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**The Birth of European
Modernity from the Spirit of
Enlightenment**



The Age of Enlightenment was the founding period of modernity, a time in which the European worldview, values and way of thinking were fundamentally redefined. A profound revolution of knowledge established new criteria which had to be fulfilled before a statement could be considered true. The traditional Christian humanist worldview was thus shaken to its core. Vast areas of knowledge that had been nurtured and expanded over centuries were suddenly unmasked as illusions, bare of any grounding in reality. Hand in hand with this went the triumphant advance of the new criteria of truth, coupled with the development of new methods to arrive at that truth. The traditional worldview of course did not disappear entirely, but lived on in sites of intellectual refuge and compromise. This was especially true of the Christian faith in its various confessional forms. Yet the future belonged to the new mindset. This process of change manifested itself differently in the various cultural regions of Europe, and with a time lag from west to east that was not always clearly definable. Such variants are still discernible and virulent today. One example can be found in the uncompromising laicism of the state and politics in France that originated in the irreconcilable antagonisms between Catholicism and the Enlightenment and between Catholicism and revolution in the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, the Enlightenment is both a pan-European and a specifically *European* movement.

The revolution of knowledge during the Enlightenment drew its transformational energy from three different sources. For one, the traditional Christian humanist worldview lost its credibility in the aftermath of the wars of faith and religious persecutions pervading the seventeenth century. Martin Luther's (1483–1546) religious revolution of 1517, which placed the believer directly in charge of his or her faith before God, had radically questioned the authority of the Church as an agent of salvation. In spite of all attempts at conciliation, the rift with Catholicism was to remain irreconcilable. While the Protestant authorities held on to the idea of the Church, albeit substituting the one universal Catholic Church with many national and territorial churches, these churches were charged only with the mission of annunciation and education and no longer with that of salvation. With the passing of time they were unable to prevent the recurrent secession of Protestant religious groups. Particularly in view of the religious dynamics engendered by the Protestant principle of salvation as a personal responsibility, more and more dogmas and rituals began to seem like man-made products having nothing to do with the

will or the grace of God. Seen from this perspective, religious discipline and persecution seemed equally as unjustified as the religious wars that were devastating the Continent. This renunciation of violence gave rise, above all, to a pragmatic policy of tolerance in the Protestant countries which was even supposed to be extended to the Jews, hitherto exposed to a systematic stigmatisation on all fronts. At the same time it saw the emergence of the notion that faith in God surpassed all concrete religions (Deism), and the idea of a natural religion too. The consequences that the latter notion held in store for Christianity were set down by Matthew Tindal (1657–1733) in his treatise *Christianity as Old as the Creation; or, the Gospel a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (1730).

An even greater threat to the traditional Christian humanist worldview was posed by the Scientific Revolution which, running almost concurrently with the theological challenges, fundamentally altered the criteria of truth in respect of statements about reality. Henceforth, neither Revelation nor the authority of ancient or Christian authors counted as valid proofs of truth. In fact, they did not even constitute an *a priori* statement of truth, but on the contrary raised doubts as to the credibility of those who used them. Furthermore, all statements had to comply with the universal claim to validity exerted by natural laws, the principle of causality and even the laws of probability. As a result, the validity claimed by much of classical literature and the entire spectrum of knowledge with regard to phenomena of the supernatural world was called into question, though these undeniably had their place in the Christian humanist order of knowledge. The Enlightenment had use for neither pantheistic and animistic ideas nor for angels, demons or witches, but rather perceived these as mere instruments to instil fear and horror in the people, to make them docile and prevent them from using their reason. Worse still: the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith – the miracles and Passion of Christ and the resurrection of the flesh – lost their credibility. From that point on, statements were to be considered true only if, in addition to the criteria of truth already mentioned above, they were founded in precise, meticulously described, ideally quantified observations, or based on reproducible experiments. For reproducibility and verifiability were seen to guarantee the truth. Furthermore, statements were true if they followed the intersubjective methods of a given philology and met with the general rules of reasoning. Mathematical proofs served for a long time as a model. The transition from a rational-deductive to a sensory-inductive examination of reality shifted the balance within this 'authentication grid', albeit without contesting the basic validity thereof.

The final blow to the traditional worldview came with the wealth of knowledge flowing into Europe from the fifteenth century, when the boundaries of the European world began to dissolve, thus exposing its people to a diversity in the natural and social worlds they had never known before. This new world knowledge raised new questions, and the process of answering these led the way into new intellectual worlds: what might it mean for the traditional understanding of creation, or, to put it in neutral terms, for a secular natural science, that there were no large animals in America? Could humanity be thought of in terms of one human race, or of many different races? Did Christ also die for those who knew nothing of him? And if so, why did God deny them the knowledge of the Passion of Christ, constitutive of belief and hence salvation? How could a culture develop to the extent, say, of the Chinese, without even having heard the story of salvation so deeply entrenched in the Occident? One question gave rise to the next, while none could be answered according to the categories of the traditional Christian humanist system of thought: the need for a new explanation of the world was irrefutable.

These three historical roots – Christianity’s loss of credibility in its confessional form, the establishment of new rules of truth during the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, and the explosive increase of knowledge about the world which defied traditional categories – grew together in the last third of the eighteenth century to form the cultural movement of the Enlightenment. A confrontation developed between the traditional Christian humanist and the new rational-analytical modes of thought. Yet it was enlightened thought that was to emerge as the victor and fortify its command posts, (con)testing the traditional knowledge base and creating new ones. This assault on old ways of thought was brought forth from the safe bastions provided by a number of key works such as Isaac Newton’s (1643–1727) *Principia mathematica* (1687) or John Locke’s (1632–1704) *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), but it otherwise took place in a rather uncoordinated manner in various fields and in quite different forms ranging from the travel account to the novel through to the (popular) scientific treatise. In France, for example, Fontenelle’s (1657–1757) *Histoire des Oracles* (1687), Montesquieu’s (1689–1755) *Lettres Persanes* (1721) or Voltaire’s (1694–1778) *Lettres philosophiques ou lettres anglaises* (1734) examined the old school of thought from very different angles and in very different ways. What lent the Enlightenment a particular force in this regard was the fact that the battle between the various orders of knowledge was waged not in the seclusion of the scientific community, but rather directly in the eye of an emerging public. Presented in literary forms, it was accessible to a growing general-reading audience whom scholars credited with the necessary critical faculties to decide for themselves upon the questions discussed.

Around the middle of the eighteenth century, the time was ripe for a systematisation of the newly acquired knowledge. On the one hand, there was the content-inclusive approach of the *Encyclopédie* (1751–1772), Jean le Rond d’Alembert (1717–1783) and Denis Diderot’s (1713–1784) universal lexicographical enterprise, which not only offered a comprehensive history of knowledge but also gathered together France’s enlightened intellectuals into a kind of party. On the other hand, there was the publication of key works, such as Montesquieu’s *De l’esprit des lois* (1748) or Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon’s (1707–1788) *Histoire Naturelle* (1749–1788), which, taking an essentially neutral approach to interpretation, made it their business to take stock of recently acquired knowledge about society and nature. Ultimately, the realisation that the diversity of world cultures is historic by nature, that is, grounded in what Ernst Bloch termed the principle of “the non-simultaneity of the simultaneous”, led to the drafting of historico-philosophical narratives based on the idea of progress. Yet the various Enlightenment movements employed different parameters of progress: in the Scottish school – in the writings of Adam Smith (1723–1790), for example – economic growth and property expansion were the main parameters; France, as can be gleaned from the works of Jacques Turgot (1727–1781) and Condorcet (1743–1794), was more concerned with the development of culture and primary cultural practices such as language and writing; while in Germany, as represented, say, in the writings of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), the parameter of humanitarianism was key.

In the last third of the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment entered into a phase of hegemonic permeation of social awareness and political-administrative implementation on the one hand, and a further differentiation of its content and theoretical self-reassurance on the other. For the purposes of illustration, one may refer to the abundance of practical writings such as Cesare Beccaria’s (1738–1794) philosophy of criminal law, *Dei delitti e delle pene* (1764), the constitutional project of Leopold of Tuscany (1797–1870) or the introduction of the *Allgemeines Landrecht für die*

Preußischen Staaten (General Common Laws for the Prussian States, 1794), not to mention the writings of authors ranging from Adam Smith to Dugald Stewart (1753–1828), the French Ideologues or Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) critical work.

The Age of Enlightenment had its origins in the Scientific Revolution of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, whose impulse continued to reverberate in the natural sciences of the eighteenth century – albeit at a significantly reduced pace, but significantly with the discrediting of substantial bodies of knowledge, as in the field of biology. This shows that the progress of scientific knowledge does not adhere to linear or exponential models of growth and that patterns vary from one discipline to another. The eighteenth century saw a whole range of outstanding mathematical and natural scientific achievements ranging from the development of calculus by Isaac Newton and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), though they arrived at their results independently of one another, to the discovery of oxidation by Antoine Lavoisier (1743–1794) and John Dalton's speculations on atomic theory. This granted, the focus of modernisation in European-Atlantic thought was quite clearly in the field we now refer to as the human and social sciences.

At the heart of Enlightenment thought was the human being. No longer was it a human being in the capacity of a believer in the face of God, but rather an individual, living firmly in the here and now. Salvation, long held to be the ultimate goal of being human, was now replaced by happiness – a huge step forward in the history of individuality, whose evolution has been predominantly contained to the European-Atlantic region.

The human being was now conceived in speculative terms as a physiological-psychological entity. For both epistemology and ethics, this constituted a significant renunciation not only of the revelatory truth of religion but also of the tenets of Cartesianism with its brusque differentiation between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*. Humanity's new, direct relationship with the world charged Enlightenment philosophers with the task of shoring up the theoretical procedures and apparatus they used to perceive the world before they could set about subjugating it. Though it is beyond the scope of the present essay to trace the individual ramifications of epistemological discourse in the Enlightenment, it is worth noting here one particular aspect which rarely finds the consideration it deserves. I am alluding to the fact that this initial localisation of the new ways of knowing took place within a European framework. The main currents of the European Enlightenment each contributed their specific cultural-geographical manifestations to a conversation which, when it comes down to it, was conducted on a European plane. France's contribution derived from Cartesian discourse and was intellectual-rational; England's input continued the tradition established by Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and Isaac Newton and was sensationalistic-empirical. In both camps counter-movements came into being, generally drawing upon the argumentation of their respective opponents. Indeed Voltaire, Pierre-Louis Moreau de Maupertuis (1698–1759) and Frederick the Great (1712–1786) each took their turn at playing vassal to Newton. As the century was drawing to a close, Kant, taking up certain tenets of Leibniz's thought, managed to resolve the controversy with his transcendental philosophy in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) – not by proffering some kind of intellectual compromise, but rather a new level of theoretical reflection. In their ideal modes of operation, the cognitive apparatus and cognitive processes went from being empirically to theoretically defined.

In light of the conceptual proximity between epistemology and moral philosophy, under the influence of sensationalism, it is not surprising that conflicts ran along similar lines. However, it did not take long before other problems came to the fore. Would human beings, in following their drive for individual happiness – governed as it is by positive and negative impulses – be able to form a society at all? And all things considered, how strong was the impulse of socialisation, the drive to make certain objectives, such as security, easier to achieve? In his notorious *Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits* (1714), Bernard Mandeville (1670–1733) raised these questions in satirical form. Turning all the conventional rules of sociability on their head, he posited that the bee society, with its excessive sense of honour and sobriety, was on the verge of collapse. Societies as a whole were able to survive only if they were governed by greed and vice, for “private vices” turned out to be “public benefits” in the long run. The English moral philosophers, from Anthony Ashley-Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713) to Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746) and David Hume (1711–1776) to Adam Smith preferred not to depend on this mechanism. Rather, they worked with the assumption that human beings were clever enough to pursue their personal interests in an enlightened manner. Moreover, they imagined the individual to be in possession of a “moral sense” or, as in Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), a sympathetic urge, prompting him or her to complement selfish with social actions. Notwithstanding, Smith kept the “invisible hand”, his metaphor for harmony, in reserve. In France, Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709–1751) demonstrated the possibility of a moral aberration of sensationalist ethics by putting it on the path to hedonism. Turning the concept of moral philosophy on its head, this path ended up in the political pornography of the late eighteenth century and the violent, erotic zero-sum games of lust and pain in the works of the Marquis de Sade (1740–1814). Once again, it was Kant who, with his categorical imperative, showed the way out of this labyrinth of arguments and errors, much in the same manner as he had dealt with the distortions of the epistemological discussion.

Field by field, the Enlightenment tested the truth of traditional knowledge, purging it of falsities and supplementing it with new knowledge that deferred to the new criteria of truth. I would like to continue by demonstrating this first in the fields of aesthetics, natural history and the philosophy of history before directing my attention to the more practice-relevant areas of knowledge: religion and socio-political theory.

The aesthetic discourse of the Enlightenment occurred on a number of different interfaces. On the one hand it is not surprising that the struggle between the rational-deductive and the analytical-inductive approaches in epistemology and natural philosophy also made its presence felt in aesthetic discourse, as in the works of Nicolas Boileau (1636–1711) or Shaftesbury for example. After all, art was conceived as being in direct proportion to nature, both being obliged to remain congruent to one another, whereas science and art were interdependent. On the other hand it was inevitable that the social and cultural developments crucial for literature and art altered and shifted aesthetic categories. The long trajectory taking us from Boileau’s system of rules in *L’Art poétique* (1674) to Hume’s discussion of taste in England and then to the aesthetics of genius in the late-eighteenth century overarches the various internal aesthetic, cultural-critical discourses within Europe’s cultures of Enlightenment, these having originated in the emergence of a market for literature, journalism and the arts on the one hand and an enlightened educated elite on the other. On and between these different levels, the ‘magic triangle’ – given by the artist, the artwork and the audience – was redrawn many times over the course of the eighteenth century, while some of the key ideas of modern aesthetics were, at the very least, envisaged. All of this remained embedded within the

reassessment of knowledge handed down from classical antiquity and the value such knowledge might hold for society at that time – a time which was a product of the knowledge revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but importantly saw the rise of a new sense of cultural self-confidence first touched upon in the *Querelle des Anciens et Modernes*.

In the natural sciences, the initial impulse of the Scientific Revolution was gradually displaced by the need to come to grips with the abundance of new knowledge about nature. The advance of the *mathesis universalis*, so fervently advocated by René Descartes (1596–1650) and later Leibniz, came to a standstill with the turn towards Empiricism. New sciences such as geology and biology came to the fore, opening a new act in the drama of the knowledge revolution from the Christian humanist to the Enlightenment worldview. God's creation and the transmission thereof were once again put to the test, albeit from a different angle. New theories about the origins of the world – Buffon's, for example – confronted the Bible's narratives of Creation and world chronology with hard geological evidence contradicting them. The natural history cabinets of princes and mineral collections of private individuals archived these new findings about the age and formation of the world in the same way that they assembled data on the structure of faraway lands. Yet they also served to symbolically document the participation of their owners in the acquisition of new knowledge and their subscription to the knowledge revolution with which it went hand in hand.

Biology left a softer impression. Its image was significantly shaped by the vast systematic approaches of Carl von Linnæus (1707–1778) and Buffon, the former's having maintained its validity right through to the present day. Also important were comparative biology and in particular comparative anatomy, which contributed to the nascent branch of science's inventory of knowledge and methodology. One of its leading exponents was the Swiss-born anatomist Albrecht von Haller (1708–1777), whose work is associated with the University of Göttingen. Also known for his great nature poem "Die Alpen" (The Alps, 1729), Haller's contributions to mapping the human being endured until the turn of the twentieth century. With his research on the central nervous system, he probed into the assumptions of sensationalism from a physiological perspective, while his lexicographical contributions expanded the general accessibility of medical knowledge. However, the emergence of biological theory took strange forms too.

Preformation theory, according to which the construction plans for all living things were drawn up at the creation of the universe and only needed to be unfolded in the course of time, sought to reconcile Christian religious doctrine with the new natural sciences. The Swiss biologist Charles Bonnet (1720–1793) even attempted to find biological evidence of parthenogenesis (virgin birth) and palingenesis (life after death). Other theoretical dead ends, such as Buffon's degeneration theory or his American degeneracy theory – an adaptation of the theory of environmental conditioning, leading him to declare America a place in which adverse environmental conditions stymied human, animal and plant development – seem less bizarre, yet they should not be overrated as failed attempts on the way to the theory of evolution.

In the realm of historical thought in general, and universal – or world – history in particular, the knowledge revolution took place in a much more purposeful manner, the significance of which can still be felt today. Universal history had been very much influenced by Christianity up until the end of the seventeenth century. Spanning from the early history of the Jews and the various peoples with whom they came in contact

through to the history of Christian Europe, it had rarely been continued through to the present and was limited in terms of region to the European and Asia Minor areas. The last major manifestation of this kind of history writing can be found in Jacques Bénigne Bossuet's (1627–1704) *Discours sur l'histoire universelle*, which was written in 1681 for the French heir apparent, Louis de France (1661–1711). Indeed, with the onset of globalisation in the sixteenth century, both in intellectual and – if somewhat less so – commercial terms, historiographies of this kind no longer made much sense. No longer could one turn a blind eye to the fact that the story of salvation and the history of humanity were anything but identical. Theologically-inspired interpretations of history thus became obsolete. Universal history, if it was to survive at all, would need to be charted along different lines. One such attempt can be found in Montesquieu's famous *De l'esprit des lois* (1748), a kind of handbook of world societies based on their legal systems. Taking a synchronic approach, he argued that history was only one of the many variables, including climate, soil conditions or religion, that played a part in shaping the world. World history was broken down into a series of localised histories pertaining to the various world cultures. However, the majority of Enlightenment scholars viewed history from a diachronic perspective. Considering the heterogeneity of world conditions in terms of a "simultaneity of the non-simultaneous", they sought to come up with a secular grand narrative of world history that would conclusively explain these differences. They found it in the idea of progress, which comfortably accommodated the seemingly contradictory notions of a singular world history on the one hand, and a plurality of actual historical manifestations on the other. In the philosophy of history, the paradigm of development was the new magic spell: Europe was seen to be the driving force of world history, the vanguard of social, economic and cultural progress, while the rest of the world was at various earlier stages of human development. Other societies, it was thought, were developing at a significantly slower rate, with some perhaps even having ceased to develop at all. As a matter of fact, this assessment could well have been applicable to Europe as well, bearing in mind the varying levels of development from region to region. Indeed, viewed in this light, the vanguard of progress is typically situated in the respective historical interpreter's home domain.

This new interpretation of universal history came about as a result of an operation which, borne out of the ingenious impulse of reducing complexity, was to have a considerable impact on the European understanding of history. Existing knowledge about the history of ancient and mediaeval Europe and the non-European world was collated and divided up into a sequence of varying stages of development, these acquiring the status of a theoretical history or *histoire raisonnée*. This not only conserved world history as a single entity, but also consolidated Europe's claim to leadership, convinced as it was of being the only advanced world culture, and confirmed the historical backwardness of other societies.

Applied with a focus on economic history by representatives of the Anglo-Scottish school of the philosophy of history, ranging from Adam Smith to Adam Ferguson (1723–1816), and, with a focus on cultural history, by their French counterparts, Voltaire, Turgot and Condorcet, this method exerted a powerful influence on world history. For not only did it provide the theoretical basis for the European claim to cultural-moral custodianship and hegemony over the other people of the world – a claim that, with the exception of the German philosopher Herder to some degree, remained largely uncontested – but also formed the basis of the Marxist philosophy of history, thus influencing the way in which non-European societies perceived themselves.

In our survey of the order of knowledge in eighteenth-century Europe we have now arrived at the specifically practice-relevant fields of knowledge. Let us begin by looking at religion. Following the contestation of divine revelation as the source of all truth, positive religion – or in other words religion of the confessional, ecclesiastical variety – found itself hopelessly on the defensive. Where the ranks of the church were being consistently undermined by one generation of enlightened clerics after another, not even its institutional power offered any protection to speak of. This was most keenly felt in the Protestant churches in Britain and Germany where there seemed to be a constant call for compromises in both dogma and liturgy. Catholicism, by contrast, proved more resilient, yet it was precisely this resistance that fuelled its confrontation with the Enlightenment, forcing it into an aggressive laicism. This gave rise to a particular political constellation – conservative Catholicism versus left-wing laicism – which even now characterises the political landscape of France and many southern European countries (not to mention the former Iberian colonies in the Americas).

No matter what 'guise of compromise' the Enlightenment may have assumed in various European cultures, it was on a one-way road to Deism, a religion founded upon reason, and in any case to the call for religious tolerance. Where this call had long been confined to other Protestant denominations, it was now broadened to encompass people of other faiths, including the Jewish people, especially in Central and Eastern Europe as the Jewish communities there were much stronger than in Western Europe. In fact, reaching its pinnacle with the publication of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's (1729–1781) tolerance drama, *Nathan der Weise* (Nathan the Wise, 1779), and the Patents of Religious Toleration issued by the Holy Roman Emperor, Joseph II (1741–1790), the discourse on tolerance culminating in the emancipation of the Jews grew to be a hallmark of the German Enlightenment. Yet even in places where the Enlightenment had become a force to be reckoned with, there nevertheless remained small pockets of piety, such as the Methodists in England, the Jansenists in France, and the Pietists in Germany, who, even in respect of their habitus, turned their backs on their enlightened environment.

After religion, superstition was next in the line of fire, with no end of magic rituals falling subject to the scrutinising gaze of the Enlightenment. Indeed, the vast spectrum of explanatory models and practices steeped in folk religion and magic – ranging from the curing of scrofula by the touch of a monarch's hand to the incantation of warts by village wise-women, from the belief in ghosts, vampires and werewolves to delusions and hallucinations – were declared ineffective and fraudulent, and people were urged to set aside their fears of such wild concoctions. In the judicial system the *crimen magiae*, the denunciation of witches and the running of sorcery trials, slowly became a thing of the past. For a few decades, ghosts were even banned from literature, as evidenced by Friedrich Schiller's fragmentary novel *Der Geisterseher* (The Ghost-Seer, 1789), and were only allowed back in by the Gothic novel and the Romantics, the latter being inclined to have their fun with the sobriety of the Enlightenment.

The principles underlying the political and social order of the old Europe had a similarly difficult time in standing up to scrutiny. The claim to divine sovereignty, stated even in the titles of many of Europe's monarchs, became untenable, although political supremacy still remained the domain of a ruling class who inherited their power from one generation and bequeathed it to the next. Based on the hypothesis of the "state of nature" and the contract theory of political power, Enlightenment philosophers – particularly John Locke in his famous *Second Treatise of Civil Government* (1690) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) in *Du contrat social; ou, Principes du droit politique* (1762) – made it clear

that sovereignty could be nothing short of a mandate of those who could tolerate having it over them, such that it would serve a certain purpose, namely the protection of life, freedom, and property. This specific function of political power worked best if it was established with the consent of those who would be submitting to it.

Thus, the basis for the legitimacy of political power once and for all shifted away from the grace of God, from the inheritance or transfer of power, towards a legitimacy based on popular consensus, able to be renewed or terminated at will. Subjects became citizens. England, which, since the days of the Glorious Revolution of 1688–1689, seemed to have done an exemplary job at satisfying the new requirements concerning the claim to legitimate political power, soon became the model state for all of Europe. Montesquieu's description of the constitutional protection of English liberty in chapter thirteen of his *Esprit des lois* became the *locus classicus* of European-Atlantic constitutional thought. The Enlightenment founded its renewal of European political philosophy upon the older notions of "a state of nature" and the "social contract", albeit with quite a number of shifts in emphasis which it is impossible to explore in full detail here. Most important in the present context is the methodological approach, which, though it was no doubt inspired by the ethnographic reality of so-called primitive American societies, otherwise drew its cogency from the fact that it ignored prevailing political and social conditions in Europe, enquiring instead into the logic of sovereignty and society per se. Those who considered such profound changes in their state's constitution impossible or inopportune – namely, the enlightened monarchs of continental Europe like Frederick II of Prussia or the Holy Roman Emperor, Joseph II, whose foundation for rule was challenged – nevertheless intended to hold office in the spirit of Enlightenment. They were at the very least obliged to declare the happiness of their subjects a matter of state. For a long time, this new political expectation remained little more than a possibility, the attempts at its fulfilment being inadequate on the one hand, and more *with* than *against* the existing authorities on the other. This was to change fundamentally, however, when Enlightenment Europe, roused by the example of the American Revolution and its culmination in the Declaration of Independence on 4 July 1776, witnessed a wave of politicisation.

In parallel with the assault on traditional notions of political legitimacy, the Enlightenment undermined the hierarchical social model of the Ancien Régime, a society of nobility and privilege. In the new way of thinking there was no place for the idea of the traditional aristocracy as a ruling class – or, for that matter, for a caste guaranteed social and legal privilege by birth. Indeed, the Enlightenment's various hypotheses presupposed the political-judicial equality of all members of society. Privileges, or even authority over other people, and the transfer of these by inheritance were not justifiable. Relics of this school of thought, such as the Law of the Conqueror (*ius conquestus*), in the law of nations, drafted in accordance with natural law, were quickly eradicated. This did not mean that the Enlightenment had somehow taken up the cause of social equality. The vanishing point of social thought at that time was not the individual per se, but rather the individual as property owner. In contrast to the heredity of social rank, the heredity of property was conceived of as something entirely natural. This circumstance alleviated the confrontation with aristocratic society inasmuch as the nobility was able to take refuge, as it were, in the guarantee of ownership – this, of course, came at the cost of reducing the capital of social rank and honour to just one form of capital among others. As trenchant as ever, English painter and printmaker William Hogarth (1697–1764) portrayed precisely this phenomenon in the first plate of his *Marriage A-la-Mode* series (1745). Again, it appeared that England, with its gentry society, had solved the problems

of the aristocracy better and earlier than other countries, that it had found the royal road out of the "crisis of the aristocracy" which towards the end of the eighteenth century had taken hold among the nobility on the Continent.

Meanwhile, Enlightenment thinkers began to examine the nobility from another perspective. Members of the upper echelons of society were reproached for their moral decadence which, it was argued, they brought upon themselves by their pursuit of exclusivity and their adherence to the perverted rules of courtly society. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's epistolary romance novel, *La nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), became one of the great bestsellers of the eighteenth century with its story of a love affair between a young noblewoman and her middle-class tutor, doomed by her father's class conceit. In Germany, Lessing and Schiller brought to the stage their critique of the moral corruption of Germany's petty principalities with their respective dramas *Emilia Galotti* (1772) and *Kabale und Liebe* (Intrigue and Love, 1784). In 1782, Choderlos de Laclos published yet another suggestive tableau of aristocratic *libertinage* in late Ancien Régime French society with his epistolary novel, *Les liaisons dangereuses* (1782).

The society of owners was supposed to be able to develop freely along the lines of economic forces, undisturbed by interventions in the market motivated by extra-economic concerns. This was the aim of the theory of the free market as posited by Adam Smith in his *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776): a rejection of the mercantilist economic policy of the past, it praised the market as the best of all allocation systems for balancing supply and demand and identified the division of labour as the source of wealth. It corresponded with Great Britain's historical experience as a trading nation to locate the main source of added value in trade, whereas French economists François Quesnay (1694–1774) and Turgot considered the generation of surplus in agricultural production to be the decisive factor. Just as Adam Smith intended to liberate trade from all political constraints, so the Physiocrats aspired to achieve the same for agriculture, which was to be unburdened of all economic factors running counter to the natural order, the *ordre naturel*. The traditional feudal agricultural constitution now came under fire, its purported expediency challenged. Moreover, the stance taken in the debate over the deregulation of the grain industry was interpreted as a signal of sorts among the French *philosophes*. However, it was ultimately the French Revolution, along with the various secondary reform experiments, as it were, that it precipitated across Europe at the turn from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, that delivered a lasting blow to the Ancien Régime as a society of vested rights and privileges. In France, the *Loi le chapelier*, passed in 1791, founded the economy upon the individual and his property, thus undermining the positions of all intermediary economic institutions, ranging from guilds to journeymen's brotherhoods. In Prussia, free trade was a core element of the Stein-Hardenberg Reforms (1807). In England, where the market had meanwhile been freed of most restrictions, a similar law, known as the Combination Act of 1799, had already been passed with a view towards regulating trade unionism.

It goes without saying that the Enlightenment was more than an intellectual phenomenon. Indeed, it took place in a political, social, and cultural context which both partly obstructed and partly advanced its progress. The ambivalent reaction of the Ancien Régime, with its society of nobility and privilege, has already been mentioned above. The nobility could not help being fascinated by this new cultural movement, though it was a movement that so clearly undermined its very foundations – at the ideal level, at least. The French historian Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, a specialist on the French nobility, put it in a nutshell with a rather clever pun on the title of a play by Molière (1622–1673): while

at the end of the seventeenth century France's foremost comic playwright was still able to mock the *bourgeois gentilhommes*, members of the bourgeoisie seeking to emulate the nobility, by the end of the eighteenth century, the *gentilhomme bourgeois*, the nobleman seeking to justify his elevated role with bourgeois values and behaviour, had well and truly prevailed. This observation can be readily applied to the state of the Ancien Régime. Some of Europe's absolutist princes attempted to put the Enlightenment to good use in the rationalisation and modernisation of power structures and socio-economic conditions within their countries. Frederick II of Prussia embarked on the experiment of bringing the courtly system in tune with the Enlightenment spirit by establishing his court – with himself as central figure – as the political and intellectual 'control centre' of European Enlightenment. On a personal level, Frederick displayed surprising talent as an enlightened intellectual: he wrote essays and poems, composed music and excelled in the art of conversation, not in his capacity as king but simply as a clever conversationalist. His attempt at reconciling the courtly system with the Enlightenment was even more resolute when it came to the model of the "court of the muses" in Germany's petty principalities, the most culturally significant example thereof being the Weimar court of Anna Amalia (1739–1807) and Ernst August (1737–1758). Christoph Wieland (1733–1813) had already tutored princes there, and from 1775 onwards Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) worked to establish Weimar as a cultural centre of the Old Empire. Calling some of the best minds of the German Enlightenment, among them Herder, Schiller and Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), not only to Weimar, but also to the neighbouring state university of Jena, he ruled this intellectual scene with a strong hand as *arbiter elegantiarum*. To this day, Weimar plays a key role in the German national imagination and cultural memory being the founding place of the German cultural nation in a political landscape marked by the enforced renunciation of power. In Russia, Catherine the Great (1729–1796) sought to join the Enlightenment movement in a manner similar to Frederick the Great in Prussia. However, in doing so, she looked beyond the courtly world, finding it rather limited and exalted in spite of all its European grandeur, and saw the Enlightenment as a summons to implement social and economic reforms. A little while later, in the 1780s, Joseph II initiated sweeping governmental, social and economic reforms, which were to change the face of Central and Central-Eastern Europe. The Prussian Reforms, which began with Baron vom Stein's (1757–1831) Edict of Emancipation on 9 October 1807, abolished the vestiges of serfdom and the nobility's territorial privilege and stood in this tradition of enlightened practice. They were inspired by socio-political measures taken by Napoleon (1769–1821), who similarly drew on the legacy of the Enlightenment.

Of course, all of these reforms were historical compromises. They were top-down reforms, with enlightened bureaucrats performing the role of trustees of a society of responsible citizens still to come into its own and implementing what they themselves thought reasonable. Indeed, many enlightened intellectuals had developed sympathies for this model – a guardianship of reason, as it were – and were attracted by the notion of becoming the mandarins of Europe. Notwithstanding, the western European Enlightenment remained a social movement. Since the turn from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, the reading and decision-making community within the enlightened public sphere had grown continuously and, in conjunction with the products it was offered, more nuanced too. The media revolution, which had reached an initial climax during the Reformation in the sixteenth century with the formation of an audience based on faith, thus came to a close. Over the course of the seventeenth century, journalism increasingly treated secular as well as religious topics, yet with a time lag from west to east. Ample material could be found in the news about the world's diversity, which

increasingly flowed into Europe as Europeans discovered progressively more of the world around them, captivating readers as much as the encounter with God had done a century before. Whereas the devotional literature of the confessional age sustained a decline in popularity (or prominence?), as did its subject matter, these new topics were well suited to entertain readers and arouse their curiosity. New publication formats, such as the magazine or the novel, supported this development. It is no coincidence that Daniel Defoe's (1660–1731) adventure novel *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) – still a classic of young adult literature today – became one of the most popular successes of this transitional phase, blending as it does elements of travel writing with fictional narration. The literary-journalistic market developing in the course of the eighteenth century offered a livelihood, if quite a precarious one, to many a representative of the new enlightened intelligentsia. In all probability, however, few would have been able to fully earn their living as a writer or an artist. Yet on the fringes of the nascent publishing industry several opportunities for employment emerged, as translator, copyist, colourist, indexer, publisher, or literary agent, which allowed many to hold on to the illusion of a new independence and develop renewed self-confidence in other situations of life as private tutors, scribes, or clerks.

The enlightened public was a virtual variable. It manifested itself only rarely and when so, then often only temporarily in reading circles and debating societies, coffee houses and salons, or on a more authority-oriented level in assemblies at scientific academies, at the theatre or sometimes even larger events. When the enlightened public began to organise itself politically towards the end of the eighteenth century – first in the American colonies, then in France, but also among oppositional groups in England and Germany – in order to become a revolutionary Nation and compete with traditional authorities for sovereignty, it built upon these prior experiences in political clubs, correspondence societies and, somewhat more directly, district assemblies.

It is not easy to reconstruct the mode of communication in these circles. Certainly, the Enlightenment's avowal of a culture of communication and argumentation was not put into practice as a matter of course. Visitors of places where enlightened discussion took place knew from their own experience – if they had not read it in Plato's (c. 428–348 BC) *Gorgias* dialogue (after 399 BC) – how rhetoricians and sycophants, enthusiasts and defeatists, sophists and solipsists could jeopardise a discussion per se, not to mention the topics it addressed. Still, it can be concluded that the criteria of truth propagated by the Enlightenment were discursive in nature and hence possessed added repercussions in more authoritative contexts such as at scholarly academies or the ritualised opportunities for discussion at universities. This is especially apparent in scholarly academies' prize questions linking institutional and public discourse. Some of the Enlightenment's most eminent texts, from Rousseau's famous *Discours* (1754) on progress and inequality to Kant's *Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightenment?"* (1784), had been written for just such occasions.

About the author

Guenther Lottes was born in Altdorf near Nuremberg, Germany in 1951. Following his studies in history, English and political science at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, he received his doctorate in 1977 for a thesis entitled "Politische Aufklaerung und plebeijsches Publikum". With a continuing focus on the European Enlightenment he completed his habilitation in 1984, followed by a period as visiting professor in the Department of Modern and Recent History at the University of Bayreuth from 1985 to 1986. After holding professorships at the University of Regensburg from 1986 to 1992 and the Justus Liebig University in Giessen from 1992 to 1999, he served from 1999 to 2007 as director of the Research Centre for the European Enlightenment at the University of Potsdam, where from 1999 to the present he has held a chair in modern and cultural history. His recent books include: „Kompass der Geschichtswissenschaften“ (with Joachim Eibach), Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002; „Vom Kurfürstentum zum Königreich der Landstriche“: „Brandenburg-Preußen im Zeitalter von Absolutismus und Aufklärung“, Berlin: Wissenschaft-Verlag, 2004; „Europäische Hofkultur und aufgeklärte Öffentlichkeit“: Potsdam im 18. Jahrhundert (with Iwan D´Aprile), Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2006 and „Immanuel Kant: German Professor and World-Philosopher“ (with Uwe Steiner), Hanover: Wehrhahn, 2007. He is also editor (with Brunhilde Wehinger) of the bilingual edition of the works of Frederick the Great (Potsdamer Ausgabe).

This text has been taken from:

Die Kunst der Aufklaerung (*The Art of the Enlightenment*), Exhibition Catalogue by Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden and Bayerische Staatsgemaeldesammlungen Munich in cooperation with the National Museum of China, Beijing 2011

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