

EDITORIAL



One major preoccupation of recent critical debates has been the attempt at a philosophical definition of the present through an account of our relations to the Enlightenment. Whether for or against 'modernity', contributors to these debates have tended to identify modernity with the Enlightenment, and to make their respective philosophical stands on this basis. Thus, it is the Enlightenment heritage of Kant that Habermas and his supporters defend against post-war French appropriations of a late nineteenth and early twentieth century German tradition of counter-Enlightenment. While it is Habermas's maintenance of allegedly out-dated, philosophically and politically discredited, 'universal' rational norms that is the object of his opponents' derision. Either way, for modernists, postmodernists and neo-conservatives alike, the Enlightenment has been the focal point of a process of historical self-definition that has shaped the terrain upon which a whole series of issues has come to be discussed.

The contribution of recent feminist theory to this process has been crucial. Taking up the post-Nietzschean critique of Enlightenment reason as a narrow, one-sided, instrumental form (with its freedoms based only in a series of inner and outer oppressions), feminists have both extended this argument to include hitherto neglected areas of social life and given existing variants a distinctively new, gendered dimension.

Underlying much of this work is a series of simple yet powerful equations: between the Enlightenment as a historical phenomenon and as a philosophical principle, between this principle and the merely instrumental use of reason, and between instrumental reason and masculinity. In this way, a whole period of European history falls foul of a decisive, indeed devastating, gender critique. Such theory locates itself at the cutting edge of a modernist postmodernism that would relegate the modernity of the Enlightenment to the status of a patriarchal tradition, systematically and oppressively misrecognising itself as emancipation.

But what, then, of the history of feminism itself during this period, and its relations to contemporary feminist critique? Must it too be dismissed as a patriarchal form? In pursuit of an answer to this question, Pauline Johnson's essay in this issue sets out to dismantle the simplifications underlying the postmodernist version of recent feminist thought. The opposition of feminism to Enlightenment, she argues, involves a misinterpretation of the Enlightenment,

both historically and philosophically. Reducing a dynamic and continuing process of self-criticism to a set of fixed principles, it prevents us from understanding both the history and the current state of feminism. Illustrating her argument with a comparison between Mary Astell's seventeenth century rationalist feminism and Mary Wollstonecraft's more radical, yet still deeply ambivalent, late eighteenth century Enlightenment feminism, she interprets the feminist critique of Enlightenment as a part of Enlightenment's on-going self-development, rather than its rejection.

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Apart from Habermas, Foucault is probably the thinker whose work has been most central to the debate over the philosophical definition of the present, in a number of ways: as a critical historian of institutions of Enlightenment (the asylum, the prison, the factory, the barracks, the school); as the theoretician of a 'post-Enlightenment' epistemology, in his charting of the mutual imbrication of power and knowledge in successive 'discursive formations'; and as the promoter (alongside feminism) of a new emphasis on questions of sexuality and the body in both epistemological and political debates. In addition, several themes specific to his later work have recently received renewed attention. Most notably, there is his redefinition of Enlightenment as a 'philosophical ethos' (a position with intriguing affinities to the one outlined here by Johnson, demonstrating the possibility of a rapprochement with the Habermasians), and the reappearance in his writings of a broadly Kantian concept of the self, developed in the context of a re-examination of Greco-Roman culture.

Central to any discussion of this 'Return to the Subject in Late Foucault' (the title of an article by Peter Dews in *Radical Philosophy* 51) is the issue of how it affects the problems of normativity inherent in his earlier theory of power. The article we publish here by Andrew Thacker explores this question from the standpoint of the introduction into Foucault's final work (*The History of Sexuality*) of the notion of an 'aesthetics of existence'. Tracing the 'semantic slipperiness' of Foucault's use of the term 'aesthetic', Thacker argues that it oscillates between two rather different positions: the advocacy of some kind of positive 'aestheticisation of everyday life', in the manner of the historical avant-garde, and a more cautious problematisation of the role of the aesthetic in social life, that would provide a standpoint for its utopian critique. In running the two

together in the context of his historical inquiries, it is suggested, Foucault courts the danger of a merely backward-looking Utopianism.

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If gender has replaced class as the focal point of much of the literature that has been concerned to establish a critical distance between the Enlightenment and the present, an equally, if not more, powerful motive for such distancing is to be found in the history of European colonialism. Yet here, more than anywhere else, remembering that history, bringing it to light, and tracing its continuing effects within the present, is an essential preliminary task.

Few books have been more successful in this regard, and more productive in stimulating subsequent enquiry, than Edward Said's *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, first published in 1978. Said's work has been exemplary, not only in its interdisciplinarity (at the crossroads of literature, politics and critical theory), but in placing the cultural consequences of colonialism centre-stage in any discussion about how literature works politically. Yet Said's relationship to Enlightenment humanism is far from being a dismissive one. Rather, as he insists in the interview we publish here, for him humanism embodies reserves of critical possibilities that must be preserved

against the retreat into reassertions of religious and ethnic particularity. In a wide-ranging discussion that spans questions about the theoretical framework of *Orientalism*, its relation to feminism, poststructuralism and the debate about the canon in the US academy, to Palestinian politics and the Gulf War, Said outlines and defends his conception of what it means to be a critical intellectual today.

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There would seem to be no more chilling reminder of the potential consequences of the reassertion of ethnic particularities than the horrendous, bloody conflicts that have attended the break-up of the state of Yugoslavia. Yet the concept of ethnic conflict at work here remains largely unexamined. In what sense, precisely, are these specifically 'ethnic' conflicts – as opposed to disputes fueled by a variety of social, political, and cultural contradictions? And what has been the role of the so-called 'international community' in fostering such perceptions? In her contribution to our Commentary section, Cornelia Sorabji raises these questions with reference to the situation in Bosnia. Delineating the different factors that lie behind recent transformations of 'Bosnian identities', she lays bare some of the complexities masked by the simple, and often self-serving, talk about 'ethnicity' in the West.

Peter Osborne

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