RECLAIMING THE ENLIGHTENMENT

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To My Dear Friend
John Ehrenberg

For reason is the light of the mind and without her all things are dreams and phantoms.
—Baruch Spinoza

The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! Have the courage to use your own understanding!
—Immanuel Kant

I have always preferred freedom to everything else.
—Voltaire

The genuine synthesis will probably remain an undiscovered country.
—Goethe

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PREFACE

What follows is an attempt to reclaim the Enlightenment, with its peculiar tradition of theory and practice. Of course, the twenty-first century is not the eighteenth: there is clearly no exact symmetry between past and present. The analog it might provide for engaged intellectuals, no less than its ethical model for resisting oppressive structures of power, needs reinterpretation to meet new conditions. Rigid notions of progress have fallen by the wayside; no group or party can any longer claim to incarnate the ideals of humanity, and the intellectual too often identifies the university with the world. Images from television and film rather than words on the page now shape the public sphere. Liberal regimes have often been corrupted by imperialist ambitions and parasitical elites. Both the left and the right have championed totalitarianism. The new global expansion of capitalism, the rise of the bureaucratic state, media consolidation, thoughtless consumerism, disregard for the environment, and cultural relativism have all undermined the ideals of cosmopolitan tolerance, economic justice, democratic accountability, and the idea of the "good society" generally associated with the Enlightenment.

But, if the progressive intellectual can no longer guarantee the realization of reason's promise, it is still the liberal rule of law with its explicit privileging of civil liberty, the interventionist state as an agent of social justice, and cosmopolitan movements intent on demanding recognition of the "other," that serve as the precondition—the condition sine qua non—for bettering the lives of individuals, enabling them to expand the range of their experiences, which is the most basic meaning of progress. Current forms of engagement probably seem more pedestrian: perhaps that is the case. But political engagement is no less important than in earlier times. Universal interests remain real. It is only that the engaged intellectual can no longer indulge in the old romantic expectations of "changing the world" in one fell swoop.

Enlightenment intellectuals may have laced their political engagement with drama, but they never fell into the trap of demanding all or nothing. To view them as either utopians or totalitarians is philosophically untenable and historically absurd. They took the world as it was, and sought to deal with the problems that it presented in a pragmatic and principled way. But the world has changed. There is no longer an "agent" capable of realizing the emancipatory values of the Enlightenment. Neither "humanity" nor the proletariat nor the once colonized peoples can any longer be identified with what Hegel termed "the world spirit." There is also no longer a "republic of letters." But these changes are, too often, employed as an excuse for passivity. There is an even more diverse cosmopolitan community of critical intellectuals and there exists an even greater variety than heretofore of progressive organizations that deal—and often deal positively—with crucial issues ranging from world hunger to the protection of individual liberties to animal rights. Specifying an 'agent" of change or creating a hierarchy of causes is neither possible nor necessary. Teleology has fallen by the wayside and realizing freedom lacks any historical guarantee. The issue is no longer what party or social movement or interest group is joined; rather the issue concerns the initial decision to engage political reality and the choice of an ethical stance capable of fostering solidarity between organizations. That, indeed, is where the Enlightenment legacy still has a role to play.

Solidarity should not simply be assumed: the landscape of the left is still littered by ideological turf-wars inherited from the 1960s. Enlightenment political values are important not only because they contest narrow organizational ambitions that interfere with cooperative action, but also because they provide a historical and speculative orientation for progressive activists and intellectuals. That orientation virtually vanished following the fragmentation of the civil rights and poor peoples movements and the new popularity accorded the variants of postmodernism and—what perhaps lies at the root of them all—the "late" brand of critical theory associated with *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. In keeping with the decline of radical political parties, and the identification of resistance with the expression of subjectivity, the Enlightenment has been subjected to a new metaphysical form of "immanent" critique. Its *political legacy* has thus become a secondary concern.

The preoccupations of the *philosophes* with social and institutional reform , and what Max Weber termed the "elective affinity" between their values and progressive agents for change, now seem to receive scant attention.

This is all the more unfortunate since new transnational movements have come into existence, often confused in terms of how they should respond to "globalization," along with functioning transnational political institutions that still suffer from a deficit of loyalty. New communications technologies are providing new organizational possibilities for political resistance, expanding the range of available experiences, and opening the way for new understandings of the most diverse cultures. New forms of solidarity, reflected in the popular concern with "human rights," have challenged imperialist wars, outdated cultural norms, and authoritarian politics. The objective conditions for realizing the unrealized hopes associated with internationalism, liberal democracy, and social justice are already there; only the ideological willingness to embrace the assumptions underpinning these values is lacking. That is what provides the Enlightenment with a new salience for our time.

Humanity is not in the past, but rather in the making. Conservatism may have set the agenda since the last quarter of the twentieth century. But that does not justify the resignation and increasingly debilitating pessimism associated with so many current forms of "radical" thought. Genuinely progressive changes have occurred: dictators have fallen and more citizens of the world have been enfranchised; battles for economic justice have been won; racism and sexism are on the defensive; and there has been poetry—good poetry—after Auschwitz. Easy to downplay the gains, suggest that they have now been "absorbed"; and embrace a new version of the old and tired attitude known as "cultural pessimism." Cynicism always comes cheap. The real challenge lies in recognizing how the "system," which was never as "totally administered" as many would like to think has been changed for the better through social action inspired by the Enlightenment.

The closed society has become more open and—against the provincial, religious, exploitative, and authoritarian sources of opposition—it has the potential of becoming more open still. Deciding to enter the fray, however, becomes more difficult when relying on philosophical perspectives that leave their supporters wandering about lost in Hegel's night in which all cows are black. It is necessary to distinguish between traditions not by making reference to metaphysics, but rather by looking at the political conflicts between actual movements. Again, to be sure, the radical democratic and egalitarian aspects of the Enlightenment have been betrayed often enough. But this recognition presupposes that there was indeed something to betray. Which promises made by the Enlightenment have been broken becomes apparent not from the standpoint of "negative dialectics," communitarian

convictions, "pragmatism," or ethical relativism, but rather by taking seriously its universal understanding of liberty and progress.

To be sure: universalism can be found in western imperialist propaganda and notions like "the sun never sets on the British Empire." In reality, however, such universalism is not universal at all: it lacks reciprocity, an open discourse, and a concern with protecting the individual from the arbitrary exercise of power: That is what differentiates Enlightenment universalism from its imitators, provides it with a self-critical quality, and enables it to contest Euro-centrism and the prevalent belief in a "clash of civilizations." Let there be no mistake: it has no use for misguided tolerance. Refusals to entertain "western" criticisms can easily be used to insulate repressive non-western traditions from criticism if only because non-western elites can also be authoritarian. Enlightenment political theory always refuses to justify tradition simply because it exists. Its best representatives argue for tolerance over prejudice, innovation over stasis, the rights of the minority over the enthusiasms of the majority, and the moral autonomy of the individual over the revealed claims of religious authority. The radical moment of the Enlightenment lies in its universal assault on privilege and prejudice. Its reflexive and critical character enables its most distinctive political theory to call for constraining the arbitrary exercise of institutional power and expand the possibilities of individual experience in *both* western and nonwestern societies.

Enlightenment intellectuals provide an analogy for what contemporary intellectuals should strive to accomplish and a model of how to combat oppressive institutions, unjustifiable privileges, and anachronistic cultural practices. Viewing their political theory as the source of bureaucratic conformism or totalitarianism is a profound mistake. Their insistence upon demonstrating a plausible—not a perfect, but a plausible—connection between means and ends with respect to political action and social change was not merely to be directed against the ruling elites but against those who would resist them. They anticipated how the collapse of this connection would historically work against the interests of the lowly and the insulted. They sensed that it would turn individuals into a means for political ends and let them be seen as nothing more than economic "costs of production."

Resisting this state of affairs is the most radical purpose of the two most important political products of the Enlightenment: liberalism and socialism. Both inspired progressive mass movements and, for good reasons, inspire them still. The point of their intersection has become the intellectual point of departure for any genuinely progressive politics. Identification with the disenfranchised and the exploited from a cosmopolitan standpoint is the

necessary implication of this position. Such is the legacy of the Enlightenment. Making good on it, however, calls for privileging the satisfactions and benefits of political interpretation over the esoteric and metaphysical vagaries of fashionable pseudo-political philosophical currents. If philosophy really has been an expression of what Novalis termed "transcendental homelessness," which I doubt, then perhaps it is time to confront the philosophical with the political and, finally, for the prodigal to return home.

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