

## Introduction

WARREN BRECKMAN AND PETER E. GORDON

It is something of a truism that each age must work through the legacy of its predecessors. In the case of the nineteenth century, this obvious statement gains poignancy when one considers the novel challenges and possibilities of the eighteenth century, which was, after all, the age of the Enlightenment. In its many guises and national variations, the Enlightenment asserted provocative and epoch-making claims about the role of reason, science, and criticism *vis-à-vis* the traditional authority of religion, state, and received knowledge. It drew new roadmaps for the conscious and reflexive reform of society and the betterment of people. At its core, it articulated a new emancipatory project – at once philosophical and political – chiefly oriented toward the ideal of individual autonomy. The cultural, social, and political configuration that shaped the Enlightenment came to something of an end in the closing decade of the eighteenth century, partly through processes of internal critique but also, spectacularly, through the political collapse of the Old Regime. In the changed circumstances of the early nineteenth century, the Enlightenment fragmented into a multitude of contests over the meaning of its legacy. What is the status of reason, and what is its proper relationship to other modes of knowledge? What of religion? What is the key discipline or cultural form that will, depending on one's perspective and priority, advance, hinder, or deepen the impulses of enlightenment? What are the promises and perils of the project of emancipation, and how might it be continued, radicalized, or restrained? Are there limits to the pursuit of individual autonomy? What is the proper relation between the past and the future, tradition and innovation? None of these questions admitted definitive answers, but they fueled creative efforts, debate, and conflict across a great range of intellectual and cultural pursuits.

The shaping legacy of the Enlightenment intertwined with the ramifications and reverberations of the great political upheaval that brought the eighteenth century to a close. Or, if we are to follow recent historians in

WARREN BRECKMAN AND PETER E. GORDON

speaking of the *long* nineteenth century, we would be just as correct to say that the French Revolution in 1789 opened the new century. Across nineteenth-century Europe, the ideal of popular sovereignty and national self-determination, the emergence of nationalism and democratic republicanism, struggles to open up political participation to greater numbers and extend suffrage, efforts to impose constitutions upon truculent monarchs – all drew inspiration from the revolution that toppled the old regime in France. Just as readily, the politics of restoration and conservation struggled against these impulses throughout the century, striving at times to reverse the processes opened by the Revolution and at other times to channel new political demands into stabilizing social and political hierarchies where they might be contained and tamed.

The British historian Eric Hobsbawm reminded us decades ago that the nineteenth century in fact opened with a dual revolution, not only the political but also the industrial revolution.<sup>1</sup> Yet while the first was a series of dramatic and often violent events, the second, with roots reaching back into the mid-eighteenth century, was a process unfolding across many decades in Europe and throughout the world. The centrality of the economy in the intellectual preoccupations of the age is attested by the lively and innovative discipline of political economy, from early nineteenth-century successors to Adam Smith such as David Ricardo and Thomas Malthus to the Marginal Revolution spearheaded by William Stanley Jevons, Carl Menger, and Léon Walras in the 1870s.

No greater statement of the prodigious dynamism of industrial society as well as its risks and costs can be found than the *Communist Manifesto* published by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848. Capitalism, they argued, was the real agent of revolutionary change in the modern world, sweeping away traditional hierarchies and belief structures, propelling the society toward undreamt powers of production, concentrating populations in enormous cities, and pulling the entire globe into an ever-tighter network. Yet they believed that bourgeois society, like a sorcerer who conjures spirits from the nether world, was losing control of the social forces it had unleashed, careening from crisis to crisis. Thus Marx and Engels predicted the inevitable collapse of capitalism in a social revolution that would dwarf the political revolution of the eighteenth century. Written at the mid-point of the nineteenth century, as Europe stood on the brink of another series of revolutionary convulsions from France to the

<sup>1</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: 1789–1848* (New York: New American Library, 1962).

## Introduction

borderlands of Russia, the *Communist Manifesto* could point to an already quite elaborate history of conflict over this emerging capitalist world while foreshadowing the socialist and communist struggles that were to gain greater and greater power in the latter half of the century.

The intellectual history of the nineteenth century participated in these great currents of political and social contest. The first part of the century witnessed an intense period of reflection on the new political and social world opened up by the French Revolution. Conservatives tried to hold back the tides of change, and in the process fashioned new theoretical accounts of society, as did Edmund Burke in his seminal 1790 *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Liberals such as Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill recognized the inevitable development of the principle of equality – Tocqueville called it a “providential fact” – but they worried about the possible excesses of democracy, seeing threats to individual liberty posed both by majoritarian governance and by informal pressures of conformity in a society of equals. Republicans and democrats strived to keep alive the political ambitions of the Revolution, some even embracing its most extreme, Jacobin phase. Socialists such as Robert Owen, Henri Saint-Simon, and Charles Fourier predated Marx and Engels by decades as they worried about the breakdown of solidarity in the individualistic society inaugurated by the Revolution and tried to steer political energies toward the so-called “social question,” namely the array of problems created by new forms of social inequality that were emerging from the industrial reorganization of labor, society, and the economy. Some of these socialists, including Saint-Simon and his followers, would flirt with non-democratic ideas of social organization in the hope of better distributing the resources of the new economy. Marx, by contrast, saw the collective ownership of society’s productive means as the *sine qua non* of true democracy.

If Marx and Engels famously believed that history is driven by class struggle, thinkers of other stripes offered quite different generalizations about the engine of history. Some liberals reduced history to a perennial struggle between the individual and the state. Nationalists in the first half of the century, such as J. G. Fichte and Giuseppe Mazzini, often imagined the course of human affairs as an equally perennial contest between sovereign (or ethnically unitary) peoples and dynastic – frequently foreign – overlords, whereas nationalists in the second half of the century saw it as a contest between rival peoples; pioneering feminists wavered between seeing the subordination of women as the grounding fact of the existing order or as one dimension of more general social and political inequities. The former position anticipated critiques of patriarchy that became familiar in twentieth-

WARREN BRECKMAN AND PETER E. GORDON

century feminism; the latter opened complicated and often tense relations between feminism and other progressive movements such as socialism or democratic reformism.

The core issue of European political thought in the nineteenth century was emancipation: for whom, to what extent, and by what means? The French Revolution opened up this recognizably modern political landscape; but, in the broadest sense, the issue of emancipation formed the ground tone of the Enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> The most famous statement of Enlightenment values was perhaps Immanuel Kant's 1784 answer to the question "What is Enlightenment?": "Enlightenment is man's exit from his self-incurred minority. Minority is the incapacity to use one's intelligence without the guidance of another. Such minority is self-incurred if it is not caused by lack of intelligence, but by lack of determination and courage to use one's intelligence without being guided by another. *Sapere Aude!* Have the courage to use your own intelligence! is therefore the motto of the enlightenment."<sup>3</sup> Centered in western Europe and Britain, radiating out to the peripheries of Europe and the New World, and spanning the decades from the late seventeenth to the late eighteenth centuries, the Enlightenment was too complex to be adequately contained in this or any other definition. Kant's rousing call for the achievement of human autonomy can and should be balanced by recognition that the Enlightenment also advocated for more prosaic, though by no means trivial, causes – for a greater degree of civility and polish in social life, moderation and tolerance in matters of belief, skepticism toward superstition, and the employment of empirical evidence and rationality in weighing truth claims. The impulses of the Enlightenment can be detected in practical projects aimed at the improvement of the living conditions of people as well as in the conscious application of science and technology to ameliorate suffering.

- 2 The historical literature on the Enlightenment is vast. Some older overviews remain valuable, even if dated in many assumptions. See especially Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951); and Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1966–1969). For excellent examples of newer approaches, see Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (eds.), *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Ulrich Im Hof, *The Enlightenment*, trans. W. E. Yuill (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); Margaret Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981); Roy Porter, *The Enlightenment*, 2nd edn. (New York: Palgrave, 2001); and Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- 3 Immanuel Kant, "Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment," in *Basic Writings of Kant*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. Thomas K. Abbott (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 135.

## Introduction

The greatest undertaking of the French Enlightenment, the *Encyclopédie* launched by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert in 1751 and concluded in 1772, eventually included almost 72,000 articles restructuring the world of knowledge and human endeavor according to the ambitions of the *siècle des lumières*: from entries on revelation, clergy, atheists, natural law, natural equality, invention, hydrodynamics, cosmology, and reason, to theocracy, torture, the slave trade, and intolerance, to farm laborers, cotton, mining, metallurgy, commerce, and inoculation, the world was to be reformed in the light of rational, systematic, and empirically grounded knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

The reformist and ameliorist impulses of the Enlightenment continued to course through the nineteenth century. That is also true of the Enlightenment's most provocative claims for the power of human reason to discover truth and propel progressive change. Kant's insistence in *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) that "Our age is, in especial degree, the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit"<sup>5</sup> found strong resonance long after history had drawn a shade on the age of Enlightenment itself among thinkers ranging from Kant's student J. G. Fichte, who saw his philosophical account of human freedom to be an exact counterpart to the French Revolution, to the first generation of German Romantics, to the radical followers of Hegel such as Ludwig Feuerbach and Bruno Bauer, Marx and Engels, to the Frenchmen Auguste Comte, founder of Positivism, and Charles Baudelaire, possibly the greatest French lyric poet of the century, to the English liberal John Stuart Mill, to the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky, to Friedrich Nietzsche, who imagined himself to be thinking with a hammer. Yet what critique meant, what it aimed to achieve, and what were its best instruments were issues that preoccupied many thinkers in the nineteenth century, and positions staked out in the Enlightenment themselves came under critical scrutiny.

By way of examples, consider more closely three areas where these issues played out across multiple fields of philosophical and artistic endeavor.

The cutting edge of eighteenth-century theories of knowledge rooted the development of reason in an empiricist psychology, that is, the development of increasingly complex ideas from an original basis in sensations. Kant blew this empiricist epistemology apart when he proposed his "Copernican Revolution" in philosophy,<sup>6</sup> namely by insisting that, even though "There

4 See *The Encyclopedia of Diderot and d'Alembert: Collaborative Translation Project* (<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/>) for a fully searchable online English version.

5 Immanuel Kant, "Preface to First Edition," in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), 9.

6 Kant, "Preface to Second Edition," *Critique of Pure Reason*, 22.

WARREN BRECKMAN AND PETER E. GORDON

can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience,” it “does not follow that it all arises out of experience.”<sup>7</sup> A thousand philosophical ships were launched by this hypothesis, and in many ways they are still under sail today. If Kant contended that the something else that supplements the data of the senses was a conception of *pure* reason, replete with *a priori* concepts and structures, others gave very different answers. Poets such as Goethe and Schiller, fresh out of their involvement in the so-called *Sturm und Drang* movement of the 1770s when Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* appeared, offered the passions and creative imagination as the crucial supplement or perhaps even guide of reason. In the case of Kant’s greatest immediate philosophical successor, G. W. F. Hegel, reason became an emphatically historical and social phenomenon, developing higher and higher articulations that promised to overcome the divisions between human and human, between human and nature, and even between human and divine. By the mid 1790s, Romantics in France, Britain, and Germany had subjected Enlightenment rationality to critical scrutiny; though instances of Romantic hostility toward the Enlightenment and indeed rationality itself can be found, the more characteristic positions were to expand the conception of reason beyond what Romantics like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, or Friedrich Schelling judged to be a narrowly construed base in analysis and experience or to balance the claims of reason against other human faculties – imagination, feeling, empathy, intuition.

With this broadening and reevaluation of human faculties went some shifts in the status of the natural sciences. Arguably, the greatest cultural hero of the Enlightenment was Isaac Newton. To be sure, the nineteenth century saw no diminishment in the centrality of the natural sciences. Indeed, it witnessed bounding leaps forward in almost every field of science and medicine; and to Newton, it added another icon of scientific mastery, Charles Darwin, whose *Origin of Species* (1859) opened the modern epoch of biological research but also an era of dubious evolutionary metaphors applied to social and cultural matters. The interweaving cultural significance of these two figures is amply attested by Friedrich Engels’s 1884 graveside eulogy for his friend Karl Marx, when he praised Marx as *both* the Newton *and* the Darwin of the social world. And, accompanying the many scientific advances of the period, the nineteenth century even witnessed a kind of cult of science, the philosophy of Positivism launched by Comte. But alongside the undeniable rise of the natural sciences, the nineteenth century saw robust debates

<sup>7</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 41.

## Introduction

about the validity of other disciplines and modes of knowledge, from metaphysics to historical study, from poetry and art to theology.

A single watchword might sum up the Enlightenment's stance on religion, namely *avoid fanaticism*. But beyond that plea for moderation, the Enlightenment counted in its ranks theists, rationalist deists, and radical atheists. Despite this plurality of religious positions, earlier generations of historians readily believed that in the aftermath of the Enlightenment, Europe witnessed a steady secularization of the mind and a decline of the public significance of religion.<sup>8</sup> Contemporaries of the nineteenth century often expressed similar views: In 1843, Marx declared the criticism of religion completed; Comte believed that the "age of theology" had yielded to an "age of metaphysics" and now, in his own lifetime, to a "positive age," by which he meant to signal the triumph of science. Mill suggested he lived in an "age of weak beliefs";<sup>9</sup> Matthew Arnold lamented in the poem "Dover Beach" that "The Sea of Faith / Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled. / But now I only hear / Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar, / Retreating . . ."; two years later, in 1869, Thomas Huxley, the first great champion of Darwin and the author of the first work placing humans in the evolution of species, coined the term "agnosticism"; in 1834, the poet Heinrich Heine admonished his reader "Hear ye not the bells resounding? Kneel down. They are bringing the sacraments to a dying God"; the radical Hegelian Bruno Bauer declared in 1841 that "God is dead for philosophy"; and a few decades later, Friedrich Nietzsche went the full distance and had his mad prophet Zarathustra declare "God is dead."<sup>10</sup>

In the last two or three decades, historians have grown skeptical of the image of a steadily secularizing European world, finding ample signs of the robust perseverance of belief in private life, society, and politics.<sup>11</sup> The same goes for intellectual life. For one thing, where the image of an implacable conflict between science and religion once dominated the historiography of

8 See, above all, Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

9 John Stuart Mill, "Utility of Religion," in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2006), vol. X, 403.

10 Heinrich Heine, *Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, trans. John Snodgrass (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), 103; Bruno Bauer, *Die Posaune des jüngsten Gerichts über Hegel den Atheisten und Antichristen: Ein Ultimatum* (Leipzig: O. Wigand, 1841), 77; and Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 181. Nietzsche used this phrase in numerous texts, but most influentially in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

11 For an influential example of this revisionist scholarship, see David Blackbourn, *Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (New York: Knopf, 1994).



WARREN BRECKMAN AND PETER E. GORDON

the nineteenth century, two generations of scholars have now discovered a much more flexible and resilient relationship.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the nineteenth century was a period of great creativity in religious thought, in large measure, perhaps, precisely because modernity posed so many challenges to the traditional religions. Protestant theologians from Friedrich Schleiermacher at the opening of the century to Albrecht Ritschl at its close recast theology in terms that spoke to the most advanced thinking of their times. The poet François-René de Chateaubriand reimagined Catholicism in Romantic terms, celebrating it not for its doctrinal truth but for the splendors and aesthetic satisfactions of its rituals. The Tübingen School of Catholic Theology rethought doctrinal issues as well as the relationship of the historical faith to philosophy. More generally, the revival of Thomism among Catholic thinkers reinvigorated the intellectual life of the Church and reverberated well into the twentieth century. Søren Kierkegaard underscored the irrational reservoirs of faith in works that were to find resonance among the existentialist thinkers of the 1920s and 1930s, while Russian writers and thinkers like Solovyov and Dostoevsky turned to a mystical religion that melded community and God through the body of Christ. Even the critics of religion frequently approached belief from an angle quite at odds with the most radical thinkers of the Enlightenment, who had tended to view religion as a zero-sum game, either true or false. So, for example, the Young Hegelians of the 1830s and 1840s viewed religion as a stage in the development of consciousness, bearing a kernel of truth even if the religious person misrecognized this truth. From a very different starting point, Mill readily conceded the utility of religion, while strenuously disputing its truth. He even presented secular commitments like his own youthful attachment to the Utilitarian movement as “in the best sense of the word, a religion, equally fitted to exalt the feelings, and (with the same aid from education) still better calculated to ennoble the conduct . . .”<sup>13</sup> The Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy was excommunicated from the Orthodox Church but nonetheless believed that humans could not exist without religion, insofar as humans ask why they exist and how they are connected to the universe. By the turn of the century, the Harvard psychologist William James could explore the varieties of

12 For a recent survey of this issue, see Frederick Gregory, “Science and Religion,” in *From Natural Philosophy to the Sciences: Writing the History of Nineteenth-Century Science*, ed. David Cahan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 329–358.

13 Mill, “Utility of Religion,” 420. Mill uses the same phrasing to describe his conversion to Utilitarianism upon reading Jeremy Bentham as a teenager in “Autobiography,” in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2006), vol. I, 69.



## Introduction

religious experience, asserting that their value lay not in their legitimacy but in their pragmatic effects.

In a world experiencing rapid social change and new political challenges, intellectual and cultural life branched into many different paths. The nineteenth century witnessed an ever-increasing proliferation of intellectual tendencies, movements, concerns, and currents. Pluralization is not the same thing as pluralism, in which multiple positions coexist harmoniously. Conflict could – and often did – accompany the pluralization of intellectual life: rival schools of philosophy, socialist versus bourgeois thought, anarchists against socialists, Romantics against realists, symbolists against realists, feminists against patriarchy, the emerging artistic avant-garde against the dominance of the academy, Nietzsche contra almost everyone. The rhizomic expansion and differentiation of intellectual and cultural activity went hand in hand with important shifts in the social conditions of knowledge.

Long gone were the days when the patronage of the Church was key to the prospects of intellectuals. Aristocratic support of writers and artists remained significant in the eighteenth century, as attested by the importance of the Parisian salon for the advance of Enlightenment ideas. But aristocratic patronage was on the wane, as the proliferation of voluntary associations and academies dedicated to the spread of knowledge suggests. As importantly, in the eighteenth century, some writers were already able to live from the sales of their works. The *Encyclopedia*, we were reminded years ago, was a business venture, whatever else it was.<sup>14</sup> By the end of the eighteenth century, the number of readers in countries like England, France, and Germany was increasing rapidly, and with the growth of readership came an ever-expanding literary marketplace and steam-driven printing machines that could meet the rising demand.<sup>15</sup> To be sure, it was still a great struggle to eke out an existence dependent on this market. Novels like Honoré de Balzac's *Lost Illusions* (1837–43) and Gustave Flaubert's *A Sentimental Education* (1869) open windows onto a Parisian world of aspiring writers, dreaming and destitute. But the dynamics of this expanding print market stamped the period, producing the conditions for various kinds of intellectual entrepreneurship, offering intellectuals incentives and possibilities

<sup>14</sup> See Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie 1775–1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

<sup>15</sup> See Reinhard Wittmann, "Was There a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century?," in *A History of Reading in the West*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999). See also Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics*, revised edn. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

WARREN BRECKMAN AND PETER E. GORDON

for the creation of journals and other publishing ventures, and tempting some to tailor their works for the market and provoking others to insist on the non-commercial purity of their creations. In the expanding capitalist world of western Europe, the rapid growth of cities fueled the commodification of cultural life and created important new contexts of intellectual and artistic life. Perhaps the most indelible impression of this new urban culture remains bohemianism – rebellious, eccentric, non-conformist, creative and spontaneous, decidedly anti-bourgeois and, typically, dirt poor.<sup>16</sup> Already emerging in the Paris of the 1830s and 1840s, bohemianism would replicate itself in cities great and small; but the association with Paris is strong enough that to this day a certain kind of tourist is drawn to the epicenter of nineteenth-century bohemian life, the Parisian neighborhood Montmartre, to indulge in nostalgia for days of absinthe, ribaldry, and artistic frenzy.

Bohemians were often non-political in the ordinary sense of politics, but there were elective affinities between Bohemia and revolution. In the cultural underworld of the big city, bohemians and revolutionaries frequently rubbed shoulders or even joined ranks, as we see in Baudelaire's poems depicting Paris during the Revolution of 1848.<sup>17</sup> The nineteenth century saw the emergence of a figure with no precedent in European history, the professional revolutionary. Marx, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Mikhail Bakunin, Rosa Luxemburg, Clara Zetkin, Vladimir Lenin, and Auguste Blanqui were just some of the men and women who dedicated their lives to the theory and practice of revolutionary activism. Toward the end of the century, with expanding manhood suffrage and the advent of the era of mass democratic politics, powerful socialist parties emerged, and with them, the sometimes conspiratorial and almost always marginalized revolutionary was supplemented by yet another new type, destined to have a long career in the twentieth century: the party intellectual.

Bohemians and revolutionaries are undoubtedly compelling figures, but it may be that the real heroes of nineteenth-century intellectual history were the professors. Universities throughout Europe had fallen into considerable disrepute in the eighteenth century. Certainly, they were not engines of innovation in any field, and in some cases they were havens of

16 From a large literature, see Jerrold Seigel, *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830–1930* (New York: Penguin, 1987); and Mary Gluck, *Popular Bohemia: Modernism and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

17 Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 126. In Traverso's book, see especially the chapter "Bohemia: Between Melancholy and Revolution."