Those with affirmative views actually stood in no closer relation to the "people" than their Dreyfusard opponents on the left—and, arguably, less so. Nevertheless, by packaging their message in a populist rhetoric, an elitist stigma soon became attached to the critical "intellectual."

There is something to be said for the belief that intellectuals connected "empirically" with particular social movements might be best placed to build

36. The term 'intellectual' appears to originate from the pen of Clemenceau in an article in *L'Aurore* of January 23, 1898, as a collective description of the most prominent Dreyfusards. The new term was promptly taken up in a pejorative sense of unscrupulousness and irresponsible disloyalty to the nation by Maurice Barrès in *Scenes et doctrines du nationalism* (Paris, 1902), pg. 46 (where incidentally even the un-French quality of the word itself becomes part of the accusation)." J. P. Nettl, "Ideas, Intellectuals, and the Structures of Dissent," in *On Intellectuals,* ed. Philip Rieff (New York, 1969), 87.

the need for solidarity with other groups.[37] But this should be construed less as a matter of principles than tactics. The Counter-Enlightenment showed the danger of reducing intellectual work to the symbolic or existential gesture of the "person" whose own "I" is in the postmodern era, moreover, always fundamentally in doubt. Judgment can then rest only on the immediate "experience" of reality. Critical reflection will become subordinated to some intuition of reality privileged by the race, gender, or ethnic background of the individual. Fixed and stable categories of "identity" are basically affirmative: they militate against new concerns with hybridity first raised by "postcolonial" thinkers; they offer nothing other than tactical possibilities for solidarity between groups, and they ignore how the ability to choose an "identity" with some degree of safety depends upon the existence of liberal institutions with liberal norms. These institutions and norms have their source within the Enlightenment. Many a postmodern or and communitarian intellectual obsessed with privileging "experience" in the world of today is not far removed from the anti-intellectual intellectual of yesterday.

The critical intellectual from the time of the Abbé Galiani to Jean-Paul Sartre has always been willing to "meddle in what is not his business."[38] Intellectuals like Albert Einstein, Linus Pauling, and Noam Chomsky stand in this tradition. They have used the prestige they gained in highly specialized fields of inquiry to intervene positively in debates over crucial political matters often, in the process, illuminating hidden normative and material interests embedded within elite forms of decision-making in striking ways. The Enlightenment intellectual knew that it takes no particular experience or expertise to recognize injustice and Edward Said was insightful in noting the connection between the intellectual and the "amateur." Therein one finds the legacy of Voltaire and the critics of the *ancien régime*, of the Dreyfusards, and the students who went to protest segregation in the American South or the atrocities of the Vietnam War. These people were neither necessarily intimately associated with the oppression they witnessed nor experts in legal or military affairs. They could engage themselves precisely because they felt unrestricted by their particular "experiences" or fields of expertise.

But praise for the amateur also has its limits. To ignore the need for critical disciplinary intellectuals with various forms of scientific expertise is to

37. Michel Foucalt, "Intellectuals and Power" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977); 205ff; also "Truth and Power," in *The Foucault Reader,* ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 68ff..

38. Jean-Paul Sartre, "A Plea for Intellectuals" in *Between Existentialism and Marxism* trans. John Matthews (London, 1974), 230.

abdicate responsibility for a host of issues involving knowledge of fields ranging from physics and genetics to electronics and even environmentalism. There is surely an overabundance of jargon and mystification and, as has been mentioned before, the need exists for a new sensitivity to the vernacular.[39] But it is also the case that complex issues sometimes require complex language and, often for good reasons, fields generate their own vocabularies. A judgment is undoubtedly necessary with respect to whether the language employed in a work is necessary for illuminating the issue under investigation: that judgment, however, can never be made in advance. There must be a place for the technocrat with a political conscience as surely as for the humanist with a particular specialty. The battle against oppression requires a multi-frontal strategy. Best to consider the words of Primo Levi who understands the critical intellectual as a "person educated beyond his daily trade, whose culture is alive insofar as it makes an effort to renew itself, and keep up to date, and who does not react with indifference or irritation when confronted by any branch of knowledge, even though, obviously, he cannot cultivate all of them."[40]

But the historical trajectory of modernity seems to have plotted a different course: what seemingly began in the age of democratic revolution as the attempt by Enlightenment intellectuals to offer a "practical program" for the liberation of the individual from the dogma of "throne and altar," instead created a world dominated by specialists and a bureaucratic, if not always totalitarian, society marked by the "dull indifference and apathy of the individual towards destiny and to what comes from above."[41] Critical theory had always been skeptical about claims concerning the autonomy of philosophy, but its partisans nevertheless sought to explain this development through the supposedly immanent dynamics of Enlightenment philosophy. In so doing, however, they produced a reified understanding of "reason" that fit an equally reified understanding of reality. Conflicts of ideological interest fell by the wayside—the wars of words and bullets, and the great moments of political decision as well. Seeking to deal with the unintended consequences produced by Enlightenment thought, in keeping with its idealist heritage,

39. Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

40. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage, 1988), 132.

41. Max Horkheimer, "The Social Function of Philosophy," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell et. al (New York: Continuum, 1982), 271.

critical theory felt it sufficient to illuminate a new version of what Hegel termed "the cunning of reason."

The myth still exists that the Enlightenment intellectual is the source of modern totalitarianism. It is spread on both the left and the right. Some argue that the erosion of authority through critique opened the floodgates of revolution:[42] as if it would have been better to leave the authoritarian institutions, the economic misery, and the cultural prejudices of the *ancien régime* intact. Others suggest that the problem involved the belief of Enlightenment intellectuals that they retained a "privileged" insight into truth, justice, and progress.[43] Taking any position or "standpoint," however, necessarily involves privileging it. But the philosophes were generally skeptical about ontological claims, they debated openly with one another, and their principle battle was against dogmatism. The philosophes inspired antifascist movements while their enemies paved the way for Mussolini, Franco, and Hitler. Critics of the Enlightenment intellectual rarely take this into account because they usually show only contempt for political history and political engagement.

Arguments claiming that contemporary intellectuals—in contrast to their predecessors—should remain content to "interpret" misunderstandings between groups, rather than attempt to "legislate" conclusions,[44] exhibit the same political irresponsibility and simply rehash the myths of a warmed over populism. They over-estimate the power of intellectuals in the same way others overestimated the hegemony of Enlightenment values. Smugly they ask why "sophisticated" and worldly Enlightenment intellectuals, who prided themselves on their tolerance, should have grown "apoplectic" or "descended into sarcasm and smut" when dealing with "priests and creeds." They forget that a political battle was in progress against repressive institutions and customs with which priests and their churches were—correctly—associated in their minds.[45]

A dictatorship of the intellectuals is, of course, an appalling notion. But when did Enlightenment intellectuals ever hold power? The philosopher-king has always been little more than a useful fiction. Enlightenment intel-

42. R. J. White, The Anti-Philosophers: A Study of the Philosophes in Eighteenth Century France (London: Macmillan, 1970);
43. Karlis Racekvis, *Postmodernism and the Search for Enlightenment* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995).
44. Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpretors: On Modernity, Post-modernity, and Intellectuals* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 5ff and *passim*.
45. Porter, *The Enlightenment*, 31

lectuals lacked a catechism of orthodoxy, an articulated program, and a political party: if there was a problem with their political vision, from a revolutionary perspective, it had less to do with their hidden authoritarianism or intolerance than their inability to envision the prospect of a counter-revolution or what it might take to deal with it. The philosophical justification for revolutionary terror was, other than a few famous phrases like that of forcing people to be free, precisely what the philosophes did not provide. The best that can be said historically is that the absence became the presence. Intellectuals did not rule in 1793 and, long before the purges of the 1930s, Stalin had displaced Lenin's self-appointed vanguard party of "professional revolutionary intellectuals" with his own thugs under the slogan "gangway for talent." Various important intellectuals extended their support to Stalin and Hitler. In doing so, however, they obviously compromised their "critical" role and the political principles of the Enlightenment.[46] In any event, the idea that intellectuals somehow held sway over the Nazi and Communist regimes is ludicrous.

Enlightenment intellectuals were always held in contempt by totalitarians on both sides of the political spectrum. And that is because they were, historically, committed to curbing state power and contesting dogma. Talk about their "legislative" ambitions under such circumstances becomes just another mode of populist posturing and avoiding political responsibility: as if reaching conclusions on matters of policy or organization were somehow better left to non-intellectuals or that for the intellectual in the totally administered society, there is nothing self-serving in the claim that "inviolable isolation is now the only way of showing some measure of solidarity."[47] Enlightenment intellectuals engaged in politics were always a threat to the authoritarian establishment. Their skepticism and their humanism made them suspect. In fact, such intellectuals fostered precisely what is most fundamental to undermining the appeal of totalitarianism: the will to know.

46. "If there was a uniquely German phenomenon that prepared the ground for Nazism, it was not the spread of anti-Semitism among the population in general but its spread among the intellectual elites. . . . In the 1920s the Nazis attracted an important section—the teachers and students especially, because the universities had become a hotbed of extremist right-wing ideas decades before." Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 33.

47. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections of Damaged Life*, trans.E.F.N. Jephcott (London: New Left Books, 1974), 26.