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The Legacy of the Enlightenment

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Keith Michael Baker and Peter Hanns Reill, editors. *What's Left of Enlightenment? A Postmodern Question*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001. 203 +ix pages. \$45.00, cloth. \$19.95, paper.

Daniel Gordon, editor. *Postmodernism and the Enlightenment: New Perspectives in Eighteenth-Century French Intellectual History*. London & New York: Routledge, 2001. 227 + vi pages. \$80.00, cloth. \$22.95 paper.

If the Enlightenment did not exist, postmodernism would have had to invent it. It performs the same function, Daniel Gordon argues in his introduction to *Postmodernism and the Enlightenment* (hereafter, *P&E*), that the *Ancien Regime* did for the French revolutionaries: as the “other of postmodernism,” it represents “the modern that postmodernism revolts against” (*P&E* 1). Indeed, the image of the Enlightenment that emerges from the postmodern critique does seem, in large part, to be an invention. As Keith Michael Baker and Peter Hans Reill suggest in the introduction to their collection *What's Left of Enlightenment?* (hereafter *WLE?*) the various strands of thought commonly grouped under the label *postmodernism* “have at least one thing in common: “they all depend upon a stereotyped, even caricatural, account of the Enlightenment” which sees the Enlightenment as the point of origin for the “rationalism, instrumentalism, scientism, logocentrism, universalism, abstract rights, eurocentrism, individualism, humanism, masculinism, etc.” that defines the modernity which postmodernity hopes to supersede (*WLE?* 1).

One consequence of the inclination to trace the origin of the various failings of modernity to the Enlightenment is that arguments about the “legacy of the Enlightenment” tend to get out of hand. In a particularly sharp-sighted contribution to the Baker and Reill collection David Hollinger notes that it is all too easy for a critic of Enlightenment to argue that “I’m hot stuff because I’m not only refuting you, my puny opponent, but ... every great thinker from Descartes to Popper” and, conversely, all too enticing for those

who have been criticized to counter, “watch out, you think you are arguing only against me, but the implications of your reasoning are to deny the common sense of every humane and rational mind since the seventeenth century” (*WLE?* 9). Historians of the eighteenth century have been curiously reluctant to join this battle and have, for the most part, left the field to philosophers, literary scholars, and political theorists (*WLE?* 17-18; *P&E* 3). The intent of the two collections reviewed here is to remedy this situation by setting a group of historians to work scrutinizing differing aspects of the postmodernist critique of the Enlightenment. More often than not, the results are quite rewarding, though the question of the relationship between postmodernism and the Enlightenment remains, in the end, somewhat ambiguous.

A quick survey of the contents of these two volumes might be helpful, especially since their scope is quite impressive. Baker and Reill’s collection opens with essays by David Hollinger and Richard Rorty (one of the two non-historians invited to the festivities) offering contrasting characterizations of the relationship of postmodernism and the Enlightenment. It continues with a discussion of a few important interpretations of the Enlightenment (including articles by Jonathan Knudsen on German historicism, Hans Sluga on Heidegger, Johnson Kent Wright on Cassirer, and Michael Meranze on Foucault) and concludes with essays by Lorraine Daston (“Enlightenment Fears, Fears of Enlightenment”), Dena Goodman (on gender difference in the Enlightenment), and Lawrence Klein (on the idea of “conversation” in the Enlightenment) that seek, in differing ways, to reveal “the existence within the Enlightenment of elements frequently seen as characteristic of Postmodernity itself” (*WLE?* 3).

Gordon’s volume offers a counterpoint to the final part of Baker and Reill’s collection: each of its nine essays is intended as confrontation between a postmodernist characterization of a particular aspect of the Enlightenment and an account of “how the

theme really operates in Enlightenment thought” (*P&E* 5). Thus Malick W. Ghachem examines how Montesquieu’s account of law was applied to French colonies in the Caribbean, Arthur Goldhammer discusses Diderot’s view of language, Daniel Rosenberg considers the role of time and history in Diderot’s *Encyclopedia*, Elena Russo explores Montesquieu’s defense of aristocratic virtue, Ronald Schechter surveys Enlightenment attitudes towards Jews, Sophia Rosenfeld probes the role of censorship in the Enlightenment, Alessa Johns searches for utopian traces in an eighteenth-century text, Johnson Kent Wright questions whether Carl Becker’s discussion of the Enlightenment anticipated postmodernist themes, and Lewis Miller casts some new light on the relationship of Nietzsche and Foucault to the Enlightenment.

As might be expected, the picture of the Enlightenment that emerges from these volumes is a good deal more complex than the image constructed by postmodernism. Many of the essays attempt to blunt the postmodernist critique by finding anticipations of postmodernist stances within the Enlightenment itself. In her contribution to *What’s Left of Enlightenment?* Goodman reiterates an argument that should be familiar to readers of her earlier work: feminist scholars bent on criticizing the Enlightenment for its abstract universalism have tended to ignore the extent to which Enlightenment salons fostered a “discourse of difference” in which women played a central role. In the same volume, Klein suggests that, far from championing the primacy of science above all other modes of inquiry, thinkers such as Shaftesbury and Addison can be seen as seeking “to limit and reverse the influence of science and scientifically inspired philosophy” and to develop and elaborate “traditions of conversation, politeness, and sociability” (*WLE?* 154, 158). Ghachem’s contribution to *Postmodernism and Enlightenment* argues that Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws* provides a “radically contextualized legal sociology” that more than matches the work of Michel Foucault in shifting the focus from formal law and institutions to “sites of nongovernmental authority” (*P&E* 8, 11). In the same volume,

Russo draws some suggestive parallels between Montesquieu's advocacy of the virtues associated with ancient aristocracies and the works of Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois, while Rosenberg documents the extent to which the Encyclopedists were keenly aware of the particular temporal moment in which their undertaking was situated. Indeed, Goldhammer pushes this line of argument to its ultimate conclusion by suggesting that Diderot's approach to language manifested such a concern with the "art of variegating sameness" that it could well be argued that "the postmodern begins with Diderot" (*P&E* 43).

Other essays are a bit more sympathetic to postmodernist approaches and consider the possibility that some of the concepts associated with it might promote a better understanding of the Enlightenment. Rosenfeld's contribution to *Postmodernism and Enlightenment* employs the notion of "constitutive censorship" — the "invisible, socially constructed thought control" that postmodernists such as Stanley Fish find in modern, liberal societies (*P&E* 118) — to argue that, far from advocating an unrestricted flow of ideas, the *philosophes* wound up viewing language (somewhat uneasily) as "an instrument of both liberation and social control" (*P&E* 133). Daston's essay in Baker and Reill's volume traces how the Enlightenment's fear that scientific facts might not prove strong enough to resist the corrosive force has given way to a state of affairs in which we tend to see ourselves as "tyrannized by natural facts" and confronted with a nature that has become "amoral and indifferent to moral concerns" (*WLE?* 124, 127).

Finally, a number of the essays are less concerned with the battle between postmodernism and the Enlightenment than with exploring the emergence of the current understanding of "the Enlightenment." Knudsen's contribution to *What's Left of Enlightenment?* examines how German historicism contributed to the construction of the image of a "shallow Enlightenment" by emptying the Enlightenment of everything that might have given it

depth. Wright's contribution to the same volume offers a detailed account of the philosophical and political background of Ernst Cassirer's *Philosophy of the Enlightenment* which casts a good deal of light on the relationship of Cassirer's classic study to Weimar politics. Wright's discussion of "The Pre-Postmodernism of Carl Becker" in Gordon's volume does the same for *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, linking Becker's account to other trends in American thought during the 1930s. Drawing on Nietzsche's *Nachlass*, Miller's contribution to *Postmodernism and the Enlightenment* offers a fascinating discussion of how Nietzsche's reflections on Schopenhauer moved him into the orbit of "the Anglo-French — loosely, anti-Christian, skeptical, and positivistic — Enlightenment" (*P&E* 183). That Foucault, along with other French Nietzscheans, has "virtually no interest" in the material contained in Nietzsche's unpublished manuscripts strikes Miller as revealing something rather strange about the French Nietzsche reception: "one would have to imagine Georg Lukács or Herbert Marcuse being entirely uninterested in the discovery of Marx's Paris Manuscripts" (*P&E* 190). Meranze's discussion in *What's Left of Enlightenment?* of Foucault's concern with the question "What is Enlightenment?" explores somewhat more familiar territory: Foucault's turn to a focus on "ethics" in last works, while Sluga's essay on Heidegger in the same volume examines the relationship of Heidegger's Nazism to his critique of western rationality and concludes that the Enlightenment, per se, held rather little interest for him.

There is, on balance, a good deal here to admire and, taken individually, the essays gathered in both these collections have a great deal to say about a number of themes that will be of importance both to students of the Enlightenment and to those interested in exploring its appropriation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This alone makes both collections important contributions to the field of eighteenth-century studies. It is less clear, however, what these two collections ultimately tell us about their common

concern: the relationship between postmodernism and the Enlightenment. The ambiguities here are worth pondering.

Much of the problem, as Hollinger suggests in his thoughtful and engaging contribution to *What's Left of Enlightenment*, may stem from the slight-of-hand trick through which the Enlightenment came to be equated with “modernism.” Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, “modernism” had been used to characterize “the work of a heroic generation of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century intellectuals who had challenged the epistemological and political traditions of the Enlightenment, and had seen the dark side of what came to be called the modernization process” (*WLE?* 10). As presented in the works of Lionel Trilling, H. Stuart Hughes, Carl Schorske, Irving Howe, and others, the modernist canon was understood, above all else, as a “revolt against the positivism, rationalism, realism, and liberalism that the Victorian intellectuals had refined from the Enlightenment.” Nietzsche and Dostoevsky were typically viewed as the avatars of this revolt. Then, sometime around 1980, the historical landscape changed: “Modernism came to mean not Dostoevsky, but Descartes” while “Nietzsche, after his long career as a founder of modernism, began a new career as a precursor, if not a founder, of postmodernism” (*WLE?* 11). In this reshuffling, the meaning of “postmodernism” changed as well. Originally juxtaposed to “the modernism of Eliot and Pound and Nietzsche and James” by critics such as Leslie Fiedler, Susan Sontag, and Irving Howe, the term — once it had been translated into French and then back into English — came to be employed by Jean-François Lyotard as the Other of a “modernism” which had now been pushed back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (*WLE?* 12-13). One important consequence of this wholesale redrawing of the periods was that the Enlightenment “made the historical transition from a distant episode long interrogated by the great modernists into a vibrant enemy of the newest and most exciting insights

coming from Paris” (*WLE?* 14). In other words, the Enlightenment once again became something worth fighting about.

Given the complicated genealogy reconstructed by Hollinger, it should come as no surprise that it is never entirely clear what counts as a “postmodernist” critique of the Enlightenment. Typically, when contributors to these volumes hear the word “postmodernism,” they tend to reach for their copies of Lyotard, and to his now famous definition of postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives.”¹ Yet, as Gordon notes, such a characterization hardly suffices to distinguish postmodernism from the Enlightenment, since these suspicions are shared such paragons of Enlightenment as Voltaire, whose *Candide* is nothing if not suspicious of metanarratives (*P&E* 202-3).² Another possible suspect is Michel Foucault, whose grinning visage shares the cover of Gordon’s collection with a considerably more restrained Voltaire. Yet Meranze observes that Foucault’s belated embrace of Kant makes it difficult to place him among the Enlightenment’s postmodernist critics (*WLE?* 102, 108). Both collections allude from time to time to Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but aside from Schechter’s juxtaposition of their account of anti-Semitism to that of Arthur Herzberg (*P&E* 94-7), there is no sustained discussion of the book in either collection. In any case, Wright characterizes the book (along with Becker) as a “modernist,” rather than a “postmodernist” critique (*P&E* 172) and Gordon concludes that Horkheimer and Adorno were “simply too visionary to be postmodernist” (*P&E* 206). Sluga’s discussion of Heidegger downplays the importance of the Enlightenment in his work, noting that his reservations about western rationality stretch begin well before “modernity” and concluding that “the Enlightenment” figures in Heidegger’s thought “only as a distant trail in the long, tangled history of reason” (*WLE?* 52). Finally, Richard Rorty — the one contributor to these volumes who is on record as having characterized his work as “postmodernist” — now seems to want to suggest that the label was foisted on him by

others (*WLE?* 20), which may be enough to leave readers wondering whether there really ever were such things as “postmodernists.”

In the conclusion to his volume, Daniel Gordon suggests that postmodernism might best be viewed “not only as a school of European theory but as a social phenomenon emanating from this theory: a set of widespread suppositions, a mentality” (*P&E* 205). This mentality would seem to have had, in his view, rather divergent results. He holds that its influence in philosophy has been “entirely positive,” serving as “the primary counterweight” against a triumphant positivism that has severed the ties between philosophy and other humanistic disciplines with the result that “American analytical philosophers” no longer participate in “major debates about culture” (*P&E* 207-8).³ In his view, postmodernism alone has “dared to fill” the “hole in the humanities” that has resulted from the severing of philosophy from “the social and historical grounds of experience” (*P&E* 208). The impact of postmodernism outside of the area of philosophy is, for Gordon, a different story. Examining what postmodernists have had to say about the Enlightenment, Gordon finds “error on such a grand scale” as to suggest that the main influence of postmodernism in the writing of history has been the creation “an ambience in which such unscholarly boldness is possible” (*P&E* 211-2).

Both volumes do a commendable job of showing how the charges that critics have raised against the Enlightenment — that it embraced an abstract rationalism, that it had no appreciation of local peculiarities, that it had no understanding of the complexity of language — collapse once generalizations about “the Enlightenment” are replaced by an examination of particular eighteenth century thinkers. Yet it is unclear whether this is enough to support the more robust rehabilitation of the Enlightenment that Gordon seems to have in mind when he concludes that “The Enlightenment is the inheritance one must accept in order to revolt against the present” (*P&E* 220). For, faced with the diversity of

positions that thinkers associated with the Enlightenment have advanced, it by no means obvious what “the Enlightenment” has left behind as a legacy.

In his contribution to *What’s Left of Enlightenment?* Richard Rorty distinguishes (as he has in a number of other places) between “two Enlightenment projects — one political and one philosophical.” The political project sought to “create heaven on earth: a world without caste class, or cruelty,” while the philosophical project attempted to “find a new, comprehensive, world-view which would replace God with Nature and Reason” (*WLE?* 19). As might be expected, Rorty is more than happy to sign on to the legacy of the political project, but is a good deal less enthusiastic about the philosophical legacy, arguing that “abandoning Western rationalism ... leaves the Enlightenment political project looking just as good as ever” (*WLE?* 20-21). But why stop counting at two? As Klein notes, “the Enlightenment was not one project but rather an array of projects” (*WLE?* 164) and, as the essays collected in these two volumes demonstrate, a good many of these projects involved the coupling of philosophical and political projects in ways that are a good deal more complicated than Rorty would have us believe. Klein shows how Shaftesbury’s philosophical project of reviving early modern traditions of “conversation, politeness and sociability” was linked to “an endorsement of freedom that had nothing to do with rights” (*WLE?* 154, 157-8). Daston, in contrast, sees the Enlightenment’s political campaigns against fanaticism and intolerance as intimately linked with its epistemological campaign against the excesses of the imagination (*WLE?* 121-3). There is a good deal to be said for both of these characterizations as accounts of what Enlightenment thinkers were attempting to do, just as there is much to be said for Rosenberg’s discussion of Diderot’s effort to “elevate the work of criticism to the same epistemological status as the positive work of description and synthesis” (*P&E* 50) and Russo’s analysis of Montesquieu’s attempt to “define the moral identity of modernity by confronting it with a past of mythical loss and normative ideal” (*P&E* 70). In the face of

careful historical accounts such as these, Rorty's neat sundering of the Enlightenment into a viable political project and a misguided philosophical project begins to look rather glib. The Enlightenment has left us with a number of different projects, and — *pace* Rorty — the bulk of them fused philosophical and political concerns in differing ways.

While it is relatively easy to refute postmodernist characterizations of the Enlightenment by doing the one thing that critics of the Enlightenment seem to have a vested interest in avoiding — namely, spending time with eighteenth-century texts — it is more difficult to move back from these texts and offer an alternative account of what the Enlightenment was all about. For example, in the conclusion to his volume, Gordon criticizes postmodernism for equating the Enlightenment with seventeenth century rationalism and invokes the famous distinction between the seventeenth century's *esprit de système* and the *esprit systématique* of the Enlightenment that Ernst Cassirer appropriated from D'Alembert. Gordon rightly notes, "Since postmodernism's historical perspective generally goes back no further than the eighteenth century, the moves the *philosophes* made *away* from the foundationalism of Descartes and Leibniz are beyond the limits of its comprehension" (*P&E* 212). But in constructing a counter-image of the Enlightenment that gives pride of place to "Voltaire's tragic and critical irony, Diderot's refined and half-crazed dialogues, Montesquieu's synthetic and chatty treatises," Gordon distances himself from a central feature of Cassirer's classic account of the "mind of the Enlightenment": Cassirer's understanding of the *esprit systématique* was expansive enough to embrace both Voltaire *and* Leibniz.⁴ As Wright notes in his fine contribution to the Baker and Reill volume, Cassirer insisted on giving Leibniz a major role in his account of the Enlightenment. Faced with the rise of National Socialism, he sought to remind his German readers that the Enlightenment was a European — and not simply a French — movement (*WLE?* 84-5, 90-1). In response to the postmodernist critique of Enlightenment "foundationalism," Gordon seconds Voltaire's verdict on Leibniz and

jettisons half of Cassirer's Enlightenment (*P&E* 213). Thus, while postmodernist critics attack an Enlightenment that is defined by the trinity of Descartes, Locke, and Kant, friends of the Enlightenment return fire under the banners of Diderot and Voltaire. In the fog of battle not only is it difficult to figure out just what constitutes "postmodernism;" the identity of "the Enlightenment" also begins to look a little suspect.

"The Enlightenment," no less than postmodernism, seems to need its Others in order to define itself. Thanks to their common opposition to an Other that was captured under the catchwords "fanaticism," "enthusiasm," and "intolerance," those figures which we now see as part of "the Enlightenment" were able to overlook the significant philosophical and political differences that divided them.⁵ Against the specter of Nazism, Cassirer sought to approach the Enlightenment "in its characteristic depth rather than its breadth" and "in light of the unity of its conceptual origin and of its underlying principle rather than of the totality of its historical manifestations of results."⁶ While it is difficult not to be impressed by the passion and the intelligence with which Cassirer argued his case, the explosion of eighteenth-century studies over the last several decades has had one notable consequence: an incredulity towards generalizations about "the Enlightenment." It is in this spirit that J. G. A. Pocock has argued that the time is fast approaching when "there will no longer be 'The Enlightenment,' a unitary and universal phenomenon with a single history to be either celebrated or condemned, but instead a family of discourses arising about the same time in a number of European cultures."⁷

Lawrence Klein's contribution to *What's Left of Enlightenment?* draws what may be the appropriate lesson from this pluralization of enlightenments: the idea of thinking about our relationship to the past in terms of the metaphor of "legacy" needs questioning. The "modernity" of the Enlightenment was a distinctly eighteenth-century sort of modernity and the various projects in which friends of enlightenment were involved "were local in a

setting of immense complexity. If one wants ‘legacies,’ one has to recognize that the ‘legacies’ of their projects are multiple, if not infinite ...” (*WLE?* 150). The simplified picture of “the Enlightenment” that emerges from some of its postmodernist critics has served both to obscure the multiplicity of enlightenments with which historians must deal and to offer the enticing prospect of yet another Other which might provide “The Enlightenment” with a clear identity. Thus, had postmodernism not existed, perhaps friends of the Enlightenment might have been tempted to invent *it*. But if we are interested in doing justice to the complexity of the Enlightenment, this may be a temptation worth resisting.

¹ Almost never cited is the cautionary phrase that immediately precedes this characterization: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodernism* as incredulity towards metanarratives.” Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) xxiv. Thanks to repeated quotation by a generation of graduate students, Lyotard’s quip has settled into a cliché.

² Gordon’s discussion of Voltaire might be profitably contrasted with that offered by Karlis Raceveskis. See *Modernity’s Pretenses: Making Reality Fit Reason from Candide to the Gulag* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998) 19-32 and *Postmodernism and the Search for Enlightenment* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993) 78-88

³ Gordon might want to reconsider this judgment in light of the considerable impact that the work of John Rawls and his students has had in discussions in the areas of law and public policy. Of course, much turns on just what constitutes “analytical philosophy.”

⁴ See Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, translated by Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951) 27-36.

⁵ On this point, see the fine collection of essays edited by Lawrence E Klein and Anthony J. La Vopa, *Enthusiasm and Enlightenment in Europe, 1650-1850* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1998).

⁶ Cassirer, v.

⁷ J. G. A. Pocock, “Enthusiasm: The Antiself of Enlightenment,” in *Enthusiasm and Enlightenment in Europe* 7.