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DANIEL BREWER

The Enlightenment today?

For long, the Enlightenment has been seen as the cornerstone of modern Western intellectual and political culture. Whether as historical period, philosophical and intellectual movement or social and political event, the Enlightenment has been equated with the beginnings of modernity, a past that betokens the present, a moment that in some sense is also our own. But what do these moments share, and how are the Enlightenment past and present joined? We can begin to answer this question by noting that the Enlightenment took shape in attempts to place knowledge on new foundations, to know things differently. This regrounding of knowledge involved nothing less than a redefinition of human existence, values and action. The term ‘Enlightenment’ would thus come to signify a set of ideas, ideals and cultural practices that grew out of an existing intellectual and socio-political order, sometimes by resisting it from without, but often enough by working to reconfigure it from within, and that gradually gained prominence and power during the eighteenth century. Over the following two centuries these ideas, ideals and practices would come to define fundamental aspects of modern political and social life in a liberal, democratic society, on the level of both individual existence and collective action.

Ultimately, the term ‘Enlightenment’ would designate the following aims and values: the autonomy of essentially rational individuals; the progressive function of the State to which individuals give up their freedom in return for increased collective well-being; the pre-given rationality of a natural order made accessible through scientific investigation, the knowledge resulting from experimental practice and technological applications of science designed to improve material existence; and, finally, the potentially just nature of collective social relations. Thus defined, the Enlightenment designates not a past moment but a goal to be realized, a programme reflecting the desire to reform and regulate individual behaviour and collective social relations. Reformist, progressivist and emancipatory, the Enlightenment project is fundamentally future-oriented, even to the point of seeming impossibly

I

DANIEL BREWER

utopian. Rising up on a constantly receding horizon, it represents a worthy goal, yet perhaps a constitutively and forever unrealizable one.

To approach the Enlightenment not simply as period but also as project means that the question of the Enlightenment cannot be posed solely in the past tense. Michel Foucault suggests as much when he asks, ‘What is this event called Enlightenment that has determined, at least in part, what we are, what we think and what we do today?’¹ With this question, posed in 1984, Foucault revived another question that had been formulated some two centuries earlier by Immanuel Kant in his celebrated essay ‘An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?’. In this short essay, Kant suggested that Enlightenment is the emergence from a self-incurred immaturity or tutelage (*Unmündigkeit*), a state marked by the inability to use one’s own understanding without being guided by another or directed by tradition and unexamined beliefs. Instead, Enlightenment involves the courage to establish a new relation to knowing, a relation encapsulated in the phrase Kant borrowed from Horace, *sapere aude* (dare to be wise, dare to know). The chapters in this volume examine the French Enlightenment from numerous disciplinary perspectives, yet they all address what it was that men and women of the French eighteenth century ‘dared to know’, how they did so and with what results.

The present chapter opens this volume by recalling Foucault’s contemporary return to Kant’s question in order to stress what Foucault takes to be, for us today, the inescapability of the Enlightenment question. We are bound to the Enlightenment, which bequeaths to us its haunting legacy and challenges us to realize its emancipatory project. The attempt has been made, however, to loosen, if not undo, that bind, which links us to an Enlightenment associated with darker events in the history of the West. This Enlightenment has been denounced for being implicated in capitalist expansion, in the rise of fascism and in colonial exploitation. This Enlightenment is a more sombre one, in which reason seems to be in eclipse, promoting ways of knowing human subjects that instrumentalize and institutionalize them, transforming them into objects of a masterful power/knowledge.² It is entirely understandable that we might wish to forget such a past, or recall it only partially, in other words in bits and pieces, but also prejudicially and in service of particular interests. Our relation to this Enlightenment is a critical one, an Enlightenment both crucial to who we are yet one in need of vigilant critique. This critical relation is driven by the wish to free ourselves finally from this shadowy past, to believe we have developed ways of knowing that are more scientific, more rational and ultimately more just. Yet in subjecting the Enlightenment to such a critique, we subject ourselves all the more to the double bind of Enlightenment, for we cannot escape using what

The Enlightenment today?

Kant called courageous thinking, an unfettered and self-reflexive form of questioning, in order to critique precisely the Enlightenment thought from which we might seek to free ourselves. Herein lies the ensnaring double bind of Enlightenment, the impossibility of engaging in modern critical thinking except in relation to, and perhaps by using the terms of, the Enlightenment itself.

But this version of the Enlightenment is only one of many, for numerous modern moments have defined themselves in relation to the particular ‘Enlightenment past’ they construct.³ Seldom, however, has this modernity been theorized with the unflinching self-reflexivity that Foucault enjoins us to adopt. In the idiom of intellectual history, for example, the story of Enlightenment is told in less problematic terms. Here, an advent narrative recounts the development of a modern way of knowing, one conventionally located in the work of René Descartes. Author of *Discours de la méthode* (*Discourse on Method*) and *Méditations métaphysiques* (*Metaphysical Meditations*), Descartes also wrote a dialogue (published posthumously in 1701) entitled *La Recherche de la vérité par la lumière naturelle*. The ‘light’ figured here stands for a way of knowing that is distinct from both religion and scholastic philosophy, faith and tradition, as the work’s complete title indicates: *La Recherche de la vérité par la lumière naturelle, qui toute pure, et sans emprunter le secours de la religion ni de la philosophie, détermine les opinions que doit avoir tout honnête homme touchant les choses qui peuvent occuper sa pensée et qui pénètrent dans les secrets des sciences les plus abstraites* (*The Search for Truth by Means of the Natural Light That, Entirely Pure, and Unaided by Either Religion or Philosophy, Determines the Opinions That Every Honest Man Must Hold Concerning Things That May Occupy His Mind and That Enter into the Secrets of the Most Abstract Sciences*). This inner ‘light’ no longer needs to be in harmony with divine or scholastic revelation, and the truths it reveals found a more reliable and scientific knowledge of the world.

Although Descartes’s scientific writings would be criticized in the next century as fanciful, overly systematized and ungrounded in empirical experience, his philosophical position was received more positively. The intuitive and innate ‘natural light’ of Cartesian philosophy would be rephrased as human reason, a universally shared faculty of the mind that frees the rational thinker from shadowy and unexamined superstition and dogma. In the eighteenth century, light becomes lights, as the abstract principle of reason is made visible in multiple ways of knowing. The philosophical spirit of the Enlightenment submits received truths as well as empirically experienced reality to critical examination, as the enlightened subject maps the world anew, guided by his or her own reason. This remapping occurs in numerous

DANIEL BREWER

domains, notably in the scientific realm, in the path-breaking works of what we now classify as natural history, biology, chemistry, anthropology, art history and medicine. But new forms of aesthetic experience share in this remapping as well. Perhaps most famously, in Voltaire's *Candide* the tale's eponymous hero constantly tests his received view of the world, analysing it against what he comes to know of it through experience. But in countless eighteenth-century novels as well, from the sentimental to the libertine and even the erotic, the reader's experience of reading doubles the hero or heroine's experience of the world, as fiction becomes a way for readers to feel newly in sync with the world, both critically and empathetically, to know it through aesthetic imagination.⁴

The shape this 'new' knowledge takes need not mirror divine order, claim the Enlightenment writers. This position has led scholars to view the Enlightenment as driven by the imperative of rational scientific analysis, whose by-product is a demystifying process of secularization. In this view, scientific rationalism of the eighteenth century resulted in delegitimizing what Max Weber in the next century would call an 'enchanted' and sacred world view, in which spiritual beliefs infuse institutions and give meaning to action. Scientific rationalism was seen to depart from the sacred view of things, following a strategy of resistance to the sacred that was frequently experienced as heady liberation from unreason. The nineteenth-century philosopher of science Auguste Comte pursued this distinction, promoting 'positive' science as the source of empirical, quantifiable and ultimately objective knowledge. Yet this objectivity was seen to have come at a steep price. C. P. Snow, writing in the mid twentieth century, worried that the rise of 'modern scientific thought', for all its benefits, led not to the certainty of a totalizing epistemological viewpoint but rather to fragmented, contradictory and irreconcilable ways of knowing. There existed 'two cultures', Snow claimed, two ways of knowing, with that of 'the sciences' set against that of 'the humanities'.⁵ Philosophers would investigate this rift further, grappling with the question of technology's impact upon society and its implications concerning the essence of humanity.⁶ At present, the rift seems only to have widened, as the current debate in higher education suggests, in which 'the STEMs' (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) are cast as pitted irreconcilably against 'the liberal arts'.

The opposition between 'enchanted' knowledge and scientific knowledge need not be drawn in such inflexible terms, however, at least not in the case of the Enlightenment. The narrative that sets static and benighted tradition against a more dynamic, secularizing and modernizing Enlightenment – in which modernization stands as the outcome of secularization – is not the only way to explain the Enlightenment's approach to knowledge production.

The Enlightenment today?

The dividing line between the religious and the scientific, the enchanted and the secular, was not always a simple one to draw in the eighteenth century. Exploring the complex crossovers between reason and emotion in Enlightenment scientific discourse, historians of science have shown that Enlightenment science is less scientific than we might think, or rather that it is scientific but only once framed in terms other than those of an inexorable march to modernity.⁷ The thesis of scientific rationalism, the keystone of the modernizing narrative, may reflect not so much how things actually happened in the eighteenth century but rather how a later moment configured its past as pre-scientific. Exploring the French version of such a reconfiguration, we can see its deep roots in the rancorous political and ideological debates leading to the establishment of the nineteenth-century Third Republic, which pitted partisans of religion against those of secularism or *laïcité*, the hallmark of which was the secular state.

It is doubtless not possible to rid ourselves fully of the lens of the present when reading the texts of the past. Nor perhaps should we, at least if treating the Enlightenment historically means understanding it as part of the present's inevitable project of constructing, if not the past itself, then at least its own past. Consequently, in returning to the Enlightenment we need to keep in mind that various intellectual debates, as well as political and ideological battles (from the French Revolution onwards, and including the battle to bring about modernity), were not necessarily those of the Enlightenment writers themselves, however much they and their writings can be, and indeed were, pressed into service in those debates. The question thus arises, how might we read the Enlightenment otherwise than in terms of an oppositional, demystifying, secularizing and modernizing narrative?

Consider, for instance, the *Encyclopédie* and how its writers grappled with the ordering of knowledge. As Diderot concedes in the article 'Encyclopédie', divine knowledge provides the most perfect of epistemological ordering principles. But he approaches the question of encyclopedic order not so much in oppositional terms as in pragmatic ones. However desirable that divine knowledge of things might be, he observes, it ultimately remains unattainable. So, for the encyclopedist, to know something one must dare not to know everything. Better instead is to order knowledge on a human scale, organizing it the way the mind works in interacting with the world. This principle was the one that Diderot and his co-editor Jean le Rond d'Alembert adopted in the *Encyclopédie*. The articles of this compendious scale model of Enlightenment are organized and interconnected according to the branches and sub-branches of the 'tree of knowledge', whose divisions reflect the way the encyclopedists assumed the mind worked in processing sensation and organizing knowledge; these divisions also mark the still unruly beginnings

DANIEL BREWER

of the modern disciplines – and disciplining – of knowledge.⁸ In this way the encyclopedists can claim to found their knowledge not on God but on ‘man’, the subject they put at the centre of their work. The term ‘man’ refers in their writings to the universal rational subject, or so implied the lettered men of a certain social privilege who readily saw themselves represented in such a construct. But even if encyclopedic knowledge is not all-encompassing and universal, it nonetheless remains workable, providing strategic and provisional knowledge because it is knowledge on the human scale, designed to be used in human time. Arbitrary as it is, and however much it might be mediated and limited by pragmatic self-interest, this form of knowledge remains a more useful tool, and a more powerful weapon, in the enterprise in which the encyclopedists willingly enlist, namely, as Diderot defines the goal of the *Encyclopédie*, ‘to change the common way of thinking’. To be sure, much of the knowledge the *Encyclopédie* contains is quaintly out of date today. The encyclopedists themselves worried that even in their own time both philosophical and technological innovation would outstrip their ability, and that of language, to keep up with change. It is in this vast work’s relation to knowledge, rather than in the knowledge it conveys, that the *Encyclopédie* creates a more modern way to conceive of, produce, disseminate and use knowledge, in a manner that is at once critical, disciplinary and collective.

Since the 1970s, scholars have taken renewed interest in the social and cultural history of the Enlightenment. With this shift, the ‘ideas’ of the ‘high Enlightenment’ on which intellectual historians previously had focused were seen instead as being contextually embedded, materially determined and characterized by their rich cultural density. From the perspective of this newer history, the Enlightenment was no longer the continuation and popularization of a ‘modern’ science that emerged in the seventeenth century. Nor was it the ideological, class-based expression of a rising bourgeoisie, as Marxist historiography had claimed. Instead, hybrid historiographical models were developed to explain social and cultural transformation otherwise. From a cultural perspective, the Enlightenment writer’s identity and activity were seen to be shaped by complex negotiations and interactions in a world characterized by an array of scholarly institutions (such as the Académie Royale des Sciences or the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts), as well as more social ones (such as Mme de Geoffrin’s salon or d’Holbach’s ‘coterie’).⁹ The story of this Enlightenment was less about ideas than about communication, a lens that brought a new Enlightenment world into focus. If historical change was driven by anything, it was not by the insufficiently contextualized ideas of intellectual history, nor by an overly determined theory of class conflict dear to Marxist historiography. Rather, what drove change during

The Enlightenment today?

the Enlightenment were forms of exchange and patterns of politeness and sociability, the defining features of an elite society in which privilege could coexist with the principle of merit and civic equality.¹⁰ As César Chesneau Dumarsais suggests in his *Encyclopédie* article ‘Philosophe’, Enlightenment writers readily imagine themselves to be citizens of the greater Republic of Letters, as belonging to an enlightening elite whose members are committed to striving to realize the greatest happiness of the largest number of men and women.

The world of this French Enlightenment was centred in such places as the salons, coffee houses, print shops and libraries of Paris, yet it was marked by a powerful centrifugal impulse that opened it up to a world outside of France. A writer such as Voltaire, for example, was keenly aware of how broadly his readership spread across Europe. Perhaps the first Enlightenment celebrity in the modern sense of the term, he took great care to construct and manage his image beyond French borders, as if he knew that this celebrity would serve as a strategic weapon in his defence of victims of fanaticism. Enlightenment writers just as intentionally participated on an international stage, as did Voltaire and Diderot in their individual relations with Frederick the Great of Prussia and Catherine of Russia. More broadly, Enlightenment writers were active members of international networks of exchanges involving scholarly societies, newspapers, journals and reference volumes (such as Melchior Grimm’s *Correspondance littéraire* [*Literary Correspondence*] or Guillaume Thomas François Raynal’s *Histoire des deux Indes* [*History of the Two Indies*]). The cosmopolitan world of these communication networks was experientially real, which means we can reproduce it in an empirical sense by generating, for instance, the membership list of the Prussian Royal Academy of Sciences (whose first president was the Frenchman, Pierre-Louis de Maupertuis) or the geographical reach of one of the thousands of Voltaire’s letters.

But that empirical world also possessed a symbolic dimension. Participation in these communication networks was a form of self-fashioning, a way of moving up the ladder of prestige, leaving the world of ‘Grub Street’ that Robert Darnton has analysed, and becoming a writer, a critic, a man of science.¹¹ In a broader, more social and political sense, participation in these networks created what Jürgen Habermas called *Öffentlichkeit* or the ‘public sphere’.¹² A non-courtly space, set apart in significant ways from the State, this space was discursive in nature, characterized by the public discussion and debate that took place there. In coffee houses, reading rooms and salons, this discussion was spurred by the growing variety of critical genres, including newspaper articles, public speeches, scientific reports, encyclopedia articles and novels. Participation in this public space created a community of

DANIEL BREWER

enlightened citizens whose reasoned discussion and critical debate were perceived as a process that gave voice to public opinion. Producing a form of civic identity independent from religion or royal power, the public opinion located in the public sphere was also seen as possessing a regulative power over state authority. For Habermas, the development of this public sphere parallels no less than the rise of democracy.

While some social and cultural historians highlighted the public dimension of Enlightenment life, others turned to its more private sides. Not so much an ‘age of reason’ as an ‘age of affect’, this other Enlightenment was one that promoted the development of intimate relations and new forms of identity (such as family, domesticity, maternity or sentimentality). In contrast with a public courtly space whose prestige and power were in decline, private space allowed new forms of subjectivity to emerge via experiential modes such as conversation and reading. A privileged genre of such experience was the ‘new’ novel, not that of previous centuries’ pastoral romance, for example, but rather the urban, sentimental, domestic novel. Epistolary novels, fictional memoirs and autobiographies, all flourishing genres in the eighteenth century, were especially important in making reading into an experience of intimacy by proxy. Finally, this newly emerging private space was also a gendered space. Here, the experience of intimacy that reading afforded gave rise to a sense of the gendered self, in a process that cultural and literary historians of the Enlightenment have explored in great detail.¹³

Whether considered in its intellectual, social, cultural or political dimension, the French Enlightenment was soon overtaken by historical events. From 1789 onwards, the French Revolutionaries struggled to bring about a new, autonomous and legitimate modernity; reshaping cultural practices and remaking institutions, they aimed to produce a modern political subject. For long, historians have debated whether, to what extent and in what fashion the Enlightenment can be said to have prepared, perhaps even brought about, the French Revolution, either in its initial and more progressive version (1789) or its more radical and bloody one (that of Robespierre and the Reign of Terror of 1793–4). To be sure, the connections between the French Enlightenment and the French Revolution are rich and complex. Yet a teleological model of cause and effect, based on the notion of origin, is likely not the best way to explain these connections. As Roger Chartier has noted, following Michel Foucault, origins are not pre-given but rather after-effects, something produced after the fact. Consequently,

when history succumbs to ‘the chimera of origins’, it burdens itself, perhaps unconsciously, with several presuppositions: that every historical moment is a homogeneous totality endowed with an ideal and unique meaning present in each of the realities that make up and express that whole; that historical

The Enlightenment today?

becoming is organized as an ineluctable continuity; that events are linked together, one engendering another in an uninterrupted flow of change that enables us to decide that one is the ‘cause’, another the effect.¹⁴

Instead of supposing a causal relation between the Enlightenment past and the Revolutionary present, Chartier asks (productively albeit counter-intuitively) whether it was not the Revolution that invented the Enlightenment.

This revolutionary invention involves putting in place a new *régime d'historicité*, a new way of configuring the historical subject's relation to past, present and future. Consider the well-known example of the Revolutionary calendar, for instance, in which 22 September 1792 became the beginning of Year One. The Revolutionaries' calendar created a violent temporal break designed to reset not just calendar time but social, political and cultural time as well. Subjected to the temporal disjunction that this new calendar produced, individuals underwent a collective beginning, which marked the political subject's existential ‘regeneration’ as citizen. For that process to work though, and the Revolution itself, the Revolutionaries had to position the Revolutionary present in relation not just to a past with which they broke but to a past of their own construction. Consequently, this new and imaginary past, the Ancien Régime, was less a reflection of what had been than a projection of what had to have been. That past was a kind of screen that made legible the conflicts, contradictions and drives shaping the Revolutionaries' own present. Thus, if the Revolution invented the Enlightenment, argues Chartier, it was ‘by attempting to root its legitimacy in a corpus of texts and founding authors reconciled and united, beyond their extreme differences, by the preparation of a rupture with the old world’.¹⁵ In this sense, the Enlightenment may well be located at the origin of our modernity but an origin that comes into view retrospectively. As a result, the ‘Enlightenment question’ is not about what the Enlightenment actually was so much as how we construct it and make use of it. Interpretations of the Enlightenment, as of any intellectual or cultural phenomenon, are best understood as being contextually embedded in the moment of their production. They are produced, received and have their impact in particular contexts, whose determining role must not be forgotten, papered over or repressed but instead identified and brought to light. Three examples of such embedding and its recall are particularly illustrative.

Few books have shaped succeeding generations' understanding of the Enlightenment as extensively as Ernst Cassirer's *Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, published in German in 1932 and in English translation in 1951. In retrospect, the impact of Cassirer's work can be seen to lie not only in its neo-Kantian understanding of the Enlightenment but also in the way this interpretation was entwined with the intellectual, cultural and political

DANIEL BREWER

context of the times. In 1932, Cassirer held a professorship at the University of Hamburg. The following year, Hitler became Chancellor, and Cassirer left Germany in exile. In his 1932 introduction to the volume, Cassirer refers implicitly to the darkening clouds of unreason on the horizon, suggesting how crucial was the return he sought to an eighteenth century of reason, tolerance and free thought. 'Instead of assuming a derogatory air', he wrote,

we must take courage and measure our powers against those of the age of the Enlightenment, and find a proper adjustment. The age which venerated reason and science as man's highest faculty cannot and must not be lost even for us. We must find a way not only to see that age in its own shape but to release again those original forces which brought forth and moulded this shape.¹⁶

Rejecting German Romanticism's 'derogatory' dismissal of Enlightenment, Cassirer sought a way to revive the Enlightenment in the threatening pre-war fascist present. The American translation of Cassirer's work a few decades later has an equally significant contextual dimension to it, for its commercial success and academic impact can be read as reflecting the wish in the USA to reconstruct post-war Europe. Cassirer's Enlightenment, whose beginnings he locates in England and France but whose ultimate culmination he situates in Germany with Kantian philosophy, meshes remarkably well with the post-war goal of rebuilding European intellectual and cultural unity.

If Cassirer's Enlightenment is a hopeful one, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is far gloomier. Originally published in German in 1947 in the aftermath of the devastation that Cassirer anticipated, this work analyses the negative dialectical unfolding of an Enlightenment characterized by a reason whose internal logic and historical development reflect the attempt to master the real. In the process though, reason negates itself, working upon subjects as if they were objects. This reason produces an objective knowledge, but one that is also objectifying, for it promotes the dehumanization of human subjects through a powerful brand of knowledge that undergirds the technological expansion of the totalitarian state. Adorno and Horkheimer's Enlightenment begins with the Greeks, but the French eighteenth century occupies a privileged place in the story they tell. What should we make of this juxtaposition of Cassirer and Horkheimer and Adorno? For Michel Delon, it is a politically dated conflict that opposes two bygone ideologies, with Cassirer standing for a hopeful liberalism and Horkheimer and Adorno voicing an intransigent Marxist critique of advanced capitalist societies.¹⁷ Can we escape from this bipolar situation, Delon asks, in which the choice seems to be either to identify uncritically with Enlightenment values or to decry their constitutive illusions? Or, rather, rephrasing Delon's alternatives slightly, is it sufficient to