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Edited by
Norman Geras and Robert Wokler



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Edited by

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and

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First published in Great Britain 2000 by

MACMILLAN PRESS LTD

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and London
Companies and representatives throughout the world

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0-333-71650-7



First published in the United States of America 2000 by

ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, INC.,

Scholarly and Reference Division,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010

ISBN 0-312-22385-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The enlightenment and modernity / edited by Norman Geras and Robert
Wokler.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-312-22385-4

1. Enlightenment Congresses. 2. Philosophy, Modern—20th century
Congresses. I. Geras, Norman, 1943- . II. Wokler, Robert, 1942-

B802.E545 1999

190—dc21

99-25944

CIP

Selection and editorial matter © Norman Geras and Robert Wokler 2000

Introduction and Chapter 9 © Robert Wokler 2000

Chapter 8 © Norman Geras 2000

Chapters 1-7, 10, 11 © Macmillan Press Ltd 2000

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01 00

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham, Wiltshire

Contents

<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	vii
<i>Editors' Preface</i>	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	x
<i>Robert Wokler</i>	

PART I INTERPRETING ENLIGHTENMENT PRINCIPLES

1	The Sceptical Enlightenment: Philosopher Travellers Look Back at Europe <i>Ursula Vogel</i>	1
2	Education Can Do All <i>Geraint Parry</i>	25
3	Kant: the Arch-enlightener <i>Andrea T. Baumeister</i>	50
4	Kant, Property and the General Will <i>Hillel Steiner</i>	66
5	Can Enlightenment Morality be Justified Teleologically? <i>Ian Carter</i>	80
6	Ganging A'gley <i>Alistair Edwards</i>	100

PART II ASSESSING THE ENLIGHTENMENT ROOTS OF MODERNITY

7	English Conservatism and Enlightenment Rationalism <i>Ian Holliday</i>	117
8	Four Assumptions About Human Nature <i>Norman Geras</i>	135
9	The Enlightenment, the Nation-state and the Primal Patricide of Modernity <i>Robert Wokler</i>	161

10	Critique and Enlightenment: Michel Foucault on ‘Was ist Aufklärung?’ <i>Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves</i>	184
11	The Enlightenment, Contractualism and the Moral Polity <i>Vittorio Bufacchi</i>	204
	<i>Index</i>	225

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Editors' Preface

Most of the papers collected in this volume were presented to a workshop seminar held in the Department of Government at the University of Manchester during the 1994–5 academic session. They are all the work of scholars either currently or recently connected with this department.

The aim of the seminar, which was proposed and organized by Norman Geras, was to explore how the Enlightenment and its legacy were perceived by the several contributors to relate to their own current areas of research and, through our discussions, to view this central theme in the light which our different interests and approaches might cast upon it. The volume we have assembled is the outcome of that collective enterprise.

Norman Geras
Robert Wokler

Introduction

Virtually everyone who holds opinions about the most central issues of contemporary ethics or political theory, or indeed about the crises of our civilization as a whole, has thereby felt licensed to pronounce upon the nature of the Enlightenment Project. Whatever principles it might embrace are presumed, by persons who reflect upon such matters, to form the essential core or guiding thread of modernity itself. The Enlightenment Project is the ghost in our machine. Students of eighteenth-century thought across a variety of disciplines may be forgiven their frustration when confronting such global judgements about the subjects of their research, not only because shorthand truth always makes detailed scholarship redundant, but also because it portrays their excursions into what they imagine to be the uncharted past as circumnavigations of the present locked within familiar waters. Why should they set out with their scalpels to clear away the frontiers of knowledge when if they stay at home with sledgehammers they can dispose of the Enlightenment at a stroke? Never mind that *the Enlightenment* is an invention of the late nineteenth century, *the Scottish Enlightenment* a fabrication of the early twentieth century, *the Enlightenment Project*, of more recent pedigree than the Manhattan Project, just a scheme largely devised in the past two decades. What possible bearing can genuine scholarship have upon claims about the conceptual roots of modernity which are writ large and on stilts?

Scholars of Enlightenment thought almost invariably have at least a dual identity. After assembling at symposia and conferences addressed to eighteenth-century themes, they return to their departments of English, French or German language and literature, or of philosophy, music or art. If they are specialists in political thought with academic appointments in the English-speaking world, they may feel not so much schizophrenic as shorn of any identity at all, on account of the great gulf that has arisen in their discipline over the past thirty years since the predominance of political theorists at the University of Chicago, on the one hand, and at Oxford University and the London School of Economics, on the other, has been transformed into the hegemony of Harvard, with respect to political philosophy, and Cambridge, in the history of political thought. That sharp division of labour does not lend itself well, either to the contextual study of Enlightenment political thought or to the conceptual analysis of modernity in terms of its putative Enlightenment roots. The wedge now deemed to separate the history from the philosophy of political argument

only obscures the interdisciplinary character of eighteenth-century thought, across boundaries which did not come to be demarcated until after the end of the age of Enlightenment itself.

In the discourses of modernity that figure in the philosophical histories of Voltaire, d'Alembert or Gibbon are embedded frameworks for the understanding of contemporary civilization along lines that lead in our day to the perspectives of Reinhart Koselleck, Jürgen Habermas or Michel Foucault, but which have scant purchase for those who only study political concepts either analytically or alternatively with respect to the initial circumstances of their use. Above all, perhaps, the current gulf between political philosophy and the history of political thought masks the sense in which so many leading eighteenth-century thinkers sought not only to interpret the world but, through their interpretations, to change it. If such moral endeavour may be described as their Enlightenment Project, our manner of fragmenting it by way of our methodological approaches to the study of political thought betrays its most fundamental ideals.

This collection comprises a modest attempt – perhaps even an unwitting effort on the part of some contributors – to repair that breach. No subject in the human sciences offers a more dramatic illustration of the ties that join philosophy and history than the Enlightenment and its legacy. Some of the central questions of psychology and epistemology today still turn around claims regarding the nature of human perception and knowledge first articulated by Descartes, Locke, Berkeley or Hume. In linguistics, Enlightenment doctrines of universal grammar or the origin of languages have been embraced by researchers determined to map the future of their discipline no less than by those who have sought to retrace its past. By way of Kant in particular, modern ethics is seen by most of its current interpreters to have embarked upon a wholly fresh path, disencumbered of the authority of classical or religious dogmas. In economics and other social sciences, Smith and Montesquieu are deemed to have cast our current disciplines in the forms in which they are still studied. Every school child comes to learn that contemporary society was first shaped by the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century, and that the modern nation-state is an invention of the French Revolution, generated in turn by an Enlightenment spirit of commercialism and republican ideals of self-rule. A close connection between the theory and practice of the modern state, as advocated in the eighteenth century by writers of all denominations, has also been identified by later critics of totalitarianism who have uncovered its philosophical roots in the doctrines of Rousseau. Still other commentators have attributed the patriarchal character of modernity ultimately to the exclusion of women from the French Revolutionary declaration of the rights of man.

For much of the past two hundred years, before the history and philosophy of politics took their separate paths, most of our principal political and social theorists have followed Hegel, Tocqueville, Marx and Nietzsche in tracing the conceptual or economic underpinnings of modernity to the age of Enlightenment, thereby pursuing themes about the nature of modern civilization and the course of its past or prospective history which were already much discussed by eighteenth-century thinkers themselves. In the twentieth century, the subject of modernity's debt to Enlightenment ideals of progress or to its canons of reason and scientific objectivity has been of central importance to Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt in their conservative critiques of atomistic individualism, and to Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel and other radical communitarian opponents of Enlightenment liberalism.

The subject has informed the sceptical realist perspective adopted by Richard Rorty and a variety of so-called post-modernist objections to principles of universal truth. It lies at the heart of the difference between Foucault's anti-Enlightenment account of the despotism of knowledge and power in the modern world, on the one hand, and Habermas's commitment to the open and engaged discourses of the public sphere, on the other. Interpreters of the Holocaust from Max Horkheimer to Zygmunt Bauman have understood modernity's greatest crime as also, in some measure, a legacy of the Enlightenment. Passionate admirers of Isaiah Berlin, such as Steven Lukes and John Gray, take fierce issue with one another around the question of Berlin's debt or opposition to Enlightenment ideals. From a Thomist perspective, Alasdair MacIntyre rejects the political philosophy of John Rawls just because of its Kantian, and hence Enlightenment, presuppositions. It is proving increasingly difficult to open a literary review or even a daily newspaper without confronting the question. Rather too few of the commentators who feel obliged to address it are sufficiently well-informed. If they pause long enough to read these essays, at least some of them may come to feel better insulated from the windy vapours they often emit themselves.

Our first section is devoted to the study of Enlightenment moral, political, educational and scientific principles, with respect both to eighteenth-century debates and their current applicability. Ursula Vogel, in challenging misconceived notions of the abstract universalism of the so-called Enlightenment Project, offers a perspective on its concrete dimensions through some of its travellers' commentaries on the nature of foreigners who inhabit the peripheries of the civilized world. With reference especially to the eighteenth-century discovery and exploration of Tahiti, she shows that the philosopher travellers of the age of Enlightenment, even

while subscribing to notions of mankind's nature in general and to a Eurocentric bias in particular, took notice of the distinctive character of savage societies in ways which enriched their perceptions of the variability and diversity of human cultures. Moving from the margins of civilization to the internal dynamics by which it can be acquired, Geraint Parry addresses Enlightenment conceptions of autonomy and self-fulfilment with respect to programmes of instruction designed to emancipate children from religious prejudice and blind conformity. In stressing the spirit of criticism and ideals of active life encouraged by eighteenth-century educationalists, he shows that the Enlightenment promoted a greater plurality of values and more self-reliance than have been allowed by critics who subscribe to Foucault's contention that the same intellectual movement which discovered our liberties also invented our disciplines.

Andrea Baumeister takes to task those critics of Kant's moral philosophy who find that his conception of self-reliant subjectivity leads to the fragmentation of society, contending that, on the contrary, his dictates of the categorical imperative are premised on a notion of moral community which aims to overcome just such fragmentation. Pursuing a line of argument in part inspired by Onora O'Neill, she shows that Kantian claims about the nature of public reason and the development of moral character imply an approach to the cultivation of the virtues which his communitarian detractors have overlooked, from which it follows that his ethics comprise a corrective to, rather than a source of, the impoverishment of modern morality. Hillel Steiner finds Kant's formulation of the same dictates to be linked with his notion of universal justice conceived in terms of a distribution of property rights, which, however, are shown to be without proper foundation as Kant defines them. For in stipulating that such rights can issue from the original common possession of things only through the enactment of the general will, he makes the obligations of forbearance which are entailed by property rights depend upon the agreement of persons who would have had to consent before they were born.

Ian Carter confronts several of the same objections to Enlightenment ethics which Baumeister meets on behalf of Kant, in his case by demonstrating that they may enjoy much the same rational justification as the teleological moral principles which MacIntyre in particular invokes against them. Enlightenment ideals of progress and perfectibility may appear more indeterminate than the specifiable ends of human activity which were portrayed by Aristotle, but allowing for the empirical correlation between progress and freedom, or progress and equality, which liberal thinkers have so often accepted, Carter contends that the merits of liberty or equality can be legitimately upheld just in so far as they are seen to

promote those ideals. Alistair Edwards subjects to close critical scrutiny the contention of Friedrich von Hayek, drawn from the Cardinal de Retz by way of Adam Ferguson, to the effect that the social order is an unintended product of individual actions. Hayek's contrast between what he sees as this essentially Scottish approach to social scientific enquiry, on the one hand, and the rational constructivism of Continental thinkers like Rousseau, on the other, is found to be overdrawn, while the strength of unintended consequence explanations of how social institutions operate, Edwards argues, is due less to any hidden hand of spontaneous order than to the inescapability of mistaken knowledge and ignorance.

In our second section, which deals with the conceptual history of modernity, we address a variety of questions about the Enlightenment's putative influence, or lack of influence, in shaping our political thought and culture. Ian Holliday re-examines the English conservative critique of Enlightenment rationalism associated above all with Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott, and he argues that the plausibility of the conservative case is as much a matter of sociological understanding as of philosophical principle. Not only did English conservatism offer the first major response to the universalist, empiricist or utilitarian strains of eighteenth-century philosophy as a whole, he observes; in engaging with Enlightenment rationalism over the whole course of its history, it established the traditions which underpin its own identity by way of the different voices it adopted in that conversation. Taking a work of Ralph Miliband as his point of departure, Norman Geras considers some implications of the assumptions that human nature is intrinsically evil, or intrinsically good or vacuous, and he concludes that the only warrantable assumption for socialists is that it is intrinsically mixed. Optimistic psychological claims drawn from the Enlightenment are often upheld by socialists, but particularly on the evidence of the brutalities of our century they are difficult to sustain, he observes, while allowing that modest hopes for the establishment of tolerably contented human existence may be more solidly grounded on realist and pessimistic premises.

Robert Wokler challenges both the proposition that the Enlightenment loved the thing it killed, in substituting a secular religion for Christian absolutism, and the contention that the main philosophical and political principles of modernity since the French Revolution stem from the Enlightenment. If the notion of an Enlightenment Project means anything at all, he argues, it must embrace a commitment to pluralism and religious toleration, while the nation-state that was invented in the course of the French Revolution betrayed not only the cosmopolitan ideals of the republic of letters but also the Rousseauist principles of popular sovereignty

from which it appeared to have sprung. Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves interprets an essay drafted by Foucault on Kant in commemoration of the two-hundredth anniversary of the publication of Kant's *Was ist Aufklärung?*, and he compares its argument closely with two earlier texts which Foucault had completed on the same subject. In investigating Foucault's diverse readings of the tendencies of Enlightenment thought, he suggests that the apparent tensions between them may be reconciled, particularly in the light of the Nietzschean character of his critical ontology, whose fundamental hostility to the age of Enlightenment Foucault never abandoned.

Vittorio Bufacchi examines the normative implications of two main traditions of Enlightenment social contract theory, one deriving from Hobbes and based on a notion of mutual advantage, the other inspired principally by Kant and founded on an idea of social cooperation. In stressing the benefits of cooperation, David Gauthier has adopted the Hobbesian perspective, he argues, while John Rawls, in emphasizing that cooperation must be based on fair terms, has instead followed in the footsteps of Kant, there being no way to reconcile these differences in the manner attempted by Rawls, since they recapitulate the tensions in an Enlightenment Project that never had, nor ever can have, logical coherence. Whatever might be the coherence, or indeed the identity, of that Project, these essays bear testimony to the persistence and significance of claims about its nature, and to the strength of its images and ideals within the edifice of modernity that we inhabit. For better or worse, whether enacted or betrayed, the so-called Enlightenment Project has cast Western civilization under its long shadow over the past two hundred years. Even if it brings modernity to its close, the second coming of Christ, due soon after the publication of this book, may by contrast seem little more than an apocalyptic anti-climax.

Robert Wokler

Part I
Interpreting Enlightenment
Principles

1 The Sceptical Enlightenment: Philosopher Travellers Look Back at Europe

Ursula Vogel

If the scientific and scholarly gain of a few individuals has to be bought at the price of the happiness of whole nations, then it would be better for discoverers and discovered alike if the South Sea had never become known to the restless European.¹

INTRODUCTION

A central failure of the Enlightenment, it is frequently argued today, lay in its incapacity to deal with human difference and diversity.² The consequences of this failure seem nowhere more apparent than in the question of Europe's relationship to non-European peoples and cultures. The alleged insensitivity of eighteenth-century thinking to the intrinsic value of cultural difference is commonly attributed to its universalist frameworks of inquiry – to its abstract conceptions of a uniform and invariable human nature and to the grand narratives of a progressive history of human civilization.³ What is at issue in this critical portrayal of Enlightenment legacies is not merely the epistemological inadequacy of universalist pre-suppositions to the task of understanding foreign cultures in their own terms. Enlightenment universalism is seen to have fostered modes of thinking which in the following two centuries would all too often serve to legitimate European global dominance and to conceal the histories of destruction that were entailed in it.⁴

In this chapter I shall attempt to give an alternative account of the Enlightenment's engagement with a world constituted by ethnic and cultural difference. That its perception of this world was mediated through discourses of cognitive and moral universalism is not in doubt; nor that the latter remained anchored in the presumption of Europe's unique role in the history of humankind. That such universalist principles, however, should have implied a dogmatic belief in the uniformity of human nature, of a kind that would have systematically closed off all interest in its

diverse forms and concrete contexts, betrays a fundamental misunderstanding. It has had the effect of filtering out, and rendering all but invisible, the distinctive scientific aspirations and the intellectual and practical energies which shaped the Enlightenment's encounter with the world outside Europe. In large part the misunderstanding is due to the neglect of many of the key texts and some of the most characteristic genres of Enlightenment literature. Whether, to name but a few of those texts, we turn to Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* or Condorcet's construction of a universal history of the human mind, we can easily see how much moral and political argument in this period owed to empirical knowledge about non-European peoples, especially primitive ('savage') societies at the periphery of the known world: 'No reputable philosophe would theorize on the nature of man without producing some well-chosen references to the American Indian, the Chinese, the African negro or the Hottentot.'⁵ The same outward-going interest in distant lands and their inhabitants can be observed in the immense popularity of all kinds of travel literature – from the merely entertaining, titillating presentation of 'the exotic' to the serious work of fiction and the scholarly tract – among the reading publics of the eighteenth century.⁶

In short, any attempt to engage with the legacies of the Enlightenment Project must take account of the dynamic of its *Weltoffenheit*. Given that neither the certainties of religious faith nor the *a priori* constructions of metaphysical systems could any longer provide reliable guidance, philosophical inquiry had to turn to the world given in experience. Openness towards the world expressed itself in restless curiosity as the motivational drive behind the pursuit of knowledge and, on a different plane, in the epistemological imperative that questions about the nature of man and society could only be answered by observing human existence in all its diverse manifestations. 'It was my intention,' wrote Georg Forster (traveller and philosophe who from 1772 to 1775 took part in Cook's second voyage around the world), 'to consider the nature of man from as many perspectives as possible'.⁷ Even Kant, usually the key witness in the case brought against the Enlightenment's abstract universalism, advised the moral philosopher of the need to travel, at least in the form of conscientiously following the available travel reports.⁸

No other genre of Enlightenment literature expressed these aspirations more faithfully than the 'philosophical' travel account. A distinctive form of narrative interspersed with general reflections on what the traveller had seen and experienced, this genre emerged towards the end of the eighteenth century in response to the great voyages of discovery that had

enlarged the world known to Europeans by the immense terrains of the Pacific Ocean. As a result especially of James Cook's expeditions it could be said that the world as the habitat of human beings had become one, in the sense that all its parts were – in principle – accessible to knowledge and could be connected and integrated in a global perspective on the human species. The philosophical travel account captured the meanings and implications of this historic moment. Its author might be a traveller himself, like Bougainville and Georg Forster. Or, in the manner of Montesquieu, Diderot and Kant, he might be an 'armchair traveller', who used the observations brought back by the voyagers as raw material and inspiration for setting the frame to his philosophical or literary enterprise.

The philosophical travel account was indebted to the spirit of scientific investigation in that it aimed to convey exact and comprehensive information about a hitherto unfamiliar region of the earth (about its geography, climate, flora and fauna as much as about the physiognomy, behaviour and customs of its native populations). But it moved beyond the boundaries of empirical, factual description in the endeavour to bring the new knowledge about the differences and variations among the peoples of the world to bear upon philosophical inquiry into the nature and moral constitution of man as a species being. It is in this context that the observed contrast between primitive and civilized societies became the catalyst of a 'painful' enlightenment⁹ – of a critical self-reflection on Europe's own identity.

None of the explorations of the 'New World' of the Pacific islands proved as significant in this respect, alluring and unsettling at the same time, as the discovery of Tahiti. In the main part of the paper I shall use accounts of Tahiti as a kind of case study to consider the constitution of a sceptical Enlightenment. For reasons of space I shall confine myself to two main examples – Diderot's *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage* (written in 1772, but not published before 1796) and Georg Forster's *Voyage around the World* (1774 in its original English version; 1778 in German). Although the *Supplement* is the work of an armchair traveller, while Forster's 1,000-page volume is based on first-hand experience, the two texts share a number of critical perspectives: in both, savage Tahiti casts radical doubt upon the self-confidence of enlightened Europe, revealing the corruption at the heart of its political systems, its refined morality and civilized forms of sociability. Both envisage the disastrous consequences that the contact with Europe will inflict upon the integrity of Tahiti's native culture. But while Diderot implicated enlightenment itself in the process of irreversible destruction, Forster's critique of civilization salvaged those of its achievements which might in future work to the benefit of all peoples on the globe.

THE GREAT MAP OF MANKIND IN
THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The eighteenth century's perception of the world evolved out of long-standing and varied traditions of thought which recorded the successive stages of Europe's encounter with foreign lands and alien cultures.¹⁰ With its roots in the discourses of Hellenic barbarism, on the one hand, and in the confrontations of Christianity with Islam in the Middle Ages, on the other, Europe's understanding of the geographical and cultural boundaries of the world and of its own central place within it was first radically altered as a consequence of Columbus's discovery of the New World and of the waves of overseas expansion which followed in its wake. The voyages of the Renaissance period transformed the closed, hierarchically ordered cosmos of the Christian transnational community into a spatial universe of as yet uncertain extent.¹¹ Not only did this epoch witness the most extensive enlargement of the known world in terms of physical space which, as Alexander von Humboldt put it, 'doubled the works of the Creation' for the inhabitants of Europe.¹² It brought the latter face to face with terrains and peoples for which neither the Bible nor the classical authors of Greek and Roman antiquity would provide authoritative guidance. To the extent that first-hand knowledge about the indigenous populations of Asia, Africa and the Americas continued to reach European readers in the form mainly of missionary reports, the understanding of primitive peoples remained until the end of the seventeenth century bounded by concerns central to Christian faith and salvation. Yet, as the travellers and scholars of the eighteenth century were to acknowledge, the expeditions of the Renaissance already laid the foundations of that systematic secular interest in the shape and history of the earth which was to become the hallmark of the scientific endeavours of the Enlightenment period: 'For the first time man knew the globe that he inhabited.'¹³

Voyages around the world in the eighteenth century heralded a second momentous phase in the history of European overseas discoveries. The exploration of the Pacific Ocean by Bougainville, Cook and many others, and the discovery of Australia, New Zealand and the South Sea islands brought one-third of the earth's surface into the orbit of the known world. After Cook's second voyage (1772–5) had laid to rest the long-held belief in the existence of a vast land mass in the southern hemisphere (the *terra australis incognita*) there remained no new continents to be discovered. Much was still left to future explorations, especially as regards the inland regions of Africa, the Americas and Australia. But the cartography

of the globe was largely complete.¹⁴ And in this sense the world was known:

But now the great map of mankind is unrolled at once; and there is no state or gradation of barbarism and no mode of refinement which we have not at the same instant under our view.¹⁵

In contrast with the Spanish and Portuguese conquests since the sixteenth century, the colonial settlements in North America and the slave trade from the coast of West Africa, contact with the native populations of the Pacific took place under relatively favourable circumstances of intercultural tolerance. Due to the decline of missionary endeavour in the eighteenth century the voyages pursued no religious aims. Nor were they directly implicated in, or immediately followed by, military conquest, colonization and economic exploitation. Bougainville's and Cook's vessels sailed under instructions to stake out claims on behalf of their governments; they carried soldiers and military equipment, and instances of violence against natives occurred. But with astronomers, botanists, natural historians, linguists and engravers on board, the prior interest of the journeys lay in the expansion of knowledge.

The knowledge sought by the itinerant scholars (and by their counterparts back home) covered a wide spectrum of objectives. It was to be of use to the seafarer through the exact cartographic delineation of the coastlines of continents and islands, the location of ice masses, the measurement of the depths and currents of the ocean. The inquiries of the natural historian focused on the formation of the planet earth and the evolution and variation of vegetative, animal and human organisms under different circumstances of climate, soil and water supply. The interest in man as part of nature called for detailed observations of the physiognomy and anatomy of native tribes in their relationship to a specific natural environment. Attention to sexual behaviour, patterns of parenting and familial organization, as to modes of subsistence, religious rituals and forms of sociability, similarly contributed to identify the specific characteristics that distinguished each variation of the human species. From this perspective alone – that is, if we consider the wealth of factual information about the native populations of the Pacific that was conveyed in the note-books and published accounts of the travellers¹⁶ – the view of the Enlightenment's lack of interest in diversity can hardly be sustained. Nor should we, on the other hand, overlook the magnitude of intellectual challenges and moral apprehensions that confronted the European observer in the shock experience of extreme forms of otherness. 'For the benefits of the friends of

man [*Menschenfreunde*] we have explored a number of hitherto unknown variations of human nature': Forster's concluding remarks on the achievements of his voyage show that the encounter with the unfamiliar and alien was experienced as an enrichment of knowledge and moral horizons alike. But the immediately following reference to the unfortunate savages of the Tierra del Fuogo – 'half-starved, apathetic ... and relegated to the lowest stage of human nature at the borderline to non-rational animals'¹⁷ – also attests to the difficulties of absorbing this experience. The enormous distance that seemed to separate the European from some of his fellow humans threatened to undermine the unity of the human species and to thrust the Enlightenment's central question, 'What is man?', into a vacuum of radical uncertainty.

Confrontations of this kind – to which we might add the observation of cannibalism among the Maoris of New Zealand – go some way to explain the unique space that Tahiti came to occupy in the travel narratives of the late eighteenth century. Filtered through the spell-bound descriptions of virtually all travellers who set foot on the island, the discovery of Tahiti captured the imagination of the European reading public as an event of extraordinary and lasting fascination.¹⁸ Reality and myth combined in many different ways to make the Tahitian islander both the distant ancestor and beguiling hope of European man. Tahiti became the focus of nostalgia for a lost world of human happiness, of utopian speculation and even plans of emigration. It supplied an imagery capable of expressing the widely felt disenchantment with the ills of the modern world and of turning the critical modes of Enlightenment thinking upon the progress of enlightenment itself.¹⁹

What was it about Tahiti, a small island thousands of miles away from Europe, that could evoke such intense and profound identifications? The more important answers to this question would, of course, have to be sought in Europe, i.e. in the dominant intellectual currents and collective sentiments of the late eighteenth century. But we can get a glimpse of what the real Tahiti, at the moment of discovery, must have been like if we consider those first impressions on which the testimony of all visitors converged.²⁰ What struck the travellers first – after the hardships of a dangerous and uncertain sea journey and after months spent without sighting land – was the overwhelming natural beauty of the country. All accounts dwell on the beguiling charms of a landscape where coastal regions, inland valleys and distant mountains were suffused with the intense colours of abundant vegetation and where the neatly built abodes of the natives were set out in rich groves of banana, coconut and bread trees. Nature herself, operating through a beneficent climate, seemed to provide human

beings with all they needed without exacting the tribute of arduous labour. This favourable impression was matched by the physical beauty of the islanders: their well-built, healthy bodies, their nakedness borne without shame and artificial reserve, their attractive bronze skin colour and melodious language. These physical attributes alone set the Tahitian apart from other savages whom the travellers encountered in the Pacific region, comparing them favourably with the forbidding ugliness of the natives of New Zealand and New Caledonia, who displayed stark similarities with the negroes of West Africa and the Caribbean islands. Above all, the visitors were attracted by the behaviour that the inhabitants of Tahiti showed towards them. The same scene of arrival is replayed in all descriptions: The ships of the Europeans, anchoring at some distance from the shore, would soon be surrounded by countless canoes and cries of 'Tayo' (friend). The uncanny friendliness, childlike trust and innocent curiosity of these savages would become further evident in their willingness to barter the much-needed fresh foodstuffs for iron nails and trinkets of fake jewellery, and to share their meals, huts and – if we are to believe Bougainville and Diderot – their women with the strangers. In short, in the Tahitian islander eighteenth-century Europeans met their *bon sauvage* (whom the previous century had identified with the North American Indian). Here was a 'variation' of the human species sufficiently different to be endowed with all the charms of the exotic and yet, unlike other savage tribes, still similar enough to be adopted by the European as an image of himself.

Tahiti, then, seemed to offer a glimpse of what the human condition of man 'close to the origins of the world'²¹ and as yet unspoilt by the trappings of civilizatory progress must have been like. It might be said, of course, that it was the European traveller weary of Europe's decadence who invented the Tahitian as his other and turned his island into a place of ecstatic imagination. However, as we shall see in the following two sections, the most pertinent insights of Diderot's and Forster's accounts and the distinctive features of their sceptical Enlightenment are owed to the fact that Tahiti was a real place. Both understood that Tahiti's discovery and first contact with Europe marked the beginning of an inexorable process that would draw its people into the world determined by the superior power of European civilization. In Diderot these insights took the form of resignation in the face of irremediable loss. Forster was led to a position where he altogether abandoned the presumption that questions about the nature of man and about the future of the human species could ever be answered by reference to a state of primitive simplicity and happiness.

BOUGAINVILLE AND DIDEROT: THE MYTH OF TAHITI

The magic spell that a first encounter with the island of Tahiti could cast even over an experienced traveller of foreign lands is particularly evident in the case of Bougainville. Louis Antoine Bougainville (1729–1811) – aristocrat, soldier, philosophe and naval explorer – was the perfect embodiment of the Enlightenment’s explorative spirit, ‘balancing a treatise of integral and differential calculus on one side, with a voyage round the world on the other.’²² Much of his account is given to technical problems of navigation and to the detailed recording of the dangers, hardships and ravaging diseases that the seafarer is likely to encounter in remote parts of the world. The same endeavour to supply an extensive array of useful facts is applied to the description of indigenous populations and of the economic and political strategies of the colonial powers. The imperative of factual veracity leads him into frequent attacks upon the then fashionable genres of merely entertaining travel literature and, with no less indignation, on the distortions of experience that are owed to the speculations of the closet philosophers at home: ‘Geography is an exact science and not to be fashioned in the spirit of system without falling prey to fatal errors.’²³

Yet, it was Bougainville who ‘really launched the legend’ when he named Tahiti *La Nouvelle Cythère*, after the mythical Greek island of erotic pleasure.²⁴ His observations may be of interest to us mainly because they supplied the factual material from which Diderot was to fashion the philosophical tale of civilized man’s alienation from his natural state. But they are also interesting in their own right in that they highlight the manifold difficulties and misunderstandings that enveloped the traveller as he attempted to give a faithful description of native attitudes and practices which in many instances would appear wholly unintelligible to the eyes of European observers. (Such difficulties were compounded in Bougainville’s case by a brief stay on the island of only ten days and, above all, by his ignorance of the native language.) ‘We did not trust our eyes’: Time and again Bougainville voices the inadequacy of previous experience to establish the meaning of what he sees.²⁵ Nothing, it seems, has prepared the European traveller for the spectacle of beautiful native women unashamedly displaying their naked bodies and willing, indeed positively encouraged by their menfolk, to grant sexual favours to strangers. Familiar codes of sexual propriety which back home bind sexual desire into the narrow confines of the monogamous marriage are thrown into disarray in the face of the freedom and ease with which the Tahitians follow the promptings of their natural impulses.

What comparisons and analogies were available to the foreigner to incorporate these unfamiliar sights into his own language and modes of thinking? As an educated Frenchman well-versed in classical literature, Bougainville spontaneously recalls names and images that belong to the mythology of ancient Greece. He compares the event of a Tahitian woman stepping on board the *Boudeuse* to the goddess Venus appearing to the phrygian shepherds; he invokes anacreontic songs and dances to capture the graciousness and innocence of the public display of erotic desire. Although further observations would lead him in some instances to correct those first rapturous impressions,²⁶ the alluring image of a Tahiti situated in the 'elysian fields' remains unaffected.

With these references to the cradle of European civilization Bougainville's 'Tahiti' is set in a discursive tradition and pattern of assimilation which for centuries had played a dominant role in the European traveller's exploration of primitive societies.²⁷ The gap of cultural difference is bridged and the incomprehensibility of non-European peoples overcome by moving the latter into one's own distant past, be it actual or imagined. Mediated through the imagery that pertains to that past, a relationship between them and us is created. They – the savages at the periphery of the world – represent an earlier and perhaps happier stage of mankind's development which once was ours too.

Diderot's *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage* construes this relationship in an altogether different manner. Tahiti reminds us not of the ancient Greece of our known history, but of a much earlier stage 'close to the origins of the world'. Although the title seems to suggest that the work would merely add to Bougainville's observations and although these can be seen to have provided a minimal frame of factual information, the *Supplement* bears little resemblance to the original travel account. Bougainville's description of events, adventures and curiosities is transformed into a philosophical satire on the morality of civilized society.²⁸ As in other works, Diderot uses the literary form of the dialogue (here, in fact, of a double dialogue) as the most suitable vehicle to consider a philosophical question from multiple standpoints and to indicate the incompleteness and ambivalence of any one of them.²⁹ The work consists of four parts, each of which develops a different perspective upon the moral implications and practical consequences of the encounter between Europe and 'Tahiti' – between civilized and natural man. An initial conversation between two philosophers, A and B (Diderot's alter ego), about Bougainville's explorations and their contribution to the expanding knowledge of nature and man, is followed by the 'old man's farewell' which carries Diderot's impassioned indictment of the devastating abuses which

the European intruders have inflicted upon Tahiti. The third and main part of the *Supplement* recounts a dialogue between the ship's chaplain and Orou, the wise Tahitian native, about the true foundations of a sexual morality which would be in tune with man's natural dispositions and unencumbered by the religious and institutional fetters of civilized society. The concluding conversation between A and B reflects on the irreconcilable divisions between civilized and natural man and on the practical implications that should be drawn from this knowledge. There is, in the end, no universal standpoint from which the antagonism could be resolved.

In the involuntary erotic adventures and trials of 'the good chaplain' – who struggles in vain to uphold the demand of celibacy imposed by his religion – Diderot portrays the contrast between Europe and 'the most savage people on earth'³⁰ as a conflict about the meaning and practice of sexual love. What on Tahiti is a physical appetite satisfied spontaneously and without secrecy has in civilized Europe become chained by a myriad of artificial moral and religious precepts. The chaplain's unsuccessful struggle against his natural impulses is replicated in his conversations with Orou and in his inability to refute the latter's radical interrogation of the morals and customs of Europe. In this context Diderot does not confine himself to denouncing particular institutions and practices, such as the indissoluble marriage, the adultery laws and, more generally, the hypocrisy inscribed in civilized society's codes of sexual etiquette. In a mode of radical abstraction which follows in the footsteps of Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* he tears away from the core of human nature all and any additions that have entangled natural sexual desire in refined sentiments and affections. Other thinkers of the Enlightenment, like Condorcet, Adam Smith, and Georg Forster, took the gradual refinement of manners in the process of civilization as heralding a move towards greater equality between the sexes and an improvement of the status of women.³¹ For Diderot, by contrast, nothing but the basic biological imperatives which direct physical passion towards the sole end of procreation are left standing as authentic, unadulterated nature. Like male and female in other living species, the young men and women of Tahiti simply follow the path that nature has outlined for them: 'They eat to live and grow; they grow to multiply.'³² From the age when their bodies are mature and their sexuality has awakened they are at complete liberty to consummate their passion: 'let the good and simple inhabitants multiply without shame in the light of the day under the open sky'.³³ If the freedom that pertains to the expression of sexual desire and to the choice and change of sexual partners among the Tahitians deserves the name of a

natural *morality*, it is because this unconstrained pursuit of natural human impulses accords with the demands of public utility. Against Tahiti, where numerous healthy and able-bodied children count as the most cherished good of the community, all of Europe's legal and moral regulations as well as the common standards of physical beauty stand revealed as so many artificial rules that thwart both individual and public happiness. Where women, instead of being the property of their husbands, are free to take new lovers, the 'tyranny of man'³⁴ sanctioned by monogamous marriage must appear as the greatest threat to liberty. Tahiti's women are treasured – and deemed beautiful and attractive – to the extent that their bodies suggest the promise of bearing strong and healthy offspring. Terms such as 'adultery' which in Europe carry the stigma of sin and crime are unknown on Tahiti. Even the taboo of incest fades away as but a distortion of a perfectly natural and innocent practice. (By the same token, on the other hand, sexual acts doomed to be unfruitful – intercourse during menstruation or with a woman beyond childbearing age – fall under public censure and even harsh punishment, like exile and enslavement.)

How much of this picture is owed to the real Tahiti? How closely does it reflect the knowledge available at this time? Diderot's *Supplement* betrays little of the traveller's ambition to convey all the details and nuances of what he has experienced. Bougainville's more balanced observations, for example, of the patriarchal structure of marriage based on a husband's far-reaching powers over his wife, and of the severe punishment which the latter's act of adultery will incur on the island,³⁵ do not enter Diderot's vision. Nor does he seem to entertain the doubts which trouble Forster, namely whether what is perceived by the eye of the foreign observer corresponds to the local, native meaning of a given custom. Orou is not a genuine native at all. Like Usbek in Montesquieu's fictional *Persian Letters*, he speaks in the unmistakable voice of the Enlightenment philosophe. The same confusion of perspectives occurs when the Tahitians are described as a 'people wise enough to have stopped their development at an early stage'.³⁶ Such wisdom could not possibly be attributed to the youthful savage tribe still in the infancy of the human race. It is a wisdom derived from the disillusionments and the self-knowledge of 'old age'.

And that is, of course, the point. In promising to show that the myth of Tahiti 'is not a myth',³⁷ Diderot is not concerned to convey specific factual knowledge about a particular people and its unique ways of life. He is concerned to reveal the truth about civilized Europe. The confrontation with the otherness of primitive society serves the purpose of exposing, and undermining, the false sense of superiority that Europe derives from its advanced civilization. That, however, is only possible because, unlike the

savage tribe in the South Sea, the Tahitians of Diderot's fable are in an important way like us. They are, that is, what we would be had we been fortunate enough not to be drawn into the turmoils of progressive historical change. Conversely, there is the danger that they will one day be forced to be what we now are.

It is from this latter perspective that Diderot addresses the real relationship between Europe and the newly discovered world of primitive nations. The universalist principle of a common humanity and of the common destiny of the human race which, as we have just seen, impedes the understanding of primitive cultures in their own terms of reference is used to defend their identity in terms of their entitlement to their freedom, to their soil and their own ways of life. In the 'old man's farewell' Diderot launches a devastating attack not only on the political practices of European colonialism but also on the illegitimate intrusion entailed in the restless dynamic of discovery and expansion.³⁸ Occupation of land, plunder and the transmission of venereal diseases have laid a trail of destruction which will eventually lead to the subjugation and enslavement of the indigenous populations. Commercial relations, economic improvement and, in the last instance, the advance of knowledge have left an equally fatal legacy that is bound to subvert the self-sufficiency and moral integrity of the native culture: 'We have no wish to exchange what you call ignorance for your useless knowledge. Everything that we need and is good for us we already possess. ... Do not fill our heads with your factitious needs and illusory virtues'.³⁹ Enlightenment seems to turn on itself as Diderot questions the very expectations and hopes which he had once invested in the project of the *Encyclopédie*: 'to assemble knowledge ... so that our descendants, in becoming better informed, may at the same time become more virtuous and content'.⁴⁰

GEORG FORSTER: THE REAL TAHITI

The traveller who makes his way around all four continents will nowhere find that charming tribe that dreamers promised him in every forest and every wilderness.⁴¹

At the time when Diderot worked on the review of Bougainville's book, Georg Forster was sailing towards Tahiti on board Cook's ship the *Resolution*. In many respects his account of the South Sea island reads like a 'Supplement to Cook's voyage', betraying the same fascination with 'the uncorrupted children of nature' and the same mood of disenchantment

Certainly, Marx and his followers were heirs to the Enlightenment project of emancipation. Louis Menand has stressed the qualitative breakthrough he achieved, however, along with Engels and subsequent Marxists. According to Menand, "Marx and Engels were philosophes of a second Enlightenment." Marxism gave a meaning to modernity. It said that, wittingly or not, the individual performs a role in a drama that has a shape and a goal, a trajectory, and that modernity will turn out to be just one act in that drama. Historical change is not arbitrary. It is generated by class conflict; it is faithful to an inner logic; it points toward an end, which is the establishment of the classless society. Enlightenment and Modernity - PowerPoint PPT Presentation. To view this presentation, you'll need to allow Flash. Click to allow Flash. After you enable Flash, refresh this page and the presentation should play. Loading PPT " Enlightenment and Modernity PowerPoint presentation | free to view - id: 7040a-ODk5N." The Enlightenment - The Enlightenment 3.06 Compare the influence of religion, social structure, and colonial export economies on North and South American societies. | PowerPoint PPT presentation | free to view. Enlightenment Test Bank - Title: Unit 6 Enlightenment Test Bank Author: Pat Vakos Last modified by: Local Admin Created Date: 11/11/2004 11:17:36 PM Document presentation format | PowerPoint PPT presentation | free to view. Why is it important for modernists to understand " What was its legacy and why is that advertisement. The Enlightenment and Modernity Mark Knights " Why is it important for modernists to understand the Enlightenment? " What was its legacy and why is that legacy a controversial one? " "Isms"™ " Is the Enlightenment a useful term, does it have a coherence, a common set of values? Is it useful as a set of ideas/ideals? Legacies: 1) Liberalism (toleration of opinion and of religions; separation of church and state; consensual government; free speech; free market (social progress through the m