View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by Boston University Institutional Repository (OpenBU)

Boston University

OpenBU | http://open.bu.edu

History | CAS: History: Scholarly Papers

2012-07-09

Projects and Projections: A Response to Christian Delacampagne

https://hdl.handle.net/2144/3881
Boston University

Projects and Projections: A Response to Christian Delacampagne

While my differences with Christian Delacampagne are likely overshadowed by our more fundamental agreement on the continuing significance of the Enlightenment and our shared reservations about some of the criticism it has received, it may nevertheless be useful to clarify our disagreements and to correct a few misunderstandings. My article argued that much of what passes today as a critique of "the Enlightenment Project" rests on two questionable moves. The first projects onto the eighteenth century a set of ideals and aspirations that the critic sees as responsible for current maladies. The second, typically cast in the form of what Albert O. Hirschman has termed the "perversity thesis,"[1] argues that these ideals and aspirations, while laudable in theory, yield results diametrically opposite from those intended. I argued that the first move results in bad history: the project under attack is largely the creature of the critic. I suggested that the second move yields rather implausible explanations for subsequent events: thus James Q. Wilson sees the distribution of condoms to fourth-graders as part of the "legacy of the Enlightenment" while Berel Lang argues that Kant's moral philosophy has an "affiliation" with Nazi genocide.

Delacampagne shares some of my misgivings about the first of these moves, recognizing that "the Enlightenment" encompassed a remarkable diversity of positions and that its critics tend to oversimplify matters. But, after acknowledging that there is "not a single philosophical or political position" shared by "all of the main representatives of the Enlightenment," he manages to find one after all: "the anti-religious position." Vacillations of this sort are not unusual in the literature I surveyed: a recognition that the Enlightenment is not a "monolithic block" is regularly followed by arguments that proceed as if it were. Rarely has the maxim "Quit while you are ahead" seemed so appropriate.

Attempts to ascribe a single "project" to "the Enlightenment" are either so narrow as to invite a host of counter-examples or so broad as to be analytically useless. Consider Delacampagne's proposal that "the core" of the Enlightenment project resides in "the will to emancipate earthly life (including knowledge) from the tutelage of religion." On its face, we have a characterization that might have been true in Paris (though from what we know about the importance of Jansenism in the eighteenth century, this is doubtful), but which misrepresents the situation in Berlin, where leading members of the clergy regarded the dissemination of "enlightened" ideas as part of their pastoral responsibilities, and which overlooks the role played by dissenting clergy such as Richard Price in the radicalization of Enlightenment thought in England.[2] When taken, as Delacampagne urges, "in a more informal way," as a "refusal to let the authority of religion substitute itself for that of individual reason," the characterization becomes too broad to do any serious analytic work. While it is true that few Enlightenment thinkers supported clerical absolutism, it is hard to see how such a characterization of the "Enlightenment project" — which tells us what they rejected, but not what they sought to put in its place — is of much help in understanding the Enlightenment.

Historians have gotten used to the idea that while the Enlightenment may have been one (though some — notably J. G. A. Pocock[3] — would dispute even this) its projects were varied and diverse. Whatever "cohesion" the Enlightenment possessed was less the result of a shared commitment to a core principle (however broadly defined) than the consequence of an overlapping (but not coinciding) set of commitments, a kindred (but not identical) group of challenges, and a variety of institutions (e.g., journals, academies, coffee houses, salons, Masonic lodges) that enabled those engaged in efforts at enlightenment to satisfy their curiosity about what sorts of activities were underway in other parts of Europe. Indeed, it is the very multiplicity of projects that gathered under the banner of "the Enlightenment" that makes this period so fascinating.

With regard to the second move, I argued that criticisms of the "Enlightenment project" gain much of their rhetorical force from a reliance on what Hirschman terms the "perversity thesis." As an example, I discussed Berel Lang's argument that Enlightenment notions of religious toleration produced a "conceptual structure" that had an "affiliation" with Nazi genocide. While Delacampagne claims that he finds some merit in Lang's work, he does not contest my "specific reading" of Lang's account (which, readers might recall, concluded that Lang's discussion of Kant was seriously flawed). Instead, he offers a somewhat different argument about the relationship between the Enlightenment and Nazi genocide, drawing on the work of Léon Poliakov.[4]

Delacampagne's alternative argument runs as follows: 1) Nazi genocide requires that Jews be seen as a biologically distinct "race." 2) Such a conception was not "available" until the eighteenth century since Church doctrine rejected the notion of a polygenesis of the human species. 3) The Enlightenment's "enfranchisement" of scientific reasoning undermined Church authority and, with it, the doctrine of monogensis. 4) Hence, genocide must be viewed as one of the "fruits of the Enlightenment century." A good deal is problematic here. Both polygenetic and monogenetic accounts found support within the Enlightenment and it was possible to embrace polygenesis but not argue for the inferiority of races, just as it was possible to endorse monogenesis and still advance racist arguments.[5] Nor is it obvious that Nazi genocide required the polygenetic thesis: some advocates of monogenesis supported eugenics. More generally, it is questionable whether arguments of this sort tell us much about the causes of Nazi genocide. Any number of alternatives (e.g., bureaucratic organization, mass political mobilization, nationalism, and anti-Semitism) can be inserted in place of the words "biologically distinct 'race'" in the first statement with the result (once the necessary adjustments have been made in subsequent statements) that Nazi genocide can be seen as the ultimate "fruit" of a staggering number of things. Much of Europe experienced an enlightenment of some sort (just as much of Europe had

bureaucracies, mass political parties, nationalistic passions, and anti-Semites). How do we move from general conditions such as these to the particular event of Nazi genocide?[6]

In the end, the appeal of accounts which implicate the Enlightenment in Nazi genocide resides less in their ability to reconstruct the path that led to the Final Solution than in their ability to draw unsettling and unexpected connections between eighteenth-century ideals and twentieth-century atrocities. The argument that the origins of Nazi genocide are to be found in the Enlightenment's universalistic ethics is a good deal more striking rhetorically than the argument that Germans killed Jews because (as Daniel Goldhagen has argued) they were inspired by an exterminationist anti-Semitism or because (as Christopher Browning has argued) of the overwhelming power of group-identification. If Hirschman's account of reactionary rhetoric has taught us anything, it is that we should never underestimate the curious appeal of the perversity thesis — which is all the more reason to be suspicious of accounts whose principal claim on our attention resides in the ease with which they invoke it.[7]

Delacampagne describes me as "an advocate of historicism" who sees the Enlightenment as characterized "by an 'épistémè,' a language, a problematic, a certain way of asking questions" that is "totally different" from the present. While I smile at the thought of having somehow been mistaken for Michel Foucault, my position is, I fear, a good deal more pedestrian. It is obvious that many of our institutions, values, and modes of thought have been influenced by one or another of the projects that constituted the Enlightenment. But we will learn little about the Enlightenment if our first instinct is to project our own problems onto the eighteenth century. It is difficult to have the "intellectual conversation" with the past that Delacampagne recommends if we are unwilling to shut up about our concerns long enough to figure out what earlier thinkers might have been saying.

Thus, while much that the *philosophes* wrote remains current, it is still worth remembering that they are not our contemporaries. They *are* different (though hardly

"totally different") from us; this is one of the reasons they are so interesting. While many of their concerns may still be ours, there is no reason to assume that all our problems are the perverse effects of "the Enlightenment project." Blaming the dead strikes me as a rather cheap way of accounting for our problems. I doubt this is enough to certify me as "an advocate of historicism." But I do think it would be a good idea for critics (and defenders) of "the Enlightenment project" to take some time off from their attempts at deconstructing (or reconstructing) Western rationality and learn some history.

James Schmidt

Boston University

---

[1] Albert O. Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991) 11-42.

[2] On Berlin, see Günter Birtsch, "The Christian as Subject: The Worldly Mind of Prussian Protestant Theologians in the Late Enlightenment Period" in *The Transformation of Political Culture: England and Germany in the Late Eighteenth Century*, edited by Eckhart Hellmuth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). On Protestant dissenters, see the essays collected in Knud Haakonssen, editor, *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[3] See the first volume of J. G. A. Pocock's *Barbarism and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), for an argument for the plurality of "enlightenments."

[4] Delacampagne differs from Lang in arguing for a causal relation between "Enlightenment rationality" and Nazi genocide; Lang claims only that there is an "affiliation" between the two. It is difficult, however, to determine exactly what Lang means by "affiliation." For a definition (largely cast in terms of what "affiliation" is not)

see Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 189.

[5] I have learned much about the daunting complexity of Enlightenment discussions of race from the scrupulous work of Aaron Garrett. See his exhaustive article “Human Nature,” in Knud Haakonssen, editor, *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming) and his review article “The Hale, the Hallowed, the Racist?”, *Harpers* (in press).

[6] I have said a bit more about this question in “Genocide and the Limits of Enlightenment: Horkheimer and Adorno Revisited,” in James Kaye and Bo Strath, eds. *Enlightenment and Genocide, Contradictions of Modernity* (Brussels: P.I.E./Peter Lang, 2000).

[7] In this context, I am reminded of the wicked definition offered by my colleague Jeffrey Mehlman: “Deconstruction: A method for producing unexpected results. Quickly.”