

EUROPÄISCHE STUDIEN
ZUR IDEEN- UND WISSENSCHAFTSGESCHICHTE
EUROPEAN STUDIES
IN THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE AND IDEAS
17

Charlotta Wolff/Timo Kaitaro/Minna Ahokas
(eds)

The Enlightenment

Critique, Myth, Utopia

PETER LANG
Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften

Introduction

When we were preparing the symposium that eventually resulted in this volume, we could not avoid asking ourselves why we were inviting people for just another symposium on the Enlightenment. Or, to put the question more generally: Why must we keep rethinking the Enlightenment? If the beliefs, doctrines and ideologies that the Enlightenment criticised and fought against have either disappeared or taken completely new forms, and if now we cannot take too seriously the belief in reason and progress that supposedly characterises the Enlightenment, why should we keep evoking it, be it to ground our values or to criticise its heritage?

I believe we have good reasons to do this. One reason for the continuing need to re-evaluate the heritage of the Enlightenment is that the image of the Enlightenment that we have inherited is determined by our specific historical situation. We should examine whether we have projected onto the Enlightenment *our own* belief in the progress of reason, which belief is even today often apparent in the naivety with which we tend to regard previous stages of history, such as the Enlightenment, as something that is *behind* us, as something that we have superseded and towards which we can consequently take the condescending attitude of those who 'know better'. We should also ask whether we, anachronistically, tend to project onto the Enlightenment the seeds of later historical processes or ideas or to see it though a veil of ideas inherited from the historical periods that followed, such as Romanticism and Idealism.

We cannot take for granted the image that tradition has given us of the Enlightenment. We are obliged to reread and re-actualise the texts written in the eighteenth century, and when doing so, we often discover that that they contain much more than their contemporaries, or their later defenders or critics, or even the authors themselves, have found in them. If we discard the so-called 'intentional fallacy' and admit that that the author is not in a privileged position to understand the meaning of his text, we must admit that neither is no one else, and that the whole idea of closed and definite meanings is contrary to the nature of human language. And this absence of the definite and final meaning of the Enlightenment signifies that it still contains uncharted regions, texts not yet even read, as well as uncovered novel meanings in texts already covered by erudite commentaries. Instead of limiting our access to the Enlightenment, our historical situation may allow us to reveal something about the Enlightenment that our predecessors have not yet been able to see.

Although one cannot take seriously the image that the Enlightenment has left us of the dark Middle Ages, the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment were sometimes

able to reveal the prejudices and limitations of the conceptions of the preceding eras and find new ways of thinking. Likewise, their romantic or postmodern critics were sometimes able to see the prejudices of the Enlightenment. Yet sometimes, by rereading the texts of the Enlightenment, we are able to reveal the prejudices of the Romantics and the postmodernists. But, of course, understanding the prejudices of the latter may also help us to understand ours better. Thus history teaches us, if not nothing, at least a lesson in modesty.

The words 'myth' and 'critique' associated with the Enlightenment in the title of this volume should be taken not only as referring to the critical attitude of the Enlightenment or to the 'myths' that this critical and anti-mythical thinking may itself have had recourse to, but also as referring to the critique that the Enlightenment has been the object of and to the myths that this critique often gives rise to or propagates. Thus most of the articles in this volume, written on the basis of papers presented in the eponymous symposium that took place on 17 and 18 October 2008 in Helsinki, deal with the reception of the Enlightenment or with present attempts to reread its traditional texts or to reveal still partly uncharted textual corpora – such as the clandestine philosophical manuscripts rediscovered at the beginning of the previous century. Instead of contributing to defining the Enlightenment, the articles collected here reveal that the Enlightenment cannot be defined once and for all. Its identity is, to use one of one of the favourite figures and metaphors of the *philosophes*, like that of a living organism – maintained despite, and even *through* continuing transformations.

Timo Kaitaro