

Keith Michael Baker, « Enlightenment and Violence », communication à la journée d'étude organisée par le Centre d'histoire de Sciences Po et France-Stanford Center for Interdisciplinary Studies, 21 mars 2011, *La violence en Europe au XX^e siècle*.

Enlightenment and Violence

What does the Enlightenment have to do with violence in Europe in the twentieth century? It would not be difficult to rehearse some of the obvious answers to this question. The Enlightenment has been indicted by Adorno and Horkheimer for the technological savagery of the Holocaust; by J.L. Talmon for the phenomenon of totalitarianism more generally; by critics of colonialism for a conception of universality that condemned other civilizations to the waiting room of history or the operating room of modernity; by deconstructionists of many stripes for a despotism of reason masquerading as liberation.

Setting aside these now rather well worn claims to reveal the hidden violence within the ideology of Enlightenment, I thought it might be interesting to take a different tack in asking how Enlightenment thinkers themselves thought about violence. That turns out to be difficult. There is no obvious text to turn to in this regard; I could find no Sorel of the Enlightenment waiting with a set of "Reflections on Violence." Failing that, I decided to turn to the *Encyclopedia* of Diderot and d'Alembert, now searchable digitally through the ARTFL database at the University of Chicago. Remarkably, the article on "Violence" in that work consists of two lines. It identifies the term as the name for the "divinité fille du Styx, & compagne inséparable de Jupiter," and cites Pausanias for the detail that this goddess had a temple in the citadel of Corinth along with Necessity, but no one was permitted to enter. The article had none of the famous renvois to move the reader along. Not very revealing, then, unless to suggest that the Encyclopedists had no very substantial theory of violence as an integral category of action or behavior.

The term "violence" does, of course, occur in the *Encyclopedia*, 1010 times to be exact. It appears above all as a feature of natural phenomena: of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, winds, hail; of the force of physical and chemical reactions; of medical symptoms, such as fevers, convulsions, and other bodily states. Often it characterizes human passions, emotions, dispositions, and desires, states that seem beyond an individual's control. Much less frequently, it is an attribute of crimes and punishments, of war, revolt, and conquest, of physical force and fanaticism, of injustice and the untrammelled will of a usurper, tyrant or despot.

There are some interesting aspects of this list. Other than an occasional reference to war, there is no reference to violence as a characteristic of collective action. Even more striking, violence appears as

an attribute of other phenomena rather than as a phenomenon in itself. An example of this form does occur, notably in the article on the Koran that makes a point of saying that Islam was “established and spread less by seduction than by violence and the force of arms.” But the Encyclopedists rarely speak in this way. They think of violence as a degree of force, intensity, disruption. They see it as an attribute of extreme phenomena, ineluctable or eruptive, natural or unnatural, but in any case mostly beyond human choice or control.

To anticipate, perhaps, a point that Priya Satia will make this afternoon, the Encyclopedists use of the term suggests that we might also reflect on our own. Violence can apply to so many phenomena that we might ask when and how it became an analytical category in itself, if indeed it has. For us, it seems now to connote any form of transgression, physical, intellectual, or psychological, whether individual, institutional, or collective. Obviously, the shocking experiences of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have much to do with that. We have witnessed more violence, violence on an unimaginable scale. But it may also be that we have discovered more violence in the world. Like the notion of rights, the idea of freedom and self-determination, individual or collective, constantly finds new forms of realization, not all of them salutary; it also discovers or generates new obstacles to that realization. It ultimately discovers the violence of the expectation of freedom, at least of a certain kind of freedom. This may indeed be a dialectic that we owe in large part to the Enlightenment.

Rather than looking at the violence the Enlightenment may have engendered, though, I would like to point to the violence from which it emerged. I would not be the first to point out that the Enlightenment was haunted by the memory of traumatic violence or that it defined itself in large part in reaction to that memory. I’m referring, of course, to the memory of the Wars of Religion, from the carnage of St. Bartholomew’s Day to the ravaging of an entire continent by the Thirty Years War. Descartes, finding himself in the midst of the latter, dreamed of a system of universal reason that would be beyond contestation; in this, Leibniz followed his lead. Hobbes and Bossuet, in their different ways, imagined a peace that could be achieved through absolute rule. But the philosophers of the Enlightenment, by and large, took another tack. For rational systems and absolute authority they substituted epistemological modesty. Following Locke, they dared not to know. They saw religious conflict, like fanaticism, intolerance, persecution, oppression, and much human misery, as derived from the fact that human beings insisted on exaggerated and dogmatic claims to an absolute knowledge about matters they could not possibly know. Violence was the superstitious fruit of metaphysical panic on the part of those who refused to recognize the true limits of the human mind. Enlightenment thinkers demanded, on the contrary, that human beings accept their condition and limit themselves to what they could know: their immediate sensations and experiences, and the world around them only insofar as they could build a sufficiently reliable conception of it on the basis of an analysis of these sensations and experiences.

To take this stance was to abandon centuries-old aspirations to an ultimate knowledge of the world and its meanings, settling instead for the limited view of an infinitely small being in an infinitely large universe. There were, however, immense compensations to be found in this willingness to recognize that human knowledge was merely pieced together from sensations, built up for human purposes and in response to human needs, not given by revelation or found entire by abstract reasoning from first principles. Because knowledge was relative to human beings, it could also be relevant to them, which is to say that it could be useful in the conduct of their everyday life, the only life that they could directly know. The utility of human knowledge, and the collective benefits of human society deriving from it, compensated for acceptance of human limitations.

It followed, too, that knowledge could be enlarged in the future precisely because it was limited in the present. Because it was ever partial, it could ever grow. Future progress became the reward, and the warrant, for acceptance of present limitations. Rash anticipation could place that progress at risk; epistemological modesty could advance it. As the eighteenth century advanced, nonetheless, Enlightenment thinkers became increasingly confident in projecting the future progress of the human mind, as of the society it could shape. With Condorcet in one vein or Adam Smith in another, they saw the development of modern society as offering a dynamic framework of human existence endowed with mechanisms producing stability through a constant process of change generated by the progress of reason, the advance of liberty, the growth of commerce, the expansion of individual rights, and the unleashing of human energies to transform the social and natural world.

In this vision, violence could be exorcised: passions would give way to a harmony of interests and a spirit of benevolence, war would be tamed, even eliminated, the slave trade would be abolished and slavery eventually eliminated, spectacular punishments would be abolished, freedom and equality would be maximized, collective choice made more rational. Individuals would fulfill their needs, pursue their goals, and seek their own happiness. It was true, Condorcet acknowledged, that ignorance and error still lived to bring crime and oppression into the world, but “these monsters, the most formidable enemies of man’s happiness, drag with them the mortal dart that has struck them, and their very cries, which terrify you, prove only how sure and terrible have been the blows they have received.” In this conception, Enlightenment was a profound revolution already underway, a process of cultural transformation that was freeing the present from the past and reorienting expectations towards a universal future.

There were, of course, more anxious views prognoses for modern society. “You trust in the present order of society without imagining that this order is subject to inevitable revolutions,” Rousseau warned. “We are approaching the state of crisis and the century of revolutions. Who can tell you what you will become then? All that men have made, men can destroy.” The crisis metaphor was a medical one, the period of crisis being that point in the progress of a disease at which the illness would recede or advance, with the natural outcome that the patient might either recover or succumb. More

remotely, it was an eschatological one, the ultimate crisis being the last violent days of life on earth. It was also a classical republican one, fruit of a view of the political body as ever caught between virtue and corruption, vigor and weakness, health and sickness, life and death. In this view, the state of crisis was the moment in which the very existence of the body politic would hang in the balance, in which its health and vigor would be recovered or it would fall into an irreversible, fatal sickness. As classical republicanism took the form of a critique of modern commercial society, so then the notion of crisis was extended to describe the effects of the destructive forces within that society as wealth and luxury fed courts and ministers, placemen and pensioners, bureaucrats and standing armies, harbingers of the inevitable appearance of despotism and social collapse.

Rousseau's prognosis was taken up by one of the most compelling journalists of the last years of the Old Regime, Simon-Nicolas Henri Linguet. Writing from exile in London, he opened the first issue of his *Annales politiques* in 1777 with an account of "the singular revolution threatening Europe." His diagnosis turned Enlightenment assumptions about the progress of society upside-down. Beneath the appearances of cultural advance and social progress that seemed to many of his contemporaries to make this age the happiest and most peaceful in the annals of human civilization, he saw more sinister developments at work. In his view, European prosperity had been achieved by an abolition of serfdom that had freed the masses only to subject them to even greater exploitation and amiseration. This process had reached a point at which a terrible crisis was inevitable, in which the oppressed would either expire in silent misery, leaving European civilization to collapse, or be emboldened by a new Spartacus to rise up and establish a new liberty "through the destruction of the murderous and deceitful laws that make it misunderstood." One cannot help seeing in the allusion to Spartacus a perhaps unconscious evocation of the fear of slave revolts that haunted the eighteenth-century Atlantic World.

In a sense, then, philosophy offered two possibilities for modern society at the end of the Old Regime. One was the happy revolution that would be the fruit of Enlightenment, the rational advance of humanity toward a better social world. The other was the violent revolution that would be the fruit of misery and despair, the fateful moment of crisis in a sick society. Remarkably, these two conceptions were fused in the process unleashed in France in 1789.

One can glimpse this moment of fusion in one of the earliest of the new revolutionary journals, the *Révolutions de Paris*. Day after day, the readers of the journal were invited to understand the French Revolution as a crisis, a terrifying moment of life or death in the social body. At the same time, this conceptualization of revolution was cast in Enlightenment terms. The French were carrying out a universal historical mission, acting not only for themselves but for "all the nations which have not yet broken the chains of despotism." To be rightly understood, their fight against this monster -- "as old as the world" -- had to be placed within a global narrative. No less significantly, an embittered and oppressed people was accomplishing the revolution of philosophy. "Only excessive misery and the

progress of enlightenment can bring about a revolution in a people that has grown old in the degradation of servitude,” the journalist insisted. Misery had generated the courage and energy to ignite a revolution; philosophy would ensure its beneficent outcome. The terrible violence of “a severe vengeance” could thus be redeemed by the “peaceful operation of philosophy;” anxieties occasioned by profound rupture could be alleviated by the promise of reason. “We find reassurance in the fact that it is the revolution of hearts and minds, and this has been the guarantee of no other revolution.” In this formulation, the revolution that was the transformation of society by enlightenment now assured the outcome of the revolution that was the frightful moment of crisis in the life of the body politic.

With this reconceptualization, perhaps, violence could take on a new meaning and purpose as the mechanism of revolutionary transformation. No longer merely an endemic fact, it could become a redeeming collective act. Lop off a few hundred heads – or a few thousand, or a few hundred thousand – and countless more would be saved. So Marat urged. The number could be increased indefinitely...