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HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEWS

THE POLITICS OF ENLIGHTENMENT: FROM PETER GAY TO JONATHAN ISRAEL*

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ABSTRACT. *According to the textbook version of history, the Enlightenment played a crucial role in the creation of the modern, liberal democracies of the West. Ever since this view—which we might describe as the modernization thesis—was first formulated by Peter Gay, it has been repeatedly criticized as misguided: a myth. Yet, as this paper shows, it continues to survive in postwar historiography, in particular in the Anglophone world. Indeed, Gay’s most important and influential successors—historians such as Robert Darnton and Roy Porter—all ended up defending the idea that the Enlightenment was a major force in the creation of modern democratic values and institutions. More recently, Jonathan Israel’s trilogy on the Enlightenment has revived the modernization thesis, albeit in a dramatic new form. Yet, even Israel’s work, as its critical reception highlights, does not convincingly demonstrate that the Enlightenment, as an intellectual movement, contributed in any meaningful way to the creation of modern political culture. This conclusion raises a new question: if the Enlightenment did not create our modern democracies, then what did it do? In answer to that question, this paper suggests that we should take more seriously the writings of enlightened monarchists like Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger. Studying the Enlightenment might not allow us to understand why democratic political culture came into being. But, as Boulanger’s work underscores, it might throw light on an equally important problem: why democracy came so late in the day.*

For centuries, Europeans lived under the combined tyranny of priest and king. The Renaissance and Reformation dented the power of this hybrid monster over men’s minds. But around the turn of the eighteenth century, a much more fundamental challenge to the status quo emerged. A new generation of men

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(for this is a story without women) stood up and cast off the shackles of superstition and authority in the name of reason. Taking their cue from Holland and especially England, the most liberal European nations, they waged a war for religious and political freedom. The generals of this war, a little flock of self-styled 'philosophes', resided in France, but troops were enlisted throughout the whole of Europe. Displaying great courage, wit, and perseverance, they managed to gain the upper hand against the forces of darkness. By the end of the eighteenth century, a mental revolution had been achieved. The events of 1776 and 1789 were the outcome of this intellectual sea-change. The modern, liberal democracies they created put the philosophes' programme into practice.

We all know this story. It is, of course, the textbook version of Enlightenment history: the Enlightenment as a revolutionary force that contributed to the making of modern, political culture. Nowadays, not that many historians would admit to taking it seriously. The idea that philosophes like Voltaire or Montesquieu had anything to do with the overthrow of the Old Regime in Europe has been repeatedly dismissed as misguided, a myth. Nonetheless, this narrative arguably continues to inform much recent work on the Enlightenment. And recent work means not just the overviews produced by hapless textbook writers who lack the time or energy to wade through the latest scientific papers, but the scholarship produced by Enlightenment specialists who have devoted their lives to the study of the eighteenth century. Why has this been the case? How can we explain the iron grip of the modernization thesis over our historical imagination? And, more importantly, how do we get rid of it? If the Enlightenment did not make modern political culture, then what did it do?

I

How did the modernization thesis come into being in the first place? Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Rousseau were firmly convinced of their own historical importance. They believed that they and their brethren were united in a campaign to modernize the world – that is, to make it less superstitious, more rational, in a word, more enlightened. But they did not think they were trying to overthrow the Old Regime. When the philosophes talked about the need to *écraser l'infâme*, they meant the church, not royal absolutism. They defined their age as one of reason, not freedom. That did not mean they had nothing to say about politics. But their political convictions were much too disparate to speak about a specific programme. They certainly were not trying to establish a democratic republic in France or elsewhere.¹

¹ For the self-definition of the 'philosophical' movement, the anonymous tract 'Le philosophe' is probably the most useful source. In Robert Darnton's words, 'Le philosophe' 'defined the ideal type of the worldly, witty freethinker, who held everything up to the critical light of reason and especially scorned the doctrines of the Catholic Church' (Robert Darnton,

The first to suggest otherwise were not the philosophes themselves, but their enemies. After the Revolution, Frenchmen on both the left and the right who tried to understand where it had all gone wrong were quick to fault the philosophes.² Rousseau in particular was blamed for the violent overthrow of the Old Regime and for the descent of the Revolution into republicanism and the Terror. But the firm link thus established between Enlightenment and Revolution served the reputation of the philosophes well once painful memories had receded and a new and more positive view of the achievements of 1789 had taken hold. Under the Third Republic, the philosophes suddenly became fashionable. Voltaire and the other philosophes were now celebrated as republican precursors who had rightly criticized the many abuses of the Old Regime. Thus, the black legend was replaced with its mirror opposite: the philosophes were responsible not for all that was worst, but for what was best in modern political culture.³

Debate between enemies and advocates of the Enlightenment further intensified in the wake of the political turmoil in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s. The communist take-over in Russia, the rise of Nazism and fascism in the European heartland, the violence of two world wars – these dramatic events left many to wonder, just like nineteenth-century Frenchmen had done: where exactly had it all gone wrong? Two competing answers were proposed: too little *philosophie*, or too much. The ensuing debate initially centred on the relationship between the Enlightenment's philosophical project and the new political phenomena of the interwar period. Was the eighteenth-century turn to reason responsible for the rise of fascism and communism, or were the problems of the twentieth century on the contrary provoked by a lack of Enlightenment rationalism? German philosophers such as Ernst Cassirer, or Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, provided their readers with very different answers to this question.⁴

The forbidden best-sellers of pre-revolutionary France (New York, NY, and London, 1991), p. 89). The tract originally appeared in 1743, and was later republished in the *Encyclopédie* as well as being re-issued separately by Voltaire.

² As Darrin McMahon has pointed out in his by now classic study of the French Counter-Enlightenment, opponents of the Enlightenment had warned even before 1789 that 'the triumph of philosophie augured regicide, anarchy, and the annihilation of religion.' McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: the French counter-Enlightenment and the making of modernity* (Oxford, 2001), p. 11. However, these claims of course gained much broader currency after the descent of the Revolution into the Terror.

³ On the celebration of the philosophes as republican precursors under the Third Republic, and more generally for an excellent overview of the genesis of Enlightenment studies, see Lynn Hunt, with Margaret Jacob, 'Enlightenment studies', in Alan Kors, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment* (4 vols., Oxford, 2002), 1, pp. 418–30.

⁴ Much excellent work has been produced on the interwar debate about the Enlightenment. See, for instance, on the context in which Cassirer's work took shape: Peter Gordon, *Continental divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 291–300. On Horkheimer's and Adorno's critique of the Enlightenment, see Martin Jay, *The dialectical imagination: a history of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923–1950* (Berkeley, CA, 1973), pp. 253–80.

All this is of course familiar terrain, but perhaps less frequently noted is that the debate took a slightly different turn in the 1950s. Scholars now came to focus more explicitly on the political thought of the philosophes than on their metaphysical or epistemological presuppositions. In this context, an earlier critique of the philosophes' political thought was revived by historians such as Jacob Talmon, a Polish émigré who had spent the war in Cambridge and London and who ended up as a professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Talmon was catapulted into fame in 1952 with the publication of a book on the origins of totalitarianism. He blamed not just the Terror but the rise of totalitarianism on the philosophes. Rousseau in particular was held responsible for the ideas which had led to Hitler and Stalin.⁵

Talmon's book as well as similar publications created a fierce debate in the Anglophone world, not just among students of totalitarianism, but also in the budding field of Enlightenment studies. The London-based historian Alfred Cobban published an indignant reply in 1960. A life-long student of French history, Cobban is now probably best remembered for his critique of the Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution. But his book on the eighteenth century, *In search of humanity: the role of the Enlightenment in modern history*, had a very different target. Cobban set out to refute Talmon by rehabilitating eighteenth-century political thought. He ended up doing much more. *In search of humanity* did not just correct Talmon's overblown claims, it presented the flip side of the black legend. The horrors of the twentieth century were not a product of the Enlightenment. Quite the opposite, Cobban argued: the Enlightenment had provided the intellectual foundation for the liberal democracies that had ended up saving the world from Nazism and fascism.⁶

The debate between Talmon and Cobban might have remained an interesting footnote in Cold War history, if it had not been for the work of Peter Gay. One of the many Jewish-German émigrés to wash up on the shores of the land of liberty in the wake of Hitler's rise to power, Gay went on to a brilliant career in the American academy. More than anyone else, he was responsible for stimulating interest in the Enlightenment in the Anglophone world. He was a mentor, inspiration, and punching bag for many younger Enlightenment scholars, even after he had moved on to the greener pastures of Weimar history

The work of the American historian Carl Becker, who detected a link between the Enlightenment's naïve faith in progress and reason and twentieth-century communist utopianism, needs to be read in the context of this debate as well. See Johnson Kent Wright, 'The pre-postmodernism of Carl Becker', in Daniel Gordon, ed. *Postmodernism and the Enlightenment: new perspectives in eighteenth-century French intellectual history* (New York, NY, 2001), pp. 161–78.

⁵ Jacob Talmon, *The origins of totalitarian democracy* (1952; London, 1961). For an overview of Talmon's intellectual trajectory, see Arie Dubnov, 'Priest or jester? Jacob L. Talmon (1916–1980) on history and intellectual engagement', *History of European Ideas*, 34 (2008), pp. 133–45.

⁶ Alfred Cobban, *In search of humanity: the role of the Enlightenment in modern history* (London, 1960).

in the 1970s. It is also Gay who was the main advocate of the modernization thesis in the Anglophone academy – and that is why this paper discusses his views on the Enlightenment in some detail.⁷

The Cold War context is crucial to understanding Gay's work. From the very beginning of his career, Gay set out to rescue the Enlightenment from critics like Talmon and other conservatives.⁸ This led him to focus in his early work on the political thought of the philosophes. One of his very first articles was a survey of the place of the Enlightenment in the history of political thought, in which he described the existing literature on the subject as marred by 'neglect compounded by misconceptions'.⁹ Gay set about correcting these misconceptions with admirable energy and eloquence. In a book-length study of Voltaire's political thought, published in 1959, Gay stressed the pragmatism of his subject. Voltaire was revealed not as a utopian dreamer, but as a hard-headed realist, a relativist, who understood that different forms of government might be necessary under different historical circumstances. Gay kept on hammering this nail in subsequent work. In 1964, he wrote that 'the philosophes' hope for transforming the world was modest indeed'. They had never peddled utopianism.¹⁰

It is one of Gay's enduring legacies that few historians nowadays take Talmon's views seriously (although it should be noted that the same cannot be said of non-historians). But, like Cobban, Gay did more than demolish the black legend of the Enlightenment. He contributed a great deal to the creation of a new one: that the Enlightenment was at the basis not of the worst, but of the best in the modern political culture of the West. To Gay, that meant that the philosophes had invented the kind of modern, liberal values and institutions that made his newfound homeland, the United States, so different from the dehumanizing and illiberal regimes of Hitler and Stalin. Gay's seminal work on the Enlightenment – a two-volume history published in 1966–9 – described the

⁷ On Peter Gay's life and career, see Robert L. Dietle and Mark S. Micale, 'Peter Gay. A life in history', in Mark S. Micale and Robert L. Dietle, eds., *Enlightenment, passion, modernity. Historical essays in European thought and culture* (Stanford, CA, 2000), pp. 1–23. Dietle and Micale remark that 'Gay first organized his ideas about the Enlightenment in the 1940s and 1950s; against the backdrop of twentieth-century challenges to freedom by fascism and communism, the Western liberal-rationalist tradition, he believed, very much deserved affirmation.' *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁸ In one of his earliest scholarly papers, Gay identified 'the so-called "New Conservatives" like John H. Hallowell and Russell Kirk', as 'the authors most responsible for perpetuating clichés about the Enlightenment'. See 'The Enlightenment in the history of political theory', *Political Science Quarterly*, 69 (1954), p. 375. In his 1964 book, *The party of humanity: essays in the French Enlightenment* (New York, NY, 1964), Gay went on to criticize Talmon repeatedly while praising Cobban's *In search of humanity*. See, for instance, his discussion of both historians, pp. 176–7. In this sense, the writings of Talmon and the New Conservatives formed a more immediate context for the genesis of Gay's interest in the Enlightenment than his critique of Carl Becker, even though Gay later came to put more emphasis on Becker as a foil against which his own arguments took shape.

⁹ Gay, 'The Enlightenment in the history of political theory', p. 375.

¹⁰ Gay, *The party of humanity*, p. 176.

men of the Enlightenment as united on a 'vastly ambitious program', a programme meant to foster not just secularism, humanity, and cosmopolitanism, but above all 'freedom in its many forms'.¹¹ 'Enlightened politics', Gay wrote, was essentially 'modern liberal politics', which called for 'parliamentary regimes, political parties, widespread literacy, and a free press'.¹²

The only problem with this rousing vision was that it did not quite fit with the facts. Many philosophes, including Gay's own Voltaire, were not at all that politically radical. As Gay himself was the first to admit, there was very little evidence that they were working towards the overthrow of the Old Regime. But it was also far from clear that the philosophes were laying the intellectual foundations of the liberal democracies of the West. Voltaire, for instance, might have admired the English parliamentary regime, but he was careful to point out that it was not necessarily a model for continental nations such as France. And he repeatedly expressed a dislike for democracy. Men were rarely worthy of self-government, Voltaire wrote in his *Philosophical dictionary*. Republics were suitable only for little peoples, who hid away on islands or in the mountains, 'like rabbits trying to get away from carnivores'. Moreover, it was not a durable form of government, for in the end, those rabbits were usually found and devoured by their monarchical neighbours.¹³

Gay developed several strategies for explaining away remarks such as these. In his book on Voltaire, he put great emphasis on the oppressive political atmosphere of eighteenth-century France to explain his hero's lack of radicalism. He depicted Voltaire as a man 'in mortal, not wholly unjustified fear of the authorities', who had often been allusive and evasive to escape scrutiny by the censors.¹⁴ But this did not fully explain Voltaire's consistent and life-long support for royal absolutism in France. Gay therefore invoked a second justification. The reactionary nature of eighteenth-century French society, he argued, had forced the philosophe to renounce his innate liberalism. Deep down, Gay believed, Voltaire would have preferred a representative government. But he had supported absolutism 'for the sake of reform'.¹⁵ Voltaire's more unpalatable views were therefore either dishonest, or, at best, wholly instrumental.

Gay's attempts to explain away the philosophes' support for the status quo in France became particularly convoluted in his two-volume history of the Enlightenment. It was true that the philosophes had often been chummy with the powers that be, Gay admitted in the opening pages of his book. This alliance

¹¹ Gay, *The Enlightenment: an interpretation* (2 vols., New York, NY, 1966–9), I: *The rise of modern paganism*, p. 18.

¹² *Ibid.*, II: *The science of freedom*, p. 450.

¹³ Voltaire, 'États, gouvernements', in *Dictionnaire philosophique: comprenant les 118 articles parus sous ce titre du vivant de Voltaire, avec leurs suppléments parus dans les Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*, ed. J. Benda and R. Naves (Paris, 1954), p. 188 [ARTFL]. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁴ Peter Gay, *Voltaire's politics: the poet as a realist* (1959; New Haven, CT, 1988), p. xiii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

'cost them heavily', 'distorted their tactics', 'long circumscribed their freedom of action', 'sometimes seduced them into intellectual dishonesty', and 'blurred their radicalism'. For readers who were left wondering how such a decidedly un-radical radicalism had been able to contribute to the downfall of the Old Regime, Gay came up with yet another hypothesis. Their religious unorthodoxy, Gay suggested, made political radicalism all but inevitable. 'The intellectual revolution over which the Enlightenment presided pointed to the abolition of hierarchy as much as to the abolition of God', Gay wrote, even if 'most of the philosophes found much to cherish in the existing order.'¹⁶

These strategies allowed Gay to conclude that the Enlightenment pointed in one single direction: the foundation of modern, liberal political culture. The American Revolution – rather than its more problematic French counterpart – was chosen as the finale for Gay's magnum opus. He described the founding fathers as the true heirs of the philosophes. The *Federalist* was Gay's prime exhibit – 'a classic work of the Enlightenment, a worthy successor to Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois*',¹⁷ a 'document', in short, 'of the Enlightenment in its hopeful realism'.¹⁸ With the creation of their modern republic, the philosophical founding fathers had become 'pioneers of modernity'.¹⁹ Thus, Gay made clear again that Voltaire's support for royal absolutism, or, for that matter, Rousseau's direct democracy, had no real place in the story of the Enlightenment.

II

Gay's summa came under attack almost immediately after its publication. Historians found much to criticize in his account. They were especially dismissive about Gay's main thesis: that the 'little flock of philosophes' was responsible for laying the groundwork for modern, liberal democracy. To attribute a world-historical importance to what was after all but a handful of thinkers and texts seemed highly questionable to the new generation of *dix-huitièmistes* who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. Gay had tried to pre-empt such criticism by arguing that his was a 'social' history of ideas, which was very different from the intellectual history practised by philosophers such as Ernst Cassirer. His critics, however, were not convinced. For the next few decades, the hunt was on for a more robust, less philosophical understanding of the Enlightenment. It would bring historians from Roger Chartier's *Bibliothèque bleue* to Habermasian coffeehouses and salons.²⁰

¹⁶ Gay, *The Enlightenment*, I: *Rise of modern paganism*, p. 25.

¹⁷ Gay, *The Enlightenment*, II: *Science of freedom*, p. 563.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 566.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Gay, *The Enlightenment*, II: *Science of freedom*, pp. ix–x. For an influential critique of Gay's methodology, see Robert Darnton, 'In search of the Enlightenment: recent attempts to create a social history of ideas', *Journal of Modern History*, 43 (1971), pp. 113–32. On the *Bibliothèque bleue*, see Roger Chartier, *Lectures et lecteurs dans la France d'ancien régime* (Paris, 1987).

But more substantive concerns were raised as well. Intellectual historians were quick to seize upon the weak point in Gay's analysis: the overwhelming evidence that many of the philosophes had been much more supportive of the status quo than Gay had been willing to admit. Studies of key Enlightenment texts such as the *Encyclopédie* showed that these in no way pointed towards the more democratic regimes introduced by the American or French Revolution.²¹ Similarly, an increased interest in the Enlightenment 'peripheries' of Spain, England, or Prussia showed that an enlightened outlook on man and the world could very well gain adherents without leading to revolution or the overthrow of the Old Regime.²²

Nevertheless, the modernization thesis, in one form or another, has continued to exercise its hold over Enlightenment scholarship until the present day. It did not just survive in the textbook version of history, but it was also never really abandoned by Gay's most influential successors. Why was this the case? The persistence of the black legend goes a long way to answer that question. Especially from the 1980s onwards, detractors of the Enlightenment regained a large audience in the Anglophone world, not just or even mainly among conservatives, as it had been the case in the 1950s, but also among left-wing, 'postmodern' intellectuals.²³ In order to rebut the postmodernists' accusations, Enlightenment scholars often invoked the modernization thesis. But less ideological issues also played a role. Historians struggled to come up with an alternative vision of the Enlightenment, one that gave their subject a similar importance and grandeur. Especially when addressing an audience of

Jürgen Habermas's 1962 study *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* was translated into English by Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA) in 1989 and has exercised a considerable influence on Enlightenment studies in the Anglophone world since the 1990s. See, for instance, Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: a cultural history of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, NY, 1994). For a more general appraisal of the turn away from intellectual history since the 1970s, see Carla Hesse, 'Towards a new topography of Enlightenment', *European Review of History*, 13 (2006), pp. 499–508.

²¹ For instance, John Lough, in his *The Encyclopédie* (1971; Geneva, 1989), concluded that 'if one were to seek in the pages of the *Encyclopédie* the text of the Declaration des droits de l'homme or a blueprint of the limited monarchy set up by the constitution of 1791, one would certainly be disappointed' (p. 326).

²² One of the first historians to focus on the reformist, rather than revolutionary impulse of the Enlightenment in many European countries was Franco Venturi. See Venturi, *Settecento riformatore* (5 vols., Turin, 1969–90). Volumes III and IV of *Settecento riformatore*, entitled *La prima crisi dell' Antico Regime, 1768–1776* (Turin, 1979) and *La caduta dell' Antico regime, 1776–1789* (Turin, 1984), have been translated into English by the American historian Robert Burr Litchfield under the title *The end of the Old Regime in Europe*. Today, historians such as Tim Blanning have moved beyond Venturi in that they argue that Enlightenment could also actively shore up the Old Regime (Tim Blanning, *The culture of power and the power of culture: old regime Europe, 1660–1789* (Oxford and New York, NY, 2001)). I would like to thank Gabe Paquette for drawing my attention to the importance of Blanning's work in this context.

²³ David Hollinger, 'The Enlightenment and the genealogy of cultural conflict in the United States', in Keith Baker and Peter Reill, eds., *What's left of Enlightenment: a postmodern question* (Stanford, CA, 2001), pp. 7–18.

non-specialists, they tended to revert to the modernization thesis – even when this thesis had not been borne out by their own research.

The example of Robert Darnton, one of the leading specialists in the French Enlightenment, is particularly illustrative in this regard. In the 1970s, Darnton published a series of provocative and highly entertaining articles in which he argued that Gay's emperor had no clothes. Gay's rebellious philosophes, Darnton claimed, were really just fat cats, champagne radicals who had been muzzled by their co-optation into the existing social hierarchy. The philosophes, 'pensioned, petted, and completely integrated in high society'²⁴ had worked hard to uphold the basic structures of the Old Regime. Darnton gleefully quoted some of the philosophes' more outrageously elitist comments, such as d'Alembert's remark that 'the superiority of birth and eminence commands our deference and our respect.' The idea that they had anything to do with the overthrow of the Old Regime, Darnton concluded, was preposterous. 'Rather than challenge the social order', he wrote, 'they offered a prop to it.'²⁵

A lesser man might have concluded from this that the Enlightenment was not really all that important after all and gone on to study more interesting phenomena. But Darnton was not so easily discouraged. Instead of throwing in the towel, he went on looking for a new Enlightenment, one that could be more plausibly cast as a revolutionary force. He found this alternative Enlightenment in the 'literary underground' of the Old Regime – in the political slander of Grub Street and the forbidden best-sellers of the eighteenth century. Retrieving these voices meant that historians had to leave their comfortable armchairs and get down and dirty in the archives, and that is exactly what Darnton did for the next twenty-five years. He emerged in 1995 with a truly impressive magnum opus, *The forbidden best-sellers of pre-Revolutionary France*, which introduced readers to *livres philosophiques* such as *Thérèse philosophe*, a Bildungsroman in which materialism was souped up with sexual escapades, or the *Anecdotes about Mme la comtesse du Barry*, in which Louis XV's mistress was described as a whore with undue political influence.²⁶

The 'underground' Enlightenment that thus emerged from Darnton's writings was certainly very different from Gay's. It was a whole lot more revolutionary. It was also a lot less cerebral. In 1971, Darnton had emphasized that the radical writers he was interested in lacked a political programme; indeed, that their writings 'hardly contained any abstract ideas at all'.²⁷ In 1995, he again pointed out that the forbidden books he studied, for all their violent

²⁴ Darnton, 'In search of the Enlightenment', p. 119.

²⁵ Darnton, 'The high Enlightenment and the low life of literature', *Past and Present*, 51 (1971), pp. 81–115, reprinted in Robert Darnton, *The literary underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, MA, 1982), p. 14.

²⁶ Robert Darnton, *The forbidden best-sellers of pre-revolutionary France* (New York, NY, and London, 1995).

²⁷ Darnton, 'The high Enlightenment and the low life of literature' (1982 edn), p. 34.

critique of the Old Regime, did not contain blueprints for the new order established by the French Revolution. Thus, the society imagined in Louis-Sébastien Mercier's futuristic novel *The year 2440* – the most highbrow book discussed by Darnton – was basically identical to that of the Old Regime, albeit without its abuses. It in no way prefigured the new world of the French Revolution, Darnton emphasized, let alone our own world.²⁸

The Enlightenment therefore appears, both in Darnton's early essays and in his *Forbidden best-sellers*, in a very particular guise. It is a wholly destructive force. His literary underground is filled with hatred for the Old Regime, but incapable of providing the tools for building a new and more modern political system. The upshot of Darnton's work was therefore, paradoxically, to point to the French Revolution rather than the Enlightenment as the true foundational moment of democratic modernity – an idea which was also at the heart of the new, revisionist history of the French Revolution produced by François Furet and his associates while Darnton was working on his *Forbidden best-sellers*. Furet's redefinition of the French Revolution as a political rather than a socio-economic transformation was primarily aimed at the Marxist interpretation of 1789. But the revisionist emphasis on the immense creative power of the revolution also entailed, albeit more implicitly, a critique of the assumptions undergirding Enlightenment historiography. The revolutionaries, not the philosophes, had created modern political culture.²⁹

Darnton himself, however, shied away from drawing such radical conclusions. Instead, in 1997, just two years after *Forbidden best-sellers*, he made a remarkable turn. 'George Washington's false teeth', an essay published in the *New York Review of Books*, defended the Enlightenment as the bedrock of modern, liberal democracy. Indeed, it reads as if it could have been written by Peter Gay himself (although it should be noted that Darnton never mentioned his predecessor).³⁰ Just as Gay had done, Darnton set out to defend the Enlightenment against its detractors – not Jacob Talmon, of course, but Talmon's heirs, such as the political philosopher John Gray. In order to do so, Darnton depicted the

²⁸ As Darnton puts it: 'L'An 2440 provided readers with a retrospective view of the France of Louis XV, not a preview of the French Revolution, to say nothing of the twenty-fifth century', *Forbidden best-sellers*, p. 129.

²⁹ In addition to Furet's own *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris, 1978), the most important work to come out of the revisionist school is probably the four-volume collection of essays published to mark the bicentennial, which is tellingly entitled *The French revolution and the creation of modern political culture* (Oxford, 1987–1994). In the very first volume, editor Keith Baker noted in the 'Introduction' that the French Revolution was 'a radical political invention' (p. xxiii).

³⁰ Darnton, 'George Washington's false teeth', *New York Review of Books*, 27 Mar. 1997, pp. 34–8. In his excellent overview of Darnton's intellectual trajectory, Jeremy Popkin has likewise pointed out that Darnton's 1997 essay 'is a declaration of loyalty, not just to any Enlightenment, but to something very similar to Peter Gay's Enlightenment'. See Popkin, 'Robert Darnton's alternative (to the) Enlightenment', in Haydn Mason, ed., *The Darnton debate: books and revolution in the eighteenth century* (Oxford, 1998), p. 128.

Enlightenment, again just as Gay had done, as a moderate, pragmatic, and above all, liberal movement. Instead of the pornographers and hack writers who had played such a prominent role in his previous work, Voltaire and other elitists now regained centre stage.

They did so with a vengeance. Instead of deriding the philosophes as corrupt props of the Old Regime, Darnton now explained that they had played a crucial role in modernizing society – Western society, that is. The philosophes, Darnton wrote, ‘represented a new force in history’. Although their campaign ‘began with derision, as an attempt to laugh the bigots out of polite society’, it ended as something very different, ‘as a campaign for the liberation of mankind, including the enserfed and the enslaved, Protestants, Jews, blacks, and (in the case of Condorcet) women’. In the process, the Enlightenment ‘produced a set of values that remained alive through the centuries that followed and that set some societies apart from others’.³¹ Continued interest in and study of the Enlightenment was important not just from a historical but also from an ethical perspective: it would help to keep these values alive, Darnton concluded.

What to make of this volte-face? Darnton’s example clearly shows how the black legend and the modernization thesis keep each other alive. When confronted with the task of providing an alternative to the postmodernist critique of the Enlightenment, Darnton found no better solution than to revert back to Gay’s vision – even though that vision had not been borne out by his own research. Of course, Darnton could have simply limited himself to refuting the allegations made by postmodern critics of the Enlightenment. But in addressing an audience of non-specialists (the readers of the *New York Review of Books*), Darnton clearly felt compelled not just to make a case against the Enlightenment’s detractors, but also for the importance of Enlightenment studies. Here, Gay’s modernizing philosophes proved much more serviceable than Darnton’s own literary underground, hell-bent on the destruction of the Old Regime.

Darnton was by no means the only scholar who ended up channelling Gay against his or her better judgement. An even more intriguing case is provided by Roy Porter, a London-based historian whose impact on Enlightenment studies has been at least as profound as Darnton’s, especially among students of the non-French Enlightenment. In 1981, Porter edited, together with Mikulás Teich, a short volume of essays devoted to a discussion of different ‘national’ Enlightenment. As they made clear in their introduction, Porter and Teich saw this approach as an important corrective of the Franco-centric nature of Peter Gay’s Enlightenment.

But this seemingly minor critique had far-reaching implications. A more European view of the Enlightenment, Porter and Teich argued, would require a substantially different understanding of the movement than Gay’s. Instead of

³¹ Darnton, ‘George Washington’s false teeth’.

putting the Enlightenment into the straitjacket of one coherent movement, researchers should start from the assumption that it took many different forms in different national contexts. In particular, the Enlightenment was not necessarily the revolutionary, subversive movement it had been in France. In other national contexts, enlightened thinkers might have been much more supportive of the established order than their French counterparts had been.³²

This idea was put forward with particular force by Porter in his own contribution on the British Enlightenment. He dismissed the idea that the Enlightenment's task was 'to smash the ancien régime and build the free world'. This 'myth', propagated by Peter Gay, had long prevented historians from understanding that there had been an Enlightenment in Britain and other countries which had not experienced a revolution like France's.³³ In England, the Enlightenment had not needed to be radical because it was generally espoused by the educated classes. As a result, philosophical reflection had turned away altogether from political issues in order to focus on the moral problems raised by the Enlightenment's condoning of the pursuit of hedonistic liberty. 'Unlike elsewhere', Porter declared, 'state power was not the central focus: neither its destruction, nor its task in building the new Heavenly City.'³⁴

This was strong stuff. But subsequent publications made clear that the break with Gay was not as fundamental as the rhetoric would lead one to believe. Quite the contrary. In 2000, Porter turned his original article into a book-length study of the British Enlightenment. Now that his work was aimed at a broader audience, however, its stated goal changed dramatically. Instead of using the British case to come to a different vision of the Enlightenment, Porter set out to correct the 'blind spot' which had prevented historians from seeing that the British had had an Enlightenment as well – an Enlightenment that was every bit as modern and progressive as the one depicted by Gay. Despite some perfunctory nods to his earlier critique of the modernization thesis, Porter's book confirmed rather than challenged Gay's position. Indeed, it sounded as if he tried to go one better than Gay. For in Porter's reading, the British Enlightenment had been the true fount of modernity, a crucial force in 'the creation of the modern world' (as Porter put it in his book's title) even

³² Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich, 'Preface', *The Enlightenment in national context* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. vii–ix.

³³ Porter, 'The Enlightenment in England', in Porter and Teich, eds., *The Enlightenment in national context*, p. 6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16. Porter soon received support from one of the most influential intellectual historians of the early modern period: John Pocock. In a speech to the London School of Economics in 1988, Pocock described the British Enlightenment as a 'conservative' force, which had 'less to do with emancipation from tradition, or from previous modes of social power, than with the protection of sovereign authority and personal security against religious fanaticism and civil war.' See Pocock, 'Conservative Enlightenment and democratic revolutions: the American and French cases in British perspective', *Government and Opposition*, 24 (1989), p. 83.

though this had been obscured by an inexplicable historical obsession with France.³⁵

Unlike Gay, Porter of course lacked a revolution with which to end his narrative on a suitably high note. But he could begin his story with one. Indeed, despite Porter's earlier claims that 'state power' had not been of major concern to the British Enlightenment, he now located the very birth of the British Enlightenment in the political struggles of the post-1650s period, which had resulted in the radicalization of thinkers like John Locke. After the settlement of 1688, of course, some enlightened publicists had turned into supporters of the status quo. But at the same time, other enlighteners 'continued down the decades to target the citadels of power'.³⁶ In the wake of the American Revolution in particular, the 'moderate Enlightenment' had been succeeded by a second, more radical Enlightenment, which counted among its representatives authentic firebrands such as Joseph Priestley and Jeremy Bentham. Anglo-American support for the democratic goals of the French Revolution, coming from men such as Tom Paine and William Godwin, was the progeny of this 'second Enlightenment' which had stressed the shortcomings rather than the accomplishments of the post-1688 political order.

In short, *The creation of the modern world* often reads as if Porter was trying to rewrite Gay's narrative with a new set of characters. As a contribution to British historiography, this approach undoubtedly delivers results. Porter's book can be read as a useful corrective of the traditional view of eighteenth-century Britain as the quintessentially conservative society. But as a contribution to Enlightenment historiography, as critics have pointed out, his book is less persuasive.³⁷ In particular, it is hard to see what is gained by labelling as 'enlightened' a set of opinions that seem more germane to the Anglo-American political tradition than to a broader Enlightenment movement. The democratic ideals of the 'second Enlightenment', in particular, seem to be much more indebted to the revolutionary fervour created by the American Revolution, which in turn drew upon British precedents of 1642 and 1688, than to the attempt to create a 'science of politics' aimed at preserving the status quo by key Enlightenment thinkers like David Hume.³⁸

By the early years of the twenty-first century, in other words, Enlightenment historiography was deeply at odds with itself. On the one hand, historians had been criticizing Gay's narrative for decades as based on weak textual evidence.

³⁵ The original British title of Porter's book was *Enlightenment: Britain and the creation of the modern world*, but it was re-issued in the United States under the title: *The creation of the modern world: the untold story of the British Enlightenment* (New York, NY, and London, 2000). I have used the American edition while writing this paper.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 33.

³⁷ See, for instance, the review by Patricia Fara 'Enlightenment or Enlightenment?', *Journal of Modern History*, 55 (2001), pp. 335-7.

³⁸ On the 'conservative' intent of the Enlightenment science of politics, see Robert Wokler, 'The Enlightenment science of politics', in Christopher Fox, Roy Porter, and Robert Wokler, eds., *Inventing human science* (Berkeley, CA, 1995), pp. 323-46.

On the other hand, his modernization thesis was kept in service to argue against detractors of the Enlightenment and, more generally, to make the case for the continued importance of Enlightenment studies. This conflicted attitude arguably goes a long way in explaining the success of what has by now become one of the most influential (as well as controversial) contributions to recent Enlightenment historiography: Jonathan Israel's trilogy on the 'radical Enlightenment'.³⁹

Like Gay's work, Israel's trilogy gains much of its appeal from its passionate defence of the Enlightenment against enemies on both the right and the left. Israel has shown himself particularly critical of 'the growing tendency, from the 1970s onwards, to contest the validity of the "Enlightenment's" ideals and see its laying the intellectual foundations of modernity in a negative rather than a positive light', a tendency which he primarily attributes to the influence of postmodernism.⁴⁰ At the same time, he also aimed to rescue the Enlightenment from the irrelevance to which it had been condemned by historians who emphasized the pluriform and diverse nature of the movement in its different national contexts. Instead, Israel powerfully reaffirmed Gay's core inspiration: that the Enlightenment was a movement of world-historical importance which had created our modern, democratic political culture.⁴¹

But at the same time, he offered an ambitious revision of the chronologic and geographic boundaries of Gay's Enlightenment—a revision which was indispensable, Israel argued, to grasp the modernizing role of the Enlightenment. In his first volume, *Radical Enlightenment: philosophy and the making of modernity*, Israel turned his attention away from the eighteenth-century French heartland mapped by Gay. Instead, he focused on developments in the Dutch Republic of the mid-seventeenth century. There, the Jewish-Dutch philosopher Baruch de Spinoza was cooking up a heady mixture of atheism and democratic republicanism. Spinoza's writings in turn inspired a radical movement that rapidly fanned out from the Dutch Republic to other European countries such as England, Italy, Germany, and France. This movement, Israel argued, constituted a 'radical Enlightenment', whose core ideas were far more modern and forward-looking than anything imagined by Gay's philosophes. Indeed, major philosophes such as Voltaire and Montesquieu, being deists rather than atheists

³⁹ Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: philosophy and the making of modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford, 2001); idem, *Enlightenment contested: philosophy, modernity and the emancipation of man, 1670–1752* (Oxford, 2006); idem, *Democratic Enlightenment: philosophy, revolution, and human rights 1750–1790* (Oxford, 2011). Israel has also provided a summary of his arguments for a broader audience in *A revolution of the mind: radical Enlightenment and the intellectual origins of modernity* (Princeton, NJ, 2010).

⁴⁰ Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, p. 1.

⁴¹ On Israel's critique of the 'postmodern' reading of the Enlightenment, see in addition to the quote above: *Enlightenment contested*, pp. 869–71; idem, *Revolution of the mind*, p. xiii; and idem, *Democratic Enlightenment*, pp. 1–2, 23. For his critique of the 'many Enlightenments' school as condemning the Enlightenment to irrelevance, see *Enlightenment contested*, p. 863. Israel has repeatedly depicted himself as following in Peter Gay's footsteps, see *Enlightenment contested*, pp. v, 10; idem, *Democratic Enlightenment*, p. 3.

and defenders of the status quo rather than revolutionaries, were proponents of a very different, 'moderate', or conservative Enlightenment, which postdated the radical, Spinozist Enlightenment and had mainly emerged in reaction against it.

In two subsequent volumes, *The Enlightenment contested* and *Democratic Enlightenment*, Israel went on to trace the dissemination of the radical Enlightenment throughout Europe in the first half of the eighteenth century. He argued that the ideas of the radical Enlightenment were opposed at every turn not just by a counter-Enlightenment but also by the moderate Enlightenment, which supported the powers that be against the radical onslaught. In France, however, a particular confluence of circumstances assured that 'Spinozists' gained the upper hand around the 1750s, when materialists like Denis Diderot became the dominant figures of the French Enlightenment. The materialist and democratic ideas of the radical Enlightenment, Israel explained, rapidly gained adherence among broad segments of the population in France and neighbouring countries. Thus, Israel was able to link Spinoza's mental revolution to the real-life democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth century, which had in turn laid the groundwork for today's political ideals.

Israel's books provide a dramatic new understanding of the Enlightenment. His Spinoza – an atheist, republican freethinker – certainly appears much more genuinely modern and progressive than Voltaire, with his inexplicable sympathy for Louis XV's regime and elitist contempt for the masses.⁴² But do Israel's far-reaching claims stand up to closer scrutiny? The critical reception of his work suggests that this is not the case. Many reviewers have pointed out that Israel fails to provide sufficient proof for his claim that the radical Enlightenment was responsible for the 'core democratic values' we hold dear today. There is very little evidence, for instance, as Anthony LaVopa has argued, that Israel's Spinozist thinkers had a truly inclusive notion of democracy, which would have extended civic rights not just to a propertied elite but to all adults. Diderot's biologically essentialist materialism, for instance, left no room whatsoever for women in the public sphere.⁴³

But even the weaker claim put forward in Israel's books – that the radical Enlightenment consistently argued for a more democratic alternative to the political order of the Old Regime – seems based on shaky evidence. In this context the work of Margaret Jacob, a scholar whose work has inspired many of Israel's arguments, is particularly instructive. In a study first published in 1981, Jacob had pointed, like Israel would later do, to the existence of a

⁴² It should be noted though that Israel's interpretation of Spinoza as the quintessential modern thinker has been questioned. See, for instance, Samuel Moyn's incisive review of *A revolution of the mind*, 'Mind the Enlightenment', *The Nation*, 12 May 2010.

⁴³ Anthony LaVopa, 'A new intellectual history? Jonathan Israel's Enlightenment', *Historical Journal*, 52 (2009), p. 727. For a similar critique on Israel, see Siep Stuurman, 'Pathways to the Enlightenment: from Paul Hazard to Jonathan Israel', *History Workshop Journal*, 54 (2002), pp. 227–35.

European-wide, republican, and atheist 'radical Enlightenment', which she distinguished, again as Israel would later do, from the 'moderate', deist Enlightenment of Voltaire and Montesquieu. Jacob however made clear that the democratic and republican tendencies which had characterized the radical Enlightenment in the English and Dutch contexts in which it originated, 'largely fell by the wayside' when it was transmitted to France. There, prominent atheist thinkers such as Diderot's close friend and collaborator Baron d'Holbach remained firmly committed to absolute monarchy.⁴⁴

Other scholars have likewise pointed to the lack of political radicalism among France's most prominent atheists. In his authoritative study of d'Holbach's circle, Alan Kors showed how most surviving members of d'Holbach's salon, including figures such as the Abbé Raynal (who plays an important role in Israel's *Enlightenment contested*) opposed the French Revolution from its very outset. This opposition was not just triggered by the threat posed to their own position and livelihood by the revolutionary events, but by their long-standing 'fear of the forces unleashed by revolution and an elitist mistrust, either in general or in particular reference to their own country, of broad participation in the means of social change.'⁴⁵ This makes it very hard to maintain, of course, that the transition to a more modern and democratic political culture in France was linked to the spread of atheism and materialism, or to anything that can be plausibly described as a 'radical Enlightenment'.⁴⁶

Israel's work has done a great deal to reignite debate about the intellectual history of the Enlightenment. It has become and it probably will remain a landmark in Enlightenment studies, just like Darnton's and Porter's books. But what it does best is arguably to highlight once again just how difficult it is to locate the genesis of our own democratic political culture in the writings of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers. Even after downsizing the Enlightenment to a cherry-picked set of 'radical' thinkers, Israel is no more successful than Peter Gay in showing that they were responsible for the introduction of modern, liberal democracy into the Western world.

III

Where does that leave us? If the Enlightenment did not usher in the modern, liberal democracies that dominate today's world, then what did it do?⁴⁷ In order

⁴⁴ Margaret Jacob, *The radical Enlightenment: pantheists, freemasons and republicans* (London, 1981), p. 249.

⁴⁵ Alan Kors, *D'Holbach's coterie: an Enlightenment in Paris* (Princeton, NJ, 1976), p. 309.

⁴⁶ This is not to say, of course, that there were no republicans at all in eighteenth-century France. But eighteenth-century French republicanism tended to be classical rather than enlightened. See Keith Baker, 'Transformations of classical republicanism in eighteenth-century France', *Journal of Modern History*, 73 (2001), pp. 32–53.

⁴⁷ It is of course possible to simply bracket this question by using the term 'Enlightenment' as a temporal adjective, referring to the eighteenth century, rather than as a well-defined intellectual movement. Such an approach can be very useful in order to broaden our

to answer that question, one might simply leave politics out of the equation. The philosophes themselves, after all, often talked about revealed religion and 'superstition' as the main target of their movement. Recent work on the 'enlightenments' occurring among various groups of religious believers⁴⁸ could be read as showing just how successful Voltaire and his ilk were in changing the conversation about the role of religion in society.⁴⁹ Thus, the Catholic reform movement that took shape around the middle of the eighteenth century can be described as 'enlightened', as Ulrich Lehner argues, precisely because it was 'in dialogue with contemporary culture, not only by developing new hermeneutical approaches to the Council of Trent or to Jansenist ideas, but also by implementing some of the core values of the overall European Enlightenment process that tried to "renew" and "reform" the whole of society'.⁵⁰

At the same time, it is undeniable that the Enlightenment was not just a secularizing or anticlerical movement, but that it also tried more broadly to create a more rational and more modern world. But the modernity celebrated by the philosophes, as Dan Edelstein has recently reminded us, was in many respects very different from our own. The political ideals defended by the philosophes bore very little resemblance to the world that would eventually be created by the democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth century and beyond.⁵¹

understanding of Enlightenment-era perspectives, as Sankar Muthu shows in his *Enlightenment against empire* (Princeton, NJ, 2003). Yet, as David Hollinger argues in his 'The Enlightenment and cultural conflict', considering the continued importance of the term in contemporary debate, historians 'should not shy away from constructing the most historically sound Enlightenment we can, and from offering the best arguments we can about its consequences' (p. 18).

⁴⁸ See, for instance, David Sorkin, *The religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton, NJ, 2010).

⁴⁹ This is not to say, of course, that the new emphasis on a more 'reasonable' faith was merely a response to the challenge posed by deism and other enlightened forms of religious unorthodoxy. Enlightened religious believers, as Helena Rosenblatt points out, were often at least as worried about religious enthusiasm as they were about religious unorthodoxy. See Rosenblatt, 'The Christian Enlightenment', in Stewart Brown and Timothy Tackett, eds., *Cambridge History of Christianity*, VII: *Enlightenment, reawakening and revolution, 1660–1815* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 283–301.

⁵⁰ Ulrich Lehner, 'What is Catholic Enlightenment?', *History Compass*, 8 (2010), p. 167; and more generally Lehner and Michael Printy, eds., *A companion to the Catholic Enlightenment in Europe* (Leiden, 2010). For an excellent overview of the recent debate about the relationship between Enlightenment and religion, see Jonathan Sheehan, 'Enlightenment, religion, and the enigma of secularization: a review essay', *American Historical Review*, 108 (2003), pp. 1061–80.

⁵¹ Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: a genealogy* (Chicago, IL, and London, 2010). Edelstein makes this argument more generally, but for his discussion of the distance between the political ideals of the philosophes and our own, see pp. 52–60. Sophia Rosenfeld similarly points out how different the Enlightenment conception of free speech was from our own conception of liberal tolerance. See Rosenfeld, 'Writing the history of censorship in the age of Enlightenment', in Gordon, *Postmodernism and the Enlightenment*, pp. 117–46.

Indeed, one could argue that the political future imagined by many Enlightenment thinkers was much more similar to the regime of Louis XV than to the France of 1791. That, at least, is the conclusion one could draw from the writings of Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger, a fairly typical representative of the French Enlightenment whose writings deserve closer scrutiny than they usually receive.

The son of a paper merchant, Boulanger became an engineer for the government and travelled around France repairing roads and bridges. But his heart was not in his work as an engineer. He wanted to be a philosopher. Boulanger taught himself a working knowledge of Latin, Greek, Aramaic, and other obscure languages and started writing books about the origins of religious and political systems in which he attempted to refute many biblical myths. None of these books were published in his lifetime, but they circulated in manuscript and Boulanger drew the attention of famous philosophes such as Denis Diderot. On the request of Diderot, Boulanger contributed several articles to the *Encyclopédie* before he died, worn out by hard work and illness, at the age of thirty-seven.

Boulanger plays a supporting role in many of the narratives that this paper has discussed. Peter Gay, for instance, describes him as one of the lieutenants of the major Enlightenment figures, on a par with Abbé Raynal – a philosophe of the ‘second rank’, who nevertheless made an important contribution to the diffusion of the Enlightenment.⁵² Jonathan Israel’s work abounds in references to Boulanger, who is listed as one of seventy philosophes responsible for propagating the radical, materialist Enlightenment in the eighteenth century.⁵³ Yet, if we read Boulanger’s political tracts, it becomes clear immediately that he in no way fits the modernization thesis propagated by both Gay and Israel. For Boulanger combined his religious unorthodoxy with an avowed monarchism. And this monarchism was by no means insincere or instrumental. Boulanger did not support Louis XV’s regime because he saw the king as an ally against the traditionalist forces of church and aristocracy. Rather, he believed that the monarchy under which he lived was both a modern and free regime, especially when compared with alternatives such as Asian despotism or the republics of the ancient world.⁵⁴

⁵² Gay, *The Enlightenment*, I: *Rise of modern paganism*, pp. 18–19.

⁵³ Israel repeatedly includes Boulanger in his lists of radical defenders of materialism and republicanism. See the index to *Enlightenment contested*, p. 958, which lists six references to Boulanger’s ‘egalitarian republicanism’.

⁵⁴ It is worth noting that Boulanger’s monarchism differs quite fundamentally from the love of enlightened despotism which has often been attributed to the philosophes by adherents of the black legend. Boulanger in fact made a sharp distinction between despotism, which he, like his *maitre à penser* Montesquieu, despised, and monarchy, which he believed to be a liberal regime. And again like Montesquieu, Boulanger was able to make this distinction because he believed that monarchy was compatible with a high degree of personal security and individual freedom.

That much becomes clear from Boulanger's most important political treatise, the *Investigations into the origins of oriental despotism*, which was probably written in 1755, and which circulated in manuscript during Boulanger's lifetime.⁵⁵ It was first published two years after his death in 1761, and was then reprinted eight times as well as being also translated into English.⁵⁶ Even if it was not one of Darnton's forbidden best-sellers, it was in other words a book that people read. Voltaire had a copy, Grimm commented upon it in his *Literary correspondence*, and in 1768, a 'Mr de Polignac' – possibly the royal favourite, the count de Polignac – indignantly demanded that the Parisian police return his confiscated copy of Boulanger's book – a request with which, it seems, the police complied.⁵⁷

Like Boulanger's other books, *Oriental despotism* was an anticlerical tract. Boulanger set out to investigate, as he announced in his title, the origins of oriental despotism. He rejected the Hobbesian thesis that despotism had its roots in psychological or social phenomena, such as the despotic power of a father over his family, or that it was a punishment from God. Instead, Boulanger argued that despotism had its origins in religious fervour. Fear of the supernatural had led to the first political systems, which had been theocracies. However, theocratic rule by a priestly caste gave rise to frequent abuses and men therefore turned to elect a single ruler who would represent god on earth. Thus, the confusion between the natural and the supernatural order introduced with theocracy was reinforced, and despotism slowly conquered the world. This brought Boulanger to the second part of his story. Despotism was unfortunately still rampant in Asia, but, as Boulanger emphasized, in Europe this form of government had on the whole disappeared. How had that happened? Boulanger set out to investigate. The first European states to liberate themselves from the despotic yoke, he argued, were ancient Greece and Rome. There, republican self-government had replaced despotism and men had lived free and happy, at least for a while.

So far, so good – and so radical. But this is where Boulanger's story takes an interesting twist. For Boulanger's book was no republican tract. Instead, he drew heavily upon Montesquieu.⁵⁸ And like Montesquieu, Boulanger argued that republican governments were impossible to maintain in the corrupted,

⁵⁵ [Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger], *Recherches sur l'origine du despotisme oriental* (n.p., 1761).

⁵⁶ Paulo Sandrin, *Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger (1722–1759) ou avant nous le deluge*, no. 240 in *Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 43–51.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50 n. 29.

⁵⁸ Boulanger made no secret of his debt to the *Spirit of the laws*. He devoted the final section of his book to a eulogy of Montesquieu, whom he described as 'the sublime author of the *Spirit of the Laws*', 'a genius', 'that unique human being who stands out among the men of our own time as well as times past'. See [Boulanger], *Despotisme oriental*, p. 430. On Montesquieu as a defender rather than a critic of the French monarchy, see Céline Spector, *Montesquieu: pouvoirs, richesses et sociétés* (Paris, 2004); Michael Sonenscher, *Before the deluge: public debt, inequality, and the intellectual origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ, 2007), esp. ch. 2; Paul Cheney, *Revolutionary commerce: globalization and the French monarchy* (Harvard, MA, 2010); Annelien de

modern world. Virtue, the ability to renounce one's own private interest for the public good, was simply too much to ask from people. It had to be imposed upon an unwilling population and so despotism was reintroduced. This is why the republican governments of antiquity had all succumbed in the course of time to despotism. Only with the establishment of monarchy in Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire had freedom become truly possible.

Boulanger's book ended with enthusiastic praise for the monarchical governments of continental Europe. As Boulanger saw it, the monarchies of eighteenth-century Europe were 'a masterpiece of human reason', as well as 'the safe haven in which the human species, battered by stormy attempts to find an imaginary happiness, had found peace'.⁵⁹ Monarchy was the only government 'made for this earth', Boulanger insisted. Republican self-government might sound great on paper, but it was really 'made for heaven' and despotism, of course, was 'made for Hell'.⁶⁰ In short, monarchy alone, Boulanger concluded, was capable of safeguarding happiness and individual liberty.

What does Boulanger's example tell us? First and foremost, Boulanger's treatise shows that it was possible for an aspiring philosophe to support the French monarchy on enlightened grounds. Boulanger's defence of monarchy, it has become clear, was by no means instrumental or insincere. Rather, he argued that it was a more suitable regime for the secularizing, liberalizing world of the eighteenth century than the classical republics of antiquity. Second, and equally importantly, it makes clear that such support cannot be explained away as a subterfuge to confound the censors (as Gay would have it). Neither was it limited to a pensioned, petted elite, muzzled by its integration in high society (as suggested by Darnton), or to deistic conservatives (as Israel claims).

Enlightenment monarchism à la Boulanger has been consistently ignored or dismissed by Enlightenment authorities ranging from Peter Gay to Jonathan Israel. Yet, there are good reasons to give it a more central role in our narratives about the Enlightenment. As several recent contributions to the historiography make clear, support for monarchy as a modern and potentially liberal form of government seems to have been quite widespread in Enlightenment circles throughout Europe. Indeed, it might very well have been more widespread than support for democratic regimes or even English-style parliamentary government.⁶¹

Dijn, 'On political liberty: Montesquieu's Missing Manuscript', *Political Theory*, 39 (2011) pp. 181–204.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 421.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 420.

⁶¹ Franco Venturi already pointed to the importance of monarchy as a political ideal in eighteenth-century Europe in his *Utopia and reform in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 70; but his book primarily focuses on the spread of republicanism in eighteenth-century Europe. More recently, however, several historians have drawn our attention to the importance of monarchism, both enlightened and non-enlightened, in eighteenth-century Europe. Particularly relevant in this context is the collection of essays edited by Hans Blom, John

All this points not simply to the distance between the philosophes' political goals and our own ideals, but also to a new understanding of the Enlightenment's historical role. Reading the philosophes might not really help us to understand why our modern political culture came into being. But grasping just how different their political ideals were from our own might help to shed light upon an equally important problem: why democracy came so late in the day. This was not simply because of the cowardice of Enlightenment thinkers, or the grip of authority and tradition over the population at large. It was because some of the most advanced thinkers of the eighteenth century believed that democracy or even a representative system like England's was not necessarily the best way of achieving Enlightenment goals. Other political regimes, such as the French monarchy, they believed, were much more suitable to a modern and enlightened people.

In order to substantiate further this argument, many questions still need to be answered. How influential was the new, enlightened monarchism? What role did it play in public debate? How was it received by more traditional supporters of the monarchy? In short, we need to evaluate and flesh out further the historical importance of Enlightenment monarchism – the idea that monarchy was both a modern and liberal (in the sense of 'free') regime. But one thing is surely beyond doubt. We have been telling ourselves for over fifty years now that our democracies are a necessary product of the Age of Reason. It is time to stop doing so.

Christian Laursen, and Luisa Simonutti, *Monarchisms in the age of Enlightenment: liberty, patriotism and the common good* (Toronto, 2007).