

1 What is Enlightenment?

The time will come when the sun will shine only on free men who have no master but their reason.

(Condorcet)

The Enlightenment has been defined in many different ways. Even in the eighteenth century, contemporaries were well aware that when an Italian called this movement of ideas *Illuminismo*, he meant something other than the word *Lumières* which would have been used by a friend in France, or the *Aufklärung* current in the German states. With such diversity, it was no wonder that the Berlin pastor Johann Friedrich Zöllner (1753–1824) in an article in the December 1783 number of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* should have asked ‘What is Enlightenment? This question is nearly as important as the question What is truth? This question must be answered before anyone can begin to enlighten themselves. And yet I have never seen it answered anywhere!’ This question, hidden away in a footnote to an article on matrimonial law by an obscure pastor, was one of the most fruitful ever asked. Essays in answer to it began to be submitted to the *Monatsschrift* by leading thinkers. For the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86), who published an essay in the September number in 1784, ‘Enlightenment’ referred to an as yet uncompleted process of education in the use of reason, which should be open to all. Mendelssohn therefore supported the movement for ‘popular philosophy’ which sought to spread Enlightenment ideas among lower social classes. Other competitors, such as Schiller, Herder, Wieland, Hamann, Riem and Lessing, some of the great names of the German Enlightenment, put forward quite different ideas, often, as did Schiller, emphasising aesthetics as defining the Enlightenment. These essays can be read as a compendium of the diverse meanings which by the end of the century had come to be attached to the word ‘Enlightenment’.

The Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant also participated in the competition. Kant wrote, in a now famous, though often misinterpreted

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essay, in the December 1784 number of the *Monatsschrift*, about the apparently paradoxical ways that Enlightenment should operate in the world. Kant believed that the use of reason should be as far developed as possible. Yet, he was well aware that the unbounded development of reason, if carried too far with unlimited questioning or redefining of current meanings, could dissolve social, religious and political order into chaos. On the other hand, Kant could also see the Enlightenment far more positively. Enlightenment is also, in a much quoted phrase, ‘man’s release from his self-incurred immaturity’ through the use of reason without guidance from others. The ancient motto, ‘*Sapere aude!*’ (Dare to know!), was, as Kant proclaimed early in his essay, the motto of the Enlightenment.

Yet the knowledge gained by such daring might not all be the same. Kant produced so many different interpretations of the Enlightenment in his essay that contemporaries sometimes regarded it as a satire on the meanings and uses of Enlightenment in the Prussian kingdom, whose king Frederick II replicated in his own person all the contradictory meanings of Enlightenment present in Kant’s essay. Frederick regarded himself as ‘enlightened’, as even being himself a philosopher. He took personal care of the Berlin Academy of Sciences, yet was also interested in maintaining power over public opinion and religious controversy. As Kant remarked, reflecting this ambiguity: ‘The public use of man’s reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about Enlightenment among men; the private use of reason may be quite often seriously restricted.’ In what he calls the public sphere, a place where people are free from the obligations of their calling, subjects are free to write or speak critically. In what he calls the private sphere, subjects have an actual duty to restrain the expression of wayward political judgement, in the interests of upholding the ruler’s will and lessening the likelihood of the outbreak of chaos. The curate must not criticise the bishop, the soldier his superior officer, even if their commands seem absurd.

Kant thus poses, in different words, the same problem which appeared in Mendelssohn’s essay: what happens if men think without limits? Does such thought necessarily have a positive outcome? Kant makes clear his irritation with those who saw Enlightenment as an uncomplicated progress towards the achievement of rational social and political change. For him it was clearly full of dangers, problems and contradictions. It was thus, even for contemporaries, very difficult to define ‘Enlightenment’. For men like Immanuel Kant, though many others would have disagreed, Enlightenment seemed to present itself more as a series of processes and problems, rather than as a list of intellectual projects which could be resolved quickly and neatly.

It is helpful to follow Kant's lead, and to think about the Enlightenment as a series of interlocking, and sometimes warring problems and debates. These were problems and debates which affected how the Enlightenment worked not only in Europe, but also in the rest of the world. These are perceptions which will be incorporated into this book. This presentation of the Enlightenment sees this movement as a group of capsules or flash-points where intellectual projects changed society and government on a world-wide basis.

However, this is a new interpretation. Until quite recently, it was normal to understand the Enlightenment as ultimately a unitary phenomenon, as if there was an entity called *the* Enlightenment. This version of Enlightenment saw it as a desire for human affairs to be guided by rationality, rather than faith, superstition or revelation, a world view based on science, and not tradition. In this interpretation Enlightenment, in spite of its universal aspirations, was largely something which happened in France. French attitudes were taken as typical. Yet the hostility of thinkers like Voltaire and Diderot towards the Catholic Church was quite different from the profound interest in theological questions shown by such German thinkers as Christian Wolff and Leibniz. The questioning of royal and ecclesiastical power, which was so common in the French Enlightenment thinkers such as Diderot or Voltaire, found little echo in Germany before the 1790s, where a full-scale science of administration called *Cameralkwissenschaft*, based on natural law and the interest of the common good, had already been developed.

It was also typical of this approach that the Enlightenment was presented as bounded by philosophy. The leading pre-war synthesis of the Enlightenment, Ernst Cassirer's 1932 *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, defined it as a period bounded by the lives of two philosophers: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Immanuel Kant. To be so bounded by movements in philosophy also implied that the Enlightenment was a-political. Interpretations today are very different, making Enlightenment very much nearer general history, and more concerned with the manifestations of Enlightenment beyond the works of leading thinkers in western Europe and especially France.

Cassirer's views on the Enlightenment were to a large extent reproduced in the leading synthesis of the post-war period. Peter Gay's two volumes, *The Rise of Modern Paganism* and *The Science of Freedom*, indicate his definitions of the Enlightenment. Like Cassirer, he defines the Enlightenment as a unity, and defines its chronology in terms of the lives of the great thinkers. For Gay, the first period of the Enlightenment was that of Voltaire, the second that of Denis Diderot, d'Alembert and Jean-Jacques Rousseau; the late Enlightenment is defined as the lifetimes of

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Lessing and Kant. Gay defines the programme of the Enlightenment as one of hostility to religion, and as the search for freedom and progress, achieved by a critical use of reason to change man's relationship with himself and society. He sees the Enlightenment as a liberal reform programme, and dwells less on writers such as Rousseau, whose works cannot be easily fitted to this mould.

However, Gay also is one of the first to link the American colonies of England, and the later American Republic, to the Enlightenment. He discusses the American inventor, statesman and printer Benjamin Franklin, and the third President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, and argues that the Declaration of Independence of 4 July 1776, and in particular its commitment to 'Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness', were the fulfilment of Enlightenment programmes. Gay's account thus recognises that the Enlightenment had found a place outside western Europe.

Gay's synthesis dominated the 1960s. By the next decade, however, new strands of analysis were coming to the fore, which emphasised a much more complete picture of the Enlightenment outside Europe. H. F. May's 1976 *The Enlightenment in America* was the first full modern treatment of this theme, and was followed by A. Owen Aldridge's work on the Enlightenment in the Spanish American colonies, his 1971 *The Ibero-American Enlightenment*. Both books made it impossible any longer to see the Enlightenment as a unified phenomenon, or one which was unaffected by geographical location. Aldridge in particular pointed to the difficulties of applying standard ideas of the Enlightenment to colonial societies living on European models and yet surrounded by largely incommensurable indigenous cultures.

Increasingly since the 1970s, historians have expanded the geographical area which they have been willing to see as affected by the Enlightenment. The Italian historian Franco Venturi sees Enlightenment as a force in Italy, Greece, the Balkans, Poland, Hungary and Russia, on the so-called periphery of Europe. Venturi's 1979 work, *Settecento riformatore*, and his *Utopia and Reform* of 1971, emphasised the transmission of ideas through newspapers, pamphlets, letters, books and political events which at the same time fed off and contributed to the western world of ideas. In fact, Venturi argued that it was precisely in these 'peripheral' areas where the stresses and strains within the Enlightenment could best be analysed.

By the 1970s it was also clear that historians were becoming far more interested in the social basis of the Enlightenment, in the problem of how ideas were transmitted, used and responded to by society. There was a recognition that more knowledge was needed of the now obscure and

forgotten writers who in fact had been more widely read than had works by the great names. As Robert Darnton pointed out, the majority of books in the eighteenth century had not been produced by great minds, but by now forgotten professional writers, who wrote for the market anything from pornography to children's books, to handbooks for the traveller, to textbooks on Roman history. These commercial writers, far from regarding themselves as lofty public educators or scholars advancing knowledge, wrote simply in order to be able to afford to eat. It was but a small step to enquire into the economics of the Enlightenment, the creation of markets and the strategies of sales. Darnton investigated this using the case history of the *Encyclopédie* edited by Diderot and d'Alembert, in his 1979 *The Business of Enlightenment*. All this testifies to a new willingness to place the Enlightenment in comparative contexts. There is nowadays a multiplicity of paths into the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment has, however, been unique amongst historical periods in the way it has been captured and put to use by philosophers wishing to substantiate their writings about the present, and to define modernity itself. Such different philosophers as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Jürgen Habermas and Michel Foucault, have used the Enlightenment as a jumping-off place to comment on the present. Rather surprisingly, their work, although produced to gain a leverage on the present rather than to gain an accurate picture of the past, has become an icon for many historians of the period, perhaps glad to have presented to them a convenient paradigm of their period, validated by the renown (as philosophers) of intellectual great names.

In 1947, Horkheimer and Adorno published their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Writing in the immediate aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust, the authors examined 'why mankind, instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism'. This happened, in their view, because of the paradoxical nature of the Enlightenment. As they write in the Introduction to the *Dialectic*:

The Enlightenment had always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant. The program of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world: the dissociation of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy.

Man gained control over nature, and then over other human beings, by controlling them 'rationally' through the use of technology. This means that nature is no longer seen as the location of mysterious powers and forces. Enlightenment in this view is ultimately totalitarian in the sense that it abandons the quest for meaning and simply attempts to exert

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power over nature and the world. The Enlightenment relies on ‘rationality’, reasoning which is free from superstition, mythology, fear and revelation, which is often based on mathematical ‘truth’, which calibrates ends to means, which is therefore technological, and expects solutions to problems which are objectively correct.

But it is notorious that human beings often fail to arrive at rational solutions. Having given up non-rational ways of explanation like mythology or revelation, the only way to resolve such differences was by the use of force. At the heart of the Enlightenment lurks political terror. Horkheimer and Adorno thus argued that the Enlightenment had left no legacy which could resist the technologically assured man-made mass death of the Holocaust. Gas ovens relied upon modern chemistry, the calibration of food to individual in labour camps was minutely developed. Trains, one of the technological triumphs of the century, brought hundreds of thousands to extermination camps, on minutely calibrated timetables and fuel. Human beings were treated as mere objects to be administered, and then consumed by a ‘rational’ technological system at its starkest expression.

Another important interpretation of the Enlightenment is far more positive. The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas adopted many of the insights of Horkheimer and Adorno into the way in which the Enlightenment consumed culture, turned culture into a commodity, and turned knowledge into information. These are themes which are pursued in Chapter 2. For Habermas, however, other potentials of the Enlightenment still made its ideas worth pursuing. Habermas followed Kant’s perception that far from being an epoch which was closed and over, the Enlightenment had still to be brought to completion. The Enlightenment, he argued, contained the potential for emancipating individuals from restrictive particularism in order to be able to act, not as ‘Germans’ embattled by adherence to a particular national and cultural ethos, but rather as human beings engaged in a common search with other human beings for universal values such as freedom, justice and objectivity. Habermas thus also opposed even thinkers of the Enlightenment itself, such as Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) who had decried attempts to override feelings of local identity based on culture, religion and language.

Habermas also saw the Enlightenment as the creator of what he called the ‘public realm’. This meant that a ‘public opinion’ could arise and start to question privileged traditional forces. Habermas’ public realm is a space, very like Kant’s ‘private realm’, where men could escape from their role as subjects and gain autonomy in the exercise and exchange of their own opinions and ideas. Very differently from Horkheimer’s and

Adorno's accounts, Habermas reinterpreted the culture of the Enlightenment as a world where knowledge retained its capacity to liberate through criticism, even while remaining a commodity. He was also demonstrating the possibility of historical analysis filled with moral meaning for the present.

Habermas' work converged with that of the influential philosopher Michel Foucault, who had himself published philosophical interpretations of historical eras, such as his book *Discipline and Punish* on the growth of institutions of confinement for criminals and other groups, or *Madness and Civilisation*, about differing definitions of madness and the growth of asylums. Like Habermas, Foucault saw Kant's essay as the major definition of the Enlightenment. Abandoning earlier positions in which he had argued that there was no continuity between Enlightenment and the modern world, Foucault took up Kant's view that the Enlightenment was not complete, and used Kant's essay as the starting point for a new understanding of the idea of the critical use of reason in the public realm as an agent for change. Both thinkers agreed on the importance of the Enlightenment as a yardstick by which to assess the present. All these debates may be approached in Paul Rabinow's 1984 collection of essays, *The Foucault Reader*.

Enough has now been said to show that the Enlightenment has been interpreted in many different ways. The Enlightenment is very unusual in the extent to which its historical study has been influenced by analyses originating in philosophical enquiry. Foucault, Habermas, Horkheimer and Adorno, not to mention Kant and Hegel, have not only shaped ideas about the structure of Enlightenment thought; they have also written with the conviction that the Enlightenment is not a closed historical period, but one which, whether for good or ill, is still at work in the present. As we have seen, recent writing on the Enlightenment by professional historians has opened up new areas of enquiry, especially in the social history of ideas, rather than maintaining the former concentration on the works of a canon of great thinkers. We are now far more aware of the many different Enlightenments, whether national or regional, Catholic or Protestant, of Europeans and of indigenous peoples. This diversity mirrors the inability of eighteenth-century people themselves to make any single definition of Enlightenment.

This chapter has maybe implied that, in the end, the term 'the Enlightenment' has ceased to have much meaning. A more positive reaction might be to think of the Enlightenment not as an expression which has failed to encompass a complex historical reality, but rather as a capsule containing sets of debates which appear to be characteristic of the way in which ideas and opinions interacted with society and politics.

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Yet, in spite of all the ways in which Enlightenment interpretation has changed over the past decades, Enlightenment scholars have yet to come to grips with the issues of the relationship between the Enlightenment and the creation of a global world. By globalisation is meant here the study of the history of the factors which, with accelerating speed since the Enlightenment, have come together to make the world a single system. Such factors might include the large-scale movements of people, especially through the organised slave trade; the formation of interconnected markets in commodities and in capital; the world-wide circulation of certain commodities, such as tea, furs, cotton, whale oil and gold; the expansion of merchant fleets to transport these commodities; the state financing of geographical exploration which demonstrated how oceans and continents were linked; the emergence of transcontinental European empires very often administered on standardised bureaucratic models, and the emergence of multinational trading companies, such as the Hudson's Bay Company, the British East India Company, and its Dutch equivalent, the VOC.

Globalisation was a world drama. This was the time in which European ideas, beliefs and institutions began to be spread into the rest of the world. Cross-cultural contact became an increasingly common experience, and one which for the Europeans often crossed social as well as cultural barriers. Sailors working in the merchant fleet or in the royal navies, East India Company soldiers, the artisan missionaries sent out by the Moravian church from Siberia to the West Indies, clerks employed by the trading companies, trappers working for the Hudson's Bay Company, represent only a small sample of working-class people who, just as much as naval or scientific elites, made the global world.

How have historians of the Enlightenment dealt with this global story? The answer is that few indeed have tried to integrate the creation of a unified world with the structures of Enlightenment thought. Many general historians are working on the problem of increasing global contacts, but again, few relate it to Enlightenment ideas, or the problems raised by globalisation. This is the more surprising in that some Enlightenment thinkers were already working out what a world history would look like. Schiller, Herder, and lesser figures like the Göttingen Professor Schlüter all wrote world histories, in Schlüter's case for both adults and children. These were also important because the genre of world history had existed before, but was written as an account of God's will working itself out in the world of men. Now, world history was being reworked as the global history of men.

One of the most convincing recent demonstrations of the link between Enlightenment and the globalisation of the Enlightenment has come

from the historian Jorge Canizares-Esguerra. His work concentrates on eighteenth-century Mexico and the ways in which historians of European descent tried to work out the meanings of the histories written by indigenous peoples before and after the Spanish conquest. This task was of great importance not just for scholars on both sides of the Atlantic working on this problem and trying to set rules of historical interpretation, but also because this was a time when colonial elites were beginning to detach themselves from Spain. One part of this cultural detachment, part of the long run-up to the wars of independence of the 1820s, was to construct a history which emphasised not the dependence of the colonists on the Crown, but how scientific, professional men and colonial administrators, as well as indigenous elites, had constructed a world which was hardly in need of the Crown government in Madrid, but had entered the international community. The working out of the rules of evidence for history, the techniques of documentary interpretation and the interpretation of pictorial evidence, were also debated at this time in Europe, and thus incorporated the Mexican historians in important debates three thousand miles away.

Three thousand miles would be a small measurement in the scale of Richard Groves' 1995 *Green Imperialism*. Groves looks at the eighteenth-century international link between standardised institutions, like botanical gardens, acclimatisation stations and geodesic stations. He for example demonstrates that debates about the causes of deforestation took place world-wide between professional botanists and agronomists, as a matter for urgent decision-making. Botany and ecology became part of empire-building and the management for resources of states. Botanical decisions were also inevitably bound up in the growth of the large-scale empires of the eighteenth century.

Enlightenment had many meanings. In order to understand how it could affect so many levels of society and politics, and be present not just in Europe, but throughout most other parts of the world touched by European influence, we turn in the next chapter to explore the new social and economic background to the production and marketing of ideas in this period.

2 Coffee houses and consumers: the social context of Enlightenment

In opulent or commercial society, besides, to think or reason comes to be, like every other employment, a particular business, which is carried on by a very few people, who furnish the public with all the thought and reason possessed by the vast multitudes that labour. Only a very small part of any ordinary person's knowledge has been the product of personal observation or reflection. All the rest has been purchased, in the same manner as his shoes or his stockings, from those whose business it is to make up and prepare for the market that particular species of goods.

(Adam Smith)¹

Introduction

Recent historical research has focussed overwhelmingly on the social context in which Enlightenment ideas were produced, received and marketed. Historians such as Robert Darnton have produced a wealth of new information on the readers, the writers and the entrepreneurial publishers of the increasingly large number of books, newspapers and pamphlets sold in this period.² Historians such as Roger Chartier and Robert Muchembled have examined the penetration of Enlightenment ideas from the elite to the lower social classes, from 'high' to 'low' culture.³ Others have focussed on the spread of literacy, and the changing nature

¹ W. R. Scott, *Adam Smith as Student and Professor* (Glasgow, 1937), 344–5, from draft for the Wealth of Nations composed in 1769.

² R. Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1984); 'The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France', *Past and Present*, 51 (1971), 81–115; *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie 1775–1800* (Cambridge, MA, 1979); *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, MA, 1982); *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge, MA, 1968).

³ Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations* (Ithaca, NY, 1988); Robert Muchembled, *Popular Culture and Elite Culture in France, 1400–1750* (London, 1985) translated from his *Culture populaire et culture des élites dans la France moderne* (Paris, 1978).