

Two Enlightenments

Professor Gertrude Himmelfarb FBA, *Professor Emeritus of History in the City University of New York*, delivered the 5th Elie Kedourie Lecture at the Academy on 15 May 2001. In the lecture, Professor Himmelfarb illustrated the differences between the French and British Enlightenments by focusing on the distinctive social ethics in the two traditions. In the edited extract below, she considers the influence of the French ‘philosophes’ upon the Revolution.

Members of the Kedourie family decided in 1993 to establish a Fund in memory of the distinguished modern historian and political philosopher, Elie Kedourie, elected a Fellow in 1975. The Fund’s principal purpose was to establish an annual lecture in modern history, preference being given to subjects in Middle Eastern and modern European history, reflecting Professor Kedourie’s own interests.

Even the most sympathetic commentator on the French Enlightenment cannot fail to observe the disdain for the masses on the part of the most influential *philosophes*. Voltaire used the terms ‘*le peuple*’ and ‘*la canaille*’ almost interchangeably. ‘As for the *canaille*,’ he told d’Alembert, ‘I have no concern with it; it will always remain *canaille*.’ And it would remain *canaille* because it was uneducable. The people would never have ‘the time and the capacity to instruct themselves; they will die of hunger before they become philosophers.’ ‘We have never pretended to enlighten shoemakers and servants; that is the job of the apostles.’

Le peuple could not be educated because they could not be enlightened; and they could not be enlightened because they were incapable of the kind of reason that the *philosophes* took to be the essence of enlightenment. They were mired instead in the prejudices, superstitions, and irrationalities of religion. This was the great enemy – *l’infâme*. Religion, Voltaire wrote to Diderot, ‘must be destroyed among respectable people and left to the *canaille* large and small, for whom it was made.’ Diderot agreed. The poor were ‘imbeciles’ in matters of religion, ‘too idiotic – bestial – too miserable, and too busy’ to enlighten themselves. They would never change; ‘the quantity of the *canaille* is just about always the same.’

The *Encyclopédie* reflected this disdain for the unenlightened. In Diderot’s article defining the purpose of the *Encyclopédie*, he made it clear that the common people had no part in the ‘philosophical age’ ushered in by his enterprise. ‘The general mass of mankind can neither follow nor comprehend this march of the human spirit.’ Everyone agrees, he wrote in the article on Natural Law, ‘that we must reason about all things, because man is not just an animal but an animal who reasons; that for every subject there are ways of discovering the truth; that whoever refuses to search for that truth renounces the very nature of man and should be treated by the rest of his species as a wild beast; and that once the truth has been discovered, whoever refuses to accept it is either insane or wicked and morally evil.’ In another

article he wrote: ‘Distrust the judgment of the *multitude* in matters of reasoning and philosophy; its voice is that of wickedness, stupidity, inhumanity, unreason and prejudice... The *multitude* is ignorant and stupefied. Distrust it in matters of morality; it is not capable of strong and generous actions; heroism is practically folly in its eyes.’



One cannot saddle the French Enlightenment with responsibility for all the deeds, or misdeeds, of the French Revolution. Yet there is no doubt that some of the principles and attitudes of the Enlightenment were carried over into the Revolution, the anti-clericalism, for example, resulting in the emancipation of Protestants and Jews and the legalization of civil marriage and divorce. By the same token, the *philosophes*’ indifference (or worse) to the poor may be reflected in the fact that, apart from the abolition of feudal privileges, little was done to alleviate the condition of the poor, and such measures as were attempted were notably unsuccessful. The workshops established by the *Comité de Mendicité* proved so unwieldy that they had to be suspended, and the laws regulating prices, wages, and the production of food were not only ineffectual but counterproductive. A few historians have made much of these initiatives, describing them as the forerunner of the modern welfare state, but even they admit the failure of these attempts. Most historians agree that the poor, bereft of the old religious charities and suffering from the dislocations and disruptions caused by the Revolution itself, were worse off at the end of the Revolution than at the beginning.

As with poverty, so with education: so far from improving the condition of the poor, the Revolution actually exacerbated it. The anti-clerical bias of the new regime meant that the old Church-run country schools were abolished with nothing replacing them. In 1791 Condorcet wrote a report on public education for the Assembly, including a proposal to establish a school in every village for children between the ages of nine and thirteen. But perhaps because of the outbreak of

war the following year, it was put off for discussion, so that for the first three years of the Revolution, the subject of education was never officially raised. In 1793 Robespierre presented a plan for compulsory education – in boarding schools, he specified, where the children would be protected from the influence of reactionary parents. Although this was passed by the Convention, its essential provisions were eliminated. Only after Thermidor did the Directory promulgate an educational code providing for a minimal elementary education to be paid for by parents.

It was not an historian but a modern philosopher who attributed to the Revolution a conscious, articulate, truly revolutionary social ethic and social agenda. For Hannah Arendt (*On Revolution*, 1963) this was the distinctive feature of the French Revolution and its bequest to all later revolutions. More than reason, more than liberty, she maintained, it was the ‘social question’ that defined the Revolution; this was the ‘necessity’ that drove it forward and eventually sent it to its doom: ‘When they [the poor] appeared on the scene of politics, necessity appeared with them ...; freedom had to be surrendered to necessity, to the urgency of the life process itself.’ ‘*Le peuple*,’ the key words in the Revolution, referred to the ‘low people,’ *les malheureux*, *les misérables*. It was for the sake of these people that Robespierre, the disciple of Rousseau and the agent of this social revolution, abandoned the Rights of Man for the Rights of the Sans-Culottes and sacrificed the ‘despotism of liberty’ to the ‘welfare of the people.’ This ‘passion for compassion,’ first articulated by Rousseau and carried out by Robespierre, had no room for law or government, for liberty or even reason. Nor did it have any patience with the negotiation, persuasion, and compromise required in the political process. Heeding only the voice of ‘necessity, the urgent needs of the people,’ compassion called for immediate and direct action. Thus it created the Terror that was the doom of the Revolution.

This is a moving and dramatic account of the Revolution, but a fanciful one. The Revolution did not turn into a social revolution and did not fail because of the attempt to do that. The motif of Robespierre’s government was not the welfare of the people but ‘public safety,’ the safety of the regime. The Republic of Virtue celebrated not the virtue of compassion but that of reason – an abstract, elevated reason that denigrated the practical reason of ordinary people. Its profession

of equality was similarly abstract, conferring no real, existential equality upon the populace. ‘*Le peuple*,’ in whose name Robespierre established the Republic, was not the people in any ordinary sense, not even the poor, still less *les misérables*, but a singular, abstract ‘people’ represented by an appropriately singular and abstract ‘general will.’ Robespierre might have been quoting Rousseau when he described the people: ‘The people is good, patient, and generous.... The interest, the desire of the people is that of nature, humanity, and the general welfare.... The people is always worth more than individuals.... The people is sublime, but individuals are weak.’

This ‘people’ required not education in the usual sense (literacy), not even reformation in the usual sense (an alleviation of abuses and grievances), but nothing less than ‘regeneration.’ It was in the name of regeneration that Robespierre defended his proposal for boarding schools: ‘I am convinced of the necessity of bringing about a complete regeneration, and, if I may express myself so, of creating a new people.’ The historian Mona Ozouf sees the idea of ‘regeneration’ as a key concept of revolutionary discourse, connoting ‘nothing less than the creation of a “new people”.’ That term, she points out, had often been invoked but by no one so fervently as Rousseau, which is ‘one of the reasons why the Revolution was all his from the beginning.’

In Britain, where the ‘passion for compassion’ (in Hannah Arendt’s memorable phrase) first arose, it took the form not of regeneration but of melioration. Secular and religious institutions, civil society and the state, public relief and private charity complemented and co-operated with each other. Above all, there was no *Kulturkampf* to distract and divide the country, pitting the past against the future, creating an unbridgeable divide between reason and religion, and making social reform hostage to anti-religious passion. The British Enlightenment, one might say, was latitudinarian, compatible with a large spectrum of belief and disbelief (just as Wesleyanism itself was compatible with both Anglicanism and Dissent). A book on the British Enlightenment could never bear the subtitle that Peter Gay gave to the first volume of his work, ‘The Rise of Modern Paganism.’ Even Hume, sceptical in matters of faith and fearful of religious zealotry, was a staunch supporter of the established church, if only as a corrective to zealotry. And Gibbon, contrary to the popular view, was not hostile to Christianity as such; it was as a Protestant distressed by what he

took to be the perversions of the original faith of the gospels that he criticized the church in antiquity.

This may be the most striking contrast between the two Enlightenments. As there had been no Reformation in France, so there was no equivalent to Methodism, no religious revival to animate the established church or provide a religious alternative to it, and thus no opportunity to enlist religion in humanitarian causes. It is often said that it was the identification of the absolute monarchy with the Catholic Church that made the *philosophes* so unremittingly hostile to Catholicism in particular and to religion in general. But it was also their reverence for reason that made them antagonistic to everything and everyone redolent of religion. They had no sympathy with *les misérables* because they had no respect for those so unenlightened as to be religious. To be religious was to be wanting in reason, thus deficient as a human being. This was the ultimate expression of rationalism as the *philosophes* understood it: a rejection not only of institutional religion, not only of religion per se, but of the religious conception of man – man who is truly human simply by virtue of being born in the image of God.

In this sense, the British, even the most secular of them and even the least democratic of them, were more egalitarian than the French. They were not about to admit the lower classes into the polity, but they did not deny their essential humanity. In

France, Peter Gay explains, the campaign to abolish torture, like that to abolish the Jesuits or to spread technological knowledge, was part of 'the struggle to impose man's rational will on the environment.' The motive for reform was quite different in England. There the campaign to reform prisons, or abolish the slave trade, or promote education, was motivated not by 'rational will' but by humanitarian zeal, by compassion rather than reason.

Tocqueville was speaking of the French revolutionaries – but he might have been of the *philosophes* – when he said that their 'salient characteristic' was a loss of faith that upset their 'mental equilibrium.' The vacuum in their soul was promptly filled by the ideal of the perfectibility of man. 'They had a fanatical faith in their vocation – that of transforming the social system, root and branch, and regenerating the whole human race.' They adored the human intellect and had supreme confidence in its power to transform laws, institutions, and customs. But the intellect they adored was only their own. 'I could mention several,' Tocqueville sardonically observed, 'who despised the public almost as heartily as they despised the Deity.' This was very different, he added, from the respect shown by Englishmen and Americans for the opinions of the majority of their countrymen. 'Their intellect is proud and self-reliant, but never insolent; and it has led to liberty, while ours has done little but invent new forms of servitude.'