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Daniel Brewer

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

*Producing Enlightenment history*

How do we seize the foreign past?

Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was” (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.

Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*

We want historians to confirm our belief that the present rests upon profound intentions and immutable necessities. But the true historical sense confirms our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or a point of reference.

Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”

The Enlightenment has long been hailed as the foundation of modern Western political and intellectual culture. The beginnings of this historical moment, the “age of reason” of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, are commonly located in the attempts to place knowledge on new foundations and in so doing to regroup existence and action. The term ‘Enlightenment’ thus signifies a particular set of ideas, values, and cultural practices that grew out of an existing intellectual and socio-political order, often enough by resisting it, and that gradually gained power and prominence during the eighteenth century. Over the following two centuries these ideas, values, and practices would come to define fundamental aspects of contemporary political and social life in a liberal, democratic society, on the level of both individual and collective existence. More precisely, the term Enlightenment would designate the following tenets: the autonomy of fundamentally rational individuals, the progressive function of the state to which individuals give up their freedom in return for increased collective well-being, the essential rationality of a natural order made accessible through scientific knowledge and its

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technological applications designed to better material existence, and the potentially just nature of collective social relations. The desire to regulate human affairs based on these values constitutes the so-called Enlightenment project, a program aimed at reforming individual behavior and social practices.

Reformist, progressivist, and emancipatory, the Enlightenment project is fundamentally future-oriented, even to the point of being impossibly utopian, a constantly and constitutively unrealizable goal. The emergence of this project thus sets in place a changed relation between past, present, and future, instituting what François Hartog calls a new “régime d’historicité,” a specific way of writing history but also of structuring historical knowledge and phrasing historicity, the historical nature of things and being.<sup>1</sup> No longer is the present to be understood and lived in terms of the past, whose repetition the present makes manifest. Instead, the present is to be grasped as becoming what it no longer will be. Viewed from the perspective of a future anterior, poised between irremediable loss and ultimate accomplishment, the present of the Enlightenment project is experienced increasingly in terms of what it will have been.

Michel Foucault has claimed that we must try to think of ourselves as “beings who are historically determined, to a certain extent, by the Enlightenment.”<sup>2</sup> My aim in *The Enlightenment Past* is to examine the implications of Foucault’s remark, teasing out the question of our historical determination by considering how the vast Enlightenment narrative has marked more than two centuries of intellectual thought and cultural practice. In a sense, that narrative is well known. Thanks to numerous anthologies and case studies of Enlightenment writers, as well as synthetic histories and critical interpretations of the period seen through the lens of social, cultural, and intellectual movements, the story of the Enlightenment sketched out above has become a familiar one in the cultural imaginary. It is a story often told telegraphically, as a kind of *aide-mémoire*, a way of remembering our contentedness with civilization, or perhaps forgetting our discontent. Less well understood is why the Enlightenment narrative has become so familiar. What conditions link us to the Enlightenment past? Are we bound by that historical determination, and what would it mean to be free from it, in historical, epistemological, or ontological terms? Foucault’s comment underscores the urgency of reflecting not on the Enlightenment past per se, as an autonomous object or event, but rather on a present and the mode of its relation to that past. What Foucault calls for is a form of critical thought defined and constituted by its linkage to the Enlightenment past.

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Reflection on the Enlightenment past inevitably must involve critical self-reflection, which can productively be located discursively, in narrative and in the stories a culture tells (of) itself. Consequently, it is pressing to ask not what the Enlightenment was, but rather how we tell its story – assuming these two issues can be separated, which is far from certain. Situating the Enlightenment past in relation to such stories may mean that we must accept that past as a constructed, imaginary object. Yet the question of the Enlightenment remains nonetheless historical in nature. Moreover, raising the question of what the Enlightenment was must also involve investigating the discursive operations and cultural practices whereby certain images of the Enlightenment were – and continue to be – constituted, circulated, contested or rejected. If the Enlightenment is of cultural value in the present moment (and my contention is that it is), then we must investigate how such value comes to be attached to the Enlightenment. We must reflect on how we come to know and valorize these constructed images, for it is in this coming to invested knowledge that we link the Enlightenment to our present moment. The aim of this book is to provide a space for such reflection by proposing a critical genealogy of the Enlightenment.

From the moment it was first posed, the question of the Enlightenment involved epistemological innovation, the project of devising new knowledge. Such writers as Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, d'Alembert, and Condillac rejected traditional, canonical, and doctrinaire ways of knowing, proposing instead radically new ways of structuring knowledge. Their aim, moreover, was to create alternative ways of relating that new knowledge to their own times. In *L'Esprit des lois*, for instance, Montesquieu views the sociopolitical order of past cultures as essentially rational and thus comprehensible in human terms, an argument on which he bases his claim that the sociopolitical order of eighteenth-century France can be restructured in a more just fashion. Continuing the work of critical skepticism undertaken by Pierre Bayle in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, Voltaire delights in revealing how successive generations wrote over the truth of their past with errors of ignorance and self-interested lies. In this negative insight into the foundations of existing historical knowledge lies the promise of an ultimately rational history. The materialist epistemology of sensationalism, promoted by Diderot, d'Alembert, and Condillac amounts to a new way of knowing through the body, a body grounded in the present moment of sensation. In the realm of art, new pictorial, theatrical, and novelistic genres amount to technical experimentations with ways to relate this sensational,

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sentimental knowing to the present as it is experienced by imaginary characters of fiction, as well as by their eighteenth-century spectators and readers. Diderot's art criticism displays this relationship and also theorizes it, and Rousseau explores the complexity of the present apprehended as experience, both in his epistolary novel, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, and his lyric, autobiographical writing, including the *Rêveries d'un promeneur solitaire* and *Les Confessions*.

This view of the canonical texts of eighteenth-century writing extends a vector of the Enlightenment project itself, namely, the drive to bring about a new way of knowing (in) the present historical moment. Yet the story I wish to tell in *The Enlightenment Past* cannot extend that project uncritically, just as we cannot rely unconditionally on the narrative of Enlightenment itself. One of the aims of this book is to pry apart two distinct Enlightenment narratives, two ways of organizing time and the subject's place in it – that of certain eighteenth-century writers who came to stand for the Enlightenment, and that of their successive readers. Each of these narratives represents a specific and distinct “régime d'historicité.”

To begin reflecting then on how these Enlightenment texts are read, we can note a frequent recourse to an ‘advent narrative’ that recounts an inaugural conceptual event marking the beginnings of modernity. This move is particularly manifest in intellectual history, in such examples as Paul Hazard's *The European Mind, 1680–1715* (1935), Ernst Cassirer's *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (1932), and Peter Gay's *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (1966–69). In different ways each of these classic works was shaped by, and helped shape, the national-intellectual traditions in which they were produced and into which they have been imported. Despite these local, contextual differences, each of these three works illustrates how an image of the Enlightenment stands for an emergent modernity. Defining this modernity schematically via the proper name, these works construct the following portraits: Descartes, the first modern philosopher of rationalism; Voltaire, the first modern historiographer; Rousseau, the first analyst of modern contractual identity in its psychological, social, and political dimension; Diderot, the first modern art critic (or novelist or materialist philosopher); d'Alembert, the first modern historian of science.

Increasingly, the inaugural narrative that situates the beginnings of modernity in the idea of Enlightenment seems to possess less power to persuade. Is the Enlightenment regime of historicity over, no longer our own? Perhaps not, but certainly what compels our attention is not the narrative of intellectual origins but rather the social and institutional

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origin of narratives. At present, research focuses more frequently on revealing the contextual location of the idea, its place within a cultural network of texts, social relations, and interests. Symptomatic of this paradigm shift, in the United States at least, is the fact that intellectual history no longer enjoys the disciplinary status it once possessed. Considering such varied indices as academic hiring patterns, debates within scholarly publications, library cataloguing, and scholarly press publicity nomenclature, we see that it is not in intellectual history but in social and cultural history that the most appealing research agendas seem to be located, the most compelling interdisciplinary debates are taking place, and disciplinary renewal has been most spiritedly manifest. One consequence of this paradigm shift towards the sociocultural is that different stories about the eighteenth century and its significance for the present are now being told. Different texts, contexts, and events are foregrounded in the narratives of social and cultural history, which employ other explanatory logics to account for other cultural formations and practices. Patterns of sociability, strategies of self-production and resistance, newly empowered relations to knowledge, the role played by image-making and representation in determining thought, constructions of identity (gendered, national, racial, urban, domestic, colonial . . .) – the significance of these research topics lies perhaps as much in the present they imply as in the past they explain (or construct).

One story these narratives do not tell, however, is that of a heroic, emancipatory, and ultimately modernizing Enlightenment such as it was told by earlier generations of intellectual historians. For some, these new narratives are the discouraging sign that research agendas have gotten hijacked by political ones, with scholarship having been pressed into service to promote ideological ends. For others, scholarship never enjoyed such protection from the political and such inoculation from the ideological. In this light the heroic story that once was told of an emancipatory Enlightenment that marks liberal thought is just as much a product of its times, from Kant to the 1960s, as any other less enchanted story about the Enlightenment, past or present. But in one case or the other, the Enlightenment now looms up from the other side of a paradigm shift. How should we grasp what we see? Is the Enlightenment to be understood from the perspective of intellectual history, cultural history, or perhaps in terms of a mode of historical thinking and analysis that cannot be reduced to such disciplinary labeling? A guiding thread of *The Enlightenment Past* is that, as historical object, the Enlightenment cannot be taken as a given, for reasons that are both historical and epistemological. One way to frame

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the issue of historical knowledge posed by the Enlightenment is by considering what has been called the ‘crisis’ of French historiography in the last half of the twentieth century.

The specter haunting the French historian is that of an instrumentalized history, based on the notion of the French nation-state and pressed into service in schools and universities to forge a patriotic and nationalist French imaginary. Easily caricatured, this was the history-writing illustrated by Ernest Lavissee, author of a primary-school history book, ‘*le petit Lavissee*’, and a twenty-seven-volume *Histoire de France* (begun in 1892), followed by a nine-volume *Histoire de France contemporaine* (1921–2). Lavissee’s texts had a massive influence in the production of Third Republic French national identity.<sup>3</sup> That history of France begins to break up in 1929 with the appearance of the journal founded by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, *Annales d’histoire économique et politique*.<sup>4</sup> Responding to the trauma of the First World War, the *Annales* suggested the bankruptcy of history-writing that focused on the wars of the nation-state. Rejecting the ideology that undergirded nineteenth-century positivism, the *annalistes* shifted emphasis from the political to the economic, as well as from a Gallo-centric view to a more Eurocentric one. Their work also questioned the notion of organic evolution and teleological progress that had buttressed earlier national histories.

“Nous vivons l’éclatement de l’histoire,” wrote Pierre Nora in 1971 in his description of the new series he would edit with the publisher Gallimard entitled “La Bibliothèque des histoires.” What Nora’s series signaled was the breakup and disappearance of History in favor of the story/history of numerous objects – regions, classes, outlooks, times, things . . . Rejecting overarching syntheses in favor of the exploration of objects in their multiplicity, historians gave up on universal and universalizing history. Instead, it was sensed that ‘new history’ was being done in France in the 1970s. The notion takes form in the title Jacques Le Goff gave to the collection of essays he edited in 1978, *La Nouvelle histoire*. The disciplinary renewal that this ‘new history’ represented was based above all on the methodological model of *mentalité*. From Lucien Lévy-Bruhl’s *La Mentalité primitive* (1922) and Marc Bloch’s *La Société féodale* (1939) to its wholesale incorporation in the 1960s, the concept of *mentalité* was used to uncover the ‘unthought’ of thought, “the internalized conditionings that cause a group or a society to share, without the need to make them explicit, a system of representations and a system of values.”<sup>5</sup> Aiming via the notion of *mentalité* to uncover structures that were impersonal and unconscious, psychological rather than intellectual, collective rather than individual, the

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'new history' of the 1970s renewed history, but it did so at a price. As Roger Chartier argues, the 'new history' placed a serious limit on understanding the past by radically separating the ideas of the past that constitute a *mentalité* from those of the present that make up historical interpretation. Furthermore, this separation implies that ideas have an intrinsic signification, existing independently of their interpretation. However, as Chartier observes, this separation is far from a given. Instead, it may well belong to the covert strategy the historian employs to legitimate his or her own relation to the past. By covering over the traces of how the past is 'consumed', the individual historian can make it seem as if the concept of *mentalité*, along with other categories generated by historical analysis, were in fact universals.

The disciplinary renewal produced by the 'new history' in France resulted from the decision to work against this strategy of interpretive camouflage. One way to restore historicity to categories of thought was by locating the origin of historical understanding in the practice of making history, the various ways in which individuals and groups are discursively and disciplinarily conditioned – as well as enabled – to speak about the past, both individually and collectively. This turn to discourse grew out of the high structuralism of the 1960s, illustrated most classically in Roland Barthes's bringing narratological analysis to bear upon the historical.<sup>6</sup> Observing that history writing is essentially a form of narrative, Barthes argued that any historical understanding derived from that writing is narratively determined. Just as literary discourse does, the discourse of history produces its own 'effect of the real' through precise technical means, such as the pronominal absence of the "I" or the focus on 'there' and 'then' to the exclusion of any 'here' and 'now'. For that reality effect to take hold, these markers of discursive technique must be made to appear to be absent, doing their work as if they were not there. Literary scholars may have relied on Barthes's essay to indict historians for an under-theorized relation to their own craft, and historians may have rejected the insights of structuralism out of hand for being a mode of thought that is resolutely, if not imperiously and terroristically, anti-historical. Yet the disciplinary renewal brought about by *la nouvelle histoire* in France grows out of a probing concern with history's relation to language and the role it plays in determining historical understanding.<sup>7</sup>

Michel de Certeau extends Barthes's insight to argue that historical discourse is a disciplinary discourse, determined by a specific collective practice. Taking the example of intellectual history, *l'histoire des idées*, *Geistesgeschichte*, Certeau notes that its object, the idea as that which can

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be thought in a given time (be it the Hegelian ‘spirit’ or *Geist*, Weberian *Weltanschauungen*, or Kuhnian paradigms), is not so much a real, historical object as a sign of a constitutive need on the part of historiography. Intellectual history stands for the impossibility of eliminating the ideologies that inform historiography, Certeau claims.

But in awarding them the place of an object, in isolating them from socio-economic structures, or in supposing, furthermore, that ‘ideas’ function in the same fashion as these structures, parallel to them and on another level, the ‘history of ideas’ can only find in the form of an ‘unconscious’ this inconsistent reality in which it dreams of discovering an *autonomous* coherence. What it manifests is in fact the unconscious of historians, or rather, that of the group to which they belong . . . The search for a coherence belonging to an ideological level thus refers to the *place* of those who develop it in the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup>

The case of intellectual history can be taken to stand more broadly for doing history *tout court*. Following Certeau’s lead, focus on the historical given is replaced by attention to the historiographical process, resulting in a changed relation to the real.

If meaning cannot be apprehended in the form of a specific knowledge that would either be drawn from the real or might be added to it, it is because every ‘historical fact’ results from a praxis, because it is already the sign of an act and therefore a statement of meaning. It results from procedures which have allowed a mode of comprehension to be articulated as a discourse of ‘facts.’<sup>9</sup>

It was Michel Foucault who offered a relentlessly bracing exploration of the relation between historical understanding and historical praxis. A guiding thread in Foucault’s writing is the problematic linkage between history and metaphysics, a connection that always risks coming undone. In the early essay, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” for example, Foucault defines traditional historical practice in terms of a suprahistorical perspective always implicit within this practice. Traditional history is

a history whose function is to compose the finally reduced diversity of time into a totality fully closed upon itself; a history that always encourages subjective recognitions and attributes a form of reconciliation to all the displacements of the past; a history whose perspective on all that preceded it implies the end of time, a completed development. The historian’s history finds its support outside of time and pretends to base its judgments on an apocalyptic objectivity. This is only possible, however, because of its belief in eternal truth, the immortality of the soul, and the nature of consciousness as always identical to itself.<sup>10</sup>

The “support” of the historian’s history, the latter’s ground, is thus a metaphysical one, claims Foucault. In defense of the historical discipline,

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we might object that no ‘practicing’ historian believes anymore in total history, in the perfect recoverability of absolute origins, in an essence of things that preexists the world of contingency and change, in truths that will be made manifest in a teleological march towards history’s end, in an enduring subject of history that remains always identical to itself. But do such denials serve less to defend the historian’s method and craft than to imply that traditional history involves a metaphysics whose foundations are all too shaky, a metaphysics that has come ungrounded?

To embrace this metaphysical ungroundedness and nonetheless produce historical knowledge, Foucault calls for replacing traditional history with genealogical history. This brand of history refuses to assume the timeless truth or identity of things prior to their emergence, and in this refusal reveals the accidental and contingent aspect of these truths and identities. The genealogist does not recover the origin of events in the attempt to reveal an ultimate, total signification; rather, the aim is to make legible their descent, their ongoing construction or constant reconfiguration.

To follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being does not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents.<sup>11</sup>

If the genealogist “listens to history,” writes Foucault, what is heard is not “the timeless and essential secret of things.” Instead the genealogist discovers “the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms.”<sup>12</sup> Can we quibble here and ask whether ‘listening to history’ suggests the latter’s voice, and thus that the enigma of history could be resolved in the final expression of its secrets? Does the image of voice thus reground history and its capacity to speak truths? We should note, though, that Foucault does not state that history speaks; rather, he insists on what the genealogist discovers. History’s voiced truths are an act of ventriloquism. However much we might wish to hear the voice of history, what is revealed in the critical and self-reflexive encounter with history is the inescapable contingency of its making.

Both Certeau and Foucault draw attention to the ‘place’ or practice of history, to the set of discursive, disciplinary, and institutional conditions that determine all historical knowledge. These are processes always at work in the confection of all history, the telltale signs that historical knowledge is a singular perspective that can never be made universal,

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total, or true. Consequently, to maintain belief in traditional history, these signs must be effaced. As Foucault notes, “historians take unusual pains to erase the elements in their work which reveal their grounding in a particular time and place, their preference in a controversy – the unavoidable obstacles of their pleasure.” They hide these signs, he adds, by invoking “objectivity, accuracy of facts, and the permanence of the past.”<sup>13</sup> Yet at particular moments, and in the texts that mark them, these telltale signs of history’s place and its practice become particularly visible.

One such moment was the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution. Spawning countless conferences, articles, and books, the bicentennial produced an extremely detailed view of the complex revolutionary period. Generating intense debate in France, and somewhat more detached commentary elsewhere, these bicentennial events highlighted the extent to which the legacy of the Revolution was still in dispute, certainly among historians but also in the larger public sphere.<sup>14</sup> While the French government continued the well-established republican tradition of representing a Revolution that best suited it, French historians reflected more publicly on the overtly ideological and polemical use that had been made – and was still being made – of the revolutionary past. In a disciplinary self-reflexive sense, certain historians wondered aloud whether it was possible to avoid such a politicized understanding of the revolutionary past, or whether, on the contrary, the moment had arrived to examine the role of the political in historical understanding.<sup>15</sup> This French ‘historians’ feud’ concerning the fraught relation between memory and the political thus crystallized a debate under way within the discipline of history since the beginning of ‘the new history’. Extending beyond the flashpoint event of the Revolution, this reflection questioned how to remember other particularly controversial events (such as the Occupation and the Vichy ‘syndrome’, the Algerian War or the Dreyfus affair). This reflection derived its theoretical impetus from French historians’ desire to examine the role their own disciplinary practice had played – and could play – in constructing the narrative of French cultural identity, such as it was being formulated in the fraught context of postwar, postcolonial, post-national France.<sup>16</sup> Marked by a *devoir de mémoire*, a memorial duty and dutiful memory, historiographical practice became inescapably an obligatory act of civic and ethical engagement.

The revolutionary celebration spawned renewed interest in the Enlightenment, and the disciplinary self-reflection it occasioned generated explanatory paradigms forged to take the place of the by then moribund Marxist interpretation of the Enlightenment. Championed