

INTRODUCTION



Living the Enlightenment

PARAPHRASING THE GREAT Karl Marx in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, one might say that a specter is haunting Europe: it is the specter of the Enlightenment. It looks sad and emaciated, and, though laden with honors, bears the scars of many a lost battle. However, it is undaunted and has not lost its satirical grin. In fact it has donned new clothes and continues to haunt the dreams of those who believe that the enigma of life is all encompassed within the design of a shadowy and mysterious god, rather than in the dramatic recognition of the human being's freedom and responsibility.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, some thought that it was time to liquidate what was left of the heritage of the Enlightenment. Surely they could now, finally, lay to rest that ambitious and troublesome cultural revolution, a movement that in the course of the eighteenth century had overcome a thousand obstacles to overthrow the seemingly immutable tenets of *Ancien Régime* Europe. One could at last put paid to the fanciful Enlightenment notion of the emancipation of man through man, i.e., to the idea that human beings could become enfranchised by their own forces alone, including the deployment of knowledge old and new that had been facilitated by the emergence of new social groups armed with a formidable weapon: critical thought.

Sapere aude—dare to know. Come of age. Do not be afraid to think with your own head. Leave aside all ancient *auctoritates* and the viscous conditioning of tradition. Thus wrote the normally self-controlled Immanuel Kant in a moment of rare enthusiasm in 1784, citing the Enlightenment motto. However in our day, under the disguise of modern liberals, some eminent reactionaries

have even entertained the dream that it might be possible to restore all the *Ancien Régime*'s reassuring certainties without firing a single shot. They would all come flooding back: God's rights (and therefore those of ecclesiastical hierarchies), inequality's prescriptive and natural character, legal sanction for the rights of the few, the primacy of duties over rights, the clash of communities and ethnicities against any cosmopolitan or universalistic mirage.

In fact, even though pain and injustice still persist and any hope of emancipation seems lost, if one peers closely into the dark clouds of our times a different picture begins to emerge. Those same epochal events of 1989 have had a liberating effect on the old and now sterile interpretative paradigms and imaginary philosophies of history that harsh reality has refuted. The storm raised by those events let through some faint rays of sunshine. The events themselves were positively marked by the end of ruthless communist dictatorships and by a toppling of the violent myth of class struggle, which had been conceived as a necessary tool through which to achieve the various stages of an imaginary material progress that gave no purchase to liberty and the rights of man. Now, that storm has rekindled our hope in a better future, moving us beyond countless illusions and recurring disappointments, it has given rise to new studies everywhere, and to the need for new inquiries into the Enlightenment. Today questions are posed that have never yet been asked about that profound cultural revolution, which sought to emancipate and enfranchise man, and whose width of horizon and long-term effects can be compared only to those of the rise of Christianity and its dissemination across the Western world.

We have finally started to untie the crucial knot constituted by the hoary old question of the link between the Enlightenment and the French Revolution—which had been a dogma and the beating heart of European historical consciousness until now. We are seeing the beginning of a new period in historiography under the banner of discontinuity. Historians are now free from the teleological bond, and from the multifarious ideological conditioning imposed by a powerful paradigm that had long coupled the ultimate meaning of the experience of the Enlightenment to the French Revolution in a deterministic and organic way. The Enlightenment, as a result, had been identified with the unstoppable dynamic of revolution that infected Western society, leading one to forget that the original impetus of the Enlightenment was towards reform, and obscuring the ways in which its specific forms and contents constantly oscillated between utopia and reform. This new historiographical period now faces the task of giving back dignity and an autonomy of meanings to the world of the Enlightenment *iuxta propria principia*. Contrary to the belief of historians of ideas, whose every reading is geared towards the final revolutionary outcome, that complex cultural system was made up of more than the circulation

of subversive ideas within a circumscribed and elitist intellectual movement. It consisted also and primarily in the rise of a new civilization that was strongly rooted in society, as new research has clearly begun to show. The picture has started to emerge of an original culture that boasted a wide and solid diffusion and a thoroughly critical spirit, a culture that consisted in the production and consumption of new representations, institutions, values, practices, languages, and styles of thought: a new and polemically alternative way of thinking and of living everyday reality under the *Ancien Régime*. Hence the absolute centrality of the expression *living the Enlightenment*. The focus here is on a life experience, a brand new and original way of inhabiting the world by thinking and practicing in new and dramatically different terms the relationship between nature and culture, between being and having to be, between the challenges posed by the historical context and the range of possible responses to those challenges. This picture puts man firmly at its center, with his capabilities and his limitations, his growing and ever more tragic and acute awareness of his dramatic finitude, his need to constantly redefine the very foundations of the religious question, of social, political, and economic order, so as to give rise to what we now see as our modern civil society, a kind of society without which, at the time, no program of emancipation could be put into practice.

As early as the 1760s, a famous Enlightenment manifesto prefaced by Diderot to Boulanger's works quite rightly and proudly described the attempt that was then taking place to forge a new cultural identity in the Western world by changing the very course of history and making history with one's own hands: "One has talked of a *savage Europe*, a *pagan Europe*, a *Christian Europe*, and worse could be said still. But the time has finally come to talk about a *Europe of reason*."¹ This accurately summarized the work of those who were about to set their republican spirit against the despotic absolutism of the princes, against ancient forms of domination, against the social and economic system of the guilds, and the intolerance of authority and religion towards the rights of man.

Redefining the traditional chronology and geography of the Enlightenment in the Western world was indispensable to a new cultural history of eighteenth-century European society, and for this the so-called "late Enlightenment" has proved a crucial period, especially the last quarter of the century, and especially the years between the American and the French Revolutions of 1776 and 1789, respectively.

It is necessary to gain an understanding of that period in order to bring into focus the original and fundamental traits of that world of the Enlightenment, whose legacy would provoke in later generations the incandescent polemics and struggles that constitute one of the most important questions analyzed in this book. In those years, far from being restricted to a few persecuted

intellectuals in love with abstract ideas, the Enlightenment in fact triumphed in all quarters, becoming the hegemonic culture of European élites: a resounding phenomenon *à la mode* with massive political and social impact over both supporters and adversaries. The language of the Enlightenment was adopted by both its friends and its enemies. Its ideas, values, and cultural practices affected academies, masonic lodges, social gatherings, university clubs, reading societies, even court politics. From St Petersburg to Philadelphia, from London to Naples, and from Paris to Berlin, in the provinces as well as in big capital cities, the culture of the Enlightenment placed the new language of the rights of man once and for all at the center of its republican conception of politics, a conception that was understood to require ever-wider participation in the government of the commonwealth. The Enlightenment saw to the constitutionalization of that language in written documents and its final transformation into *droits politiques*, as Condorcet would put it. It fostered the establishment of modern public opinion, the transformation of printing into the publishing industry, and the rise of new forms of political and social communication.

It was not only philosophers, scientists, sovereigns, and politicians of every rank, then, who experienced the Enlightenment and came to grips with a new style of thinking and new cultural practices. Painters, musicians, literary figures, and artists of every stature were affected. It is no surprise therefore that every European gazette reported with enthusiasm and admiration Voltaire's coronation in March 1778 at the *Comédie française* in Paris. Apart from rather belatedly and highly symbolically recognizing the importance of the famous figure himself and of the generation that had created the *Encyclopédie*, that accolade, granted by the *Ancien Régime*, also represented a clear passing of the mantle to a younger generation, that of Raynal and Condorcet, Filangieri and Pagano, Alfieri, Jefferson, Jovellanos, Goya, David, Lessing, Goethe, Beaumarchais, Mozart, and many others. In the decade before the great Revolution, while they were still very young men, these figures experimented with putting effectively into practice that peculiar and demanding Enlightenment humanism that had taken shape at the start of the century in polemical opposition to ancient Christian humanism.

In their paintings, music, novels, juridical and economic treatises, and plays, as well as, in some cases, in their direct engagement in civil and political matters, there is no sign of that abstract "enthronement of man" or of the individual subject that characterized the Enlightenment's epistemological project in Foucault's famous image. There is no hackneyed rehearsal, no working to an early death of ideas produced in the first half of the century and at the time of the *Encyclopédie*. There was, on the contrary, something that was totally new and original to these later decades of the Enlightenment: namely, a conscious

and passionate creative effort aimed at bringing about a fairer and more equitable society, made by man for man, an attempt to put into practice individual rights, giving political space to what was the truly revolutionary discovery of the natural right of man to pursue happiness as the ethical foundation for a new universal morality. These men were faced with the crisis of the *Ancien Régime*. And the Regime was creaking in every one of its ancient joints under the weight of huge economic changes, of the marked increase in commerce, and of the first significant stages in a process of globalization that had begun with the Seven Years' War (1756–1763)—the first real world war, the war that gave rise to colonialism and modern empires.

Without a doubt, the defining characteristic of the late Enlightenment—and the most positive aspect of its legacy to the Western world today—is the creation of a distinctive language of the rights of man, and the use of that language as an instrument in its struggles, with an attendant politicization of intellectual life in all its aspects. However, subsequent positions immediately came up against the bitter reality of those years. Conflicts were unavoidable, and this specific period of the Enlightenment came to be characterized as deeply experimental and problematic, a time of inevitable contradictions, of greatness, and misery. One might say that the late Enlightenment was not at all a part of the historical construct we now identify as *modernity*, using the term to confer a sense of something completed and definitive. It was, rather, the *laboratory of modernity*. Although a lot of work still needs to be done in reconstructing this fundamental historical phase, one could perhaps cite briefly some of the difficulties that have been encountered and the solutions that have been suggested. This will perhaps give an idea of why the term “laboratory” is so appropriate.

How could one give the “rights of man” real credibility and impact in the face of the exponential growth of the modern trade slave in the second half of the eighteenth century? We should never forget that those subjective “rights” could only lay claim to that name if a series of qualities and requirements were also present, conditions that only a centuries-long process of stratification had made possible: such rights had to be 1) *naturally inherent* in human beings as such; 2) *equal* for all individuals, with no distinction of birth, census, nationality, religion, gender, or skin color; 3) *universal*, that is to say valid everywhere, in every corner of the world; 4) *inalienable and imprescriptible* before the power of any political or religious institution. One could scarcely imagine a greater challenge to the political action and coherence of those European citizens who were working with passion and intellectual honesty to spread the new political language than the deportation of millions of African slaves mostly towards the United States of America, the self-styled homeland of rights and freedom. It was precisely thanks to an emphasis on the principle of inalienability that a few

scattered and ultimately harmless references to subjective rights in the state of nature, which in previous centuries had already been investigated by legal experts from the school of natural law, had been transformed by Enlightenment culture into a powerful political language capable of overthrowing the *Ancien Régime*. Now, for the first time, that culture came into conflict with the crude economic interests of both individuals and the colonial powers. A politics of values voiced by reformist thinkers ran up against reality and the politics of self-interest championed by the forces of conservatism.

On the other hand, contradictory signals were given by the rapid progress throughout the eighteenth century in the “human sciences,” the crowning glory of a humanism that was determined to place the scientific revolution at the service of mankind, rather than vice versa as some late positivist ideas would later seem to imply. The discovery of the historical world, the rethinking of history from its foundations up, and its study from the point of view of the Enlightenment seemed to demonstrate that man’s destiny was on this earth and consisted in liberty, and to establish also the ethical postulates of equality and of the existence of human rights as an effective foundation for a new universal and rational morality that had as its aim the happiness and well being of nations. At the same time, however, disciplines such as physiology and comparative anatomy, the rigorous scientific study of the human being, instead focused on the peculiarities and differences that distinguished individuals and species one from another, a mode of thought that more or less consciously supported early racist views. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century profound transformations affected even the great question of the Western world’s religious identity, a question that arose following the definitive collapse of the *Respublica christiana* in the sixteenth century and then came to a boil at the beginning of the eighteenth century when the Enlightenment proposed its answers.

For instance, it was one thing for a circumscribed group of intellectuals to discuss atheism, as had happened up to now, quite another to arrange for its popular diffusion and propaganda via a publishing campaign like that attempted without great success by adherents of the Radical Enlightenment. It was one thing for the different Christian denominations and the great revealed religions to be split by bloody and incomprehensible theological controversies. It was another matter entirely to posit point blank the idea of establishing a new universal and natural religion common to all the peoples in the world, a religion that was rational—devoid of dogmas, churches, hierarchies, and priests—and that would take hold first among the élites and then among the rest of the population. This implied the existence of a God who was very far away and frankly uninterested in human events, and whose sole function was that of granting the ultimate guarantee for man’s freedom and responsibility and none whatsoever for the authority of any Church.

Late Enlightenment humanism profited greatly from the solutions arrived at by Italian and French *libertins* in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, by Dutch and English freethinkers, and by Voltaire and Rousseau. However, it also went further. It did not just step up the fight against the *Infâme*, that is to say against the betrayal of the authentic Gospel message of love and charity, a betrayal perpetrated by historically realized Christianity and by the inquisitorial violence exercised by a Church that invoked the Donation of Constantine, and one corrupted by the exercise of power, as well as by Luther and Calvin's fanaticism and intolerance. Through novels, paintings, plays, and musical works, Enlightenment humanism also took it upon itself to penetrate the drama of the human condition, the implacable presence of evil, and the need to live a religious experience in some way so as to give meaning to human existence. The struggle for tolerance and the individual's right to freedom derived vital momentum precisely from those first crude analyses of the human being's dignity and potentialities, of man's limitations and finitude as well as his iniquity and will for power. A clear-cut separation between politics and religion and between Church and State had been advocated by Locke and Voltaire, who in their writings provocatively reintroduced the evangelical maxim, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." That separation finally became a matter tenet of constitutional order, passionately supported by jurists such as Filangieri, politicians like Jefferson, and such literary figures as Lessing. Rousseau's stipulation that religious sentiment belonged within one's heart, while the public sphere should be given over to the construction of a new civic Christian religion that was tolerant and unflinching in its sacralization of the principle of sociability and of human rights, became the primary task of Masonic Lodges and of admirers of Spinoza's pantheism and his sacralization of nature.

In the late Enlightenment, this new humanism, bent on finding on earth the best conditions likely to safeguard the individual's natural right to the pursuit of happiness, also began to address in concrete terms the problem of social rights. It examined the question of how to guarantee work and education, and how to safeguard everyone's right to live in the face of ever stronger attacks launched against the corporative system in the name of freedom by the same Enlightenment circles, attacks that provided early signs of the rise of what we now call the market economy. Despite those first few difficult and contradictory solutions, which saw different sets of rights opposed to one another, the late Enlightenment was nevertheless a real and still unexplored laboratory of modernity. In fact, it bequeathed to later centuries something extremely important: values, ideals, cultural practices, languages and representations that—as we stressed at the beginning of this introduction—still bother those who nowadays dream of an impossible return to the logics of the *Ancien Régime*.

Those values consist in the construction of a universal morality founded on recognizing the common identity of all human beings, on equal rights, on the diffusion of a spirit of tolerance, on a non-arrogant use of reason as an instrument to ensure peaceful relationships among human beings and to keep at bay those terrible monsters created by our own mind that were so admirably illustrated by the great Goya. They also issue a solemn warning to all religions never to forget the centrality and dignity of man, or to transform him into a mere cog in God's design. These values remain important components of a possible life program and of the meaning of existence for all men of good will.

This book was written in part to defend this noble legacy against recurring attacks from the enemies of the Enlightenment, in the awareness that the search for historical truth can and must still have a public function. It consists in the first two lectures I read at the Collège de France in 2005 as part of a course entitled *Les Lumières dans l'Europe d'Ancien Régime entre histoire et historiographie*. Two other lectures, on the rights of man and Vittorio Alfieri's political and intellectual experiences, are to be published separately.³ In the chapters of this book I have sought to rethink the historical experience of the Enlightenment as a whole, from different points of view, keeping well in mind its irreducible vitality and the ever more urgent need to clarify its authentic meaning in face of the repeated attempts to manipulate and obfuscate it that have taken place in the course of the centuries down to our own time. The opportunity I was generously given by my Parisian colleagues seemed to propel me specifically in that direction.

Because of the Collège's history and the nature of its audience, which is not made up exclusively of eminent colleagues and specialists, its invited scholars are required not only to present the results of their research, but, if possible, also to verify the applicability of those results to the contemporary public sphere. To that effect, I thought it would be useful to compare and even polemically contrast the point of view of the historian and that of the philosopher in the genesis and the very manner of their thinking about the Enlightenment. This would, I hoped, allow me to clearly distinguish research hypotheses from ideologically biased positions and from those results that are now generally accepted by the scholarly community. The decision to adopt this way of proceeding matured slowly in the course of my thirty years' work on this subject. Its first glimmers appeared as far back as my early formation at the University of Turin Faculty of Letters.

Ever since that distant day in July 1977 when I handed in my dissertation on a French eighteenth-century topic to Franco Venturi just before my oral examination, I realized that there was something singular in the way he viewed the Enlightenment, something that deserved to be investigated further. As he

welcomed me smiling on his doorstep, without ceremony because “that’s how we do things among Enlightenment people”—those were his very words, which I shall never forget—that great scholar enrolled me without further ado into the eternal Enlightenment party. Little did he know that he was in fact opening up for me a huge epistemological problem. Did it really make sense to allow past and present to merge in that way, with only apparent irony, as though there was indeed a perennial philosophy of the Enlightenment? Behind that kind of “lay baptism” there must be something more than a whimsical attitude and the recognition of the persistence of a glorious legacy from the past. It was a long time before I came across a first answer to that question. I was working on Benedetto Croce and the formation of Italian historical consciousness in the twentieth century. In his 1938 book *La storia come pensiero e come azione*, Croce, oscillating as usual between Kant and Hegel, concisely defined the Enlightenment as an ideal and eternal category of the spirit, a type of abstract rationalism that “is on the one hand a perpetual form of the human spirit and one of its necessary arms, and on the other has given its name to a very vigorous and productive epoch of European life.”² One could not have hoped for a better definition of what in the following pages I call *the paradigm of the Centaur*; that is to say of the way in which philosophers in thinking of the Enlightenment mix together history and philosophy. Although he had little time for literary scholars and philosophers and proudly claimed for himself the title of historian, Venturi remained ever fascinated by Croce’s remark. And he was not alone. Much of the current debate seems unable to break the spell of the Centaur—and not only in Italy.

This is why the first essay presented here spends quite a lot of effort on examining this paradigm’s genealogy and its huge relevance to historians’ research hypotheses, as well as on tracing how scholars have progressively focused on the Enlightenment as the leading philosophical issue of modernity, a key in their search for the ultimate foundation of man’s very nature, i.e., of the subject. I then examine the most important and cogent solutions to the problem put forward in Europe, following developments up to the current unexpected metamorphoses of this issue, as it turns from a philosophical into a theological matter. Here the focus is on the analyses offered by eminent Catholic scholars, and especially by Joseph Ratzinger. Those analyses followed from the process of deconstruction of the Enlightenment carried out by so-called postmodern philosophers, and above all from the radical changes in the historical context caused by totalitarianism, the Holocaust, and the Second Vatican Council’s so-called “anthropological turn.”

The second of the essays in this volume takes issue with those public figures who take into consideration only the philosophical reading of the Enlightenment, thus leaving the door open to misleading interpretations of an

ideological and political nature that go far astray of the historical truth. Accordingly, I have attempted to take stock of our current knowledge of the historical phenomenon of the Enlightenment as a cultural revolution within the *Ancien Régime*. This analysis of the state of the question was conducted in a critical spirit and with an awareness that new generations of historians must finally see through easy teleological shortcuts and abandon political myths, such as those of a link between the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, or the myths of an imaginary organic tie between the Enlightenment's way of conceiving science as solely the servant of man and the positivist era, an era that was in fact characterized by entirely different positions from those of the Enlightenment. Above all, our new generations should finally renounce those historiographical nationalisms, based as they are on ideologies that have caused so much grief in the last century. The new united Europe that is on the rise badly needs to find again its authentic roots within eighteenth-century cosmopolitanism, tolerance, liberty and, more generally, within that notion of the rights of man that Enlightenment culture promoted as the proper political language of the modern and as a legitimate existential aspiration for all people of the earth.

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