American Behavioral Scientist
Volume 49 Number 5
January 2006 647-663
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10.1177/0002764205282215
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What Enlightenment Was, What It Still Might Be, and Why Kant May Have Been Right After All

James Schmidt
Boston University

Debates about "the end(s) of Enlightenment" tend to confuse *the Enlightenment* (the historical period) with *enlightenment* (an activity whose nature and ends were the subject of much debate during the 18th century). This article explores the history of discussions of "enlightenment" and "the Enlightenment," paying particular attention to the uncertainties the 18th century had about just what the former implied and the different ways in which the 19th and 20th centuries understood the latter.

Keywords: *enlightenment; Kant; Hegel; Cassirer*

After the End of the Enlightenment

Near the beginning of his history of Frederick the Great, Thomas Carlyle (1858) shifted his focus from the infant Frederick—who "lies in his cradle back in Berlin, sleeping most of the time" and is, thus, an unrewarding object for the narrator's gaze—and turns to Hanover where a "rather disappointing" avenue stretches from the "Town Palace to the country one." Looking down it we catch a glimpse of "a rather weak but hugely ingenious old gentleman, with bright eyes and long nose, with vast black peruke and bandy legs," who happens to be making his way down the road. The man is Leibniz, and he is on his way to provide a diversion for the Electress Sophie by discussing philosophical matters with her. Carlyle admitted that theirs will not be a "very edifying dialogue," yet it is "the best that can be had in present circumstances." For Hanover is but the "lunar reflex of Versailles," and whatever light falls on this court is of French origin. Carlyle urged his reader not to think ill of the mix of "Eclecticism, Scepticism, Tolerance, Theodicea, and Bayle" that Hanover imported from Versailles: "Let us admit that it was profitable, at least that it was inevitable; let us pity it, and be thankful for it, and rejoice that we are well out of it" (pp. 34-35).

Carlyle's account of Frederick's life offers admirers of the Enlightenment the opportunity to spend some time with a man who loathed the 18th century. There is a

guilty pleasure to be found savoring those passages in which Carlyle laid his cards on the table:

> To me the Eighteenth Century has nothing grand in it, except that grand universal Suicide, named French Revolution, by which it terminated its otherwise most worthless existence with at least one worthy act;—setting fire to its old home and self; and going up in flames and volcanic explosions, in a truly memorable and important manner. A very fit termination, as I thankfully feel, for such a Century. Century spendthrift, fraudulent-bankrupt; gone at length utterly insolvent, without real money of performance in its pocket, and the shops declining to take hypocrisies and speciosities any farther:—what could the poor Century do, but at length admit, "Well, it is so. I am a swindler-century, and have long been,—having learned the trick of it from my father and grandfather; knowing hardly any trade but that in false bills, which I thought foolishly might last forever, and still bring at least beef and pudding to the favored of mankind. And behold it ends; and I am a detected swindler, and have nothing even to eat. What remains but that I blow my brains out, and do at length one true action?" Which the poor Century did; many thanks to it. (Carlyle, 1858, pp. 7-8)

Faced with a rant like this, admirers of the 18th century can take a perverse pleasure in reflecting on the terrible burden that has been placed on later critics of the Enlightenment: Nothing that they will ever write or could ever hope to write will be the equal to Carlyle in its inventiveness, its wit, or its brutality.

The detachment that permeates the best of Carlyle's attacks flowed from an unshakeable conviction that he was dealing with something that was over and finished. The "swindler-century" had taken gun in hand and blown its brains out: End of story—and the dawning of an age in which stories about that story could be told. We need only contrast Carlyle's view of the French Revolution with Burke's (1987) to appreciate the rhetorical advantages that this conviction conveyed. At his best Burke can approach Carlyle in the force of his invective, but Carlyle's *History* is permeated by a sardonic wit that is lacking in Burke's *Reflections*. For Carlyle, the passions that drove the Revolution were a thing of the past: They could be loathed, lamented, and ridiculed; they no longer needed to be feared. For Burke, writing in 1791, the end of the Revolution was not yet in sight. The same was true for the mischief wrought by those sinister forces that, at least in Burke's overheated imagination, lay behind the Revolution. Toward the end of his life, Burke offered some words of support to the Abbe Barruel's campaign to warn the world about the conspiracy of philosophes, freemasons, and Illuminati who he held responsible for hatching the plot that had touched off the Revolution (Deane, 1988, p. 11). For Barruel, for Burke, and for the various polemicists who wrote for British anti-Jacobin newspapers, the conspiracy that had been mounted (to borrow some words from John Robison's version of the story) against "all the religions and governments of Europe" was still active (J. Schmidt, 2003). Carlyle was free from such phantoms: Dreadful though the 18th century might have been, we are now well free of its grip.

There is, however, one thing absent in Carlyle's polemic against the Enlightenment: the term *the Enlightenment*. He was endlessly inventive in the terms of abuse he

hurled at the period we call the Enlightenment. But the word itself is not there. In view of the brilliance of so much of his writing, the absence is scarcely notable. Yet it may offer us a starting point for thinking about what is involved in talking about the end—and the ends—of enlightenment. Not having a word for something does not, of course, mean that the thing that will eventually be designated by the term was not there. When we look at Carlyle and others, it is easy enough to see that what they criticized is something we would call the Enlightenment. And because Carlyle and others were critics of "the Enlightenment," it may be tempting to follow the practice initiated by Isaiah Berlin and see these figures as participating in a movement called "the Counter-Enlightenment" (Mali & Wokler, 2003). But although such a division might be useful for some purposes, it is less than helpful for any number of others.

It can, first of all, promote a specious sense of common purpose to a group of thinkers who share rather little beyond the honor of having been selected, either by Berlin or by subsequent commentators, as part of the Counter-Enlightenment. Historians of the Enlightenment have begun to doubt whether it is possible to speak of a single Enlightenment, unified on a single set of doctrines. Those who invoke the Counter-Enlightenment will likely find themselves forced down the same road, at which point they may find themselves wondering what, if anything, ties together a group of thinkers as diverse in their orientations and interests as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Gottfried Herder, Justus Möser, Joseph de Maistre, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. It can also lead, as J. G. A. Pocock (1999) has argued, to an overly restricted view as to what sort of enlightenment was being countered, with the category counter-enlightenment serving as an all-too convenient resting place for anything that does not fit into the commentator's sense of what the Enlightenment involved: Consider how recent literature questions whether Johann Gottfried Herder (Norton, 1991) and Justus Möser (Knudsen, 1986)—both classified by Berlin (1980, pp. 10-14) as part of the Counter-Enlightenment—might, in fact, have a great deal more in common with certain tendencies in enlightenment thought than Berlin assumed. Finally, such a neat compartmentalization will make it difficult to see how the notion that there was such a thing as the Enlightenment arose in the first place: When tracing the history of concepts, even though the absence of a word for something may not be evidence that the thing was not there, it is an invitation to look more carefully at the way in which past thinkers grappled for concepts whose existence we now take for granted. This last task will occupy me here. In trying to understand what the Enlightenment was and what it still might be, it may help to look at some of the ways in which it was talked about during an age that was not entirely sure what it was all about.

Questioning the Ends of Enlightenment

Thanks to the efforts of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thomas Carlyle's library wound up at Harvard, allowing those who are so inclined to paw through the books Carlyle used when writing the history of Frederick the Great. One of the more peculiar items in the

collection is Johann Georg von Zimmermann's *Fragmente über Friedrich den Grossen zur Geschichte seines Lebens, seiner Regierung, und seines Charakters* (1790). The book is (as advertised) a collection of anecdotes about Frederick, with little tying them together beyond their interest in illuminating various aspects of the monarch's life and reign as seen from the perspective of his physician. Late in the book, Zimmermann considered the political consequences of Frederick's death, with special attention to the reactions of the "Berlin Aufklärungssynagoge." *Synagoge* is employed here as a synonym for the French *clique,* which Zimmerman defined, in turn, through a reference to the *Schattenriss von Berlin* (a motley collection of sketches of Berlin life—some fairly risqué—dating from 1788), as designating "the union of various persons towards the advancement of their needs" (Zimmerman, 1790, pp. 259-260).[1] According to Zimmerman, the Berlin that emerges from the *Schattenriss* is a city populated by *Litterarcliquen* that "take pride in working toward the enlightenment of the people." In the wake of Frederick's death, these groups sought "to enlighten" Friedrich Wilhelm II, the new monarch; yet, Zimmerman warned, the prejudices that these groups harbor "are entirely contrary to enlightenment" (pp. 252-253).

It is difficult to be entirely sure what Zimmermann was driving at and much of this difficulty stems from his failure to give us what we have come to expect. We know that Friedrich Wilhelm II responded to what we have come to call the Berlin Enlightenment with edicts on religion and on censorship, edicts that in turn touched off a vigorous pamphlet war in which champions of Aufklärung gathered under the banner of freedom of the press and championed a decidedly unorthodox interpretation of Christian beliefs that has come to be called *neology.*[2] In this view of things, the ascent of Friedrich Wilhelm II to the throne signifies the beginning of a series of events that would mark "the end of the Enlightenment in Prussia" (Lestition, 1993). Zimmermann, however, did not see things this way. Although he was quite well disposed toward Friedrich Wilhelm II, he also—like the author of the *Schattenriss*—presented himself as an advocate of enlightenment, although his enlightenment is not the same sort of enlightenment that is advocated by the members of the Berlin *Aufklärungsynagoge*. "Germany's true enlightenment," Zimmerman insisted, "hangs on countless threads, it is the consequence of a multitude of causes, it does not have an exclusively Berlin origin, it is not at all a Berlin monopoly" (p. 288). Where, he asked, is there a more enlightened land than England, and what do the members of the Berlin Enlightenment clique really know about conditions in England? Only in a madhouse, Zimmerman continued, could it be argued that the fall of the Bastille (which he seems to applaud) was "the fruit of the Berlin Enlightenment" (p. 289). Zimmerman (p. 295) concluded that although there may be widespread affection for the word *Aufklärung* in Germany, the respect for the word is rarely accompanied by much attention to the actual thing.

There is, Zimmermann (1790) suggested, much confusion about what may properly be called enlightenment. The members of the Berlin Aufklärungssynagoge were speaking a different language than he—and one would assume, his implied audience—spoke. So he attempted to explain what they were saying by translating their

terms back to the tongue from which they had been pilfered—which, he argued, is French. The scheme that was hatched in the literary cliques

> is now called in Berlin *Aufklärung* (*Illuminatisme*); the members of the synagogue are called *Aufklärer* (*Illuminants*); and *Aufgeklärte* (*Illuminés*) are the blind slaves of this sect. Of the true enlightenment (*progrès des lumières*) nothing is spoken in the Berlin *Aufklärungssynagogue.* (Zimmerman, 1790, p. 282)

Zimmermann was not alone in his confusion as to what was meant when the ideal of *Aufklärung* was invoked. Since 1784, when Johann Friedrich Zöllner—a clergyman, educator, freemason, and member of an exclusive secret society in Berlin called by its members the Friends of Enlightenment and known to the rest of the world (to the extent that it was known at all) as the Wednesday Society—inserted a footnote in an article of his in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* asking for someone to answer the question, What is enlightenment? the question of what enlightenment involved had been hotly debated (J. Schmidt, 1996). The discussion began with a complaint: Zöllner could not (or at least feigned that he could not) understand what those who contributed articles to the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* (contributors who, it should be noted, were members of the same secret society to which he belonged) meant when they spoke of Aufklärung. It ended in utter confusion, with one journal publishing a review of the debate that concluded that the word had been so divorced from any clear conventions of usage that it was unclear what exactly it might mean (Anonymous, 1790).

Yet this much about the meaning of the word was clear: To pose the question, What is enlightenment? at the end of the 18th century was to request clarification regarding a process or an activity, rather than to ask for a definition of an historical period or an intellectual movement. If this nuance is frequently overlooked today—where studies of what we call the Enlightenment routinely begin with an appeal to Kant's 1784 response to Zöllner's question—it was not lost on the man who first translated Kant's response into English. In his 1798 translation, John Richardson rendered the title of Kant's "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?" as "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightening?" thus, capturing, better than any modern translator (including the author of this article) that Kant took *Aufklärung* to designate something that one did rather than an age in which one was living (Kant, 1798, p. 3). What exactly this process might involve and what its proper ends might be was something that was open for dispute, hence, the massive outpouring of essays that attempted to distinguish "true enlightenment" from "false enlightenment" (Schneiders, 1974). But although the proper ends of this process might be in dispute, there was no suggestion in these essays that any of their authors thought they were attempting to characterize a particular historical period—a period with more or less clear temporal boundaries—known as the Enlightenment. The enlightenment with which 18th-century commentaries wrestled was an activity that was oriented toward a diverse set of ends rather than a period that could be defined by a beginning and an end. Setting up those temporal boundaries would be the task of the 19th century.

Ending the Enlightenment

Paul Leopold Haffner came to Mainz in 1864 as a 35-year-old Catholic priest, having studied at Tübingen and having briefly taught philosophy. He became bishop of the city in 1886 and held the post until his death in 1899. His importance for our discussion resides in a small book that he published in the same year that he took up his post in Mainz: *Die deutsche Aufklärung: Eine historische Skizze*. Haffner (1864) found little to like about the Enlightenment and—like his other major publication, a history of materialism—the purpose of the book was to recount the history of a movement that good Catholics should find appalling. There is little in Haffner's study that cannot be found in later accounts, but that is what makes it significant. Here, in the middle of the 19th century, we have a book that lays out a history of the Enlightenment that is not all that different in its contents from some of the sketches that we can find in present-day textbooks. Where 80 years earlier Germans were confused as to what *Aufklärung* designated, Haffner was so confident that he understood what the Enlightenment was all about that he attempted an historical sketch of its German wing.

Haffner (1864) treated his readers, however, to a moment of hesitation at the very start of the book, professing confusion as to his topic: Will he be recounting a history of "German enlightenment" or of "German endarkenment [Verfinsternung]"? Faced with such a quandary, he suggested that it might be advisable to follow the advice of Pius IX, who argued that when attempting to understand the meaning of a word, one should go back to its origin. And following the advice of the Holy Father, Haffner discovered that

> Enlightenment is a sublime word, if one goes back to its meaning; it means illumination of the spirit through truth, liberation from the shadows of error, or uncertainty, of doubt. Enlightenment is, in its deepest meaning, the transfiguration (*Verklärung*) of reason. (p. 1)

To write a history of this enlightenment, one would have to "begin with God and end with God."

This, however, is not the history that Haffner (1864) offered. He was, he confessed, "too much a child of the nineteenth century" to depart so violently from its conventions of speech. Instead, Haffner proposed to speak the language of his own day, "which exchanges the meaning of light and darkness" and produces a literature that regards "the light of Christian centuries as dark gloom" and that "greets the shadows of doubt and the progress of religious barbarity as light" (p. 4). The enlightenment whose history Haffner recounted rests on a rejection of "1) all truths, which have their origin in divine supernatural revelation; . . . 2) authority and belief in authority as a principle of knowledge; and . . . 3) all sources of knowledge that lie above the level of the human mind" (p. 4).

This enlightenment, then, is "purely negative, destructive, empty; it has no positive content and no productive principle"; to be counted among the truly enlightened, one must "know nothing" (Haffner, 1864, p. 4).

Although Haffner (1864) cannot match Carlyle (1858) in the inventiveness of the language in which he framed his indictment, the two shared the conviction that whatever it was that so unsettled the 18th century had now run its course. Haffner argued that the Enlightenment was laid to rest by "Schiller and Goethe, Schelling and Hegel" and by the arrival of the romantic school, in whose work he sensed a foreshadowing of a rising "Catholic consciousness" that promised to replace the "cold light" of the Enlightenment with the "warm" light of life (pp. 9, 141-143). Thus, his initial uncertainty as to whether he was narrating a tale of enlightenment or endarkenment was little more than a rhetorical ploy. He lived in an age that had learned to use *die Aufklärung* as a way of designating a particular historical period, a period populated by a particular cast of characters, most of whom are mentioned in the course of his article. He also lived in an age that had settled on a group of adjectives that could be attached to this noun: for instance, *cold*, *narrow*, and *empty*. In knowing which adjectives to choose when talking about the Enlightenment, he was also a child of his age.

How did his age get to be the way it was and to talk the way it did? The decisive influence seems to be G. W. F. Hegel, who was one of the first, if not the first, to employ the term *Aufklärung* as a name for a particular historical period. In his 1806 *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel (1970, Vol. III, p. 400) still used the term as a way of designating a process—the spread of "pure insight"—rather than a particular historical period. As Robert Pippin (1997) has rightly observed, in the *Phenomenology*, the term refers to "a human activity, not a happening but a doing" (p. 7). However, in his Berlin lectures from the 1820s, Hegel began to use the word differently. At the close of the lectures on the philosophy of history, he reflected on an event whose impact he himself had experienced: the French Revolution. Explaining to his students what the world was like when he was their age, Hegel (Vol. XII, p. 529) spoke of the enthusiasm that had gripped his contemporaries when they learned that "the old framework of injustice" had toppled overnight, unable to resist the onslaught of a new and triumphant ideal: The notion that constitutions should be established on the basis of reason. The celebration, however, proved premature. The Revolution collapsed into the Terror, the Terror gave way to the Directory, the Directory crumbled before Napoleon, war engulfed Europe, and—when the "fifteen years' farce" was finally played out—the monarchy was restored. There were some, Hegel noted, who charged that "the French Revolution resulted from philosophy." It was an accusation he was not inclined to dismiss, although he stressed that the philosophy that provided the "first impetus" for the Revolution was not "the concrete comprehension of absolute truth" that presumably, he was offering his students but rather, that "abstract thought" for which the French had a particular weakness. This superficial approach to philosophy, which summons all established authorities to the tribunal of reason and attempts to deduce both the laws of nature and "the substance of what is right and good" from individual consciousness, was known by the "infamous name" *Aufklärung*.[3]

Similar uses of the word can be found in Hegel's other lecture cycles from the Berlin period. In his 1825-1826 lectures on the history of philosophy, Hegel (1990, Vol. III, pp. 206-207) used *Aufklärung* to designate the "German form" of the broad movement in the 18th century that sought to turn "natural feelings and sound human

understanding" into a principle that could be used to scrutinize religion and ethical life. In other texts from the same period, the word was extended to encompass 18th-century French and English thought as well (Hegel, 1970, p. 431). The same pattern can be found in the Berlin lectures on the philosophy of religion, where *Aufklärung* denotes the movement of thought that turned against the doctrinal system of the churches in the name of "rational theology" (Hegel, 1984, pp. 122-125). It rejected the doctrine of the Trinity as incoherent, thus, embracing an abstract and shallow approach to religion that, in the end, deprived the notion of God of all content (Hegel, 1985, p. 244). As a mode of thought that "knows only of negation, of limit, of determinacy as such," it "does an absolute injustice to content" and represents "the ultimate pinnacle of the formal culture of our time" (Hegel, 1985, pp. 344-346).

Thus, in his Berlin lectures, Hegel used *Aufklärung* as a way of designating an historical epoch that was now completed. We are separated from it by the French Revolution, which both marks the end of the period and proves to be the end toward which Aufklärung had been moving (whether it knew it or not) all along. The same event that terminates the Aufklärung also, allegedly, reveals its true character: It was abstract, cold, and narrow, it had no respect for faith or tradition, it was French, and when put into practice, it was the cause of public mayhem of a sort that was historically unprecedented. Not the least of Hegel's achievements was to have framed a way of talking about the Enlightenment that would have a career long after his own particular version of the story had been dismissed or forgotten.

The Enlightenment Becomes History

To see what historians would subsequently do with Hegel's account, we need only look at the work of one of his former Berlin students, the historian Max Duckner. His 1845 lecture on the "crisis of the Renaissance" opens with a summary of recent German intellectual history that sees it as moving through four periods, the first of which is designated as die Aufklärung. Duckner, like Hegel before him, held that the impact of Aufklärung was primarily negative. It destroyed, but it could not create: "The enlightened gaze of the understanding . . . was unable to comprehend and conceptualize the product of drives, of fantasy, of feeling" (Southard, 1994, pp. 72-75). In Duckner's account, it fell to the Romantic period to find a way to overcome these failings, just as it fell to the period of "philosophical rationalism" (a period that Duckner associated with German idealism in general and Hegel in particular) to remedy the failings of Romanticism. It remained for the present—designated by Duckner as a period of "historical rationalism"—to correct the shortcomings of German idealism.

The temporal boundaries of the historical period that came to be designated as die Aufklärung remained somewhat unclear. Historians of philosophy such as Schwegler tended to follow Hegel's lead and trace the origins of the Aufklärung to Descartes and to see Kant's work as signaling its conclusion. Literary historians typically used the term to denote a period that began in the late 17th century and ended either with the revolt of the Sturm und Drang shortly after the middle of the 18th century or with the

rise of the so-called Classical Period represented by Goethe and Schiller.[4] One consequence of carving up history in this way was that it tended to remove figures such as Kant or Schiller from the ranks of *Aufklärer*, making it all the easier to present the Aufklärung as an impoverished period, largely derivative of French models, which—at least in Germany—was quickly overcome. This, indeed, was one of Haffner's (1864) chief points: The German Enlightenment was not, in fact, German at all—it was a French import (p. 8).

English usage was largely dependent on this German literature but tended to lag behind it, as can be seen by the difficulties that English translators of the works of Hegel and of German historians of philosophy had in coming up with an English equivalent for *Aufklärung*. The convention of translating *die Aufklärung* as *the Enlightenment* was not established until close to the end of the century. Until that time, translators experimented with terms such as *the Lighting Up* or *the Illumination*, employed the French *Éclaircissement*, or simply left the German term untranslated (J. Schmidt, 2003). Even when, early in the next century, the Princeton philosopher John Grier Hibben (1910) published *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*—the first book in English to carry the term in its title—he seems to have been unsure whether his readers would be familiar with what it was that his book was discussing. The opening of the book gives the impression of a man attempting to cover all the possible bases: Within the space of two pages, Hibben referred to the period as "the Enlightenment, or Aufklärung," as the "philosophical century," as "the age of illumination, or enlightenment," and finally, that old standby: "the age of reason" (pp. 3-4).

For Hibben (1910), the Enlightenment was "an age characterized by a restless spirit of inquiry" and animated by a spirit of "searching investigation and criticism" (p. 3). Hibben argued that it was a period of interest to his readers not only because of its own merits and "representative value" but also because it illustrated the path traversed by "great thought movements in general" (pp. 7-8). In good Hegelian fashion, Hibben argued that movements of thought typically begin with the expression of an idea that is "necessarily partial, one-sided, or extreme" and then move on to a stage where the idea is "subjected to a running fire of criticism," a stage in which contradictions and inconsistencies are brought to light. When these controversies have run their course, the stage is set for "a period of reconstruction" in which "contradictions are resolved, limitations are removed, [and] whatever may have been inadequate is completed" by supplying insights that were lacking in the original statement of the idea (p. 8). Thus, in Hibben's presentation, the Enlightenment begins with Locke's *Essay Concerning Understanding*, a work that inspired such divergent philosophies as Berkeley's idealism, the rationalism of Wolff and Leibniz, and the materialism of Priestley, Diderot, Helvetius, and Holbach. Its shortcomings were subsequently elaborated by Hume, and Hume's criticism prepared the way for Kant's efforts at reconstruction. Although the overarching Hegelian structure of his account sometimes seems forced, Hibben's scholarship demonstrates a wide reading in the area of 18th-century philosophy: A year of study in Berlin acquainted him with the work of Lessing, Mendelssohn, and Herder, and he had an appreciation for the arguments of Diderot and Rousseau. His discussions are well informed and devoid of the animosity that had marked so many

19th-century accounts of 18th-century philosophy. Indeed, to read Hibben is to be reminded of a much more famous work, a work that would eventually be translated into English with the same title as Hibben's then-forgotten book: Ernst Cassirer's *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung* (1952).

Like Hibben (1910), Cassirer (1952) saw individual thinkers as part of a larger story involving the development of Western thought. In an oft-quoted passage, Cassirer described the aims of the book as an attempt to present the Enlightenment in its "characteristic depth" rather than "breadth," to elucidate its "conceptual origin" and its "underlying principles" rather than to record "the totality of its historical manifestations and results" (p. v). Cassirer's concern with seeing the work of individual thinkers in the context of the broader development of modern philosophy would draw a sharp critique from Peter Gay (1967) in his well-known critique of his teacher's work. Gay's attempt to write a "social history of ideas" would, in turn, be criticized by Robert Darnton (1971), who suggested that Gay had not been entirely successful in breaking free from the sort of history of ideas that Cassirer had been writing. But even earlier, doubts about the coherence of Cassirer's account of the Enlightenment were being raised by scholars who found it difficult to see how the particular aspects of the Enlightenment they had been exploring were supposed to fit into the narrative that Cassirer had constructed (Crocker, 1987; Dieckmann, 1961; Niklaus, 1967).

In retrospect, it is not difficult to see why such doubts were bound to surface. In Hegel's (1970, 1984, 1985, 1990) Berlin lectures, *Aufklärung* designates an historical period—embodied by a particular set of philosophers—that played a specific role in the overall architectonic of his philosophical system. In the decades after Hegel's death, confidence in the coherence or the utility of his system faded, but the rough outlines he had set for the Enlightenment continued to serve as a way of structuring historical narratives. The particular thinkers who made up his enlightenment continued to figure in these accounts, but with time were joined by other figures. For a while, it was possible—witness the work of Hibben (1910) and Cassirer (1952)—to provide some sort of philosophical coherence to accounts of this sort, even without the resources of the Hegelian system, and with time, other ways of patching together a story about the Enlightenment would be attempted (e.g., Paul Hazard's [1935] attempt to see the Enlightenment as the crucial moment in a "crisis of European consciousness"). But as a focus on the social history of ideas came to replace the grand, overarching narrative that had been the stock in trade of Hegelian accounts, the alleged unity of the Enlightenment tended to look more and more doubtful. By the last decades of the 20th century, what might be described as a "pluralization of the Enlightenment" was well under way. Scholars had gotten used to speaking of various national enlightenments—Scottish, German, Italian, and eventually, English (Porter & Teich, 1981)—and then, within some of these national enlightenments, they began to discover "rival enlightenments" struggling with one another (Hunter, 2001). Even those who criticized this tendency and sought to describe an enlightenment that transcended national borders wound up only introducing another division into the already fractured landscape: The distinction between a cosmopolitan "radical" enlightenment and the various, more conservative, national enlightenments (Israel, 2001). Social histori-

ans were accustomed to looking beneath the “high” enlightenment of famous thinkers and their texts to map the “low enlightenment” of the clandestine book market. Still others focused on the network of institutions—scientific academies, secret societies, coffeehouses, and salons—that served as the arena in which the various ideas and projects associated with the Enlightenment (as well as a variety of ideas and projects that only now came to be associated with the Enlightenment) circulated. It is, then, hardly surprising that in the face of this pluralization of enlightenments, some have suggested—perhaps none more insistently than Pocock (1998, p. 7)—that it might be better to dispense with the definite article and eschew claims about the Enlightenment in favor of a more careful account of the languages spoken by the various enlightenments that inhabited 18th-century Europe.

Enlightenment After the Enlightenment

This proliferation of enlightenments is not an entirely unfortunate development. Indeed, with apologies to Carlyle, we might regard it as profitable, probably inevitable, and less an occasion for pity than for gratitude. That it was probably inevitable should be clear from the arguments of the preceding section: Absent an overarching philosophical structure of the sort Hegel had once provided, it is difficult to see how the various individuals, institutions, and projects that we have come to associate with the Enlightenment can be seen as part of a single story. The demise of such accounts has been profitable in at least two ways. First, it has allowed scholars working in the area of 18th-century studies to pursue research into thinkers, institutions, and projects that did not figure prominently in the sorts of overarching accounts of the Enlightenment that one finds in Hibben (1910), Cassirer (1952), and even in Gay (1967). Second, it has also provided a way of responding to those critics of “the Enlightenment Project” who recycle a series of rhetorical tropes that can be traced back to the 19th century: The enlightenment these critics attack is largely a creature of their own (or, more likely, Hegel’s) making and might best be regarded as the latest form taken by a literature whose scholarly credentials have long passed their expiration date.[5]

Some scholars, however, have questioned whether its pluralization entails too great a cost. John Robertson (2003) has recently sought to “make a case for the Enlightenment in the singular” by restoring “a definite intellectual content” to the Enlightenment and then examining the ways in which this content was articulated in differing social contexts. Robertson (pp. 73-75) argued that this “intellectual content” must be more sensitive to the actual concerns of the historical Enlightenment than either the somewhat simplified version of the Enlightenment that Isaiah Berlin used as the foil for his counter-enlightenment or the overly philosophical conception employed by Ernst Cassirer.[6] On the other hand, against those who would reduce the Enlightenment to its social or institutional settings, Robertson insisted,

> If ideas are no longer the focus of attention, it is much harder to define and to defend the Enlightenment’s distinctive identity. It was as a movement of ideas that the Enlighten-

> ment acquired its historical significance, for good and ill; to marginalize its intellectual content, as social and cultural historians tend to do, is to make "Enlightenment" into a label of convenience, with little or no substantive significance. (pp. 77-78)

Robertson proposed that the "intellectual content" of the Enlightenment is to be found in its "commitment to understanding, and hence to advancing, the causes and conditions of human betterment in this world" (p. 78). Emphasizing that the "first part of this formula is as important as the second," Robertson saw three concerns as central to the Enlightenment's efforts to understand the causes and conditions of human betterment: (a) the systematic study of human nature; (b) inquiries into the causes of "material betterment, the subject matter of political economy"; and (c) more general investigations, beyond the more specific concerns of political economy, with the historical progress of society "from 'barbarism' to 'refinement' or 'civilization'" (p. 78). In demonstrating the ways in which this particular set of ideas was put into practice, Robertson proposed a comparative study of the activity of enlightenment that focuses on "its development in two of its most distant settings: Scotland and Naples" (p. 82). By focusing on two "national contexts" that differed markedly in geography, history, and intellectual resources, Robertson hoped to show how—in spite of these differences—"a common engagement with the Enlightenment" can be seen (p. 82).

Robertson (2003) granted that the Enlightenment he proposed to investigate "does not include everything which many recent scholars have wished to associate with it" and that a focus on the Enlightenment, understood in this way, will make it necessary "to set aside much that recent scholarship has suggested is of great interest" (although he was quick to add that this does not mean that "what is set aside should not be studied in its own right," pp. 81-82). This more restricted focus, Robertson argued, yields considerable benefits:

> The unrestricted definition of Enlightenment, or its alternative, the admission that there were multiple Enlightenments, has rendered the subject so blurred and indeterminate that it is impossible to reach any assessment of its historical significance. The Enlightenment for which I have made a case here is one, I suggest, which existed as an historical phenomena, rather than an artificial philosophical construct. It is not an Enlightenment which can be held directly responsible for the horrors, any more than for the advances, of the twentieth century; far too much history lies in between. But as a specific intellectual movement of the eighteenth century, it is an Enlightenment which can be matched against the conditions which faced it in its own time. (p. 82)

Although there is much in this proposal that is sensible and promising, it may be worth asking whether Robertson's distinction between the Enlightenment as "historical phenomenon" and as "philosophical construct" holds up.

If the history of attempts to respond to the question, What is enlightenment? that is traced in this article is accurate, it would appear that where Robertson (2003) saw "an historical phenomenon," others might well see an historian's construct. This construct is, in many respects, preferable to the various philosophical constructs that Robertson (rightly) questioned, but it is, for better or worse, a construct—a way of bringing

coherence to a decidedly messy historical reality by highlighting certain features of that reality and downplaying others. Robertson's construct has the advantage of capturing an aspect of efforts at enlightenment that is of central importance: The conviction that enlightenment was a process, an activity, something that one did. He has focused attention on some central components of this activity: the framing of sciences of human nature, political economy, and historical development. But he did this at the cost of neglecting certain other activities that other historians have seen as important parts of the process of enlightenment. For instance, would the concern with the cultivation of a new understanding of what was involved in "civility," a concern that Daniel Gordon (1994) has explored in his work on the French Enlightenment, be included in those activities that Robertson saw as part of the Enlightenment or is Gordon's work concerned with one of those (otherwise worthy) areas of inquiry that fall outside the conception of the Enlightenment that Robertson sought to articulate? Or what about those Spinozists, materialists, and pantheists who made up Jonathan Israel's (2001) cosmopolitan "radical enlightenment?" Robertson would seem to want to exclude them from his account of the Enlightenment understood as a "historical phenomenon" because "Spinoza's materialism did not exhaust the philosophical resources available to Enlightenment thinkers" (p. 79) and because those who focused on the bettering of this world did not, necessarily, have to deny the possibility of future redemption in another world. Yet Israel has presented us with a group of thinkers who labored under the impression that the improvement of this world involved, in part, efforts at unmasking the ways in which hopes of a better world had been exploited by priests and kings for their own benefit. The fact that Spinozism was not the only resource available to thinkers of the Enlightenment does nothing to alter the fact that Israel has discovered a group of Spinozists who saw themselves as engaged in what they took to be enlightenment.

If the study of 18th-century texts teaches us anything, it is that the answer to the question of what enlightenment involved was not entirely obvious to those who thought they were doing it—which was, after all, the reason why Pastor Zöllner asked his question in the first place. To be sure, nothing obliges historians to remain as confused about such questions as those who were asking them. But it would seem that at least part of the task of making sense of the Enlightenment as an historical phenomenon would be to avoid—in the effort to make things neater—throwing out too many of the conflicting images of enlightenment that populated the 18th century. Those conflicting images offer us our best contemporary record of what was involved in the historical phenomenon that we call the Enlightenment. All the rest is construct and commentary.

Kant was well aware of this. Thirty years ago, Franco Venturi (1971, pp. 1-17) suggested that the understanding of the European Enlightenment "from Kant to Cassirer and beyond" had been dominated by a "philosophical interpretation of the German Aufklärung," which had led historians to overlook the political dimensions of the Enlightenment. Venturi may have been right about the part of this history that runs from Hegel to Cassirer and beyond, but he was less than fair to Kant. Kant's (1798) account of what enlightenment involved was, after all, rather catholic: He defined it,

quite simply, as the free use of public reason. Aside from the requirement of publicity, he had rather little to say about what counted as a contribution to enlightenment. This would, presumably, be something that would also have to be decided in the tribunal of public deliberation. Kant's response to Zöllner's question may be too diffuse to serve as a definition of *the Enlightenment*—although the not inconsiderable body of work that has grown out of Jürgen Habermas's (1962) attempt to see what Kant's understanding of enlightenment might mean in terms of the development of the "bourgeois public sphere" suggests that it has not been without significance. But as an attempt to capture something of what enlightenment might have meant to those who were engaged in it, it acquits itself rather well.

What, in the end, does it mean to make a case for the Enlightenment? As an historical construct, as a way of grouping historical materials into a coherent narrative, the Enlightenment will prove its utility by the sort of research it provokes, research that—if the past history of the notion is any indication—will force us to keep testing our generalizations about the Enlightenment against the staggering variety of evidence that the 18th century provides as to what might (or might not) count as part of this enlightenment. Those who are attempting to make a case for the Enlightenment may have something to gain by trying to deal with the objections of those who, like Pocock (1998, 1999), have been filing briefs against the Enlightenment and advocating the multiplying of enlightenments. Likewise, those who have found Pocock's tack promising can be grateful to scholars such as Robertson (2003) for providing an alternative to the accounts of the Enlightenment that populated the earlier literature.

Making the case for enlightenment, however, involves something different from defending the Enlightenment. Critics of the Enlightenment Project typically ignore this distinction and then proceed to level attacks on something that diverges markedly from what historians typically understand as the Enlightenment. At their best, these criticisms raise questions about what ought to count as rational, what sorts of activities should be considered reasonable, what sorts of rights (if any) individuals ought to enjoy, what role (if any) religious beliefs should play in civil society, and so on. Although the questions that critics of the Enlightenment are raising may be worth considering, the historical claims that accompany these questions lag well behind current scholarship on the Enlightenment. It might be worth pointing this out. In clarifying how we think about the issues such critics raise, it might also be helpful to read some works by thinkers who have been the part of one or another of the Enlightenments that historians have explored. This is all the more necessary because critics of the Enlightenment Project do not always seem to have spent much time with 18th-century texts. But in the end, when we enter into discussions—whether as historians, as political theorists, or as citizens—of the questions that critics of the Enlightenment are trying to raise, it might be helpful to realize that we are neither making a case for nor against the Enlightenment. What we are, instead, engaging in are efforts at enlightenment—an activity that, pace Carlyle, is by no means finished.

Notes

1. This construction parallels English usage from the same period where *synagogue* was employed, in controversial literature, as a term of abuse from gatherings devoted to the pursuit of ends that stand in opposition to those of the pious. To cite a few examples from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Milton referred to the Scots Presbytery in Belfast as an “unchristian Synagogue,” whereas in 1674, Hickman expressed the wish that “no Arminians had . . . forsaken the Church of England, and took sanctuary in the Synagogue of Rome.”

2. The classic study of this episode is found in Schwartz (1925). For a brief discussion in English, see the introduction to Carl Friedrich Bahrdt’s *The Edict of Religion: A Comedy* by translators John Christian Laursen and Johan van der Zande (2000). Bahrdt was one of the edict’s most audacious and creative critics.

3. The phrase translated as “infamous name” appears in Friedrich Stieve’s lecture note from the winter semester of 1826-1827 as “verruchten Namen” (Hegel, 1968, p. 915ff). Lasson, the editor of Hegel’s (1968) *Philosophy of World History*, suggested that the term may have been the result of a mishearing and that Hegel presumably had said “verrufenen Namen.” The English word *infamous* encompasses both German terms. The German *verrufen* refers to the reputation enjoyed by a thing rather than the thing itself (i.e., infamous in the sense of held in infamy), whereas the German *verrucht*—monstrous or abominable—refers to the thing itself rather than its reputation (i.e., infamous in the sense of deserving of infamy). Lasson assumed that Hegel employed the weaker of these two terms, whereas Stieve thought he was hearing the former. In any case, the use of either phrase is further complicated by its use in conjunction with *name* (i.e., Is it the name that is infamous or monstrous or the event to which the name refers?).

4. Book 3 of Hermann Hettner (1894) deals with the classical age of German literature; it begins with an introduction titled “The Battle Against the Limits of the Enlightenment” and then goes on to a discussion of the *Sturm und Drang*. Heinrich Julian Schmidt’s (1886) work has a chapter titled “Enlightenment and Pietism 1687-1699” that examines Pufendorf and Thomasius, among others; it is followed by sections devoted to and titled “*Die Kopfzeit* 1720-1748” and “The Rise of Idealism 1748-1763.” For a brief discussion of the question of periodization with regard to 19th-century literary historians, see Batts (1993, pp. 84-85).

5. For examples of such responses, see the essays collected in Baker & Reill (2001) and Gordon, (2001). I have discussed this literature in J. Schmidt (2000, 2002).

6. Robertson’s (2003) claim, however, that Cassirer saw Kant’s philosophy as providing “a systematic summation of the intellectual project of the entire Enlightenment” tends to overstate the role of Kant in Cassirer’s account. For a corrective, see Wright (2001, pp. 91-93).

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James Schmidt is professor of history and political science at Boston University. He is the editor of *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (University of California Press, 1996) and the author of numerous articles on the Enlightenment.