

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



John Robertson. *Enlightenment: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 147 pp. \$11.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-959178-7.

Reviewed by Diego Lucci (American University in Bulgaria)

Published on H-Albion (January, 2017)

Commissioned by Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth (Red Deer College)

This intelligently written and informative book is more than simply a "very short introduction." John Robertson's book provides, although concisely, a thorough and original interpretation of the Enlightenment as both a historical phenomenon and a philosophical idea. The introductory chapter 1 explains that the ambiguities still surrounding the term "Enlightenment" originated in the various ways in which the idea of Enlightenment was construed in the eighteenth century. In this respect, Professor Robertson concentrates on Jean D'Alembert, David Hume, and Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, who all highlighted the genesis of human knowledge in the senses, and on Immanuel Kant, who, conversely, argued that "reason, elaborating *a priori*, categorical propositions of cause and substance, was the prerequisite of our understanding of both the physical and the moral worlds" (p. 7). Kant's famous answer to the question, "what is Enlightenment?", which recommends the application of reason to all matters that can benefit humankind, has often been taken as the conclusive explanation of this concept. However, Robertson observes that it would be inappropriate to reduce the meaning of "Enlightenment" to Kant's definition, not only because Kant's view of the Enlightenment was rooted in his philosophical system, but also because he saw "Enlightenment" as a process: "A definition of 'the Enlightenment' still lay some distance in the future" (p. 8). The view of the Enlightenment as a process has strongly influenced the historiography of the subject since the early twentieth century. Robertson points out that the first half of the twentieth century witnessed the historical reconstruction of the Enlightenment as a philosophical movement radiating mainly from France and the German-speaking world. However, starting with Franco Venturi's stud-

ies in the 1950s, other national contexts were rediscovered and, later, attention shifted to the "transnational" Enlightenment. Moreover, other historians, following Robert Darnton's example, have rejected the traditional focus on Enlightenment ideas alone; thus, they have promoted the reassessment of other areas of human life in Enlightenment studies. As a result, the study of the Enlightenment has become an interdisciplinary field, encompassing not only the history of philosophy and intellectual history, but also cultural, social, economic, and political history. Another consequence of the changes in historiography in the past half-century or so is "the conclusion that it is hard to distinguish any particular set of ideas as unique to the Enlightenment" (p. 12). Therefore, today many historians agree with John Pocock's suggestion to talk of a "family" of Enlightenments, overlapping with one another, but impossible to reduce to a single categorization.

Robertson's reconstruction of the Enlightenment is indebted to the above said developments in recent historiography. His account of the Enlightenment benefits from his extensive and impressive knowledge of not only the philosophy of the Enlightenment, but also the social, political, and economic thought of the eighteenth century and a number of cultural and sociopolitical factors that contributed to the making of the Enlightenment as a historical phenomenon. In the three central chapters of this book, entitled respectively "Engaging with religion," "Bettering the human condition," and "Enlightening the public," Robertson illustrates the main challenges and developments of Enlightenment thought and culture in relation to these three different but interconnected goals. It is no accident that these three chapters are organized

in this way. In fact, in a world still dominated by religious beliefs, sources, and institutions, Enlightenment thinkers had to engage with religion first and foremost; and, as Robertson notes, they did so in more complex, creative, and nuanced ways than the outdated cliché of “Enlightenment hostility to religion” suggests: “At the very least, the Enlightenment can be associated with a spectrum of attitudes towards religion” (p. 15). Robertson does not deny the specificities of different Enlightenment attitudes towards religion. However, he recognizes a common element to all of them in the “refusal to sacrifice the possibilities of life here on earth to whatever prospects might be held out on behalf of the world to come” (p. 16). Moreover, he calls attention to the continuity between the Enlightenment’s engagement with religion and lines of enquiry and argument developed well before the eighteenth century, particularly in relation to the three strands of this engagement which he examines in chapter 2—the historical enquiry into the nature of religion, arguments for toleration, and the reflection on, and historical analysis of, the relation between the sacred and the civil.

Most of chapter 2 is devoted to the historical enquiry into the nature of religion, starting with early Enlightenment thinkers such as Baruch Spinoza, Pierre Bayle, John Toland, Pietro Giannone, and Giambattista Vico. Robertson maintains that the Enlightenment borrowed the distinction between nature and revelation from seventeenth-century Protestant and Catholic thought. But, in the early Enlightenment, natural religion was not necessarily subordinate to revealed religion and, according to some “radicals,” natural law did not have to necessarily agree with God’s (allegedly) revealed word. The early Enlightenment’s rethinking of the relation between nature and revelation had a twofold outcome. On the one hand, its hermeneutical and historical-critical methods contributed to a new historical understanding of the Bible among religious Enlightenmenters, without nevertheless undermining revelation. On the other, the early Enlightenment’s attempts to demystify the biblical text inspired national histories of religion, such as those written by Voltaire, Hume, Nicolas Antoine Boulanger, and Johann Gottfried Herder, which presented religion as a natural, universal phenomenon and gave no prominence to the Judeo-Christian tradition. This multifaceted attitude to religion also emerged in tolerationist arguments and in the rethinking of the relation between the sacred and the civil. As to religious toleration, Robertson convincingly argues that John Locke’s and Bayle’s arguments were still rooted

in a Protestant worldview, given their focus on the importance of religious worship, faith, and salvation and, in Locke’s case, given also its advocacy of religious pluralism, rather than liberty of conscience. Conversely, the defenses of toleration written by Spinoza, Voltaire, and Moses Mendelssohn, as well as the documents sanctioning the right to religious freedom in the American and French Revolutions, were based on the principle of individual liberty of conscience, besides considering the benefits that the legal recognition of this principle could bring to social peace and progress. The latter line of reasoning was intrinsically connected to the tendency to subject the sacred to the civil—a tendency that, originating in Erastian and Gallican claims on the supremacy of the political authorities in ecclesiastical matters, was often applied by Enlightenment governments and found intellectual endorsement, according to Robertson, in Giannone’s and Edward Gibbon’s works of history.

Chapter 3 explores the theme of human betterment in the moral, social, and economic thought of the Enlightenment. Robertson traces the development of natural law theories from Protestant natural jurisprudence—mainly from Hugo Grotius, Samuel von Pufendorf, Christian Thomasius, and Locke—to the Enlightenment’s theories of sociability, particularly in the Scottish context, where Francis Hutcheson, Hume, and Adam Smith called attention to the role of “advantageous sentiments” in the foundation of morality, thus provoking Kant’s rationalist reaction. Another contribution to the Enlightenment’s reflection on human betterment came from “the great panoramic narratives of Voltaire, Hume, [William] Robertson, and Gibbon” (p. 60). Robertson describes the historical narratives of the Age of Enlightenment as avowedly philosophical, given that Enlightenment historians incorporated in their narratives factors like social structures, customs, geographic contexts, climate, and economic relationships. Thus, they conceived of history as a dynamic process: they thought “that societies developed—that it was possible therefore to think in terms of ‘the progress of society’” (p. 61). On the other hand, Robertson attaches great importance to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality*, which, while still considering history as a dynamic process, presented less optimistic conclusions than the emphasis on progress in the works of Enlightenment historians: “Rousseau explicitly identified modern civilization with corruption.” Corruption as Rousseau understood it was so dangerous because it was a process within history, an integral consequence of that “progress of society” which offered men hitherto unimaginable material

rewards and social status. Corruption was but the other face of bettermentâ (p. 70). Rousseauâs challenge was answered by only a few Enlightenment thinkers, including Smith, the most prominent political economist of the eighteenth century. And political economy is the last discipline Robertson examines in his chapter on âbettering the human condition.â He contrasts the importance that the French physiocrats gave to agriculture as the foundation of a healthy national economy with the revaluation of commerce in the works of Hume and Smith, concluding that eighteenth-century political economists were generally optimistic about the growth of free trade in a more and more globalized market.

Chapter 4, âEnlightening the public,â moves further away from the realm of ideas and covers issues that largely belong to the provinces of social and cultural history. This chapter concentrates on the Enlightenmentâs reassessment of public opinion: âThe conviction that political influence must now be exerted through public opinion distinguished the Enlightenment approach to politics, constituting its novel strength and, in the end, fatal weaknessâ (p. 81). Starting with the premise that the public sphere, as conceptualized by Jürgen Habermas in the 1960s, is now âthe lens through which historians view and assess the Enlightenmentâs impact on the societies in which it was activeâ (p. 85), Robertson examines the role that various âinstitutions of sociability,â such as coffee houses, Masonic lodges, and salons, had in shaping and spreading Enlightenment thought and culture. He then considers the main developments in print culture and in the social and financial status of authors, as well as the impact of these developments on the production and transmission of ideas. Furthermore, he observes that governmental reforms in education, the legal system, and the bureaucratic machine of the state, especially when attempting to promote the national economy, were greatly indebted to the social, political, and economic thought of the Enlightenment. In fact, it is no accident that a number of Enlightenment economists, lawyers, and political thinkers from a number of countries served in the state administration.

The concluding section of chapter 4 considers the question of the Enlightenmentâs relation to revolution, especially the French Revolution. Robertsonâs position on this controversial question is clear: while acknowledging that âthere were continuities between Enlightenment and revolution—continuities of men, women and ideasâ (p. 115), and while mentioning âthe revolutionariesâ constant invocation of the work of Rousseau and Montesquieuâ (p. 116), Robertson unequivocally declares

that âcontinuities, however, do not make the Revolution the outcome of the Enlightenment. The contrary is just as arguable. On the account of the Enlightenmentâs politics offered in this book, the Revolution was the antithesis of Enlightenment. Where Enlightenment philosophers looked to an informed public opinion to exert an indirect, restraining influence on government, the revolutionaries were committed to the overthrow of the *ancien régime* by direct action. Revolution, in other words, was the revenge of political agency upon the impersonal, gradual process of change envisaged by the Enlightenment concept of the âprogress of societyââ (p. 116). *Contra* some historiansâ distinction between the early, Enlightenment-inspired phases of the French Revolution and the Terror, Robertson argues that the Revolution as a whole, which he defines as âan unanticipated and never-before-experienced political processâ (p. 117), presented a radical denial of the ideals of the Enlightenment. Therefore, modern politics faced the key questions of democracy—i.e., âwhat were its social foundations, how far did popular sovereignty extend, how was it to be represented?â (p. 117)—only as a consequence of the French Revolution, in the nineteenth century and beyond; but, according to Robertson, these questions âwere not the questions which had engaged the attention of the Enlightenmentâ (p. 117). Last but not least, the renewal of some Enlightenment initiatives in the nineteenth century (e.g., initiatives for the improvement of agriculture, which Robertson expressly cites as an example) must be understood against the background of a political framework deeply transformed by the French Revolution and its aftermath.

The conclusion of chapter 4 is logically connected to Robertsonâs discussion of the recent historiography of the subject in chapter 5. What is remarkable in this concluding chapter is Robertsonâs distancing himself from the question of why the Enlightenment still matters, which, in his opinion, has had a detrimental effect on the study of the Enlightenment as a historical phenomenon. Robertson argues that this question has led various philosophers since the mid-twentieth century, such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Isaiah Berlin, and Michel Foucault, to dismiss and denigrate the Enlightenment as a social and intellectual movement that furthered the development of authoritarian social and political structures. On the other hand, Robertson contends that recently some historians, such as Jonathan Israel and Anthony Pagden, have rejected the postmodern philosophic critique of the Enlightenment by equating âEnlightenmentâ with âModernityâ—in particular with

the latter's positive elements. Thus, they have followed the example of other historians who, in the 1950s and 1960s, subscribed to a version of modernization theory, be it Weberian or Marxist. They identified Enlightenment with the twin forces of secularization and economic development, and generally assumed that it was modern in its thinking and its political orientation (p. 124). By contrast, Robertson endorses mere historical reconstruction of the Enlightenment, given that we are separated from the Enlightenment by the historical catastrophes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, by epoch-making developments in philosophy, the social sciences, and scientific discourses, and by economic, social, political, and now also environmental challenges inconceivable in the 18th century (p. 129). Robertson's own approach to the study of the Enlightenment is described in the concluding pages of this book: "We should not be trying to reassure ourselves that the Enlightenment still matters. But we can enrich our thinking, our awareness of the variety of ways of understanding human affairs, by imaginatively reconstructing the conceptual languages of Enlightenment thinkers, recognizing the problems they encountered, and appreciating the originality of their responses to them. It is not the relevance of the past which the intellectual historian seeks, but the challenge of understanding how problems were formulated, addressed, and conceptualized in terms different from those we use now" (pp. 129-130).

Robertson's methodological proposal enables the intellectual historian to avoid a teleological approach to the Age of Enlightenment. Nevertheless, I do not find the question of why the Enlightenment still matters meaningless or superfluous, when it comes to studying this historical phenomenon and its historical significance. I rather find more continuities than Robertson does between Enlightenment ideas, proposals, and projects and the achievements and catastrophes of the nineteenth and twentieth century. This does not mean to claim, as some philosophers have done, that totalitarianism, the Holocaust, and the social and ecological disasters of the last two centuries are a direct consequence of the Enlightenment and of its rationalizing approach to the human and natural worlds. On the other hand, this does not mean to equate the fundamental principles of contemporary liberal democracy with Enlightenment or revolutionary concepts of liberty, equality, and fraternity. The making of modernity is indeed a more complex phenomenon than a mere offspring of the Enlightenment, as Robertson argues in his dense and fascinating conclusion. However, we must recognize that the Enlightenment, as an intellec-

tual movement that pervaded the culture, economy, society, and politics of the late seventeenth and eighteenth century, was a significant turning point in the history of humankind—and not only in Western history, given the global impact of some historical phenomena that, for the better or for the worse, were triggered by the philosophical, scientific, and political discourses of the Enlightenment.

This is, of course, not the right place to develop a thorough analysis of the Enlightenment's impact on subsequent eras; but, as Robertson himself acknowledges, what is particularly interesting about Enlightenment thought was its willingness to engage with change in this world independent of the next, to think about what might constitute progress (p. 130). And this attitude to look forward and to act played a momentous role in the making of the modern world. Despite the remarkable differences between the Enlightenment's conceptualization of sociopolitical relations and the main questions of democracy in nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberal, socialist, and conservative thought, the roots of the reflection on those questions can well be traced to Enlightenment works such as Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*, and Rousseau's *Social Contract* (a work that Robertson mentions only briefly in his book), to name a few. Moreover, despite the persistence of religious, although often heterodox, ways of thinking among the majority of Enlightenment intellectuals, the Enlightenment's willingness to engage with change in this world independent of the next produced a new attitude toward the possibilities of change offered by the moral and physical worlds. This attitude even permeated the thinking of many religious Enlighteners, as, for instance, David Sorkin's and Ulrich Lehner's studies on the Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic Enlightenments have demonstrated. And this attitude subsequently characterized, for the better or for the worse, not only the philosophical-political projects of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also the pursuits of science, technological advance, and economic enterprises since the First Industrial Revolution coeval with the late Enlightenment, as Margaret Jacob's recent studies on the "first knowledge economy" have pointed out. On the other hand, if we turn our attention to the "dark sides" of the Enlightenment, eighteenth-century polygenist and proto-racist classifications of human beings according to biological traits, along with the spread, in the Age of Enlightenment, of historical myths about the origins of European nations—a phenomenon that Poliakov examined already in the 1970s—can well be con-

sidered as the embryonic phase of the development of racist, nationalist, and imperialist theories and practices. In some cases, even the Enlightenment's commitment to bettering the human condition (which often turned into aspirations to "emancipate" humankind from both external and internal limits) contributed to undesired and unexpected occurrences in the Age of Revolution and in the next two centuries—such as the growth of state structures that attempted to control, standardize, and employ the population in the most rational and profitable ways. An emblematic consequence of this phenomenon was the emancipation process of European Jews, given that late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century emancipatory policies were perfectly in line with Enlightenment projects (formulated by Christian Wilhelm von Dohm, Henri Grégoire, and still others) which promoted Jewish self-emancipation and assimilation into surrounding society. But I have to acknowledge that dealing with so many controversial issues is an extremely demanding task, especially in what is supposed to be a "very short introduction." As a matter of fact, this book is much more than merely an introduction, given that Professor Robertson brilliantly manages to offer a thorough, original, and stimulating interpretation of the Enlightenment. Thus, my comments above must be taken, first and foremost, as suggestions for those interested in acquiring further knowledge of the Enlightenment, its many complex aspects, and its historical importance.

Professor Robertson's book indeed presents an admirable attempt to provide effective guidance to those willing to approach this subject. This book also offers valuable "food for thought" to specialists in the field, thanks to Robertson's innovative reading of, and sound methodological approach to, the Enlightenment as a philosophical idea and a historical phenomenon. Another praiseworthy aspect of this concise but detailed analysis of the Enlightenment is its interdisciplinary character, which has been made possible by Robertson's solid knowledge of various areas and methods of historical research. Robertson's interdisciplinary approach has also enabled him to consider philosophical and political theories in relation to the sociocultural and political phenomena with which Enlightenment thought continually intertwined, instead of abstracting ideas from historical contexts. Last but not least, Robertson's book has the merit to take into consideration different geographical, sociocultural, political, and intellectual contexts—not only France and the German-speaking world, but also England, Scotland, Naples, Milan, Spain, Portugal, etc. In conclusion, this thought-provoking book is a must-read for anyone interested in the Enlightenment, be they beginners or experts in the field.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Diego Lucci. Review of Robertson, John, *Enlightenment: A Very Short Introduction*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. January, 2017.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=46328>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.