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Author(s): William B. Warner

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William B. Warner
University of California–Santa Barbara

Over the past 60 years, scholars have developed different answers to Immanuel Kant's famous question, "What is Enlightenment?" The Enlightenment has been understood as a distinct epoch in the history of ideas; as the period where new science and new technologies achieved their distinctive modern influence; as an event in the history of media and mediation; as the first modern period to embrace skeptical critique as a settled intellectual stance; as the time when the modern public sphere emerged to challenge political absolutism; as the first epoch to grasp its own historicity and undertake a "history of the present." In *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago, 2010), a short, lucid, and engaging book, Dan Edelstein offers an alternative account, one that pivots on the power of an influential narrative of Enlightenment. Against the recent tendency to understand Enlightenment as plural in its variety, pan-European in its origin, and as a response to the wars of religion, Edelstein's book offers an Enlightenment that is singular, secular, and made in Paris. From its origin in France, the Enlightenment then undergoes diffusion and adaptation by the many countries that accepted French hegemony and recognized Paris as the cultural capital of Europe.

There are several different ways Edelstein makes this account plausible. First, for Edelstein, the Enlightenment is a narrative about the enlightenment of society as a new historical fact. The narrative depends upon the development of "a new idea of society" and an interpretation of "society as becoming enlightened" (22, 23). The simplicity of this thesis can make it difficult to grasp. The narrative offers a way to understand this homogeneous, substantive, civil society as the new subject of history. Second, Edelstein does not attribute this idea to one or another of the *philosophes*. Instead, the idea of civil society as the subject of history that had now arrived at a state of steady improvement was catalyzed by a debate within the French academy, which started in 1687, between "the Moderns" and "the Ancients." The Moderns argued that both the contemporary literature of the "Grand siècle" of Louis XIV and the "New Science" of

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the modern epoch were superior to the literature and science of classical Greece and Rome. In response, the Ancients acknowledged modern scientific achievement but insisted upon valuing and translating into the contemporary period the science and the literature of the classical period as it had been made available by the humanistic scholarship of the previous two centuries. Edelstein is at his most cogent in describing how the dialectical exchange between these two interrelated positions became the common sense of the French Enlightenment and helped to forge a new self-consciousness about modernity as distinct from every previous period. Finally, against the cliché notion that the Enlightenment is most centrally about contesting all forms of knowledge and authority, Edelstein shows how the narrative of enlightenment first developed by academicians like the Abbé Jean-Baptiste Dubos (the real hero of this book) allowed later French *philosophes* to forge productive alliances with institutions like the university, the absolutist state, and even the official agencies of censorship.

This book offers a valuable critical revision of Enlightenment. It helps us to understand one of the oft-remarked features of the period called the Enlightenment: unlike other period designators—like Medieval, Renaissance, or even Romantic—the Enlightenment was a self-designation. By emphasizing that Enlightenment resulted from a self-conscious act of historical narrative, Edelstein makes an appealing, though flawed, case for the singularity of Enlightenment, against the partisans of multiple, distinct but analogous Enlightenments. The narrative of Enlightenment might circulate and travel and be adapted throughout Europe and America, but, according to Edelstein, it started in one place and time: during the academic French debate between the Ancients and Moderns. This account allows Enlightenment to pivot upon a specific shared self-understanding of the *philosophe*: "What mattered was that they perceived themselves to be thinking and acting in 'reasonable,' 'philosophical,' and 'enlightened' ways in the present" (74). This formulation makes Enlightenment a shared performative and finally a literary invention. Thus, Edelstein notes that this Enlightenment-that-is-French is promulgated not primarily as philosophy by difficult writers (like Kant) but within accessible literary genres like poetry, the periodical essay, comedy, novels, salon reviews, encyclopedia entries, and so on.

This book attempts a restoration of an earlier version of Enlightenment. Thus, Edelstein mentions Peter Gay's "monumental study of Enlightenment" (4)[1] with favor, and in his introduction he affirms that, in spite of notable differences, Gay's "spirit . . . informs these pages" (5). There are several ways in which Edelstein's book returns us to an earlier understanding of Enlightenment. First, this book reaffirms the centrality of France, with academicians at the origin of the Enlightenment narrative and the later French *philosophe* (Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Diderot) as strong though various and nuanced proponents of that narrative. Secondly, by focusing upon the discourses of the elites, Edelstein looks away from the direct or indirect roles of marginal groups (women,

the semi-literate, creoles, indigenous others, etc.) in Enlightenment. Finally, at its core, this book, like many of the classic accounts of Enlightenment, offers a new form of intellectual history. For at the center of the "narrative of the Enlightenment" is an *idea* of civil society as becoming enlightened.

This intellectual history erases and demotes a good deal. Thus Edelstein quite explicitly explains away the influence of England (and a figure like John Locke) and the Dutch Republic (and a figure like Baruch Spinoza) upon the Frenchmen who promulgate the narrative of Enlightenment. This skews Edelstein's picture of the Enlightenment. Thus the French Enlightenment is often admired for its cosmopolitanism, which assumes the value of a two-way traffic in ideas, science, and culture. There is plenty of evidence for this in the archive of the French Enlightenment, from Voltaire's celebration of English political culture in the 1730s to France's celebration of Franklin in the 1770s. Edelstein concedes, though minimizes, the influence of Locke and Isaac Newton on the French Enlightenment. In this way, Edelstein's account makes the French Enlightenment more parochial than it was. Thus, Edelstein subordinates simple but enormously generative ideas (like the arguments for popular sovereignty or religious tolerance) to the fashion for modernity implicit in this narrative of Enlightenment as formulated in France. Indeed, at points Edelstein even entertains the notion that the influence of the *philosophes* depended upon their being admen for the narrative of Enlightenment, the disseminators of a new modern mode of intellectual fashion. Edelstein notes that the common root shared by the French words for modern and fashion suggests a deeper connection between the two: "After all, the editors of the *Encyclopédie* placed their work under the sign of 'this philosophical spirit, so fashionable today [*si à la mode aujourd'hui*]'" (81).

Where Edelstein falls behind the most recent scholarship upon the Enlightenment is through his refusal to grasp the centrality of practice to the coming of Enlightenment. Thus recent veins of scholarship upon the Enlightenment have foregrounded the following: the production and consumption of printed commodities; the emergence of the public post enabling private correspondence for any purpose; the gathering in salons, clubs, secret societies, and committees of correspondence to pursue various improving projects; the emergence of new genres of writing (the public newspaper distributed by post; the "system"; the popular declaration as overwriting the petition to authority; the encyclopedia) or the repurposing of old genres like the novel for new uses (the philosophical tale; the scandalous chronicle that "outs" the misbehaving great); the power of the popular (in crazes like Mesmerism, in notorious legal cases, in festivals); the collecting of specimens from around the world so as to produce a systematic catalog of nature; and so on. These are just a few of the practices that fall into the margins, or entirely out of, Edelstein's account of Enlightenment. The issue here is not that Edelstein doesn't write about these particular practices (and many others) in a book that is focused elsewhere. Rather it is that his approach

through a narrative of Enlightenment is too conceptually totalizing, too self-complete, in short, too intellectual, to allow a generative role for practices in giving form to many of the most salient tendencies of Enlightenment: the systematizing of knowledge, the expansion of literacy, the emergence of the public sphere, the popularization of consumption, the public access to previously private spaces, the exercise of popular sovereignty, the toleration of those with different creeds, and the formation of modern institutions like the circulating library or the public museum.

Central to the argument of *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* is the thesis that, though there might be important strands of the Enlightenment developed outside of France, only in France was there developed a coherent narrative of Enlightenment sufficient to make Enlightenment an influential international movement. But if one takes a broader, more catholic, and more practice-centered view of Enlightenment, then one can explain a historical itinerary that is a scandal to Edelstein's genealogy: the relative autonomy of other-than-French Enlightenments. I'll close this review by briefly considering how such an independent genealogy of the Enlightenment might work in the case of prerevolutionary Boston.

The political and religious leaders of Boston in the mid-eighteenth century fashioned a systematic political resistance to British authority that culminated in the first Enlightenment revolution, the American Revolution. To do this, they did not need to read about the quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns nor the synthetic speculations of the *philosophes* about the steady "rational," enlightened improvement of civil society. In part, this reflected the intellectual provincialism of a town of 17,000 on the periphery of Britain's Atlantic empire. But the absence of the French Enlightenment among the legal and clerical elite in Boston was also practical. They did not *need* the French Enlightenment to do their politics. To win arguments with Parliament, they needed to argue from British legal precedents and political history. Boston leaders like Rev. Jonathan Mayhew, James Otis, Jr., Samuel Adams, and his second cousin John Adams developed a Roman republican rather than a French Enlightenment understanding of the character of society. Throughout their writings they expressed alarm about the increased corruption of modern British society and the concomitant threat this posed to public virtue in Boston. In developing their case for political resistance to Britain, these leaders drew upon a heterogeneous set of English sources: the Protestant Reformation as a model for comprehensive, righteous critique of instituted authority; the rich archive of the English Civil War, especially as its political theory had recast classical republicanism for modern uses; a legal appeal to the English Bill of Rights of 1689, which was given canonical philosophical justification in Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*; and, finally, the long tradition of English radical party opposition expressed by the influential writings of John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon (namely *Cato's Letters*, 1720–23) and others. This body of writing was central to the post-1688 British

political consensus to which the Boston Whigs fully subscribed: a limited monarchy under the law with sovereignty of the people expressed through their representative assembly. Finally, to conduct their revolution, Boston leaders developed organizational innovations (like the committees of correspondence joined into a distributed network) and generic innovations (the popular declarations) that would be useful in the political agitation undertaken later in the century in England, Ireland, and France.

The example of Boston and the American Revolution suggests why Edelstein's might more accurately be entitled "The French Enlightenment: A Genealogy." However, even qualified in this way, this genealogy is an original and engaging achievement and well worth reading.

NOTES

1. See Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York, 1966, 1995) and *The Enlightenment: The Science of Freedom* (New York, 1969, 1996).