

GARY GRIEVE-CARLSON
Lebanon Valley College

THE ENLIGHTENMENT: GOOD FOR WHAT AILS US?

Stephen Eric Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Toward a Politics of Radical Engagement*, Columbia University Press, 2004, 181 pages

Stephen Bronner's project in this book comes in two parts: the first is a rebuttal of the attack on the Enlightenment articulated in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) and developed in various ways by proponents of postmodernism, "late" critical theory, feminism, post-colonialism, and assorted other camps in the landscape of the contemporary intellectual left. The second is a call for the contemporary American left to rally around the Enlightenment values that lie at the root of liberalism and socialism so that meaningful political change can once again occur. Bronner sees the resignation, pessimism, and "ideological turf wars" that afflict the American left today as the direct result of Horkheimer and Adorno's argument that Enlightenment values are inherently hegemonic, leading inexorably to the Terror of the French Revolution and twentieth-century totalitarianism.

Critics on the left have argued that the Enlightenment's "instrumental reason" and scientific method result finally and inevitably in a seamless bureaucratic order, a "totally administered society" in which individual conscience and freedom have no room to maneuver. Enlightenment reason, according to these critics, seeks a single, absolute truth (one right answer) not only with regard to the natural sciences but also with regard to moral choices. Indeed, choice comes to have meaning only in the context of consumerism, and "tolerance" exists only within the box of an exploitative mass society. Scientific rationalism makes possible total war, and the reification of human beings that results from such rationalism ends inexorably, in Horkheimer and Adorno's graphic image, with a number tattooed on an arm, i.e., the Holocaust is the logical end of the Enlightenment. For similar reasons, Horkheimer and Adorno also assert that Enlightenment reason fulfills itself in the thinking of the Marquis de Sade. More recently many critics have observed that beneath its façade of tolerance and equality, the Enlightenment accepted sexism, racism, elitism, and Eurocentrism.

Horkheimer and Adorno argue that in the contemporary West, organized politics no longer affords a prospect of meaningful change, and Bronner finds among the contemporary left "a basic discomfort with the notion of progress." For the left, "progress" has come to mean globalization, growing disparities in the distribution of wealth, and burgeoning consumerism. Instead of trying to

work for change from within the existing political system, and being co-opted by that system, genuine resistance against our authoritarian mass society requires, for Horkheimer and Adorno, a retreat from politics and the cultivation and intensification of an aesthetic, metaphysical subjectivity. Such a subjectivity provides the best—indeed the only—means of resisting the reification to which the culture industry subjects each and every one of us.

Prompted by the arguments of the Frankfurt School, suggests Bronner, the contemporary American left has collapsed into intellectual incoherence and a politics of the ineffectual. By rejecting the Enlightenment, the left promotes experience over reason, ethnic identity over cosmopolitanism, the community over the individual, and myth over science. Michel Foucault, arguing along lines similar to those laid out in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, writes that the “universal” intellectual typical of the Enlightenment employs a “grand narrative” of history and “totalizing” ideas of universal justice in the service of an effectively authoritarian monolithic order. In contrast to such a figure, Foucault proposes a “specific” intellectual who is intimately familiar with the discourse and experience of his/her particular group, who “knows” his/her group in ways that the “universal” intellectual can not. But, says Bronner, this is precisely the argument employed by the right during the Dreyfus case in France: only French Christians could genuinely understand the meaning of that incident for France. The contemporary left’s embrace of the local and distrust of the universal opens itself to a parochialism that has historically lent support to the reactionary right.

When the contemporary left, in its discomfort with the universalizing “liberal republic,” valorizes the kind of democracy to be found in town meetings or workers’ councils, Bronner points out that such local institutions presuppose the liberal norms and judicial system of a larger republic. He argues that if the American left wants to effect meaningful political change, it must abandon its nostalgia for a traditional, naïve populism that is dangerously counter-Enlightenment in many ways, as well as its attraction to a romantic, apocalyptic, anti-political utopianism that might exist in the optative, but never in the indicative. “The radical left,” writes Bronner, “has never formulated an adequate substitute for the liberal republic in theory and it has certainly never offered any sustainable institutional alternative in practice.” Nor has “late critical theory” been able to provide any sort of substantive foundation for individual human rights, apart from Enlightenment ideas.

The left’s only way forward, for Bronner, lies in a reaffirmation of the values of the Enlightenment and a clear rejection of the arguments of the Frankfurt School and what he calls “late” critical theory. Bronner asserts that, contrary to its critics’ assertions, the Enlightenment does not imply latent authoritarianism, the omnipotence of reason, the eradication of subjectivity, the superfluousness of passion, or the domination of nature. Nor are Enlightenment values merely an ideological veil for capitalist exploitation. On the contrary, argues Bronner, these values provide the best available model for resisting oppressive power structures, prejudice, and the privileges of wealth, gender, race, or birth, and for promoting cosmopolitan tolerance, economic justice, and democratic

accountability. The Enlightenment gave us ideas such as equality under the law, the consent of the governed, the protection of minority rights, and rights predicated on reciprocity. Indeed, writes Bronner, “hardly a single idea of the Left does not derive from the Enlightenment.” Far from leading to the totalitarianism of Mussolini, Hitler, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao, as Horkheimer and Adorno argue, the Enlightenment’s emphasis on individual rights, civil liberties, and the questioning of authority provides the strongest antidote to such politics. In American history, Enlightenment ideals lay behind the Progressive movement, the New Deal, and the Civil Rights movement. Far from being the inevitable outgrowth of the Enlightenment, fascism was in fact a reaction against the Enlightenment political movements of socialism and liberalism. “Instrumental reason” may have been a necessary condition for the occurrence of the Holocaust, but it was far from being a sufficient condition, as Horkheimer and Adorno argue.

Bronner concedes that the idea of “progress,” so central to Enlightenment thought, has been used to justify colonialism, genocide, racism, and anti-Semitism, as well as the “stultifying determinism” of communism. An over-reliance on bureaucracy, instrumental reason, and specialization has been an unintended consequence of modernity. Similarly liberalism’s embrace of the free market involves the potential for exploitation, and global capitalism has exacerbated economic inequality and our environmental crisis. The Enlightenment world was primarily white, male, straight, and Christian, and seminal Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke and Adam Smith allowed for inequality (even slavery)—but because the Enlightenment insists that *everything* is subject to criticism, Enlightenment thought also provides the strongest foundation for any critique of slavery, sexism, or any other “exclusion of the other.” For Bronner, “progress” includes our desire to know the world around us, as well as our ability to imagine a better world, that is, “progress” means that we have the right to change the world. And we ought to change the world, he implies, in the direction established by the Enlightenment’s two most important political products: liberalism and socialism.

The Enlightenment project involves an “unfinished understanding of freedom,” for Bronner, and as that understanding develops, he suggests that we will see more clearly that, for example, just as we do not apply laissez-faire economics to the military or the federal reserve, so we need not apply such economics to much of the rest of our economy. As Isaiah Berlin was fond of pointing out, some rights conflict with other rights, for example, the right to property may conflict with the right to decent working conditions. But Enlightenment thought, for Bronner, provides the best framework for the reasoned resolution of such conflicts.

Bronner is persuasive in his critique of Horkheimer and Adorno and in his defense of Enlightenment thought. Who would object to such principles as the consent of the governed, minority rights, separation of powers, or economic justice? But he weakens his argument by falling into an either/or trap: either one wholly supports the Enlightenment, or one supports the Counter-Enlightenment

(as President Bush said, “You’re either with us, or you’re against us in the fight against terror.”). For Bronner, any opposition to Enlightenment values inevitably aligns itself with Counter-Enlightenment values of reactionary traditionalism, revealed religion, dogma, prejudice, aristocratic privilege, and authoritarianism, which, he observes, seem much more prevalent in today’s world than Enlightenment values. Bronner goes so far as to include beneath the umbrella of the Counter-Enlightenment such movements as romanticism, orthodox Christianity and Judaism, organicism, localism (or provincialism), and nationalism, alongside anti-Semitism and fascism. Only the Enlightenment, he argues, allows us to recognize the dignity of the “other.” In fact, Enlightenment values “underpin the struggle of every progressive movement,” and “they project the type of world that every decent person wishes to see.” This extreme claim needlessly antagonizes anyone who identifies with the romantic, the organic, the local, or the religious, who may conclude that Bronner is peremptorily excluding them from the camp of “decent persons.”

Defending the Enlightenment against its critics on the left is only one part of Bronner’s project; the second part is his argument that Enlightenment thought can most effectively bring about the social-democratic political system that we ought to have. Bronner points out that the economic and political power of working Americans has declined steadily in the face of the demonization of the welfare state and the rollback of various redistributive policies. The top 1% of the American population takes in more after-tax dollars than the bottom 40%, which may not matter for a libertarian or a free-market absolutist, but it matters to anyone who acknowledges that freedom and individual autonomy depend to some extent upon access to material resources, and that material inequality inexorably narrows the exercise of freedom. Bronner argues that the left has devoted far too much energy to the kind of “identity politics” that serves only to fragment the working class and to distract attention from an economic system in which working people are treated merely as “costs of production.” Returning to the values of the Enlightenment, he says, is the surest way to “strengthen the radical legacy of liberal democracy.” The Enlightenment project remains “unfinished,” but we need to re-embrace that project if we are to realize the goals of a cosmopolitan liberal socialism.

Politically, Bronner’s argument is in many ways persuasive. As he points out, the Eastern European freedom movements of 1989 embraced Hobbes and Locke more fully than Baudrillard or Adorno because the Eastern Europeans recognized, perhaps more clearly than has the Left in the West, the fundamental importance of the Enlightenment emphasis on popular sovereignty, constitutionalism, legal equality, and the accountability of the state’s leaders and institutions. But Bronner ignores certain weaknesses in Enlightenment thought that render his overarching argument less compelling. When Horkheimer and Adorno assert that the logical end of the Enlightenment is a number tattooed on an arm and argue for withdrawal from political activity, they push their claims to such an extreme that it is not too difficult for Bronner to argue against them. Nevertheless, there is a strain in Enlightenment thought—and Bronner seems susceptible to this strain—that suggests that reason can ultimately resolve

conflicts among human values and ideals, and that reason can lead us progressively closer to an ideal social polity. In Bronner's mind, this ideal society is a social democracy, but we know that other partisans of the Enlightenment have imagined this ideal in Marxist terms or, more recently, in neoconservative terms. What links thinkers as otherwise disparate as Marxists and neoconservatives is their core belief that a single model of political economy is rationally optimal and ought to be promoted and/or imposed—arguably by violence, if necessary—around the world. Enlightenment rationalism lends itself to one-best-answer (or “best practice,” as the corporate world puts it) models that, if not hegemonic, are ironically similar, in their assertion of universal validity or truth, to the theocratic or aristocratic authoritarianisms against which the Enlightenment initially rebelled. Suspicion of the building and attempted imposition of such “single best systems”—rather than a naïve privileging of experience over reason, as Bronner would have it—is at the root of romanticism's unease with certain aspects of the Enlightenment, particularly that aspect which claims to know where History is going, and/or where it ought to go, and how best to help it get there. Alexander Herzen spoke for the romantics against the Marxists, the neo-conservatives, and thinkers like Bronner when he said “history has no libretto.”

Bronner is equally unpersuasive when he identifies the Enlightenment's chief enemy as religion—he seems fixated on the eighteenth-century struggle against the Counter-Enlightenment. If he is correct to identify the contemporary American Left's most important political goal in terms of a cosmopolitan liberal socialism that seeks redress of our burgeoning material inequality, then it is difficult to understand why he insists that the Enlightenment's primary task today is an “unrelenting assault” on religious fanaticism, whether Islamic or Christian. This is precisely the kind of distracting and divisive approach that he criticizes in his remarks on identity politics.

Bronner's superficial understanding of religion and myth is apparent when he presents Prometheus and Icarus as symbols of the Enlightenment. Prometheus was deeply admired by thinkers as disparate as Shelley, Marx, and Rockefeller, but in Hesiod's *Theogony*, he is not a hero: Zeus takes fire from away from men, leading Prometheus to steal it back, only because Prometheus has foolishly attempted to deceive Zeus into choosing the poorer portion of the sacrificial meats. Aeschylus, in *Prometheus Bound*, depicts Prometheus as a mercenary in the war between the Olympian gods and the Titans (who include Prometheus's parents)—he serves Zeus only because Kronos rejects his help. Icarus is an equally odd choice as a symbol of the Enlightenment—the bastard son of Daedalus, he fails to follow his father's advice, flies too close to the sun, and is killed. We might find the famous artisan Daedalus a more appropriate symbol of the Enlightenment, until we remember that he goes into exile in Crete because he murders his highly talented nephew out of professional jealousy. Daedalus's “instrumental reason” is then placed at the service of Pasiphae, for whom Daedalus constructs the wooden cow that allows her to be impregnated by Poseidon's bull, and so to conceive the monstrous Minotaur.

Because religion is not reducible to mere reason, because it does not conform to the kind of progressive accumulation of knowledge typical of the sciences, and because of its role in the Counter-Enlightenment, Bronner is irrationally hostile toward it. He argues, for example, that “the large mainstream religious organizations have—historically—opposed virtually every scientific advance, every new philosophical movement, and every progressive political development,” and then seems to soften his criticism: “religion turns into a problem only when it strays beyond the private sphere and identifies its concerns with those of the public weal.” But it was precisely their religious credentials that lent such moral authority to Robert Drinan, William Sloane Coffin, and the Berrigan brothers during the Vietnam War, to Karol Wojtyla during the last stages of the Cold War, to Desmond Tutu in the struggle against apartheid, and to Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Civil Rights struggle. Surely Bronner cannot believe that the major civil rights legislation of the 1960s would have passed if it were not for the involvement of “religious organizations,” and if the churches had not strayed “beyond the private sphere,” which is where the racists and social conservatives wanted them to stay.

Finally, the book is marred by sloppy editing: words are needlessly repeated (“Hobbes and Locke conceived conceived of the state...”), words are inserted where they don’t belong (“Such thinking was in already prevalent in Germany”), words are carelessly confused (“it took a few hundred ideas for the idea to permeate the mainstream discourse”), and names are misspelled (“Mercea Eliade”). Bronner also has an annoying stylistic habit of beginning a sentence with an adjective in the subject slot, e.g., “Crucial is that Enlightenment liberalism understood resistance. . .” or “Important is that both the philosophers and their adversaries saw themselves. . .” A good editor might let this sort of construction slide once or twice, but it occurs far too often in this text.

GARY GRIEVE-CARLSON is Professor of English and Director of General Education at Lebanon Valley College. He is the editor of the recently published book *Olson’s Prose*. In addition to his work on Olson, his publications include work on William Carlos Williams, Carolyn Forché, Robert Penn Warren, Robert Frost, Arthur Miller, Edmund Wilson, and Susan Sontag.

©All rights reserved. Gary Grieve-Carlson.

Grieve-Carlson, Gary. “The Enlightenment: Good for What Ails Us?” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, vol. 9 no. 1 (Winter 2008): 112-117.