Enlightenment as Concept and Context

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The *Ideas in Context* series has served the Enlightenment well. Roughly a quarter of the first hundred books in the series deal (at least in part) with the period, including studies of Locke (Tully, Carey, Dawson), Rousseau (Rosenblatt), Smith (Forman-Barzilai), Mandeville (Goldsmith and Hundert), Thomasius (Hunter), the reception of Hobbes (Parkin), and a now-classic account of the ideological origins of the French Revolution (Baker).[1] Of no less significance are broader-gauged examinations of the "common good" (Miller), "luxury" (Berry), and "empire" (Brown, Armitage), as well

[1] On Locke: James Tully, *An Approach to Political Philosophy: Locke in Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Daniel Carey, *Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson: Contesting Diversity in the Enlightenment and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Hannah Dawson, *Locke, Language and Early-Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). On Rousseau: Helena Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva: From the First Discourse to the Social Contract, 1749–1762* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). On Smith: Fonna Forman-Barzilai, *Adam Smith and the Circles of Sympathy: Cosmopolitanism and Moral Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). On Mandeville: M. M. Goldsmith, *Private Vices, Public Benefits: Bernard Mandeville's Social and Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); E. J. Hundert, *The Enlightenment's "Fable": Bernard Mandeville and the Discovery of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). On Thomasius: Ian Hunter, *The Secularisation of the Confessional State: The Political Thought of Christian Thomasius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). On Hobbes: Jon Parkin, *Taming the Leviathan: The Reception of the Political and Religious Ideas of Thomas Hobbes in England 1640–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). On the ideological origins of the French Revolution: Keith Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

as explorations of the Enlightenment's relationship to Rational Dissenters (Haakonssen) and Judaism (Sutcliffe) and its debts to theories of natural law (Hochstrasser and Hunter).[2] The nexus of commerce, politics, and history has also been a major concern of the series (Pocock, Tribe, Winch, Force, Robertson).[3] But a tally of this sort only begins to register the significance of Ideas in Context for studies of the Enlightenment. As might be expected from a series ably shepherded by Quentin Skinner, significant methodological questions have also come to the fore.

According to the statement that stands at the front of each volume, the goal of the series is to trace "the emergence of intellectual traditions and of related new disciplines" by setting the "procedures, aims, and vocabularies" generated by these traditions and disciplines in the context of the "ideas and institutions" in which they developed. If the way in which this setting of ideas in contexts was to be effected might not have been entirely clear from the programmatic essay in the inaugural volume (though jointly signed by Skinner, Jerome Schneewind, and Richard Rorty, it was, as Richard Fisher has recently explained, "largely written" by Rorty and "tonally rather different to much of what has followed"),[4] such matters would be

[2] On the "common good": Peter N. Miller, *Defining the Common Good: Empire, Religion and Philosophy in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). On "luxury": Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). On Empire: Stewart J. Brown, ed., *William Robertson and the Expansion of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). On Rational Dissenters: Knud Haakonssen, ed., *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). On Judaism: Adam Sutcliffe, *Judaism and Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). On natural law: T. J. Hochstrasser, *Natural Law Theories in the Early Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Ian Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[3] J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Keith Tribe, *Strategies of Economic Order: German Economic Discourse, 1750–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750–1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and Donald Winch, *Wealth and Life: Essays on the Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1848–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Pierre Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith: A Genealogy of Economic Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples, 1680–1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[4] Richard Fisher, " 'How to Do Things with Books': Quentin Skinner and the Dissemination of Ideas," *History of European Ideas* 35 (2009): 277–78.

clarified considerably by the second volume in the series, J. G. A. Pocock's *Virtue, Commerce, and History*. Reviewing recent developments in the history of political thought, Pocock observed that the "history of thought (and even more sharply 'of ideas')" was being supplanted by a "history of speech" or a "history of discourse."[5] An overview of what such a history might look like quickly followed: *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, a volume tracing the various discourses in which political thought had been conducted from the Renaissance to the dawn of the nineteenth century.[6] In his contribution to the volume, Pocock observed that the ability to say anything presupposed "a language to say it in," which suggested that the relationship of ideas to contexts might be conceived along the lines of that between *parole* and *langue*.[7] While the volumes that followed were not limited to products of what came to be called the "Cambridge School" (and while not all of those associated with the "Cambridge School" embraced the analogy Pocock was proposing), a concern with the discursive context in which arguments were conducted has implications for accounts of the Enlightenment.

"Enlightenment" can be used both to designate a particular historical period (i.e., "the Enlightenment") and to refer to a process (i.e., "enlightenment") that, though associated with certain historical periods, is captive to none of them. Drawing out the implications of the "history of discourse" that Pocock, Skinner, and their colleagues were developing, "the Enlightenment"—as a discursive context in which things could be said (and, hence, done)—might be seen as a sort of *langue*, while "enlightenment" might be understood as encompassing a variety of activities, the bulk of them presumably occurring within the discursive context known as "the Enlightenment." Thinking about the Enlightenment in this way stands in sharp contrast both to Ernst Cassirer's attempt to grasp "its conceptual origins" and "underlying principle" and to Peter Gay's identification of it with the "little flock of *philosophes*" who, though adhering to no single party line, nevertheless constituted the "party of humanity."[8] Against Cassirer (and, momentarily, in company with Gay), an attention to texts and discursive

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[5] Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History*, 1–2.
[6] Anthony Pagden, ed., *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
[7] Pocock, "The Concept of a Language and the *métier d'historien*: Some Considerations on Practice," in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, 22.
[8] Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), v; Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (New York: Knopf, 1966), 1:3–8.

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contexts shifted the focus from the Hegelian "phenomenology of the philo-
sophical spirit" Cassirer was offering to a consideration of the specific
actors and the historical contexts in which they were engaged. But, against
Gay, the Enlightenment that began to come into focus reached beyond the
circle of *philosophes*. As early as *Virtue, Commerce, and History* Pocock
noted that Gibbon and Burke were united by a common opposition to the
"fanaticism of natural right" that Gibbon sensed in Priestley and Burke saw
in Price.[9] Since the Enlightenment is generally viewed as wary of fanaticism,
this suggested that there could be what Pocock termed a "Magisterial
Enlightenment" as well as a "radical" one, with the former "owing quite
as much to prelates as to *philosophes*."[10] Thus began a proliferation of
Enlightenments that, by the second volume of *Barbarism and Religion*, had
grown to include Arminian, Cartesian, Neapolitan, Newtonian, Parisian,
Protestant, and other species.[11] While Pocock had initially adhered to the
convention of situating Gibbon within "the world view of the late Enlight-
enment," he soon concluded that, since the term "enlightenment" was "a
word or signifier, and not a single or unifiable phenomenon which it consis-
tently signifies," it might be best to dispense with the definite article alto-
gether.[12]

Approaches to the history of ideas that followed Cassirer's lead have
the luxury of treating "the Enlightenment" as the sort of entity that—like
other collective subjects—could possess a "worldview." A history of dis-
courses operates under more rigorous constraints: if "the Enlightenment"
was to serve as a discursive context, then—in addition to the discourses of
"civic humanism" or "natural law"—there would have to be a recognizable
"discourse of the Enlightenment." But what the volumes in Ideas in Con-
text that dealt with the Enlightenment revealed looked less like a distinctive
langue and more like a variety of pidgins and creoles, playing off other,
more familiar, discourses. M. M. Goldsmith showed how Mandeville had
taken aim at the conventions of civic humanism and E. J. Hundert explored
the difficulties *The Fable of the Bees* posed for representatives of both the
Scottish and the French Enlightenments. Keith Baker began his account of
the ideological origins of the French Revolution with a withering attack on
the tendency to treat "the Enlightenment" and "the Revolution" as if they

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[9] Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History*, 155.
[10] Ibid., 200.
[11] J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
1999).
[12] J. G. A. Pocock, "Historiography and Enlightenment: A View of Their History," *Mod-
ern Intellectual History* 5 (2008): 83.

were two monolithic entities that (somehow or other) had to be linked and proceeded to document the various discourses—judicial, political, and administrative—available to the French revolutionaries.[13] Adam Sutcliffe's *Judaism and Enlightenment* rejected the tendency to draw "easy oppositions" between "the Enlightenment" and its alleged "defining 'Other' "[14] in favor of an examination of the ways in which Judaism was viewed by Enlightenment thinkers as both "the essence of unenlightened thought" and as "the kernel of their own positive ideals."[15] Pursuing the implications of Richard Tuck's discussion of the impact of natural rights theories on European political thought, T. J. Hochstrasser emphasized the importance of the "histories of morality" that prefaced works by natural law theorists in shaping the "early Enlightenment" in German-speaking Europe.[16] And Knud Haakonssen closed his introduction to *Enlightenment and Religion*—a collection of articles on the impact of "rational dissent" in eighteenth-century England—by noting that while "the religious mind was tempted into Enlightenment, . . . the enlightened mind exceeded itself and the excess was religious."[17]

Reviewing Haakonssen's volume, J. C. D. Clark wondered whether "The Enlightenment, as a historical concept, is in danger of losing its cohesion."[18] The emancipatory, secularizing Enlightenment—that "leading agent in what Gay called 'the pursuit of modernity' "—had been demoted to one among a number of diverging Enlightenments. The demise of "the Enlightenment" was not particularly troubling for Clark, who dismissed the notion as one of those "nineteenth-century terms of historical art" that, as we better understand early modern thought and its "religious preoccupations," was destined to "fall noiselessly away."[19] In contrast, *The Case for the Enlightenment*—John Robertson's ambitious comparative study of developments in Scotland and Naples between 1680 and 1760— maintained that "the Enlightenment" was defined by "a core of original thinking" involving a "systematic study of the understanding, the passions,

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[13] Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution*, 18–27.
[14] Sutcliffe, *Judaism and Enlightenment*, 5.
[15] Ibid., 254.
[16] Richard Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories: Their Origin and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); and Tuck, "The 'Modern' Theory of Natural Law," in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 99–119.
[17] Haakonssen, *Enlightenment and Religion*, 11.
[18] J. C. D. Clark, "Review of *Enlightenment and Religion*, [ed.] by Knud Haakonssen," *The American Historical Review* 103 (1998): 176.
[19] Ibid., 177.

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and the process of moral judgment" that fused "mental and moral philoso-
phy in a single science" and developed a sophisticated political economy
that yielded an account of the historical progress "from 'barbarism' to
'refinement' or 'civilization.'"[20] Robertson granted that making a "case for
the Enlightenment" along these lines necessitated abandoning much of
what previously had been associated with the period. Treating the Enlight-
enment as chiefly concerned with "human society and the physical and
moral well-being of individuals" required both the exclusion of other "orig-
inal lines of thought" (e.g., the developments in mathematics and the natu-
ral sciences?) and the narrowing of "its possible chronological extent" to
"broadly between the 1740s and the 1790s."[21] Some geographical trim-
ming was also required: France, Germany, Italy, and Scotland were part
of it, while England (where "modernity pre-empted Enlightenment") was
not—although Gibbon, Price, Priestley, Bentham, Wollstonecraft, and God-
win might be regarded members of a "late Enlightenment whose leaders
were Condorcet and Gaetano Filangieri."[22] But they were already bumping
up against the end date of an Enlightenment whose "horizons" did not
extend beyond "the world of the *ancien régime*."[23]

For Robertson, the "most powerful scholarly exponent" of the case
against "*the* Enlightenment" was J. G. A. Pocock, whose review of *The
Case for the Enlightenment* was appreciative of Robertson's work on Scot-
land and Naples but still doubted whether this (or, for that matter, any
other) Enlightenment "deserves to be exclusively described as 'the Enlight-
enment.'"[24] It is a testimony to the fecundity of Ideas in Context as a breed-
ing ground for diverging assessments of what the Enlightenment involved
that, four years before Robertson made his case for "the Enlightenment," a
compelling brief had been filed against the idea of a unitary Enlightenment:
Ian Hunter's *Rival Enlightenments*, a study of conflicting understandings
of enlightenment in late-seventeen and early eighteenth-century Germany.
Where Robertson saw himself as protecting an Enlightenment already
"beleaguered" by the attacks of postmodernist critics from further damage
at the hands of historians eager to chop it into ever smaller pieces,[25] Hunter
took aim at an allegedly "dominant form of intellectual history" that—
despite its "recognition of different national, cultural, and religious enlight-
enments"—remained stubbornly "committed to the reality of a single

[20] Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*, 29.
[21] Ibid., 41.
[22] Ibid., 42–43.
[23] Ibid., 43.
[24] Pocock, "Historiography and Enlightenment," 84–85.
[25] Ibid., 1–2.

process or project of Enlightenment."[26] In this tradition, any concessions in the direction of the recognition of a plurality of enlightenments were subsequently revoked by a narrative that, in good Hegelian fashion, wound up treating these enlightenments as preliminary stages on the way to a final, all-embracing vision. Hunter, in contrast, argued that there had been an ongoing struggle between a "civil enlightenment" that, drawing on an avowedly eclectic set of approaches, bolstered the claims of a state that sought to expel religious concerns from politics and a "metaphysical" conception of enlightenment that, through a rational interpretation of traditional Christian doctrines, constructed a new public theology in which "the locus of salvation was metaphysics itself."[27] Pufendorf and Thomasius were the leading representatives of Hunter's "civil enlightenment," while Leibniz and Kant were main figures of the rival (and, ultimately, victorious "metaphysical enlightenment"). In the intellectual history written by the metaphysical enlighteners, Pufendorf and Thomasius either vanished or, at most, were consigned to minor roles in an "early Enlightenment" destined to be absorbed in the triumphant "Kantian *Aufhebung*."[28]

Quentin Skinner's discussion of the relationship of words and concepts in his contribution to the eleventh volume in the series[29] helps clarify what is at stake in the diverging accounts of "enlightenment" (a word that, it would appear, points to a number of different concepts) that Ideas in Context seems to have bred.[30] He observes that it is possible to grasp a concept without necessarily understanding how to apply certain terms associated with it. To cite his example: while Milton's aspiration towards "things unattempted yet in prose and rhyme" squares with the current concept of "originality," a search for Milton's use of this particular term is of little use in understanding his stance towards the concept in question, since the word did not enter the language until well after his death. It also is possible to know how to apply a term but not be able to grasp the concept it specifies: Skinner considers the possibility of a community of language users consistently employing such terms as "being" or "infinity" even though there could be "no concept which answers to any of their agreed usages."[31] For

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[26] Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments*, 1.
[27] Ibid., 26.
[28] Ibid., 28, 271, 202–9.
[29] Terence Ball, James Farr, and Russell L. Hanson, eds., *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
[30] For a revised version of the article see, Skinner, *Visions of Politics: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 158–74.
[31] Ibid., 7–8.

Skinner, "the surest sign that a group in society has entered into self-conscious possession of a new concept is that a corresponding vocabulary will be developed, a vocabulary which can then be used to pick out and discuss the concept with consistency."[32]

To the extent that the volumes in Ideas in Context dealing with "the Enlightenment" are at all representative, it would appear that the community of historians of ideas lacks a vocabulary that would enable them, with any consistency, to pick out and discuss what does and does not count as part of the Enlightenment. But disagreements about the scope of "enlightenment" are, however, hardly unique to historians of ideas: the absence of a shared vocabulary for designating just what "enlightenment" was supposed to involve can be found during the period now known as "the Enlightenment." As Hunter demonstrates, those who were engaged in efforts at "civil enlightenment" operated with a set of concepts that diverged markedly from those of their "metaphysical" rivals (consider, for example, their focus on "offices" as rather than "virtues").[33] It is also worth remembering that Kant's attempt to answer the question "What is enlightenment?" was prompted by the *inability* of a society of "Friends of Enlightenment" to reach an agreement on just what "enlightenment" actually involved.[34]

These eighteenth-century disagreements about the concept of "enlightenment" are instances of the sorts of disputes regarding the use of "appraisive" terms that Skinner's account of conceptual change sought to catalogue. He suggests that, if we are to understand what is going on in arguments about terms like "courageous," we will need to understand the "nature and range" of the criteria that govern the application of these terms, the set of circumstances in which they can be used, and the "range of attitudes" they can express. For much of the eighteenth century, "enlightened" and "enlightenment" (and their equivalents in other languages) would appear to be terms that generally signaled approval: it is hard to say bad things about light.[35] But while it might generally have been granted that "enlightenment" was a good thing, there was considerable debate over what truly counts as "enlightenment." For this reason, eighteenth-century attempts at making "the case for enlightenment" often involved making

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[32] Ibid., 8.
[33] Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments*, 166.
[34] See my "Misunderstanding the Question: 'What Is Enlightenment?': Venturi, Habermas, and Foucault," *History of European Ideas* 37 (2011): 43–52.
[35] For an exception, see Patritius Fast, *Austellungen über die Vorstellung an Se. pabstliche Heiligkeit Pius VI* (Vienna: Erzbischoflichenkur, 1782), 45–46.

cases *against* various forms of "false enlightenment."[36] Over the course of the nineteenth century, "enlightenment" began to be used to refer to a historical period as well as to an activity and this historical period could, in turn, be associated with either laudable or deplorable activities. As a result, "enlightenment" came to be used to designate two distinct, albeit sometimes related concepts, one of them the "term of historical art" that Clark would gladly see "fall noiselessly away," the other the site of noisy battles involving reason, faith, science, progress, and other matters that rage down to the present.

There is a certain ambiguity in the case that Robertson is concerned with making. He argues that the "advent of Enlightenment in Naples and in Scotland" was marked by "the emergence of political economy as a systematic explanation of economic behavior and guide to policy, on the basis of more or less explicitly Epicurean assumptions about human nature."[37] "It was," he argues, "in these terms that the case for Enlightenment was made in the two countries."[38] But making a "case for Enlightenment" in eighteenth-century Scotland or Naples is, of course, not the same thing as making a "case for the Enlightenment" at the start of the twenty-first century against historians who are inclined to question the utility of "the Enlightenment" as an instrument for historical inquiry. Nor is it apparent how shoring up this embattled term of the historian's art does much to strengthen the cause of "enlightenment" against the onslaught of aging postmodernists and excitable cultural conservatives. One of the difficulties of making a case for either enlightenment or the Enlightenment is that it is hardly obvious which particular tribunal has the authority to hear it. Driving that point home may be one of the more salutary achievements of the first hundred volumes of Ideas in Context.

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[36] Werner *Schneiders, Die Wahre Aufklärung* (Freiburg: Alber, 1974). For a recent discussion of the persistence of this contrast, see Richard Schaefer, "True and False Enlightenment: German Scholars and the Discourse of Catholicism in the Nineteenth Century," *The Catholic Historical Review* 97 (2011): 24–45.
[37] Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*, 325.
[38] Ibid., 326.