

## *Enlightenment and Despair*

THIS IS A CRITICAL history of social theory in England, France, Germany and the USA from the eighteenth century to the present. Geoffrey Hawthorn begins with the 'prehistory' of the subject and traces, particularly in the thought of Rousseau, Kant and Hegel, the emergence of certain fundamental distinctions and assumptions whose origins – indeed whose existence – are often overlooked in studies of the traditional 'founding-fathers' of sociology such as Marx, Durkheim and Weber. It is a distinctive feature of this book that Hawthorn explains this intellectual history in terms of the very various intentions of the main theorists and the social, political and cultural conditions in which they worked. He is sensitive particularly to the long-standing and important differences in style and character of thought not only between Europe and America but also between England, France and Germany.

The book is itself a contribution to social theory as well as to history. Hawthorn argues that in some striking and important respects the history of sociology has been a failure, and that in some of these respects the failure was inevitable. In a new conclusion to this second edition he argues that, however defensible the project of a social theory once may have been, it is, for theoretical and empirical reasons, no longer so.

The author is Reader in Sociology and Politics at the University of Cambridge.

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TO TOM AND DAN

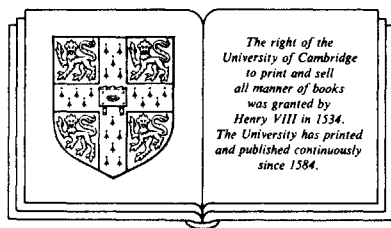
# *Enlightenment and Despair*

*A History of Social Theory*

SECOND EDITION

GEOFFREY HAWTHORN

*Reader in Sociology and Politics, University of Cambridge*



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## *Preface*

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IN THIS BOOK, I try to recover the intentions of those who can be seen to have been proposing what we now think of as social theories. I wanted to understand those intentions as the intentions they were. Of course, I failed. One reason for this, as Bernard Williams puts it at the start of his book on Descartes, was that even if one manages to play old music on old instruments, one cannot hear it with old ears. There is no way of understanding the beliefs of others in terms which are not in some way or another, to some extent or another, ours. There is no escape from translation. And translation, as Quine has made clear, is indeterminate; we can only make it less so by supposing some community of interest between others and ourselves, some similarity in psychology perhaps, or in sociology, by extending, as it has been said, some 'charity'. We understand others and can only understand others by supposing that in one or more respects they are, even as themselves, like us. It may of course be going too far too soon to agree, as Quine and others are reported once to have agreed in discussing the matter, that 'the more absurd or exotic' the beliefs of others seem, the more suspicious we are actually 'entitled' to be of the translations of those beliefs. It will defeat the purpose if we too readily attempt, as Gadamer encourages us to in his *Truth and Method*, a 'fusion of horizons'. But the only perspective on beliefs as the beliefs they are is the perspective of those whose beliefs they are. Ours is ours. Understanding those beliefs in their terms, rather than ours, is pre-empted.

We can nevertheless wish to respect them. We can want to ask of a thought or an argument not, or not immediately, 'what does it mean to us?' but 'what, to those who had it and to those who heard it, did it mean and could it have meant?' Yet to say that we have an interest in 'respect' says too much and too little. It says too much if it suggests reverence. Having played old music

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on old instruments, we do not have to admire it, much less to like it. But it says too little if it suggests that we can avoid the corruptions caused not only by our interests but also by our hindsight. Some of these corruptions are obvious. We are constrained by what survives and select from it. Others, however, are not. To see the impulse and intention in a past argument, even, sometimes, to see it *as* an argument, is from where we are to see what the impulse in it was not, to see what wasn't said, what might have been said at the time, and what might be said now against whatever was. It's to see what the author and his immediate audience may not have known or been able to know. Having seen all this, of course, we could then try to forget it. We could try instead to see what a writer felt and thought just as he, then, might have felt and thought it, and to describe it in terms that he would have accepted. But even if that were possible, which, as I have said, it is not, it is unlikely to lead to the illumination that difference and distance can bring.

I wanted to get such a distance. I wanted to free myself from a forced intimacy with what Isaiah Berlin, in sympathy with Herzen, once nicely described as the 'symmetrical fantasies' of social theory. I wanted to avoid what John Bayley calls 'the English vice', of pruning the past into a National Trust, and the Soviet vice, of polishing it into 'an instrument of policy and advertisement'. I wanted, as Bayley reports the critic Shklovsky as saying, to 'make it strange', to be able more clearly to see it as a past which impinged on me but in which I was a sometimes irritated, often bemused and always uneasy stranger. In the terms of Richard Rorty's recent discussion of the matter, I realise that I had wanted to avoid 'doxography', 'the attempt', as Rorty puts it, 'to impose a problematic on a canon drawn up without reference to that problematic, or, conversely, to impose a canon on a problematic without reference to that canon'. I had wanted to avoid a history of social theory which treated it as a more or less unproblematic natural kind. I wanted instead to attempt an historical reconstruction of it which had also in part to be a rational reconstruction, and I wanted to make this reconstruction a piece of 'intellectual history', in Rorty's sense, as well; in the spirit of a splendid question that is said to have been set at Oxford before the war, 'why is French music like that?', I wanted to try to answer why social theory too, in the societies in which and for



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which it was written, was like *that*. But in order even to ask this question, I had to have some prior sense of what this theory was. I had to decide the canon. And in order not to lapse back into supposing that the theory was indeed some sort of natural kind, delivered, as it tended to be delivered when I conceived the book, as an unproblematic and really rather imposing thing, I had to decide what sorts of questions being asked in what sorts of ways made it, for me, that canon. I had, in Rorty's sense of the term, to be a *Geisteshistoriker*.

And *Geistesgeschichte*, as he says, 'is the sort of intellectual history which has a moral'. 'The moral to be drawn is that we have, or have not, been on the right track in raising the questions' that we now do. Ten years ago, I had a sense that something was wrong with the existing track. But I did not know quite what. Now, I am clearer. I am clearer about what, if it has been one project, the project of social theory has been. I am clearer about why I think that it was misconceived. And I am convinced that as that project, it is finished. I have accordingly written a new conclusion which, in what I hope is its greater clarity about the canon, might also, as a late-flying Owl of Minerva, serve as a further Introduction to the book.

I have in addition revised the end of Chapter 10, corrected some avoidable errors and obscurities, and added some more recent items to the Bibliography. I make no apology for the undoubted persistence of what an American reviewer called my 'parochialism'. The book was written from Britain in the 1970s and not from New York then or from some other place at some other time, let alone from that 'point of view (if I may say so) of the Universe' to which Henry Sidgwick, writing a few hundred yards from where I do, once nervously aspired. I do regret not having said more about the diversities of American thought. But I continue to believe that if there is one contrast in this respect to be drawn between Europe and America, mine (that is to say, de Tocqueville's) is it. If I were to write the whole book again, however, I would include something on Italy. Its always more sceptical tradition and its humanist past, so lovingly recovered by liberals towards the end of the nineteenth century, do much to explain the fact that although social thought there, both liberal and socialist, was prompted by some of the same preoccupations as those in the north, it had such a different tone. So too, of

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course, does Italy's different economic and social character throughout the period. Were I to pursue these differences, I suspect that I might be led to refine some of my accounts of social thinking in the three European countries that I do discuss.

The book began in notes for some lectures that I gave more than twenty years ago in the remarkable department of Sociology that Peter Townsend created at Essex. I owe a great deal to the students I have taught there and since in Cambridge. I remain grateful for an opportunity at Harvard to get things into a perspective with which George Homans, although not quite for my reasons, came to agree. Ruth Hawthorn and John Dunn sustained me in the original writing; many friends took the trouble to comment on the book when it first appeared; Jeremy Mynott did much for the first edition and encouraged a second; Bernard Williams has given me whatever understanding I now have (an understanding which is apparent in the new Conclusion) of what a theory of and for human affairs might be, and of much else besides; conversations in Caracas with Luis Castro, and just before I wrote the new Conclusion, with Richard Rorty, Alan Ryan and Roberto Unger, have left their mark on it; Judith Shklar, in a year of talk in Cambridge, and over a much longer period Stefan Collini, John Dunn, and Anthony Pagden have done more than they know to enlighten me about the past and the point of social and political thought; the last three and Jeremy Mynott have also read and commented on the changes I have made.

*Cambridge*  
*March 1986*