The Hague Debate

The Enlightenment, I contend, was the most important and profound intellectual, social and cultural transformation of the Western world since the Middle Ages and the most formative in shaping modernity. It must be understood as both an intellectual movement and as mainstream socio-economic and political history - for historiography a distinctly unfamiliar combination. It evolved on both sides of the Atlantic and began in the second half of the seventeenth century. The product of a particular era it has profoundly affected every aspect of modernity.

What was the Enlightenment? Historians have found it notoriously difficult to provide a fully adequate definition. Many definitions have been suggested and used which are correct and relevant up to a point and capture much of what historians and philosophers identify as the Enlightenment, but none seem altogether satisfactory. Peter Gay was right to claim that the ‘men of the Enlightenment united on a vastly ambitious programme, a program of secularism, humanity, cosmopolitanism, and freedom, above all, freedom in its many forms – freedom from arbitrary power, freedom of speech, freedom of trade, freedom to realize one’s talents, freedom of aesthetic response, freedom, in a word, of moral man to make his own way in the world.’ Only his definition seriously overstates the secularism of the mainstream Enlightenment and the commitment of many enlighteners to free speech, free trade and personal freedom. It is also largely valid, as another historian wrote, to say that the Enlightenment ‘began not as a definite “thing” or even as a chronological period, but as processes concerned with the central place of reason and of experience and experiment in understanding and improving human society.’ What distinguished the Enlightenment’s particular emphasis on reason was indeed a belief that applying reason tempered by experiment and experience, not anything based on blind authority, would bring vast social benefits. It can also be justly defined as an era that pursued with
greater consistency than any other the notion that things ought to be justified rather than ‘blindly accepted from habit and custom’.\(^3\)

But while true as far as they go such definitions crucially miss the social historical dimension: they fail to give a sense of the Enlightenment being a response to the dilemmas of a society standing at the confluence of the static, the traditional norms, with the rapid changes, fluidity and pluralism so typical of modernity.\(^4\) Neither they do they sufficiently give a sense of the ideologically and politically embattled status of the Enlightenment, its being besieged by powerful forces from without while also being continually ravaged by disputes within. Like the Renaissance and Reformation, in the Enlightenment intellectual and doctrinal changes came first but impacted on – and responded to – social, cultural, economic and political context so profoundly that they changed everything. But unlike the Renaissance which revolved around the rediscovery of the texts of classical antiquity, or the Reformation which pivoted on a revolt against Catholic doctrine and ecclesiastical authority and forged several Protestant confessions, with the Enlightenment it has proven difficult even to agree as to which intellectual tendencies should chiefly be stressed. Even the notion that the Enlightenment placed a new and particular stress on ‘reason’ can be easily be questioned by citing the examples of Hume and Burke, two of the Enlightenment’s greatest thinkers. Given the notorious difficulty of providing a complete definition it is unlikely that there will be general agreement regarding the definition I am presenting here. But it is important to be clear about the interpretation being put forward and why this definition of the Enlightenment might seem more adequate than other characterizations.

A fully adequate historical and philosophical definition does not necessarily have to accommodate some of the things academics, politicians, social theorists and others writing today are prone to mean by the term ‘Enlightenment’. Especially alien to the eighteenth century concept – and the way it was used by the democratic left in the French Revolution- and sometimes highly pernicious in our contemporary usage is the today widespread assumption in some quarters that we in the Western world are ‘enlightened’ and need to defend and preserve a supposedly shared body of values.
Quite apart from the fact that it is a completely baseless assumption, in my opinion, to regard present American or European societies as essentially shaped by the Enlightenment – only their democratic laws, constitutions and declarations of Human Rights are– no Radical Enlightenment or revolutionary writers of the 18th century thought that Europe or America was actually enlightened then.

At the same time, a habit has developed in recent decades in historical studies of focusing much attention in Enlightenment studies on questions of sociability, *mondanité*, cultural spaces. The study of sociability and social practices is often interesting and important but has little directly to do with what contemporaries meant when they accounted innovations, recommendations or changes ‘enlightened’, éclairé, or *aufgeklärt*, terms incessantly used at the time. No significant Enlightenment figure had sociability or social practices in mind when designating as ‘enlightened’ or the fruit of ‘enlightened’ attitudes, the great shifts, cultural, scientific, social and political they saw occurring, or as having recently occurred or as needing to occur. Therefore little attention is paid here to this aspect of eighteenth-century history and it is neither necessary nor advisable to find room for the cultural history of sociability and social practices in defining the Enlightenment. If the Parisian salons, for example, were an extremely important social space, their contribution to the Enlightenment as such was practically zero except as a (very) marginal conduit of dissemination.⁵ Sociability, in short, is just a gigantic red herring. But this does not mean that Enlightenment was a purely intellectual movement. There was a great deal of social grievance and legal archaism in the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment precisely by establishing new principles, understood intellectually, set up a powerful process of social and political innovation, reformism and change which profoundly affected the whole of society. The Enlightenment is not a story of ideas but a story of the interaction of ideas and social reality.⁶

One of the most important recent historians of the Enlightenment, John Robertson begins his 2005 study by characterizing the Enlightenment as a shift commencing in the 1740s involving ‘a new focus on betterment in this world, without
regard for the existence or non-existence of the next’. The main intellectual effort, he argued, was ‘concentrated on understanding the means of progress in human society, not on demolishing belief in a divine counterpart’. His emphasis on there having been a core of ‘original thinking to the Enlightenment ‘that was not simply a matter of common aspirations and values’ and within which ‘the understanding of human betterment was pursued across a number of independent lines of enquiry’ is right and, like earlier definitions, captures much of what is needed. Any workable definition of Enlightenment must focus on betterment in this world and get away from social practice and common values and must centrally stress new principles, concepts and constitutional arrangements being introduced that are conceived to be transforming society for the better. But Robertson’s characterization still has four notable defects, I would argue. Firstly, advocates and opponents of the Enlightenment typically saw the process as beginning in the mid and late seventeenth century so that the 1740s is simply too late a starting point; 2) Robertson’s formula insufficiently stresses the tendency to see human amelioration as something arising from a general transformation in men’s thinking, attitudes and ideas and by challenging accepted values, rather than stemming from other arguably useful changes such as economic processes, social practices, inherent national characteristics real or alleged, imperial expansion, religious revelations, rediscovering ancient texts or ancient constitutions; I don’t think there is any such thing as a valid account of the Enlightenment that fails to put philosophy at the center of the picture and Robertson simply doesn’t sufficiently do so. Thirdly, he fails to capture the idea that what was needed and happening (or about to happen) was a giant leap forward, a vast revolutionary change, that the difference between enlightened attitudes and society and unenlightened attitudes and society is like light and darkness, that an enlightened society is totally different from an unenlightened society in every respect. At one point, Robertson criticizes Robert Darnton for postulating too close a link between Enlightenment and the French and American revolutions; but here, surely, Darnton was right. Finally, missing here is any reference to the profoundly typical quest
for universal solutions and recipes. Universalism was one of the quintessential characteristics of the Enlightenment.

Admittedly, other recent definitions have put more stress on pluralism and the national perspective within the enlightenment than either Robertson or myself. But in general the notion of distinct ‘national’ ‘enlightenments and a plurality of enlightenments – lots of people love this idea, I know- but to me it seems very weak indeed altogether invalid firstly because in most European countries, from Russia to Portugal, the primary intellectual influences were invariably foreign ones – mostly French, British or German after around 1720, though before that Dutch influence was also crucial. Secondly, there was never, in Britain, America or anywhere else any basic unity to the local enlightenment. It was always fundamentally divided between rival factions drawing inspiration from different sources both national and international.

We need to keep in mind the unitary and fundamentally transforming character of the Enlightenment and avoid the narrower, fragmented quality, and resort to national perspectives, of John Pocock’s definition. We need also to incorporate the full chronological span – the Enlightenment era runs from around 1680 to around 1800, and to restore the centrality of ‘philosophy’ rather than other things as the primary agent of betterment, to reflect the close linkage of Enlightenment with fundamental transformation, challenging accepted values, and revolution, and, finally, to accommodate the quest for universality. Such a formula, one might suppose, misses the essence of the British Enlightenment. But even the most conservative of the Enlightenment’s great philosophers, and the most inclined to restrict the scope of reason, Hume and Burke, clearly thought the principles and new (as they saw it) constitution produced by the Glorious Revolution of 1688-91, and the toleration, press freedom and mixture of monarchy and republicanism issuing from it, had recently transformed England, Scotland and North America fundamentally, and could transform other societies – Burke hoped to see this in India, Ireland and France – and they too believed that philosophy and philosophical history played a large part as a critical tool,
especially in revealing what was the real nature of these salutary and transforming principles and how to preserve and propagate them.

Enlightenment then was a unitary phenomenon operative on both sides of the Atlantic, and eventually everywhere, consciously committed to the notion of bettering humanity in this world through a fundamental, revolutionary transformation discarding the ideas, habits and traditions of the past either wholly or partially, this last point being bitterly contested; Enlightenment operated usually by revolutionizing ideas and constitutional principles, first, and society afterwards but sometimes by proceeding in reverse order, uncovering and making better known the principles of a great ‘revolution’ that had already happened. All Enlightenment by definition is closely linked to revolution. Here I think is an accurate, historically grounded, complete definition. In most cases, the Enlightenment led to revolutions in ideas and attitudes first, and actual practical revolutions second. Throughout there was a deep internal split between radical and moderate enlighteners. But both radical and moderate enlighteners sought general amelioration and both could readily accept Adam Smith’s definition of ‘philosophy’ as the ‘science of the connecting principles of nature’. Both tendencies could agree that therefore nature and everything shaped by Nature is the sphere of philosophy and that ‘philosophy’ is the key debate with regard to everything. Of course, both sides adamantly insisted on their realism and practicality while assailing the other for being impractical, Burke rebuking Richard Price for instance, for dealing in empty abstract propositions when speaking of inalienable rights. But where moderate Enlightenment demonstrated its practicality by compromising with tradition, experience and the existing order, by disavowing reason’s applicability in some areas and justifying existing constraints and circumstances in part, the radical wing claimed to be, the more realistic in offering comprehensive solutions to increasingly urgent unsolved social, legal and political problems that the moderate Enlightenment proved unable to cope with. Only the Radical Enlightenment then swept the entire edifice of the past aside and put forward basic human rights, full freedom of thought expression and the press,
democratic political forms, and the emancipation of women, blacks, homosexuals and Jews giving all underprivileged groups of earlier times full equality and their full rights.

This was not something that was just implied. It was actively fought for on all these fronts and many intellectuals and publicists understood all this at the time as the direct outcome of radical Enlightenment philosophy and not anything else. Much of this agenda, the basis of democratic modernity, was momentarily achieved in constitutional law by the French Revolution between 1789 and 1793, though many aspects of the programme - including the emancipation of women and the ending of black slavery, together with the world’s first democratic constitution, the French constitution of 1793 - were afterwards reversed and largely undone. Conservatives won the great war of the late 18th century and defeated the radical Enlightenment. But did they defeat it definitely? That is the question of our time? Much of the Radical Enlightenment agenda still hasn't been fully accomplished today. But the fact that we see that democratic forms and freedoms are the best kind of society and the key to how society should be organized is due to the achievements of the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment. This is why I believe the Radical Enlightenment is the foundation of democratic modernity and remains of overriding importance for us today even if we cant yet easily teach all this in civics classes to children or grown ups because religion, prejudice and conservative politics still stand in the way and because there are still lots of professional scholars and even first rate philosophers experiencing real difficulty in coming to grips with the historical reality and the full significance of the kind of philosophy that gave rise to the Radical Enlightenment.

1 Gay, *Enlightenment i*, 3
2 Withers, *Placing*, 2
3 Dupré, *Enlightenment*, 358
4 Roche, ‘*Lumières concrètes*’, 94–7
5 Lilti, *Les salons*,
6 Roche, ‘*Lumières concrètes*’, 92–3
Robertson, *Case* 8

8 Ibid., 6

9 Smith, *Essays*, 45

10 Thomas, ‘Introduction’, p. xix