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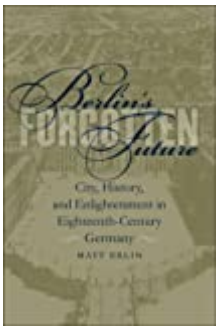

Matt Erlin. *Berlin's Forgotten Future: City, History, and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Germany.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. xi + 216 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-8127-9.

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Urban Modernity and History in the Eighteenth Century

In this stimulating and interesting work Matt Erlin examines the relationship between debates about the eighteenth-century city, especially Berlin, and historical thought in the German Enlightenment. He argues that already in the eighteenth century urban development comes to be recognized as an important historical phenomenon and, in many ways, as one representative of modernity itself. Erlin's aim is to reconstruct "a shared framework for conceptualizing the city and its historical-theoretical significance" (p. 9) in the Enlightenment, because, he says, discussions of the city nearly always entailed explicit or implicit reflection on historical-theoretical issues (pp. 6-7). He suggests that Berlin is a particularly good example of this relationship, because it was the "site of both progress and repression ... a hub of enlightenment, as well as a hideout for obscurantists" (p. 2) and therefore raises the question of the relationship between urban life and historical progress with particular urgency. Urban life significantly "impacted key facets of eighteenth-century German culture," although Erlin also points out that this "impact [of urban life] sometimes left its traces beneath the surface of the text" and is implicit rather than evident (p. 36).

Each of the four main chapters is on a central figure of the German Enlightenment. The first focuses on the Berlin journalist Friedrich Gedike, best known as the editor of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* between 1783 and 1791. Gedike published a series of twenty-eight letters on Berlin in the *Monatsschrift* between 1783 and 1785, which, according to Erlin, reveal "the extent to which the controversy about the advantages and disadvantages of modern urbanism" is an integral part of the controversy about enlightenment in the 1780s (p. 45). Gedike treats contemporary Berlin as the product of "linear progress, articulated in the city topography" (p. 54), for example, in the modern "symmetry and linearity of the Neustadt" (p. 53), which was much superior to the remnants of medieval architecture in the city. Erlin argues that Gedike's view of Berlin as an example of progress was, however, complicated by the presence of features that were opposed to enlightened modernity. One of these was the condition of the Berlin Jews, who, Gedike believed, had become superstitious and corrupt as a result of the oppression they had endured, which had prevented their enlightenment. Only in the present generation had the external constraints on the intellectual progress of the

Berlin Jews disappeared or at least been weakened. Erlin argues that Gedike relates this historical progress of the Jews in Berlin to the urban context in which it took place: "by coupling the concentration of wealth, which is repeatedly associated with metropolitan life in the period, and the historical progress of the Jews as a nation, Gedike both thematizes the role of the urban dynamic as a motor of positive change and reveals the extent to which urban phenomena inspired reflection on the mechanisms of historical causality" (pp. 56-57).

The connection Erlin sees between the question of historical progress and the urban context of Gedike's writing, however, seems debatable. Of course Gedike is discussing the circumstances of Jews in Berlin, but it is not necessarily clear that Gedike believes he is making a point about urban life generally. Erlin's case rests on his statement that the concentration of wealth, which encourages Jewish emancipation, is "repeatedly associated with urban life in the period" (p. 56), a statement that is not necessarily self-evident and which would perhaps require more evidence to be entirely persuasive. If the concentration of wealth is not an essentially urban phenomenon, then it is also less likely that Gedike linked the historical progress of the Jews and their urban context.

The following chapters raise similar questions about the connection between debates about the city and historical-theoretical reflection. Erlin is keen to demonstrate a close relationship between history and urban life in enlightened thought, but the evidence seems at times circumstantial and implicit, rather than conclusive. In chapter 3, for example, Erlin discusses the writings of the Berlin author and publisher Friedrich Nicolai. In 1786 Nicolai published the third edition of his *Description of the Royal Court Cities Berlin and Potsdam and All of the Objects of Interest Found Therein.* Erlin describes this work as a disjointed survey, in which history is the only connecting thread. Nicolai's description of the city was intended to illustrate the fact that since the twelfth century the city had been improved and, indeed, radically transformed. However, although Nicolai is writing about the improvement of Berlin, it is not evident that he believes this type of progress to be an essentially urban phenomenon. This is the case especially, as Nicolai apparently also considers the urban environment to be in some ways a hindrance to progress (pp. 90-91), so that the relationship between historical thought and the city seems unclear.

The following discussion of Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm* (chapter 4) similarly emphasizes the importance of the urban context, which, Erlin argues, is linked to an "endorsement of a historicist epistemology" (p. 95). Tellheim, one of the central characters in the play, is at first a representative of a fatalistic "ahistorical epistemology" (p. 123), which, however, is undermined by Minna's deception. This deception depends on the urban setting in which it takes place, because it is this setting that gives Minna the opportunity to trick Tellheim into believing she has been disinherited, thus paving the way for the happy end of the play and Tellheim's emancipation from his ahistorical epistemology. Thus Tellheim's adoption of a historicist viewpoint depends on the fact that the action takes place in a city, that is, Berlin. This line of argument may seem plausible to a modern reader, but Erlin could have provided more evidence that Lessing or his contemporaries viewed the play in those terms. It is not, for example, necessarily true that fatalism in eighteenth-century thought automatically implied an ahistorical epistemology.

Chapter 5 is concerned with the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. His essay on sociability expresses concerns that "are clearly entwined with the experience of modernity. They also suggest a connection to the urban context out of which the essay originated" (p. 148). Again, the connection between Mendelssohn's views on the city and historical thought sometimes seems tenuous. History is, of course, an important concern in the thought of the German Enlightenment, but the significance of debates about the city for historical thought is often difficult to identify. As Erlin points out, there is "little in the reactions to Mendelssohn's works to suggest that his contemporaries made an explicit connection between his philosophy and his urban experience" (p. 152), but he then argues that the fact that Mendelssohn is writing in an urban context must mean that the city had an impact on his historical thought. But this claim still falls short of demonstrating a link.

In summary, this is an interesting, informative, and illuminating book, but it is sometimes difficult to be entirely persuaded by Erlin's central argument that the urban context of Berlin is very important for historical thinking in the German Enlightenment. Erlin himself qualifies his argument by conceding that the "impact [of] urban life" sometimes left its traces beneath the surface of the text" (p. 36) and is not always very evident. He also writes that the relationship between the city and historical thought is often contradictory and confused: the city could, for example, be both a motor for improvement and a hindrance to progress (pp. 90-91). While the texts Erlin has examined reveal many references to Berlin and ur-

ban life, on the whole the evidence for a sustained interest in the connections between urban life and historical-theoretical questions still seems fragmentary and elusive.

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