



**Martin Mulsow.** *Moderne aus dem Untergrund: Radikale Frühaufklärung in Deutschland 1680-1720.* Hamburg: Fritz Meiner Verlag, 2002. x + 514 pp. EUR 16.80 (paper), ISBN 978-3-7873-1597-0.



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### Finding Light in Dark Places

Martin Mulsow has written extensively on Renaissance and early modern intellectual history from his post at the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich; *Moderne aus dem Untergrund* represents his *Habilitationsschrift*. It draws together a remarkable body of knowledge about the people and the literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Comprised of eight individual studies, *Moderne aus dem Untergrund* contributes to the conversation begun by Ira Wade and continued by, among others, Richard Popkin, Alan Kors, Margaret Jacobs, Peter Burke, Jonathan Israel, and Robert Darnton. In general they have all addressed the nature of the Enlightenment, its key ideas, how these ideas developed, and particularly, the role of the radical, the clandestine, the free thinker, the libertine, and the atheist in the development of the age.

Mulsow engages this discussion with a great deal of nuance and appreciation for the theoretical quandaries involved with any discussion of the Enlightenment. Rather than offering a new grand interpretation of it, however, Mulsow prefers microhistorical case studies, all which allow him to engage the larger conversation

and offer ten observations about Enlightenment dispositions and the ironic transformation of ideas. Implicit in his approach to intellectual history is a rejection of the broad, linear, developmental grand theories of modernization and secularization, akin to confessionalization, that sweep across the centuries, picking up key authors here and there and tying together great events and societal changes.

Like Kors, Mulsow is interested in the unintended and the contingent aspects of intellectual history. He is interested in mutability and irony, how texts can be transformed, carried out of one context into another, only to create a new intriguing hybrid discussion. Rather than attempt to discern a new mechanics of intellectual change, Mulsow's interest is more dispositional. According to Mulsow, a side effect of the Reformation-era debates about theology that grew amongst the ruins of the Thirty Years War was that scholars began reading widely across old disciplines, and, with the interest in Near East languages, introduced themselves to whole new body of texts and interlocutors among Jewish and Muslim scholars. In effect, religious scholars turned to unlikely in-

ternational allies in their fiercely local debates, a process that involved a degree of tolerance as well as opportunism. Mulsow sees in this new disposition of the scholar the evolution of a uniquely modern sensibility—interest in and tolerance of other ideas. And yet, as Mulsow illustrates, along with the new tolerance arose another modern predicament: ambivalence. The tolerance provided scholars with the ability to gain from the diversity of opinion and introduced them to talented writers from other traditions. Scholars could thus learn to respect and appreciate the ability of other writers and arguments even if they could not accept the implications of the argument. One could appreciate the skillful use of argument by an anonymous atheist even to the point that one felt unable to refute the argument satisfactorily, and yet not be willing to accept the argument itself. This ambivalence led scholars to circulate texts among their colleagues and friends, which allowed these clandestine texts to survive, and—often in unacknowledged ways—inform new texts. Clandestine manuscripts, like the anonymous Portuguese Jewish manuscript Mulsow discusses in chapter 2, could have long and surprising careers. (In a remarkable display of scholarly detective work Mulsow tracks down the author of the work after consulting scholars and collections as far away as Israel.)

Mulsow is able to trace this otherwise deep background to the discussions of the seventeenth and eighteenth century only after doing extensive work in the archives. This dedication to careful and extensive research is perhaps his most eloquent commentary on the prevailing historiographical debates on the Enlightenment—for all the theorizing there is still a huge amount of work to be done on the people, ideas, events, and circumstances of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

Mulsow draws on the techniques of microhistory to organize his research. Not surprisingly, there is a strong narrative thread to Mulsow's work. His first three case studies, in particular, read like a detective novel (chapters 2-4). Mulsow uses manuscripts, marginalia, letters, drafts, library catalogs and rare texts to piece together his account, and subscribes to the theory that some of the most interesting parts of intellectual history can be found in the subtexts and the contexts of the day as well as in the texts themselves.

The book is divided into eight chapters and a summary chapter, including case studies on figures such as Samuel Crell, Johann Joachim Mülller, Souverin and Gundling, and Gundling and Buddeus's *De tribus im-*

*postoribus* (1688) and themes such as political theology, Christian Platonism, and indifferentism. Through this use of case studies, Mulsow places his readers in a position of ironic detachment as he traces the movement of manuscripts from one person to the next. He creates dramatic irony by identifying the authors of texts whose authorship, at the time, was mysterious and a source of speculation. He creates situational irony by detailing the chain of ownership of manuscripts from one hand to the next—a process in which key information was lost and successive owners looked upon the manuscripts with dramatically different attitudes. Through all his appreciation for polemics, Mulsow is careful not to privilege one perspective over another—Orthodox, Fideist, Deist, Skeptic, Socinian, Arminian, or Atheist. But as his narrative suggests, ambivalence need not mean neutrality—his subjects' willingness to introduce, preserve, or pass on these clandestine, skeptical, or even atheist texts suggests a curiosity that prefers inquiry over certainty, and possibly a sense of mischief-making that enjoys seeing others confront uncertainty. In that sense Mulsow can be seen to identify with his subjects and clearly takes delight in the irony and unintended consequences that the circulation of these clandestine texts provoked. Given the detachment he creates, it is hard to take Mulsow's historical world too seriously—we are presented with so many perspectives that no one particular perspective can be seen to be authoritative, too pressing, or too controversial, which is exactly the effect that was in fact beginning to arise in the early Enlightenment, if one takes Mulsow's point to heart. The ambiguities and perspectivalism Mulsow captures represent precisely the modern disposition—intellectual ambivalence—that he argues was emerging at the dawn of the eighteenth century, if even in its most incipient stages.

Though clearly up to date on the scholarship and the theoretical discussions of his subject, Mulsow does not let the theoretical take the place of the historical. His scholarship shows the good faith of a scholar who is willing to do the legwork of digging in archives and scrounging for details and then assembling them into a larger, readable, story. As a result, Mulsow's extraordinarily learned book offers historians a model of how to write intellectual history. Mulsow has contributed to the sense that we really have a great deal more to learn from the early days of the German enlightenment beyond the clichéd tropes of Preussentum, Pietismus, and Rationalismus. The sum of Mulsow's many parts adds up to a greater portrait of the dynamism of the age than the more familiar linear, grand theories that have no real interest in the age itself,

but are instead primarily intended to comment on a later age. While Mulsow offers a great deal of food for thought about modern intellectual history, he never loses sight of the period that provided the grounds for his insights— a period that is gradually coming to light thanks to the productive efforts of scholars, like Mulsow, who are not afraid to discover something new.

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