

A Makable Past

Enlightenment Historiography from Cassirer to Israel in Moral Perspective (1932-2006)

Enlightenment is a hot topic in politics, especially since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. Politicians claimed to defend enlightened western values by attacking Afghanistan and Iraq. In the Netherlands, Pim Fortuyn called Islamic culture retarded, because it had not (yet) encountered an Enlightenment of its own. On the other hand, conservative thinkers like the Dutch professor in the Philosophy of Right Andreas Kinneging described Enlightenment as the root of all that is wrong in modern day politics.

Political interpretations of the Enlightenment are strongly informed by analyses of the present – their function being arguments in present-day political debates. Historians, although primarily focused on the past itself, are also influenced by their present. Their choice of subject, their approach, and especially the syntheses they construct based on their findings all contain a creative, subjective element. This however does not justify the conclusion that history is merely a form of art. Because the subject of history is human action, and the historian is a human actor himself, his perspective on human acts in the past is a moral perspective (moral in this case meaning both ethical and political).

The thesis that in every historical research there is a moral dimension is involved, is not a new one. It is a claim quite commonly accepted amongst historians, especially in the field of theoretical history. In concrete historical research however, the thesis tends to function as a dogma which, once confessed, has no consequences for the research practice as such. In this master thesis, my intention was to apply the thesis to the study of Enlightenment historiography. The choice for this particular subject has been based on two equally important arguments. Firstly, the case of the Enlightenment has recently provoked a lot of debate amongst historians and philosophers, closely connected to present-day political debates. Yet the subject is not as heavily morally laden as for example the history of World War II. Secondly, the Enlightenment as a field of study has grown rapidly in the twentieth century, especially in the last few decades. This creates an urgent need for the kind of overview a historiographical study can offer.

Being a combination of a case study and a historiography, this study focuses on four of the most important twentieth century publications on Enlightenment (one

of them being, as a matter of fact, early-twentyfirst century). This limited scope provided me with the opportunity for a detailed study of the monographs. And, as each publication focused on the Enlightenment in its entirety and thus in its essence, there was some degree of comparability – which in turn enabled me to focus on the role of the moral dimension in explaining the differences between those publications. This focus however does not imply an exclusion of the wider historiographical debate of which these publications form a part.

The first of the four central publications is *Philosophie der Aufklärung* (Philosophy of the Enlightenment) by the neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer. The book was first published in Germany in 1932, only months before Adolf Hitler was elected Reichskanzler. Upon hearing this news Cassirer, being a German Jew, immediately decided to emigrate. Being a cosmopolitan intellectual, Cassirer saw it as his mission to show the ‘bright clear mirror’ of the Enlightenment to his fellow Germans in the failing Weimar Republic.

Cassirer’s hero of the Enlightenment, although hardly actually mentioned in the book, was Immanuel Kant. Enlightenment for Cassirer was a process of gaining autonomy, self-confidence and mutual solidarity (cosmopolitanism), a definition closely connected to Kant’s famous answer to the question ‘What is Enlightenment?’. Cassirer’s decision to write about the Enlightenment, his emphasis on cosmopolitanism and solidarity, and on the German role in the Enlightenment are all easily explained when focusing on his personal involvement with his subject of study.

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, also being German Jews and writing their *Dialektik der Aufklärung* only one decade after Cassirer’s *Philosophie*, did not share any of these conclusions. The Enlightenment in their opinion was a process of instrumentalization of thought ending in the opposite of what it had aimed for. Its original aim was the victory of reason over myth, but the Enlightenment project ended with the Holocaust – a victory of instrumental reason in service of hollow myths. Their ‘hero’ of the Enlightenment was the most unlikely of heroes: the marquis De Sade. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, De Sade was the first to show that the disinterested moral attitude propagated by Enlightened thinkers could easily lead to immoral or even amoral conclusions. Connecting the Enlightenment to Nazi-Germany, modern anti-semitism and the rise of the American culture industry,

Adorno and Horkheimer came to the bleakest vision of the Enlightenment since the French Revolution.

Peter Gay, yet another German Jew (who later on decided to adopt the American nationality), disconnected Nazi-Germany and anti-semitism explicitly from what he saw as the Enlightenment. According to him, it was not the Enlightenment that led to the Holocaust, but a lack of Enlightenment. Cosmopolitanism, freedom, humanity and most of all secularism were the key values developed by the *philosophes* – and those values, according to Gay, are still worth it to be defended in present day. With his emphasis on secularism it is easily explained that for Gay the heroes of the Enlightenment were Voltaire and David Hume. Gay, writing in the late sixties, did not feel the urge to revolt to his father: it was his father who taught him the importance of the values mentioned above. Thus, his contribution to the ‘roaring sixties’ was an embracement of what he saw as Enlightenment.

After Gay, Enlightenment was increasingly studied by social historians, who focused on local and cultural differences. The one cosmopolitan Enlightenment was replaced by all kinds of local Enlightenments, all very different from one another. And in the 1980’s, the attention of historians like Margaret Jacob was drawn by early Enlightenment freethinkers (after Ira Wade linked those freethinkers to the Enlightenment) who were much more radical than the traditional champions of the Enlightenment like Voltaire. At the end of the twentieth century, it had become virtually impossible for historians to write about The Enlightenment as a coherent movement.

Yet in 2001, Jonathan Israel published his *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750*, in which he asserted that in essence, there was only one real Enlightenment project: the Radical Enlightenment. The champion of this Enlightenment was primarily Spinoza, later on aided by Pierre Bayle and Denis Diderot. The ‘high Enlightenment’ of thinkers like Voltaire, Leibniz, Locke and Hume was just a watered down version of the real project. Israel, a Jewish-British historian specialized in the history of the Dutch Republic, openly defends the values of his Radical Enlightenment as the solution to all contemporary political problems. Those values, according to him, form an interconnected set consisting of democracy, equality both sexual and racial, secularism (preferably atheism), toleration and liberty.

Israel's attempt to restore the unity of the Enlightenment must be taken seriously. His publications are based on massive amounts of both primary and secondary sources, and discuss each topic with great detail. On the other hand, each sentence is an argument to prove or defend his thesis, which makes criticizing his thesis extremely difficult. But in this case, his strength is also his weakness: Israel can not help exaggerating Spinoza's radicalness on some points like feminism, and downgrading the radicalness of thinkers like Locke - ending in arguments downright *ad hominem*.

In conclusion: due to the diversity of current debate among historians on Enlightenment, writing a new historiography of the Enlightenment is an urgent matter. For a better understanding of developments in twentieth-century Enlightenment historiography, it proves useful to pay attention to the 'moral dimension' of history-writing. Historians are in some way or another involved with their subject, and the role of this personal involvement as one of the motors of historiographical developments must not be neglected. It is, after all, what makes the past part of our present.