Enlightenment and modernity, historians and philosophers*

John Robertson

I

Since 2000, it has been common for historians to identify Enlightenment with 'modernity'. They have done so confidently, in some cases stridently. It will surprise no-one familiar with the field that the most assertive in identifying the two has been Jonathan Israel; but in this at least he has been seconded by other leading Enlightenment scholars, including Vincenzo Ferrone, Margaret Jacob, Anthony La Vopa, Antoine Lilti and Anthony Pagden.[1] Where they have led, many of us have followed.[2] So arguing,

* I would like to thank the editor, Devin Vartija, both for his invitation to contribute and for his thoughtful comments on the initial draft; likewise the two anonymous readers for their suggestions and corrections. I am particularly grateful to Silvia Sebastiani for her reading of the draft, and constant prompting to think through the issues. The judgements I make are of course mine alone.

[1] In Israel's case, most fully in *Enlightenment Contested. Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); see below 000-000. Vincenzo Ferrone, *The Enlightenment. History of an Idea* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), and now *Il mondo dell'illuminismo. Storia di una rivoluzione culturale* (Turin: Einaudi, 2019), qualifying the association by characterizing Enlightenment as 'the laboratory of modernity'. Margaret C. Jacob, 'The mental landscape of the public sphere: a European perspective', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 28 (1994), 95-113. Anthony J. La Vopa, 'A new intellectual history? Jonathan Israel's Enlightenment', *The Historical Journal* 52 (2009), 717-38, esp. 720. Antoine Lilti, 'Comment écrit-on l'histoire intellectuelle des Lumières? Spinozism, radicalisme et philosophie', *Annales* 64 (2009), 171-206, esp. 205-6, reprinted (and revised) in Antoine Lilti, *L'héritage des lumières. Ambivalences de la modernité* (Paris: EHESS-Gallimard-Seuil, 2019), 223-57. Both La Vopa and Lilti were otherwise highly critical of Israel's project. Anthony Pagden, *The Enlightenment and why it still matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), as on p. 5, and see below 000-000.

[2] Including the present author (albeit conditionally): John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment. Scotland and Naples 1680-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 48.

historians are clearly associating Enlightenment with something of value. Modernity is not simply the present, the set of circumstances in which we currently live, to be taken as it comes. Modernity expresses a normative claim: it is an achievement, a condition which we should seek to defend, enhance, and diffuse to those who do not yet enjoy its full benefit. It may have its problems, its unfulfilled aspirations; the universality of its application may still be contested. But to be able to associate Enlightenment with modernity does both causes good. It gives modernity a sophisticated intellectual foundation; and it ensures that the work of Enlightenment historians has present purpose and relevance.

What is striking about this determination to associate Enlightenment with modernity is that it puts historians on ground usually occupied by social and political philosophers. For if modernity is not simply present circumstances, then it is a conceptual construction, a set of concepts intended not only to capture key developments in the 'modern' world but also to evaluate them. To describe a phenomenon as 'modern' is of course to invoke a period of time, but that may be quite imprecise: for the philosopher, chronological specificity is likely to be far less important than it is to the historian. Rather than specific historical developments, it is the referents of modernity, construed in broad economic, social and political terms, which will matter most to the philosopher. Among philosophers, moreover, 'modernity' may as well be a subject of critique as of positive evaluation. As well as to its own merits, 'modernity' owes its conceptual significance to having been the object of critique at the hands of the philosophers and critics styled 'Postmodernists', a *soubriquet* implying that modernity itself should be superseded, left to the past. But the contested status of modernity only reinforces the puzzle of the historians' stance. Why have historians set themselves up amidst the philosophers and critics as the champions of a beleaguered modernity?

In what follows, I offer an account of how this strange situation has come about. I emphasise at the outset that it is *an* account – others, or at least different emphases, are certainly possible. As will be evident, the linguistic bias of this study is anglo- and italo-phone; an essay on the same subject which started from its treatment in other major

languages of Enlightenment scholarship, French or German above all, would trace a different course. While certain moments in the narrative would be likely to feature in all its versions, the inflexions would be different. It should also be emphasised that the narrative is designed to address the specific question of Enlightenment and modernity; it is not a comprehensive historiography of Enlightenment.[3] Nevertheless, I hope that I can make a point with general resonance: if historians can be encouraged to be more self-aware, to take stock of where this preoccupation with modernity has taken them, they may be better able to extricate themselves from the concept's limitations and vulnerabilities. As I shall also argue, however, such self-awareness will depend on historians recognising the enduring relationship between history and philosophy in study of the Enlightenment.[4]

I begin, as James Schmidt suggested to participants in the roundtable from which this contribution derives, with the *locus classicus* of discussion of the relation of history to philosophy in study of the Enlightenment, the introduction to Franco Venturi's *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment* (1971).[5]

---

[3] Nor do I aim to be bibliographically comprehensive; references intended to illustrate a trend in scholarship have generally been limited to one major work per author.

[4] In this contention, my argument shares much common ground with that of Ferrone, *The Enlightenment. History of an Idea*, which treats in turn 'the philosophers' Enlightenment' and 'the historians' Enlightenment'. As will become clear, we diverge in that Ferrone believes the two Enlightenments should remain distinguished, and that history can establish the truth of the Enlightenment.

[5] 'Revisiting the "philosophical interpretation" of the Enlightenment', Roundtable convened by James Schmidt and Aaron Garrett, Fifteenth International Congress on the Enlightenment, organised by the International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, Edinburgh, 16 July 2019. Rewritten from a contribution to the roundtable, this essay is a very imperfect *homage* to the pioneering – and always generous – role played by Jim Schmidt over more than forty years in furthering dialogue between historians and philosophers of Enlightenment.

II

Utopia and Reform derived from the series of 'Trevelyan Lectures' which Venturi had delivered in Cambridge in 1969. The contents of the book are very much a composite, covering Venturi's interests in the English Commonwealthsmen, the Italian republics, and Beccaria's case for penal reform, and placing them between a methodological introduction and a concluding survey of the 'chronology and geography' of the Enlightenment. For all the heterogeneity of its contents, however, the book's introduction made it a manifesto for a historical understanding of the Enlightenment. At the heart of that manifesto was a repudiation of 'the philosophical interpretation of the *Aufklärung*'.[6]

For this purpose, Venturi singled out for attention Ernst Cassirer's *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung*, first published in German in 1932, and in an English translation as *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* in 1951.[7] Cassirer's understanding of *Aufklärung* was misconceived in substance and in approach. His subjects were almost exclusively philosophers. 'There is not one economist to be found in the whole of Cassirer.' His approach was the reverse of the one a historian should adopt. Still in thrall to the Germanic nostalgia for the *Ur*, Cassirer looked upstream, seeking the source of the ideas he found in the eighteenth century. What historians need to know is how the river made its way, amidst what obstacles and difficulties. The studies which made up *Utopia and Reform* would show how this should be done. By investigating the context in which

---

[6] Franco Venturi, *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971); an Italian version was published a year earlier: *Utopia e riforma nell'illuminismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1970).

[7] Ernst Cassirer, *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1932); *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. F.C.A. Koelln and J.P. Pettegrove (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951).

ideas 'germinated', where, when and how they were deployed, and to what effect, Venturi would write 'a political history of the Enlightenment'.[8]

However sharply Venturi differentiated his approach, his critique of Cassirer hardly did justice to the latter's book.[9] Not only did Venturi slight the increasingly hostile environment in which Cassirer wrote – within a year of the book's publication Cassirer had resigned from Hamburg University and gone into exile. He discounted features of Cassirer's argument with which he might have found common ground. Cassirer, like Venturi, identified Enlightenment with a distinct historical period: while it might have had origins in the earlier seventeenth century, its earliest major protagonist was Leibniz, and it ended with the publication of Kant's major critical treatises, which inaugurated a new phase in the history of philosophy. Cassirer's Enlightenment was also cosmopolitan in intellectual character: if its roads tended to lead to German thinkers, the English and the French had made vital contributions along the way. But perhaps the most striking commonality was the emphasis on agency. For Cassirer identified the philosophy of the Enlightenment, not with a unified, determining 'system' of thought, but with a series of fields of enquiry, in each of which experience, judgement and the capacity for agency were indispensable. It is true that Cassirer's book formed part of a larger philosophical project, which would culminate in the attempt to reconstruct the 'logic of the cultural sciences'. In this perspective, the Enlightenment was a phase in the disentangling of philosophy from myth as the means to understanding nature and human existence, a process Cassirer thought Kant had brought to fruition.[10] But *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* did not include an account of Kant's achievement: it treated

---

[8] Venturi, *Utopia and Reform*, 1-3, 17.

[9] As Keith M. Baker noted, 'Venturi's *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment*', in Manuela Albertone, ed. *Il repubblicanesimo modern. L'idea di repubblica nella riflessione storica di Franco Venturi* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 2006), 33-57, at 35.

[10] Ernst Cassirer, *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences. Five Studies*, published in German in 1942, trans. S.G. Lofts (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

Enlightenment philosophy in its own right, celebrating its emphasis on agency in ideas. As J. K. Wright observed, there is an important sense in which this book (too) was 'a political history of ideas'.[11]

Why then was Venturi so hostile to Cassirer's book? His dissatisfaction with it was not new: he had expressed it to Benedetto Croce in 1941, in a letter in which he remarked that he found more to interest him Hegel's treatment of the Enlightenment in his *Phenomenology*.[12] In *Utopia and Reform*, he associated Cassirer's book with Carl Becker's *Heavenly City of the eighteenth-century Philosophers* (1932) in which the novelty of eighteenth-century thinking was denied in favour of reading it as a reprise of the medieval, Christian ideal of the *civitas dei*.[13] Venturi acknowledged that Becker's book had been strongly criticised by Peter Gay in *The Enlightenment: an Interpretation* (1966), whose point of departure had been Cassirer and the Warburg Institute in Hamburg. Gay had brought a 'modern philosophical sensibility' to this tradition, and a

---

[11] Johnson Kent Wright, '"A bright, clear mirror": Cassirer's *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*', in Keith Michael Baker and Peter Hanns Reill, eds. *What's Left of Enlightenment. A Postmodern Question* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 71-101 – an exegesis and commentary to which the above paragraph is considerably indebted. Now also: Ursula Renz, 'Cassirer's enlightenment: on philosophy and the "Denkform" of reason', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 28 (2020), 636-52, highlighting Cassirer's sense of the activity of reason in different domains of thought in the Enlightenment.

[12] Venturi to Croce, 16 June [1941], in Silvia Berti, ed. *Benedetto Croce – Franco Venturi Carteggio* (Naples: Il Mulino, 2008), 28. Venturi's relations with Croce, a friend of his father and Italy's most distinguished philosopher and man of letters, were complex: see the 'Introduzione' to this volume by Silvia Berti, and also Girolamo Imbruglia, 'Benedetto Croce and the problem of Enlightenment', *History of European Ideas* 36 (2010), 101-11. As the praise of Hegel suggests, Venturi was not always hostile to philosophic treatments of the Enlightenment: arguably, his own early work was more open to a philosophical approach to the history of ideas.

[13] Venturi, *Utopia and Reform*. 3-4, referring to Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932). Venturi noted that Croce's Italian followers liked Becker's fusion of history and philosophy.

'political sensibility' too. But these were no more than 'new branches grafted onto an old and glorious trunk'. For Gay had also gone backwards, identifying Enlightenment with the recovery of classical values, as 'the rise of modern paganism'.[14]

Venturi may have been strengthened in his hostility to Cassirer by Isaiah Berlin, who had reviewed *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* with surprising harshness: finding that Cassirer had failed to draw clear distinctions between the ideas of different thinkers, Berlin judged the book 'serenely innocent', inadequate to the times in which it had been written.[15] Venturi knew Berlin, who had earlier arranged for Venturi's major study of Russian populism to be translated into English, by Francis Haskell, the art historian.[16] But if this was an influence, it was unacknowledged. Venturi made no reference either to the works of philosophers explicitly critical to Enlightenment thinking, whether Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944) or Reinhart Koselleck's *Kritik und Krise* (1959). Of the two, Koselleck's book touched most directly on Venturi's interests, since central to his critique was the claim that the utopianism of Enlightenment philosophers had led them fatally to underestimate the importance of politics and of the state; later Venturi would bracket Koselleck with Cassirer as a proponent of the philosophical approach to the German Enlightenment.[17]

---

[14] Venturi, *Utopia and Reform*, 4-5; Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation I The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1966; London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967).

[15] Isaiah Berlin, review of Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, in *English Historical Review* 68 (1953, 617-19.

[16] Franco Venturi, *Roots of Revolution: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth-Century Russia*, translated by Francis Haskell, with an Introduction by Isaiah Berlin (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1960). Italian original, *Il populismo russo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1952).

[17] Franco Venturi, 'Postilla' to Luciano Guerci, Carlo Capra and others, 'Settecento riformatore', *Annali della Fondazione Luigi Einaudi* XIX (1985), 403-54, at 451-2; referring to Reinhart Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise. Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt* (Freiburg/Munich: Verlag Karl Albert, 1959).

But in *Utopia and Reform*, Cassirer, with Becker, was sufficient for Venturi's purpose: a rallying cry for historians to dispense with philosophers, and to study the Enlightenment for themselves.

Where then did Venturi and his fellow-historians take the Enlightenment? By the time he published *Utopia and Reform*, Venturi himself was already well-set on the course of research announced in his 1954 article, 'La circolazione delle idee', in which he had called upon Italian historians to shift their gaze away from the nationalism of the Risorgimento and Fascism, and to focus on the *Settecento*, the long eighteenth century, when quite different (and better) ideas of Italy's future had been canvassed.[18] The essential preliminary to such an enquiry had been the identification of the leading eighteenth-century reformers and their works, which Venturi and others collected and excerpted in volumes of *Illuministi Italiani*.[19] By the late 1960s, he was ready to mould these studies of individuals into a narrative of Enlightenment and reform across Italy. The first volume of *Settecento riformatore. Da Muratori a Beccaria*, was published in 1969, the year of his Cambridge lectures; four more were published between 1976 and 1990 (Volumes IV and V both in two parts).[20] Towards the end, it is still fair to say, the

---

[18] Franco Venturi, 'La circolazione delle idee', *Rassegna Storica del Risorgimento* 41 (1954), 203-22; first delivered to the 23rd Congress for the History of the Risorgimento in September 1953.

[19] Franco Venturi, ed. *Illuministi italiani III Riformatori Lombardi, piemontesi e toscana*, *V Riformatori napoletani*, *VII Riformatori delle antiche repubbliche, dei ducati, dello Stato pontificio e delle isole* (Milan – Naples: Ricciardi, 1958, 1962, 1965). The third of these was edited with Giuseppe Giarrizzo and Gianfranco Torcellan.

[20] Franco Venturi, *Settecento riformatore I Da Muratori a Beccaria* (Turin: Einaudi, 1969); *II Le Chiesa e la repubblica dentro I loro limiti (1758-1774)* (1976); *III La prima crisi dell'Antico Regime (1768-1776)* (1979); *IV La caduta dell'Antico Regime (1776-1789) i I grandi stati dell'occidente; ii Il patriottismo repubblicano e gli imperi delll'Est* (1984); *V L'Italia dei lumi (1764-1790) i La rivoluzione di Corsica. Le grandi carestie degli anni Sessanta. La Lombardia delle riforme* (1987); *V ii La Repubblica di Venezia (1761-1797)* (1990). Volumes III and IV i-ii were translated into English by R. Burr Litchfield as, respectively, *The End of the Old Regime in Europe, 1768-1776. The First Crisis*, and *The End of the Old Regime in Europe, 1776-1789 I The Great States of the West*, *II*

project was breaking up under the sheer weight of detail Venturi had amassed; the narrative splintered into regional components. Nevertheless, the potential of a 'political history of the Enlightenment' had been triumphantly demonstrated: not only the viability of identifying Enlightenment with 'reform', in economy, society and government, but the value of recognising the disruptiveness of reform, its utopian potential, and hence its role in creating the conditions for revolution. As Carlo Capra pointed out, the programmes of 'reform' studied by Venturi equated in many respects to what mid-twentieth-century social theory understood as 'modernisation'. But Venturi's own use of the term 'modern' (and its cognates) was occasional and purely descriptive; in any case, his preference for a focus on individual agents tended to obscure any larger sense of process.[21]

Venturi was no academic autocrat: colleagues, pupils, and younger scholars took the study of Enlightenment in several directions. Some – Furio Diaz, Luciano Guerci, Anna-Maria Rao – pushed outwards from Italy to ancien regime France and the French Revolution.[22] Others – Capra, Rao again – thought that the narrative of reform could and should be aligned more closely with the development of the individual Italian states.[23] Still others – Giuseppe Giarrizzo, Giuseppe Ricuperati, Vincenzo Ferrone, Girolamo

---

Republican Patriotism and the Empires of the East (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989, 1991).

[21] Carlo Capra, 'Immagine e realtà nel "grande progetto" di Giuseppe II', contribution to the roundtable 'Settecento riformatore', 419-26. For a rare example of Venturi's use of the term 'modernization', referring to Charles III of Spain, *Utopia and Reform*, 127-8. It is clearly descriptive. 'Modern' was used similarly, and infrequently.

[22] Furio Diaz, *Filosofia e politica nel Settecento francese* (Turin: Einaudi, 1962); Luciano Guerci, *Libertà degli antichi e libertà dei moderni: Sparta, Atene e i 'philosophes' nella Francia del Settecento* (Naples: Guida, 1979); Anna Maria Rao, *Esuli. L'emigrazione politica italiana in Francia (1792-1802)* (Naples: Guida, 1992).

[23] Carlo Capra with Domenico Sella, *Il Ducato di Milano dal 1535 al 1796* (Turin: UTET, 1984); Anna Maria Rao, *L''amaro della feudalità'. La devoluzione di Arnone e la questione feudale a Napoli alla fine del '700* (Naples: Guida, 1984).

Imbruglia, Edoardo Tortarolo – shared the younger Venturi's interest in the history of ideas, and pioneered in Italy what is now thought of as intellectual history.[24] This openness to ideas may be related to the teaching of history and philosophy alongside each other in Italian high schools, although at university level the two subjects are separated in different departments.[25] A symbolic instance of the separation is supplied by scholarship on the great Neapolitan contemporaries Pietro Giannone and Giambattista Vico: Giannone has been the province of historians, Vico, very largely of philosophers.[26]

Outside Italy, meanwhile, historians were taking study of the Enlightenment in directions of which Venturi had been less approving. He was particularly sceptical, in the same Introduction to *Utopia and Reform*, of the kind of sociological and quantitative history of books and academies being pursued by Daniel Roche and others of the *Annales* school in France, likening the apparatus brought to bear on one such academy by Roche to 'using a cyclotron to crack a nut'.[27] But the depth which such researches brought to

---

[24] Giuseppe Giarrizzo, *Edward Gibbon e la cultura europea del Settecento* (Naples: Istituto per gli studi storici, 1954) – the work of an independent colleague rather than a successor to Venturi; Giuseppe Ricuperati, *L'esperienza civile e religiosa di Pietro Giannone* (Milan – Naples: Ricciardi, 1970); Vincenzo Ferrone, *Scienza, Natura, Religione. Mondo Newtoniano e cultura italiana nel primo Settecento* (Naples: Jovene, 1982) – the first of a succession of major studies of Enlightenment intellectual culture; Girolamo Imbruglia, *L'invenzione del Paraguay: studio sul idea di communità tra Seicento e Settecento* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1987); Edoardo Tortarolo, *La ragione sulla Sprea: coscienza storica e cultura politica nell'illuminismo berlinese* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1989).

[25] I owe this observation to Silvia Sebastiani. In French *Lycées*, by contrast, History is taught alongside Geography.

[26] Ricuperati, *L'esperienza civile e religiosa di Giannone*, inaugurated a new wave of intellectual historical scholarship on Giannone. An early historian among the philosophers writing on Vico was Giuseppe Giarrizzo, *Vico. La politica e la storia* (Naples: Guida, 1981). Among the most historically minded of the philosopher-scholars of Vico have been Paolo Rossi, *Le sterminate antichità, e nuovi saggi vichiani* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1999), and Enrico Nuzzo: *Tra ordine della storia e storicità. Saggi sui saperi della storia in Vico* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2001).

[27] Venturi, *Utopia and Reform*, 9-10, 14-15.

understanding *les lumières* in France's provinces could not be denied; and the approach proved, if anything, even more valuable in the fragmented circumstances of eighteenth-century Germany.[28]

A more radical version of the social history of Enlightenment was of course pursued by the American historian Robert Darnton. Darnton made a major contribution to the publishing history of Enlightenment, specifically of the *Encyclopédie*; and in the 1990s he would issue an indignant defence of the Enlightenment when it came under attack from Postmodernism.[29] But Darnton always made it clear that 'the low life of literature' was of more interest to him than the 'high Enlightenment', [30] and his work increasingly focussed on the contest between publishing and censorship, culminating in his posing the direct question: 'do books cause revolutions?'.[31] Between 'the facts of

[28] Daniel Roche, *Le siècle des lumières en province. Académies et académiciens provinciaux 1680-1789* (Paris: Mouton, 1978). The subject of Venturi's ire was an earlier article, 'La diffusion des lumières. Un exemple: l'Académie de Châlons-sur-Marne', *Annales ESC* v (1964), 887-. A comparable approach to the study of Enlightenment in Germany has been led by Hans-Erich Bödeker, ed with Ulrich Hermann, *Über den Prozess der Aufklärung in Deutschland im 18 Jahrhundert: Personen, Institutionen und Medien* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987).

[29] Robert Darnton, 'The *Encyclopédie* wars of Pre-revolutionary France', *American Historical Review* 78 (1973), 1331-52; expanded, with an emphasis on the *Encyclopédie Méthodique*, as *The Business of Enlightenment. A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979). His defence of the Enlightenment appeared under a title emphasising its practical benefits: 'George Washington's false teeth', *New York Review of Books*, 27 March 1997, 34-38.

[30] Robert Darnton, 'The high Enlightenment and the low life of literature in pre-Revolutionary France', *Past and Present* 51 (1971), 81-115.

[31] Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (London: Harper Collins, 1996) Part III: Do Books cause Revolutions?

literary life' in eighteenth-century France and the Revolution, the Enlightenment and its achievements were squeezed into relative insignificance.[32]

Within France, there did persist alongside the new social history an older tradition of studying Enlightenment through French literature, in a manner closer to the history of ideas. The instigator was Gustav Lanson, converted to Voltaire and *les lumières* by the Dreyfus case; but the major works were those of his pupils, Daniel Mornet, author of *Les origines intellectuelles de la Révolution Française* (1933), and Paul Hazard, author of *La crise de la conscience européenne* (1935).[33] (Venturi had attended the lectures of both as a student in exile in the later 1930s.) Since the War this tradition has continued to flourish in French literary studies, within and beyond France: as individual thinkers, Voltaire, Montesquieu and others are largely the province of literary scholars.[34] Alongside this tradition, the status of intellectual history itself in France has long been, in Antoine Lilti's phrase, 'precarious', although he has identified signs of a 'renaissance' in lines of enquiry directly relevant to Enlightenment, including the history of political economy and of anthropology. But even if (as Lilti believes) it is a strength of intellectual history in

---

[32] Robert Darnton, 'The facts of literary life in eighteenth-century France', in K.M. Baker, ed. *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture I The Political Culture of the Old Regime* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1987), 261-91. For a compendium of criticism: H. T. Mason, ed. *The Darnton Debate. Books and Revolution in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1998), concluding with Darnton's vigorous response: 'Two paths through the social history of ideas', 251-94.

[33] Daniel Mornet, *Les origines intellectuelles de la Révolution française 1745-1787* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1933); Paul Hazard, La crise de la conscience européenne (Paris: Boivin, 1935), translated by J. Lewis May, as *The European Mind 1680-1715* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1953).

[34] Testimony to the longevity of the tradition: Alphonse Dupront, *Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996) – but deriving from lectures given in 1946. Exemplary of individual studies: Catherine Volpilhac-Auger, *Tacite et Montesquieu* (Oxford: *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 232, 1985), followed by a lifetime of editing Montesquieu. Also Nicholas Cronk's enterprise, as Director of The Voltaire Foundation at Oxford, in co-ordinating new, critical editions of Voltaire and Montesquieu.

France that it has not sought conflict with social and cultural history, it is also the case that a distance has persisted between historians and philosophers interested in eighteenth-century thinkers.[35] In Germany, by contrast, a similar foundation for study of *Aufklärung* in literary studies did not exist, the period being squeezed between those of Classicism and Romanticism. *Begriffsgeschichte*, which sought to bridge history and philosophy, was no substitute, since *Aufklärung* remained tainted by Koselleck's earlier critique.[36] The development of an intellectual history of Enlightenment in Germany would therefore take time, emerging gradually through the efforts of Hans-Erich Bödeker and Martin Mulsow, seconded from outside by Anthony La Vopa and Edoardo Tortarolo.[37]

Instead, it was a newcomer to Enlightenment historiography which brought intellectual history fully into play, the Scottish Enlightenment. To be sure, social history also played an important part as the field took shape in the 1970s. The pioneering articles

---

[35] Antoine Lilti, 'Does intellectual history exist in France? Chronicle of a renaissance foretold', in Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn, eds. *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 56-73. Marking an intellectual historian's distance from philosophy, Stéphane van Damme, *À toutes voiles vers la verité: une autre Histoire de la philosophie aux temps des lumières* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2014).

[36] Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck, eds. *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1972-97): *I: A – D*: 243-342: Horst Stuke, 'Aufklärung'. Cf. *IV: Mi – Pre*, 93-131: Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, 'Modern, Modernität, Moderne', a concept much more central to the project's and Koselleck's concerns.

[37] Hans-Erich Bödeker, ed. *Aufklärung und Geschichte. Studien zur deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft im 18 Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 1986); Martin Mulsow, *Moderne aus dem Untergrund: radikale Früaufklärung in Deutschland 1680-1720* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2002), translated by H. C. Erik Midelfort as *Enlightenment Underground. Radical Germany 1680-1720* (Charlottesville, Virginia: Virginia University Press, 2015). Also, Anthony J. La Vopa, whose contributions include *Fichte. The Self and the calling of Philosophy 1762-1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Tortarolo, *La ragione sulla Sprea* (above, n. 24).

of Nicholas Phillipson promised a 'social history of ideas' after the example of Daniel Roche, while the roles of the church, the universities and publishing were explored in depth by the leading scholar of the next generation, R.B. Sher.[38] But since this was an Enlightenment whose cast of thinkers was led by David Hume and Adam Smith, supported by Francis Hutcheson, William Robertson, Adam Ferguson and John Millar, it quickly attracted scholars interested in new approaches to intellectual history, especially those emanating from Cambridge. Three established practitioners led the way, Duncan Forbes, Hugh Trevor-Roper, and John Pocock.

As much as anything, it was the difference of the routes by which they came to the Scots which gave the three their collective impact. Duncan Forbes (Cambridge) went back to the Scots from an early interest in early nineteenth-century historical philosophy, Liberal Anglican and Hegelian – and from what seems to have been a formative encounter with Meinecke.[39] By contrast, Hugh Trevor-Roper (Oxford) became aware of the Scots from his interests in historiography and the history of social thought, the latter stimulated by an early interest in Weber's *Protestant Ethic*.[40] John Pocock (New

---

[38] Nicholas Phillipson, 'Culture and society in the eighteenth-century province: the case of Edinburgh and the Scottish Enlightenment', in Lawrence Stone, ed. *The University in Society, II, Europe, Scotland, and the United States from the 16th to the 20th century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, and London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 407-48. Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment. The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); *The Enlightenment and the Book. Scottish Authors and their Publishers in Eighteenth-Century Britain, Ireland and America* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2006). Many others could be cited.

[39] Duncan Forbes, *The Liberal Anglican Idea of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), quickly followed by '"Scientific whiggism": Adam Smith and John Millar', *The Cambridge Journal* 7 (1953-4), 643-70; and after a longer interval, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

[40] H.R. Trevor-Roper, 'The Scottish Enlightenment', *Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century* 58 (1967), 1635-58; to be read in the context of the essays collected in his *Religion, the Reformation and Social Change* (London: Macmillan, 1967), several of which reflect the stimulus of Weber's thesis.

Zealand, Cambridge and the United States) brought to bear other historiographic interests, in the English ancient constitution and in Machiavellian republicanism, and was in addition increasingly identified with the Cambridge 'school' in the history of political thought.[41] For all three, Hume's political and historical writings were centre stage, but these soon led them to Smith, Robertson, Ferguson and Millar as the authors of wide-ranging enquiries into the 'progress of society'. By the early 1980s a King's College, Cambridge project led by Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff had added political economy to the enquiry, bringing Smith alongside Hume: their volume, *Wealth and Virtue*, combined contributions by younger and senior scholars (including Venturi as well as Pocock) in a manner that brought the intellectual history of the Scottish Enlightenment to international attention.[42]

Initially, it seemed as if the attention devoted to Hume's political, economic and historical thought would be at the expense of his philosophy, and that this would be left to professional philosophers. But gradually even Hume's philosophical writings yielded to a historical approach, and philosophers ceased to insist on keeping these to themselves. At first tentatively, then more confidently, a dialogue between historians of philosophy, political theorists and intellectual historians explored the implications of Hume's scepticism for his moral philosophy, and its relation to the natural jurisprudence tradition.[43] Conducted over four decades, the dialogue would at last make possible a

---

[41] John G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law. A Study of English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957); *The Machiavellian Moment. Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), whose penultimate chapter surveyed the Scottish historians.

[42] Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, eds. *Wealth and Virtue. The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[43] Landmarks in the dialogue have included: David Fate Norton, *David Hume. Common Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Nicholas Phillipson, *Hume* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989); Annette C. Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments. Reflections on Hume's Treatise* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991); James Moore, 'Hume and Hutcheson', in M. A. Stewart and J. P.

comprehensive intellectual biography of Hume, written by an academic philosopher, James Harris, for whom the history of philosophy and intellectual history are one.[44] The convergence between philosophy and intellectual history in the Scottish case, however, has been the exception in Enlightenment scholarship – and would, as we shall see, shortly be turned against the historians.

The success of the Scottish Enlightenment as a subject encouraged a rapid expansion of enquiry into 'the Enlightenment in national context'. An edited volume under that title mapped the possibilities, among them the case for an English Enlightenment, now assertively stated by Roy Porter in defiance of Venturi's observation that 'in England the rhythm was different'.[45] The case for an American Enlightenment (equally if not more important for the Enlightenment's standing in the anglophone world) had been made earlier, in the 1970s; soon national Enlightenments were discovered from Scandinavia to Greece.[46] The case was lent intellectual weight by John

---

Wright, eds. *Hume and Hume's Connexions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 23-57; Knud Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy from Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); M.A. Stewart, 'Hume's intellectual development, 1711-1752', in M. Frasca-Spada and P. J. E. Kail, eds. *Impressions of Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005); Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*, 256-324: 'Hume, after Bayle and Mandeville'; Aaron Garrett, 'Butler and Hume on reasoning about morals', in Ruth Savage, ed. *Philosophy and Religion in Enlightenment Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 169-86.

[44] James A. Harris, *Hume. An Intellectual Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[45] Roy Porter, 'The Enlightenment in England', in R. Porter and M. Teich, eds. *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1-18. An essay by Phillipson on 'The Scottish Enlightenment' was the second in the volume, 19-40. For Venturi's remark, *Utopia and Reform*, 132.

[46] Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); and Donald H. Meyer, *The Democratic Enlightenment* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1976). Tore Frängsmyr, 'The Enlightenment in Sweden', in *The Enlightenment in National Context*, 164-75. Paschalis M. Kitromilides, *The Enlightenment as Social Criticism. Iosipos Moisiodax and Greek Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

Pocock, arguing for an English Enlightenment as one of a 'family' of Enlightenments, after Wittgenstein's concept of a 'family' of languages, each overlapping others, but without a common core; as Pocock would insistently point out, this makes it impossible to speak of 'the' Enlightenment.[47] But for most historians, 'national context' was more simply a matter of identifying and reconstructing Enlightenment where and out of what they liked. Looked at on a positivist basis of the evidence, Enlightenment had obviously taken different forms in different places.[48] There was an element of self-deception in this, for these historians were clearly still using 'Enlightenment' to denote 'a good thing', and few reckoned with the conceptual implications of Pocock's argument. Nevertheless, the proliferation of national (and other) Enlightenments by the 1980s was a clear token of the subject's academic acceptance.

By the mid-1980s, therefore, the historians' Enlightenment was well-established. Venturi's warning against reducing the Enlightenment to social history may not always have been heeded, but his dismissal of the philosophers' Enlightenment appeared to have been vindicated. In places – in Italy, in Scotland – an intellectual-historical approach to Enlightenment was more than holding its own against the social; and the history of philosophy might be accommodated within it. But the Enlightenment as a subject for philosophy and its history seemed to have slipped from view. No-one was attempting to write another *Philosophy of the Enlightenment*. The absence of a response to Venturi from historians of philosophy is underlined by the work which came closest to Cassirer's in its coverage, J. B. Schneewind's *The Invention of Autonomy. A History of Modern*

---

[47] John G. A. Pocock, 'Clergy and commerce. The conservative Enlightenment in England', in R. Ajello, et al, eds. *L'età dei lumi. Studi storici sul Settecento europeo in onore di Franco Venturi* (Naples: Jovene, 1985), I, 523-62.

[48] An exception to such positivism was 'Eastern Europe', which as Larry Wolff pointed out had been a construction of the Enlightenment: Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

Moral Philosophy (1998 – but begun in 1981). Although his narrative also ran from the early seventeenth century to the late eighteenth, Schneewind rejected the identification of Enlightenment as a coherent moment within the history of philosophy.[49] Schneewind's lack of interest was all the more pointed coming from a joint editor, with Richard Rorty and Quentin Skinner, of the volume *Philosophy in History* (1984), whose introduction had called for a reset in relations between the history of philosophy and intellectual history. That reset yielded no new sympathetic philosophical treatment of Enlightenment.[50]

If Enlightenment as a philosophical issue disappeared from historians' radar between the 1960s and the mid-1980s, almost equally invisible was the matter of Enlightenment's relation to the 'modern'. Peter Gay was exceptional in using the term 'modernity' in relation to the Enlightenment's approach both to art and to politics.[51] It is plausible to suggest that in the background to the thinking of Venturi and Trevor-Roper lay the contemporary economic and social theory of 'modernization', in the ascendant in the 1960s as an alternative to the Marxist theory of historical development. In a

---

[49] J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy. A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), xiii, 8. After the initial dismissal of an 'Enlightenment project', the term 'enlightenment' is used infrequently and always with the lower case.

[50] Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind and Quentin Skinner, eds, *Philosophy in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 1-14: 'Introduction'. On the volume's aspirations, context – and apparently limited impact: Leo Catana, 'Intellectual history and the history of philosophy: their genesis and current relationship', in Richard Whatmore and Brian Young, eds, *A Companion to Intellectual History* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 129-40, esp 134-40.

[51] Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation II The Science of Freedom* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), ch 6 'The emancipation of art: a groping for modernity', and Part III 'The pursuit of modernity'. See Annelien de Dijn, 'The politics of Enlightenment: from Peter Gay to Jonathan Israel', *The Historical Journal*, 55, 3 (2012), 758-805, esp. 786-91, which identifies Gay's Enlightenment with the 'modernization thesis', though without specifying what that was beyond an argument for liberal democracy.

Weberian form, for instance, it underlay Trevor-Roper's suggestion that there were 'religious origins' of the Enlightenment.[52] But for Trevor-Roper as for Venturi, 'modern' was a term primarily descriptive, used without normative charge. The historians who followed them, meanwhile, were happily pursuing proliferating Enlightenments without feeling a particular need to proclaim their modernity. They had, it seems, little or no idea what was about to hit them.

III

What hit them, of course, was Postmodernism. For the philosophers and critics who styled themselves 'postmodern', the Enlightenment provided the perfect target, the embodiment (as they constructed it) of misplaced confidence in the primacy of reason, the universality of values, and the pre-eminence of the European philosophical tradition. In this section I shall sketch the Postmodern objections to 'the Enlightenment' of which historians became particularly aware. Although the movement known as Postmodernism got under way only in the late 1970s, I want to begin this sketch by going back to another response to Cassirer's *Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Michel Foucault' review of the new French translation, published in 1966, a year before Venturi's critical remarks in his Cambridge lectures.

The review was entitled 'une Histoire restée muette' – 'a history which has remained mute' (or perhaps 'muted').[53] For Foucault, the belated translation of Cassirer's

---

[52] H. R. Trevor-Roper, 'The religious origins of the Enlightenment', *Religion, the Reformation and Social Change* (second edition, London: Macmillan, 1972), 193-236; on which, John Robertson, 'Hugh Trevor-Roper, intellectual history and "The religious origins of the Enlightenment"', *English Historical Review* 124:511 (2009), 1389-1421. That Weber himself attached no value to the modern is forcibly argued by Peter Ghosh, 'History and theory in Max Weber's "Protestant Ethic"', *Global Intellectual History*, 4:2 (2018), 121-55.

[53] Michel Foucault, 'Une Histoire restée muette', review of E. Cassirer, *La philosophie des lumières*, trad. P. Quillet (Paris: Fayard, 1966), in *La Quinzaine littéraire*, July, 1966. It is reprinted in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits 1954-1988 I: 1954-1969* (Paris: Gallimard,

work offered another example of the way in which the French had been protected from German literature and philosophy, as they had earlier been from Heidegger . Foucault paid tribute (as Venturi would not) to the circumstances in which Cassirer had written: his book had been a last stand on behalf of German universities as the conscience of the nation. Despite being 'purely and simply historical', it had clear philosophical significance. For its subject was the great *coupure* – the rupture effected in Western thought by Kant. 'Neo-Kantian' that he was (that we all are), Cassirer had asked the essential question: what were the determinants ('les fatalités') of reflection and knowledge which rendered Kant possible and the constitution of modern thought ('la pensée moderne') necessary? By failing to answer this question, western thought had remained blind to its own 'modernity' for two hundred years, indulging instead in the nostalgic dilemma of choosing between the Greek question of our relation to being and the eighteenth-century preoccupation with the forms and limits of knowledge.

Cassirer's book itself did not answer that question. If anything, it would reinforce 'nostalgia' for the eighteenth century. Its value lay rather in its method. For Cassirer had foresworn both the 'psychological' approach to an epoch or civilisation – the approach which treats it as an individual, with opinions, desires, anxieties and aspirations, in the manner of Hazard's *Crise de la conscience européenne* – and that of the Marxist historians, for whom an epoch in thought was the expression of a collective subject. Discounting individual intention and biographical accident on the one hand, social and economic determinants on the other, Cassirer had shown how to reconstruct an autonomous universe of *discours-pensée*: by uncovering its intrinsic necessities, by leaving thought to think by itself ('la pensée penser toute seule'), by following its divisions, its *croisements*, its contradictions. In this way, Foucault argued, Cassirer isolates the autonomous space of the 'theoretical' from all the other histories (of the

---

1994), 545-49. The exposition in this and the following paragraph are based on the reprinted version. The interest of the review was highlighted by Wright, '"A bright clear mirror"', 98-100.

individual, of society) that can be written. It is in this space that the forms of knowledge which are possible within an epoch or civilization are defined. Cassirer may have read the texts of the eighteenth century for his own philosophical purposes; in certain respects, notably in the primacy he accorded to philosophy itself, he may have remained bound by the limitations of traditional histories of ideas. But by applying his method and erudition to the whole theoretical space in which eighteenth-century thinkers had cohabited, he had not only written an original work of history. He had uncovered 'the calm, irresistible, enveloping force of theoretical universes', and had thus made possible 'a new history of thought'.

It was just unfortunate that the 'new history of thought' which Foucault had already written – and published in the same year – was not a history of the Enlightenment. Had it been, Venturi's criticism of Cassirer as exemplifying the philosopher's approach to the Enlightenment might have been pre-empted. Instead, Foucault's *Lets mots et les choses* (1966, translated in 1970 as *The Order of Things*) divided the history of European thought from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries into three periods, each constituted by an underlying epistemic order of knowledge.[54] The first, in which knowledge was constituted by resemblances, lasted through the sixteenth century. The second, in which representation was constitutive, could be identified between c.1600 and the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; the third, established by the mid-nineteenth century, was beginning the crumble only now, in the second half of the twentieth century. Of these three, the first might be associated with the Renaissance, the second Foucault designated 'the Classical age', and the third 'the modern age'. In this schema, the Enlightenment had no separate existence and no epistemic significance; and there is no sign that Cassirer's book had been a presence while Foucault was writing his. But there was one significant commonality: as in his review,

---

[54] Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966); unattributed English translation as *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London, Tavistock, 1970).

Foucault identified the 'threshold of our modernity' with the moment of Kant's critique.[55] In other words, he followed Cassirer in placing Kant outwith the field of *discours-pensée* which prevailed for most of the eighteenth century (Cassirer's Enlightenment, Foucault's Classical age), but within or at least at the threshold of the modern. Foucault too separated the eighteenth century off from the modern.

After *The Order of Things* Foucault pursued a singular course through the 1970s, publishing major studies of regimes of punishment and of sexuality, and giving lecture courses on governmentality and bio-politics which would be published after his death. All of these could be and have been read as exposés of the dominative, repressive character of Enlightenment rationality. But it is far from clear that the Enlightenment was what Foucault had in his sights, as a substantial historical or philosophical phenomenon relevant to these large topics. Instead, in the late 1970s he returned to Kant and the question of critique, now phrased as Kant's own question, 'What is Aufklärung?'. Two lectures, 'What is critique?' (1978), and, shortly before his death in 1984, 'What is Enlightenment?' (1983) framed this preoccupation.[56] The second in particular is often treated – perhaps especially for pedagogic purposes – as the exemplary postmodern critique of the Enlightenment.

---

[55] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xxii-xxiv, 242. At 221, the passage from the Classical to the modern epistemes is assigned dates: at the 'outer limits', between 1775 and 1825, and within these, in the fields of biology and economics, more or less to the years 1795 to 1800.

[56] Michael Foucault, 'What is critique?', lecture first delivered at the Sorbonne in May 1978 and published as 'Qu'est-ce-que la critique/Critique et *Aufklärung*' in 1990, translation in James Schmidt, ed. *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1996), 382-98; 'What is Enlightenment', published first in English in Paul Rabinow, ed. *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Random House, 1984, in the edition of London: Penguin, 1991), 32-50.

As James Schmidt and Antoine Lilti have emphasised, however, these lectures are much harder to parse than that.[57] In 'What is critique?', the more ordered of the two, critique is first related to governmentality, to the exercise of power, and then back to Kant's question, 'What is Aufklärung?' Rendered as the latter, Foucault recognised, the question 'what is critique?' became 'historicophilosophical', and seemed to privilege a particular empirically determinable epoch, however fuzzy. But Foucault countered that to find the eighteenth century interesting because in it one encounters the problem of Aufklärung is not to privilege it: the eighteenth century is interesting, not because it was the first to ask the question, but because it leads one to consider 'under what conditions…one can apply to any moment of history this question of Aufklärung, the relationship of power, truth, and the subject.' It is through the problem 'What is Aufklärung?' that one encounters 'the historical scheme of our modernity' as a whole. In other words, modernity is a historical condition, but the fact that it was first manifest in the eighteenth century does not mean that either the century or Enlightenment should bear the brunt of critique of that condition. Aufklärung was the term used to frame the question; the historical scheme of modernity, whenever it is identified, is the subject of the critique.[58] In the second lecture Foucault invoked Baudelaire to offer a different definition of modernity, this time not as a period, but as an attitude to the present. This in turn enabled him to cast Enlightenment, not as the enemy, but as the philosophical 'ethos' of a permanent critique of 'our historical era', the present. This was why there should be no need to be 'for or against the Enlightenment'. Kant's question was not an

---

[57] James Schmidt, 'Misunderstanding the question: "What is Enlightenment?": Venturi, Habermas and Foucault', *History of European Ideas* 37 (2011), 43-52, esp. 48-52; Lilti, *L'héritage des lumières*, 357-87: 'Le diagnostic de la modernité'. For another account of why Foucault ended back with Kant, Peter Ghosh, 'Citizen or subject? Michel Foucault in the history of ideas', *History of European Ideas* 24 (1998), 113-59.

[58] Foucault, 'What is critique?', esp. 391-2.

invitation to indict the Enlightenment: it was a call to critique of power while we live within modernity.[59]

When it came to the Enlightenment, therefore, Foucault flattered to deceive, or at least to confuse. The review of Cassirer was appreciative because it served as a trailer for Foucault's next book, not because he valued the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Given his commitment to a form of structuralism, Foucault was never likely to take as a subject of enquiry a movement so consciously well-*intentioned* as Enlightenment. Although a study which applied the method of *discours-pensée*, which re-read the texts of the enlighteners free of authorial intention, leaving the thought in the texts 'to think by itself', would have challenged intellectual historians of Enlightenment in a way that could not have been dismissed as Venturi dismissed Cassirer, it must remain an unlikely might-have-been. But equally, Foucault was not against Enlightenment as such. For Foucault in those late lectures identified more than ever with Kant's usage of 'Aufklärung', which he understood, not as equating Enlightenment with modernity, but as the necessity of critique of modernity through Enlightenment.

Foucault may have disturbed historical scholars of Enlightenment, but more direct expressions of the postmodern critique were a greater provocation. The main critique, indeed, was conveniently if infuriatingly general, assailing the Enlightenment for its rationalism, universalism and Eurocentrism. The association of the Enlightenment with modernity was a little more puzzling: as David Hollinger wryly pointed out, 'Modernism' had previously been presented as a critique of Enlightenment.[60] But two American philosophers, Richard Rorty and Alasdair MacIntyre, helpfully took it upon themselves to

---

[59] Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', esp. 39-50. On Foucault's move from Kant to Baudelaire: Lilti, *L'héritage des lumières*, 364-5, 369. Lilti brings out the difference of Foucault's writings on 'Aufklärung' from the works of the early 1970s; but the identification of Kant's critique as the threshold of 'modernity' goes back at least to 1966.

[60] David A. Hollinger, 'The Enlightenment and the genealogy of cultural conflict in the United States', in Baker and Reill (eds), *What's Left of Enlightenment?*, 7-18.

explain the association. Of the two, Rorty made by far the lighter work of the subject. For him the problem with Enlightenment was that some philosophers associated with it had either subscribed to, or inadequately understood the difficulties involved in, the conviction that it is possible truthfully to mirror or represent nature, whether by reason or by experience. But if this mistake, which originated far earlier in the history of philosophy and persisted long after the Enlightenment, were admitted, then it should be perfectly possible, Rorty argued, to continue to champion moral and political principles associated with Enlightenment, toleration and the avoidance of cruelty above all. One needs simply to recognise that these values are a choice, not natural, universal truths.[61]

For MacIntyre, by contrast, it was specifically the Enlightenment's moral-philosophical ambition that was the problem. Scottish-born himself, MacIntyre seized upon the achievements of the Scottish philosophers as providing Enlightenment culture with a unity and coherence France alone could not supply. But in that unity lay the danger, since it had issued in a specific 'Enlightenment project', which had sought to provide 'an independent rational justification of morality'. MacIntyre was confident that the project had failed – between them Hume and Kant had seen to that. But since the moral philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had refused to admit the failure, the threat represented by the Enlightenment project remained. Only a return to Aristotle would enable moral philosophy to be re-set on a sound basis.[62] Evidently, MacIntyre and Rorty made an inconsistent pair: Rorty happy to style himself a postmodern philosopher, but also to assert that if the Enlightenment's truth-claims

---

[61] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, in the thirtieth anniversary edition, 2009) – in which there is no chapter or even index reference devoted to 'Enlightenment'; and 'The continuity between the Enlightenment and "postmodernism"', in Baker and Reill, eds. *What's Left of Enlightenment?*, 19-36.

[62] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory* (London, Duckworth, 1981), vii-viii, 36-8. MacIntyre further developed the argument in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1998).

regarding knowledge were discarded, its moral values might still be adopted; MacIntyre a critic of Enlightenment and of the moral disorder of 'the modern and modernising world', but still hoping to find a secure standpoint from which to judge and act. But for the historians who read them (and the many more who didn't), the two philosophers certainly added to the cacophony of postmodern critique of their subject.

The interventions of these contemporary philosophers also reminded historians of earlier critiques of Enlightenment in the German philosophical tradition. Two in particular stood out, their prominence underwritten by their recent translation into English: Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Reinhart Koselleck's *Critique and Crisis*.[63] Of these, the critique administered by *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was the more comprehensive, but also the more baffling, since it had so little to say about the Enlightenment familiar to historians. James Schmidt has explained why.[64] Adorno and Horkheimer were firmly in the German tradition of treating *Aufklärung* as a metaphor-concept for the cognitive process, understood as the process by which mankind replaced myth with rational knowledge. Crossing Cassirer's, their argument was that Enlightenment had failed to distinguish itself from myth as completely as its confidence in its reason proclaimed, and that the continued interpenetration of the two had fuelled the rise of authoritarianism in the modern world. The apparent remoteness of this argument from anything the historians now understood

---

[63] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (New York, 1944, reissued in German, 1969; English translation by John Cumming as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York, 1972 and London, 1973; used here in the edition of London: Verso, 1997); Reinhart Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise. Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt* (1979), translated into Spanish (1965), Italian (1972), French (1979) and finally English as *Critique and Crisis. Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Oxford, New York and Hamburg: Berg, 1988)

[64] James Schmidt, 'What, if anything, does *Dialectic of Enlightenment* have to do with "the Enlightenment"?', in S. Lavaert and W. Schröder, eds. *Aufklärungs-Kritik und Aufklärungs-Mythen / Enlightenment Critique and Enlightenment Myth: Horkheimer and Adorno from the Perspective of Philosophical History* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 11-28.

by Enlightenment was only underlined by the choice of the two eighteenth-century thinkers to be discussed at any length, Kant and the Marquis de Sade; and they were entirely abstracted from their historical setting.[65]

In complete contrast, Koselleck's critique was simple and historical, even if it owed a good deal to the political philosophy of his mentor, Carl Schmitt. The Enlightenment had failed to grasp the importance of the state. Despite Hobbes having explained that religious and intellectual freedom depended on the absolute authority of the state, the eighteenth-century philosophers had chafed against their exclusion from power, and criticised the absolutist state in the name of universal moral truths without reference to particular political circumstances. By the late eighteenth century, their criticism had become utopian and they had resorted to conspiracy, unleashing a revolution of which they quickly lost control. Koselleck presented this argument at a level of abstraction resembling that of Tocqueville, prompting Venturi, as we have seen, to bracket Koselleck with Cassirer as exponents of the philosophical approach to Enlightenment. By the time *Critique and Crisis* appeared in English, however, Koselleck was better known as the exponent of *Begriffsgeschichte*, and specifically of the thesis that the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries formed a *Sattelzeit*, a 'saddle period' in which the pre-modern gave way to the 'modern'. In the widespread (and continuing) enthusiasm for this idea, Koselleck's early critique of Enlightenment slid from view, and he became associated instead with a particularly appealing concept of 'modernity'.[66]

---

[65] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 81-119: 'Excursus II: Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality' (by Horkheimer).

[66] Manifest in successive editions of his essays in translation: Reinhart Koselleck, trans. Keith Tribe, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: M.I.T. Press, 1985 – thus preceding *Critique and Crisis*); most recently, *Sediments of Time. On Possible Histories*, trans. and ed. S. Franzel and S-L Hoffmann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018). Even so, it is clear that Koselleck continued to stand by his critique of Enlightenment: see, e.g., the interview with Carsten Dutt in the last of these volumes, 254.

This shift in historians' perception of Koselleck, from critic to potential ally, epitomises the confusion sown by the postmodern critique of Enlightenment. Historians were painfully aware that a field of enquiry they had just made their own was under attack. But the grounds of the attack were either ludicrously general and unhistorical, or, where articulated by philosophers, supported by seemingly confused and inconsistent arguments. One obvious response was to point out that most historians no longer thought in terms of 'the Enlightenment', let alone an 'Enlightenment project', since they had disaggregated their subject into plural Enlightenments.[67] But this hardly allayed the historians' realisation that it was the value of their subject which was in serious question. To counter that challenge, they needed a positive cause of their own. They were offered one by another German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas.

It was Habermas who made the case for 'the project of Enlightenment' as 'modernity'. He first did so in a lecture in 1980. He was then invited by Foucault to a conference in California in 1984 to discuss Foucault's latest treatment of Kant's question, only for Foucault to die before it took place. Frustrated of a live dialogue, Habermas was left to frame the debate on his own, and he did so in terms which polarised the issue to an extent foreign to Foucault's oblique observations. Even then, the philosophical case for the Enlightenment's modernity was founded in nineteenth-, not eighteenth-century thinkers, in Hegel and Weber above all.[68] But historians of Enlightenment could overlook this, because Habermas had already, in a work published twenty years earlier, identified the eighteenth century as the setting in which a key feature of the modern world had emerged, the public sphere.

---

[67] A point cogently made on historians' behalf by James Schmidt, 'What Enlightenment project?', *Political Theory* 28 (2000), 734-57.

[68] Jürgen Habermas, *Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985), translated into English as *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity. Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1987) and into French in 1988. On which, Schmidt, 'Misunderstanding the question', 46-48; and T. Coignard and M. Roudaut, eds. *Les lumières de Jürgen Habermas*, *Lumières*, 19 (2012).

First published in German in 1962, but propitiously appearing in English translation as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1989, Habermas's study had begun, like so many others, with Kant's question, 'What is Aufklärung?'[69] But what particularly interested Habermas was Kant's counter-intuitive conception of the 'public' as opposed to the 'private', and his evaluation of the importance of rational discussion by citizens in their public capacity. What in turn rendered this argument appealing to historians (anglophone historians in particular) was his identification of the first such 'public sphere' as having emerged in eighteenth-century England.[70] At first literary rather than political, the public sphere had taken advantage of new settings for social mixing such as the coffee-house, and of the popularity of new periodical journals such as *The Spectator*, to facilitate discussion of a much wider range of issues than had hitherto been permitted. As this sphere expanded, so it escaped governmental control, and gradually transformed (though not for the better) into a fully political public sphere. There was much that was nostalgic and naïve in Habermas's historical portrayal – but as Anthony la Vopa pointed out, the nostalgia was part of the appeal of the Habermas thesis to historians of the eighteenth century and Enlightenment.[71] Here was an attractive basis on which to claim that the eighteenth rather than the nineteenth century was formative of our modern world. This attractiveness was enhanced, perhaps many times over, by the publication of the English translation in the same year as the fall of the Berlin Wall, which in turn led to the rapid disintegration of Marxism as a coherent theoretical account

---

[69] Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffenlicheit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Darmstadt and Neuwied: Hermann Luchterhand, 1962), trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press and London: Polity, 1989). As with Koselleck's *Critique and crisis*, this was late: Italian and French translations had appeared in 1971 and 1978 respectively.

[70] Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 57-67: 'The model case of British development'.

[71] Anthony J. La Vopa, 'Habermas, Jürgen', *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment* ed. A.C. Kors, 4 vols, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), II, 169-72.

of the development and present prospects of the modern world. At just the right moment, in 1989, Habermas enabled historians of Enlightenment to believe, not only that Enlightenment had been worthwhile, but that it had a value in the present and the foreseeable future – the present and the future of 'modernity'.

IV

Even before 1989, Habermas's insight into the growing importance of the 'public' in the eighteenth century had been picked up by anglophone historians alert to German scholarship. The lead was taken in the 1980s by Keith Baker, who in a seminal essay argued that 'public opinion' had been a political invention of the decades after 1750. Anxious to avoid the politics of party conflict they observed in England, French reformers, many associated with Enlightenment, had represented 'public opinion' as a consensus-building instrument of constructive change in the monarchy.[72] Understood thus, public opinion had been an aspect of what Baker called the 'political culture' of the old regime, a conceptualization which allowed him to bring intellectual history to bear on the explanation of the Revolution in a way arguably more sophisticated, less dismissive of Enlightenment, than Darnton's focus on books and censorship. But this early acknowledgement of Habermas did not lead Baker to become a champion of Enlightenment's modernity. His conception of political culture was equally open to the stimulus of postmodernism, evident in his exploration of the contemporary 'narratives' of revolution, while the later collaborative initiative which yielded *What's Left of Enlightenment? A Postmodern Question* (2002) was eirenic rather than combative.[73]

---

[72] Keith Michael Baker, 'Public opinion as political invention', originally published in 1987, revised version in idem, *Inventing the French Revolution. Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 167-99.

[73] Baker, 'Inventing the French Revolution', the title chapter in *Inventing the French Revolution*, 203-23; Baker and Reill, eds. *What's Left of Enlightenment?*, 1-4: 'Introduction'.

By contrast, two American historians who were quick to welcome Habermas's association of public sphere, Enlightenment, and modernity in the early 1990s were Margaret Jacob and Dena Goodman. Jacob's earliest interests had been in the history of science, in particular the diffusion of Newtonianism. But by 1981 she had uncovered the interest of 'Radical Enlightenment', a clandestine network of writers and publishers who enabled heterodox and irreligious ideas to circulate within and beyond the United Provinces in the opening decades of the eighteenth century. From there Jacob had gone on to study Freemasonry, placing a fresh emphasis on the political agency of Masons, and on the participation of women in their Lodges. What Jacob called 'the mental landscape of the public sphere' offered a conceptual framework within which she could draw together the several threads of her scholarship, and thus pin down Enlightenment's contribution to 'the social and cultural origins of modernity'.[74]

Contemporary in her enthusiasm for Habermas, Dena Goodman saw in the public sphere a concept particularly suited to demonstrating the contribution of women to the French Enlightenment. Pushing back against Darnton's emphasis on the male 'low-life' of later eighteenth-century Paris, Goodman looked afresh at the *Salonnières*, arguing that they played a critical role as intermediaries and correspondents in making Enlightenment possible.[75] Although this argument may have been overturned by Antoine Lilti's study of

---

[74] Jacob, 'The mental landscape of the public sphere', an article which was also a defence of the study of Enlightenment against its postmodern and earlier critics. Preceded by her books: *The Newtonians and the English Revolution 1689-1720* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1976); *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981); *Living the Enlightenment. Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[75] Dena Goodman, 'Public sphere and private life. Towards a synthesis of current historiographical approaches to the Old Regime', *History and Theory* 31 (1992), 1-20; followed by *The Republic of Letters. A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994). But Goodman is not one to be tied down: her earlier *Criticism in Action: Enlightenment Experiments in Political Writing*

the *Salons* ten years later,[76] Goodman's initiative in countering the overwhelmingly male gaze of Enlightenment historians was an inspiration to the much broader enquiry into 'Feminism and Enlightenment' launched by Barbara Taylor in 1998, a collaborative project which culminated in 2005 in the volume *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*. Contributors to this explored the place of women as both subjects of intellectual enquiry and agents of enlightened activity, in writing, teaching, publishing, and (often heterodox) religious and political activism.[77] But those pursuing the enquiry have also not disguised the limits to what was possible for women: unsurprisingly, therefore, of all the main lines of historical enquiry into Enlightenment since 1990, that into women and gender has been the least concerned to bang the drum for modernity.[78]

Antoine Lilti, meanwhile, took the argument over Enlightenment and the public sphere in a different direction. Engaging Habermas on conceptual as well as historical grounds, Lilti would maintain that Enlightenment's modernity rests on its profound ambivalence towards 'the public' as an idea and a purveyor of 'opinion'. The value of the *salons* to the *philosophes* was that they excluded the public, facilitating instead the access of men of letters to the 'worldly' culture of the aristocracy. In a subsequent study of the culture of celebrity, Lilti suggested that Rousseau's connection with his public epitomised

---

(Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989) was a study in textual analysis of postmodern inspiration.

[76] Antoine Lilti, *Le monde des salons: sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au 18e siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2005); trans. Lydia Cochrane as *The World of the Salons. Sociability and Worldliness in eighteenth-century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[77] Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor, eds. *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005).

[78] For a concise explanation why: Barbara Taylor, 'Enlightenment and the uses of woman', *History Workshop Journal* 74 (2012), 79-87.

what his fellow *philosophes* feared: the public's preference for notoriety over substance.[79] But this is not to deny Enlightenment's modernity: Lilti's point is that Habermas offered a misleadingly idealised concept of the public sphere, one which could not do justice to the complexity of intellectual and social practices in eighteenth-century Paris, and to the 'ambivalences' which are inherent in our modernity.[80]

If the Habermasian public sphere offered an initial stimulus to historical association of Enlightenment with modernity, other incentives were soon added. By the first decade of the new millennium the political and intellectual consequences of the Fall of the Wall had been complicated by the sudden recrudescence of religiously justified violence in the Balkans and the Middle East. Here, it seemed, was the threat the Enlightenment had been born to counter. It was clearly in the mind of Jonathan Israel, when in 2001 he published the first of what would become four large volumes expounding the course of Enlightenment from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. Now completed, Israel's is an enterprise which towers above all others in the historiography of the Enlightenment in its scale and its energy. From late seventeenth-century beginnings in the Netherlands, Israel's Enlightenment stretches across the European continent, runs through the American and French Revolutions, and culminates in the re-making of Latin America inspired by Simon Bolívar. It is important to recall, however, that the first volume to be published, *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (2001) appeared as a free-standing contribution to study and understanding of the Enlightenment. Israel's central argument was that the Enlightenment that mattered had been inspired by the Dutch-Jewish philosopher Benedict Spinoza and his immediate Dutch interlocutors, and pursued by their readers and followers (many of them reading clandestinely) across Europe in the

---

[79] Antoine Lilti, *Figures publiques: l'invention de la célebrité 1750-1850* (Paris: Fayard, 2014); trans. Lynn Jefress as *The Invention of Celebrity 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

[80] Lilti, *L'héritage des Lumières*, 167-96: 'Vies privées, espace public'.

first four decades of the eighteenth century; by the middle of the century, the Enlightenment that mattered was over. Arguing thus, Israel displaced the beginnings of Enlightenment geographically from England and France to the United Provinces; intellectually from Locke and Montesquieu to Spinoza, Balthasar Bekker, Henri de Boulainvilliers and Pietro Giannone. At the core of this Enlightenment was not only a critique of the power of churches, denounced as 'priestcraft', but a radical questioning of the foundations of religious belief in the name of a materialist metaphysics which denied the separate, spiritual existence of the soul and its survival after the death of the body.[81] Israel's claims for the appeal of materialism were not themselves novel: after all, the subject had previously been explored by Margaret Jacob, Giuseppe Ricuperati and other Italian scholars.[82] What distinguished Israel's argument was his focus on one form of materialism: the monist, one substance metaphysics of Spinoza. Spinoza's metaphysics, he claimed, was the essential philosophical underpinning of Radical Enlightenment's critique of ecclesiastical power, and of its suggested alternative forms of religious belief. What Israel did not, at this stage, press home was the promise of his title: that philosophy held the key to the making of modernity. For the moment he claimed only that the Enlightenment was of a different order of importance to Renaissance and Reformation in understanding 'the rise of the modern world', and confined mention of 'modernity' to the French Revolution.[83]

---

[81] Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). The striking claims about periodization are on pages 6-7.

[82] Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*; Ricuperati, *L'esperienza civile e religiosa di Pietro Giannone*. Among several other Italian scholars active in the field: Silvia Berti, 'The first edition of the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs* and its debt to Spinoza's *Ethics*', in Michael Hunter and David Wootton, eds. *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 182-220.

[83] Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, vi-vii, 714.

Quite different was the next volume, *Enlightenment Contested. Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (2006). In the interval between this and its predecessor, the threat from radical Islam had spectacularly intensified: not only the 9/11 attacks in the United States in September 2001, but, at least as close to home for Israel, the murder in Amsterdam of the film-maker Theo van Gogh by a Dutch Muslim, Muhammed Bouyeri, in November 2004.[84] But in print, Israel's immediate target was Postmodernism: the opening paragraph of his Preface now pitted 'modernity' directly against 'the Postmodern camp'. Radical Enlightenment and revolution were both, he argued, essential to modernity, the latter understood as a secular, non-theological 'system' of democratic values and individual liberties.[85] The better to make this argument, Israel drew a new distinction, between the Radical and the Moderate Enlightenments. Historically, he conceded, the values and goals of modernity were attributed to the philosophy of Locke, and after him to Voltaire and Hume – proponents of what Israel identified as Moderate Enlightenment. But philosophically, the values of modernity were Spinozist in inspiration and conceptual foundation – they derived from Radical Enlightenment. With one exception, the cast-list of *Enlightenment Contested* was not very different from that of *Radical Enlightenment*. The exception, an important one, was Pierre Bayle, subject of a monograph by Gianluca Mori which made it possible for Israel to recruit him into the Spinozist camp.[86] For the cast already in place – a good example would be Giambattista Vico – the interpretation of their philosophy as 'Spinozist' had

---

[84] Ian Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam. The Death of Theo van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006). Israel was connected with the event by the script-writer of van Gogh's offending film, Hirsi Ali, who acknowledged a debt to *Radical Enlightenment*.

[85] De Dijn, 'The politics of Enlightenment', 798-800, likewise underlines Israel's hostility to postmodernism, with more emphasis on his political commitments.

[86] Gianluca Mori, *Bayle philosophe* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999).

become more emphatic, but was not obviously the stronger for it.[87] What had matured was Israel's confidence that Spinozism, one-substance metaphysics, supplied the only coherent philosophical basis for modern democratic values. Summarizing in the 'Postscript', he claimed that for all the 'vast diversity' of Radical Enlightenment, 'the only kind of philosophy which could (and can) coherently integrate and hold together such a far-reaching value condominium in the social, moral, and political spheres, as well as in "philosophy", was the monist, hylozoic systems of the Radical Enlightenment generally labelled "Spinozist" in the long eighteenth century.' He ended by denouncing Postmodern and Postcolonial philosophers for having 'least of "ethical importance" to offer the world's "excluded and exploited"'. 'This is unquestionably true', he declared, in defiance (glorious or breath-taking) of the obvious Postmodern riposte that the status of 'truth-claims' is precisely what is at issue.[88]

These claims were the subject of some push-back from reviewers,[89] and would be muted in the next volume of what had clearly become a series. As a foretaste of what was to come, Israel published the Isaiah Berlin Lectures he gave at Oxford in 2008. These still had 'modern' in the sub-title, and in them he repeated the claim that Spinoza had laid 'the basic metaphysical ground-plan' for the defining core values of 'modern secular

---

[87] Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested. Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), v, 3-60. The case of Vico, discussed in *Radical Enlightenment*, 664-70; and *Enlightenment Contested*, 513-37, illustrates Israel's *modus operandi*, which was to harness and amplify an existing line of Spinozist interpretation of the Neapolitan philosopher, without offering more than an illustrative reading of the original texts, or weighing alternative readings.

[88] Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 866-7, 870-1.

[89] E.g. J.B. Shank, in *American Historical Review* 113, (2008), 441-4, accusing Israel of remaining, 'at root', a positivist, empirical historian, and claiming Spinoza for Postmodernism.

egalitarianism'.[90] But in *Democratic Enlightenment. Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (2011), 'modern' had been removed from the title. Israel still opened by affirming the need to defend the Enlightenment and modernity against the Postmodern denial of universal values, but was now more concerned to defend his account of Enlightenment from criticism by fellow historians, and in particular from the extended critiques of Anthony La Vopa and Antoine Lilti. La Vopa had concentrated his fire on the crudeness of the distinction between 'Radical' and 'Moderate' Enlightenments, Lilti, by contrast, on the analytical coherence and empirical existence of eighteenth-century Spinozism.[91] La Vopa's criticism would be the one most frequently repeated by historians, but Lilti's had cut deepest. Israel was now determined to show that Radical Enlightenment persisted into the second half of the century: in France, an allegiance to Spinozist materialism was manifest in the writings of Diderot, Helvétius, Holbach and his circle, and Raynal; in Germany, in the *Pantheismusstreit* in the 1780s. Beyond and inspired by these, Radical Enlightenment was the ideology of the French Revolution – until its leaders fell victim to Robespierre's Rousseauist Counter-Enlightenment in the Terror of 1793. A 'revolution of the mind', brought about by Radical Enlightenment' had been the 'chief cause' of what Israel called the 'General Revolution' of the late eighteenth century.[92]

The fourth and, it is clear, final volume in the series had to wait for Israel to write and publish two comparably large volumes on the French and the American

---

[90] Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind. Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), 241.

[91] La Vopa, 'A new intellectual history? Jonathan Israel's Enlightenment'; Lilti,, 'Comment écrit-on l'histoire intellectuelle des Lumières? Spinozism, radicalisme et philosophie' (see Note 1 above for details).

[92] Jonathan I. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment. Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1-35, 936-51 for the opening and closing declarations of intent and responses to his critics.

Revolutions.[93] As the title conveys, *The Enlightenment that Failed. Ideas, Revolution, and Democratic Defeat 1748-1830* (2019) is at once elegiac and defiant in tone. The Counter-Enlightenment Terror of 1793 had not destroyed Radical Enlightenment: this had continued to find adherents, champions of revolutionary, representative democracy, well into the nineteenth century, in Europe but also, most strikingly, in the Caribbean and Latin America. In Toussaint Louverture, Jeremy Bentham and Simon Bolívar, Israel's cause had new heroes. But ultimately, Israel admits, Radical Enlightenment did fail, as these radical leaders were overthrown or marginalised. Its fate was sealed in 1844, when Karl Marx renounced the Spinozism which had supplied the metaphysics behind his enthusiasm for the Young Hegelians, and became a Marxist. For Israel, Marxism is to be understood as an unholy combination of political economy (a characteristic interest of the Moderate Enlightenment) and the idea of the revolutionary potential of the proletariat (legacy of the populist conception of direct democracy promoted by Robespierre): as such, Marxism was an utterly unworthy nemesis of Radical Enlightenment.[94] But despite admitting Enlightenment's failure, Israel remains defiant, using several hundred pages of the volume to retrace the chronological steps of his argument and to reiterate his core message that Radical Enlightenment equates to modernity, and that there 'is' a 'necessary connection between one-substance metaphysics and Radical Enlightenment political and social reformism'.[95] He continues to denounce Postmodernism and its deconstructive techniques, while his historical critics, Lilti above all, are attacked with a harshness

---

[93] Jonathan I. Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas. An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from the Rights of Man to Robespierre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); *The Expanding Blaze. How the American Revolution Ignited the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

[94] Jonathan I. Israel, *The Enlightenment that Failed. Ideas, Revolution, and Democratic Defeat, 1748-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). On Marx, 898-922: Chapter 29: Marx and the Left's turn from Radical Enlightenment to Socialism (1838-1848).

[95] Ibid, 1-453: the Introduction and Parts I and II are devoted in large part to retracing ground covered in the previous three volumes. Final quotation from the Conclusion, p. 925.

rarely, if ever, seen in recent scholarly disagreement.[96] What must be defended, Israel insists, is 'our "modernity"'. For the modernity of Radical Enlightenment 'matters still today profoundly'. It is essential to understanding 'the rise of universal and equal human rights and the process of world secularisation – hence for the entirety of modern history'.[97]

After 2010, a further dimension was added to the Enlightenment's association with modernity. Now the context was the mounting criticism of the liberal global order following the financial crisis of 2008. In the face of this, the Enlightenment's modernity was identified afresh with its cosmopolitanism, and with its 'global' potential. The case for the first of these associations was advanced in the full-length synthesis by Anthony Pagden, *The Enlightenment and why it still matters* (2013). 'If we regard ourselves as modern – Pagden began – if we are forward-thinking, if we are tolerant and generally open-minded, if stem-cell research does not frighten us but fundamentalist religious beliefs do, then we tend to think of ourselves as "enlightened"'.[98] There followed an adroit navigation of the definitional issues. For Pagden, Enlightenment should be treated as 'an intellectual process', one which cannot be identified with a strict period and which defies comprehensive, unitary definition – but which can still be studied as a historical phenomenon. The association with modernity was likewise carefully phrased. It is not that modernity would never have taken place without the Enlightenment. Nevertheless, as a critical philosophical movement, the Enlightenment was (as Renaissance and Reformation were not) 'the true beginning of modernity, as an open-ended, continuing progression, subject to constant scrutiny and re-evaluation'. This is why it 'still matters'.[99]

---

[96] Ibid, 16-17, but especially 923-40: 'Conclusion. The "Radical Enlightenment Thesis" and its critics'.

[97] Ibid, quotations at 930, 941 and 32.

[98] Pagden, *The Enlightenment and why it still matters*, vii.

[99] Pagden, *The Enlightenment*, vii-xiv, 1-11.

To make this case, Pagden responded to two versions of the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment. First, he rejected MacIntyre's contention that there had been an 'Enlightenment project' to set reason to tame the emotions. A repetition of the Romantic condemnation of the Enlightenment's soulless rationalism, the claim was based on a wilful misunderstanding of Enlightenment philosophy.[100] Pagden devoted a substantial portion of his study to demonstrating that the opposite had been the case: the conviction that thought and moral values were derived from our feelings was far more prevalent, and constituted the philosophic basis of the Enlightenment's 'Science of Man'.[101] This, in turn, had made possible the Enlightenment's distinctive cosmopolitanism. Here it was the judgement of the original proponent of postmodernism, Jean-François Lyotard, that Pagden would reverse. For Lyotard, the Enlightenment stood for the impossible aspiration to a universal human identity and destiny. But for Pagden, it was precisely such a cosmopolitan vision of 'the great society of mankind' that Enlightenment thinkers had championed through their studies of man in his natural environment, of commerce, and of the different civilizations of East and West. This vision was the Enlightenment's most important legacy.[102]

The case for modernity as the global Enlightenment is not quite the same thing as the cosmopolitan Enlightenment, since it posits Enlightenment as a world-wide process. It was advanced in 2012 by the German global historian Sebastian Conrad.[103] Conrad

---

[100] Ibid, 11-15, 335-42. Another to assail MacIntyre's conception of an 'Enlightenment project' was Robert Wokler, 'Projecting the Enlightenment', first published in 1994, reprinted in Robert Wokler, *Rousseau, the Age of Enlightenment, and their Legacies*, ed. Bryan Garsten with Christopher Brooke (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), 260-78.

[101] Pagden, *The Enlightenment*, 1-167.

[102] Pagden, *The Enlightenment*, 17-18, 168-351.

[103] Sebastian Conrad, 'Enlightenment as global history: a historiographical critique', *The American Historical Review* 117 (2012), 999-1027.

suggested that there were three ways in which one could think about Enlightenment and the non-European world: Enlightenment as a process of emancipatory modernisation by the diffusion of its ideas outwards from Europe; Enlightenment as an expression of cultural imperialism, imposed by force on the colonised; and Enlightenment as 'multiple modernities', as analogical processes of modernisation occurring in different parts of the world across an extended period of time. Conrad advocated the third. It required historians to think of an Enlightenment of longer duration, reaching into the late nineteenth and even early twentieth centuries to capture the Japanese and Chinese debates over modernisation. It also required a willingness (and ability) to translate the terms deployed in those debates into the European concept of 'Enlightenment': as examples of the possibility, Conrad offered the Japanese terms *Keimó* and *Kaika*. It is arguable that Conrad overlooked or underestimated several difficulties facing his conception of 'global Enlightenment'. Since western texts were discussed in the Japanese and Chinese debates to which he referred, the line between Enlightenment by diffusion and by analogy was hardly as clear as he suggested. For the case for analogy to be developed, the translatability of the Asian debates into European conceptual languages would need to extend much further than the identification of equivalents for 'Enlightenment'. Finally, the suggestion that Enlightenment be understood as a process extended temporally and spatially still presupposed a universal concept of Enlightenment, one, moreover, integrally connected with modernity.[104]

The pitfalls of a globalized association of Enlightenment with modernity are illustrated when the question is turned around, as it has been by economic historians, and becomes why China was not the first to modernise, when it had appeared to have so many advantages over Europe. The question was posed by Kenneth Pomeranz, a historian of China, and answered by Joel Mokyr: Britain was the first to industrialize, because it not only had the necessary resources (China had coal too), it also had

---

[104] See also, more generally, Lilti, *L'héritage des lumières*, 41-86: 'Le défi postcolonial', on Conrad 57-8.

Enlightenment. It was 'the Industrial Enlightenment' which gave Britain the technological know-how to exploit those resources.[105] The story could not be more triumphant: Enlightenment as the agent of modernity, achieved in Europe, validated globally.

Since the 1990s, therefore, we have been through a phase in which historians have been much more confident in asserting the modernity of Enlightenment than they had shown any inclination to be before. Such confidence is all the more striking for being accompanied by a willingness to take on the philosophic critics of Enlightenment identified as 'Postmodern': it is as if Enlightenment historians have appointed themselves the guardians of 'modernity', identified generously, if not always identically, with a range of moral and political values and practices to be found in the eighteenth century. To be sure, the association has been placed on various foundations, and advanced with more or less historical caution. Choosing as his target MacIntyre's old-fashioned claim that the Enlightenment project was to assert the primacy of reason, Pagden could draw on the now considerable body of scholarship on eighteenth-century Scottish and German philosophy to show that the Enlightenment 'science of man' was founded upon sentiment. As a response to MacIntyre, this was strictly historical: Pagden did not commit himself to the view that the enduring relevance of Enlightenment values depended upon such a philosophy.

By contrast, Israel's claim appears to be much more ambitious: that a certain metaphysics – the monist, one-substance materialism elaborated by Spinoza and his followers – was the *necessary* condition of the moral and political thinking of Radical

---

[105] Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence. China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000); Joel Mokyr, *The Enlightened Economy: Britain and the Industrial Revolution 1700-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), followed by *A Culture of Growth: the Origins of the Modern Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017). See 321-38: 'China and the Enlightenment', for an argument that while China may have had an Enlightenment, it was not a 'useful' one.

Enlightenment, and hence of modernity. It is not always clear whether this necessary condition applies beyond the period of Radical Enlightenment's historical existence (that is, beyond the 1840s). But the language of conceptual 'necessity', the use of the present alongside the past tense in making this claim, and the willingness to assert the claim as a truth-claim, all point to the conclusion that Enlightenment as modernity depends upon the choice of the right metaphysics. For Israel, in other words, historians must vindicate Enlightenment as modernity by beating the philosophers at their own game. Such confidence – such hubris – is unusual: for most historians, the cost of accepting Israel's presupposition is far too high, whether in slighting other lines of eighteenth-century philosophic argument, or in polarising Enlightenment thought into 'Radical' and 'Moderate'. Nevertheless, there is an important sense in which Israel has been honest in his hubris. All Enlightenment historians who set themselves up as defenders of 'modernity' as a set of values are intervening in an argument over a concept which cannot be settled on evidence alone, and they can reasonably expect to be asked by non-historians on what basis they do so.

Nor is this imperative diminished when the association of Enlightenment and modernity is elevated to a global plane; arguably, it is even more urgent. For the global historian of Enlightenment must be confident that the same values can be found through translation of the term Enlightenment in intellectual traditions as different from the European as the Chinese and Japanese. It is one thing for historians to claim to be better philosophers within western traditions; another for them to pretend to global intellectual omniscience. At the least, the problems of translating and comparing not only individual concepts, but patterns of argument and discourses or traditions of thought which have developed over time, need closer consideration that they have hitherto received.

V

It is of course the case that thinkers associated with Enlightenment in the eighteenth century were conscious of the 'modern' in their own world. Two historians who have

explored the nature and significance of this awareness are John Pocock and Dan Edelstein. In the first instance, Pocock pointed out, the 'modern' was simply all that was not 'ancient'. Modern thus covered every century since Greek and Roman antiquity, and was to be associated with any development which did not originate in antiquity. The first of these was Christianity; in Pocock's words, 'the modern was therefore the ecclesiastical'. The modern was also the 'barbarian', and was embodied in the systems of tenure, allodial and feudal, which the barbarian conquerors had established in the territories of the Roman Empire, and in the structures of government with which they enforced them, structures predominantly though not exclusively monarchical. On this understanding, the modern included the medieval.[106]

But further distinctions could be drawn, and the introduction of these had tended to identify the modern more particularly with the period after 1500. The first was a transformation in the arts and sciences brought about by the discoveries of printing, gunpowder and the compass needle, all three unknown to the ancients. For Bacon, these inventions had 'changed the whole face and state of things throughout the world', in literature, warfare and navigation.[107] By the end of the seventeenth century the advantage Bacon implicitly ascribed to the modern was put to the test in the 'Querelle des anciens et des modernes'. Recent scholarship on the *Querelle* has been inclined to emphasise that it was neither as polarised nor as one-sided as might be anticipated.[108] But

---

[106] J. G. A. Pocock, 'Perceptions of modernity in early modern historical thinking', *Intellectual History Review* 17 (2007), 55-63. Elsewhere, Pocock argued that even 'savages' were modern, being unknown to the ancients: *Barbarism and Religion Volume IV Barbarians, Savages and Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 157-80: 'The invention and discovery of savagery'.

[107] Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, I, cxxix, in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, eds. J. Spedding, R.L. Ellis, and D.D. Heath (London, 1858), I, 221-3, with transl. in IV, 113-15. Bacon was by no means the first to identify the three inventions, but his account of them became the best known.

[108] Levent Yilmaz, *Le temps moderne. Variations sur les Anciens et les contemporains* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004); Larry F. Norman, *The Shock of the Ancient. Literature and History in Early Modern France* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press,

what the *Querelle* made conceptually possible, Dan Edelstein argued, was a developmental narrative of the acquisition of knowledge, in which the 'ancient' provided a critical yardstick against which to measure the 'modern'. When D'Alembert elaborated such a narrative into the 'Discours préliminaire' to the *Encyclopèdie*, he was not only celebrating the advances of modern knowledge, he was providing adherents of 'les lumières' with a new historical self-awareness.[109]

To this narrative would be added a further iteration of the 'modern', in the rise of commerce and its concomitant, personal liberty. As David Hume put it in 1741, 'trade was never esteemed an affair of state till the last century; and there is scarcely any ancient writer on politics, who has made mention of it.' The Italians too had been silent on the subject, and it was only now that trade had begun to engage the attention of statesmen and 'speculative reasoners.' Systematic thinking about commerce, in other words, was to be found neither in antiquity nor in the Renaissance. It was a distinguishing feature of 'modern times.' Commerce not only made possible a higher standard of living for all; it had also freed labourers from the servile condition in which they were kept by ancient masters and feudal lords. As Adam Smith observed, specifically crediting Hume with the insight, it was commerce which had made possible 'freedom in our present sense of the word'.[110]

2011). On the parallel English debate, Joseph M. Levine, *The Battle of the Books. History and Literature in the Augustan Age* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991).

[109] Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment. A Genealogy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010).

[110] David Hume, 'Of Liberty and Despotism' (1741, re-titled 'Of Civil Liberty' in 1758), and 'Of Commerce' (1752), in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), 88-9, 94, 255-67. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), 2 vols, R.H. Campbell, A.S. Skinner and W.B. Todd, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 400 (Book III, chap iii, para 5), 412 (III.iv.4).

In these various iterations of the term 'modern', Enlightenment thinkers can be seen to have articulated a sense of the 'modern-ness' of their own world, along with a historical perspective which allowed for self-criticism by standards acquired in the passage from 'ancient' to 'modern'. The potential irony of this did not escape Pocock, who wryly remarked that such capacity for historical self-criticism might be regarded as modernity's answer to postmodernism, had either of those concepts existed in the eighteenth century.[111] But Pocock's irony also reflects on the concepts' twenty-first-century exponents. Not only have they been unfazed by the absence of the concepts from the eighteenth century; they have been uninterested in the ways in which Enlightenment thinkers did use the term 'modern', and the developments to which they applied it. It is striking confirmation of the extent to which the historians' equation of Enlightenment with modernity has been their own, very recent construction.

VI

As the 2010s turn into the 2020s, there are signs that Enlightenment historians' enthusiasm for the cause of modernity is beginning to wane. Crude, celebratory restatements of the claim by non-historians such as Steven Pinker do not bolster its credibility among scholars.[112] It is far from clear that 'modernity' is the banner under which historians should rally to face what are likely to be the major challenges of the next decade, climate change, humankind's continuing vulnerability to disease, and the persistence of race as a marker of division and inequality. But if modernity no longer looks so appealing, how are historians to continue to study Enlightenment without its uplifting rationale? In 2001, relatively early in the historians' push-back against postmodernism, David Hollinger called on historians to do what they do best, to

---

[111] Pocock, 'Perceptions of modernity', 62.

[112] Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now. The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress* (London: Allen Lane, 2018).

construct the most historically sound Enlightenment they could, and thus to provide 'a sound and stable sense of the Enlightenment' for those participating in present debates to work with.[113] Can historians still do this?

Historians can certainly be expected to continue to study subjects within and adjoining the eighteenth century for which the term 'Enlightenment' has established itself as an organising principle of research. These subjects will include languages of thought, texts, thinkers themselves (whether in groups or individually), and the interplay of all these with social practice, government and politics. They will do so on the basis of a selection of the available evidence, whether that evidence is newly discovered, or recombined in novel ways. They will also do so with a sense of 'period', accepting that chronology imposes constraints on a historian that are not always equally felt by scholars in other disciplines. But neither period nor place are likely to remain settled. Even if some scholars persist in arguing that Enlightenment should remain confined to Europe and the European world in the mid and later eighteenth centuries, the temporal and spatial extension of its boundaries is likely to continue. A good example is the extension of Enlightenment into Latin America, whose creole inhabitants looked to the European world for inspiration, but by the early nineteenth century had made Enlightenment their own.[114] Chosen simply for the interest of the material, these Enlightenments will be plural, though it is not inconceivable that a particular choice of evidence may also be held to demonstrate the existence of a single, unitary Enlightenment, excluding others. In addition, just as medievalists transposed the idea of a Renaissance from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries back to the twelfth century, so global historians may follow the lead of Conrad in applying Enlightenment to intellectual developments beyond Europe

---

[113] Hollinger, 'The Enlightenment and the genealogy of cultural conflict', 18.

[114] In addition to Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 504-34, and *The Enlightenment that Failed*, 859-97, Gabriel B. Paquette, *Enlightenment, Governance and Reform in Spain and its Empire 1759-1808* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Nicola Miller, *Republics of Knowledge. Nations of the Future in Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming 2020).

and in later periods. If they do not want to think simply in terms of extension and diffusion, with the risk of reiterating European primacy, they will face hard questions of translatability. But if those questions can be answered, application of the term Enlightenment to the evidence may be justified.

Viewed simply as intuitive positivists, who conduct research according to academically established categories of analysis, historians may therefore be expected to continue to study Enlightenment. But the history of Enlightenment can never be written simply on the basis of a choice of evidence. For the historians of Enlightenment as modernity are justified in this: with Enlightenment, positivism is never enough. Even those for whom Enlightenment is simply an embellishment of the title of their monograph admit as much: Enlightenment is there because it adds value to their subject. Even as an organising principle of research, Enlightenment is necessarily a construction, conceptual and also normative. As such, it has become a historians' construction. But before that, it was a philosophers' construction. And before that, in the eighteenth century, whether as 'lumières', 'Aufklärung', 'i lumi', or 'ilustración', it was a construction inherently associated with philosophy and with its history. It is because these terms existed in the eighteenth century that the historical association of Enlightenment with that period is so strong (even if in English 'the Enlightenment' was only associated with the period from the late nineteenth century).[115] But it is also because of the philosophical connotations of those original terms that historians cannot expect to claim Enlightenment as their own to the exclusion of the philosophers. If historians appropriate those terms, and translate them interchangeably as 'Enlightenment', they are committing themselves to a concept which has always been philosophical.

For this reason, Hollinger's modest request to historians to provide 'a sound and stable sense of the Enlightenment' is unlikely ever to be met. As philosophy and as history, constructions and reconstructions of Enlightenment will be plural: the history of

---

[115] James Schmidt, 'Inventing the Enlightenment: Anti-Jacobins, British Hegelians and the *Oxford English Dictionary*', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64 (2003), 421-443.

philosophical and historiographical debate over Enlightenment mandates that there is no one 'truth' of the Enlightenment.[116] For a while at least, these constructions are likely to be less hubristic than of late: less emphasis on the Enlightenment's heroic 'modernity', more awareness of the problems facing humanity which it did not address or anticipate. But this is no reason for historians – or philosophers – to leave the field altogether.

A fine example of what philosophers can still make of the Enlightenment is offered by Genevieve Lloyd's *Enlightenment's Shadows* (2013). It is not, Lloyd argues, that Enlightenment still shines directly on us now: it is the shadows, benign and malign, left by its light that we should continue to explore.[117] For their part, historians are also changing direction, whether, like Lilti, to underline the ambivalences of modernity, or, more radically, like Silvia Sebastiani, to explore dimensions of Enlightenment thought which do not fit comfortably with any version of modernity's agenda.[118] Although the opportunity has yet to be taken, there is perhaps particular scope for historians of philosophy to re-enter the field alongside intellectual historians. Not to rewrite *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, but to ask why Enlightenment has lasted so long as a philosophers' construction – and what critical and normative purposes this construction has served. In whatever directions these enquiries are pursued, however, they do not need to prove 'relevance', to demonstrate that Enlightenment 'still matters' to us directly. Even were we to allow, though it be counter-intuitive to do so, that the thought we

---

[116] It is here that I diverge most sharply from Ferrone, *The Enlightenment. History of an Idea*, 57-66,

[117] Genevieve Lloyd, *Enlightenment Shadows* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), an exquisite book, undistracted by the question of modernity.

[118] Lilti, *Figures publiques*; *L'héritage des lumières*. Silvia Sebastiani, *The Scottish Enlightenment. Race, Gender, and the Limits of Progress*, translated from the Italian edition of 2008 by Jeremy Carden, (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); and, indicative of her current work, 'Frontières de l'humain. L'homme-singe dans le débat britannique sur l'esclavage (1770-1780)', in Antoine Lilti, Silvia Sebastiani and others, ed., *L'expérience historiographique. Autour de Jacques Revel* (Paris: Editions de l'EHESS, Enquêtes, 12, 2016), 201-220.

associate with Enlightenment is as remote from us as, say, Scholasticism, it would retain its value in the present, in showing us how, and how resourcefully, its exponents posed and addressed the questions they believed they should be answering. To appreciate Enlightenment's value, what *is* essential is that historians and philosophers recognise each other's existence, and do not suppose that their constructions of Enlightenment are mutually exclusive.