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Introduction

1. DEFINING THE ENLIGHTENMENT

In recent decades the other major historical transitions towards modernity—the Renaissance and Reformation, and also the British Industrial Revolution—have receded somewhat from the commanding centrality they used to enjoy in the world of historical studies. Both the Renaissance and the Protestant–Catholic split have recently tended to lose something of their earlier importance in our society. The effect of this together with the growing clash between theological perspectives and secularism and the increasingly fraught question of universal human rights has been to push the Enlightenment increasingly to the fore as the single most important topic, internationally, in modern historical studies, and one of crucial significance also in our politics, cultural studies, and philosophy.

Meanwhile, a 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 has, at the same time, caused an escalating ‘crisis of the Enlightenment’ in historical and philosophical studies.¹ In particular, Postmodernist thinkers have argued that its abstract universalism was ultimately destructive, that the relentless rationalism, concern with perfecting humanity, and universalism of what they often disparagingly called ‘the Enlightenment project’ was responsible for the organized mass violence of the later French Revolution and the still greater horrors perpetrated by imperialism, Communism, Fascism, and Nazism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many argued that the assumption that humanity is ‘infinitely malleable’, as James Schmidt put it, ‘provided the intellectual inspiration for attempts by totalitarian states to eradicate every trace of individuality from their subjects.’² Others insisted that the Enlightenment reduced complex moral dilemmas to a superficial level using simplistic solutions to iron out long-existing and deeply felt community differences and values. This multi-faceted indictment was lent added philosophical coherence by Michel Foucault’s overarching and powerful claim

¹ Schmidt, *What is Enlightenment?*, 1; Bartlett, *Idea of Enlightenment*, 7–11; Dupré, *Enlightenment*, 335–6, 338; Robertson, *Case*, 1–2; Withers, *Placing*, 4–5.

² Schmidt, *What is Enlightenment?*, 1.

that the Enlightenment's insistence on the primacy of reason was ultimately just a mask for the exercise of power. He maintained, often very convincingly, that Enlightenment was not just about liberation but even more about new forms of constraint. Postmodernist theorists urge us to forget the Enlightenment's quest for universal moral and political foundations, claiming different cultures should be left 'to determine their own priorities and goals without our discriminating politically or morally between them'.³ In this way a new 'project' arose, replacing the intellectual foundations forged by the Enlightenment with a fresh set of criteria framing a postmodern world built on multiculturalism, moral relativism, and the indeterminacy of truth.

Given the overriding importance and vast scope of this global cultural-philosophical clash today any scholar discussing Enlightenment in broad terms has a clear responsibility to render as accurate, carefully delineated, and complete a picture of the phenomenon as possible. Except for those willing to yield to Postmodernism and concede the death of reason and moral universalism, it remains an ongoing, live, and vital issue. Moreover, even many of the Enlightenment's contemporary defenders appear to agree that this great movement in global thought, interpretation, and reform 'was flawed and one-sided'. But was it? Before we can answer we need scholarship to explore the issue thoroughly, and it is an astounding fact that many aspects of this great movement still remain remarkably little known.

In view of this, and since this present study has now grown into a trilogy of volumes and become too large for readers easily to obtain an overview of, it seems essential to begin here by providing a clear and concise résumé of the overall argument, to enable readers to grasp clearly what is being argued and how this volume connects with the previous two in the series. This is all the more essential in that numerous determined and sometimes sharply expressed critiques questioning my general interpretation of the Enlightenment have appeared in recent years, notably by Theo Verbeek, Paolo Casini, Margaret Jacob, Henry Chiswick, Antony La Vopa, Wiep van Bunge, Antoine Lilti, Sam Moyn, Dan Edelstein, and on one crucial point also Siep Stuurman—the latter insisting that there is no 'necessary connection' between one-substance metaphysics and Radical Enlightenment political and social reformism, a contention in which he as well as the others are most certainly mistaken—debunking efforts which raise important and relevant questions and objections that need answering, certainly,⁴ but also include much that amounts

³ Robertson, *Case*, 1.

⁴ The closely argued thirty-nine-page critique (*Annales*, 64 (2009), 171–206) by Antoine Lilti is the most cogent and effective of these critiques so far despite the striking contradiction in his robustly defending the socio-cultural approach of Darnton, Chartier, and Roche against my criticism after having conclusively demonstrated in his main work, *Le Monde des salons* (2005), that their socio-cultural approach to the Enlightenment vastly overestimates the role of new eighteenth-century social spaces and practices, such as the salons, in generating Enlightenment ideas and is totally invalid as a method of explaining the Enlightenment phenomenon. His critique is entitled 'Comment écrit-on l'histoire intellectuelle des Lumières? Spinozisme, radicalisme et philosophie'. My reply is forthcoming in the journal *La Lettre clandestine* (*Annales* having refused to publish a response of matching length to Lilti's detailed argument). Stuurman's claim that 'there is no necessary linkage between metaphysics and politics',

to little more than failure to grasp the argument and inaccuracy in reporting what is actually being argued.

The Enlightenment, I maintain, was the most important and profound intellectual, social, and cultural transformation of the Western world since the Middle Ages and the most formative in shaping modernity. It must be understood both as an intellectual movement and as mainstream socio-economic and political history—for historiography a distinctly unfamiliar combination. It evolved on both sides of the Atlantic and began in the second half of the seventeenth century. The product of a particular era, it has profoundly affected every aspect of modernity. What was the Enlightenment? Historians have found it notoriously difficult to provide a fully adequate definition. Many definitions have been suggested and used which are correct and relevant up to a point and capture much of what historians and philosophers identify as the Enlightenment, but none seems altogether satisfactory. Peter Gay was right to claim that the ‘men of the Enlightenment united on a vastly ambitious programme, a programme of secularism, humanity, cosmopolitanism, and freedom, above all, freedom in its many forms—freedom from arbitrary power, freedom of speech, freedom of trade, freedom to realize one’s talents, freedom of aesthetic response, freedom, in a word, of moral man to make his own way in the world’.⁵ Only his definition seriously overstates the secularism of the mainstream Enlightenment and the strength of the commitment of many enlighteners to free speech, free trade, and personal freedom. It is also largely valid to say that the Enlightenment ‘began not as a definite “thing” or even as a chronological period, but as processes concerned with the central place of reason and of experience and experiment in understanding and improving human society’.⁶ What distinguished the Enlightenment’s particular emphasis on reason was indeed a belief that applying reason tempered by experiment and experience, not anything based on blind authority, would bring vast social benefits. It can also be justly defined as an era that pursued with greater consistency than any other the notion that things ought to be justified rather than ‘blindly accepted from habit and custom’.⁷

But while true as far as they go such definitions crucially miss the social historical dimension: they fail to give a sense of the Enlightenment being a response to the dilemmas of a society standing at the confluence of the static, the traditional norms, with the rapid changes, fluidity, and pluralism so typical of modernity,⁸ or a sense of the ideologically and politically embattled status of the Enlightenment, its being besieged by powerful forces from without while also being continually ravaged by disputes within. Like both the Renaissance and Reformation, in the Enlightenment intellectual and doctrinal changes came first but impacted on—and responded

expounded in his article ‘Pathways’ and elsewhere, is repeated in his published lecture ‘Global Equality and Inequality in Enlightenment Thought’, 1, 28, 31–2.

⁵ Gay, *Enlightenment*, i. 3.

⁶ Withers, *Placing*, 2.

⁷ Dupré, *Enlightenment*, 358.

⁸ Roche, ‘Lumières concrètes’, 94–7.

to—social, cultural, economic, and political context so profoundly that they changed everything. But unlike the Renaissance which revolved around the rediscovery of the texts of classical antiquity, or the Reformation which pivoted on a revolt against Catholic doctrine and ecclesiastical authority and forged several Protestant confessions, with the Enlightenment it has proven difficult even to agree as to which intellectual tendencies should chiefly be stressed. Even the notion that the Enlightenment placed a new and particular stress on ‘reason’ can be easily questioned by citing the examples of Hume and Burke, two of the Enlightenment’s greatest thinkers. Given the notorious difficulty of providing a complete definition it is unlikely that there will be general agreement regarding the definition employed here. But it is important to begin by clearly formulating the definition used in these volumes and briefly explaining why this definition of the Enlightenment seems more adequate than other characterizations.

In defining the Enlightenment, we must bear in mind two particular difficulties hindering a satisfactory, historically accurate characterization: first, it is undoubtedly true that as a general cultural phenomenon the Anglo-American Enlightenment placed much less emphasis on the role of reason and philosophy as the agent of change than was the case in France, Italy, and Germany; secondly, it is necessary to remember that the very term ‘Enlightenment’ we use today and its French equivalent *Lumières*, or Spanish *Ilustración*, are to a large extent later nineteenth- and twentieth-century constructions—though the German *Aufklärung* was more widely used in the late eighteenth century; the term ‘Enlightenment’ therefore carries an ideological baggage and resonances often superimposed later and not part of the original phenomenon. Hence, a fully adequate historical and philosophical definition does not necessarily have to accommodate some of the things academics, politicians, social theorists, and others writing today mean by the term ‘Enlightenment’. Especially alien to the eighteenth-century concept—and sometimes pernicious in our contemporary usage—is the today widespread assumption in some quarters that we in the Western world are ‘enlightened’ and need to defend and preserve a supposedly shared body of values.

Furthermore, a habit has developed in recent decades in historical studies of focusing much attention in Enlightenment studies on questions of sociability, *mondanité*, cultural spaces. The study of sociability and social practices is often interesting and important but has little directly to do with what contemporaries meant when they accounted innovations, recommendations, or changes ‘enlightened’, *éclairé*, or *aufgeklärt*, terms incessantly used at the time. No significant Enlightenment figure had sociability or social practices in mind when designating as ‘enlightened’, or the fruit of ‘enlightened’ attitudes, the great shifts, cultural, scientific, social, and political, they saw occurring, or as having recently occurred or as needing to occur. Therefore little attention is paid here to this aspect of eighteenth-century history and it is neither necessary nor advisable to find room for the cultural history of sociability and social practices in defining the Enlightenment. If the Parisian salons, for example, were an extremely important social space, their contribution to the

Enlightenment as such was practically zero except as a (very) marginal conduit of dissemination.⁹ Sociability, in short, is just a gigantic red herring. But this most certainly does not mean that Enlightenment was a purely intellectual movement. There was a great deal of social grievance and legal archaism in the eighteenth century, and the Enlightenment precisely by establishing new principles, understood intellectually, set up a powerful process of social and political innovation, reformism, and change which profoundly affected the whole of society. The Enlightenment is not a story of ideas but a story of the interaction of ideas and social reality.¹⁰

John Robertson begins his important 2005 study by characterizing the Enlightenment as a shift commencing in the 1740s involving ‘a new focus on betterment in this world, without regard for the existence or non-existence of the next’. The main intellectual effort, he argued, was ‘concentrated on understanding the means of progress in human society, not on demolishing belief in a divine counterpart’.¹¹ His emphasis on there having been a core of original thinking to the Enlightenment ‘that was not simply a matter of common aspirations and values’ and within which ‘the understanding of human betterment was pursued across a number of independent lines of enquiry’ is in many ways excellent and, like earlier definitions, captures much of what is needed. Any workable definition of Enlightenment must focus on betterment in this world and get away from social practice and common values to stress especially new principles, concepts, and constitutional arrangements being introduced that are conceived to be transforming society for the better. But Robertson’s characterization still has four considerable limitations. Both advocates and (the many) opponents of the Enlightenment typically saw the process as beginning in the mid and late seventeenth century so that the 1740s is simply too late a starting point; Robertson’s formula insufficiently stresses the tendency to see human amelioration as something arising from a general transformation in men’s thinking, attitudes, and ideas and by challenging accepted values, rather than stemming from other arguably useful forces for change such as economic processes, social practices, inherent national characteristics real or alleged, imperial expansion, religious revelations, rediscovering ancient texts or ancient constitutions; thirdly, it fails to capture the general consensus that what was needed and happening (or about to happen) was a giant leap forward, a vast revolutionary change, that the difference between enlightened attitudes and society and unenlightened attitudes and society is like light and darkness. At one point, Robertson criticizes Darnton for postulating too close a link between Enlightenment and the French and American revolutions; but here, arguably, Darnton was entirely correct.¹² Finally, missing here is any reference to the profoundly typical quest for universal solutions and recipes. Universalism was one of the quintessential characteristics of the Enlightenment.

⁹ Lilti, *Les Salons*, 9–10, 107–9, 321–2, 413–15; Edelstein, *Enlightenment*, 10.

¹⁰ Roche, ‘Lumières concrètes’, 92–3.

¹¹ Robertson, *Case*, 8.

¹² *Ibid.* 6.

Admittedly, other recent definitions have put more stress on pluralism and the national perspective within the Enlightenment than either Robertson or myself. But the concept of distinct ‘national’ enlightenments seems to me altogether invalid first because in most countries, including Russia, Scandinavia, the Austrian empire, Poland, Spain, Portugal, Greece, and post-1720 Netherlands, the United States, Canada, Brazil, and Spanish America, the primary intellectual influences were predominantly foreign—mostly French, British, or German, though before 1720 the Dutch factor was also crucial. Secondly, while there was never any basic unity to the local enlightenment in any given country, including Britain, America, and France where the Enlightenment was always divided between competing factions drawing inspiration from different sources both national and international, the rifts were characterized less by plurality than duality. Nowhere did these divisions point to a high level of fragmentation. Pocock holds that in studying the intellectual history of the late seventeenth and eighteenth century we encounter positions and lines of thought ‘to which the term “Enlightenment” may usefully be applied, but the meanings of the term shift as we apply it. The things are connected, but not continuous; they cannot be reduced to a single narrative; and we find ourselves using the word “Enlightenment” in a family of ways and talking about a family of phenomena, resembling and related to one another in a variety of ways that permit various generalizations about them’. This seems to me far too vague and diffuse to be useful. There was a wide range of opinion, certainly, but it was not a spectrum but rather a set of rifts between closely interactive competitors readily classifiable as a single narrative. Indeed, with its two main contending streams—moderate and radical—the Enlightenment can only be understood as a single narrative.

The definition used here retains Robertson’s emphasis on the unitary and fundamentally transforming character of the Enlightenment while avoiding the narrower, fragmented quality, and resort to national perspectives, of Pocock’s definition. It also avoids the excessively unitary character of Gay’s definition. Mainly, though, the definition proposed here attempts to be more complete than other definitions in particular by correcting Robertson’s four gaps. That is it seeks to incorporate the full chronological span—the Enlightenment era runs from around 1680 to around 1800—to restore the centrality of ‘philosophy’ rather than other things as the primary agent of betterment, to reflect the close linkage of Enlightenment with fundamental transformation, challenging accepted values, and revolution, and, finally, to accommodate the quest for universality. Such a formula, one might suppose, at first glance, misses the essence of the British Enlightenment; but I do not think that it does. Even the most conservative of the Enlightenment’s great philosophers, and the most inclined to restrict the scope of reason, Hume and Burke, clearly thought the principles and new (as they saw it) constitution produced by the Glorious Revolution of 1688–91, and the toleration, press freedom, and mixture of monarchy and republicanism issuing from it, had recently transformed England, Scotland, and North America fundamentally, and could transform other societies—Burke hoped to see this in India, Ireland, and France—comparably, and that philosophy and philosophical

history played a large part as a critical tool, especially in revealing what the real nature of these salutary and transforming principles was and how to preserve and propagate them.

Enlightenment, then, is defined here as a partly unitary phenomenon operative on both sides of the Atlantic, and eventually everywhere, consciously committed to the notion of bettering humanity in this world through a fundamental, revolutionary transformation discarding the ideas, habits, and traditions of the past either wholly or partially, this last point being bitterly contested among enlighteners; Enlightenment operated usually by revolutionizing ideas and constitutional principles, first, and society afterwards, but sometimes by proceeding in reverse order, uncovering and making better known the principles of a great 'revolution' that had already happened. All Enlightenment by definition is closely linked to revolution. Here I think is an accurate, historically grounded, complete definition. This projected 'revolution'—this term was continually used in this connection at the time by Voltaire and other contemporaries—had either recently happened, as was often supposed in England, Scotland, and pre-1776 America, or was now happening, as Voltaire believed was the case in Germany, France, Switzerland, Scandinavia, Russia, and Italy, or would eventually happen, as was hoped by most radical *philosophes* and the first Spanish American *libertadores*, such political visionaries as Francisco de Miranda.

Enlightenment is, hence, best characterized as the quest for human amelioration occurring between 1680 and 1800, driven principally by 'philosophy', that is, what we would term philosophy, science, and political and social science including the new science of economics lumped together, leading to revolutions in ideas and attitudes first, and actual practical revolutions second, or else the other way around, both sets of revolutions seeking universal recipes for all mankind and, ultimately, in its radical manifestation, laying the foundations for modern basic human rights and freedoms and representative democracy. Certainly, there was a deep internal split between radical and moderate enlighteners. But both radical and moderate enlighteners sought general amelioration and both could readily accept Adam Smith's definition of 'philosophy' as the 'science of the connecting principles of nature'.¹³ Both tendencies could agree that therefore nature and everything shaped by Nature is the sphere of philosophy and that 'philosophy' is the key debate with regard to everything. Of course, both sides adamantly insisted on their realism and practicality while assailing the opposition for being impractical, Burke rebuking Richard Price, for instance, for dealing in empty abstract propositions when speaking of inalienable rights.¹⁴ But where moderate Enlightenment demonstrated its practical good sense by being able to compromise with the existing order, by disavowing reason's applicability in some areas and justifying existing constraints and circumstances in part, the radical wing claimed to be, and was, the more realistic in offering comprehensive solutions to

¹³ Smith, *Essays*, 45.

¹⁴ Thomas, 'Introduction', p. xix.

increasingly urgent unsolved social, legal, and political problems that the moderate Enlightenment proved unable to cope with.

2. INTERPRETING THE ENLIGHTENMENT: THE ARGUMENT

What caused the Enlightenment? As one would expect from so profound, far-ranging, and multi-faceted a phenomenon, its roots were numerous, complex, and very deep-seated. There were two main categories of causes that can be usefully classified as intellectual-scientific, on the one hand, and social-cultural on the other. The first group were essentially factors of destabilization undermining long-accepted scientific, theological, and philosophical premisses. An obvious strand here was Copernicus' heliocentrism and the researches of Galileo rejecting all previously accepted notions about the relationship of the earth to the sun and other planets and changing the ways nature itself was conceived and science pursued. In other words, the impact of what today is commonly still called the 'Scientific Revolution', originally an idea forged by Fontenelle, d'Alembert, Voltaire, and others in the Enlightenment era, was a key cause of the Enlightenment.

But there were other major destabilizing initiatives such as the Renaissance's rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, especially the rediscovery of ancient scepticism which eventually introduced systematic doubt in every area of argument and belief, generating intense and long-lasting unease persisting well into the eighteenth century. Another strand was the tension between philosophical reason and theology associated with the advance of Western Averroism in the later Middle Ages and the inability of Aquinas' powerful synthesis of reason and faith to effect a fully satisfactory reconciliation. Another crucial cause and symptom of the underlying tension characteristic of intellectual life, especially in Italy and France, during the century and half prior to the Enlightenment proper, was the rise of a literary movement known as *libertinage érudit*, a tendency hinting at religiously and morally subversive ideas that operated in a hidden, veiled manner, especially by quoting disturbing and disorienting comments drawn from classical literature and encouraging readers to read between the lines. This trend helped generate what from the late seventeenth century evolved into an underground literature of clandestine manuscripts rejecting all the most basic and sacred suppositions of existing authority and religion.¹⁵

Among social-cultural and political causes of the Enlightenment the most crucial was the stalemate that ended the Wars of Religion and untidy compromises embodied in the Peace of Westphalia (1648), ending the Thirty Years War. God must be on one side or the other, men assumed, so how could the outcome of the struggle be absolute deadlock and totally inconclusive? The psychological shock of such a result

¹⁵ Paganini, *Filosofie clandestine*, 3–13.

was tremendous, and the problems associated with organizing the many compromises that had to be hammered out forced a whole new culture of de facto toleration and acceptance of religious plurality which then had to be theorized and legitimized in complex ways. This unavoidable pressure to accommodate religious plurality peacefully had to be faced not just in Germany, France, Britain, and Ireland but also in the Netherlands, Czech lands, Switzerland, Poland, Russia, and Hungary-Transylvania. At the deepest level the dilemmas de facto toleration generated in a deeply traditional cultural world precipitated a weakening of theology's power to fix social norms and policy that arguably became noticeable in some areas of government policy earlier than in intellectual life. A prime example were the late seventeenth-century monarchies' willingness to give more emphasis to economic, and less to theological and legal, criteria than had been usual earlier, in widening de facto toleration and accommodating Christian dissenters and Jews.

Another social factor was the unprecedented expansion of the urban context especially in a few great capitals such as London, Paris, Vienna, Berlin, and Petersburg but also in the closely bunched Dutch towns, creating a new sphere of cultural cosmopolitanism fed by imported products and sometimes people from Asia, Africa, and the Americas and social and sexual fluidity and vagueness blurring traditional class distinctions. It is vital not to suppose, meanwhile, that anything like a socio-economic class shift of the sort Marxist historians tended to predicate was under way. Although it has been claimed that in North America the Enlightenment was the work of the 'landed gentry', in fact nowhere was the Enlightenment the work of any particular social group. Leading representatives of Enlightenment thought came from aristocratic, bourgeois, and artisan backgrounds and the Enlightenment movement itself always remained socially heterogeneous and non-class specific, in terms of its spokesmen, objectives, and socio-economic consequences.

Typically, when eighteenth-century authors referred to what we call Enlightenment they spoke of, 'ce siècle éclairé' [this enlightened century], 'ce siècle philosophique' [this philosophical century], the progress of reason, or invoked as Voltaire did writing to d'Alembert, on 4 June 1767, the 'triumphes de la raison' and this 'happy revolution occurring in the minds of all the well-intentioned over the last fifteen or twenty years'.¹⁶

Together, the long-term causes, intellectual-scientific and social-cultural, set in motion a philosophical 'revolution' which shattered all the major thought-structures and premisses of the past causing an unprecedentedly sharp break in intellectual and academic life. Seven great philosophers were associated with this initial process of rupture—Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, Bayle, and Leibniz—all of whom to a greater or lesser degree shared the 'revolutionary' tendency of all Enlightenment to sweep the past aside and lay down new premisses. Within a very short space of time, these thinkers powerfully demonstrated that both the basic assumptions of centuries of previous thought and most men's prevailing beliefs

¹⁶ Voltaire to d'Alembert, 4 June 1767, in Voltaire, *Corr.* xxxii. 138.

and ideas in existing society were fundamentally wrong and ill grounded. Were it possible, moreover, to improve men's thinking this would in itself greatly improve human life and institutions by rendering society safer, healthier, more tolerant, more effective in its use of science, and more orderly and equipped with better legislation and laws.

All seven, then, powerfully contributed to grounding the Enlightenment. However, the revolutionary tendency inherent in their innovations later developed along two distinct lines. On the one hand, there was an impulse to find ways to reconcile the new premisses with reaffirming at least the most basic components of authority and faith drawn from the past in an adjusted, slimmed-down format. This strategy of compromise, allowing some of the theologians' claims and some validity to traditional sources of authority, was most explicit in Descartes with his two-substance metaphysics and the great German thinker Leibniz, but central also to Hobbes and Locke. The other embryonic tendency discernible among the seven great thinkers and many of their disciples deemed the new universal principles uncovered by philosophical reason the exclusive guide rather than the joint source of guidance and legitimacy and hence carried the revolutionary tendency further.

Bayle was pivotal in this process of polarization because his corrosive scepticism about everything and anything anyone believes served to sever moral thought and politics from theology altogether while his use of philosophical reason to legitimize toleration (in which respect he went further than Locke), and establish the social basis for moral, social, and political principles, had the effect also of separating social theory generally from theology and church doctrine.¹⁷ However, Spinoza's contribution was arguably the most crucial in crystallizing what is here termed Radical Enlightenment, primarily because his thought goes further than that of the other six in undermining belief in revelation, divine providence, and miracles, and hence ecclesiastical authority, and also because he was the first major advocate of freedom of thought and the press as distinct from freedom of conscience and the first great democratic philosopher. Radical Enlightenment, the reader needs to bear in mind, remained a largely clandestine movement, generally denounced and decried, until the 1770s. It was everywhere a much weaker force, at least on the surface, than the moderate mainstream Enlightenment and before 1789 (with one or two very fleeting exceptions) never enjoyed the backing of any governments, commanders, or churches in the way moderate Enlightenment frequently did.

Many scholars contend that in the Enlightenment era 'Spinozism', a category frequently denounced and condemned, was not actually a coherent intellectual position but a vague, almost meaningless notion amounting to little more than a battle-cry useful for accusing enemies of being 'atheists'. Some even claim the term means substantially different things in different contexts. Doubtless there are isolated examples of vague, loose usage. Much evidence can be cited, though, showing that this

¹⁷ Bartlett, *Idea of Enlightenment*, 14–26; Mori, *Bayle philosophe*, 48–52, 266–71, 336; Israel, 'Bayle's Double Image', 135–51.

presumption of prevailing loose usage is wrong and that in all the major public controversies of the Enlightenment era from Spinoza's own time down to and after 1800, the term in fact designates a broadly coherent intellectual position. What is that position? In essence, it is the acceptance of a one-substance metaphysics ruling out all teleology, divine providence, miracles, and revelation, along with spirits separate from bodies and immortality of the soul, and denying that moral values are divinely delivered (with the corollary that therefore they have to be devised by men using terms relative to what is good or bad for society). Logically, 'Spinozism' always went together with the idea that this man-made morality should provide the basis for legal and political legitimacy—and hence that equality is the first principle of a truly legitimate politics. Always present also is Spinoza's concomitant advocacy of freedom of thought.

Wherever segments of governments, churches, universities, academies, and other learned bodies were pro-Enlightenment, prior to 1789, they invariably rejected radical ideas and preferred one or other variant of what is here termed 'moderate Enlightenment'. Even though all Enlightenment writers and thinkers, by definition, considered the philosophical and scientific assumptions of the past to be broadly wrong, in renewing science, thought, and culture, and introducing toleration and the legal, educational, and social reforms, many felt that reason is not and should not be the only guide and that a balanced compromise between reason and tradition, or reason and religious authority, is necessary. Some leading proponents of moderate enlightenment such as Voltaire and Hume accorded little or no validity to religious authority as such but nevertheless remained anxious to restrict the scope of reason and retain tradition and ecclesiastical authority, duly clipped, as the primary guides for most people. There was a marked tendency for the moderate Enlightenment to shy away from the idea that the whole of society needs enlightening, and some of its foremost practitioners, such as Voltaire and Frederick the Great, even insisted on not attempting to enlighten the great majority, seeing any such plan as ill advised and dangerous.

Both 'moderate' and 'radical' enlightenment, whether in France, Britain, Germany, or wherever, centre around the notion of 'revolution'. All enlighteners thought of the Enlightenment as something revolutionary in the sense of being a process wholly transforming our understanding of the human condition, effecting large changes in institutions and political life, and in the relationship of ideas to reality even if their field of specific action was limited, as with Wolff busily transforming German philosophy and the world of university studies or with the young Beccaria engaged in legal reform. The formerly widespread misconception among historians and philosophers that the modern usage of the term 'revolution' to mean fundamental, sweeping change was not in use before the French Revolution is, we have stressed throughout, totally wrong.¹⁸ This assumption (still widespread among some scholars) has no basis in the evidence; on the contrary, nothing could be easier than to cite innumerable examples of such phrases as 'cette heureuse révolution' used by Voltaire to designate the Enlightenment as a transforming force as he did writing

¹⁸ Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 3–14.

to d'Alembert in June 1767. Far from being unknown or rare, conceiving Enlightenment as a 'revolution' transforming everything either to a large extent or totally was wholly characteristic and, after 1750, became more and more so.

However, for Hume, Adam Smith, Ferguson, Franklin, John Adams, and Burke, the 'revolution' that counted was something that in Britain and North America had already happened in the first place with the Glorious Revolution, the perfecting of the British constitution, instituting a stable toleration and free press and the expansion of British prosperity and power. Crucial also, for them, was the recent rise of Newtonian science and Locke's empiricism which were also deemed to have profoundly changed Britain and the American colonies for the better and in principle to be a potential recipe for others. Nor were they alone in thinking so. Quite the contrary, British mixed monarchy, toleration, science, philosophical empiricism, and even English law were seen by a number of key figures on the Continent, most notably Voltaire and Montesquieu, as the best available example and package of values transforming society for the better, something to be emulated on all sides.

Considered philosophically, there were two varieties of moderate enlightenment, on the one hand the Lockian-Newtonian construct dominant in Britain, America, Spain, France, and Holland; and, on the other, the Leibnizian-Wolffian tradition dominant in Germany, central Europe, Scandinavia, and Russia. Both of these vigorous Enlightenment currents could find expression as a form of religious enlightenment (Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish), or alternatively flourish as a form of deism, atheism, or agnosticism. As regards the Radical Enlightenment, there was only one lasting philosophical basis—one-substance doctrine denying there is any divine governance of the world. Lots of thinkers shared or participated in such a vision, and helped shape it, but as Bayle, himself one of its leading heralds, emphasized, even though the rudiments of the system itself reached back to ancient times, and had flourished as an underground during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, no other thinker had managed to lend so coherent a face to this way of thinking as Spinoza. Innumerable denunciations of one-substance doctrine and materialism in the eighteenth century commonly refer to these two (not quite identical) phenomena as 'Spinozism'.

By 1789, radical thought and its social and legal goals had indeed come to form a powerful rival 'package logic'—equality, democracy, freedom of the individual, freedom of thought and expression, and a comprehensive religious toleration—that could be proclaimed as a clearly formulated package of basic human rights. Only adherents of radical ideas embraced fundamental human rights as the veritable basis for social theory and political constitutions and enthusiastically welcomed this aspect of the Revolution. However, adherents of radical ideas did not have to be atheists and were almost never willing to admit (as Spinoza was not) to being atheists. There was undoubtedly some scope for reform-minded deists, Christians, Jews, and Muslims to join the one-substance Enlightenment. During the 1660s Spinoza had formed a close alliance with a group of Socinian Collegiants in Amsterdam, and subsequently, in Holland, Britain, and America, there existed significant groups

of Unitarians, of whom Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) was the foremost publicist in the English-speaking world and Carl Friedrich Bahrdt (1740–92) in Germany, who not only rejected practically the entire apparatus of traditional theology, but steered their variant of Christianity as close to materialism as possible: Priestley actually claimed (not altogether coherently) to be a Christian materialist. Insofar as this religious fringe also called for a comprehensive toleration and full freedom of thought and the press and supported democratic initiatives, insisting the British constitution was very far from being the perfect thing most contemporary Englishmen believed it to be, and that there was an urgent need of far-reaching parliamentary, legal, social, ecclesiastical, and educational reform in Britain and the United States too, this group likewise belonged to the Radical Enlightenment. The Unitarian strand of the Radical Enlightenment, though, was always unstable intellectually and tended to fragment during the 1790s and, unlike the Unitarian churches more generally, disappeared during the early nineteenth century.¹⁹

During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the Radical Enlightenment existed only in the form of tiny underground networks, atheist, radical deist, and Unitarian, in France, Holland, Germany, and England, propagating their ideas mainly in the form of clandestine manuscripts and a few illicit, anonymous publications that were vigorously suppressed by all authorities—monarchical, republican, ecclesiastical, and academic alike. Before 1750, the radical tradition was intellectually central to European civilization but socially and politically wholly marginal. From the great public controversy over the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d’Alembert, in France during the 1750s onwards, however, the position changed. This raises the question of how and why the radical tendency surged up from the underground to become briefly hegemonic in the 1780s and 1790s. Its advances in the 1780s and early 1790s was so impressive that Tom Paine and many others assumed Radical Enlightenment was on the verge of decisively transforming the political face and social and cultural norms of the entire Western world. Its successes in the years 1788–92, however, were very partial and its philosophical principles rapidly rejected and perverted by Robespierre and the Jacobins. As Paine, one of the giants of radical ideology, aptly expressed it a few years later: with Robespierre, ‘the principles of the Revolution, which philosophy had first diffused’ were ‘departed from [and] philosophy rejected. The intolerant spirit of church persecution . . . transferred itself into politics; the tribunals, styled revolutionary, supplied the place of an inquisition; and the guillotine of the stake.’²⁰ And although the ‘revolution of reason’ was briefly reconstituted in the years 1795–1800, Napoleon (while incorporating some parts of it) shortly after 1800 definitively replaced its freedoms and democratic contours with a new kind of authoritarianism. Nevertheless, the Radical Enlightenment survived through the nineteenth century, especially in the minds of great artists and poets, like

¹⁹ Israel, ‘Meyer, Koerbagh’, 197–8, 201–2, 207–8; Donnelly, ‘Joseph Towers’, 32–5; Van Bunge, *Nederlandse Republiek*, 73–4.

²⁰ Paine, *Age of Reason*, ii, preface.

Heine and George Eliot, as the hope for a free, just, equitable, democratic, and secular society in the future.

Some critics mistakenly suppose that I claim the Radical Enlightenment achieved its partial successes in the late eighteenth century through the power of ideas alone. This criticism has been repeated time and again but is completely misplaced. The principal reason for the partial successes of radical thought in the 1780s and 1790s was the almost total failure of the moderate Enlightenment to deliver reforms that much of enlightened society had for decades been pressing for. There were many religious minorities eager for a comprehensive toleration but except for France in 1789, no European country delivered a full toleration and in Britain the position of the Catholics and Unitarians remained especially unsatisfactory. Many publicists agitated for (more) freedom of thought and the press; yet no European country delivered full, formal freedom of the press and freedom of thought until Denmark did so, fleetingly, in 1770–2 and France during the years 1788–92. Serfdom still oppressed large numbers in central and eastern Europe; but nowhere were the serfs wholly emancipated before 1789. Black slavery marred the Americas; but only slowly and marginally were the slaves being emancipated. There were ceaseless (and all too justified) complaints about the archaic, inconsistent, and often highly inequitable character of Europe's legal systems (that of Britain included); yet, full equality before the law was nowhere delivered except by revolution in America first and then, in France, in 1789. Democratic ideas were nowhere respectable except to some degree in the nascent United States and, again, in France after 1789. Men tyrannized over women everywhere as they had for centuries. This remained the case after 1789; but in radical circles in France in 1789, some editors and spokesmen began calling for reforms to the marriage laws, seeing abolition of the dowry system and civil divorce as the key to less subjection of women as well as to generally diminishing the power of paternal family heads over individuals.

The official Enlightenment of the courts and churches broadly failed in their Enlightenment reform programmes extending from Chile to Russia and from Scandinavia to Naples, because moderate Enlightenment, dependent as it was on the backing of kings, aristocrats, and the ecclesiastical arm, was incapable of delivering the emancipatory reforms many others besides radical *philosophes* wanted (albeit even more people opposed them). It was because social grievance was widespread that radical ideas proved able to mobilize support and gain an important field of action, an opportunity widened by the fact that one-substance monism yielded a metaphysics and moral philosophy apparently more consistent and free of logical difficulties than any philosophical alternative—at least prior to the rise of Kantianism as a major cultural force in the late 1780s. Philosophies reconciling reason with religious authority, or, like Hobbes's naturalism, with absolutism, or, like Hume's scepticism, combining a pruned-back reason with tradition, inevitably incurred more difficulties than *la philosophie moderne* in looking consistent and in combining principles with sweeping reform. It may be true that most people remained wholly untroubled by inconsistency and 'bad arguments'. But there are always some at all

social levels for whom intellectual consistency matters—and this applies especially to those aspiring to reform customs, laws, and institutions.

Briefly, one-substance metaphysics went hand in hand with sweeping reform. The whole point of the great *Pantheismusstreit* in Germany in the 1780s is that conservative thinkers like Jacobi and Rehberg concluded that no philosophy can withstand Spinoza using rational arguments as he is generally more consistent than any other thinker then available. From this they inferred the impossibility of blocking the materialism of Diderot, d'Holbach, and Helvétius intellectually and, consequently, the need, or duty, of true conservatives to abandon philosophy and Enlightenment altogether relying on faith and authority instead. Such arguments helped fuel the rise of the Counter-Enlightenment, rejecting reason and insisting that faith and authority are the sole true guides in human life, a key factor weakening mainstream Enlightenment. Spinoza's seemingly incomparable cogency (which greatly troubled Voltaire in his last years) cannot be dismissed, as many try to, as some sort of philosophical judgement on my part. Rather it is a historical fact that in the late eighteenth century, many people believed or feared (often much to their consternation) that one-substance monism, at least to all appearances, was much the most formidably coherent philosophy obtainable.

Finally, and integral to explaining why Radical Enlightenment eventually emerged so powerfully after 1770, is the evidence of the familiar mechanism of modern revolutions. Prior to the late eighteenth century, simmering discontent usually just kept on simmering. Institutionalized oppression persisted in pre-enlightened circumstances for centuries unaddressed or barely addressed. But this is not what happened between 1775 and 1810 when there were a truly astounding number of revolutions successful or unsuccessful in America, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, Ireland, Peru, New Granada (Colombia), Haiti, Italy, Spain, and the Rhineland. Study of these upheavals suggests the most crucial feature of their revolutionary mechanics is the introduction by an aggrieved but aspiring intellectual leadership of totalizing, all-renewing revolutionary ideologies the concepts of which the common people were not interested in and had little grasp of, but which could be successfully used (and manipulated) as channels for popular grievances and resentment.

Except for the American Revolution which followed a different pattern, all these revolutions were orchestrated by tiny batches of mostly strikingly unrepresentative editors, orators, pamphleteers, and professional agitators or renegade nobles, like Mirabeau and Volney—and practically never businessmen, lawyers, or office-holders. These entirely unrepresentative intellectuals captured a mass following by seizing on and amplifying popular protest arising from widespread discontent into a formidable political force. The leaders of the French Revolution of 1788–92 were socially completely marginal, and heterogeneous as well as unrepresentative; all they had in common was their ideological standpoint, and here the 'revolution of reason' was strikingly cohesive, especially after the pro-British, anti-*philosophique* moderate *monarchiens*—great devotees of moderate Enlightenment—were ousted from the

National Assembly in October 1789. This same pattern, a socially heterogeneous and unrepresentative tiny smattering taking the lead employing a coherent ideology, likewise recurred in Italy and characterizes the German radical *Aufklärung* and subsequent Mainz revolution of 1792–3.²¹

This cultural phenomenon—revolutionary leaderships ranging from Germany to Peru that are totally heterogeneous and unrepresentative socially but highly cohesive ideologically—is in many ways the key to understanding both the French Revolution and the saga of the Radical Enlightenment itself. A correct understanding of the Radical Enlightenment is impossible without overturning almost the whole current historiography of the French Revolution which puts far too much stress on alleged institutional and social factors not directly connected to the principles of the Revolution, thereby nurturing a quite incorrect notion of the three-way relationship between ideas, Revolution, and social grievance. One might object here that the interpretation I am proposing simply revives the accusations of those *anti-philosophes* of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries who attributed the French Revolution to the supposedly malign influence of the *philosophes*. But what I am arguing is that the Radical Enlightenment—and not the Enlightenment as such—is the only important direct cause of the French Revolution understood as a total transformation of the political, legal, cultural, and educational framework of French life, administration, and society. Everything else, the financial difficulties that brought the French *ancien régime* monarchy crashing down, discontent of the peasantry, pre-1789 legal politics, and the French nobility's tenacious promotion of its power and privileges, however crucial to the mechanics of the historical process that made the Revolution possible, was entirely secondary, in fact tertiary, in shaping the revolutionary outcome. The countless contemporary commentators blaming the French Revolution on the *philosophes* were partly right, then, except they clouded the picture by conflating their greatest enemy, *la philosophie moderne*, or *philosophisme* as they often called it, to embrace the religious scepticism of Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Hume as well, in deference to the overriding priority given to religious concerns and ecclesiastical authority.

Failure to distinguish between the Enlightenment's two main rival factions not only played directly into the Counter-Enlightenment's hands but has badly confused modern scholarship. Failure to stress and explore the rift between radical and moderate tendencies has the especially grave disadvantage of making it impossible to explain why so many enlighteners and heirs to the *philosophes* vigorously opposed the Revolution. A major advantage of the classification proposed here, conversely, is that it affords a clear explanation as to why, even if it was not always automatic, ardent long-standing adherents of radical ideas, such as Gorani in Milan, Paine, Priestley, and Godwin in England, or Georg Forster in the Rhineland, instantly embraced the Revolution as the apotheosis of the Enlightenment whereas many other enlighteners, headed by Burke, Ferguson, and Gibbon, and in France by

²¹ Blanning, *French Revolution*, 46, 255–9.

Mounier, Necker, and the *monarchiens*, and also Marmontel, were never willing to recognize the Revolution as anything of the sort.²² The primary task of the historian of the French Revolution today is to refine, clarify, and deepen the late eighteenth-century insight that modern historiography has somehow lost much to its cost that *la philosophie* was the primary cause of the Revolution. It was indeed overwhelmingly the primary factor; but not quite in the way that the *anti-philosophes* envisaged it and to explain this is one of the central objectives of these volumes.

3. SOCIAL CONTEXT, CULTURAL PROCESS, IDEAS

Discussing political reform, law, and administration, at the close of his *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (Edinburgh, 1792), the eminent Scottish thinker and social theorist Adam Ferguson (1723–1816) beautifully summed up the difference between the sort of Enlightenment he endorsed and ardently supported, the empirically grounded path of moderation exalted by Montesquieu and subscribed to by most—but by no means all—British participants in the Enlightenment, and the kind he rejected.²³ Confident that the post-1688 British constitution was superior to ‘any other constitution’, as he put it in his tract denouncing the American Revolution in 1776, ‘in the known world’,²⁴ Ferguson compared the kind of Enlightenment he repudiated with an ambitious architect planning to tear down the entire edifice of existing institutions, lock, stock, and barrel, all at once, and then rebuild the house from scratch on purely rational principles. The intentions of such confident architects were not in themselves bad though they betrayed a distinct lack of respect for the divinely fashioned order of things, as he saw it, that anyone appreciative of the role of divine providence in history would not lack. But their method was catastrophically mistaken and the consequences of their recklessness would prove disastrous for men.

Like Hume, Adam Smith, Montesquieu, and Voltaire, Ferguson did not deny the need for improvements and to make society better. On the contrary, he too supported reform and was convinced God wants us to strive for improvement: even ‘the walls’, he remarked, ‘may be renewed or rebuilt in parts successively’. He also saw the Glorious Revolution as a pivotal change of crucial world significance. But his Enlightenment sought to retain most of the existing foundations, walls, and roof in place at any one time, making only gradual, step-by-step, and carefully restricted changes without taking ‘away so much of your supports at once as that the roof may fall in.’²⁵ If attitudes needed transforming extensively, the basic structure of government, law, and administration, as he saw it, and the main lines of social

²² Blanning, *Reform*, 277, 279; Kontler, ‘What is the (Historians’) Enlightenment?’, 363.

²³ Ferguson, *Principles*, ii. 496–7.

²⁴ Ferguson, *Remarks*, 13. ²⁵ Ferguson, *Principles*, ii. 497.

hierarchy, should remain in place. Most great figures of the Scots Enlightenment thought similarly. The one major exception was the republican-minded and remarkable John Millar (1735–1801), author of *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (1771), an enlightener powerfully infused with a sense of the need to weaken aristocracy and push forward much more vigorously the emancipation of women, slaves, serfs, and the non-privileged generally.

Between these two consciously opposed and rival enlightenments, one wanting to tear the old house of *ancien régime* society down and put another in its place, the other seeking to modify and effect repairs on the old structure, given us by divine providence, and hence basically good, obviously, no compromise or half-way house was really possible. Equally, eighteenth-century science divided between those who saw the laws of physics, biology, and chemistry as divinely given, laws conceived, as Newton, and still more his disciples, had, within a framework of physico-theology, and those who saw no evidence of anything but the operation of purely physical forces. This fundamental rift could perhaps be bridged to some extent by personal friendships; but historians have hitherto not sufficiently stressed that it could not be bridged intellectually or in the practical consequences of so deep a philosophical rift. Thus, Condorcet has recently been accounted a ‘close ally of Turgot’.²⁶ But while there were, indeed, practical issues, including questions of fiscal, judicial, and naval improvements, toleration, and widening freedom of expression, where they agreed,²⁷ when it came to basic philosophical questions the two were at odds and regularly, if politely, reverted to the same, unbridgeable disagreement. This, in essence, was exactly that differentiating moderate from Radical Enlightenment. Turgot espoused a basically Newtonian vision of the universe. He detested the ideas of Diderot, Helvétius, and d’Holbach.²⁸ Broaching his basic disagreement with Condorcet, in a letter of May 1774, Turgot invoked the principle of universal gravitation. Nature, held Turgot, like Newton, but unlike Spinoza, Diderot, and d’Holbach, requires an outside force to put it into movement; from this he inferred an external mover, and that all movement in the universe must be initiated by a higher cause working outside and beyond all known mechanical causes.²⁹ This ‘first cause’ must be both free and ‘intelligent’ like the soul of humans, and since ‘freedom of the will’ seemed to him equally undeniable, he rejected the arguments by which ‘les philosophes irrégieux’, that is Diderot, d’Holbach, and Helvétius, strove to demonstrate its ‘impossibility’.

Minds, as Turgot formulated in his metaphysical dualism and Lockean psychology, are determined not by ‘des moteurs’ but by motives, not by mechanical causes but in pursuit of final causes. Beings that feel, think, and desire, he argued, have goals and choose means, and hence constitute a realm of things ‘at least as real and as certain’ as

²⁶ Williams, *Condorcet and Modernity*, 3.

²⁷ *Correspondance inédite de Condorcet*, 192.

²⁸ Poirier, *Turgot*, 266–7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*; d’Holbach, *Système de la nature*, i. 18–23.

that of beings deemed purely material and moved by purely mechanical causes.³⁰ Turgot, who, incidentally, possessed an immense personal library crammed with bibles and theology but containing comparatively little pure philosophy, adhered to a basically deist, more or less Voltairean standpoint. Condorcet, later to emerge as a prominent revolutionary leader, replied that he had examined his friend's 'reflections' on metaphysical questions with great pleasure but disliked his sliding from clear facts of physics to 'mythologie'.³¹ Turgot's claim that the principle of an intelligent first cause, and the existence of minds that are free, is at least as consonant with what we know from science as mechanistic determinism struck Condorcet as wholly unproven and at odds with what we know, as incoherent philosophically and completely 'de mythologiques'.³²

Throughout the history of the Enlightenment, whether we approach it from a scientific, religious, or political standpoint, this fundamental and irresolvable duality between the created and providential and non-created and non-providential schemes of reality was so important that it generally remained the chief factor shaping the Enlightenment's course. It is the starting point of the characteristically modern split between those who think in terms of science versus religion, as against the plea that science and religion do not conflict but stand in harmony, as well as the start of the equally basic modern split between 'right' and 'left' in politics and social theory.

Exactly as radical and moderate Enlightenment divided over the status of reason and tradition, and whether reality is governed by a knowing divine providence or by blind nature, so they diverged fundamentally over every basic issue. On one side was a body of thought maintaining that 'reason', meaning inference and argument based on physical and mathematical evidence only, is the sole criterion of truth, the exclusive guide in our affairs, and sole means of understanding the human condition. On the other stood the mainstream Enlightenment refusing this exclusive privileging of 'reason' and claiming two fundamental and distinct sources of truth, namely reason and religious authority (or alternatively tradition). True Enlightenment, held this camp, asserts the harmony between these. The religious main body of moderate Enlightenment, whether Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish, upheld formally dualist approaches, firmly separating spirit entities from physical ones, because this is essential for harmonizing reason with faith. In the case of essentially secular or deistic thinkers like Hume, Voltaire, and Montesquieu, Enlightenment moderation relied on forms of sceptical, de facto dualism of a sort restricting reason's scope and apt for explaining why the moral, social, and political order should not be primarily based on the dictates of reason.

Reason depending for its sway on reasoning, debate, and argument, Radical Enlightenment unreservedly endorsed freedom of expression, thought, and the press, seeing this as what best aids discussion and investigation, through debate,

³⁰ Poirier, *Turgot*, 150, 267; Turgot to Condorcet, Paris, 18 May 1774, in *Correspondance inédite de Condorcet*, 172–3.

³¹ Condorcet to Turgot, undated May 1774, and Turgot to Condorcet, Paris, 24 May 1774, in *Correspondance inédite de Condorcet*, 177–8.

³² *Ibid.* 178; Perrot, *Histoire*, 254.

law-making, and social amelioration, claiming ‘we shall never experience how far human reason can reach in the sphere of general truths’, as Diez, the first major German proponent of full freedom of the press, put it in 1781, ‘if we restrict or wholly refuse freedom of thought’.³³ Against this, both moderate and still more the Counter-Enlightenment stream retained (or re-introduced) permanent elements of thought policing and censorship. For by proclaiming two separate sources of authority in human life—‘reason’ and religious knowledge (or else tradition)—both provided and also required greater scope for limiting debate, expression, the theatre, and the press. Where for Radical Enlightenment, truth ascertained by ‘philosophy’ (i.e. what today we would call science and philosophy) and the supposed ‘truths’ of theology and tradition stand in direct antithesis, theology being viewed by these thinkers as imposture, the mainstream subordinated human affairs, morality, marriage, and society generally to what was deemed the divinely created and revealed physical and moral order.

This divide, the key to any proper grasp of the Enlightenment, extends to practically everything of importance, even toleration, though both wings favoured toleration in general terms. The irreducible difference here concerned whether a full toleration, treating everyone equally, ‘une tolérance universelle’, was the proper aim along with full liberty of thought and expression, as materialists and Socinians (and also d’Argens’s non-rabbinic Jews and liberated Muslims) maintained, or whether toleration should, as Locke argued, be delimited to exclude atheists, discriminate against some groups—in his case Catholics, Jews, and agnostics—and privilege others—in his case Protestants—while curbing ‘dissolute’ conduct. A full toleration moderate Enlightenment considered harmful to religion, morality, and social stability, while radical thinkers held that ‘la tolérance universelle’ and full freedom of thought and expression are ‘les remèdes infailibles’, as d’Holbach put it, against the common people’s prejudices.³⁴ Catholic apologists endorsing Locke and Newton were a very numerous segment of the moderate Enlightenment but one especially unwilling to countenance full toleration. According to the mid-eighteenth-century Catholic apologist the Abbé Hayer, *la tolérance universelle* is a pernicious concept originally introduced by Bayle, revived by La Beaumelle in his *L’Asiatique tolérant* (1748), and receiving its fullest form in the *Encyclopédie*. Quite different from true Christian tolerance, this *tolérance universelle* of the *encyclopédistes* was dressed up to sound very grand and positive but really amounts to ‘une indifférence totale’ for religious authority and tradition.³⁵

All sweeping political and social reformism of a kind denying the basic legitimacy of *ancien régime* monarchism and institutions was, in principle, bound to be more logically anchored in radical metaphysics denying all teleology and divine providence than in moderate mainstream thought. Basic human rights defined as individual

³³ Diez, *Apologie*, 45; see also Laerke, ‘Introduction’, 6–7; Israel, ‘French Royal Censorship’, 66–7, 74.

³⁴ D’Holbach, *Essai*, 81–2. ³⁵ *Ibid.* 172; Lough, *Essays*, 395.

liberty, equality, freedom of thought and expression, and democracy were inextricably linked to radically monist philosophical positions during the Enlightenment era. Moderate thought, by contrast, of necessity postulated a strong providential dimension either explicitly, as a fundamental principle, as in Voltaire, Kames, Smith, Ferguson, Turgot, Wolff, and Mendelssohn, or else as an indispensable by-product and practical consequence, especially with regard to morality and legislation, as in Hume and Kant.³⁶ Proponents of far-reaching reform invariably found radical philosophy more amenable to their aims than systems more supportive of conventional and traditional standpoints.

Catholic, Protestant, deist, Stoic, and orthodox Jewish doctrines could easily explain individual corruption but not how human society overall, including the churches, had somehow managed to become comprehensively rotten, oppressive, malfunctioning, and corrupt. At the time, virtually all churches explicitly sanctioned *ancien régime* society's basic institutions on a daily basis—monarchy, aristocracy, and ecclesiastical authority, of course, but also, at least obliquely, serfdom, slavery, the impermissibility of civil divorce, and suppression by law of freethinking, homosexuality, and extra-marital 'fornication'. Intellectually, it was by no means impossible for a moderate enlightener angry about some perceived defect to cross the divide between non-providential and providential and join with radical voices in the political arena; but it was both rare and arguably also impossible to do coherently. Only Rousseau persistently combined a strong commitment to deism and divine providence with the complaint that all men are in chains and all societies and existing institutions fundamentally corrupt. But Rousseau, as we shall see, was a strange mixture of radical, moderate, and Counter-Enlightenment tendencies and on all sides continually accused of contradicting himself.

The fact that monist systems were far more readily adapted to radical politics than Christian, Jewish, or deist ones does not necessarily mean, though, that all those embracing a Spinozistic monism or Unitarian quasi-materialism in the style of the philosopher-scientist Priestley were automatically champions of democracy, equality, and individual freedom, rejecting the existing political and social order in its entirety, even if they often were. For there existed also other kinds of sweeping opposition to the status quo fuelled by one-substance doctrine. Boulainvilliers, a great foe of Louis XIV and monarchical absolutism, was a Spinozist but an aristocratic not democratic republican; and one can think of still more striking divergences from egalitarianism and democratic republicanism. Goethe was a passionate Spinozist in the 1780s and one resolved to reject all accepted opinions and traditions about the divinity, providence, nature, science, and the human condition; but he did so in a completely different way from the revolutionary democrats. He sought an inner transformation of himself and others on the basis of a new vision of things, a transformed perspective on nature and all reality rooted in the aesthetic of ancient Greece and what we would call the Italian Renaissance. His style of liberation from the status quo liberated not

³⁶ For Hume and Kant, see Hume, *Natural History*, 183; Kant, *Religion*, 140–5.

oppressed social groups but instead the higher individual, such as himself, seeking an inner revaluation of all values and release from everything conventional that ordinary men think and believe.

But everyone, democratic republican or not, rejecting divine providence, divinely delivered morality, and belief that God created the world, was implicitly a forward-looking revolutionary. This is because such a person refuses to acknowledge the existing order to be divinely intended or benevolent, even if, in Goethe's case, he was a revolutionary of an inward, distinctly peculiar kind. A philosophy excluding divine providence, and holding the existing order to have no divine sanction or preordained direction or benevolence, is inherently better suited to buttress claims that our world has been captured by self-seeking, oppressive elites and is fundamentally disordered than one holding that the moral, social, and political as well as the physical order *is* designed by a supreme intelligence. Philosophy denying the created, planned, and supervised character of the existing order, while simultaneously maintaining that reason can provide a better social and moral order, must therefore always be more appealing to outright opponents of 'priestcraft', intolerance, archaic laws, economic inequality, slavery, monarchy, religious, gender, and racial discrimination, and aristocracy than any theological or moderate Enlightenment system.

The point needs emphasizing because questioning the link between Spinozism and political radicality has recently become one plank of the growing literature devoted to attacking the concept of Radical enlightenment underpinning this series of volumes. However necessary the fuel of social discontent in making revolutions, monist systems were in fact indispensable to the rise of a generalized radical outlook which was, in turn, the principal cause of the French Revolution and the other revolutionary movements of the late eighteenth century. This thesis is rejected by Lilti, La Vopa, Moyn, Stuurman, and Chisick as a 'very reductive vision' not amenable to empirical verification. They see it as a form of anachronism projecting into the eighteenth-century cultural milieu a political configuration enabling one to locate authors as more or less 'radical'—that is more or less 'leftist' in the terms of a later era—in the 'name of an assumed homology between philosophical and political standpoints'.³⁷ To the extent that any effort is made 'to convert this philosophical logic into an analysis of historical process', avers La Vopa, 'it is by showing that complete rejection of theological and ecclesiastical authority led to rejection of other forms of authority'.³⁸ The obvious weakness of this criticism is that there is nothing whatever assumed in the linkage between radical philosophy and the politics of basic human rights politics in the late eighteenth century. On the contrary, all the evidence shows an inextricable and universal connection just as Paine states between 'philosophy', that is monist systems, and genuinely democratic (i.e. non-Robespierriste) radical politics, this being both inherent philosophically and clearly demonstrable factually in the French Revolution down to 1792.

³⁷ Lilti, 'Comment écrit-on', 197; Moyn, 'Mind the Enlightenment', 3–4.

³⁸ La Vopa, 'New Intellectual History', 723–4.

Lilti, La Vopa, etc. could not be more mistaken. There was always an inherent tendency during the Enlightenment for democratic and egalitarian revolutionary movements urging drastic change to justify their programmes via monist, materialist systems defining the moral order as something purely natural and properly constructed exclusively on the principles of equity and reciprocity in social relations. Conversely, it followed directly from their structures and value-systems that a comparable revolutionary and egalitarian tendency could not easily feed on Lockean empiricism, Hume's scepticism, Kantianism, mainstream Christianity, or de La Mettrie's atheistic epicureanism. Far more readers were convinced by moderate than by radical thought throughout the Enlightenment. But this embedded preference could not help the oppressed peasantries of Europe, religious minorities, serfs, slaves, tradesmen resenting monopolies and privileged businesses, imprisoned debtors, and other victims of an archaic legal system and penal code, and underprivileged colonists, including the Spanish American Creole; only radical ideas could. If it is true that many moderate as well as radical theorists wanted to reform the law and commercial regulation extensively and improve administration and social conditions, radical critics were right to say that without abolishing the existing order and changing political constitutions fundamentally none of this was attainable. As Turgot's failure in France and Beccaria's and Pietro Verri's in Milan showed, moderate approaches were basically impotent under *ancien régime* monarchy, aristocracy, magistracy, and ecclesiastical authority.

Political and socio-economic developments, then, are the real, the important social context that intellectual historians, no less than general historians, need to be relating ideas to and not the cultural spaces and trends identified by Chartier, Darnton, and their disciples, or the ambiguities and contradictions so beloved by the Postmodernists. The chief link between the historiography of Chartier, Darnton, and their followers and Foucault's thought is the latter's insistence that truth is not something that resides outside and separate from power and authority. It is not the outcome of protracted meditation in isolation of debate and control. Truth is not merely a thing of this world, maintains Foucault, but also something that takes multiple forms, being the outcome of many kinds of constraint and pressure. Each society, he contends, has its 'regime of truth', general politics of truth, and specific types of discourse underpinning its conception of truth as well as its own way of fixing the status of those it considers to be exponents of what is 'true'. Foucault's influence certainly spread far and wide and broadly infused discussion of the fundamental relationship of truth and power. But while such a philosophy is a splendid basis for multiculturalism, the coexistence of different sets of values, plainly anyone strongly committed to moral universalism and basic human rights predicated on the principle of equality must reject Foucault's philosophy as false. Anyone believing truth is universal, and that human rights imply a common code that it is the duty of everyone to defend, cannot avoid taking up cudgels not just against Foucault and Postmodernist philosophy but also against the exponents of historiographical theories and approaches focusing attention on sociability, ambiguities, and

'spaces' rather than basic ideas interacting with real social context, by which I mean socio-economic tensions and political clashes, the main lines, that is, of general history. I do not mean by this that the ambiguities and discontinuities of the Postmodernists are not genuinely parts of social context: of course they are. What I mean is that they represent a secondary sphere to be kept firmly subordinate to the main lines of social, economic, and political development. In other words, our diffusionists have a completely different conception of social and cultural context and how it intersects with ideas and politics from the one adopted here and, moreover, one difficult to relate coherently to either ideas or events.

Political revolutions, undoubtedly, are not made by philosophers but a collaboration of crowds with revolutionary leaders. Hence the chief bone of contention in this mounting historiographical quarrel is the question of diffusion of ideas outside narrow intellectual circles into society. At the close of the eighteenth century, radical ideas became what one contemporary called the 'torrent de l'esprit philosophique', a torrent so powerful that it swept aside and partially defeated the moderate Enlightenment, though it was itself in turn afterwards overwhelmed by contrary movements among the public, and especially Robespierre's (and later Napoleon's) authoritarianism and Counter-Enlightenment. This raises searching questions about the character of social and cultural history and especially the question of diffusion of Enlightenment ideas whether moderate or radical, a topic which has now become a regular battle ground between Chartier's and Darnton's many followers, on one side, and general historians holding that social and cultural context interacts with ideas very differently from how they envisage the process.

Diffusion of ideas, maintains Chartier, should not be considered a direct transfer, 'une simple imposition'; rather, reception of ideas is a form of appropriation that transforms, reformulates, and distorts what it receives. Opinion is never a mere receptacle or a soft wax to be shaped in any direction 'et la circulation des pensées ou des modèles culturels est toujours un processus dynamique et créateur'. Conversely, Enlightenment texts, he holds, have no stable, fixed 'signification stable et univoque', and their impact on the perceptions of a given society produces 'interprétations mobiles, plurielles, contradictoires'. Hence it is impossible to make any valid distinction between diffusion, conceived as a progressive adjusting and enlargement of socio-cultural contexts infused by new ideas, and a body of doctrines considered in isolation from this complex process of appropriation.³⁹ Chartier and Darnton are doubtless right that intellectual historians of the old type did either ignore or greatly oversimplify the process of diffusion. But their new conception of diffusion and public opinion, I maintain, must also be rejected as too simplistic. If *l'opinion publique* was never a passive receptacle of ideas, neither was it ever the actively responsive evolving receptacle postulated by Chartier either. The democratic republican Gerrit Paape (1752–1803) was surely far closer to the mark when he pronounced the public's reception of the democratic ideas set out in speeches, texts, and slogans in

³⁹ Chartier, *Origines culturelles*, 30–1.

the 1780s and 1790s a ‘fantastic whirl’, an utterly unstable mass of misrepresentation, contradictions, and wild, unexpected contortions that no one can express as a coherent whole.⁴⁰ This does not mean *l’opinion publique* is not worth studying. It is, precisely for its wild gyrations and obsessions. But such studies must be kept subordinate to the interaction of clearly and consistently articulated ideas expounded by representatives, leaders, and influential journalists with the political, socio-structural, and economic structures that chiefly determine social context. The revolutionary crowds, the cogent reasoning of some individuals from all backgrounds notwithstanding, mostly just followed their leaders and even that only sporadically, their grasp of ideological slogans and principles being always highly unstable, uncomprehending, volatile, and inconsistent.

One of Chartier’s most curious arguments is that the Enlightenment and ‘la philosophie’ were to a large extent creations of the Revolution. ‘En un sens, c’est donc bien la Révolution’, he suggests, ‘qui a “fait” les livres, et non l’inverse, puisque c’est elle qui a donné une signification prémonitoire et programmatique à certaines œuvres, constituées comme son origine.’⁴¹ No doubt many enthuse over this stunning reversal of the once familiar order. But is anyone really inclined to imagine this could be literally true? It contradicts all the evidence. Conceiving the Enlightenment as a general reforming and regenerative force was well established by the 1760s and many pre-1789 texts refer to *la philosophie* as an engine powerful enough to cause a mighty political and social revolution. In the 1770s and 1780s there were numerous premonitions that a great ‘revolution’ would soon occur, with Albrecht von Haller’s, Dom Deschamps’s, and Louis Sebastien Mercier’s, as we shall see, among the most emphatic, a circumstance historians have by no means sufficiently emphasized. The reason for the numerous pre-1789 predictions of a great revolution was the clear recognition that the growing ‘torrent de l’esprit philosophique’, as Sabatier de Castres put it, was such as to make any other outcome hard to imagine. A prior ‘revolution of ideas’, as Dominique-Joseph Garat, a lesser revolutionary leader, later expressed it, was essential, and such a revolution certainly occurred during the decades from the 1740s to 1789. It had to come first, Garat rightly insisted, before any revolution of fact could ensue, being the motor and shaping force behind the ‘revolution of events’.⁴²

Noticeable before 1788, expectation that a fundamental revolution was pending became positively commonplace in 1788 and early 1789 prior to the opening of the Estates-General. In the pamphlet *Lettre à Monsieur Raynal*, dated Marseille, 17 March 1789, for instance, a work issued before the Estates-General convened, we are assured of the expected vast transformation soon to occur, with France’s pending ‘new destiny’ being something ‘reason’ had prepared and ‘la philosophie dont vous [i.e. Raynal] êtes l’apôtre et le martyr’ had shaped. The author asks why he

⁴⁰ Paape, *Onverbloemde geschiedenis*, 37, 45–6, 51; Israel, ‘Gerrit Paape’, 13–14.

⁴¹ Chartier, *Origines culturelles*, 112–13.

⁴² Garat, *Mémoires historiques*, ii. 230, 315.

should not state a truth known to all Europe: Raynal had ‘prophesied’ the great event about to take place by teaching the nation ‘la justice de ses droits’ and inspiring men with the hope of seeing themselves soon in possession of these rights. The people were thereby instilled with the courage and capacity for ‘une heureuse révolution, que votre prédiction a préparée.’⁴³ There could be no clearer illustration of the close linkage of Radical Enlightenment with the process of revolution.

The common people’s role, hence, was not just highly unstable and sporadic but also basically secondary, if not in providing the muscle that actually toppled the *ancien régime* then certainly in formulating the laws and forging the institutions that replaced it. One critic of the thesis that radical philosophy overthrew the *ancien régime*, apparently experiencing difficulty in understanding what is being argued, even asserts that ‘neither *Radical Enlightenment* nor *Enlightenment Contested* seem able to make a case for the dissemination of Spinozistic ideas among the general European population.’⁴⁴ This is an absurd objection and one that betrays a complete failure to grasp not just the basic argument for *la philosophie* but the processes of diffusion and cultural reorientation we are dealing with. No sensible historian proposes a decisive spread of philosophical ideas among the general population. Philosophical ideas have never spread broadly among any population. But they do sometimes penetrate where it counts. The pre-1970 view that one would need to demonstrate the diffusion of Enlightenment ideas through society to show how Enlightenment ideas could activate revolutionary masses was never a cogent concept. The real question, if we are to construct a meaningful social history of ideas, is to ask from where did the revolutionary leaders most effectively voicing popular grievance and frustration before the Jacobin takeover—Mirabeau, Sieyès, Brissot, Volney, Condorcet, Bailly, Cloots, Forster, Roederer, Manuel, Gorani, and others, whether directing the Assemblée Nationale, the Paris municipality, the Mainz revolution, or the main revolutionary journals—derive their egalitarian and democratic concepts? What is the complexion of the ideas, proposals, and slogans enabling them to lead *l’opinion publique*? Not many coherent suggestions have been advanced; and there is only one convincing answer: the Radical Enlightenment.

It was the revolutionary leaders, then, or rather those who worked in a particular direction, egalitarian, democratic, and libertarian, whose minds were filled with radical philosophy, and for this, as we shall see, the evidence is overwhelming. Does this mean that if fundamental change was on the way, and philosophy shaped the great changes, that the Radical Enlightenment was responsible for what Deschamps called a ‘révolution horrible’ and for the Terror, as Samuel Moyn and many others maintain? Certainly not. As it veered towards briefly gaining the intellectual upper hand, in the 1770s, 1780s, and early 1790s, radical thought did not assert that the most essential changes would, should, or could take place violently or suddenly, in one go, in particular countries or regions. Before 1789, radical ideas

⁴³ [Bertrand], *Lettre* (Marseille, 17 Mar. 1789), 3, 22–3, 249.

⁴⁴ Chisick, ‘Interpreting the Enlightenment’, 49.

amply justified ‘revolution’ but also admonished that in politics as in medicine, violent remedies ‘sont toujours dangereux’ and should only be employed where ‘l’excès des maux les rend absolument nécessaires.’⁴⁵ Spinoza and d’Holbach are both said to have disapproved of violent revolutions. Possibly they did but that hardly affects the issue. Radical Enlightenment consciously sought to revolutionize human existence by changing men’s ideas, starting with those few capable of understanding philosophical arguments and then placing these in positions of influence; it never advocated or glorified violence or subversion for its own sake.

Diffusion and outreach was the challenge for all wings of the Enlightenment. Thinkers on both sides of the divide, Voltaire and Turgot no less than d’Holbach, Helvétius, and Priestley, agreed (at least in their more optimistic moments) that progress was not only occurring but accelerating thanks to books and printing. By the 1760s it appeared undeniable that a general ‘revolution’ in patterns of thought and social practice *was* indeed taking place. ‘La révolution s’achève’, intoned Delisle de Sales, in the early 1770s, ‘et tout le monde devient philosophe.’⁴⁶ For Voltaire and Frederick, the ‘revolution of the mind’ happening before their eyes need not, should not, and could not involve the great mass of humanity. The principal task and objective of the ‘revolution’ which they endorsed was to weaken the influence of the churches and render governments and courts more secular, tolerant, and willing to concede individual liberty. But for their radical critics, culminating in Diderot, Helvétius, and d’Holbach, and their disciples, as well as Priestley, Price, Paine, and Godwin, moderate Enlightenment’s partial liberation of man, based on a revolution in thinking confined to courts and social elites, was something restricted, reprehensible, and ultimately illogical and impossible. Those on the radical side of this schism considered it a great presumption to maintain, like Voltaire and Frederick, that most of humanity should be left permanently in the dark, condemned to live on for centuries in what they denounced as the most abject and crassest ignorance as well as endless degradation and exploitation. Enlightenment, held d’Holbach, who thought it impossible to ameliorate man’s lot without attacking people’s misconceptions and prejudices, means above all universal re-education since it is only by teaching men the truth that they will learn to understand their true interests ‘et les motifs réels qui doivent les porter au bien.’⁴⁷

What greater insult to the human race can there be than to claim reason is reserved for some while all the rest ‘n’est pas fait pour la connaître’?⁴⁸ Those inclining to moderate positions saw no ‘insult’ and refused to agree that the existing status quo was as oppressive, and misery and injustice as all-pervasive, as the radicals contended. Moderate Enlightenment not only excluded the people from ‘philosophical’ debate on principle but also denied the common people’s ignorance was

⁴⁵ Ibid. vi. 205.

⁴⁶ Delisle de Sales, *Philosophie de la nature*, v. 342.

⁴⁷ [D’Holbach], *Le Bons-Sens*, pp. vii–viii.

⁴⁸ D’Holbach, *Essai*, 65.

inherently detrimental to society. In this respect they were largely in line with the traditional attitude of the professional elites. Most statesmen and courtiers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did not think politics should be followed and discussed by the common people, any more than most priests thought theology should or lawyers thought investigating and improving the law should. What the great mass of lawyers wanted, explained d'Holbach, was that the law should remain 'un mystère impénétrable', something like theology, adored at a distance by most as a sacred code while remaining shrouded in secrecy, and left in venerable silence.

If the good life depends on knowing the truth, held Diderot, Helvétius, and d'Holbach, then every human needs to become enlightened, 'la raison lui est nécessaire' as the latter put it, and he who enlightens his fellow man 'est un bon citoyen'.⁴⁹ Everyone needs to be enlightened because everyone has the same right to happiness and an equal share in society and the state, and hence to know 'the truth'; and also because the new secular, broadly utilitarian morality they strove to remake the foundations of society and politics on could not become sufficiently entrenched without first completely transforming attitudes moral, social, educational, and political in society. Hence, the people had to be taught to think about themselves and their connections with others and involve themselves in politics. But at the same time late eighteenth-century radical *philosophes* understood that the common people could not be the main agent of change. A dialectic was involved here of ideas and people that could only be driven by better laws and more enlightened government however this was achieved. 'Establish government universally on the individual wishes and collected wisdom of the people', held Joel Barlow, a leading spokesman of the American Radical Enlightenment and the ally who helped Paine smuggle his *Age of Reason* out of Paris after Robespierre had him imprisoned pending trial, in 1793, 'and it will give a spring to the moral faculties of every human creature; because every human creature must find an interest in its welfare'.⁵⁰

Where the ignorance of the common people needed changing fundamentally, according to radical *philosophes*, their adversaries thought this impossible, something not to be attempted, and, if attempted, fearfully disruptive and dangerous politically and socially. Frederick denounced d'Holbach for proclaiming 'magisterially' that men in general are made to learn 'the truth'. On the contrary, retorted Frederick, experience shows plainly that the vast majority have always lived 'dans l'esclavage perpétuel de l'erreur' and that only someone hopelessly prey to the 'vanité de l'esprit philosophique' could imagine they could change this, or even reach anything near what Schiller called 'halbe Aufklärung' [half-Enlightenment]. This was not an argument about the limitations of diffusion and society's receptivity to philosophical ideas but rather about whether the rights, needs, and the interest of the majority 'est une loi générale' overriding every prejudice and superstition no matter how

⁴⁹ D'Holbach, *Essai*, 67.

⁵⁰ Barlow, *Advice*, ii. 57; Jacoby, *Freethinkers*, 41.

traditional and useful to particular interest groups, such as kings, priests, lawyers, ecclesiastics, and nobles within society.

Frederick even sought to quantify the sort of Enlightenment he thought practicable and would support. In France, seemingly the most crucial battle ground, ‘philosophy’ might perhaps sway the 200,000 or so most highly educated people, but of the sixteen millions he thought inhabited the country in his day, ‘philosophy’ would never reach the remaining 15,800,000. This prevailing ignorance, everywhere nourished by tradition, faith, and religious authorities, constituted a vast edifice best and most realistically left unchallenged.⁵¹ It is not the business of the common people whose menfolk must work for their living and lack the time to study metaphysics, theology, and morality, or learn about philosophy, government, law, morality, international affairs, and statecraft. Consequently, to condemn monarchy and aristocracy, and advocate sweeping social reforms as d’Holbach, Diderot, Helvétius, and, later, Condorcet, Raynal, Brissot, Cloots, Mirabeau, Paine, Barlow, and many others did, in Frederick’s opinion ‘n’est ni sage ni philosophe’.⁵² To urge that the state exists for the good of all and that subjects ‘should possess the right of deposing when disgusted with their sovereigns’ was to invite catastrophic social turmoil.⁵³ Citing the French Wars of Religion (1562–94), he reminded opponents of the horrors rebellion against legitimate kings can precipitate.⁵⁴ Nor was it just the style, scope, and practicability of the radical *philosophes*’ programme the Prussian monarch, like his ally Voltaire, disputed but also their ultimate goals. Convinced, rightly, that the Radical Enlightenment—should it sufficiently gain ground—must entail the overthrow not just of kings but of the entire existing social order, that is of monarchy, aristocracy, existing laws, and church authority together, bringing about a universal revolution, the king reacted with fierce indignation and outright repression. Frederick did not just reject the radical *philosophes*’ basic philosophical principles as mistaken, but lent his own hand to help discredit them, lambasting Diderot’s and d’Holbach’s views as dangerous and perfectly ‘revolting’.

In all European countries, this impassioned reaction against the ‘torrent de l’esprit philosophique’ became more and more pronounced after 1770, and the defence of the existing social order more emphatic. At the same time, several prominent thinkers, such as d’Alembert in France, Burke in England, and Rehberg in Germany, became caught up in this counter-current, reverting from incipiently liberal positions in their earlier phases, as Enlightenment figures, to become pillars of conservatism, especially as regards political and social issues. In general, justification of monarchy, aristocracy, and empire on a moderate mainstream basis became more insistent and dogmatic even among those who could not altogether agree with Ferguson that rank and distinction in society were inherent in the divine order.⁵⁵ Whether they saw deference

⁵¹ Frederick the Great, *Examen de l’Essai*, 17–19.

⁵² *Ibid.* 26–8, 46, 64.

⁵³ Frederick the Great, ‘A Critical Examination of the *System of Nature*’, 171–2; Cassirer, *Philosophy*, 71.

⁵⁴ Cassirer, *Philosophy*, 52.

⁵⁵ Jen-Guo, ‘Providence’, 171, 180–6; Israel, *Revolution of the Mind*, 11–12, 130–1.

to aristocracy as grounded in the divine will or not, defence of aristocracy by 1789 had become more militant. 'It used to be thought necessary to flatter and deceive', commented Barlow, 'but here [in Burke's political philosophy] everything is open and candid. Mr Burke, in a frenzy of passion, has drawn away the veil; and aristocracy, like a decayed prostitute, whom painting and patching will no longer embellish, throws off her covering, to get a livelihood by displaying her ugliness.'⁵⁶

The eventual failure, indeed progressive breakdown, of the previously always dominant moderate Enlightenment by the 1770s and 1780s—and its replacement by the Counter-Enlightenment as the mainstay of social conservatism—was thus as much a social and political as intellectual process. Prior to 1789, moderate Enlightenment did secure a few notable improvements. But its incapacity to address major unresolved problems was more striking. Throughout Europe, including Britain, the aristocracy and lower nobility remained overwhelmingly dominant in landowning, as well as socially and politically, while aristocratic legal and tax privilege remained everywhere largely intact. People without property scarcely enjoyed the protection of the law. Capital punishment remained mandatory theoretically and often in practice for many offences besides murder. Debtors were still being cast into prison and left to the mercy of their creditors. Jews had nowhere yet attained equality of status; persecution of homosexuals persisted. Even in Britain denial of the Trinity by Unitarians as well as atheists and Deists remained theoretically a 'crime' in law, and in most people's eyes, while dissenters and Jews refusing oaths of conformity remained excluded from Oxford and Cambridge and higher positions in society. Burke was rightly accused by Priestley of joining 'with a bigoted clergy' to ensure civil offices stayed confined 'to the members of the established church.'⁵⁷

Hence, despite its intellectual dominance and some successes, moderate Enlightenment by 1789 found itself increasingly squeezed between the logic of revolution and its impotence to accomplish basic change. If, from a moderate standpoint, little could be done within the confines of *ancien régime* society, in Britain no less than continental Europe, to drive educational and law reform further, integrate Unitarians and Jews in society, or overcome the indissolubility of marriage and make divorce easier to obtain, owing to a powerful mix of social, political, and theological objections, neither could the press-gang be ended, serfs emancipated, or anything done about standing armies, great power jealousies, and the constant recurrence of appallingly bloody and destructive wars between rival dynasts. The ultimate meaning of 'moderation' was that the most pressing social problems could not be solved, and, as Barlow complained, nothing done to halt the growth in standing armies or curb great power rivalry, imperial expansion, and war.⁵⁸

The much vaunted solid good sense and pragmatism of the mainstream, Barlow pointed out, also paralysed the Europe-wide efforts at judicial reform. If Beccaria's

⁵⁶ Barlow, *Advice*, ii. 21–2.

⁵⁷ Priestley, *Letters*, preface p. v.

⁵⁸ Barlow, *Advice*, i. 74.

celebrated treatise on judicial reform, *Dei delitti e delle pene* (1764), appeared in ‘all languages’ and outdid practically every other late Enlightenment work in fame, it inspired only a few superficial reforms here and there, he noted in 1792, despite that book being followed by other ‘luminous’ writings (those of Helvétius, d’Holbach, Mirabeau, and Brissot), authors who ventured ‘much farther’ than that ‘benevolent philosopher, surrounded as he is by the united sabers of feudal and ecclesiastical tyranny, has dared to pursue it.’⁵⁹ Beccaria faltered, though moderate enlighteners opposed to the Revolution claimed he did open the gates to systematic legal reform.⁶⁰ A few law reforms were implemented but the crop was meagre. ‘The publication, within the last half century of a great number of excellent treatises on the subject of penal laws,’ averred Barlow, ‘without producing the least effect, in any part of Europe, is a proof that no reform is to be expected in the general system of criminal jurisprudence, but from a radical change in the principle of government.’⁶¹ This was substantially true.

From a radical perspective, fundamental revolution, that is revolution at once intellectual, social, political, and religious, was necessary and unavoidable for every segment of humanity if human potentiality was to be realized. Every nation, avowed Antoine-Marie Cerisier (1749–1828), an ardent supporter of the American Revolution and the Dutch democratic movement of the 1780s, and prominent in the latter, has a right to liberty because liberty is indispensable to its proper conservation and prosperity: to be free means to obey only laws tending ‘au bonheur de la société et par elle approuvées’.⁶² The radical tendency, accordingly, was revolutionary comprehensively, vesting no legitimacy in existing institutions, or in privilege and social hierarchy, or structures of education and moral thought, and altogether convinced, as Cerisier put it in 1781, that only reason can establish the ‘véritables principes du gouvernement’ and, hence, foster good government.⁶³ Moderate Enlightenment was also revolutionary but in a limited, partial fashion.

The secularizing, sceptical category of moderate thinkers found themselves bitterly rebuked by both the religious Enlightenment and the radicals. Hume, Voltaire, and Montesquieu, like their religious counterparts, strove to uphold much of the edifice of *ancien régime* institutions and social hierarchy, including traditional religion—at least for the majority. Not infrequently, the irreligion and scepticism of this sub-group led to their integrity and sincerity being questioned by both Christian apologists to their ‘right’ and the radical wing to their ‘left’. Over time, these tensions engineered some dramatic shifts in the status of great thinkers. Thus, liberal Catholic apologists in France shifted from first attacking to later warmly appreciating Montesquieu whilst Montesquieu’s reputation in radical circles, conversely, receded the more acceptable he became to enlightened Catholic sentiment. By 1790, Nageon,

⁵⁹ Barlow, *Advice*, i. 93.

⁶⁰ Portalis, *De l’usage*, ii. 226.

⁶¹ Barlow, *Advice*, i. 93.

⁶² Cerisier, *Le Politique hollandois*, 6 (1783), 205.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 6 (1783), 179, 202–4.

one of Diderot's closest collaborators, publicly rebuked Montesquieu for being too 'frightened' of angering his contemporaries to express his real views about God, religion, or the Church.⁶⁴ Society, even in France was predominantly religious in the late eighteenth century, and the largest part of the Enlightenment overall religious. The rest, however disrespectful privately, publicly evinced a healthy respect for religion's power. The writings of the irreligious mainstream and radicals alike are full of gibes aimed at popular belief. The frightful torments and martyrdoms suffered by Christ's Apostles, remarks d'Holbach at one point, suggests they were less adept at working miracles than the churches claimed.⁶⁵ But no one, radical or moderate, dared publicly express such thoughts other than in anonymous, underground publications.

To understand the peculiar mix of coherence and dissonance constituting the Enlightenment one must examine how different social groups and institutions, as well as key rulers, employed, modified, and reacted to Enlightenment ideas. Attention must focus, as many have said, especially on the intersection between ideas and society, philosophy and general context. What we learn from such an undertaking is that intellectual debate is itself a social and cultural process reacting to the logic of conditions no less than the play of ideas. The underlying divergence between the competing impulses within the Enlightenment, we discover, arose first and foremost from a dispute about the status of reason and this must be understood as a fact of intellectual history but equally a fact of social and cultural history.

The methodology of this third volume of my Enlightenment survey continues that employed in the preceding two. Our best chance of understanding the evolution of Enlightenment ideas, thinking, and debate, in terms of their contemporary setting, meaning, and relevance to society, is to focus primarily on major public controversies and examine their broader context. 'This is hardly a novelty,' complains one critic; 'intellectual historians have been drawn to such debates since the discipline came into being.'⁶⁶ This technique, holds another, has been widely adopted by others over the last fifteen years and, moreover, many studies have produced analysis 'precise and contextualized' of eighteenth-century controversies notably more attentive to 'literary strategies' and rhetorical devices as well as 'sociability' than I have been.⁶⁷ Such criticism misses the point. In this study, 'context' means political events, social tensions, legal processes, economic developments, material and aesthetic culture, and educational institutions. By 'controversialist' method, I do not mean studying batches of texts relating to controversies, something which indeed has been a method employed by intellectual history since the outset (though such study is an indispensable part of the procedure). Rather I mean a procedure, starting from the vantage point of general history, to determine what the political, social, and cultural context of a given controversy is and how the controversy's course is shaped by political, legal, ecclesiastical,

⁶⁴ Naigeon, *Adresse à l'Assemblée Nationale* (1790), 27–9.

⁶⁵ [D'Holbach], *Le Bon-Sens*, 139.

⁶⁶ Chisick, 'Interpreting the Enlightenment', 35.

⁶⁷ Lilty, 'Comment écrit-on', 190.

academic, and popular interventions, most of which are not recorded in literary or philosophical texts but in other kinds of records. An equivalent approach would be to study economic history by placing economic developments within a general framework of politics, culture, and institutional change; something economic historians, who are notoriously apt to isolate economic factors from other kinds of factors—much as the old intellectual history abstracted and isolated ideas—almost never do.

The method of starting from the general conjuncture of a given controversy and asking how the various pressures involved shaped the outcome seems to me to be a procedure that far from being widely practised is something intellectual and cultural historians have rarely experimented with. What such a methodology amounts to is general history, political, economic, legal, and social, employing intellectual controversies as its material. This trilogy is a gathering of data and evidence making possible the formulation of explanatory categories, an essentially empirical study. If it was first suggested by indications that the quest for basic human rights based on democracy and equality that later became formative for modernity appeared to originate in a certain type of materialist, determinist, and atheistic (or, alternatively, radical Socinian) ontology, what it was that cemented this primary link between radical social and political positions and materialist, anti-religious systems, philosophically, can now be said to have emerged clearly—but only through research. It was because the evidence pointed to it that it became the object of the study to explain how and why the Enlightenment split into rival tendencies, generating what Voltaire called a ‘guerre civile entre les incrédules’, and how this rift throws light on the rise of libertarian and revolutionary ideas, democratic republican ideology, and basic human rights as corner-stones of ‘modernity’.

Of course, it would be absurd to suggest that all moderate thinkers came down clearly on one side of key questions and radical thinkers always on the other. Some hardy spirits, most obviously Voltaire, forthrightly crossed the lines on some issues, alternately attracting hostility and applause from both camps. But this was relatively rare as most major philosophical questions in dispute, such as whether or not morality is divinely delivered, whether or not the Bible is divine revelation, whether or not the soul is immortal, whether or not prophecy is imposture, whether or not miracles are possible (where Voltaire took the opposite view to most other moderates), were basically either/or issues. These and comparable metaphysical questions automatically generated an overarching duality polarizing all scientific and philosophical debate leaving little room for in-between positions. For these are all questions to which thinkers (and everybody else) broadly have to answer yes or no, or else lapse into pure scepticism.

A chapter on earthquakes follows immediately on this introduction because, I believe, it illustrates with particular clarity why the Enlightenment could not be a simple spectrum of positions with infinite gradations and nuances between the most conservative and most radical standpoints. In the case of earthquakes, floods, droughts, and volcanic eruptions, there were, unalterably, only three positions possible: either all earthquakes and other natural disasters arise from purely natural

causes and none from divine intervention; or, all natural disasters are divinely ordained and none arise from purely natural causes; or, finally, some result from natural causes and others from divine intervention, leaving those adopting this dominant standpoint with the ticklish problem of explaining how we account for the difference. These three standpoints corresponded exactly to Radical Enlightenment, Counter-Enlightenment, and moderate Enlightenment with the last being everywhere the most favoured overall but the thorniest philosophically. It was hard reality itself, the reader will realize from the example of earthquakes, that ensured there was no tenable intermediate ground between radical and moderate Enlightenment, or Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment positions. Lovers of compromise and gradualism, as always, abounded; but that could not prevent a general polarization driven by reality and metaphysical positions locking thinkers into lines of thought allowing no spectrum of intermediate views.

However scornful of the existing order and mere piecemeal improvements, radical thinkers were not especially optimistic and avoided short-term forecasts when explaining its notions of and plans for human improvement. Unlike Marxism, in the next century, it issued no guarantees even for the long term. Yet, it saw something inevitable about what it considered its rightness in philosophy. Despite the slowness of our steps, the evidence shows without question, remarks d'Holbach concluding his *Système social* (1773), that there is a gradual progress of 'la raison humaine'. If several ancient and modern philosophers dared embrace reason and experience alone, rejecting all theology, as the basis of their philosophy, breaking free of the 'chains of superstition', it was Leucippus, Democritus, Epicurus, and Strato who first began to lift the veil of prejudice and rescue 'la philosophie des entraves théologiques'. If their systems were too deficient in mystery and marvels for most men and everything slid back into the 'conjectures fabuleuses des Platons, des Socrates, des Zénons', Epicureanism, thanks to Lucretius, was never wholly forgotten and man's progress resumed in the seventeenth century with Hobbes, Spinoza, and Bayle.⁶⁸

During the vast gap before and after the ancient Greeks, there were a few enlightened men, but such is the sway of ignorance and superstition that even 'les hommes les plus éclairés' could do no more than speak in veiled terms and by a 'lâche complaisance' shamefully mix lies with truth. What d'Holbach calls 'the universal prejudices' ['les préjugés universels'] impose themselves so powerfully over such long spans, even over the best minds, that many give up, despairing of mankind. Few are brave enough full-frontally to combat 'les erreurs universelles'. Far from being overly optimistic as their twentieth-century critics have frequently charged, or treating human beings as 'quasi-divine',⁶⁹ radical thinkers and mostly also the Enlightenment's moderate thinkers frequently tended, in fact, to be rather pessimistic.

Yet, the ultimate emancipation of man, and life in a free society according protection to all on an equal basis, under elected government ruling in the interest of society

⁶⁸ [D'Holbach], *Le Bon-Sens*, 247–8.

⁶⁹ As argued in particular by Gillespie, *Theological Origins*, 275.

as a whole, is not an impossible dream despite being continually obstructed and thwarted. Part of the proof that a general revolution defeating credulity and 'le pouvoir arbitraire' is not just thinkable but possible, even if only just, held d'Holbach, lies in the fact that particular local revolutions in history had already achieved significant things. During the Reformation, did not the English and Dutch throw off the papacy's yoke and later, after tremendous struggle, that of monarchical tyranny also?⁷⁰ Travellers to China, he adds, report that morality and courtesy towards others is general there, something taught even to the lowest of the citizenry. Would it not become possible one day to teach the common man to think in terms of uprightness, reason, and justice? 'If error and ignorance have forged the chains of peoples, if prejudice perpetuates them, science, reason and truth will one day be able to break them.'⁷¹ A noble and beautiful thought, no doubt, but was he right? That was and remains today the unresolved challenge of the Radical Enlightenment.

⁷⁰ D'Holbach, *Le Bon-Sens*, 561.

⁷¹ D'Holbach, *Essai*, 92; d'Holbach, *Système social*, 558–9.