

'L'héritage des Lumières'

The Enlightenment as an unfinished and morally demanding project

The French Enlightenment and the Revolution of 1789 have commonly been seen as forerunners of modern Western European democracies and democratic values such as inalienable human rights, freedom from oppression, equality, religious tolerance, social security and happiness, inherited partly from the Anglo-American revolutions and partly from the radical French *philosophes* of the last third of the eighteenth century. Historians interested in the culture of the age of Enlightenment have long been looking for the movement in itself, studying the forms of participation and the places where Enlightenment ideals, described and impersonated by men like Voltaire, Rousseau and Diderot, were propagated. As much as 'the Enlightenment' itself is not a homogeneous philosophical trend, recent historical research has shown that the social and cultural practices of eighteenth-century philosophical circles were far from corresponding to the ideals of equality and liberty commonly associated with the Enlightenment. A second bias in our interpretations of the Enlightenment is the central place given to values commonly associated with it in the legitimisation of modern democracies, while in the meantime, other phenomena of the age of Enlightenment, such as cosmopolitanism, are misunderstood or rejected because of, for example, the idea of national primacy.

This article will be concerned with how the strengthening of the focus in cultural history on social practices has changed our picture of the Enlightenment as a movement, but also with the difficulties experienced by historians who are intellectually and morally indebted to the Enlightenment in constructing a credible picture of this movement in a time when its legacy is subject to political debate.

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN postmodern critics spoke of the end of the Enlightenment and stressed its shortcomings, as the triumph of reason only seemed to

have led to the economic and philosophical legitimising of the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century. The Enlightenment, however, is not a finished project. It is both a legacy of the past and part of the present, and it is constantly renewed and revived by scholars defining and teaching its history and philosophy. Moreover, one could argue that today, as the European project is under threat and verbal violence and intolerance have become part of our political culture, we need the Enlightenment more than ever. Just as we should refrain from blaming the Enlightenment for giving birth to totalitarianisms that are fundamentally opposed to the principles commonly associated with it, so should we avoid being naïve in the ways in which we describe it. As a matter of fact, what we as scholars may perceive as being a duty in putting our knowledge at the service of the community and explaining the significance of the Enlightenment to our contemporaries implies a bias in our perception of the Enlightenment itself.

The Enlightenment is not defined only as the primacy of reason and the emancipation of human reason from arbitrary authorities. It is also, as a whole, a morally demanding legacy, from which derives a duty to put one's free and critical reason at the service of the common good, in order to advance liberty, equality, knowledge, tolerance and happiness. For many Europeans, our democratic forms of government are, directly or indirectly, an inheritance of the French Revolution, which in its turn is perceived as ideologically indebted to the Enlightenment. Modern Western European democracies and democratic values such as inalienable human rights, freedom from oppression, equality, religious tolerance, social security and happiness are inherited from radical seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political philosophy, from the Anglo-American revolutions and

from the radical French *philosophes* of the last third of the eighteenth century. The Enlightenment is commonly referred to by representatives of progressive or left-wing political movements, but also by scholars standing up to defend human rights, equality or civic liberties—including transparency and the equal right to knowledge—in situations when these rights and liberties are threatened. This tradition of referring to the Enlightenment is strong, for example in France, where it has been, since the Third Republic, part of the national historical mythology and primary school curricula, but also in other European countries.

In Finland, referring to ‘the Enlightenment’ (in Finnish *Valistus*, in Swedish *Upplysningen*) has been a little less frequent. There are many reasons for this. First, the Scandinavian tradition of liberty, including a free peasantry, lessened the need for emancipation. Second, Lutheran orthodoxy and a culture of reverence for the authorities diminished any resentment of oppression and made French Enlightenment philosophy appear to be suspicious or negative. Third, German idealist philosophy combined with the necessity to legitimise a century of allegiance to not-so-liberal Russian Tsars left little space for intellectual radicalism of the kind represented by French eighteenth-century materialist philosophers.

However, it may be noted that even during the nineteenth and late eighteenth centuries, Enlightenment philosophy was read in Finland, including in its ‘French’ variants. In addition, Finnish social scientists and historians have long been familiar with this intellectual tradition. Over the past year, as a consequence of the toleration of xenophobic, anti-European populism by more than one political party before the parliamentary elections of April 2011 and the consequent rise of the so-called ‘True Finns’ (Fi. *Perussuomalaiset*), many Finnish intellectuals have come down from their ivory towers and come out politically. Intellectuals have been particularly adamant to defend human rights after they were questioned by



The French Declaration of the rights of man and of the citizen of 26 August 1789 synthesises the political philosophy of the eighteenth century and is, despite its silences on women or slaves, commonly referred to as a symbol of the connections between the revolution of 1789 and ‘the Enlightenment’.

right-wing extremist PMs of the ‘True Finns’ party in summer 2011. An example of this awakening is the group ‘Doctors for human rights’ formed shortly after the elections and whose name is a comment on the obligations of knowledge. In newspaper columns and debates in the social media, the reference to the Enlightenment has been both implicit and explicit. Explicit, repeated references to the legacy of the Enlightenment, to progress and happiness, have been made, for example, by the current Minister of the Environment, Ville Niinistö, chairperson of the Finnish Green Party and a doctoral student of political history at the University of Turku, particularly before, but also after the elections of spring 2011. By referring to the Enlightenment, particularly to the French

Enlightenment, but also to the critical reason of Immanuel Kant, and by referring to the imperatives of freedom, democracy and knowledge that they pose, radical academics and politically active intellectuals place themselves as the inheritors of the Enlightenment, as another generation of *philosophes* denouncing iniquity and injustice.

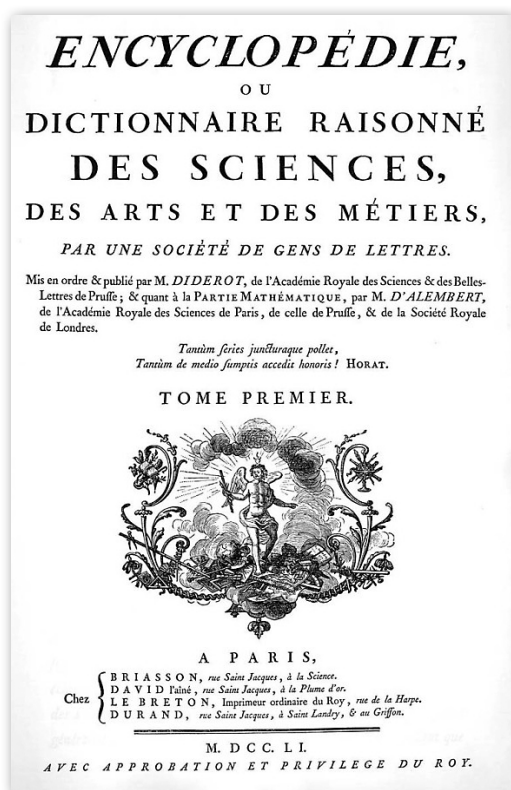
While opponents of the Enlightenment, emancipated critical reason, and even the freedom of expression in general, may prefer to see science or even philosophy as the conveyor of strictly objective, mathematical 'truths', or as an accumulation of measurable 'evidence', such a reductionist or mechanistic approach does not serve the purpose of any humanistic, philosophical or even social science. As for how we perceive the Enlightenment, a reduction of progressive knowledge to exact reason independent of morals and virtue—ethics or human dignity—does not do justice to the many aspects of Enlightenment philosophy and opens the way to totalitarian interpretations and temptations.

The historian has a duty to take an objective stand in relation to his sources, but the way he will construct his narration is inevitably dependent on his

preliminary understanding and prejudices concerning the period. History as a narrative is always a reflection of its own time as much as of the time it relates to. I would here like to evoke some biases that significantly affect the ways in which we understand the Enlightenment.

First, the threat of imminent oppression creates a need to present an alternative and to find a breathing space. For instance, for the scholar living, like Ernst Cassirer, under a fascist dictatorship, the Enlightenment may be such a space. Much research on the age of Enlightenment and European cosmopolitanism was done in the 1930s. In this research, the eighteenth century was usually presented in a very positive way, as an era of growth, freedom and internationalism, of intellectual and artistic blossoming, and so on, and as the triumph of reason over prejudice. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, writing at the end of the war, presented a much less optimistic view of the capacities of reason.

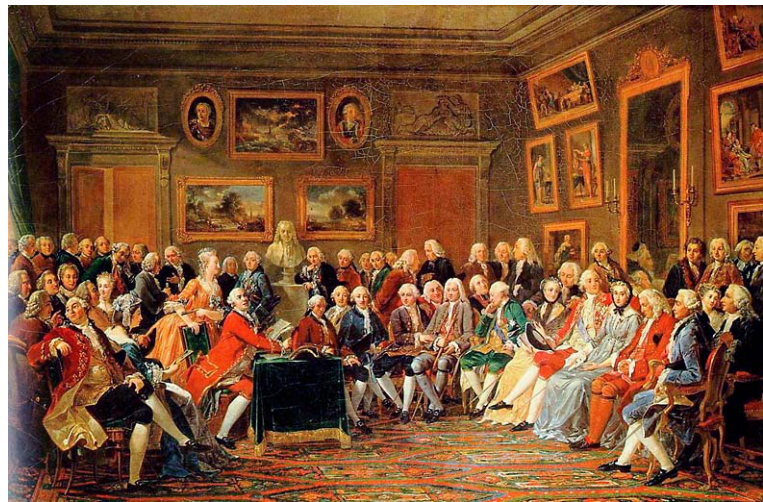
Second, the Marxist tradition and the historical materialism shared by many post-war historians affected the way scholars looked at the French Revolution and the ideals behind it. Historians interested in the culture of the age of Enlightenment were long looking for the 'movement' in itself, preferably a mass movement. But as such a mass movement was not really to be found, historians then moved on, by the end of the 1970s, to studying forms of participation and places where Enlightenment ideals were propagated. The relevance of the *salons*, mixed circles for discussion and sociability, was dismissed, as they were seen as being insufficiently egalitarian, 'compromised' as they were by their aristocratic tone, mundane agenda, self-censoring expression and female dominance. This despite the *salons* being recognised by both contemporaries and successive generations of literature scholars as important for the propagation and popularising of new ideas. Since the 1990s, historical studies on political culture, on sociability, and on the forming of opinion have been coming back to these *salons* and show a much more complex picture of the milieus connected with the Enlightenment philosophers and their protectors. As a result, while the 'Enlightenment' itself is not a homogeneous philosophical current, the social and cultural practices of eighteenth century philosophical circles were far from corresponding to the ideals of equality and liberty commonly associated with the Enlightenment. Ideals of tolerance, liberty, equality, or materialism, were diffused in a socially very traditional, not to say conservative environment.



Title page of Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, the perhaps most important French publishing project of the Age of Enlightenment by its systematic quest for critical knowledge.

A third bias is methodological nationalism, which surprisingly many scholars, consciously or unconsciously, adhere to rather uncritically, mostly because historians, as well as representatives of other humanistic disciplines, are generally trained to specialise in national histories and narratives, the origins of history as a discipline being intimately associated with the collective memories of political entities. Some scholars contest the existence of the Enlightenment as a common European phenomenon and point to its diversity, lack of unity, and contradictions. Others, however, in an almost routine manner tend to study 'the Enlightenment' of their own country (e.g. Sweden) and measure it against that of another one (e.g. France). The comparative approach is respectable and ambitious, but one can ask what purpose it serves to focus on 'national' enlightenments, as many of the central actors of what we call the Enlightenment at the European level were extremely cosmopolitan, polyglot people with ties to more than one ruler or state: cosmopolitanism is inherent to both Enlightenment philosophy and the cultural practices associated with it.

The historiography of the Enlightenment is, in many respects, part of the Enlightenment project itself. The strengthening of the focus on social practices in cultural history has changed our picture of the sociology of the Enlightenment as a movement, but it remains difficult for historians who are intellectually and morally indebted to the Enlightenment to construct a detached picture of its complex and contradictory ideals, at a time when its legacy is subject to political debate. Today, our views on the Enlightenment are biased by the necessity to defend civic liberty, equality, and human rights. The Enlightenment ceases to be only an object of study; as a mission, it comes to be felt and experienced by the academic who is spreading knowledge, combating prejudice, explaining why human rights and tolerance are things that matter, or defending the freedom to write and print. The Enlightenment cannot be reduced to a finished historical phenomenon, the existence or non-existence of which should be proved. It would be naïve to think so, and dishonest not to acknowledge our own intellectual engagement (or lack of engagement) in what we call (or refuse to call)



This painting representing the literary salon of Madame Geoffrin, one of the key figures of the Parisian intellectual circles, was made by Lemonnier as late as in 1812. It features the most important authors and philosophers of the 'French Enlightenment' in one picture, although some of them were already dead by the time others were publishing their first works.

the Enlightenment. This apparent lack of objectivity need not be a handicap for the historian who works not like a judge but more like a translator.

To conclude, the broad variety and diversity of the Enlightenment(s) is also reflected in the variety of questions linked to it that continue to elude historians. While our prejudices concerning the Enlightenment are influenced by the central place given to what we see as its major ideals in the legitimising of modern democracies, other phenomena or features of the age of Enlightenment remain contradictory to us. An example of these includes the paradox of cosmopolitanism vs. nationalism: the Enlightenment was cosmopolitan, but the ways the ideas conveyed by it were put into practice reinforced national sentiment. Another puzzling question is the relation between the ideal of reason and the use of pathos, as many so-called *philosophes* also recognised the importance of sentiment, believed in emotion as a means to attain truth and used pathos to touch their readers or listeners. Finally, the hybristic ideal of progress and growth associated with the Enlightenment and which has had a prodigious success over the past two centuries also contains some very disturbing elements.

What about ourselves, can we defend the Enlightenment only by means of logical, rational arguments? Would we not neglect a part of its legacy if we rejected sensibility? And why are we so afraid of discussing morals and ethics, a theme so often misunderstood, or understood only in a specific sense, but which was central to the Enlightenment as a social

project? Finally, why do we keep believing in 'the Enlightenment', if in fact the phenomenon was not one movement but existed in multiple, complex, interacting and even contradictory variants? A preliminary answer is, of course, that its contemporaries acknowledged its existence, which makes it a relevant object of study. Second, it is a deliberate, positive choice, denoting a desire to pursue the quest for knowledge and a democracy of knowledge. As historians, we do not, and forgive me the metaphor, 'do justice' to phenomena of the past (or of the present) if we deny their existence only because their legacies in their entirety do not appeal to us. Everyone has the liberty to interpret the legacy of the Enlightenment and its meanings, but it is our free and enlightened duty to question such a use of reason that is deliberately harmful to the interests of the community or humanity. The use of the liberty to think and speak has its own ethos; it necessitates a high degree of morality and judgement, which is another aspect of the Enlightenment that is easily forgotten. Where and when it is forgotten also delimitates the sphere of influence of the Enlightenment. As for the present; if the Enlightenment seems obsolete, then we most certainly need it. ■

Dr Charlotta Wolff is Adjunct Professor (Docent) of European History at the University of Helsinki. She is a specialist of European eighteenth-century cultural history, particularly the history of the elites, their readings and intellectual preferences. E-mail: charlotta.wolff(at)helsinki.fi.



Bibliography

- Berlin, Isaiah 2000. *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*. Ed. Henry Hardy. London: Pimlico.
- Cassirer, Ernst 1932. *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung*. Tübingen: Mohr.
- Fauchois, Yann, Thierry Grillet & Tzvetan Todorov 2006. *Lumières ! Un héritage pour demain*. Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France.
- Frängsmyr, Tore 1993. *Sökandet efter Upplysningen. En essä om 1700-talets svenska kulturdebatt*. Höganäs: Wiken.
- Goulemot, Jean-Marie 2011. 'Politique des Lumières'. In: Charlotta Wolff, Timo Kaitaro & Minna Ahokas (eds), *The Enlightenment: Critique, Myth, Utopia. Proceedings of the symposium arranged by the Finnish Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies in Helsinki, 17–18 October 2008*. 9–26. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Horckheimer, Max & Theodor W. Adorno 1969. *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag. (First published in 1944.)
- Israel, Jonathan 2010. *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mauzi, Robert 1979. *L'idée du Bonheur dans la littérature et la pensée françaises au XVIII^e siècle*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- Pocock, J. G. A. 1999–2004. *Barbarism and Religion*. Vols I–IV. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Todorov, Tzvetan 2006. *L'esprit des Lumières*. Paris: Robert Laffont.