JEAN-LOUIS FABIANI

Rethinking the Enlightenment, or thinking the Enlightenment for the first time?

In his famous comment on Kant's *Was ist Aufklärung?*, Foucault considers that the debate 'for' or 'against' the Enlightenment has no meaning as such, and calls for a new space of inquiry that would take into account our own determination, as subjects, by the Enlightenment, making it the object of a new history, still to be written. Although this short text has been quoted over and over, it is still a sort of empty programme that does not overcome the antinomies of modern rationality. I would like to draw on one of Foucault's most suggestive remarks, albeit in some ways enigmatic: '[m]any things in our experience convince us that the historical event of the Enlightenment did not make us mature adults, and we have not reached that stage yet.' Starting from this statement, I would like to delineate the possibilities of a New Enlightenment, that would not be the first one made better, or rendered adequate to its original project (as an extended rationality or as a reflexive normativity, for instance), but that would take really seriously the potential reflexivity encrypted in the *Aufklärung*, redefining the legitimate use of reason and the fair distribution of knowledge in a 'post-rationalist' age. In order to contribute to the collective reflection, I will use my own ongoing research on two different, but not unrelated topics: the question of the public as it appears in the new 'cultural public sphere' and the sociological analysis of the rationalisation process.

How can the history of the Enlightenment be rewritten?

The social and cultural history of the Enlightenment is still unfinished. Two major books; Jonathan Israel's provocative work on radical Enlightenment (2001) and Antoine Lilti's innovative analysis of the salons in eighteenth century intellectual life (2005), have triggered new lines of debate.

Let's go back to the main argument of the symposium: something went wrong because the very idea of 'cosmopolis' involved a gross oversimplification of the notion of the natural and social order. Three principles illustrate its shortcomings: the taste for homologies, which is a way of popularising the *mathesis universalis*; the imperialism of unilinearity, so obvious in the variable-based social sciences, one of the strongest legacies of the Enlightenment; and finally the hypostasis of abstract universality, which appears most of the time now as local visions mistaken for universal statements. Perhaps the most convincing element in the list is the idea of universalism as localism in disguise. We, the French People, know this too well, as colonisation French style was the direct and explicit consequence of a desire to bring French universalism to the world. The 'Parti coloniste' that advocated the conquest of the 'primitive' regions of the world in the name of the civilising duty of the Republic, was crowded with enlightened and secularised intellectuals who believed that their claims were directly derived from the 'Lumières'. Jules Ferry, the Minister of Public Instruction, who brought in free and mandatory primary school education, was one of the main theoreticians of the colonising process, seeing it as a part of the same project as that of educational development in France. The identification of the colonising process with the civilising process was a major feature of the Third Republic and contributes to an explanation of the difficulties that France faced at the time of decolonisation. In the same way, the very local and peculiar *Revolution française* had become the symbol of modernity and emancipation in a constructed mythology that lasted a very long time, until François Furet and Mona Ozouf deconstructed it. The promises of the Enlightenment were not homogeneous across the various national cultures and they were drastically reshaped in different

styles by the rise of the nation states in the nineteenth century. However something was common to all the local receptions of the *Aufklärung*: the overlapping of a political order and an epistemological order. Politics can be reduced to epistemology and epistemology is a political endeavour. Louis Althusser's theory epitomises the overlap. When he claimed that as the Greeks had discovered the continent of mathematics and Galileo the continent of physics, Karl Marx had discovered the continent of history, he gave a sort of naïve definition of the political/epistemological mix that has been one of the main outcomes of the reception of the Enlightenment since the mid-nineteenth century. Politics (and the social order as a whole) can be 'scienticised'. Thus, the revolutionary professional may be equated with the great scientist, not only in Stalin's caricature as a major linguist, but in Louis Althusser's and Alain Badiou's definition of Lenin as the hero of a true scientific revolution.

You might argue that it has nothing to do with an Enlightenment wrongly understood by its inheritors, but with a totally different set of intellectual phenomena, for example, the historical growth of a proletarian intelligentsia. I am just pointing out the issue of the nexus between knowledge and politics that is at the core of the very idea of *Aufklärung*, as Foucault noticed it. Can we rethink that nexus?

Jonathan Israel has recently come up with a very exciting but questionable 'rethinking' of the Enlightenment. He has reloaded it with radicalism and subversion. His work is an explicit attack on the still dominant neo-Kantian interpretation of *Aufklärung*, mainly popularised by Jürgen Habermas and focused on the critical paradigm and on the rise of the public sphere. Israel has put Spinoza's legacy at the forefront, as a new matrix suitable for rethinking the Enlightenment. After Israel's reloading, it would be no longer the making of a bourgeois order, which it is even when it is not read with Kantian glasses, but a clandestine movement and a model (or a secret proto-

Lecture de Moliere dans un salon by Jean-François de Troy, 18th century.

type) for later radicalism. Here again, we are provided with a new universalism in its own right. Although it is not plagued so obviously by the ideological illusion that views a 'local' phenomenon, the rise of the European bourgeois order, Israel's thesis hypostatises the 'radical view' of the world that is almost as Eurocentric as the Habermasian public sphere. Israel's reinterpretation leads us to a radical, materialistic and democratic definition of the Enlightenment. Obviously, he leaves aside big chunks of the intellectual history of the phenomenon: Voltaire, the Scots and many others do not fit nicely into the picture. I consider that Israel is a symptom of the flourishing academic leftist intelligentsia in the first years of the new century. There is a return to the grand narrative: a local phenomenon—Spinoza's reception in Europe is mistaken for a global and unitary explanatory factor of a hugely diverse movement. Israel's obsessive political reading of the intellectual field looks quite commonplace for a senior analyst of radical thought: deterministic arguments, unilinear reasoning and a plea for the multitudes against the bourgeois sphere of the contract go along with a refusal of uncertainty, ambivalence and multilinear approaches that should be considered as playing a central role in the social sciences. Antoine Lilti (2009) has brilliantly shown that Israel was doing a very traditional history of philosophy, strictly limited to the reading of texts and not interested in their circulation, selective appropriations, misreadings and misunderstandings which are central in what I have called the social life of concepts (Fabiani 2010).

Contrasting this unilinear interpretation, Lilti has shown the irreducible plurality of the philosophy of the Enlightenment and its theoretical eclecticism due to the varieties of local social settings and the diversity of sources. At some point, I would be close to writing the philosophies of the Enlightenment, as the object is more the emergence of a controversial space than the construction of a cohesive doctrine. The radical Enlightenment is a contradiction in terms, or at least an anachronism.

Linearity, discipline, public

Is it meaningful to go back to Foucault to make further comments on the necessity of 'rethinking' the Enlightenment? In my introduction I quoted his famous sentence on the fact that the Enlightenment has not reached a point of maturity yet. By discarding the criticisms against the tyrannies of rationalism that have become common parlance in the twentieth century, Foucault invites us to contribute to the archaeology of a 'moment', or of an 'event', or even of a sequence of events, that lead to the autonomisation of reason, not as a stage that could be delimited by a beginning and an end, but as an ongoing process that goes well beyond the historical circumstances of its emergence. I would claim that we should disentangle the obviously 'local' elements of the process that identify the *Aufklärung* with a very narrow European time and space from the epistemological consequences of the process. As Foucault, after Kant, reminds us, the autonomy of reason does not imply the notion of an absolute reason, nor does it imply the universalisation of local principles. Autonomising reason implies that we know its limits and its terms of use. Criticisms of old fashioned rationalism (Bruno Latour is very good at rationalism bashing) are in fact addressed to an ideology that mixes up the Enlightenment idea of the sovereignty of reason and the imperialist idea of a sovereign European power over the rest of the world. It is still possible to delocalise the very notion of critique and to use it in a non-imperialistic way. Of course, as Judith Revel (2007) has reminded us, different national traditions within Europe have taken up the issue in quite different ways. In Germany, Hegelianism imposed a quite stable agenda for philosophical (and later sociological) research as an historical reflection on society. In France, after Auguste Comte, the issue was centred on epistemology: philosophers and scientists took up the issues of the boundaries between science and non-science and between knowledge and belief. Foucault did not go further in his analysis. In both cases, he tried to identify the ethos of modernity that is still our ethos to a large extent: it is centred on the present (what is the novelty brought about by today as compared with yesterday?). Foucault, like Israel, is strongly anti-Habermasian, but for totally different reasons. According to Foucault, Habermas is desperately looking for an ideal linguistic community that unites critical reason and the social project. He thinks that this is not the point. The question *Was ist Aufklärung?* is not about our belonging to a universal community, but about our belonging to the present, to what he calls a 'certain us', always related to a cultural configuration defined by its own present and not by a tradition.

I would like to follow Foucault, at least to some extent, by using a non-Foucauldian path. If we want to give a tentative answer to Yehuda Elkana's initial impulse when he asked: 'What went wrong with the Enlightenment?' we cannot dream of going back to an

original project that would have gone off track, since such a project is a king of post-factum anachronism. Israel's attempt shows us the shortcomings brought on by a too cohesive a view of the process. I would rather like to take seriously the potential reflexivity encrypted in the *Aufklärung* and redefine the legitimate use of reason by extending it to new territories. One of the main issues is undoubtedly the fair distribution of knowledge in a so-called post-rationalist age. The democratisation of knowledge is not an issue of the past. Rationalism and contractualism, which seem to be the backbone of an enlightened social project, have been recently challenged in two ways:

- The first is epitomised by Bruno Latour's critique of the 'national rationalism' that plagues, among other things, the French Republic. Rationalism is not dead. It just has to be differentiated from unilinear and deterministic thinking.

- The second is, among a large crowd of radical thinkers, Toni Negri's anti-contractualist theme of the multitudes, or of the privilege given to the common against the public. The idea of a social contract is not dead: it is still possible to raise the question of the common good in terms of the public. We just have to redefine the public according to the line of the democratisation and de-commodification of knowledge.

I have identified three areas where the sociologist could play an active role in improving the explanatory style of the social sciences and in redefining in post Habermasian terms the issue of the public.

1) The first area is mainly epistemological. It aims at improving the explanatory tools of sociology, a discipline deeply divided between analysis and interpretation. Using Andrew Abbott's *Time Matters* (2001) as a point of departure, I suggest that we objectify the reasons for the reification of causal analysis and the domination of 'fixed entities' to give room to an 'eventful sociology', as Bill Sewell Jr puts it, that would put an end to the decontextualisation of action (Sewell 2005: 81–123). This goes against the mainstream in sociology, either quantitative or qualitative. Getting rid of the unilinear patterns of causation is very often considered as an act of murder against sociology as a professionalised discipline.

2) The second area is related to the organisation of knowledge. One the most tangible consequences of the Enlightenment is the rise of the universities, organised around disciplinary boundaries. Are these boundaries still efficient? Can we propose alternative models that would not be an attempt to deregulate knowledge and to diminish the social weight of learned communities? Would the social model of the enlightened conversation be of some use in a democratic age? Are social networks and electronic exchanges a way of constructing a new cultural public sphere?

Cemea

A critical debate in Avignon.

3) Contemporary 'high' culture is still the reserve of a social elite. Many sociologists and experts in the humanities have made very pessimistic statements about the imminent death of learned cultures. This is the paradox of contemporary cultural institutions. In some cases that I have analysed in ethnographic as well as in quantified ways, the public can be turned into a participant that constructs a collective entity: it has nothing to do with a multitude, but can be described as an ephemeral community that can develop contractual and reflexive links (Fabiani 2008). These links can be documented and allow us to describe a cultural public sphere in *statu nascendi*. Thus, cultural institutions are not mere surviving features of a dying bourgeois order, but the promise of a new social contract. ■

Jean-Louis Fabiani received his PhD in Sociology in 1980. He has wide teaching experience in various institutions in France and elsewhere. He is currently a member of the Raymond Aron Centre. Since September 2008, he has been Senior Professor of Sociology and Social Anthropology at Central European University in Budapest. His latest book, *Qu'est-ce qu'un philosophe français?* was published in October 2010 in France. Fabiani is currently working on a collaborative

project focusing on the history of French rationalism, with special attention to the fate of Marxism in the country of Descartes, and plans to resume fieldwork in the sociology of the environment, one of his early interests. He edited the first book devoted to the topic in France in 1987 and published the results of his fieldwork on the ecology of restoration in the late 1990s. He plans to work on citizens' responses to climate change in Europe and Latin America. E-mail: fabianij(at)ceu.hu.

References

Abbott, Andrew 2001. *Time Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fabiani, Jean-Louis 2008. *L'éducation populaire et le théâtre. Le public d'Avignon en action*. Grenoble: Presses universitaires de Grenoble.

—2010. *Qu'est-ce qu'un philosophe français ? La vie sociale des concepts*. Paris: Editions de l'EHESS.

Foucault, Michel 1984. 'What is Enlightenment?' In: Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*. 32–50. New York: Pantheon Books.

Israel, Jonathan 2001. *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lilti, Antoine 2005. *Le monde des Salons. Sociabilité et modernité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle*. Paris: Fayard.

—2009. Comment écrit-on l'histoire intellectuelle des Lumières ? Spinozisme, radicalisme et philosophie. *Annales HSS* 64 (1): 171–206.

Revel, Judith 2007. *Dictionnaire Foucault*. Paris: Ellipses.

Sewell, William Jr 2005. Three temporalities: Toward and Eventful Sociology. In: William Sewell Jr, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*. 81–123. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.