

ESSAY

# For a New Social History of the Enlightenment: Authors, Readers, and Commercial Capitalism

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(Received 19 February 2022; accepted 8 March 2022)

*Despite the voluminous work devoted to the “social history of Enlightenment ideas” since the 1970s, surprisingly little has been done to integrate its findings into general interpretations of this moment in intellectual history. Attempts to understand the Enlightenment as a long-term global phenomenon have made it difficult to situate it within any social context other than that of globalization. This essay makes the case for relating the Enlightenment, as it developed within Europe and European overseas possessions, to the advance of commercial capitalism. Drawing on recent work on the history of capitalism, it argues that a burgeoning market economy vastly expanded the opportunities for ordinary readers to participate in intellectual life, and that this change dramatically influenced the production of intellectual work, not only in its form and genre, but in the causes advanced by writers, whose work increasingly took the form of a great project for collective human self-improvement.*

The Enlightenment is a mirror.<sup>1</sup> We talk about it to praise ourselves for our progress, and we talk about it to scourge ourselves for our crimes. In an age of tyranny, it was said that “enlightenment is totalitarian.”<sup>2</sup> In an age of globalization, it is called a “global co-production.”<sup>3</sup> It is alternately presented as emancipatory and repressive, cosmopolitan and ethnocentric, feminist and misogynist. It is the ultimate moving target. And because it moves so swiftly, lines of inquiry into it begin, and then often peter out as scholarly interests shift. This essay is about a broad line of inquiry into the Enlightenment which deserves to be pursued further, and which, when married to newer concerns, may generate some useful insights.

It has been more than fifty years since Robert Darnton issued a call for “a more down-to-earth look at the Enlightenment,” grounded in the “social history of

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<sup>1</sup>I mean this in a very different sense from Ernst Cassirer, who famously called the Enlightenment a “bright, clear mirror” in which Europeans could see their best selves reflected. See Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton, 1951), xi.

<sup>2</sup>Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London, 1979), 24.

<sup>3</sup>Sebastian Conrad, “Enlightenment in Global History: A Historiographical Critique,” *American Historical Review* 117/4 (2012), 999–1027, at 1022. See also Conrad, “The Global History of the Enlightenment,” in Sebastian Conrad and Jürgen Osterhammel, eds., *An Emerging Modern World, 1750–1870* (Cambridge, MA, 2018), 485–526.

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ideas.”<sup>4</sup> His essay helped spur a wave of scholarship that investigated institutional structures, authors’ social backgrounds, the material contexts for authorship and the circulation of ideas, practices of reading, forms of sociability, censorship, and much else. Thanks to this work, the Enlightenment could no longer be seen simply as a chapter in the history of elite ideas, powered by the radical writings of what Peter Gay in the 1960s had dubbed “a little flock of *philosophes*.”<sup>5</sup> Darnton himself led the way, delving deep into the French-language archives to rediscover a lost universe of rapacious publishers, careerist intellectual entrepreneurs, hardscrabble poor hacks, and cunning police inspectors.<sup>6</sup> Collaborators on both sides of the Atlantic illuminated the worlds of provincial academies, Parisian salons, scientific societies, royal censors, masonic lodges, newspapers, theaters, and much more.<sup>7</sup> Work along these lines continues today, and in some cases it even takes the form of academic heavy industry: collaborative projects producing large-scale digital resources such as the Electronic Enlightenment and the French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe databases.<sup>8</sup>

Yet much of the most interesting recent scholarship on the Enlightenment has moved in markedly different directions. Some scholars question the Enlightenment’s unity and emphasize its different national and religious contexts. Others have worked to expand its geographic and temporal scope. Many have fallen into fraught debates about the ways in which the Enlightenment promoted or opposed European imperialism, and about whether it invented modern racism. Still others have insisted on a defiant return to a pure history of ideas. New technologies have been deployed to understand it. The Enlightenment has been deconstructed, decolonized, provincialized, translated, tropicalized, digitized—even anglicized.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Robert Darnton, “In Search of the Enlightenment: Recent Attempts to Create a Social History of Ideas,” *Journal of Modern History* 43/1 (1971), 113–32, at 113. Darnton took the phrase “social history of ideas” from Peter Gay.

<sup>5</sup>Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York, 1966–9), 2: 3–19.

<sup>6</sup>See notably Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, MA, 1982); Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-revolutionary France* (New York, 1995).

<sup>7</sup>See notably Daniel Roche, *Le siècle des lumières en province: Académies et académiciens provinciaux, 1680–1789*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1978); Roche, *La France des lumières* (Paris, 1993); Antoine Lilti, *Le monde des salons: Sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 2005); Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, *La république universelle des francs-maçons: De Newton à Metternich* (Rennes, 1999); Jeremy Caradonna, *The Enlightenment in Practice: Academic Prize Contests and Intellectual Culture in France, 1670–1794* (Ithaca, 2012); Margaret Jacob, *The Secular Enlightenment* (Princeton, 2019).

<sup>8</sup>“Electronic Enlightenment: Letters and Lives Online,” at e-enlightenment.com; “The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe,” at fbtee.uws.edu.au.

<sup>9</sup>Works on these themes include, among a very large proliferation of titles, Srinivas Aravamudan, “Tropicalizing the Enlightenment,” in Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688–1804* (Durham, NC, 1999), 289–325; Bertrand Binoche, “Écrasez l’infâme!” *Philosopher à l’âge des lumières* (Paris, 2018); Conrad, “Enlightenment in Global History”; Nikita Dhawan, ed., *Decolonizing Enlightenment: Transnational Justice, Human Rights and Democracy in a Postcolonial World* (Opladen, 2014); Anthony Jarrells, “Provincializing Enlightenment: Edinburgh Historicism and the Blackwoodian Regional Tale,” *Studies in Romanticism* 48/2 (2009), 257–77; Antoine Lilti, *L’héritage des lumières: Ambivalences de la modernité* (Paris, 2019); Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton, 2003); David Allen Harvey, *The French Enlightenment and Its Others: The Mandarin, the Savage, and the Invention of the Human Sciences* (New York, 2012); Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Translating the*

Even as these shifts have occurred, general works of synthesis have done surprisingly little to integrate the social history of ideas into their interpretations of the Enlightenment's origins, progress, and overall significance. Consider four of the most prominent recent works of this sort. Ritchie Robertson's engaging and erudite *The Enlightenment: The Pursuit of Happiness, 1680–1790* (2020) respectfully cites many social histories of Enlightenment ideas, and ably summarizes their main points. But he does little to incorporate them into his principal thesis, namely that the Enlightenment constituted a “sea change in sensibility” more than an intellectual movement, and one that oriented authors and political figures alike towards the attainment of terrestrial happiness.<sup>10</sup> Dan Edelstein's *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (2010) pays close attention to one particular social institution: the French Academy, and the way it launched debates that would shape what he sees as the central, defining narrative of the Enlightenment, namely the invention of a new regime of historicity.<sup>11</sup> But his concise, tightly focused book otherwise engages little with the social histories. Jonathan Israel's six massive volumes dedicated to the Enlightenment and the age of revolution (2001–20), despite calling for a “dialectic of ideas and social reality,” ignore the social histories almost entirely.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Israel dismisses their methods, and concern with broad populations, as “wholly fallacious.”<sup>13</sup> His books do not return to Gay's little flock of *philosophes*, but instead give pride of place to a different, only slightly larger, flock of “radical Enlightenment” authors whose allegedly enormous influence he credits almost entirely to the sheer force of their ideas. Finally, in the elegant, provocative, and concise “*Écrasez l'infâme!*” (2020), Bertrand Binoche announces at the start that he has approached the Enlightenment “as a philosopher,” in a self-confessed “very idealist” manner, and has nothing to say about social and cultural conditions (a particular pity, as Binoche's analysis begs to be brought together with the social history of ideas).<sup>14</sup>

Is there a place for a new general interpretation that does more to integrate the findings of the social historians of ideas? I believe there is. But such a general

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*Enlightenment: Scottish Civic Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford, 1995); J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 5 vols. (Cambridge, 1999–2011); Roy Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World: The Untold Story of the British Enlightenment* (New York, 2000); Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich, eds., *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge, 1982); Louis Sala-Molins, *Les misères des lumières: Sous la raison, l'outrage* (Paris, 1992); David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton, 2008).

<sup>10</sup>Ritchie Robertson, *The Enlightenment: The Pursuit of Happiness 1680–1790* (London, 2020).

<sup>11</sup>Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago, 2010).

<sup>12</sup>The principal books in Jonathan Israel's series are *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford, 2001); *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670–1752* (Oxford, 2006); *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750–1790* (Oxford, 2011); *The Enlightenment That Failed: Ideas, Revolution, and Democratic Defeat, 1748–1830* (Oxford, 2019). Israel attempted to connect the Enlightenment to the age of revolutions in *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from The Rights of Man to Robespierre* (Princeton, 2014) and *The Expanding Blaze: How the American Revolution Ignited the World, 1775–1848* (Princeton, 2017).

<sup>13</sup>Quotes from Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 23, 22.

<sup>14</sup>Binoche, “*Écrasez l'infâme!*”. See the review by Antoine Lilti in *Annales: Histoire, sciences sociales* 75/2 (2020), 379–82.

interpretation cannot simply catalogue existing work in the area. It needs a general interpretive framework, and this is one thing that the social history of Enlightenment ideas has generally lacked. This social history began to coalesce just at a moment when historians of the eighteenth century—especially the French eighteenth century—were mounting a powerful challenge to *marxisant* accounts of the period that characterized it as one of class conflict in Europe between a rising capitalist bourgeoisie and a declining aristocratic caste. Many of the most visible social historians of ideas—including Darnton and his frequent collaborator Daniel Roche—were instead drawn to the work of the French *Annales* school. But the *Annales* had difficulty integrating the history of ideas into the three-level model of historical change championed by Fernand Braudel: geological change, long-term “conjunctural” economic change, and short-term “event” history. While some *Annalistes* tried to tack a fourth level of “mentalities” onto the model, they never satisfactorily worked out how it related to the other three.<sup>15</sup> In the 1980s, the translation into French and English of Jürgen Habermas’s *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* seemed to offer historians a more compelling model of eighteenth-century social and cultural change. Habermas did a great deal to elucidate the social contexts in which ideas circulated, and connected these contexts brilliantly to the vision of Enlightenment promoted by Immanuel Kant. Habermas characterized Kant’s vision as an idealized form of the critical “publicity” (*Öffentlichkeit*) that had actually taken shape in eighteenth-century Europe. He related this form of publicity, which he labeled “bourgeois,” to the rise of newspapers that informed merchants about events affecting their enterprises, and to the subjectivity cultivated within the bourgeois family. He attributed its decline and corruption to the subsequent development of capitalism in the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> But Habermas did not devote much discussion to Enlightenment ideas themselves, or to authors. His interest was more in the forms of communication than in what was communicated.

Today, however, new work on the history of capitalism—still inspired by Marx but not trapped within the carapace of older forms of Marxist theory—offers an alternative interpretive framework in which to place the social histories and to relate them in a serious way to intellectual history. This new work places relatively little emphasis on industrialization, the rise of the factory system, or the formation of class identities. Building on studies of consumerism and commercial society that go back to the pioneering research of Neil McKendrick and John Brewer in the 1980s, it instead highlights changing forms of demand and the rise of the commodity form, and their implications for social experience, especially in eighteenth-century

<sup>15</sup>See Antoine Lilti, “Does Intellectual History Exist in France? The Chronicle of a Renaissance Foretold,” trans. Will Slauter, in Darrin McMahon and Samuel Moyn, eds., *Rethinking Modern Intellectual History* (New York, 2014), 56–73; Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 2015), 73–104.

<sup>16</sup>Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Neuwied, 1962). The French and English translations followed in 1986 and 1989. Habermas engaged closely with Immanuel Kant in “Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung,” *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, Dec. 1784, 481–94. Historians tended to downplay the Marxist influences on Habermas.

cities.<sup>17</sup> William Sewell's recent study of capitalism and civic equality in eighteenth-century France, which draws heavily on the social theorist Moishe Postone's reading of Marx, is particularly suggestive, both for synthesizing a mass of this earlier work and for suggesting a path forward.<sup>18</sup> Sewell's book itself is principally concerned with the conditions under which the French Revolution became possible, but its insights into the relationship between the mechanisms of the consumer marketplace and new forms of social relations have implications for the Enlightenment as well.

This alternative interpretive framework is necessarily restricted in both time and space: principally to eighteenth-century Europe, and this limitation requires some discussion. It can be a useful exercise to consider the Enlightenment as a global, multi-secular phenomenon that had multiple points of origin and multiple, sometimes contradictory, trajectories. But this global perspective, much like that of the "global turn" in general, renders the subject too broad and all-encompassing to fit within any but the weakest, most general interpretive framework.<sup>19</sup> The work of the historian becomes description, and the tracing of multiple forms of connection, rather than robust explanation.

Attempts to categorize the Enlightenment as a "global coproduction" run into particular difficulty when it comes to identifying what is intellectually distinctive about it. The works in question emphasize the Enlightenment's multifaceted, or even contradictory, nature ("radical" and atheist in some places, "conservative" and religious in others), and associate it less with projects of sustained intellectual inquiry than with a variety of political claims, gestures, programs, slogans, and images. To quote Sebastian Conrad, the principal proponent of this approach, "One should ... not make the mistake of confusing the Enlightenment with an analytical category. It was first and foremost a concept to which one could refer in order to assert claims or legitimize demands."<sup>20</sup> Arguments that the Enlightenment took shape across wide areas of the globe and lasted well into the nineteenth century also make it impossible to relate its emergence to any social and cultural developments except for globalization itself: a phenomenon that

<sup>17</sup>Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington, 1982). Important subsequent work includes Colin Jones, "The Great Chain of Buying: Medical Advertisement, the Bourgeois Public Sphere, and the Origins of the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 101/1 (1996), 13–40; Michael Kwass, "Ordering the World of Goods: Consumer Revolution and the Classification of Objects in Eighteenth-Century France," *Representations* 82 (2003), 87–117; Daniel Roche, *Histoire des choses banales: Naissance de la consommation dans les sociétés traditionnelles (XVIIe–XIXe siècle)* (Paris, 1997); John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, 2007); Frank Trentmann, *Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (New York, 2017); Michael Kwass, *The Consumer Revolution, 1650–1800* (Cambridge, 2022).

<sup>18</sup>William H. Sewell Jr, *Capitalism and the Emergence of Civic Equality in Eighteenth-Century France* (Chicago, 2021); Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge, 1993).

<sup>19</sup>See David A. Bell, "The Global Turn" (review of Emily S. Rosenberg et al., *A World Connecting, 1870–1945*), *New Republic*, 7 Oct. 2013, 25–9; Bell, "Response to Richard Drayton and David Motadel," cowritten with Jeremy Adelman, *Journal of Global History* 13/1 (2018), 16–21.

<sup>20</sup>Conrad, "The Global History of the Enlightenment," 488–9.

could take such massively different forms and produce such massively different effects in different areas and time periods that it has only limited utility as an analytical category.

The global turn in historical studies has firmly and fruitfully underlined the point that the Enlightenment in no sense represented “an autonomous result of European history alone.”<sup>21</sup> It could not have taken the shape it did without the massive expansion of contacts between European and non-European societies from the mid-seventeenth century onwards. As Michèle Duchet pointed out long ago, a very high proportion of canonical Enlightenment works include copious descriptions of non-European societies, engage in extensive comparisons between these societies and European ones (sometimes to the detriment of the latter), and on the basis of these comparisons construct complex typologies of humanity in general. None of these developments could have taken place without the massive expansion of European imperial enterprises, and the massive expansion of global trade.<sup>22</sup>

Yet at the same time, attempts to situate the Enlightenment in a global context can all too easily occlude an important story about dynamic processes that were taking place specifically within eighteenth-century Europe and its principal imperial possessions, in tandem with the rise of modern forms of commercial capitalism. These forms of capitalism themselves were driven in large part by global trade, by European imperial expansion, by the transformation of slave plantations in the Americas into quasi-industrial enterprises, and by the vast wealth that these plantations generated. But they still had distinct social effects in Europe itself, especially in Western European and European colonial cities. Understanding these effects helps explain why Enlightenment writing by Europeans took the forms it did, and why the most prominent European writers propounded the ideas they did. It helps us see common traits among even apparently disparate and opposed forms of eighteenth-century European thought.

What does it mean to say that the Enlightenment, as an intellectual phenomenon, developed symbiotically with new types of social relations generated by the advance of commercial capitalism? Most importantly, this advance generated new forms of social experience. In more and more of daily life, individuals operated under the same formal abstract rules—the rules of the consumer marketplace—and did so as equivalent entities, distinguished by the size of their purses rather than by their birth or occupation. And individuals were seen as coming together into an abstract, anonymous public that, while it excluded much of the population (including, in many accounts, women, the lower classes, and people of color), had no internal hierarchies or divisions, and found expression in new sorts of association and institution. The most prominent and influential of Enlightenment authors crafted their works in dialogue—part imagined, but part very real—with this public. It was in the course of this dialogue that they drew on and brought together a host of intellectual elements—the religious, scientific, anthropological, and temporal ideas so often adduced, without concern for the social context, as the sole sources

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 524.

<sup>22</sup>Michèle Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des lumières* (Paris, 1971). See also the literature cited above in note 9.

of Enlightenment thought—into a new and powerful constellation of ideas. These authors differed greatly in their approaches to politics, religion, social reform—to almost everything. Yet they had a common perspective, which was most powerfully articulated—for reasons that I will explore below—in France. They also had a common commitment to helping this new public educate and improve itself—and in doing so to educate and improve humanity as a collective whole.

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Before proceeding with this argument there are two tasks to be accomplished. First, the most important contributions of the social-historical work need to be identified. Second, it needs to be shown how these contributions relate to the most influential and the best-known Enlightenment writings. Surprisingly, despite the copious attention the social-historical work has attracted, scholars have done relatively little to show how it might influence our understandings of these writings. Darnton himself has taken a greater interest in how social and cultural conditions shaped what he called the “literary underground of the Old Regime” than in how they shaped the “High Enlightenment.”<sup>23</sup> Dena Goodman offered one of the most brilliantly suggestive—although also most strongly criticized—interpretations in her book *The Republic of Letters*, but with respect principally to a single social institution: what later came to be known as the “salon.” There, she argued that the emphasis placed by female hostesses on sociable conversation oriented Enlightenment writers such as Montesquieu and Diderot towards an enhanced interest in and appreciation of sociability itself.<sup>24</sup> Antoine Lilti has also provided an exciting case study, showing how the birth of modern celebrity culture shaped Rousseau’s later writing, but he has not as yet attempted an overall interpretation of the Enlightenment.<sup>25</sup>

Although the social-historical work proceeded in many directions, it did have one great, clear common feature: insisting on a vast expansion of the category of people who could be called participants in the Enlightenment. A by no means exhaustive list would include the following groups: booksellers; periodical editors; journalists; printers; members of learned academies; contributors to academic essay contests, including women and peasants; women authors; writers of pornography and political satire; writers of popular medical, scientific and engineering works; writers of travel literature and early ethnographies; colonial planters; antiquarian collectors; Freemasons; salon hostesses; sponsors of scientific demonstrations; writers of letters to the editor; fans of celebrity authors; families of authors.<sup>26</sup> Members of these groups did not, except in a few cases, write texts

<sup>23</sup>See particularly Darnton, *The Literary Underground*, 1–40.

<sup>24</sup>Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, 1994). The strongest criticism has come from Lilti, in *Le monde des salons*.

<sup>25</sup>Antoine Lilti, “The Writing of Paranoia: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Paradoxes of Celebrity,” trans. David A. Bell and Jeremy Caradonna, *Representations* 103 (2008), 53–80. See also Lilti, “Does Intellectual History Exist in France?”. Lilti’s collection *L’héritage des lumières*, while offering precious insights, is above all concerned with the legacy of the Enlightenment, especially in regard to imperialism and racism.

<sup>26</sup>Works that discuss these groups, in addition to those by Beaufrepaire, Caradonna, Darnton, Duchet, Goodman, Lilti, and Roche, include Elizabeth Andrews Bond, *The Writing Public: Participatory Knowledge Production in Enlightenment and Revolutionary France* (Ithaca, 2021); Lawrence Brockliss,

that became part of the Enlightenment canon, but they helped to shape those canonical texts, both directly and through the broader ways in which their activities had an impact on their societies and cultures. These groups did not, of course, wholly escape the attention of earlier generations of historians. Many of them featured, for instance, in Daniel Mornet's classic 1933 study *Les origines intellectuelles de la Révolution française*.<sup>27</sup> (Indeed, many of them appear in the work of Augustin Barruel, who, for all his absurd conspiracy theorizing, provided a surprisingly complete social history of the French Enlightenment).<sup>28</sup> But for Mornet and his contemporaries they principally featured as recipients of the light that shone out from the pens of the *philosophes*, rather than as actors in their own right in the drama of Enlightenment.

The forms of participation themselves varied greatly, and in the compass of a single essay can only be sketched out very rapidly. In some cases, they involved direct interaction with and influence on the period's most prominent authors. Here, the list includes the commissioning, editing, censorship, printing, selling, and reviewing of books and essays; the selection of essay competition topics and the judging of competition entries; the guiding of conversation in what later became known as salons; correspondence with authors; participation in the period's celebrity culture; and influence exercised through intimate relationships.<sup>29</sup> Other cases involved the production of original intellectual work, most often inspired by or in flagrant imitation of the period's most prominent authors. This form of interaction included writing everything from books, to law codes, to entries in academic essay competitions, to letters to the editor; taking part in scientific or engineering projects; compiling learned collections of objects; and joining organizations committed to causes seen as "enlightened" (especially religious toleration). A German observer claimed in 1761 that "we live generally in an age when ... almost everyone is afflicted by a passion to be an author ... anyone who knows how to hold a pen writes books."<sup>30</sup> This was an obvious exaggeration, but one that testifies to the unprecedented dimensions of participation.

In all the cases, this participation implied one sort or another of interaction between authors and an engaged, responsive, critical public. As Darnton and his colleagues in the field of book history have shown, the figures involved in the many different aspects of Enlightenment book production took part in early forms of market research, tracking demand for titles and themes, commissioning new work on this basis, responding to criticism.<sup>31</sup> The learned academies of

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*Calvet's Web: Enlightenment and the Republic of Letters in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford, 2002); Robert Darnton, "Readers Respond to Rousseau," in Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1984), 215–56; Antoine Lilti, *Figures publiques: L'invention de la célébrité, 1750–1850* (Paris, 2014); Meghan Roberts, *Sentimental Savants: Philosophical Families in Enlightenment France* (Chicago, 2016).

<sup>27</sup>Daniel Mornet, *Origines intellectuelles de la Révolution française, 1715–1787* (Paris, 1933).

<sup>28</sup>Augustin Barruel, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du Jacobinisme*, 4 vols. (Hamburg, 1797–8).

<sup>29</sup>See Lilti, *Figures publiques*.

<sup>30</sup>Quoted in James van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge, 2001), 123.

<sup>31</sup>On this theme see, above all, Robert Darnton, *A Literary Tour de France: The World of Books on the Eve of the French Revolution* (New York, 2018).



eighteenth-century Europe sponsored essay contests based on their sense of which topics would prove of greatest interest to a broad public, and then encouraged this same public to enter the competitions. To guard against corruption and favoritism, entries were judged blindly, in many cases allowing utterly unknown contestants, including women, to win.<sup>32</sup> The salons, in Goodman's account, constituted a semi-public forum in which writers tried out and refined their works, while paying heed to the guidance of the hostesses.<sup>33</sup> Members of the public who wrote letters to authors, or to periodicals, hoped that authors would take their opinions into account.<sup>34</sup>

The extent and nature of this public participation sharply distinguished the Enlightenment from earlier moments in European intellectual and cultural history. Of course, many of the forms of participation had existed well before the eighteenth century, but not all—and the scale of participation mattered as well. Unlike his eighteenth-century successors, a seventeenth-century author such as Thomas Hobbes could not have hoped to rise out of obscurity on the basis of an essay submitted to an academic competition. He could not have hoped to become a wealthy man because of publishers competing to pay him large sums for his manuscripts, in the hope of selling tens of thousands of copies to an expanding readership. His works were not advertised, reviewed, satirized, imitated, and debated in regularly published periodicals across the Western world. They were not discussed in thousands of coffeehouses and lending libraries. Low literacy rates compared to those of the eighteenth century in any case sharply limited the number of possible readers.<sup>35</sup> He did not become a celebrity, with his engraved portrait—or an image reproduced on playing cards or china or fashioned into pipes—widely available for purchase. Readers did not bombard him and his publishers with correspondence. He could not, on his own authority, without the backing of a powerful noble patron, start a campaign to reverse a flagrant case of injustice and intolerance. And it follows that members of the seventeenth-century reading public had far less scope to interact with authors, and far fewer ways to participate actively in intellectual life.<sup>36</sup>

The recent general histories of the Enlightenment and the eighteenth century have acknowledged the extent of these changes but have mostly resisted exploring the implications for Enlightenment thought itself. Ritchie Robertson concentrates most of his discussion of the changes into a single chapter devoted to Enlightenment ideas of sociability and denies that new practices and institutions had any appreciable, independent influence on intellectual developments. "The virtual public sphere of newspapers and journals," he writes, "was not an actual means of enlightenment unless people chose to use it for that purpose."<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Israel admits that "the expansion of publishing and the reading public" constituted "essential conditions" for the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, but in

<sup>32</sup>See Caradonna, *The Enlightenment in Practice*.

<sup>33</sup>See Goodman, *The Republic of Letters*.

<sup>34</sup>See Bond, *The Writing Public*.

<sup>35</sup>For a useful discussion of rising literacy rates see Van Horn Melton, 81–6.

<sup>36</sup>See Anne Goldgar, *Impolite Learning: Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680–1850* (New Haven, 1995); Stephen B. Dobranski, *Readers and Authorship in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2005).

<sup>37</sup>Robertson, *The Enlightenment*, 388.

the same paragraph insists that their “big’ cause” was radical Enlightenment ideas alone.<sup>38</sup>

But can we really dismiss the connections this easily? Consider, first, an important subject to which the recent syntheses devote regrettably little space: the form and style of the Enlightenment’s most famous and influential works. It is important to emphasize that Enlightenment works proved, at the time and ever since, more accessible to a broad reading public than major works of thought from any other period of Western history, before or after. In what other century did so many leading philosophical minds make their arguments in popular works of fiction, ranging from novels (Rousseau’s *La nouvelle Éloïse*, Montesquieu’s *Lettres persanes*, Voltaire’s *Candide*) to stage plays (a large part of Voltaire’s *oeuvre*, Lessing’s *Nathan der Weise*, Diderot’s *Le fils naturel*), to stories, parables, dialogues, fictive correspondence, and poetry? In what other period did these same authors devote so much of their time to the production of dictionaries, encyclopedias, and works of pedagogy? If Descartes, Hobbes, and Spinoza had found relatively large audiences in the previous century, it was because of the originality and importance, not the accessibility (still less the entertainment value), of their works. The same is true for Kant, Hegel, and Comte in the nineteenth century, and even more for the most prominent philosophers of the twentieth, despite occasional exceptions (for instance Sartre, who proved the rule by deliberately crafting an image for himself as a modern *philosophe*).

It was the authors of the Enlightenment who not only cared about reaching broad audiences but also were willing to adopt the means necessary to do so, namely writing in the most popular and accessible genres of the day. Furthermore, as the historian of reading Rolf Engelsing has argued, this public was itself increasingly reading in a new way—not studying a small number of canonical texts “intensively,” but reading a far larger number and variety of texts “extensively,” which is to say quickly and for entertainment rather than slowly and repetitively for instruction.<sup>39</sup> The choice of genre and style by Enlightenment authors both responded to this shift and drove it forward.

It is true that many Enlightenment authors, especially in France, expressed ambivalence about just how widely their works should circulate. Diderot, in the *Encyclopédie*, had spoken of reaching “the man of the people” and “changing the common way of thinking.”<sup>40</sup> Yet a few years later, in a letter to the sculptor Falconnet, he distinguished between “the mixed crowd of people of all sorts” who thronged to plays and exhibitions, and “this little flock, this invisible church that listens, looks, reflects, and speaks softly, but whose voice prevails in the long run.”<sup>41</sup> Some authors offered scathing opinions about the mental capacities of

<sup>38</sup>Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 950–51.

<sup>39</sup>Rolf Engelsing, *Der Bürger als Leser: Lesergeschichte in Deutschland 1500–1800* (Stuttgart, 1974).

<sup>40</sup>*Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une Société de Gens de lettres*, eds. Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, 28 vols. (Paris, 1751–72), 5: 637, 642A (article “Encyclopédie”).

<sup>41</sup>Denis Diderot to Étienne Falconnet, Sept. 1766, in Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres complètes de Diderot*, ed. Jules Assézat and Maurice Tourneux, 20 vols. (Paris, 1875–7), 18: 158. See on this subject Antoine Lilti, “In the Shadow of the Public: Enlightenment and the Pitfalls of Modernity,” *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity* 8/3–4 (2020), 256–77.

potential readers other than educated white European Christian men.<sup>42</sup> Voltaire insisted on one occasion to d'Alembert, "we have never claimed to be enlightening the cobblers and maidservants—that is the task of the apostles."<sup>43</sup> Many of them also spoke disparagingly about "living by one's pen," warning that dependence on the literary marketplace was no better than dependence on wealthy patrons—in both cases the dependence prevented authors from writing with true disinterest.<sup>44</sup>

But these protests speak to the anxieties felt by authors about a literary marketplace over which they had little control, indeed whose powerful dynamics swept them along despite their own misgivings. As long as they chose to commit their works to print (which Diderot sometimes did not, although largely out of fear of arrest), they could not dictate who read them. The styles that appealed to the "invisible church" drew in a far larger body of readers. Diderot's complaints that he had become a prisoner of the *Encyclopédie*, and Rousseau's frustrated denunciations of his own readers for "depict[ing] me according to their own imagination," testify eloquently to the actual, less-than-autonomous relation of even the most famous writers to the literary marketplace.<sup>45</sup>

If major Enlightenment authors tried so hard to engage with readers through their choices of style and genre, it was also not simply to sell their works (a theme I will return to). It was also because they wanted to transform these readers morally, and to prompt them to take certain forms of action. There may have been no single, overarching, monolithic "Enlightenment project," but Enlightenment projects, plural, existed in profusion. For this reason, incidentally, it should almost go without saying that Enlightenment authors saw reason and sentiment as indissolubly linked—a fact which much recent scholarship has excitedly rediscovered.<sup>46</sup> They recognized, first, that reason by itself could not dictate the aims towards which humanity should strive. As David Hume famously wrote, "reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions."<sup>47</sup> And they further acknowledged that reason would not suffice as an instrument of persuasion. To quote Montesquieu, introducing one of the parables in *Lettres persanes*: "There are certain truths which it does not suffice to persuade people of, but that you have to make them feel; such are the truths of morality."<sup>48</sup>

But it is not quite precise to say that major Enlightenment authors simply wanted to transform their readers. Better to say that they wanted to help these readers transform themselves, and again style and genre constitute a key part of the

<sup>42</sup>See Sophia Rosenfeld, *Democracy and Truth: A Short History* (Philadelphia, 2019), 44–6.

<sup>43</sup>Voltaire to d'Alembert, 2 Sept. 1768, quoted in Georges Pellissier, *Voltaire philosophe* (Paris, 1908), 269.

<sup>44</sup>On this subject see especially Geoffrey Turnovsky, *The Literary Market: Authorship and Modernity in the Old Regime* (Philadelphia, 2010).

<sup>45</sup>On Diderot see Andrew Curran, *Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely* (New York, 2019), 319; on Rousseau see Lilti, "The Writing of Paranoia," 70.

<sup>46</sup>See, for instance, Robertson, *The Enlightenment*; Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago, 2002); Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York, 2007), 35–69, and the literature on sentimentalism which she cites.

<sup>47</sup>David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1975), 2: 415.

<sup>48</sup>[Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu], *Lettres persanes*, 2 vols. (Cologne, 1721), 1: 39.

story. A large proportion of Enlightenment writing clearly prompted readers to make as great a use as possible of their own intellects. This writing took the form of puzzles, of games, of paradoxes, of mysteries, all of which would require active reasoning on the reader's part. Eighteenth-century French literary journals regularly ran riddle contests for their readers, and while many of the *philosophes* dismissed these contests as puerile entertainment, they themselves defended the use of riddles for purposes of serious instruction. As Jennifer Tsien has noted, the plots of Voltaire's *contes*, especially *Zadig*, often "hinge on moments of puzzlement" which the reader is left to ponder before the author reveals the solution.<sup>49</sup> Montesquieu spoke of *Lettres persanes* having a "secret chain" which ran through the often apparently random collection of letters from Persian travelers, and which would reveal the book's deeper meanings.<sup>50</sup> The *Encyclopédie* had its playful cross-references, most famously in the article "Cannibals": "See also Eucharist, Holy Communion, Altar."<sup>51</sup> Diderot adored the dialogue form, in which readers would have to choose between apparently opposing viewpoints. The literary scholar Elena Russo notes in her book *Styles of Enlightenment* that many French Enlightenment authors favored the so-called *goût moderne* that was informal, intimate, chatty and seductive, making readers feel as if they were in conversation with authors. She calls it the style of the boudoir.<sup>52</sup> But even Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who often abjured this style in favor of moral thundering that smacked of the pulpit, delighted in presenting his readers with apparent paradoxes which they would have to unravel: the idea that men can be "forced to be free," or that the "general will" stands opposed to the "will of all." For that matter, even Rousseau, in his works of introspection, could not resist carrying on imagined informal dialogues with his reader. "I know quite well that the reader has no great need to know all of this, but I need to tell him."<sup>53</sup> Voltaire summed up the spirit of this Enlightenment writing perfectly in the preface to his *Dictionnaire philosophique*: "The most useful books are the ones that are half written by their readers."<sup>54</sup>

Beyond these considerations of style and genre, much influential Enlightenment writing—like the *Dictionnaire philosophique*—took the form of works which readers could use to instruct themselves and others. These belonged to many genres, starting with reference works. Here, the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d'Alembert constitutes the most impressive and obvious example, and in no sense did these editors imagine the work as a heavy-handed instrument of indoctrination. As d'Alembert remarked in the work's "Discours préliminaire": "We have supposed that the reader is not entirely deprived of good sense and experience."<sup>55</sup> There are many other examples, starting with Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et*

<sup>49</sup>Jennifer Tsien, *The Bad Taste of Others: Judging Literary Value in Eighteenth-Century France* (Philadelphia, 2012), 138–50, esp. 143.

<sup>50</sup>R. L. Frautschi, "The Would-Be Invisible Chain in *Les Lettres persanes*," *French Review* 40/5 (1967), 604–12.

<sup>51</sup>*Encyclopédie*, 1: 498 (article "Anthropophages").

<sup>52</sup>Elena Russo, *Styles of Enlightenment: Taste, Politics, and Authorship in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore, 2007).

<sup>53</sup>Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les confessions*, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1845), 1: 20.

<sup>54</sup>Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, 52 vols. (Paris, 1877–85), 17: 22.

<sup>55</sup>Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, "Discours préliminaire," in *Encyclopédie*, 1: xl.

*critique* and John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, and continuing of course through Rousseau's *Émile*. That book, it should be noted, even while instructing parents and tutors in child rearing, stressed that children should begin as quickly as possible to educate themselves. In addition, many of the most influential Enlightenment authors developed—or indeed invented—new forms of criticism, designed to help guide readers through a large variety of cultural productions and to shape their taste. Diderot again was the most important figure here, thanks to the artistic criticism that he developed in the salons devoted to new French painting (although he deliberately limited their circulation), and the theatrical criticism which traces back to his *Entretiens sur le fils naturel*. Beyond these forms of writing, public scientific demonstrations, of the sort that became particularly popular towards the end of the eighteenth century across Europe and North America, provided yet another forum designed to encourage self-instruction. These demonstrations allowed audiences to follow along, to learn scientific methodologies, and to verify conclusions.<sup>56</sup> They also frequently encouraged audience members to attempt their own experiments, this being an age in which self-taught amateurs could hope to make major contributions to scientific learning. Any able observer could, in theory, deduce the principles governing nature and society.

The sensationalist epistemology to which most of the leading Enlightenment authors subscribed only further encouraged their belief in the need for the public's self-instruction. Particularly as developed first by Locke and then by the French philosopher Condillac, sensationalist theory stressed that nature provided humans with the necessary tools to make rational analyses.<sup>57</sup> Given the proper education, even the humblest people would have the tools, as Condorcet later put it, "to govern themselves according to their own wisdom" (*se gouverner par leurs propres lumières*).<sup>58</sup> It is no coincidence that Kant, in his canonical essay on the nature of Enlightenment, proposed as its motto "dare to know" (*sapere aude*), writing in the imperative mode.<sup>59</sup> In Scotland, leading authors developed so-called "common sense" philosophy, holding that even ordinary, untutored individuals possessed the ability to make sound intellectual judgments on matters of public interest.<sup>60</sup> In other contexts the need for extensive education was stressed, as the theory also pointed to the way that people could be led astray by their own powerful, wayward imaginations or by a deliberate "abuse of words" that took advantage of the inadequacies of language itself.<sup>61</sup> And these abstract threats were nothing compared to those posed by prejudice, superstition, or the strenuous efforts of *l'infâme* (i.e. "that which is infamous," especially the Catholic Church). To guard against these manifold dangers, people needed to be trained in the proper uses of their own intellects, and to receive as much reliable information as possible.

<sup>56</sup>See Goodman, *The Republic of Letters*, 259–75.

<sup>57</sup>In particular in Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Traité des sensations*, two vols. (London, 1754).

<sup>58</sup>Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (Paris, 1822), 277.

<sup>59</sup>Kant, "Was ist Aufklärung?"

<sup>60</sup>See Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History* (Cambridge, MA, 2011), 56–89.

<sup>61</sup>See Jan Goldstein, *The Post-revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), 21–59; Sophia Rosenfeld, *A Revolution in Language: The Problem of Signs in Late Eighteenth-Century France* (Stanford, 2003), 1–56.

In this case, presumably, Diderot's "invisible church" constituted only the least vulnerable part of a much more extensive public.

But the reasons for this public to instruct itself and make use of its reason went well beyond simply intellection and self-protection. More fundamentally, helping it think for itself would help it to act for itself, to transform itself, to improve itself. Improvement was in the first place a physical, material task, as shown by the large place occupied by agronomy, public hygiene, mechanics, and infrastructure in so much Enlightenment writing, starting with the *Encyclopédie* and the century's academic essay contests (where such "practical" questions well outnumbered "moral" and political ones). Morality and politics had their place as well, however. In general, if the Enlightenment can be said to have had an overall goal, the best way of describing it is probably "collective human self-improvement."

A goal, of course, is not the same thing as a "project," and we should always remember just how ferociously the major thinkers of the Enlightenment could disagree on the question of what form collective self-improvement should actually take. In the realm of politics, between Montesquieu's tempered monarchy, Rousseau's democratic sovereignty, and the enlightened despotism advocated by the later Voltaire, the distances were vast. Questions of social organization, religion and aesthetics could generate heated disputes as well. In a well-known letter to d'Alembert, Voltaire urged the *philosophes* to band together in a "secret academy" on the model of the Freemasons, but lamented that "everyone thinks only of themselves, and forgets their principal duty, which is to exterminate the *inf[âme]*."<sup>62</sup> Sometimes thinkers even disagreed with themselves, adopting radically different opinions over time. As Voltaire wrote in another letter, "I am speaking of respectable people who have no fixed principles as to the nature of things, and who do not know what is, but know very well what is not: these are my true philosophers."<sup>63</sup>

It should be added that the idea of collective human self-improvement certainly did not receive unanimous support from the period's most influential thinkers. Did ordinary people, or even indeed the educated elite, have the intellectual ability to undertake projects of self-improvement? Could they avoid error, or violent disagreement? Pessimistic answers to these questions could encourage thinkers to embrace the idea of enlightened despotism, centered on projects of improvement undertaken by an elite, or even a single individual, and imposed on everyone else, by force if necessary. True, some models of enlightened despotism or the "well-ordered police state"—for instance, the one sketched out by the high French civil servant Turgot in his 1775 *Mémoire sur les municipalités*—relied on the cooperation of a well-educated public capable of thinking for itself.<sup>64</sup> Others were far more authoritarian, notably those that held up as a model Peter the Great of Russia. When Enlightenment writers applauded the tsar as a model for how to regenerate a backwards country (and many did), they were in a sense reverting to the ancient concept of a philosopher king and abandoning the ideal of

<sup>62</sup>Voltaire to d'Alembert, 20 April 1761, in Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, 41: 272–3.

<sup>63</sup>Voltaire to d'Alembert, 5 April 1765, in *ibid.*, 43: 519–20.

<sup>64</sup>Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, "Mémoire sur les municipalités," in *Oeuvres posthumes de M. Turgot* (Lausanne, 1787), 5–98. See also Marc Raeff, *The Well-Ordered Police State: Social and Institutional Change through Law in the Germanies and Russia, 1600–1800* (New Haven, 1983).

collective self-improvement.<sup>65</sup> A materialist author such as d'Holbach also abandoned the ideal when characterizing his own philosophy and Christianity as rival religions competing for the allegiance of civilized society, and demanding that, in place of religious prejudice, societies needed a "body of doctrine capable of serving as a constant rule for the conduct of one's life."<sup>66</sup> Here, we can see a reversion to a sort of (non-religious) religious zeal. Some French *philosophes*, indeed, even sought to use the mechanisms of Old Regime censorship against their ideological enemies.<sup>67</sup> Rousseau abandoned the ideal as well when he insisted that patriotic citizens of a well-constituted state needed to give it absolute obedience and treat its laws as infallible.<sup>68</sup> In this case, the reversion was to classical republicanism. Too often, scholars have drawn on these tendencies to condemn the Enlightenment in general as repressive, and perhaps even as the seedbed of totalitarianism, whether of the fascist or communist variety.<sup>69</sup>

Rousseau's example, however, shows that these temptations to abandon the ideal of collective self-improvement themselves had strong limits, especially for the Enlightenment's most subtle and sophisticated thinkers. If Rousseau had reservations about the capacity of humankind to improve itself, it came from his deep pessimism about society in general, and its tendency to degenerate, twisting and oppressing its members in the process. It was for this reason that he suggested, in *The Social Contract*, that the formation of a properly constituted state required the intervention of a quasi-divine Legislator. But Rousseau had great enthusiasm for the notion of self-improvement on an individual level, and devoted one of his greatest works, *Émile*, to imagining how to raise a man (although not a woman) capable of thinking for and improving himself. Raising such a man, Rousseau stressed, was categorically different from raising the citizen of a republic: "As we are obliged to struggle against either nature or social institutions, we must choose between raising a man or raising a citizen; we cannot do both at the same time."<sup>70</sup>

So where did the Enlightenment concept of collective human self-improvement come from? It is certainly possible to examine its origins from the point of view of intellectual history alone. It has visible roots in the range of transformations that intellectual historians have traditionally identified as the principal sources of Enlightenment thought. New forms of religious dissent from both within and without the Christian churches challenged long-standing beliefs about God's active presence in the world and encouraged educated men and women to think that

<sup>65</sup>See David A. Bell, *Men on Horseback: The Power of Charisma in the Age of Revolution* (New York, 2020), 33–4.

<sup>66</sup>Paul Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach, *La morale universelle ou les devoirs de l'homme fondés sur sa nature*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam, 1776), 1: viii.

<sup>67</sup>See Raymond Birn, *La censure royale des livres dans la France des lumières* (Paris, 2007), 133–64.

<sup>68</sup>The reference, of course, is to *The Social Contract*, originally published under the title *Du contrat social* (Amsterdam, 1762).

<sup>69</sup>For the connection to fascism see Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; for the connection to communism see J. L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London, 1955). In his 2022 Carlyle Lectures at Oxford, Samuel Moyn suggested that "Cold War liberals" effectively abandoned the Enlightenment and its projects of social improvement because of these fears.

<sup>70</sup>Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, ou de l'éducation* (Paris, 1866), 8.

both physical and social phenomena took place according to regular, unchanging laws that human reason could uncover. The rapid progress of scientific knowledge provided stunning proof of this idea on the level of the physical laws of nature, while also illuminating the experimental and observational methods by which further such knowledge could be acquired. The massive increase in extra-European travel, and the wide dissemination of travel literature, confronted Europeans with examples of models of political, social, and religious organization very different from their own—and often surprisingly attractive and successful ones. The Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns generated new conceptions of history, centered around narratives of progress. The concept of “society” emerged to describe a field of human existence distinct from politics and providing the base on which everything else rested. The Enlightenment vision of collective human self-improvement drew upon and built upon all of these large-scale cultural and intellectual transformations.<sup>71</sup>

But it is one thing to trace this filiation, and another to explain it. Why were so many thinkers moved to draw on these previous transformations to craft a vision of humanity collectively acting to improve its own lot? Why did the works they produced prove so enormously appealing and influential, including to many readers whom these thinkers might have judged incapable of self-improvement? To answer these questions, it is not enough to point to the ideas themselves. Ideas do not have force outside specific social contexts. The same ideas may have enormous force in one context and look bizarre or repulsive in another.

The immediate context in which the notion of collective human self-improvement took hold was that of the powerful interactive relationship between Enlightenment authors and their public. As already discussed, this interactive relationship was not important solely for the readers, or for the reception of Enlightenment work. It also shaped how the most important works of the period were written, both in the form they took—matters of genre and style—and in the message of collective human self-improvement that so many of them disseminated. In this sense, it is appropriate to see the Enlightenment as a social coproduction, a product of constant interaction between authors and their publics.

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This relationship itself, in turn, however, took shape within a much broader social and cultural context. For a long time, historians have lacked a robust and convincing interpretive framework with which to understand this context. In the middle decades of the twentieth century, as already noted, it was generally agreed that the key social and economic framework was the expansion and increasing power of a proto-capitalist middle class. In some countries—notably France—this change was believed to have triggered a strong reaction from a declining and fearful aristocracy. Elsewhere—notably Britain—the middle classes supposedly managed to

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<sup>71</sup>On the role of the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns see especially Edelstein, *The Enlightenment*. On the concept of “society” see Keith Michael Baker, “Enlightenment and the Institution of Society: Notes for a Conceptual History,” in W. F. B. Melching and W. R. E. Velema, eds., *Main Trends in Cultural History* (Amsterdam, 1994), 95–120.



blend into an open, porous elite that benefited from the nascent Industrial Revolution. Marxist literary scholars—including even sophisticated thinkers such as Lucien Goldmann—proceeded from this basis to assert that the key elements of Enlightenment thought closely reflected the assumptions of the bourgeois market economy and served to advance the interests of the bourgeoisie as a class.<sup>72</sup>

Not all historians endorsed such an explicitly Marxist version of the thesis. R. R. Palmer, for instance, saw the middle class as part of a larger, more diffuse coalition of “democratic” forces.<sup>73</sup> But the fundamental, structural causes at work were held to be material ones. Starting as early as the late 1950s, though, a new wave of historians, working especially on France, challenged the evidence for the thesis. The middle class, they argued, might have been expanding, but for the most part it was not capitalist, and it derived its wealth from the same traditional sources that the nobility did. Its members did not have a clear class identity, and the very terms “middle class” and “bourgeois,” far from reflecting an unambiguous social reality, were political signifiers that could be deployed in wildly different ways.<sup>74</sup> The British nobility was not an open elite, while the Industrial Revolution started later, and proceeded far more slowly and erratically, than had previously been thought.<sup>75</sup> This revisionist work might have opened the door for a different broad account of social change, but by the time the profession had fully digested its conclusions, social history itself had reached something of a crisis. Historians were embracing the so-called “new cultural history,” and beginning to explore transnational history, global history, and “connected histories.” The moment for grand historical narratives built around social-scientific models of change seemed to have passed.<sup>76</sup>

The newer histories of capitalism avoid the older Marxian fixation on class formation. They also depart from the older Marxian assumption that the development of a capitalist system of production depended on technological innovations generating increases in productivity that would produce the surplus value necessary for the accumulation of investment capital. They often start with consumption rather than production and suggest that surplus value can result from changes on the demand as well as the supply side of the market equation. They note that in eighteenth-century Western Europe, the combination of a warming climate, political stability, expanding global trade, and incremental improvements in agricultural

<sup>72</sup>Lucien Goldmann, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment: The Christian Burgess and the Enlightenment*, trans. Henry Maas (London, 1973), 17, 20.

<sup>73</sup>R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1959–64).

<sup>74</sup>See Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c.1780–1840* (Cambridge, 1995); Lauren R. Clay, “The Bourgeoisie, Capitalism, and the Origins of the French Revolution,” in David Andress, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 2015), 21–39; Sarah Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie* (Cambridge, MA, 2003). For recent perspectives on much of this historiography see Jack Censer, ed., “Special Forum: The French Revolution Is Not Over,” *Journal of Social History* 52/3 (2019), 543–92.

<sup>75</sup>See Lawrence Stone and Jeanne C. Fawtier Stone, *An Open Elite? England 1540–1880* (Oxford, 1984); E. A. Wrigley, “The Quest for the Industrial Revolution,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 121 (2003) 147–70.

<sup>76</sup>See Burke, *French Historical Revolution*, 105–19; “Éditorial: Histoire et sciences sociales: Un tournant critique?” *Annales: Économies, sociétés, civilisations* 43/2 (1988), 291–3; Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, 1989).

productivity produced steady economic growth. Although modest by modern standards, it was sufficient to drive a consumer revolution, with city dwellers in particular purchasing increasing quantities of clothing, “exotic” foodstuffs (coffee, chocolate, sugar, etc.), household goods, books, and periodicals. The sheer volume of commercial operations increased enormously, and with it the extent of both formal and informal institutions that regulated and facilitated them, from stock markets to credit networks to commercial newspapers.<sup>77</sup>

By the mid-eighteenth century, this economic dynamism had generated fundamental structural changes in Western Europe and many European overseas possessions. Economies, and therefore the allocation of resources, increasingly operated according to a market principle, with prices determined by supply and demand.<sup>78</sup> And where the market principle prevailed, a genuine capitalist dynamic was developing, long before the emergence of what Marx himself had assumed was necessary for it, namely a proletarianized labor force employed in heavy industry. Using the example of Lyon silk production, William Sewell shows that manufacturers, relying on crude forms of market research and advertising, encouraged consumers to purchase new fashions at regular intervals and, through this stimulation of demand, managed to raise prices and therefore generate surplus value.<sup>79</sup>

In the eighteenth century, the key result of this new dynamic was the “generalization of the commodity form.”<sup>80</sup> Especially among city dwellers, more and more of daily life was shaped by the sale and purchase of commodities, and by the “universal formal abstract rules” of the capitalist marketplace in which commodities were bought and sold. In this marketplace, a person’s status—family, estate, profession—mattered less than their ability to pay, making everyone purchasing the same product in one sense functionally equivalent to everyone else. The introduction of changing fashions in clothing, which made it harder or impossible to tell people’s status from their outward appearance, reinforced this sense of equivalence. Many eighteenth-century observers commented, often in a satirical vein, on this change. Sartorial anonymity not only flattered men and women of low standing but could also come as a relief to aristocrats who spent their time at court intensely observing each other in a constant, stressful competition for status. The experience of eighteenth-century urban life, with its dense crowds and constant hubbub, powerfully reinforced the transformation as well.<sup>81</sup> In cities, as Tobias Smollett memorably put it, “the different departments of life are jumbled together ... everywhere rambling, riding, rolling, rushing, justling, mixing, bouncing, cracking, and crashing” (and, he added, “in one vile ferment of stupidity and corruption”).<sup>82</sup>

<sup>77</sup>In addition to the sources noted above (especially Sewell and Jones, “The Great Chain of Buying”), see Jürgen Kocka, *Capitalism: A Short History* (Princeton, 2016); and Joel Mokyr, *The Enlightened Economy: An Economic History of Britain 1700–1850* (New Haven, 2009), 368–91.

<sup>78</sup>See Steven Laurence Kaplan, *Provisioning Paris: Merchants and Millers in the Grain and Flour Trade during the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca, 1984), 25. Behind much of the new work on market societies, of course, is Karl Polanyi’s classic *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Times* (New York, 1944).

<sup>79</sup>Sewell, *Capitalism and the Emergence of Civic Equality*, esp. 43–128.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, 129–50.

<sup>82</sup>Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (New York, 1906), 90.

It is tempting to assume that increasingly capitalist societies must have been increasingly atomized ones, in which the cold logic of market relations dissolved traditional bonds of mutual obligation and respect, and stark new forms of inequality arose. But this picture is very incomplete. Capitalism of course excels at generating inequality. But at the same time, the intensive circulation of people and goods in dynamic urban settings encouraged the formation of all manner of voluntary, fraternal associations—clubs, reading groups, benevolent societies, literary circles—not to mention less formal gatherings in coffeehouses, salons, lending libraries, scientific demonstrations, and the like. If the new notion of “society” as a realm of existence distinct from the political gained such popularity in the eighteenth century, it was in part because it so well described this new field of experience, which stretched across classes, including many men of artisanal background. Benjamin Franklin, with his “Junto” and the many other societies he founded, was only the most compulsive joiner in what could be called a century of joiners.<sup>83</sup> Habermas saw these forms of association as significant principally for the critical “publicity” generated in them, but for the participants themselves, a sense of camaraderie and common purpose mattered just as much, if not more. In such associations, modern civil society was taking shape.<sup>84</sup>

Well before the French Revolution of 1789, these structural changes had significant consequences for European social relations. First, men and women’s experience of living more and more of their lives in accordance with the abstract rules of the marketplace, seeing people of different status from their own as nonetheless equivalent in key respects, and entering into voluntary associations, gave palpable form to notions of equality known only from Scripture and the classical republican tradition. (William Sewell neglects the long-term intellectual history of equality, but correctly places emphasis on the actual experience of it, as opposed to an intellectual familiarity).<sup>85</sup> It helped these men and women see equality as something natural and desirable, and formal structural inequality as naturally unjust and indefensible, including the privileges that leading Enlightenment thinkers themselves benefited from in their acceptance of aristocratic and state patronage.<sup>86</sup>

Second, in continental Europe, the dynamic of emergent capitalism and the resulting availability of profits led entrepreneurs to push capitalist practices through their countries’ archaic economic structures like floodwater surging through leaky dikes. Everywhere, merchants and tradesmen eager for profit moved their business to areas exempt from guild rules, turned notaries’ offices into primitive banks, set up gray markets with the tacit approval of royal officials, and as a last resort tried their hand at smuggling. Educated men and women—including many men who served in government—increasingly viewed social and political questions through

<sup>83</sup>See Simon P. Newman, “Benjamin Franklin and the Leather-Apron Men: The Politics of Class in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia,” *Journal of American Studies* 43/2 (2009), 161–75.

<sup>84</sup>See James M. Vaughn, “1776 in World History: The American Revolution as Bourgeois Revolution,” *Platypus Review* 62 (2013–14), at <https://platypus1917.org/2013/12/15/1776-in-world-history>; Pierre Rosanvallon, *The Demands of Liberty: Civil Society in France since the Revolution*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA, 2007); Victor M. Pérez-Díaz, *The Return of Civil Society: The Emergence of Democratic Spain* (Cambridge, MA, 1993).

<sup>85</sup>See Dan Edelstein, review of Sewell, forthcoming in the *Journal of Modern History*.

<sup>86</sup>On the acceptance of social hierarchies see notably Darnton, *The Literary Underground*, 1–40.

the lens of political economy, judging proposed policy changes by their impact on trade, on productivity, and on population.<sup>87</sup> As a Vallumbrosan monk exclaimed in 1764, “Now everyone speaks of political economy as if it were religion.”<sup>88</sup>

Eighteenth-century authors experienced these transformations both as members of the consumer public and as purveyors of writing to it. As already noted, the eighteenth century marked the first time in Western history when large numbers of authors could hope to live directly from the sale of their writing, as opposed to patronage. In 1723, Alexander Pope could still profess “to be the only Scribbler of my Time who never received any Places from the Establishment, any Pension from a Court, or any Presents from a Ministry.”<sup>89</sup> Within a few years many other scribblers in several Western countries could claim the same honor, and some, including Voltaire and Pope himself, grew rich in the process. Authors fought to establish solid property rights to their works.<sup>90</sup> The publishing sector experienced the same pressures as other sectors did from emergent capitalist practices. And just as the crude market research and advertising by Lyon silk producers allowed them to charge more for their products, effectively generating surplus value, so the constant interaction between authors, publishers, and the reading public arguably had a similar effect. The shift to “extensive” reading discussed by Engelsing contributed to this dynamic as well. The enormous expansion of both the quantity and forms of printed matter in the eighteenth century, and the new forms of participation open to the public, did not occur only as a result of capitalist transformations—but they could not have taken place without it.

It would be reductionist—a return to an earlier generation’s Marxism—to think that participation in these changes turned eighteenth-century writers into anything like the ideological vanguard of a rising bourgeois capitalist class, or that their notions of freedom, equality, and toleration simply reflected the assumptions and requirements of the emerging market economy. As already noted, the literary sphere remained a complex place, by no means wholly dominated by the logic of the marketplace. Patronage hardly disappeared, either in the explicit form of pensions and direct payments for works, or in the applause and approval writers could gain from pleasing the attendees at aristocratic salons.<sup>91</sup> Even while growing rich from his savvy manipulation of the literary marketplace and his even more savvy investments, Voltaire desperately hoped for courtly patronage, and received it both in France (where he briefly served as historiographer royal) and Frederick the Great’s Prussia. A few years after writing a stirring defense of perpetual copyright for the Parisian booksellers’ guild, Denis Diderot traveled to Saint Petersburg

<sup>87</sup>See Sophus Reinert, *The Academy of Fisticuffs: Political Economy and Commercial Society in Enlightenment Italy* (Cambridge, MA, 2018); John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, 2006); Sewell, *Capitalism and the Emergence of Civic Equality*, 227–332.

<sup>88</sup>Quoted in Reinert, *The Academy of Fisticuffs*, 1.

<sup>89</sup>Quoted in Melton, *The Rise of the Public*, 136.

<sup>90</sup>See *ibid.*, 123–59.

<sup>91</sup>See notably on this subject Gregory S. Brown, *Literary Sociability and Literary Property in France, 1775–1793: Beaumarchais, the Société des auteurs dramatiques and the Comédie Française* (Aldershot, 2006)

to enjoy the patronage of Catherine the Great.<sup>92</sup> But far more than in the past, powerful voices were denouncing such patronage as debilitating corruption (although sometimes not without considerable hypocrisy, as in the case of Rousseau).<sup>93</sup>

Furthermore, even taking this complexity into account, the fact remains that eighteenth-century authors had a far greater awareness of, and interaction with, what they called “the public” than any intellectual predecessors had done. Most obviously, even those most closely embedded in patronage networks still mostly wrote for publication and hoped to sell their works for as high a price as possible, leading them to pay careful attention to what sold best.<sup>94</sup> They heard back from readers both in the form of published criticism in periodicals, pamphlets, and books, and in direct correspondence. They could see when, where, and how their ideas were discussed by others. In short, as already suggested, most of them were permanently engaged in one form or another of dialogue, of interaction with a largely abstract, anonymous, but eagerly participatory public—a public, moreover, of perceived civic equals.

It can further be argued that this experience of constant dialogue, of interaction, with the reading public predisposed Enlightenment authors to embrace certain principles with particular fervor. Most obviously, it profited authors—directly, in crude monetary terms, but also in terms of the attention and esteem that they gathered—to have the freedom to write and engage the public on whatever issues they pleased, and in whatever manner—whatever excited the greatest public response. It would be foolish to think that a Diderot, a Helvetius, a d’Holbach, or other materialist authors published their most daring works simply out of a desire for monetary profit (which the wealthy noble d’Holbach, or the tax farmer Helvétius, hardly needed). Nor did they necessarily want personal notoriety—many published anonymously. But it would be equally foolish to assume that they had no motivation other than expressing pure principles. Most of them relished the controversies they provoked, took pride in reaching a broad public, and were happy to have their authorship known to friends and admirers. As a result, anything that interfered with their freedom to say what they pleased, and especially political or religious censorship, was anathema to them in a way that it would not have necessarily been to earlier writers. Enlightenment authors frequently saw this censorship as a sort of artificial and unjustified restraint on intellectual exchange, and one that bore more than a little similarity to the supposedly artificial and unjustified restraints on trade which they also increasingly condemned over the course of the century. It is no coincidence that Voltaire, throughout his long career, insistently linked freedom of thought to economic prosperity.<sup>95</sup> It is also no coincidence that where strong censorship apparatus existed, Enlightenment publishing so

<sup>92</sup>See Roger Pearson, *Voltaire Almighty: A Life in Pursuit of Freedom* (London, 2005); Robert Zaretsky, *Catherine and Diderot: The Empress, the Philosopher, and the Fate of the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA, 2019).

<sup>93</sup>For instance Rousseau, *Les confessions*, 2: 37–8. Rousseau, of course, benefited considerably from aristocratic patronage.

<sup>94</sup>Sewell, *Capitalism and the Emergence of Civic Equality*, discusses this at 151–226.

<sup>95</sup>[Voltaire], *Lettres philosophiques* (Amsterdam, 1734), 27–8; [Voltaire], *Traité sur la tolérance* (n.p., 1763), 36–41.

frequently sought to evade it. Illegal and quasi-illegal works pushed through the dikes of intellectual restraint, flooding the print market in much the way that new capitalist practices produced the flood of commodities whose production and sale evaded older guild rules.<sup>96</sup> Even in Britain, where the lapsing of the Licensing Act in 1695 had led to a considerable expansion of press freedom, the most controversial authors could still face large penalties for supposedly seditious expression. As the great populist politician John Wilkes quipped after the government had imprisoned him in the Tower of London for attacks on King George III, he did not know how far press freedom actually extended in Great Britain. However, he added, “this is exactly what I am trying to find out.”<sup>97</sup> Many other authors pushed back against the limited but real political restraints on their writing.

Eighteenth-century authors were also predisposed by their constant interactions with the reading public to advocate its expansion. To be sure, as already noted, many of them held scornful opinions as to the intellectual capacities of peasants, people of color, and women, although they knew the importance of the rapidly expanding female reading public, and in practice did little to discourage women from reading their works. But in any case, the reading public in most Western countries had considerable room to expand without having to confront these issues of diversity and inclusion. So it was very much in the interest of authors—not, I hasten to add, solely monetary interest—to encourage public education, and to seek to mold public taste through critical writings of the sort that Diderot in particular did so much to develop, despite his occasionally professed desire to speak only to his elite “invisible church.”

Interactions with the public also helped drive the development of modern social science. When Enlightenment authors spoke of the collective body of their readers, they most often used the word “public” itself. But insofar as they defined it as a collectivity distinct from—and ideally free from any interference by—political or religious authority, the concept of the public closely resembled that other concept that took on its modern meaning only in the decades around 1700, in tandem with the structural changes discussed above: “society.” Not only did it come to describe an autonomous ground of human existence separate from the political realm; it also became a central concern of Enlightenment authors who believed that they could discover invariable laws, akin to the laws of nature, that governed human behavior in society—social behavior.<sup>98</sup> Daniel Gordon has further argued that, in France, writers found it particularly conducive to imagine “society” as a space free from political interference because of their desire to escape possible repression by the absolute monarchy and to carve out a space in which they would enjoy both freedom of thought and social esteem.<sup>99</sup> Nicholas Phillipson and John Robertson have

<sup>96</sup>See Darnton, *The Literary Underground*; Darnton, *Forbidden Best-Sellers*; Darnton, *Literary Tour de France*.

<sup>97</sup>J. Heneage Jesse, *Memoirs of the Life and Reign of King George the Third*, 3 vols. (London, 1867), 1: 223. My thanks to Stuart Semmel for this reference.

<sup>98</sup>See the fundamental work of Baker, “Enlightenment and the Institution of Society”; also Reinert, *The Academy of Fisticuffs*, 3–6; and Yair Mintzker, “‘A Word Newly Introduced into Language’: The Appearance and Spread of ‘Social’ in French Enlightened Thought, 1745–1765,” *History of European Ideas* 34/4 (2008), 500–13.

<sup>99</sup>Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670–1789* (Princeton, 1994).

suggested that in Scotland and Naples, those other great centers of Enlightenment investigation into social behavior, the lack of an outlet for political expression resulting from rule by distant foreign monarchies over formerly independent homelands produced much the same result.<sup>100</sup> But in all these cases, it is important to remember that “society” was not just an intellectual abstraction. The constant interaction with an eagerly participatory reading public gave these authors a very different experience of—and desire to understand—what they called society than predecessors who had written within patronage networks that formed part of strict and steep social hierarchies.

Finally, it is worth turning back to the forms of public participation in the Enlightenment already discussed and asking what motivated men and women to engage in them. In some cases—when as yet unknown authors tried to publish works on their own or submitted essays to academic competitions—monetary considerations may have played a strong role. A desire for status and recognition in the Republic of Letters—a desire itself in tension with the concept of civic equality—also mattered greatly. As for participation in the cults of celebrity around authors such as Voltaire and Rousseau, sheer voyeurism and entertainment counted heavily. Antoine Lilti, in his book *Figures publiques*, has issued a strong reminder that the raucous eighteenth-century public sphere, in contrast to what Jürgen Habermas sometimes implied, bore very little relation to a sober, serious seminar.<sup>101</sup> Even so, it is clear that for reasons going well beyond simple monetary interest, many members of the reading public sincerely engaged in sustained and serious efforts at self-improvement. John Brewer, in his classic study *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, cites as an example the middle-class English diarist Anna Larpent, who diligently recorded her somewhat obsessive efforts at cultural self-fashioning (on one typical day in 1792: two chapters of Paine’s *Rights of Man* before breakfast, followed later by scriptural readings, trips to see a kangaroo and a “Polygraphic Exhibition,” and a play at Covent Garden).<sup>102</sup> It is not unreasonable to assume that their own sustained engagement with these eagerly self-improving readers predisposed Enlightenment authors to embrace the idea of collective human self-improvement as a goal.

The foregoing discussion also suggests why Enlightenment thought emerged with such particular force in France. In some parts of the European world (for instance the Netherlands and Britain), states and established churches either stood aloof from Enlightenment thought or actively encouraged its development. In other parts (notably Spain and the Spanish empire) throne and altar mostly opposed and persecuted it. It was in France where the central elements of this thought stood in such blatant contradiction to formal existing social and legal structures, yet where its disseminators still enjoyed considerable, if uneven, freedom, and tacit support from parts of the political establishment. In France, in

<sup>100</sup>Nicholas Phillipson, “The Scottish Enlightenment,” in Porter and Teich, *The Enlightenment in National Context*, 19–40. John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples, 1680–1760* (Cambridge, 2005).

<sup>101</sup>Lilti, *Figures publiques*; David A. Bell, “The Fault Is Not in Our ‘Stars,’ but in Ourselves,” *La vie des idées*, 8 Jan. 2015, at <https://booksandideas.net/The-Fault-is-Not-in-Our-Stars-but-in-Ourselves.html>.

<sup>102</sup>John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1997), 55–108.

other words, the contradictions could be exposed and dissected with maximum effect. On the one hand, there was the concept of a public composed of equals; on the other, enormous formal social stratification, not only between the three estates of the French kingdom, but within them as well. On the one hand, there was the ideal of free communication and exchange of ideas; on the other, a censorship apparatus formally committed to allowing into print only those ideas that posed no danger to political or religious authority, or to public morality, embedded within an economic structure characterized by royally sanctioned privilege and monopoly. The exposure of the contradictions made Enlightenment thought appear all the more vital and necessary. And at the same time, the relative weakness of official structures—their practical inability to enforce censorship, monopoly and privilege—as well as the considerable support and sympathy that the *philosophes* received from figures like Guillaume-Chrétien de Lamoignon de Malesherbes, the director of the book trade, allowed that thought to flourish.<sup>103</sup>

Again, in no sense should Enlightenment ideas be thought of as having been “determined” in any direct, rigid sense by the social transformations that followed from the expansion and transformation of commercial capitalism in the eighteenth century. It would be absurd to say that Enlightenment ideas of toleration, of freedom of thought, of civic equality, of public education and of collective human self-improvement arose as crude “reflections” of an emergent capitalist economy. These ideas all had their own, deep, independent intellectual roots. But ideas do not simply take hold because of their abstract “force.” They take hold because of the propitiousness of the social, political, and cultural context.<sup>104</sup> If these Enlightenment ideas proved so enormously popular to writers and readers alike in the eighteenth century, it was because the development of commercial economy and civil society had provided so many new and profitable ways—profitable in terms of both monetary gain and less tangible psychological rewards—for writers and readers to engage with each other. The Enlightenment as a participatory project, a project revolving around the concept of collective human self-improvement, would have been far less intelligible, and far less attractive in the smaller, more politically constrained, and steeply hierarchical intellectual world of seventeenth-century Europe. The bursting of economic dikes in the eighteenth century did not by itself produce the bursting of intellectual ones that we call the Enlightenment, but it made it possible. And the process of Enlightenment built on itself, as authors preaching toleration and freedom of thought, and engagingly urging their readers to take part in a project of collective self-improvement, met with success, and inspired ever more imitation and elaboration.

<sup>103</sup>On this point see Maria Teodora Comsa, Melanie Conroy, Dan Edelstein, Chloe Summers Edmondson, and Claude Willan, “The French Enlightenment Network,” *Journal of Modern History* 88/3 (2016), 495–534. On Malesherbes see Pierre Grosclaude, *Malesherbes: Témoin et interprète de son temps* (Paris, 1961).

<sup>104</sup>For a discussion of these issues see William H. Sewell Jr, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago, 2005), esp. 318–72. See also Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977). For a somewhat different take, and an example of how to set cultural transformations into broad social contexts, see Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Durham, NC, 1991).



The terrible irony is that this liberatory project could only take place in large part because of an economic expansion fueled by another social system that was anything but liberatory: the system of brutal enslavement practiced in European overseas colonies, and especially in the hells on earth that were the Caribbean sugar colonies. As many recent critics have pointed out, the century of European light was the century of African blood.<sup>105</sup> Indeed, in the colonies, Enlightenment discussions of property rights helped consolidate the slave system, even as Enlightenment systems of classification contributed to the development of modern biological racism. What William Sewell, perhaps somewhat unadvisedly, calls “capitalism’s rosy dawn” was anything but rosy for its millions of African victims.<sup>106</sup>

But if the Enlightenment is, inescapably, a mirror—in our origins we see ourselves—we have to recognize that what it shows is as inescapably complex as any human society. Western modernity has many facets, and the Enlightenment reflects many of them back to us. The ideal of collective human self-improvement could easily serve a terribly exclusionary purpose: self-improvement for the elect few, servitude and subordination for the rest. The very idea of “self-improvement” could serve to produce a disciplined subject, rather than a genuinely free one. It can be hoped, though, that Enlightenment ideas do not necessarily lead to such ends but can serve the cause of genuine human liberation. The Enlightenment, in the final analysis, is what we make of it.

But regardless of how we judge the Enlightenment, we should be aware of the social processes that were crucial to it, that helped to define it, and that, despite the vast differences between authors, and countries, and intellectual currents, nonetheless gave it such an important form of unity. The great work done by social historians of the Enlightenment over the past half-century cannot by itself explain why this moment in history took the shape it did. But this moment cannot be explained at all without taking their work, and the character of the Enlightenment as a coproduction between authors and the rapidly changing society in which they lived, into account.

**Acknowledgments.** For comments on earlier drafts of this essay, my heartfelt thanks to Dan Edelstein, Antoine Lilti, Darrin M. McMahon, Sophia Rosenfeld, and the Princeton Davis Fellows’ group from the fall of 2021.

<sup>105</sup>See, for instance, Tyler Stovall, *White Freedom: The Racial History of an Idea* (Princeton, 2021), 99–133.

<sup>106</sup>Sewell, *Capitalism and the Emergence of Civic Equality*, 368.

**Cite this article:** Bell DA (2023). For a New Social History of the Enlightenment: Authors, Readers, and Commercial Capitalism. *Modern Intellectual History* 20, 663–687. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244322000087>