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BOOK REVIEW

Richard Whatmore, *The End of Enlightenment: Empire, Commerce, Crisis*

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The End of Enlightenment is a groundbreaking work that proves the relevance of the Enlightenment to our era. Richard Whatmore defends the value of eighteenth-century political ideas through an extraordinary approach: the Enlightenment — or, under certain circumstances, *Enlightenments* (p. 7) — is relevant not because it championed human reason, rights, freedom, faith in the progress of humanity, and, more generally, assorted basic features of modernity as commonly depicted in the literature (p. 1). Instead, its relevance arises from the parallel predicaments in the past and present encapsulated in Whatmore's conception of "the end of enlightenment." As the book's subtitle suggests, this involves crises rising out of national frenzy over global imperial competition. New commercial forces bred fanatic prophets and demagogues who jeopardized civil peace and religious toleration (p. 13). In other words, Whatmore does not make the case of relevance by tracing the *origin* of essential elements of modern states to Enlightenment Europe but indicates that the eighteenth-century problems remain a substantial challenge for our world today (pp. 313–314).

In advancing this perspective, Whatmore's contribution is both historiographical and methodological: by acknowledging the failure of the eighteenth-century political ideal, the book recasts the conventional interpretation of the Enlightenment's achievements. At the same time, it further defends the purpose of studying the history of political thought. Given that we still live in a world shaped by the end of enlightenment, studying the past is meant to glean insights from key thinkers who strived to overcome problems similar to our present predicaments. Underscoring the eighteenth-century failure, the book demonstrates that we cannot resurrect outdated values in the hope of finding cogent answers. Yet, investigating past thinkers' responses to the Enlightenment's demise helps us to frame our normative assessment of current issues. Whatmore's approach shows us the need to avoid oversimplification and generalization precisely because it reconstructs the historical trajectory of how abstract ideas were put to use but repeatedly failed.

Whatmore's approach encourages us to keep a firm eye on the past when addressing our present challenges. This message is expressed in his recent works, among which *The End of Enlightenment* complements his intervention in the scholarly debates over early modern theories of free states. Although the book started as the Carlyle Lectures at the University of Oxford in 2019, it can be regarded as the sequel to his *Terrorists, Anarchists, and Republicans: The Genevans and The Irish in Time of Revolution*. Both works consider the eighteenth century a period of crisis in European history as the rise of commerce shifted the *raison d'être* of many states. Consequently, new forms of international competition transformed superstition and enthusiasm from the realms of religion to politics. Enthusiasm in this scenario denoted both religious fervor and political zeal. For instance, in Britain, the Whig ideas of the ancient constitution and English liberty fostered "the zeal for liberty," which subsequently became a useful tool for Britain's pursuit of empire. *Terrorists, Anarchists, and Republicans* uses the examples of New Geneva and Ireland to demonstrate the impact of such fanaticism on European commerce and empires. It further indicates Britain's key role in Whatmore's conception of the end of the Enlightenment.[1] From this perspective, the point of *The End of Enlightenment* is to elaborate on the intellectual life rising out of the political crisis in this period, which in turn reveals the recurring problem of political fanaticism in the

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[1] Richard Whatmore, *Terrorists, Anarchists, and Republicans: The Genevans and The Irish in Time of Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), pp. 347–350.

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modern world. As Whatmore acutely summarizes in his 2021 book *The History of Political Thought*, "It is not the first time in history that we anticipate the likely end of days through political revolution by democratic mobs or autocrats in the guise of military Caesars or super-rich merchant Caesars."[2]

The Paradox of Progress

The End of Enlightenment tells a story of the internal crisis of the modern world that casts light on the paradoxical nature of progress. Multiple features of modernity are often associated with the Enlightenment, such as the rise of commerce, civil government, and the international state system. Yet, they actually produced the antinomes, including the jealousy of trade, party zeal, the frenzy of liberty, and international warfare that threatened the achievements of European civilization (p. 50). Civil peace and toleration were sabotaged by "schemers" who sought to manipulate the public through superstition and enthusiasm (pp. xxx–xxxi). Enthusiasm now became "the most powerful force in social intercourse" and was identified as the "apotheosis" of violent passions. When translated into politics, it generated problematic ideas of the mercantile system that could provoke civil and international wars. Meanwhile, it fuelled factional strife to the extent that staggering polarization afflicted the whole society, which consequently produced new forms of popular frenzy (p. 57). In many eighteenth-century thinkers' view, this denoted the return of fanaticism as seen in the seventeenth-century wars of religion, which effectively terminated the hope for progressing towards an enlightened society (p. 13). Hence, the real question for them was how to preserve a free state where such a society could thrive. It is on this ground that we can properly understand Whatmore's conception of the end of enlightenment. As he argues, "the Enlightenment did exist in the form of genuine strategies for peace and toleration. When these strategies were overwhelmed by new kinds of fanaticism, enlightenment was seen to have ended" (p. 6). In other words, as new forms of fanaticism steered European nations towards civil and international wars, the socio-political upheavals terminated the conditions that had been sustaining the Enlightenment's achievements.

Whatmore's framing is recognizably Humean. The book indeed begins with David Hume's shifting positions after the Seven Years' War (1756–1763). The younger Hume was sanguine about the Enlightenment's achievements, including the progress of arts and sciences, the development of civilized monarchy, and the widespread religious toleration across society. However, since the 1750s, his hope was shattered by the British government's handling of the American colonial crisis, the London mobs in the Wilkes riots, and the frenzy of liberty fuelled by the Whig party ideology. The prevailing superstition about the English liberty now made Britain close to the fanatic state during the English Civil War. As for its international status, it had become a part of the imperial competition where major players believed that they had to destroy their rivals in order to preserve their own liberty (pp. 33, 69–73, 219). As a result, demagogical styles of politics, most notably under the administration of William Pitt the Elder, could easily manipulate public opinion. Hume's thought decisively altered the ways later generations thought about modern politics (p. 51).

The other seven thinkers examined in subsequent chapters of the book indeed operated under Hume's framework, including William Petty (the second Earl of Shelburne), Catharine Macaulay, Edward Gibbon, Edmund Burke, Jacques-Pierre Brissot, Thomas Paine, and Mary Wollstonecraft. Some of them sought to answer Hume's problem of fanaticism through moderate means whereas others called for radical republicanism to thoroughly reform society and politics. For instance, Macaulay supported the cause of the American Revolution as she believed that civic virtue could sustain the new republic (pp. 120–121). However, Hume had already argued before her that political stability had to be based on non-personal means. Macaulay soon realized that her ideal of a patriotic citizenry was impossible in both Britain and America, given the profound impact of luxury and corruption (pp. 128–129). Likewise, Paine attempted to refute Hume through his arguments for the positive impact of the American and French Revolutions on humanity (pp. 243–249). Yet, he was disappointed by the constitution of the USA and the divisiveness of French politics after the Terror (pp. 249–250). Wollstonecraft similarly had a vision of "true enlightenment" where republican politics could lead to a radical reform of manners. For her, "enlightened sentiments" could cure "the narrow opinions of superstition," further promoting liberty and equality between the sexes (p. 253). Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft failed to address Hume's point about "the likelihood of national character turning towards superstition during the end of enlightenment" (p. 293). The French Revolution eventually betrayed her ideal of an egalitarian society by creating a fanatic republic.

By indicating the Enlightenment's demise from the perspectives of both moderate and radical thinkers, Whatmore demonstrates that the modern world did not arise from the triumph of human rationality, but the plight where "the strategies to maintain enlightenment that Hume believed in when he was young" all failed (p. xxxi). Moreover, various socio-political factors raised the new challenge that superstition and enthusiasm were "translated from religion into politics promoted both nationalism and militant revolutionary republicanism. Far from being tolerant, each ideology found violence against others entirely justifiable if it maintained the independence of a state" (p. 310).

[2] Richard Whatmore, *The History of Political Thought: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 121.

The Koselleckian Moment of Crisis

The pessimistic intellectual landscape as portrayed in Whatmore's idea of the end of enlightenment reminds us of the narrative of Reinhart Koselleck's *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*.[3] Koselleck also reconstructs a historical trajectory leading to a crisis by the late eighteenth century, which yields his verdict that the Enlightenment failed. Thinkers in Whatmore's book were disappointed by the fact that their ideals became impossible since various attempts to curtail superstition and enthusiasm had failed. If we accept their view that fanatic projectors were the ones to blame, then we can see the overlapping ground with Koselleck's narrative. As Koselleck argues, the Enlightenment was "deceptively propelled" by "a Utopian image." This "ideal-type framework" produced "contradictions which could not be resolved in practice and prepared the way for the Terror and dictatorship." Just as Whatmore indicates the relevance of this peril to our own era, Koselleck asserts that this predicament "made its reappearance in the subsequent history of the modern world."[4]

Koselleck's book of course is a product of the post-war reflection on the Enlightenment's alleged legacy. Treating it as the historical precondition of German National Socialism and the Cold War inevitably makes the book a study of the origin of twentieth-century utopianism by dating back to the eighteenth century. This differentiates it from Whatmore's work, whose point is not to trace the origin of ideas. That said, the parallel between both authors' narratives reciprocally complements each other's diagnoses of the Enlightenment pathogenesis. *The End of Enlightenment* indicates two types of strategies: Hume, Shelburne, Gibbon, and Burke called for moderation in politics to counteract the growth of superstition, enthusiasm, and demagogical styles of politics (chs. 2–3, 5–6). In contrast, Macaulay, Brissot, Paine, and Wollstonecraft insisted on recourse to republican politics and revolutionary means to rescue the Enlightenment ideal of liberty and equality (chs. 4, 7–9). In Koselleck's *Critique and Crisis*, however, the key intellectual figures were those who criticized Enlightenment politics, but it is unclear whether they attempted to rescue its achievements in the same way as Whatmore's end-of-enlightenment thinkers did. As Koselleck read it, for Pierre Bayle, Voltaire, Diderot, Turgot, Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller, and Kant, political criticism safeguarded liberty not by defending abstract ideologies but by orchestrating an "appropriate response to Absolutism."[5] Hence, for them, there was not an endangered Enlightenment project awaiting rescue but only "competing claims to authority" between the state and society that led to "the prognostications of revolution." The Enlightenment luminaries' shared sense of crisis was based on a "philosophy of history" that shaped their "consciousness of the Enlightenment," including pointing out the path to revolution.[6]

This raises a series of questions for Whatmore's conception of the end of enlightenment: What was the role of criticism in the eight thinkers' arguments for the alleged failure of the Enlightenment? If it did play any role in their various approaches, was it an anatomical device for the pathology of eighteenth-century society and politics, or a skeptical technique to counteract superstition and enthusiasm? Those who employed criticism in Koselleck's narrative more or less had certain skeptical tendencies, if not of the radical kind of Bayle or Hume. But it is unclear in Whatmore's story whether those who were disappointed by the Enlightenment's demise developed their own skeptical philosophy to question the certainty of prevailing knowledge or simply — if not arbitrarily — proclaimed their dogmatic *belief* in the end of enlightenment.

The only exception is Brissot, who took a path similar to Hume. As Chapter Seven shows, he regarded skepticism as the most effective means to counteract superstition and enthusiasm. He thus spent much time composing a book on skepticism, entitled *Plan Raisoné*. Just like Hume, his way of doubt cannot be classified into the Pyrrhonian or Academic School (p. 198); both thinkers' goal was to override "false knowledge" and "dangerous religious beliefs" (p. 199). Brissot indicated that, ironically, new errors as such "threatened humanity," although "people believed they were living in the midst of enlightenment" (Ibid.). In light of this, the use of doubt deserves further examination, given that Whatmore's story begins with Hume, who was known for using skepticism to defeat superstition and enthusiasm (to be fair, Whatmore does take this seriously in the first chapter on Hume). Besides, if Brissot was the only one who developed an epistemic device to tackle this problem after Hume, one could question whether there were coherent philosophical strategies to "maintain enlightenment" (p. xxxi). Their cohesion leads to yet another question: Was there really an *orchestrated* Enlightenment project?

Moreover, Koselleck's and Whatmore's conceptions of the aim and origin of the Enlightenment yield further questions on the status of free states in the eighteenth century. While Whatmore construes the Enlightenment as "the project of preventing wars of religion from breaking out once more" (p. 11), Koselleck argues that absolutist states were the ones who took overcoming the threat of religious wars as their *raison d'être*.[7] If both Koselleck and Whatmore agree

[3] Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988 [1959]).

[4] Ibid., p. 2.

[5] Ibid., p. 102.

[6] Ibid., p. 130.

[7] Ibid., ch. 2.

that "the Enlightenment began when these religious wars ceased," then how might Whatmore's argument that the Enlightenment aimed at preserving free states square with Koselleck's point about absolutist states' *raison d'être*? If we are to accept the latter view, would it yield the deterministic thinking that the end-of-enlightenment thinkers' attempts to restore liberty and equality were doomed to fail since the Enlightenment's mechanism to curtail religious fanaticism was intrinsically absolute? For Koselleck, the tension between the liberty-loving bourgeois society and the absolute power of the state was precisely the cause of the crisis. As reported in the writings of Rousseau, Paine, and Abbé Raynal, this insoluble tension sought an outlet in the violence of revolution. It was further transformed into a blind faith of utopianism that betrayed the Enlightenment's aim to prevent religious and civil wars through the sovereign power of the state.[8] On this basis, one can also wonder if, in Whatmore's narrative, those who sought to redeem the Enlightenment through revolutionary means and republican politics were destined to be disappointed because they wrongly employed a utopian scheme for their Enlightenment project.

The Purpose of the History of Political Thought

The distinctiveness of Whatmore's approach to the eighteenth-century crisis is that it takes the history of political thought as a means to overcome uncertainty. He departs from the common view that studying history can indicate paths to the future, be that guidance to human conduct or predictions about future trends. Although there are similarities between the past and present, one should not construe them as history repeating itself. Whatmore's case for relevance is not based on a cyclical view of history, nor does it aim to validate contemporary values through teleological reconstruction of the past (p. 6). Instead, it suggests that some historical questions may not have once-and-for-all solutions. Despite the disparity between those questions' original contexts and our era, we could still live under their shadow (p. 313). But precisely because of this, the history of political thought "can relate skepticism and uncertainty about our future to parallel fears expressed in the past."[9]

In other words, the value of the similarities between the past and present consists in their parallel patterns. It is on this ground that we can legitimately consult past thinkers' responses to crises of a similar nature. Since they have gone through the challenges of their time, history becomes a tribunal for their ideas. A knowledge of history enables us to seek a surer ground for our judgment of our own predicaments. As Whatmore argues, "in drawing upon the knowledge of the past generated by scrutinizing ideas about politics in their own time, duties and responsibilities (and those of our governments) to one another and to the wider world can be more clearly and realistically perceived."[10] Committed to this approach, Whatmore's rigorous scholarship and prolific career attest that the history of political thought helps us to orient our thinking, preventing us from being lost in the woods of historically unaccountable polemics.

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[8] Ibid., ch. 11.

[9] Whatmore, *The History of Political Thought*, p. 121.

[10] Ibid.