

FROM THE ENLIGHTENMENT TO THE TERROR: NEW GENEALOGIES

ANNELIEN DE DIJN

Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam

E-mail: adedijn@me.com

Dan Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French Revolution* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009)

Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010)

Dan Edelstein is a prolific author. In less than two years he has produced not one but two books. His first, *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French Revolution*, was published by The University of Chicago Press in October 2009. Its Irish twin, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy*, appeared with the same press in the fall of 2010. Each of these books deals with a much-studied subject—respectively the Terror and the Enlightenment—the kind of subject, in other words, about which even the most recent literature alone can fill entire libraries. Yet in both cases, Edelstein manages to make a contribution of startling originality and importance. It is clear that this literary scholar—Edelstein is a professor of French and Italian at Stanford University—is one of the most important new voices in the field of eighteenth-century French intellectual history. In this review, I will start by discussing both of his books separately. I will then conclude with some reflections on what Edelstein’s work contributes to our understanding of eighteenth-century intellectual history when read as a whole.

* * *

Let us begin with Edelstein’s first-born, *The Terror of Natural Right*. Edelstein here stakes out a position that is very uniquely his own by developing a critique of both the revisionist school, which had its heyday in the 1980s and 1990s, and the more recent, post-revisionist historiography of the Terror. Post-revisionist historians such as Patrice Gueniffey and Jean-Clément Martin have qualified the revisionist idea that “ideology” or “political discourse” led the Revolution

down the path to the Terror. Instead, they argue, it was the “revolutionary dynamic” (Gueniffey) or “calculation and manipulation” (Martin) that caused the Terror.¹ Against such authors, Edelstein deliberately reaches back to the Furetian, revisionist idea that the Terror can best be understood by studying the “legal arguments and political theories” that were used to justify it (4). The Terror, he argues, and especially the proliferation of judicial killings that marked French political life between 1793 and 1794, can only be understood by taking ideas seriously, and more specifically by taking seriously the all-pervading importance of what Edelstein calls “natural republicanism”—an ideology with roots in the natural-law tradition dating back to the seventeenth century.

But that does not mean that Edelstein simply reverts to the position originally defended by the revisionist school. In a way one could argue that his disagreements with Francois Furet *et cie.* are just as fundamental as those with the post-revisionist school. To the revisionists, the marked failure of the Revolution to bring liberty and stability to France, its culmination in the Terror, was a consequence of a pervasive Rousseauism among the Revolutionary caste. More specifically, the political culture of the Revolution could generate the Terror because it was based on a Rousseauist understanding of republicanism. Law was an expression of the general will; that is, the will of the people. Whatever the people willed, was good. This position (as, again, the revisionists argue) was in marked contradistinction to the Anglo-American tradition of liberalism, based on the idea that every individual is endowed with immutable natural rights which nobody, not even a popular majority, can infringe. In brief, the failure of the French Revolution—the revisionists hold—was a result of the Rousseauist–democratic nature of French Revolutionary political culture, whereas the success of the American Revolution reflected its reliance on a liberal natural-rights tradition.²

If Edelstein is to be believed, however, this reading of revolutionary political culture, as well as the revisionists’ explanation of the Terror, is fundamentally wrong-headed. The Jacobins’ republicanism, he explains, was by no means as Rousseauist as is generally thought. Instead, theirs was a “natural republicanism,” the result of a welding of seventeenth-century natural-law theory and republicanism which had taken place in France in the course of the eighteenth century. This natural republicanism differed from the republicanism *à la* Rousseau because its adherents believed that a republic was the most natural

¹ Patrice Gueniffey, *La politique de la Terreur: Essai sur la violence révolutionnaire, 1789–94* (Paris, 2000); Jean-Clément Martin, *Violence et Révolution: Essai sur la naissance d’un mythe national* (Paris, 2006).

² A good overview and critique of the revisionist interpretation of the differences between the French and American Revolutions can be found in D. Van Kley (ed.) *The French Idea of Freedom: The Old Regime and the Declaration of Rights in 1789* (Stanford, 1994), 8–9.

form of government and that its maintenance did not require heavy policing or stern laws, but simply the unleashing of mankind's natural virtue.

However, as Edelstein argues, there was a dark side to all this talk about nature. The reverence paid to the laws of nature, he argues, turned offenders into inhuman monsters, or, to use the Latin phrase, *hostis humani generis*. This was already the case in the earliest iterations of natural-law theory as it took shape in the early seventeenth century. It was, for instance, used by European theorists versed in the tradition of natural law to legitimate the killing of the Amerindians on the ground that they were inhuman monsters. During the French Revolution, natural republicanism became the main inspiration for the Terror. All those who proved unwilling to pledge adherence to the new and more natural political order—the newly created Republic—thereby placed themselves not simply outside the political community, but outside the natural order of things. Executing opponents of the Republic thus did not require legal niceties, since they had already declared themselves to be outlaws. Thus the Jacobins “drew on natural right to authorize and draft the laws underpinning the Terror” (4).

How exactly did the Jacobins' natural republicanism become the predominant political language in Revolutionary France? Edelstein is careful to avoid arguing that the adoption of natural republicanism and its eventual justification of the Terror was unavoidably set from the beginning of the Revolution (as some revisionists are prone to argue with respect to the Rousseauist discourse of the general will). Rather, the idea that the legal order should reflect the dictates of natural law only became enshrined in French Revolutionary discourse, and more particularly in the Jacobin discourse, at the time of the Louis XVI's trial in 1792. During this trial, the Jacobins argued that the king had forfeited his legal rights, such as a right to defense, because he was an enemy not just of the state or of the French people, but of humanity. In that case, they failed to win the day—Louis XVI was not summarily stabbed on the floor of the Convention, as Louis Antoine de Saint-Just had demanded, but given lawyers and a trial. But the arguments the Jacobins developed subsequently inspired the reconstruction of the legal system which made the Terror possible—more specifically by expanding the category of “enemy of humankind” to an ever-increasing pool of the Jacobins' opponents.

Edelstein's views on the Terror and its causes are, in other words, highly iconoclastic, with regard to both the revisionist orthodoxy and the more recent, post-revisionist critique of that orthodoxy. So how convincing is his new interpretation? It seems to me that Edelstein is successful in showing that the “cult of nature” (as he puts it in the subtitle to his book) went a long way to legitimating the Terror. By means of an effective selection of examples and quotations, Edelstein convincingly shows that the Jacobins legitimated the elimination of political opponents such as royalist counterrevolutionaries or the Girondins by branding them unnatural deviants, enemies of humankind.

Rousseauist invocations of the general will had, in other words, very little to do with the legitimation of the Terror. Indeed, as Edelstein persuasively argues, it was the opponents of the Terror, and more particularly the Girondins, who used Rousseauian arguments, whereas the Jacobins were wary of direct democracy and appealed instead to the supra-human authority of natural right.

Less convincing, I would argue, is Edelstein's view that the Jacobins' reliance on natural law is the only or the most important factor in the causal explanation of the Terror. Thus one could point out that the American Revolutionaries also relied heavily on a "natural republicanism" whereas the Terror, of course, never happened there. Edelstein is aware of this objection and he tries to preempt it by arguing that the natural republicanism which the Jacobins tried to implement in France consisted of a special and uniquely French variant, more indebted to the Physiocrats than to John Locke. The natural-law theories underlying the American Revolution were very different, he argues, from those used by the Jacobins. Unlike the American Revolutionaries, the Jacobins did not merely use natural-law discourse to legitimate the founding of their Republic, but also looked to natural law as an immediately useable alternative to positive, man-made law. This, Edelstein contends, was never the case in the American context—"for the American revolutionaries, natural right merely contributed to authorize their political proceedings and did not dictate their form or content" (259).

However, it seems to me that this distinction between American and French versions of natural republicanism is too sharply drawn—one need only read the Declaration of Independence, for instance, in order to be able to see that many Americans, too, believed that their Revolution would return mankind (or at least the citizens of the newly created American republic) to a more "natural" condition. Indeed, that a blend of natural-rights discourse and of republicanism was a uniquely prominent feature of the American founding has been forcefully argued by Michael Zuckert.³ Yet the American Revolution, while far from bloodless, did stay clear from the judicial killings authorized by the natural-law concept of the *hostis humani generis*. In other words, there does not seem to be a necessary relationship between state-sponsored killing and the natural republicanism discussed by Edelstein. The role of the rhetoric of natural republicanism in the context of the Terror might have been just that—rhetorical.

That does not necessarily detract, however, from the importance of Edelstein's argument. For the real value of *The Terror of Natural Right*, one could argue, is not just or even primarily as a contribution to the historiography of the Terror. Even more importantly, *The Terror of Natural Right* spurs us to rethink

³ Michael Zuckert, *Natural Rights and the New Republicanism* (Princeton, 1998); and Zuckert, *The Natural Rights Republic: Studies in the Foundation of the American Political Tradition* (Notre Dame, 1997).

the privileged place of the natural-law tradition in modern political thought. In the wake of the Second World War and the Holocaust, this tradition came to be understood as the most effective antidote to the moral relativism which, according to many commentators, had led to the horrors of Nazism and fascism, a view that continues to be defended until the present day.⁴ But this irenic view of the natural-law tradition is hard to maintain in light of the evidence presented by Edelstein. Regardless of the question whether he really succeeds in convincing us that natural republicanism caused the Terror or not, Edelstein's book does make clear that the cult of nature can go hand in hand with political violence just as much as a Nietzschean will to power. *The Terror of Natural Right* therefore puts to question one of the most cherished convictions of postwar political theory. Edelstein is not shy in drawing out these larger implications himself in the final pages of his book, which in my view are among the best in this excellent work. Here he shows how elements of the natural-republican discourse, like the branding of political opponents "enemies of the human race," survived the historical Terror of 1793–4 in order to be deployed by the Communist and Nazi regimes of the twentieth century—indeed, ironically, even to be invoked by George W. Bush in his "War on Terror."

* * *

Edelstein's second book, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy*, brings us back from the twenty-first to the eighteenth century. *The Enlightenment* is considerably shorter than its predecessor. It does not provide an in-depth study based on extensive archival research or the unearthing of obscure primary sources. Instead, Edelstein offers his readers a more general reflection on the nature of the Enlightenment, based on an extensive knowledge of the existing literature. The result is a graceful little book with a clear and combative point of view, which has the added bonus of providing an overview of the most important recent debates about the Enlightenment through exhaustive footnotes and a handy, thematically organized bibliography.

Again, Edelstein shows himself unafraid to tackle some of the most widely accepted dogmas of current historiography. First and foremost, to Edelstein, the Enlightenment is a movement of ideas, not a set of "discursive practices" or new forms of "sociability." By making this statement, Edelstein takes position against what can now be safely described as the new orthodoxy in Enlightenment

⁴ See, for instance, Alfred Cobban, *In Search of Humanity: The Role of the Enlightenment in Modern History* (London, 1960). More recently, Tzvetan Todorov, *In Defense of the Enlightenment*, trans. Gila Walker (London, 2009), has defended the Enlightened idea of human rights as a necessary antidote to cultural relativism.

historiography. Inspired by Jürgen Habermas's linking of the Enlightenment and the rise of the public sphere, historians have now for over twenty years focused on salon culture, freemasonry and other new forms of sociability in eighteenth-century France, rather than books and ideas, as the true locus of Enlightenment.⁵ However, in Edelstein's view, this identification of Enlightenment and sociability, to the exclusion of the ideas developed by the *philosophes*, is highly problematic. As Edelstein puts it, "The Jesuits had a far more sophisticated system of global communication: does this mean they were more enlightened?" (11).

As in his first book, Edelstein thus rejects the orthodoxy of the day in order to deliberately revert to an earlier historiographical view. In this case, that is the account of the Enlightenment produced by Peter Gay in the late 1960s.⁶ Like Gay, Edelstein believes that the Enlightenment was first and foremost a movement of ideas, expressed in a series of texts. And again like Gay, he argues that these texts were mostly penned by French writers. Whereas recent historiography turned attention away from France towards Enlightenment "peripheries" such as Scotland and Naples, Edelstein's Enlightenment is unapologetically Francocentric. Benefiting from the more general appeal of French language and culture, Edelstein argues, *philosophes* like Voltaire, Montesquieu and Rousseau were widely read outside France and their ideas formed a starting point from which enlightened debates in other national contexts took shape.

But again as in his first book, Edelstein's goal is not merely to resurrect older historiographical insights. Even though Edelstein himself does not make this explicit, his views on the Enlightenment differ in some respects fundamentally from Gay's. Whereas Gay depicted the Enlightenment as a dramatic and hugely important moment in the history of mankind, Edelstein steers clear of such a heroic interpretation of the role of the *philosophes*. Indeed, according to Edelstein, nothing much new happened in the eighteenth century. Compared to the progenitors of the seventeenth-century Scientific Revolution, the *philosophes* did not add that much new to the existing stock of ideas. But what they did do was to place the very real changes that had taken place in the seventeenth century as well as in their own time—such as the Scientific Revolution—into a new framework. They came up, in other words, with a new view of what their

⁵ 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, Dana Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, 1994). For a more general appraisal of the turn away from intellectual history since the 1970s see C. Hesse, "Towards a New Topography of Enlightenment," *European Review of History* 13 (2006), 499–508.

⁶ P. Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York, 1966–69).

age was all about. As Edelstein puts it, “More than anything, the Enlightenment seems to have been the period when people thought they were living in an age of Enlightenment” (73).

How did this new self-understanding take shape? According to Edelstein, the pivotal moment in shaping the new, Enlightenment outlook on history was the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, which took place in France around the turn of the eighteenth century. Although the Quarrel started out as a literary dispute about the relative merits of Homer versus “modern” poets and playwrights, it soon came to be a more wide-ranging discussion about progress in history and the superiority of antiquity versus the seventeenth century. Like Larry Norman⁷, Edelstein argues that the more interesting and innovative position in this debate was formulated not by Moderns like Charles Perrault, but by the spokesmen of the Ancients, such as Jean Baptiste Dubos. It was Dubos who in his *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting* (1719) first put forward the idea that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were witnessing a revival of the *esprit philosophique* which had been absent from intellectual life since antiquity. The narrative thus created continued to inform the work of *philosophes* like Voltaire, who in turn managed to convince many of their contemporaries that the eighteenth century was truly an age of enlightenment after centuries of medieval darkness.

But, as Edelstein emphasizes, the *philosophes*, like Dubos, understood the new age of enlightenment more as a revival of the wisdom of antiquity than as a wholly new and unprecedented moment in the history of mankind. The *Encyclopédie*, for instance, that quintessential Enlightenment text, was deeply indebted to the work of the great humanist scholars. Indeed, the *encyclopédistes* cited their learned predecessors so frequently that their brainchild may be regarded as “the greatest book the seventeenth century ever produced” (48). When it came to politics or religion, the *philosophes* were likewise deeply indebted to their humanist predecessors. According to Edelstein, the foundations of Enlightenment political thought were laid by humanists like Bishop Fénelon, whose Homeric novel *The Adventures of Telemachus* celebrated a Spartan austerity and pleaded for the introduction of sumptuary laws. Similarly, as Edelstein points out, the deism of the *philosophes* in many respects harked back to classical antiquity.

What to think about this portrayal of the Enlightenment? On a general level, it is hard to disagree with Edelstein’s point that the example of classical antiquity and humanist learning had a huge influence on the *philosophes*. But one does wonder whether he does not push his case too vigorously. By putting so much emphasis on the indebtedness of the *philosophes* to defenders of the Ancients

⁷ Larry Norman, *The Shock of the Ancient: Literature and History in Early Modern France* (Chicago, 2010).

like Dubos, Edelstein ends up portraying them as not very different from old-fashioned Renaissance humanists. However, I would argue that the philosophes were much more self-consciously modern than Edelstein allows for. Voltaire, for instance, in the brilliant ditty “Le Mondain” (The Man of World), made fun of the nostalgia for the golden age of antiquity expressed so eloquently by Fénelon, and declared himself quite happy with his own “iron age,” with its commercial hustle and bustle, its luxury and its artistic achievements. “Pine if you wish for the good old days,” Voltaire wrote:

the golden age and the reign of Astraea,
And the beautiful days of Saturn and Rhea,
And the garden of our forbearers;
Me, I am thankful to wise nature,
Who, for my own good, made me be born in this age
So much denounced by melancholy schoolmen.⁸

More persuasive and interesting, in my view, is a second, related argument put forward by Edelstein, namely that the *philosophes*, to the extent that they were defenders of modernity, meant something very different by that word than we do. The “modernity” identified and celebrated by the *philosophes*, as Edelstein makes clear, was very distinct from our own. “Yes, some of the values defended by the *philosophes*, their patrons, and their readers are values that we still hold dear today,” he emphasizes;

But their modernity was very different from ours: it was a modernity in which large democratic states seemed unfeasible, if not impossible; religion was not just the opium of the people but an important social institution; and patronage, if not monetary, than at least political, was a simple fact of life. In this unfamiliar context, beliefs that we champion or deride today could have a very different meaning. (118)

Edelstein is, of course, not the first to make this point. Again and again, historians of the Enlightenment have pointed out that the goals and ideals of the *philosophes*, politically, religiously and epistemologically, differed quite fundamentally from our own. Nevertheless, as the recent publication of Jonathan Israel’s *A Revolution of the Mind* makes clear, the myth of the Enlightenment as the foundational moment of our own modernity remains alive and well in the twenty-first century.⁹ From this perspective, Edelstein’s sophisticated and historicist take on the Enlightenment, his careful measuring of the distance between our own reality and that of the eighteenth century, could not be more timely.

⁸ Voltaire, “Le Mondain,” in *Les oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. H.T. Mason, vol. 16, *Writings of 1736* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2003), 269–314. The translation is my own.

⁹ Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modernity* (Princeton, 2010).

* * *

Every age has its own genealogies, its own way of understanding how it came to be what it is. In eighteenth-century France, historians spent an inordinate amount of time and paper discussing the conquest of Gaul by the Franks. Had there been a conquest at all, or had the Franks merely been coopted into the Roman state? Who had been in charge of the government at the time of the conquest? Did the Franks have a king or was their government more republican in nature? What had been the legal position of the conquered people of Gaul after Clovis? Had they been subjected and enslaved or had free Gauls been given the same rights and duties as the Franks?¹⁰ All of these questions, which now seem to be of merely antiquarian interest, aroused fierce controversy among the pundits of eighteenth-century France. This was the case because the French monarchy traced its lineage and much of its legitimacy all the way back to those fifth-century Franks. What happened in the early Middle Ages was therefore highly relevant to Enlightened Frenchmen.

Today, the history of the early Middle Ages no longer arouses violent passions, unless, perhaps, in the rarified realm of early medieval scholarship. We no longer believe that what happened in the fifth century AD has much bearing on our own times. Eighteenth-century France, however, holds a huge place in our historical imagination. Both the Enlightenment and the Revolution continue to stir debate far outside the community of professional historians. This is testimony to the fact that both these movements still hold a central place in our understanding of our own world. We trace many of our own ideas, practices and institutions back to either the Enlightenment or the French Revolution. As a result, we study the Enlightenment and the Revolution not merely out of historical curiosity, but because we hope that they provide clues about the achievements and problems of our own time. Taking a position about the origins of the Terror or the nature of the Enlightenment is therefore not a purely historical act. Almost inevitably, it means taking a position about issues that are seen as highly relevant to our own, twenty-first century society.

It is to Edelstein's credit that, in this fraught field of eighteenth-century French history, he has succeeded twice in staking out a position that requires us to fundamentally rethink our genealogies. Both of Edelstein's books pose a challenge, I would argue, to many of our most cherished notions about our own ideological descent. In the case of the Terror, as he argues, we might have drawn

¹⁰ On this eighteenth-century historical debate see Harold Ellis, *Boulainvilliers and the French Monarchy: Aristocratic Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca and London, 1988). For a broader and more philosophical take on the same debate see Michel Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the College de France, 1975–1976*, ed. M. Bertani, trans. A. Davidson (New York, 2003), 115–215.

the wrong conclusions from the failure of the French Revolution to establish a free and stable regime by incorrectly attributing this failure to the Rousseauism of the Jacobins. In the case of the Enlightenment, as he points out, we might have turned into predecessors what were really people trying to make their own modernity, not ours. What Edelstein's work suggests, in other words, is that we might need new genealogies for understanding our own times. That is intellectual history at its most exciting.