

Review

James Schmidt: Claiming the Enlightenment for the Left

Stephen Eric Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Towards a Politics of Radical Engagement*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004, 224pp., hardback \$31.00/£20.00, ISBN 0-231-12608-5; paperback (2006) \$19.00/£12.50, ISBN 0-231-12609-3.

At the start of his 1977 Lessing Prize address, the Auschwitz survivor Jean Améry reflected on the declining reputation of the Enlightenment and asked, ‘What sad aberration has brought us to the point where modern thinkers do not dare to employ concepts such as progress, humanization, and reason except within damning quotation marks?’ He placed the blame on a ‘brilliant work’ by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.¹ ‘In their effort to rescue the classical Enlightenment from the naïveté determined by its epoch and to develop it further dialectically, the authors let themselves be carried away and made horrendous claims that, taken literally, could serve as an alibi for the very worst kind of obscurantism’.²

In his brief but pugnacious book, Stephen Eric Bronner sets out to save the Enlightenment from Horkheimer and Adorno’s botched rescue mission. Their work, he maintains, is largely responsible for the neglect of the ‘political legacy’ of the Enlightenment among ‘progressive activists and intellectuals’ (p. x). He argues that, because they failed to appreciate ‘the democratic inheritance of the Enlightenment’, all they could offer as an alternative was a ‘metaphysical subjectivism’ that turned away from ‘any systematic concern with social movements and political institutions’. *Reclaiming the Enlightenment* aims at recovering this neglected political dimension of the Enlightenment and thus ‘to provide the sequel that Horkheimer and Adorno never wrote in a style they refused to employ’ (pp. 4–5).

It is possible that Bronner overestimates the impact of Horkheimer and Adorno’s staggeringly difficult book. As David Hollinger has noted, a ques-

¹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London, Allen Lane, 1973.

² Jean Améry, *Radical Humanism: Selected Essays*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984.

tioning of the legacy of the Enlightenment was – before French postmodernism scrambled the terms – one of the defining features of what used to be understood as ‘modernism’.³ And, once the Enlightenment was cast in the role of inaugurating what was now dubbed ‘modernity’, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-François Lyotard (none of whom seems to have had much familiarity with *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) probably did more than Horkheimer and Adorno to darken the reputation of the Enlightenment among academic leftists.

It is also easy to exaggerate the degree to which *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was concerned with ‘the Enlightenment’ at all. Bronner is aware that Horkheimer and Adorno had a rather elastic notion of enlightenment – in a letter to his friend Friedrich Pollock, Horkheimer traced its origins to ‘the first thought a human being conceived’ – and describes the book as ‘concerned with criticizing enlightenment generally, and the historical epoch known as the Enlightenment in particular’ (p. 3; see also p. 96).⁴ But it might be more accurate to say that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is principally concerned with ‘enlightenment in general’ and, occasionally, with the historical period known as ‘the Enlightenment’. Horkheimer may originally have had a more limited target in mind: Herbert Marcuse – who briefly worked on the book before being replaced by Adorno – seems to have thought that Carl Becker’s *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* would be relevant to the project.⁵ But in the book that Horkheimer wound up writing with Adorno, explicit discussions of eighteenth-century figures are scarce – for the most part they are confined to an excursus on Kant and Sade – and tend to be lost in a cast of characters that stretches from Oedipus and Odysseus through Francis Bacon, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud, and onward to Greta Garbo, Donald Duck and Adolf Hitler.

Horkheimer and Adorno’s ultimate target was nothing less than the conception of rationality they saw as dominating the modern world. While Jürgen Habermas countered their argument by suggesting that modern rationality is not quite as impoverished as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* would have us believe,⁶ Bronner pursues a different tack. Arguing that an assessment of the legacy of the Enlightenment must ultimately turn on ‘historical justifications’ rather than ‘metaphysical claims’ (p. 98), he intends to offer an

³ David Hollinger, ‘The Enlightenment and the Genealogy of Cultural Conflict in the United States’, in K. M. Baker and P. H. Reill (eds), *What’s Left of Enlightenment? A Postmodern Question*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2001, pp. 7–18.

⁴ Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by A. Schmidt and G. Schmid Noerr, Frankfurt am Main, S. Fischer, 1985, 19 vols, vol. 17, pp. 446, 3; see also p. 96.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, *Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1987.

account that examines the ‘actual movements with which enlightenment ideals, as against competing ideals, were connected’. Any discussion of the Enlightenment that ignores this ‘political history’ will, he argues, ‘necessarily take a purely academic form’ (p. 6).

Setting himself against what he dismisses as ‘current fashions and conceits’ (p. 10), Bronner has little interest in recent scholarship on the Enlightenment. He argues that studies exploring differences between ‘diverse national, religious, gender, generational, and regional “enlightenments”’ turn the Enlightenment into a ‘dead historical artifact’ and lose sight of its ‘unifying cosmopolitan spirit’ (pp. 10–11). While he grants that it may have been legitimate for Jonathan Israel and Margaret Jacob to distinguish between ‘radical’ and ‘moderate’ tendencies within the Enlightenment,⁷ he suggests – somewhat cryptically – that such distinctions are ‘better done in hindsight’ (p. 9). He takes ‘academic historians’ to task for being overly concerned with the various ‘internal debates’ that divided Enlightenment thinkers (p. 11) and chides Robert Darnton for focusing on ‘the resentment of its lesser known against its more famous representatives’ rather than exploring what Bronner sees as the central point: ‘the political conflict between the Enlightenment and the Counter-Enlightenment’ (pp. 11–12). *Reclaiming the Enlightenment*, he announces at the outset, ‘has no intention of pleasing the narrow specialist in any particular field’ (pp. 5–6).

Measured against that intention, it is likely to succeed. The book is plagued with errors, both small and large. Losing his way in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, Bronner credits Voltaire’s famous portrait of the Royal Exchange – that place where ‘the Jew, the Mahometan, and the Christian transact together as though they all professed the same religion’ – to one of Voltaire’s letters to Frederick the Great (p. 43). One can only hope that it is not just ‘narrow specialists’ who know that the quote comes from Voltaire’s *Letters Concerning the English Nation*. Bronner claims that Kant ‘retracted his support’ for the French Revolution when the Terror began (p. 57). But, while Kant may have condemned the execution of Louis XVI, he nevertheless remained – much to the consternation of his more conservative friends – steadfast in his defence of the Revolution.⁸ As evidence of how the *philosophes* put aside their differences and closed ranks in the face of a common threat, Bronner hails their opposition to ‘the attempt to censor Diderot’s *Encyclopaedia* in 1786’ (p. 69). But by 1786 the possibility of censoring the *Encyclopaedia*

⁷ Jonathan Irvine Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2001; Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1981.

⁸ Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 340–3.

had long passed (it had been in print for about 15 years and Europe was flooded with pirate editions) and a fair number of the *philosophes* (including Voltaire, Helvétius, Condillac, Diderot and D'Alembert) were dead. Olympe de Gouges is cited as an example of the commitment of the Enlightenment to a 'uniquely modern understanding of democracy' (p. 58), yet it was her continued defence of the monarchy that led to her execution during the Terror. Bronner assures us that 'most *philosophes* considered religious faith nothing more than superstition'. The generalization holds only if we ignore the efforts of John Toland, Joseph Priestley, and others to distinguish what they took to be the rational core of Christian teachings from the web of superstitions that were the product of what Toland called 'the craft of philosophers and priests'. Bronner may have little respect for 'narrow specialists', but it is surprising that a major university press would publish a book on the Enlightenment that apparently escaped review by a reader acquainted with the period.

The 'political history' of the Enlightenment that Bronner offers as an alternative is also rather problematic. He argues that the ideals of the Enlightenment originated in the 'expression of a bourgeois class on the rise against the hegemonic feudal values of the established society' and were subsequently taken up by 'liberal and socialist forces'. These ideals met with opposition from the 'forces of religious reaction, conservative prejudice, and fascist irrationalism whose inspiration derived from what Isaiah Berlin initially termed the "Counter-Enlightenment"'. Locked in a battle that has raged 'from 1789 until 1939 and into the present', the struggle between these two camps comes to a head in 'the epic battle that would culminate in Auschwitz' (pp. 6–8).

As a gripping tale of the struggle between the forces of good and evil, Bronner's story may have its attractions. But it rests on characterizations of the Enlightenment that have long ago been called into question. The more we learn about the social context of the Enlightenment, the harder it is to see the movement as the product of 'a bourgeois class on the rise'; it flourished thanks to friends in monarchy (could the *Encyclopedia* have been published without the help of Malesherbes?) and aristocrats with an interest in new ideas (*salonnières*, for example, tended to be women of considerable means); we also find a fair number of *abbés* in its ranks. Misunderstanding the argument of Darrin McMahon's nuanced discussion of how the image of an anti-monarchical, anti-clerical and socially radical Enlightenment was fabricated by Catholic critics of the *philosophes*,⁹ Bronner takes these fantasies as evidence for the radical challenge that the movement posed to the old regime (p. 11). While McMahon (whose name Bronner misspells)

⁹ Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001.

stressed the differences between the opponents of the *philosophes* he studies and the group of thinkers that Isaiah Berlin assembled together under the label 'Counter-Enlightenment',¹⁰ Bronner treats thinkers as diverse in their philosophical, confessional, and political allegiances as Johann Georg Hamann, Joseph de Maistre, and Martin Heidegger as members of a single tradition (pp. 63, 75–6). Yet it is not just 'Enlightenment' that has begun to appear in the plural: the same thing has happened to 'the Counter-Enlightenment'. As Graeme Garrard argues in an insightful survey of the concept, 'The Counter-Enlightenment, understood as a single movement, is a fiction, and not a particularly useful one at that. There were – and are – many Counter-Enlightenments.'¹¹

The legacy of the Enlightenment is a good deal messier than *Reclaiming the Enlightenment* would have us believe. To argue that liberalism was 'the principal political theory of the Enlightenment' (p. 41; see also p. 155) and to see 'the Counter-Enlightenment' as rabidly anti-liberal overlooks the fact that a fair number of enlighteners embraced a paternalistic conception of the state that had little in common with liberal conceptions of politics and that at least some of the thinkers consigned by Berlin to the ranks of the Counter-Enlightenment were decidedly liberal in their political views (e.g. Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi was a major influence on Wilhelm von Humboldt, whose work, in turn, had a decisive impact on the argument of Mill's *On Liberty*). More generally, the picture of liberalism and socialism as the heirs of the Enlightenment's legacy (pp. xii, 42, 65, 158) ignores the degree to which both were informed by traditions – for example, Romanticism – that have typically been associated with the Counter-Enlightenment. Indeed, it is hard to see how Berlin's own robust defence of liberalism can be separated from his devotion to those 'Counter-Enlightenment' thinkers who, according to Bronner, were laying the foundations for the totalitarian state.¹² Finally, there are at least some conservatives who see themselves as the descendants of Adam Smith and Edmund Burke rather than Joseph de Maistre and Louis Bonald: Bronner's attempt to reclaim the Enlightenment for the left has now been joined by Gertrude Himmelfarb's effort to do the same for the right.¹³ While Bronner may be correct that 'Too much emphasis has been

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. 8–9, and Darrin M. McMahon, 'The Real Counter-Enlightenment: The Case of France', in R. Wokler and J. Mali (eds), *Isaiah Berlin's Counter-Enlightenment*, Philadelphia, American Philosophical Society, 2003, pp. 92–3.

¹¹ Graeme Garrard, *Counter-Enlightenments: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2006, p. 4.

¹² Graeme Garrard, 'The Counter-Enlightenment Liberalism of Isaiah Berlin', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 2: 3 (1997), pp. 281–96.

¹³ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments*, 1st edn, New York, Knopf, 2004.

placed . . . on the connection between Enlightenment thinking and laissez-faire economics' (p. 155), it will probably take a stronger argument than this to persuade the denizens of the American Enterprise Institute to shed their Adam Smith ties.

Bronner has a relatively simple strategy for dealing with anything that might complicate his account of the legacy of the Enlightenment. He concedes that 'Enlightenment intellectuals were not pillars of political correctness' (p. 65), that they were sometimes 'elitist' and exhibited 'sexist and racist prejudices' (pp. 14, 33–4); he finds it 'impossible to excuse Voltaire for his anti-Semitism' (p. 12). But none of this is allowed to complicate his final judgement: while every member of the 'the Counter-Enlightenment' – from Hamann to Heidegger – was paving the path that would lead to Auschwitz, the failings of individual enlighteners are of no consequence for what he terms 'the enlightenment ethos' (p. 14). Bronner's brief discussion of Jacob Talmon's charge that Rousseau provided the philosophical support for 'totalitarian democracy' illustrates how simple it is to keep the legacy of the Enlightenment unsullied. He argues that, even if it were possible to trace such a legacy to Rousseau, then 'this would vindicate his alienation from the general liberal political tenor of the Enlightenment and suggest that the treatment of him as an enemy by Voltaire and his friends was justified' (p. 105). The argument is irrefutable – and hence empty: all Enlightenment thinkers are liberal and tolerant and those that aren't . . . well, they're not *really* part of the Enlightenment after all. Despite its author's admiration for Voltaire, there are passages in *Reclaiming the Enlightenment* that might have slipped from the pen of Doctor Pangloss.

Settling disputed legacies is probably a job best left to lawyers, not historians, and it may be unfair to subject what is ultimately an exercise in political rhetoric to the niggling standards of normal scholarship. Written in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, it is perhaps understandable that *Reclaiming the Enlightenment* tends to see the world in relatively simple terms: on one side the forces of religious toleration, democracy, individual liberty and human rights; on the other side, religious fanaticism, authoritarianism and tribal hatreds. Yet there is a case to be made – especially in difficult times – for questioning legacies rather than simply banking on them. In a badly mangled sentence (sadly, not the only one in a book that could have profited from further proofreading) Bronner muses, 'Strange is how the left critique of Enlightenment, supposedly undertaken from the standpoint of Enlightenment itself, should wind harboring [sic] affinities with the thinking of right-wing irrationalists and neo-romantics' (p. 124). But why should this be so strange? What intrigued Isaiah Berlin about Hamann was his suspicion that this bizarre, enigmatic, and untidy thinker might have understood things about the role of language and tradition in shaping our access to the world that Kant had missed. Something similar moved Max Horkheimer and

Theodor Adorno to seek, in the 'dark writers of the bourgeoisie', a testimony to the costs of progress that their more cheerful contemporaries were reluctant to consider. The courage to entertain doubts about what counts as enlightenment may be one of the more important legacies the Enlightenment has left us.