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What is the Enlightenment? Investigating the Origins and Ideological Uses of an Historical Category

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12. What is the Enlightenment? Investigating the Origins and Ideological Uses of an Historical Category

My title echoes the title of an essay that has as good a claim as any to have actually introduced one of the most pivotal and widespread categories in the study of Western history — Kant's 1784 contribution to the *Berlinische Monatsschrift, Beantwortung der Frage: was ist Aufklärung?* [*Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*] The context of Kant's essay deserves some description because it engenders questions about the stability, definition, and ideological significance of the term 'the Enlightenment' that I will pursue in this paper. For Kant did not write this essay to prove that he lived in an 'enlightened age,' as he expressly denies.[1] Rather he was responding to a debate in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* initially sparked by an anonymous essay urging that marriage no longer be performed by the clergy, but be placed entirely in the hands of the state. This opinion sparked a debate in Berlin's free-thinking intellectual monthly, including an essay strongly defending the religious nature of marriage by one Johann Friedrich Zöllner who, despairing of those who pretended to be so 'enlightened,' asked in a footnote, 'What is enlightenment? This question, which is almost as important as: *What is Truth?* should have been well answered before one begins to enlighten!'[2] Two of the subscribers to the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* obliged. The first was Moses Mendelssohn, who in an article entitled, *Über die Frage: Was heißt*

1 Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, in James Schmidt, ed., *What is Enlightenment: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 62.

2 'Was ist Aufklärung? Diese Frage, die beinahe so wichtig ist, als: was is Warheit, sollte doch wol beanwortet werden, ehe man aufzuklären anfinge!' Michael Albricht and Norbert Hinkse, *Was ist Aufklärung: Beiträge aus der Berlinische Monatsschrift* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990), xli.

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aufklären [*On the Question: What Does it Mean to Enlighten*], maintained that 'Enlightenment' stood for the rational theory of how to create a culture appropriate to the '*Bestimmung der Menschen*' — variously translated as the 'vocation' or (more dubiously) the 'destiny' of men.[3] The second person to reply was Immanuel Kant, who broached an issue also taken up by Mendelssohn, though Kant testifies that he only read Mendelssohn's contribution afterwards: this was the question of whether the 'enlightenment' of individual human beings could conflict with the welfare of the community as a whole. In his *Was ist Aufklärung*?, Kant unwittingly concurred with Mendelssohn that this conflict could indeed happen. A judge or clergyman might have to prop up popular prejudice from time to time in order protect civil order. But Kant, with his usual and often rewarding desire to get things nicely into categories, wished to distinguish between the duties of a person as a civil being, which demanded a high degree of conformity with received truth, and the liberties of the same person as a private citizen, which should be left largely untrammeled.

One imagines Kant being surprised to learn that this modest and rather conservative response to a grumpy footnote has come virtually to define the era in which he lived, spawning an industry of scholarly commentary in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries which, ripping his little essay out of its context, remembers it almost exclusively for its inaugural slogan '*Sapere aude*,' 'dare to know.'[4] And there is a reason for this use of *Was ist Aufklärung?* as the supposed manifesto of his era, a reason that goes well beyond the relatively narrow concerns of scholars occupied with understanding the eighteenth century. We do not usually like to dwell on the often covert ideological and political purposes of our ostensibly neutral and objective preconceptions as students of history. Yet, as I will argue, the slow evolution of that relatively modern preconception about eighteenth-century Europe — that this time and place experienced an 'Enlightenment' — has been historically driven by political aims extraneous to the facts of history.

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3 Albricht and Hinske, *Was ist Aufklärung?*, xv. 'Vocation' is the translation of 'Bestimmung' in Moses Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writing*, ed. and trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 314; 'destiny' is the translation in James Schmidt, ed., *What is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 54.

4 Immanuel Kant, 'What is Enlightenment?', in *The Philosophy of Kant*, ed. Carl J. Friedrich (New York: Modern Library, 1949), 132.

A suggestive place to begin this history of histories of the eighteenth century is at the origin of the English term 'the Enlightenment,' as used as a label for a historical epoch. The relevant definition of 'Enlightenment' in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a definition curiously unchanged since 1894, indicates that in the Victorian era this term was both rare and used in a sense very different from our present sense of a distinct historical era or movement. This definition reads,

> Sometimes used [after Ger. *Aufklärung, Aufklärerei*] to designate the spirit and aims of the French philosophers of the 18th c., or of others whom it is intended to associate with them in the implied charge of shallow and pretentious intellectualism, unreasonable contempt for tradition and authority, etc.

The illustrations are drawn from nineteenth-century books on German philosophy by J.H. Sterling and Edward Caird, both of whom use 'Enlightenment' in this largely pejorative and ironic sense to mean the kind of materialist skepticism inherited from the eighteenth century by contemporary writers like Renan, Feuerbach, and Buckle.[5] Both historians contend, moreover, that Kant and later Hegel set out not to perpetuate the 'Enlightenment,' but rather to correct it by re-establishing a respect for metaphysics and positive truth. The rarity of the term 'Enlightenment' is further suggested by J. Sibree's 1899 translation of Hegel's *Philosophy of History* where the translator notes that 'there is no current term in English denoting' Hegel's word *Aufklärung*, which he renders not as 'Enlightenment' but as 'éclaircissment.'[6]

As this evidence suggests, the provenance of the term 'Enlightenment' is not French, as we might expect, but rather German. During the Victorian period, the most admired English historian of eighteenth-century France, John Morley, never used this word, relying instead on the much narrower term 'Voltairism.'[7] Nor do even French historians of the nineteenth century talk about 'l'âge' or 'le siècle des lumières.' To cite the pre-eminent French histories of the eighteenth century, neither term is used in Tocqueville's *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* (1856) while 'le

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5 Edward Caird, *The Critical Philosophy of Immanuel Kant*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1889); James Hutchison Stirling, *The Secret of Hegel* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts and Green, 1865).

6 G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (1899; New York: Dover, 1936), 438, n.

7 This is the term used throughout Morley's most popular book, the hagiographic *Voltaire* (1872; London: MacMillan, 1923).

siècle des lumières' appears but once in Taine's *L'Ancien Régime* (1876) and there only in a mocking reference to what the *philosophes* mistakenly *thought* of themselves.[8] For Taine, like Tocqueville, viewed eighteenth-century France as a sad prelude to the volatile and self-destructive political situation of the nineteenth century. Among French historians of the early twentieth century, Lanson, Monet, and Hazard evidently never used 'l'âge des lumières' nor thought of that age as especially illuminated.

It was the Germans, who some modern historians deny really experienced an 'Enlightenment' at all, who first made systematic use of this term to describe a bounded period of time characterized by rational thought, the decline of superstition, and the rise of political liberties. Such is the depiction of the *Aufklärung* in Hegel's *The Philosophy of History*, and his categorization of the eighteenth century as a unified epoch of philosophical and political progress was later adopted by materialist Young Hegelians like Feuerbach. For the Young Hegelians, who rejected both Hegel's idealism and his ultimate political conservatism, the *Aufklärung* became a rallying cry, for it represented a golden era to be recovered in the joint causes of political liberation and national unity during the years leading to the 1848 revolution.[9] In *Geschichte der Deutschen Literatur im Achtzehnten Jahrhundert*, published in 1879 and for a long time a standard German history of the eighteenth century, the former Young Hegelian Hermann Hettner uses the term *Aufklärung* systematically to describe an era that remained a shining example of philosophical enlightenment and literary accomplishment. Much to the disgruntlement of his fellow liberals, Hettner lauded the blacksmith of German unity after 1871, Bismark, as the epigone of that previous strong-armed ruler, William the Great. In Hettner's enthused imagination, the new Prussian unifier, like the past one, would preside over a renaissance of German letters.[10]

How do we account for the fact that something close to our modern notion of the Enlightenment first emerged not in France and England, which most historians now regard as the sources of this period's intellectual climate, but rather in Germany? To answer this question, we must

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8 See Hippolyte Adolphe Taine, *Origines de la France contemporaine* (1876; Paris, 1885), 2:2. This is the only reference to 'le siècle des lumières' in the 1989 edition of *Le Robert*.

9 See the long historical introduction to Hermann Hettner's *Geschichte der Deutschen Literatur im Achtzehnten Jahrhundert*, 2 vols. (1879; Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1961) by Gotthard Erler, xxx-xxxv.

10 See Hettner, *Geschichte der Deutschen Literatur*, lvi-lviii.

refer to the historiographical style and political atmosphere of nineteenth-century Germany rather than to any singular talent among its historians. The conceptualization of the eighteenth century as a discrete and homogeneous period seems to have something to do, first, with the style of history influenced by Hegel, for Germans were for a long time more comfortable than either the English or the French with dividing history into distinct epochs. As suggested before, moreover, the *Aufklärung* served an important function in political and nationalistic discourse in the nineteenth century: the German Enlightenment both confirmed Germany's membership in the community of great European nations while also, with the *Aufklärung*'s distinct character and literary heroes, serving as a communal reference point during Germany's long march towards nationhood. Neither of these concerns drove historical discussion in France and England.

The German preoccupation with the Enlightenment, moreover, became even more complex and politicized during the first thirty-five years of the twentieth century. There were dozens of German books about the Enlightenment published during this era — a trend so pronounced that the absence of much mention of the Enlightenment in some significant historical publications of this time, such as Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, seems itself worthy of comment. The immense popularity of Spengler's tract, published in 1919, is usually attributed to the upsurge of irrationalism, relativism, and pessimism in post-war Germany, and indeed somewhat less starkly throughout Europe and America during the interbellum. As such a dark mood clearly conflicted with the ideals of rationalism, confidence, and progress usually associated with the Enlightenment, it is hardly surprising that Spengler's jeremiad gives short-shrift to the eighteenth century. Spengler interestingly prefigures recent conservative authors like Samuel P. Huntington, the author of the *Clash of Civilizations* (1996), in separating the alleged greatness of the 'West' from any particular 'Enlightenment': the West, suggest both authors, is great not because it experienced any particular improvement in the eighteenth century, but because the Western tradition has always been inherently (even racially) superior to the 'civilizations' that will ultimately overwhelm it. Nor is it surprising that his rationalist and liberal opponents rushed to defend this period as an era of both illumination and German greatness. A whole series of books argued this position,[11] but none more influentially than Ernst Cassirer's *Die Philoso-*

11 See, for example, Marianne Bener-Frölich, *Höhe und Krise der Aufklärung* (Leipzig:

phie der Aufklärung, first published in 1931, but not translated into English until 1951. In defending the Enlightenment, and in particular the German Enlightenment, as a period that nobly sought to align human reason with the realties of nature, giving rise to a unified intellectual movement that reached a world-historic apogee in the writings of Immanuel Kant, Cassirer was not merely advancing a scholarly riposte to skeptics of this period. As a Jewish liberal intellectual, increasingly embattled in a bitter and increasingly anti-semitic Germany, he set out on the implicitly political mission of refocusing German pride on the supposed liberalism and rationalism of the *Aufklärung*.[12]

In the meantime, and in the future home of Enlightenment studies, the United States, the term 'Enlightenment' had begun to seep into scholarly language. In 1910, a Princeton Professor named John Grier Hibben published a book called *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* which seems highly indebted to German scholarship. In 1931, another American, Norman Lewis Torrey, produced an enthusiastic appraisal of the French eighteenth century entitled *Voltaire and the Enlightenment*. Without comparison, however, the most influential American book on the eighteenth century during the first half of the twentieth century was *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (1932), by the John Wendell Anderson Professor of History at Cornell, Carl Lotus Becker (who, despite his Germanic name, came not from Germany but from Kansas). The tale of Becker's career points a moral to all of us about the vanity of scholarly wishes. He was a fine historian specializing in Jefferson and the American Revolution, and he enjoyed the reputation of being virtually the dean of American historians during the 1930s and 1940s. *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, his most popular book, sold about 2,500 copies during the first decade after its publication, and a further 5,500 copies during the following decades.[13] Its popularity and influence was such that a conference was assembled at Colgate University in October 1956 to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1931 lectures at Yale University that subsequently became the

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Verlag von Philipp Reclam, jn., 1934); F. Brüggeman, *Aus der Frühzeit der deutschen Aufklärung* (Weimar: Herm. Böhhaus; Wien: Öster. Bundesverlag, 1928); and Emil Ermatinger, *Durch Aufklärung zur wahren Menchlichkeit* (Leipzig: Verlag von Philipp Reclam, jn., 1932).

12 See David R. Lipton, *Ernst Cassirer: The Dilemma of a Liberal Intellectual in Germany, 1914-1933* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 164-66.

13 Raymond O. Rockwood, 'Preface' to *Carl Becker's Heavenly City Revisited* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958; repr. New York: Archon Books, 1968), v-vi.

book. But this conference on Carl Becker, which in turn was published as a collection of essays, was evidently not a happy occasion for Becker's ghost. It was more like an exorcism. Led by a young and precocious Peter Gay, scholar after scholar lined up to show who dared be rudest about this formerly revered authority. The probable winner of this prize was one Edward Whiting Fox, who in a paper entitled 'Reflections on the Trial of Carl Lotus Becker,' bowed in Gay's direction by calling him 'our chief prosecutor,'[14] and then went on to convict the personally shy and gnomic Becker (who had died in 1943) as a master of 'fakery,' someone 'downright irresponsible,' comparable to Machiavelli, except that 'Machiavelli was a much better historian, and, for that matter, so much more serious and responsible a citizen.'[15]

In American academia of the 1950s, in short, the 'Enlightenment' had apparently arrived. It had arrived, moreover, as a concept that carried an explosive ideological charge. So, what had Carl Becker said in 1931 that some American scholars of the mid 1950s found so important to demolish? In *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, Becker contended in the witty and evasive style that was his trademark that the *philosophes* wished in fact to create a rationalist Utopia no less dogmatic and preposterous than the Kingdom of God imagined by Aquinas and the schoolmen of the Middle Ages. While well received in the 1930s, such *blasé* skepticism enflamed outrage in the 1950s. In the words of one participant in his 'trial,' Becker was 'perhaps the most outstanding American proponent of historical relativism':[16] he cultivated a pose of professorial nihilism and, like many scholars of his generation, found attractively ironic the notion that rationalism was just as dogmatic and empty as scholasticism. But events since 1931 had made such a posture ugly, particularly among the 1950s liberals who dominated this conference. In the words of another participant, R.R. Palmer of Princeton University, 'Since Hitler and the Soviet rewriting of history,' 'There has been considerable reaction against historical relativism.'[17] The men and occasional woman who congregated at Colgate University in

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14 Edward Whiting Fox, 'Reflections on the Trial of Carl Lotus Becker,' in *Carl Becker's Heavenly City Revisited*, ed. Raymond O. Rockwood, 175.

15 Ibid, 181, 186.

16 Geoffrey Bruun, 'Carl Becker and the Dignity of Man,' in *Carl Becker's Heavenly City Revisited*, ed. Rockwood, 77.

17 R.R. Palmer, 'Thoughts on *The Heavenly City*,' in *Carl Becker's Heavenly City Revisited*, ed. Rockwood, 127.

1956 wanted firm rational truths of a liberal provenance, and they did not want these truths to be confused with doctrines at this point aligned in varying shades of clarity with their enemies: Fascism, Christianity, and faith religions in general.

Nonetheless, the skepticism embodied by Carl Becker endured during the post-war period, though with various new ideological inflections. As we have seen, arguments unsympathetic to eighteenth-century 'Enlightenment' had proliferated since the nineteenth century, though their orientation had tended to be philosophically and politically conservative. With the experience of Nazism and the Holocaust, however, one branch of liberals began to raise doubts about the ultimate historical virtues of what they called the Enlightenment. Among these doubting liberals was, significantly, Ernst Cassirer. At the conference at Colgate University in 1956, Cassirer's *The Philososphy of the Enlightenment*, first translated five years earlier, was repeatedly lauded as the best corrective to Becker's *Heavenly City*.[18] A decade later, in the first of his two-volume study of the Enlightenment, Peter Gay stated that 'my greatest debt is to the writings of Ernst Cassirer.'[19] Yet the book Cassirer wrote at the end of his life as a refugee in wartime New York City, *Myth and the State*, reveals a significant change of heart. The Nazis, wrote Cassirer, had combined the regressive and mystifying powers of myth with technological advances and the methodological precision made possible by the Enlightenment.[20] And if Cassirer found the Enlightenment partly guilty for the draconian evil of the Nazis, his fellow German-Jewish exiles in America, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, placed the guilt of Nazism fully at the door of Voltaire and his friends. In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), written during the same years as Cassirer's *Myth and the State*, these scholars from the Frankfurt School portrayed the *Aufklärung* as propounding a rationalist dogma entirely without capacity for self-criticism, and therefore bearing a potential for the massively efficient and dehumanizing myth-making perfected jointly by the American 'culture industry' and Nazi propaganda.[21]

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18 See Rockwood, ed., *Carl Becker's Heavenly City Revisited*, 12, 40, 63, 146.

19 Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York: Norton, 1966-1969), 1:423.

20 See Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), 282-92.

21 Comparable to the thesis famously advanced by Horkeheimer and Adorno is that of another liberal German, Reinhart Koselleck. In *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and*

In the post-war period, therefore, liberal pitched against liberal in a debate about both the nature of the Enlightenment and its historical fallout. This was a debate with real ideological stakes, provoking serious political passions. Peter Gay, like Cassirer, Horkheimer, and Adorno, had come to the United States in the 1930s as a refugee from Nazi anti-Semitism, subsequently changing his name from Peter Frölich in a conscious effort, as he admits in his autobiography *My German Question*, to shed his German past and to re-create himself as a liberal American.[22] Gay's highly influential two-volume *The Enlightenment*, published between 1966 and 1969, is a barely disguised defense of an optimistic secular liberalism opposed both to pessimism about Western civilization and to what he, perhaps prophetically, regarded as the rising conservatism of his adopted nation — a trend he associated particularly with the pernicious influence of Christianity. Gay's *philosophes* are, above all, heroic anti-Christians, champions of Gay's favorite virtue, 'decency,' against persecuting eighteenth-century Christian zealots who sound in his book a lot like Nazis.[23] On the other hand, fellow American liberals like Lester Crocker and Louis Bredvold wrote books on the Enlightenment lamenting the breakdown of civilization as the result of the Kafkaesque systematizing of the modern age inaugurated by the Enlightenment.[24]

For all their differences, however, these post-World War II scholars had certain premises in common. Most obviously, they believed that something they called the 'Enlightenment' had actually happened during the eighteenth century, though they disagreed widely about the nature of this event. It is, moreover, of considerable significance that

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the Pathogenesis of Modern Society, first published in German in 1959 and then translated into English amidst a liberal backlash against the Enlightenment during the 1980s, Koselleck argues that the separation of bourgeois moral critique from the supposed realm of 'politics' during the Enlightenment ensured that the epigones of this revolution would uncritically, and fatally, understand themselves as 'moral' rather than 'political' agents.

22 See Peter Gay, *My German Question: Growing Up in Nazi Berlin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

23 Ibid.

24 See Lester G. Crocker, *An Age of Crisis: Man and World in Eighteenth-Century French Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1959); Crocker, *Nature and Culture: Ethical Thought in the French Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1963); and Louis I. Bredvold, *The Brave New World of the Enlightenment* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961).

the main figures who launched the main currents of this debate were not only Jewish — and therefore most personally embroiled in events that had raised burning questions about the progress or corruption of Western culture — but also German. Post-Hegelian styles of periodization, as well as an academic preoccupation about the *Aufklärung* typical of German scholarship, made the category of the 'Enlightenment' far more comfortable in a German context than elsewhere. With the westward diaspora of German academia, the sheer power of the American academic industry ensured that the category of the Enlightenment was chiseled into the canonical language of historians throughout the English-speaking world, and even in France. In his deservedly famous essay, 'What is Enlightenment?', Michel Foucault troubles between an epochal notion of the 'Enlightenment' that he cannot quite reject (being, at least at times, a Procrustean divider of epochs), and his sympathetic impulse to regard Kant's *Was ist Aufklärung* as only a worried self-refection on what it means to be either 'enlightened' or 'free' — not as the manifesto of an era, that is, but as the expression of an 'attitude' towards a fleeting historical moment. Foucault shows a recent French tendency to flirt, and only to flirt, with the late-twentieth-century Enlightenment lovingly embraced in America. In contrast, American versions of the Enlightenment have in recent decades become virtually Bismarkian in their confidence in epochal definition and the eschatological promise of history. 'In America,' wrote the high-ranking historian Henry Steele Commager in 1977, '. . . the Enlightenment not only survived but triumphed.'[25] Only in America, claimed this writer, had the Enlightenment succeeded as a social reality and as a theory as well.

And the question of the Enlightenment unfolds even today. Over the last twenty years or so, post-modern scholars have hardened 'the Enlightenment' into a nefarious historical conspiracy, what John Gray and others call 'the Enlightenment project,' a conscious and profoundly wrong-headed movement ending in the attempt of a Western elite to impose its brutal and self-interested systems, its soulless and misogynistic bureaucracies and corporations, on its own citizens in the West and on the rest of the world.[26] Such anti-Enlightenment philippics have

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25 Henry Steele Commager, *The Empire of Reason: How Europe Imagined and America Realized the Enlightenment* (Garden City and New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977), xii.

26 See, for example, John Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age* (London: Routledge, 1995); Michael Luntley, *Reason, Truth and Self: The Postmodern Reconsidered* (London: Routledge, 1995); and John Ralston Saul,

tended to be 'liberal' in a sense opposed, ironically, to the sort of pro-American liberalism exemplified by Peter Gay's volumes in the 1960s. Conversely, *pro*-Enlightenment discourse, traditionally associated with liberal ideologies, has become common on the political 'right,' particularly following the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001: we are all familiar with the glib line rehearsed by politicians and editorialists that this event marked the attack of a 'civilization' that had not experienced an 'Enlightenment' on one that had. Yet even this summary of the realignment of recent attitudes about the Enlightenment needs adjustment. Some recent neo-conservative writing on the eighteenth century, such as Stephen Miller's recent *Three Deaths and Enlightenment Thought* (Miller is a former fellow of the American Enterprise Institute, as well as a contributing editor to the neocon journal *The Wilson Quarterly*), attempts to redefine this period as a time of essential faith in traditional values and Christianity, utterly contradicting the historical outlook of secular liberals such as Peter Gay.[27] Similarly, the American champion of Victorian morality, Gertude Himmelfarb, the (even) biological mother of neo-conservative notable Irving Kristol, celebrates in a new book the solid conservative virtues of the English and American 'Enlightenments' against the disruptive and preening *lumières* across the English Channel.[28]

So, what of us who actually weave at the loom of eighteenth-century history? It seems to me that the upshot of this history of histories of our specialty is both cautionary and empowering. The moral is cautionary because the category of the 'Enlightenment' has in fact little of the stability and certainty that we are apt to ascribe to it: virtually all the historians whom I have mentioned have disagreed vastly about what

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Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992).

27 Stephen Miller, *Three Deaths and Enlightenment Thought* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2001).

28 Gertude Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments* (New York: Knopf, 2004). Alas, it seems that there is still more: in the weeks following the re-election of President George W. Bush, there have been signs of a revival of a *liberal* identification with the Enlightenment, as writers worry publicly about the decline of America's 'Enlightenment' legacy in the face of the competing Christian heritage that previously unsettled Peter Gay and his liberal allies of the 1950s and 1960s. See, for example, Timothy Garton Ash, 'Amerian Blues: Our Liberal Cousins are in Despair. Defenders of the Enlightenment Unite!' *The Guardian*, Nov. 18, 2004, on-line, http://www.guardian.co.uk/Columnists/Column/0,5673,13353696,00.html.

the 'Enlightenment' means. Moreover, their underlying assumption that we can characterize an entire period under a single label denoting a specific set of attitudes surely raises serious historiographical problems that we need to ponder. We also need to think about what, perhaps, is motivating us to portray this supposed Enlightenment as we do, for the history of studies of this period has been expressly driven by ideological, political, and nationalistic motives. On the other hand, we eighteenth-century scholars might also indulge a sensation of empowerment. What we say about the eighteenth century in fact matters outside our offices and lecture-rooms, for the idea of the Enlightenment, however ill-informed, has shaped and continues to shape how the Western public and its leaders think and behave. As we debate and inform each other about the eighteenth century here and elsewhere, we may be influencing the world rather more than we suspect.

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