Introduction
A New History of the Beginnings of the German Enlightenment

Theoretical constructions are only stable if they are based on solid knowledge of what lies underground.

Dirk Sangmeister[1]

1 The Familiar Story

We are familiar with the standard story about the origins of the Enlightenment in Germany. The Enlightenment supposedly began in the 1680s with Christian Thomasius and the University of Halle, founded in 1694, which became its first center. In Halle, Thomasius and his students developed a philosophy that was grounded in Samuel Pufendorf's ideas of natural law and drew on the sensualism of John Locke. Supported by various historical accounts, this philosophy saw itself as a Christian continuation of the achievements of the Lutheran Reformation. Radiating forth from Halle, it conquered most of the Protestant states of the Holy Roman Empire until it was superseded in the 1720s by the philosophy of Christian Wolff.

That story is not all wrong. This book, however, aims at setting a different narrative over against it, one that is polycentric, making the picture much more varied. This book therefore inquires into the individual circumstances in Germany that nourished more radical ideas than those cultivated by Thomasius and his students. Such radically Enlightened "moments" were rather rare, to be sure, and they did not prevail, at least not in the short run. But they also inform us of what sorts of things were thinkable in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and how far, therefore, "Enlightened" thoughts might have gone. And by asking how *these* ideas arose, this book provides an account of the origins of the

[1] Dirk Sangmeister, *Vertrieben vom Feld der Literatur. Verbreitung und Unterdrückung der Werke von Friedrich Christian Laukhard*, Bremen, 2017, p. 16.

German Enlightenment that is totally different and more complex than the simple story centered on Halle. We will suddenly find that impulses deriving from many places and from entirely unexpected persons, from little noticed topics and hitherto neglected discussions, all played a role. In saying this, however, two things need to be emphasized.

First, the mainstream of the early Enlightenment in Halle – often described as a "moderate Enlightenment," to use the description of Jonathan Israel[2] – and the underground of the fragmented "radical Enlightenment" were mutually dependent on each other. Neither strand is really conceivable without the other. Radical Enlighteners, as we will see, often radicalized initiatives stemming from Halle; and many debates among well-established scholars were infiltrated by radical Enlighteners and "subverted." Like parasites they fed off the achievements of the great. And in contrast, moderate Enlighteners could better recognize through the efforts of radical mavericks the remarkable range of implications that lay hidden in many of their own theories, even if the scholars of Halle or elsewhere were not necessarily eager to embrace these implications. Repeatedly, even if it is often hard to recognize and to reconstruct, they reacted to these renegades. We could even go so far as to draw an analogy to the biological model of the food chain or food web, in which the cycle consists not only of the fact that eagles eat snakes, and snakes eat mice, but also of the fact that a reduction in the population of one species has mutual consequences for the population of other species, so that parasites and plants influence the balance of nature, and many other factors also play a role. Similarly the recording and circulation of "radical" ideas did not just consist of the absorption of other radical or proto-radical thoughts, for they were also embedded in a net of other writings and distributions. For example, did the "parasitic" freethinker develop his heterodox teachings by deviating from established theories, only to discover that he could not publish them or find that his book was confiscated and burned? That had the effect (or could have the effect) of branding his texts as infamous or heretical so that they were then sought after by connoisseurs of rare books and manuscripts – more for their rarity and their reputation than for their actual contents. Such texts were often preserved in the libraries of well-established collectors, but then copied out by hand and put back into

[2] Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750*, Oxford, 2001; Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670–1752*, Oxford, 2006; Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750–1790*, Oxford, 2011.

circulation again.[3] So ideas transmitted in this manner might then nourish independent minds again to draw innovative consequences from them, ideas that might well have firmer foundations than those of the original freethinker.[4]

Second, the approach chosen here displays just how thoroughly the early Enlightenment in Germany was woven into the intellectual life of Europe as a whole. It is precisely by seeing these origins in a polycentric fashion, as we will do here, that we can observe how the *concurrent* upswing of both West European and German debates, driven by both foreign and domestic authors, lent wings to the whole conversation: Pierre Bayle *and* Gottfried Arnold, Baruch Spinoza *and* Jakob Böhme, Robert Boyle *and* Johann Christoph Sturm all had an impact, but not just as individuals. German scholars found that they had to work hard to adapt foreign debates so as to produce similar but not identical initiatives domestically.

So in this sense I am pulling three hitherto relatively isolated areas of research together: (1) philosophical investigations into the history of the early Enlightenment in Germany; (2) international research into clandestine literature;[5] and (3) recent work on the European world of learning and the republic of letters. Only by combining them in this way have I been able to propose this new approach.[6]

However, the practices and forms of communication, the scholarly actors and their tactical efforts to position themselves in various contexts, also play a large role in shaping the sort of intellectual history to which this book is deeply indebted. Let me mention just three examples that have an

[3] To give just one example: Johann Christian Edelmann was delighted that collectors offered high prices to purchase his works because the police were hunting for them. These were regarded as books, according to Edelmann, that "God in his inscrutable wisdom has from time to time caused to be bought up for much money by their own enemies." Edelmann, *Moses mit aufgedecktem Angesicht*, s.l., 1740, pp. 33f.

[4] See Martin Mulsow, "Radikalaufklärung, moderate Aufklärung und die Dynamik der Moderne," in Jonathan I. Israel and Martin Mulsow, eds., *Radikalaufklärung*, Berlin, 2014, pp. 203–233.

[5] To give just a few references, see: Ira O. Wade, *The Clandestine Organization and Diffusion of Philosophic Ideas in France from 1700 to 1750*, Princeton, 1938; John S. Spink, *French Free-Thought from Gassendi to Voltaire*, London, 1960; Tullio Gregory et al., eds., *Ricerche su letteratura libertina e letteratura clandestina nel Seicento*, Florence, 1981; Anthony Mc Kenna and Alain Mothu, eds., *La philosophie clandestine à l'âge classique*, Oxford and Paris, 1997; Gianni Paganini, *Introduzione alle filosofie clandestine*, Bari, 2008. One word regarding terminology: "clandestine" comes from the Latin *clandestinus*, meaning secret, hidden, surreptitious. Instead of the German "*klandestin*," I prefer "clandestine" in order to refer to the underground literature that French scholars have intensively studied as "littérature clandestine."

[6] See also the programmatic introduction to Martin Mulsow, *Enlightenment Underground: Radical Germany 1680–1720*, tr. H. C. Erik Midelfort, Charlottesville, 2015, pp. 1–28.

immediate relevance to the understanding of the early Enlightenment in Germany. First is the thesis of Martin Gierl that it was Philipp Jakob Spener's reform of the way in which Lutheran scholars argued (their *Streitkultur*, their so-called *elenchus*) combined with changes in the book trade that produced the new form of polemics found in Christian Thomasius, a polemics that emphasized public openness, scholarly competition, and *historia literaria*.[7] Second is Hermann Jaumann's discovery that the rise of the market for journals led to a "temporalization" of scholarship (fixing it more firmly in time), which decisively changed the structure of scholarship and gave a new meaning to criticism.[8] And third is Ian Hunter's contention that the various philosophies of the Enlightenment (like those of Thomasius and Wolff) embodied incommensurable styles, one that emphasized a politically and socially engaged scholarship that separated religion from politics and theology from philosophy, while the other was metaphysical and demanded the continued unity of these areas.[9]

The many different origins of the German Enlightenment were also connected, as this book will show, to different practices, tactics, and actors. Radical thinkers especially had to consider how they might try to spread their ideas. Should they weave them into literary dialogues, conceal them in footnotes, or disguise them in forms of joking? Or should they argue straightforwardly but then give up hopes of publishing, which would have been forbidden anyway, and instead rely on the secret distribution of manuscript copies? Should they use pseudonyms or stand up for themselves under their real names? And how could they discover like-minded readers, when the authors themselves had to hide?

Here is how this book will proceed: I approach the almost overwhelmingly diverse intellectual landscape of the German and European early Enlightenment by setting several separate surveying stakes, using some barely known freethinkers and persecuted authors, some secretly circulating manuscripts, and a few largely ignored problems that were actually centrally important around 1700. From these markers, working as a detective, I will cut a path through the thickets of context, following wherever the track leads. In order to comprehend our topic, it does not

[7] Martin Gierl, *Pietismus und Aufklärung. Theologische Polemik und die Kommunikationsreform der Wissenschaft am Ende des 17. Jahrhunderts*, Göttingen, 1997.
[8] Herbert Jaumann, *Critica. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Literaturkritik zwischen Quintilian und Thomasius*, Leiden, 1995.
[9] Ian Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany*, Cambridge, 2001.

matter that I must sometimes transgress disciplinary boundaries, or that German circumstances sometimes lead me into English, Dutch, French, and Italian debates, or that the context requires me to pursue a topic into classical antiquity or into the Islamic world. By ranging back and forth through the disciplines, various sorts of text, and different regions, a dense picture gradually emerges, one that has never before been visible in this manner, a new image of the early Enlightenment in Germany intertwined with the rest of European thought. This is evident not least in the fact that certain actors and themes emerge repeatedly. And at the same time intellectual centers such as Leipzig, Berlin, Halle, Hamburg, Wittenberg, Helmstedt, Frankfurt on the Oder, Jena, and Königsberg come into focus, each with its own peculiarities; and the works of others, not just of radical thinkers, but of many prominent and not-so prominent scholars also emerge with their own peculiarities.

I began this enterprise in two earlier books. In *Enlightenment Underground* (2015) and in *Knowledge Lost* (2022).[10] This book will refer to them frequently. And this book expands on some of the persons and topics already treated in *Enlightenment Underground* with many new perspectives and much new research. In *Knowledge Lost* I emphasized the fragility of many radical initiatives that we discover in the early German Enlightenment, because such initiatives were almost always precarious: they lacked the stability that institutions offered; they were fragile, easily suppressed, and revocable. That was already true of its precursors, heterodox thinkers of the sixteenth century who usually expressed their ideas for reform in religious language and whose writings were often so thoroughly suppressed that hardly any trace of them survives.[11] But by 1700 the chances of survival were a bit better, or at least the chances of rediscovering fragments of such suppressed initiatives improve. In complex and unpredictable ways, as this volume demonstrates, such works had a demonstrable impact on the larger debates of the Enlightenment. Often they laid down challenges that established scholars felt they had to respond to; we can tell from such scholars' energetic reactions that at least some provocations could not be ignored.

[10] Mulsow, *Enlightenment Underground* (note 6); Martin Mulsow, *Knowledge Lost: A New View of Early Modern Intellectual History*, Princeton, 2022.

[11] One especially impressive example of this sort of precarious knowledge is the *libro grande* written in 1551 by the heretical Benedictine monk, Giorgio Rioli, who was condemned and murdered in Ferrara in 1551. Not a single copy of his work has survived. But note the reconstruction by Adriano Prosperi, *L'eresia del Libro Grande. Storia di Giorgio Siculo e della sua setta*, Milan, 2000.

2 The Early Enlightenment in Halle

The early Enlightenment in Halle has been described in many monographs and collections of articles although we do need an up-to-date and comprehensive account. This is especially true for the early years of the new University of Halle, which was not intended to be an "Enlightenment university," and was really supposed to hew to a "moderate" course like that of the University of Helmstedt, but those early years still await serious reappraisal.[12] In contrast, in part because of the publication of his correspondence, research into Christian Thomasius has now worked out several basic themes that permit us to recognize the approaches and teachings at Halle in the years around 1700.[13]

Even before the University of Halle was founded in 1694, Christian Thomasius, who was then still in Leipzig, had composed his *Institutiones iurisprudentiae divinae*, his textbook on natural law, and his programmatic work on "court philosophy," the *Introductio ad philosophiam aulicam*.[14] They revealed a philosophy which, in connection with the gallant cultural movement and with the princely state, intended a fundamental reform of university education. It soon became clear that this would be more easily achieved in Brandenburg and at a newly founded university than in Saxon Leipzig, where far too many established social groups could rally to defend their turf. An alliance with the court in Berlin also seemed attractive because Brandenburg needed an educational establishment for its rapidly growing class of jurists. Thomasius established a model that freed politics more completely from theology and religion than usual and where many

[12] But see Marianne Taatz-Jacobi, *Erwünschte Harmonie: Die Gründung der Friedrichs-Universität Halle als Instrument Brandenburg-Preußischer Konfessionspolitik – Motive, Verfahren, Mythos (1680–1713)*, Berlin, 2014.

[13] Christian Thomasius, *Briefwechsel. Historisch-kritischen Edition*, vol. 1: *1679–1692*, ed. Frank Grunert, Matthias Hambrock, and Martin Kühnel with the collaboration of Andrea Thiele, Berlin and Boston, 2017; vol. 2: *1693–1698*, ed. Frank Grunert, Matthias Hambrock, and Martin Kühnel, Berlin and Boston, 2020. The latest volume of the encyclopedia "the New Ueberweg" provides a canonical portrait: Helmut Holzhey and Vilem Mudroch, eds., *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol 5: *Heiliges Römisches Reich Deutscher Nation. Schweiz. Nord- und Osteuropa*, Basel, 2014.

[14] Christian Thomasius, *Institutiones iurisprudentiae divinae*, Leipzig, 1688; Thomasius, *Introductio ad philosophiam aulicam*, Leipzig, 1688. Here let me mention only a few of the more recent works on him: Martin Kühnel, *Das politische Denken von Christian Thomasius: Staat, Gesellschaft, Bürger*, Berlin, 2001; Klaus-Gert Lutterbeck, *Staat und Gesellschaft bei Christian Thomasius*, Stuttgart, 2002; Thomas Ahnert, *Religion and the Origins of the German Enlightenment: Faith and the Reform of Learning in the Thought of Christian Thomasius*, Rochester, 2006; Ian Hunter, *The Secularisation of the Confessional State: The Political Thought of Christian Thomasius*, Cambridge, 2007; Francesco Tomasoni, *Christian Thomasius: Geist und kulturelle Identität an der Schwelle zur europäischen Aufklärung*, Münster, 2009.

long-engrained restraints could be relaxed in order to shape a new type of political subject: one characterized by independence, freedom, and responsible thinking.

In this vision, the task of the state was to provide civic peace while a university education aimed at turning young people into independent citizens. A basis for this was provided by a modernized natural law as explained by Samuel Pufendorf, who expanded on the thinking of Hugo Grotius. To this Thomasius added a strong psychological component, which required that students learn about real human beings and gain experience in dealing with human emotions.[15] According to Thomasius, human beings were mainly characterized by their will, which needed therefore to be guided in the proper direction.

Over time, as we know, Thomasius's view of mankind became bleaker and more pessimistic. In 1705 he revised his doctrine of natural law and set forth in his *Fundamenta juris naturae et gentium* a new interpretation that viewed people as determined by their drives, for the will was always seeking pleasure, money, or power. Only for brief intervals, if no driving forces were stirred up and there were no conflicting drives, could human beings think clearly. In a few men reason came to prevail – these were "wise" men. They were the only ones who could be moved by *consilia* – that is, by convictions derived from argument; the mass of men required *imperium*, domination, the commands and prohibitions enforced by punishments.[16]

Thomasius's idea of reason was sensualist and probably derived from the Aristotelianism of his father. Our understanding is constantly in danger of being deceived by prejudices. And Thomasius saw no need for any subtle syllogisms; they were not just superfluous but actually harmful. For him hermeneutics were more important; that is, a doctrine of understanding that dealt with probabilities and an orientation toward practice. He rejected metaphysics – his education had included only a rather mystical philosophy of spirit – and replaced it with *historia literaria*, the survey of the history of philosophy and of knowledge in search of the useful, along with an eclecticism that consisted of the practice of reasoned choice.[17]

[15] Ursula Geitner, *Die Sprache der Verstellung. Studien zum rhetorischen und anthropologischen Wissen im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert*, Tübingen, 1992. On these "psychological" components, see also Chapter 3 on the doctrine of temperaments.

[16] See Friedrich Vollhardt, ed., *Christian Thomasius (1655–1728). Neue Forschungen im Kontext der Frühaufklärung*, Tübingen, 1997.

[17] See Horst Dreitzel, "Zur Entwicklung und Eigenart der eklektischen Philosophie," *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* 18 (1991), pp. 281–343; Michael Albrecht, *Eklektik. Eine Begriffsgeschichte mit Hinweisen auf die Philosophie- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte*, Stuttgart, 1994.

At the same time Thomasius adopted the German language and the latest media, such as the expanding market for journals. He developed an essayistic and journalistic style filled with a passion for polemics as he showed in his *Monatsgespräche* ("Monthly Conversations") and in countless controversial writings. Above all the "Enlightened" intentions behind his philosophy become clear if one looks at the targets he chose: he wrote against witchcraft trials; against torture; against superstition in general; against the mania for manufacturing heretics (*Ketzermacherei*); against prejudices; against fanaticism; against any blind trust in authority, especially that of the Church; against pedantry, sectarianism, and a sclerotic university philosophy that was thickly encased in scholasticism.[18]

It is no wonder these arguments provoked a multitude of antagonists, who entangled Thomasius in bitter battles. In Copenhagen Thomasius's books were publicly burned in 1691 after court preacher Hector Masius was attacked by Thomasius, who was consequently accused of atheism and a general lack of deference. And so Thomasius was clearly regarded as "radical." In addition he helped launch into the German book market such internationally recognized Enlightenment works as Balthasar Bekker's assault on belief in witchcraft. And yet, based on his actual views, Thomasius cannot be classified as a radical Enlightener, for he deliberately separated himself from radical admirers who, like his student Theodor Ludwig Lau, interpreted his ideas in an antichristian light.

The local issues that roiled the waters of Halle show up clearly in Thomasius's work. Although in the early 1690s he was drawn to the mysticism and Pietism of his colleague August Hermann Francke, he soon distanced himself from him – indeed, it came to an open break. And with other colleagues in the faculties of medicine, law, and theology, too, we can see a complex oscillation between collaboration and opposition. Even so, Thomasius was extremely successful. His charisma certainly helps explain the fact that within a few decades Halle rose to be the leading university in the whole German Empire. Philosophers and jurists at other institutions imitated him and his teachings, and many of his students took up professorial positions at other universities. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 will go into detail about the most important of these students: Andreas Rüdiger,

[18] Werner Schneiders, *Aufklärung und Vorurteilskritik. Studien zur Geschichte der Vorurteilstheorie*, Stuttgart, 1983; Martin Pott, *Aufklärung und Aberglaube. Die deutsche Frühaufklärung im Spiegel ihrer Aberglaubenskritik*, Tübingen, 1992. Norbert Hinske's article is also instructive: "Die tragenden Grundideen der deutschen Aufklärung. Versuch einer Typologie," in Raffaele Ciafardone, ed., *Die Philosophie der deutschen Aufklärung. Texte und Darstellung*, Stuttgart, 1990, pp. 407–458.

Nikolaus Hieronymus Gundling, and Johann Franz Budde. Gundling extended Thomasius's line of investigation into natural law; Budde preferred to deal with the less secularized *Institutiones iurisprudentiae divinae*, which he hoped to support through a skillful blending of philosophy and theology. These chapters will, however, demonstrate that the publications of such students become especially interesting if one brings them together with developments from other places. Only then does a more complete picture emerge.

3 Other Centers, Other Origins

Obviously with Halle and the Thomasius Circle one authoritative center had been created from which inspiration flowed out to the whole Empire. But the intellectual landscape in Germany – like its political landscape – was far too diverse to allow everything to be reduced to just one center. Steffen Martus has described the Old Empire as a complex political community, a legal and constitutional community, one of information, of social regulation (*Policey*), of military and defense, and finally an economic community.[19] Each of these connections followed its own logic, which affected what it meant to be "Enlightened" in any one of them. For example the city council of Hamburg followed entirely different motives in deciding whether and how to tolerate confessionally diverse immigrants. "Catholics were tolerated because of the emperor's protection; Jews for economic reasons; Calvinists because of their expert knowledge as merchants and because of their warm relations with Brandenburg Prussia."[20] Similarly, the Empire also had intellectual connections at the university level, among religious groups, among book dealers and collectors, as well as protest movements that were all different on the local level and all followed their own inner rationale. And then in addition there were the downstream consequences of these rationales, which sometimes led in entirely unintended directions.

In *Enlightenment Underground* I described several strands that contributed to the German Enlightenment. One of these strands began in the 1630s with the burlesque talks given by Johann Balthasar Schupp, inspired by Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*. His jocular and satiric tone acted as a model

[19] Steffen Martus, *Aufklärung. Das deutsche 18. Jahrhundert. Ein Epochenbild*, Berlin, 2015, pp. 198–216. And more fully, Joachim Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire 1493–1806*, 2 vols., Oxford, 2012.
[20] Martus, *Aufklärung* (note 19), p. 213.

for libertine and eclectically minded imitators, such as the author of the *Ineptus religiosus* of 1652; Schupp's work provided a model for how one might jokingly bring unorthodox thoughts into play without actually committing oneself to them. But for Orthodox theologians this provoked the boogeyman of a *religio prudentum*, a religion of the so-called wise, of worldly opportunists. Just as in a complex food web with its often unpredictable interdependencies, around 1700 this boogeyman seems to have inspired certain young, freethinking students to regard the idea of a *religio prudentum*, seen through the lens of the fashionable eclectic philosophy that was making inroads at universities, not as abhorrent but as attractive.

Another paradoxical reaction can be located in the late 1680s in such centers of Lutheran Orthodoxy as Hamburg and Wittenberg. There it was especially the sons, grandsons, or sons-in-law of prominent Orthodox theologians who had become disgusted at the excessive confessional severity and narrow-mindedness of their seniors and therefore tried furtively to break free. In Hamburg it was Johann Joachim Müller, the son of a pastor, who half-jokingly but half-seriously rebelled by composing a manuscript, *De imposturis religionum*, in which he accused the three great founders of religion, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed, of fraud. He skillfully used the latest ideas emerging from historical Pyrrhonism, natural law, and Oriental scholarship to prove his thesis. Such thoughts direct our attention to Helmstedt, where Hermann Conring was teaching a combination of reason of state and historical criticism, but also in the direction of Altdorf and Leipzig, where one could study rabbinic sources that could easily draw one into relativizing conclusions regarding the Christian worldview.

In this book Chapter 4 features another example in the son-in-law of a Wittenberg pastor, Georg Michael Heber, whose *Symbolum sapientiae* – if the attribution is correct – was no less radical than Müller's work; here the skepticism of French libertinism mixed with ideas drawn from Hobbes and Spinoza as well as legal theories of proof to undermine the belief in divine revelation, but also in any natural law theory based on the universality of reason and sociability.

So if we are seeking the origins of a *radical* Enlightenment, we do not have to consider only the familiar "centers of the Enlightenment"; instead we need to pay closer attention to the centers of heightened Orthodoxy, where secret discontents shifted over into clandestine protests.

Aside from such examples of "shifting," many places in Germany also displayed synergies that emerged from unexpected alliances, which, as soon as they were bound together, suddenly unfurled a great intellectual reach.