

Review

The Enlightenment: An Idea and Its History, by J. C. D. Clark

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The idea of ‘the Enlightenment’, though prefigured in the German word *die Aufklärung*, was only used in English from the late nineteenth century, and did not denote what we currently take it to denote until the 1960s. The idea that there was a single ‘Enlightenment project’ emerged out of works by thinkers such as Cassirer, Adorno and Horkheimer, Habermas, Berlin, and was only named by Alasdair MacIntyre in 1981. There is a vast literature on ‘the Enlightenment’—we could instance, only in English, the two volumes of Peter Gay or the six volumes of Jonathan Israel or the many studies by Margaret Jacob, J. G. A. Pocock, John Robertson, James Schmidt, Anthony Pagden and others—but this literature is a literature which achieved escape velocity only in the last fifty or so years. To have shown this is the achievement of J. C. D. Clark in the book *The Enlightenment* published last year.

The argument is this. We, at some point in the last century took a word, reified it so it became a thing, and then wrote as if that thing had existed in the past. Whenever we speak of ‘the Enlightenment’, therefore, we are exerting the equivalent of an imperial sway over the past. According to Clark, there was no such thing as ‘the Enlightenment’ in the eighteenth century. Rather, ‘the Enlightenment’ is an artefact of the twentieth century. It is a consequence which went back in time to set a crown upon its purported cause: though, in fact, it also had to build this strange and awkward stuccoed Ozymandias out of a thousand potsherds and a few lightbulbs.

This argument is simple, decisive, and demands to be faced squarely by anyone who writes about the Enlightenment in the future.

Let me make some observations about the book. First, its structure. Every author, especially now, and, dare I say, especially historians—whose form of study is, to say the least, formless until they come to impose form on it—can be seen to be imposing structures on their books. Quentin Skinner’s recent book, *Liberty as Independence*, is divided into five parts, each of two chapters: which, to my mind, suggests a certain Shakespearian five-act desire to reach a satisfactory Fortinbrasian end. Richard Bourke’s recent book, *Hegel’s World Revolutions*, is, as one might expect, divided into three parts, each of three chapters. It is odd that a book so reluctant to consider Hegel systematically has a structure that apes the logic of its subject. Maurice Cowling’s *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England* was divided into two major parts, one entitled ‘Assaults’ and one entitled ‘Accommodations’, though this concealed a fourfold division of attitudes to Christianity in the modern world—defend it, destroy it, compromise with it, assim-

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ilate it. And J. C. D. Clark, who, long ago, was associated with Cowling at Peterhouse in Cambridge, seems to allude to Cowling's titles. He divides his own book into three parts, entitled 'Absences?', 'Aspirations?' and 'Achievements?', the question marks, I take it, suggesting a certain scepticism about the apparently Hegelian structure of the work. As that critic of Hegel, Kierkegaard, once wrote, we understand life backwards, but live it forwards: and it is part of Clark's claim that any Hegelian vision of history puts the cart before the horse, or, as Kierkegaard might put it, the palace before the hut: since it involves the retrospective building of castles in our imaginative picture of a former century which, simply, did not exist at the time. The stones were there, indeed, but we are the builders: we moderns.

A second observation about the book is that it is published in exemplary form. In one respect, things are as they should be: the footnotes are on the page. In another respect, there is an innovation, which I think should be adopted by all other historical writers. For the bibliography is not ordered, as is usual, without any logic—alphabetically—but logically: because it is ordered chronologically. This means that reading the bibliography is an exercise in its own right: not the usual exasperated scraping around for references of one's own, but itself a scholarly contribution to the subject. I once began an article I wrote with a short bibliographical list of works in chronological order, simply so the readers could see the lineage I wanted them to take for granted: and Clark has not only outdone me in this, but shown the way to everyone else: especially, the historians.

A third observation about the book has to be that it is massive and marvellous: more than five hundred pages, with bites of argument, extended lines of historical engagement, and much quotation. Clark, as we say nowadays, wants us to see the receipts. It is a scholarly book, so the ordinary reader would certainly find the framing of the book, and many of its asides, heavy and challenging. There are long sequences of reflections on lists of writers from the French eighteenth century, and the German and English nineteenth centuries—Owen, Hyndman, Morris Wells, Beer, Cole etc., and Tenneman, Schwegler, Ueberweg, Erdmann, Windelband etc. But there are stretches of the book which ascend to literature: not only in terms of interest and amusement, but also in terms of a wholly unusual irony. I particularly enjoyed some twenty pages on 'the English Coffee House' and *The Spectator* in chapter 1 (Clark exhibiting a rare gift of literary criticism that is almost unknown amongst historians); and some sixty pages on Locke and Hume in chapter 4. About Hume, Clark is sceptical: and this itself is ironic. As far as Clark is concerned, Hume was highly credulous. Anyone who doubts Clark's high achievement in this book should read pages 167 to 212, which I consider a sublime contemporary example of high literary art. Clark shows us how Hume ruled out final causes, sought a science of human nature, carried out experiments that were not experiments at all, since they were 'thought experiments', and never managed to indicate how a science of man could deal with even the slightest political difficulty. He saw conflicts of parties and of principles and so recommended—moderation. His *History of England*, as no one ever admits, wholly undermined the science of man outlined in his *Treatise* and the *Essays*: for it was a highly entertaining study of endless incidents: of, in Clark's words, 'rebellion, assassination, torture, arbitrary show trials and executions' (p. 197). What science could ever show how liberty came out of those? No one until now, not even Pocock, has ever suggested that enlightened history was, in fact, a highly ironical history. Clark's verdict: 'Hume was, as he wrote, discovering what he thought' (p. 201):

Hume's *History* was a major intellectual achievement; it had many strengths; it understandably achieved classic status; but taken as a whole, it did not promote an idea of any steady and coherent intellectual or social advance in any part of the British Isles or beyond (not even in Scotland) (p. 208).

I do not want to say more about Clark's book. It has to be read. Summary would be tedious, and, anyhow, obscure to anyone unwilling to read the book himself. And the argument is simple. But I would like to offer some further reflections because I do not think that we are forced only to contemplate enlightenment historically, as Clark does. We can also reflect on it philosophically: especially if we do so with some knowl-

edge of history. In fact, as Oakeshott always supposed, if we want to think about *anything* well, we have to operate in the awkward mixed medium of both historical and philosophical reflection: oils and watercolours. No science could possibly come of this; but we may at least be able to use language with more care.

What is enlightenment?

Its strict and original meaning is coming into the light. Its logic is binary. Its location is usually in the individual, though it may be experienced collectively, as when we come out of Plato's cave, or, like the Hopi people of North America, ascend into the 'fourth world'. Here enlightenment is conversion, *theosis*, nirvana etc: it is simply a standard way of referring to spiritual awakening. This first meaning is probably as old as language.

Its second meaning, by contrast, was not possible before the century of Grotius, Pascal and Bayle. It is negative, possibly atheist, religiously sceptical, also agnostic. Here enlightenment is used antithetically to its standard use. Here spiritual awakening, and religious orders and political systems they sanction, are associated together and considered to be 'dark', so that 'light' is found where they are dismissed or destroyed. This is the origin of enlightenment being associated with a break in tradition: where we leave behind the dark ages in order to make it possible to build a secular modern order. But the problem has always been how to reconcile the destructive activity of this second enlightenment with some constructive order. This leads us inevitably to the third meaning.

Its third, modern, and complete reified meaning is where 'enlightenment' becomes 'the Enlightenment', and is considered to be a historical transition affecting entire societies. It is collective, and it is positive without being religious or traditional. It involves the attempt to show that 'enlightenment' in the secular sense is not only destructive. If the second form of enlightenment is a negation, this is the negation of a negation: hence, a position. Now it requires a capital letter and the definite article.

But what sort of position is it? If we were inclined to be sceptical or historically scrupulous about terminology we would be reluctant to use the third reified form of the word. This is because the idea, again, as Clark insists, is not an eighteenth century idea at all, but a nineteenth century idea only made central to our concerns in the twentieth century. But although Clark's historical scepticism is essential, as a bringing to consciousness of exactly where to locate 'the Enlightenment' (in the ideas of the twentieth century as re-projected onto the ideas of the eighteenth century), it does not prevent us from admitting that, for better or worse, 'the Enlightenment' is now what we could call a reconstitutive idea, held in our time, that enables us to make sense of an earlier time. Indeed, the conviction that there *was* an Enlightenment is often constitutive of our simplicities, and certainly cannot easily be stripped out of our contemporary sense of history. For the moment, the term serves as a battleground. And though I admire Clark's historical restraint, I think it is inevitable that we will use the term 'enlightenment' to try to capture something of the nature of the recent past. Some say there is only one Enlightenment. Some say there are two, one better than the other. Others, like Pocock, have said that there are many. Against all these suggestions, I would say that there are three major positive forms that have been taken by enlightenment, or, if one prefers, the Enlightenment. Anyone interested in this suggestion may consult an article I wrote a few years ago (Alexander 2020). The argument is that enlightenment comes in three major, and incommensurable, forms.

First, it is manifest in the imposition of secular ideals on the world. This has involved criticism of religion, and even displacement of religion, but what has replaced religion has been of similar form if not content: it has required us to subscribe to certain conscious ideals. Instead of 'incarnation', for instance, 'revolution'. Instead of 'salvation', say, 'emancipation'. Here enlightenment is, significantly, about the imposition of enlightened ideals on the world. And these ideas have to be consciously held, and instantiated because believed. This is the blunt and simple meaning of enlightenment.

Second, by contrast, it is manifest in a process that has not been brought to consciousness except after the fact. It did not take the form of the imposition of conscious ideals, but rather took the form of certain contingent historical events which threw up emergent complexities that proved susceptible to explanation. Knowledge of this did not require the adoption of ideals. This sort of understanding was less about belief in enlightenment but retrospective knowledge that it had taken place. This is the sort of enlightenment we

find in Mandeville and Hume, and, much later on, in Hayek: an unintended enlightenment only understood after the fact.

Third, it is manifest neither as something that should happen—the imposition of ideals—or as something that has happened—the emergence of unsought but beneficial institutions—but as something that is happening. This enlightenment is not about convictions or knowledge, but about something lesser: mere opinions, or, rather, opinions in the plural. This is a distinctively political enlightenment, where enlightenment is sought in pragmatic compromises as a result of adversarial political encounters, in which rival positions are counterposed to each other. Here enlightenment is not about being right, or knowing the truth, but simply finding the best possible way in a situation in which disagreement exists. This is the sort of enlightenment that came last: the enlightenment of liberalism, of public disagreement and of justified opposition.

I think that these three forms of enlightenment are still paradigmatic. When we speak of ‘the Enlightenment’ what we mean is either: 1) the imposition of enlightened ideas, 2) the emergence of civil change through incremental, usually commercial, hence self-interested, activity, and 3) the establishment of institutional means by which arguments can hopefully be resolved. The first is completely conscious before the fact. The second is unconscious, at first, though brought to consciousness after the fact. The third attempts to make the best of the tension between these two types of consciousness, and tries to reconcile them, along with our other commitments, such as the traditions and institutions we do not entirely want to abandon, in such a way that this reconciliation is found through a political process.

Clark would probably consider this temporising. He does not want to think about enlightenment, even in this way. His book has a remarkably Plantagenet simplicity about it. He simply wants us to deal with ‘the Enlightenment’ the way Henry I dealt with Conan Pilatus at Rouen: throw it out of a tower window. His book is a great valiant and lordly work of negative judgement: and I recommend everyone read it.

REFERENCES

Alexander, James. 2020. Radical, Sceptical and Liberal Enlightenment. *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 14:257-283.