



Harold Mah. *Enlightenment Phantasies: Cultural Identity in France and Germany, 1750-1914.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003. x + 227 pp. \$41.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-4144-8.



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The historiography of the Enlightenment has known some variegated appropriations. Trumped by some as the dawn of "modernity," played in the register of a sequential liberal-progressivist development; alternately (and arguably) regarded as the core of ideas which propagated the French Revolution; or, in its negative interpretation, seen as the sacralization of instrumental reason, leading to the authoritarian regimes and barbarities of the twentieth century,[1] the Enlightenment, or Enlightenments (if regarded as distinct phenomena in their diverse national variations), supplanted a continuous struggle for definition, defying a uniform perception. Harold Mah's *Enlightenment Phantasies* seeks to encompass this problematic, and while refraining from providing an "absolute" interpretation, strives to highlight the variations within Enlightenment thought and what Mah sees as self-contradictory perceptions of identity, that would render this cultural-intellectual movement anything but a unified phenomenon.

Enlightenment Phantasies is therefore an intentionally diffuse compendium of essays, some previously published in altered form. Its purpose

is to "rewrite some of the more significant histories of French and German cultural identities that arose in the Enlightenment and continued through the nineteenth century. Challenging natural conventions about the naturalness, coherence and factual rootedness of identities, the following chapters reconstruct different trajectories of identity emphasizing their convolutions and paradoxes" (p. 3). Mah claims that his book offers a synthetic study in that it brings together many of the topics and themes of Enlightenment historiography and their connections. However, the multifarious character of the Enlightenment and its legacy compels him, so he argues, to chart a variegated path, following a diverse (but nonetheless iconic) cast of "cultural producers" (to use Bourdieu's terminology), each representing a facet in the development of this strand of thought in European culture. The historical trajectory of such phenomena as the perception and transformation of classicism, for instance, is shown to have gone through different paths in the French and German cases. While the French (Jacques Louis David, the Jacobins) used classicist revival to effect a cultural renovation, "based on the transformation of gen-

ders" (p. 4), the German eighteenth-century use of classical revival to construct German identity as a rational, autonomous self, "reveals a compulsive desire to surrender that self, to give up personal autonomy in a strange condition of aesthetic submission," from Winckelmann to Thomas Mann (pp. 3-4). This perception of German identity is seen as fraudulent and inconsistent with the notion of modernity in the nineteenth century, as a result of the encounter with the French Revolution. The end of this trajectory culminates in Marx, as Mah argues: "[t]his new sense of German culture's dislocation from the flow of history leads the young Karl Marx to repudiate German cultural identity and to invent a new agent in history defined precisely by its lack of culture: the proletariat" (p. 4). Similarly, Mah's application of post-structuralist discourse analysis to the interpretation of texts in the book signals his premeditated distance from the approaches that have often elided internal contradictions and inconsistencies of identity in order to produce "a phantasy of a fully coherent and uniform self" out of the available sources (p. 14).

Most of Mah's argumentative arsenal is poised against what he terms the "liberal" interpretation of the Enlightenment, especially the canonical work by Peter Gay,[2] which saw the Enlightenment as a unitary and predominantly French movement, giving rise to "20th century liberal progressivism's self apotheosis" (p. 5). Similarly, Mah diagnoses later historiographic contributions in the field, elicited from a diverse range of methodological and conceptual perspectives, such as those of Robert Darnton, J. G. A. Pocock, Joan Landes, Sara Maza, Dena Goodman, and ultimately Jürgen Habermas, as critiquing Gay's unilateral perception of the Enlightenment in diverse ways, but eventually unable to escape its "liberal" consequences. In Habermas's case, claims Mah, the theory of the public sphere as an assertion of the ascendant bourgeoisie's rational autonomy and emancipation from absolutist monarchy and traditional society served in effect as "the accom-

plishment of liberal modernity" (p. 10). Historians and cultural critics applying Habermas's theory to other fields of historical inquiry have therefore returned, intentionally or unintentionally, to Gay's unilateral image of a liberal Enlightenment. [3] These challenges and modifications have invariably led to a "rehabilitation of a liberal understanding of the Enlightenment in the notion of the public sphere" (p. 11), leading to an intense debate about the meaning of the Enlightenment and the intellectual and cultural identity that issued from it. It is this issue of constant fluctuations and contradictions in the formulations of cultural identities that serves as the *basso profundo* of Mah's book.

Chapter 1 deals with the "few key formative years in which Herder emerged as an important writer in the German public sphere" (p. 13), that highlight the jarring conflicts he experienced with his public persona. In contrast to Herder's perception as a consistent thinker, advancing a single program of German cultural nationalism, Mah charts Herder's continued oscillations between multiple poles of identity and cultural allegiance, some of them diametrically opposed, such as his fascination with French civility and cosmopolitanism, later to be repudiated as he embraced a particular set of German cultural national assumptions. This identitarian to and fro also involved Herder's tortured emergence from obscurity as a writer in an ever-growing and publicized market of opinion and literature, resulting in his sometime pathetic attempts to camouflage and protect his private "self" (p. 29). These were also reflected in Herder's preference of folk expression rather than modern writing--the former seemed to retain an authentic cultural personality, a quality that was lost, to his mind, in the abstract media of writing. The final oscillation in Herder's repertoire of "selves" was his ultimate return to the advocacy of German national centralism, after a stint of fantasized infatuation with the persona of the French *philosophe*, and what Mah denotes the "French discourse of civility" (p. 31). Mah then

concludes that despite Herder's continuous striving for one stable locus of identity, his attempts were thwarted by the constant displacement of terms and discourses of identity, showing "many of the signs of a 'postmodern' instability and multiplicity of selves" (p. 44).

Chapter 2 analyzes the means of expression of cultural identity, this time concerning the variations in the use of language not only as the idiom of reason, but also as a language of civility, in an intellectual trajectory extending from Diderot to Nietzsche. Mah argues that these two discourses were at odds--at times converging, but more often than not, the discourse of civility taking over that of rational language. The problem with the discourse of civility was its complete predication on an economy of gesture: manners, style (in speech and apparel), aesthetic taste, and refined comportment in civilized society, which were assumed to reflect an individual's moral self (p. 52). However, the criticism raised against it intimated that this economy of gesture was used to camouflage vice instead of virtue, and gave rise to a culture of dissimulation.[4] As a consequence, players in this discursive field felt it necessary to distinguish between civility and politeness, but while some valued civility over politeness, the valences could easily be reversed, as one commentator opined: "Civility is nothing other than continual commerce in ingenious lies to deceive one another" (p. 54). The decentering effect of the language of civility also threatened to shake an individual's sense of self, once civility became a trait of one's character, and called into question its genuineness. Civility's power, claims Mah, was in its ability to penetrate other discursive fields--gender in late-eighteenth-century France, or cultural nationalism and national language, in the German definition of national character vis-à-vis its image of the French (as in Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation*). The ultimate moral perception is one of decline--language cannot retain its purity as a signifier once it has been infused with the trope of civility, and its constant striving for inno-

vation and the engendering of new forms of metaphor, produce an ever-shifting signified which is bound to lead to its decline as an apparatus of rational communication, and to the perpetuation of "figurative excess"--the displacement of content by an excess of form (pp. 57-58). In this regard, Mah challenges the contours of the epistemic rupture proposed by Foucault in *The Order of Things*. Mah claims that Foucault discerned a change in the function of language between the seventeenth and nineteenth century,[5] from the "general grammar," "whose main concern was the representational functions of words and grammar, with how well they mirrored sensation and thought" (p. 64), to the nineteenth century, where language was not focused on the issue of representation, but on lineage and derivation--in philology. While Foucault is right about the lack of interest of many nineteenth-century philologists in eighteenth-century debates, Mah claims that he is wrong to say that these debates ceased in the nineteenth century. To back up his point Mah concentrates on Nietzsche's early philological engagements, which he charts as the prefiguring of the French-German opposition to the universal opposition of psychological traits under the labels of Apollonian and Dionysian, in the *Birth of Tragedy* (1872). Mah sees Nietzsche's reversal of these Romantic concepts in his later critiques as the emergence of "post-structuralism," incited by his ruminations about German unification (p. 66). The solution Nietzsche offers is neither French nor German, but rather "the Greek concept of culture as a new and improved nature, without inside and outside, without dissimulation and convention, of culture as the accord of life, thought, and willing" (p. 70). This, in turn, claims Mah, is an identity-construction strategy applied in both France and Germany, one that had its source in the eighteenth century (neoclassicism) --yet again a phantasmal identity that yielded instabilities.

Building on the moral flaws in the discourse of civility outlined in the previous chapters, Mah claims in chapter 3 that French and German

artists and writers looked to the neoclassical revival as a remedy, since classical models offered an antidote against the false appeal of the senses. Peter Gay's view of the rise of neoclassicism in the eighteenth century, engineering a breakthrough to modernity by a break from Christianity and traditional belief, has been shown to be too reductive by Pocock and others, Mah claims, since civic republicanism drew on classical models and had precisely an "antimodern" influence on political thought, advocating an ethos of independence and communitarianism against the egotistic self-interest of "modern" sensibilities, such as commerce. Still, argues Mah, Gay's association of classicism with the formation of rational identity remains true in one sense: neoclassicism in art prized well-functioning rationality and sought to "express a self of harmonious, developing rationality, one that carefully modulated its passions and desires" (p. 71). Mah discerns two currents in the "neoclassical turn"--in France, neoclassicism was joined to a growing popularity of Rousseauian civic republicanism--infusing language, politics, and gender conceptions; in Germany, it provided an inspiration to a national culture that found mostly aesthetic expression.[6] Both strands, writes Mah, "displayed stresses and desires that actually worked to undercut these identities. The attempt to perform each self ultimately showed other, problematic urges. In Germany and France, the phantasy of being a classical subject curiously veiled, in different ways, a desire for extinction" (pp. 72-73). The texts Mah uses for expounding this thesis are Winckelmann's *History of Ancient Art* (1764); Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* (1872), and Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912), seen as bringing this neoclassical strand to a closure. All these texts "demonstrate a deep otherness or strangeness in classicism, a strangeness discernible if not fully explainable in the metaphors and visibility--in the prescribed manner of seeing--of an orthodox classicist view of rational subjectivity" (p. 73).

Chapter 4 traces a transformation in the construction of notions of masculinity and femininity in a classicist register, in the figurative works of J. L. David, in some of Goethe's dramatic works--in particular *Hermann and Dorothea*, and in de Staël's *On Germany* and *Corrine*. Mah's argument moves between two poles in this field of reception of classical mores: first, political allegiance to the state (equated to filial piety and obedience to the father) and the emergence of the heroic male, vis-à-vis the ravages this move wreaks on familial affiliation, through the triad heroism/patriotism/sacrifice; the variations of masculine identity that emerge from this definition, and in correlation, the feminine; and second, the transition from old regime to revolutionary public mores, especially the Jacobin, that effected a change on the discourse of civility. This move produced a strongly masculinist public discourse, one that relegated women to a position of silence and passivity (and even a sort of cataleptic somnambulism in some representations) in the public sphere, in sharp contrast to the role played by pre-revolutionary elite women as mediators in the discourse of civility between men in the Ancien Regime salons. The effacement of the elite public woman, in Mah's interpretation, reaches its epitome in Marie Antoinette's execution (p. 123). In the works of Goethe and de Staël, however, Mah discerns the return of the elite public woman in the guise of the bourgeois heroine, and the weakening of the masculinist notion prevalent in Jacobin ideology. But even these new identities exhibit a slippage, when the female is again subjected to servitude and to the quotidian sphere, in this case not as part of an external imposition, but out of choice, in the service of recuperating the idyll of pre-revolutionary social harmony in the sphere of bourgeois domesticity (p. 141).

In the closing chapter, which serves as a conclusion of sorts to the book, Mah explores the lasting impact of the French Revolution on the German intellectuals' conception of historical time, and the possibility of bringing politically retro-

grade Germany up to date with French-style modernity. Doing so meant creating compatibility between German theoretical philosophizing and its political practice, an issue addressed in the intellectual trajectory that runs from Hegel, through Heinrich Heine, to the Left Hegelians Arnold Ruge and the young Karl Marx. The theme of Germano-French emulation with relation to the creation of cultural identity is tackled again, when Mah discerns a discursive trope of homologies, drawn between developments in German spiritual life (the Kantian revolution and German idealist philosophy, with Hegel's system as its apotheosis) and developments in French political institutions, as proposed by Hegel in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. Mah follows this trajectory through Heine's attempt to continue Hegel's project and recuperate German culture from its erroneous perception (solidified by de Staël's *De L'Allemagne*) as a nation of "thinkers and poets," and effect a bolder synchronization of German politics with a modern German culture. This trend was inverted in the hands of Ruge and Marx. Marx concluded that German culture was perennially caught up in its anachronism, since "its theory is fixed to the present, its politics to the past," and conjured up the proletariat, as an historical agent of progress that is found, paradoxically, outside of German culture and society, "to restore Germany to the progressive flow of time" (p. 177). [7] Yet even this inverted formulation, effected by Marx's "turning of Hegel on his head," is ultimately, to Mah's mind, self defeating: "[i]n predicting that capitalist industrialization will usher in a new, demystified condition of self knowledge, Marx is subscribing to--indeed, helping to form--one of the primary assumptions and hopes of modernization and development theory. As we have seen in our age of advanced industrialization and globalizing capitalism, this projected emancipation from phantasies of cultural identity has turned out to be the most unlikely of all such phantasies" (p. 180).

Mah's thesis hence runs along the lines that the various articulations of French and German cultural identity were ultimately "phantasmal self-perceptions" of these respective cultures, were ever-shifting and rarely in tune with the reality that gave them rise, were expressed in self-contradictory terms, and eventually caused a distortion in their proponents' perception of their actual conditions. It would seem at times that as a consequence of this constant flux, Mah's protagonists keep stumbling about in a blind stupor, succumbing to identitarian schizophrenia because of their inability to achieve cultural coherence and a holistic, harmonious self.

A couple of points could be raised to question these assumptions. The first is that the seminal concepts Mah uses in the book--"cultural identity" and "phantasy"--remain strangely under-theorized. Mah defines "cultural identity" strictly in relation to its national formulations: "[b]oth the original French and German formulations of identity and current histories of those formulations share the conventional assumption that identities are singular, discrete entities. These identities are coherent and well-functioning on their own terms because those terms reflect a set of specific social and political conditions. Eighteenth-century German identity flows naturally out of distinctive eighteenth-century German conditions and French identity out of French ones. The historiography of the Enlightenment, however, suggests that the terms of eighteenth-century identities seldom operated according to these assumptions" (pp. 2-3). Granted that this is a valid point, it should be asked, however, how do one (or several) cultural producers' identities shape collective formulations, let alone become pervasive nationally defining entities? In this sense, the connection between the diverse cast of cultural producers, whose works Mah analyzes, and their purported sphere of influence--a reading/viewing public--is only partially explored. The circulation and modes of dissemination of a preferred project of cultural identity, whether phantasmal or not, re-

main secondary to the story of the shaping of a particular figure's intellectual or artistic production. Why did the revival of classical mores, for instance, come to define the French as a nation in the age of the Revolution and to inform so radically their goals of social and cultural reform? And for that matter, how did general "French" and "German" modalities of cultural identity emerge out of the diverse individualized projects Mah explores? Political and ideological state apparatuses, elite projects serving as mechanisms for social differentiation, the actual hold that certain cultural perceptions impose on social positions (and vice versa), or what is beyond dispute one of the defining hallmarks of the Enlightenment as an historical era and cultural phenomenon--the rise in rates of literacy and the proliferation of a reading public--have only a fleeting role in what is mostly a series of explorations, some brilliant for sure (see, for instance, Mah's innovative analysis of David's oft-commented-upon *Oath of the Horatii*, which is one of the few instances in the book where he discusses a cultural product's social "life" and political significance), of individuated, loosely connected texts, despite their proposed thematic continuity. The extrapolations that Mah therefore draws upon in order to produce a generalized argument about larger identity constructions, representative of collective trends within a particular cultural discourse, seem at times gratuitous.[8] But then again, any "collective" identity construction would be anathema to the type of project Mah proposes, which must remain fragmented by definition, in order to fulfill its mission of debunking unified narratives.

Secondly, the "phantasies" themselves in Mah's discussion remain undeveloped as epistemic entities. He claims that the production of cultural identity contains some sort of fantasy (i.e., idealization of character) and so when these conflicting phantasies were enacted, "they often malfunctioned" (p. 3). But he does not dwell on what it is that makes cultural self-definitions become such mechanisms of "false consciousness,"

nor, for that matter, what is the trigger that would make a "culturally-sound" society (if there ever were such a thing) skid off-track and become deluded either with its own, or an emulated, version of invented identity. Furthermore, since it could be argued that any kind of collective identity contains a fabrication to varying degrees--as is the case, in essence, of the national myth--it is therefore Mah's ad hoc definition of what constitutes a fantasy vis-à-vis a legitimate perception of reality that deserves further explanation. Given his methodological approach, some of Mah's anecdotes concerning individual fantasies (for instance, Winckelmann's hallucinatory rapture about being carried back to ancient Greece through aesthetic appreciation, pp. 93-94) just beg for Lacanian analysis. The approach of Slavoj Žižek, who devoted a book to the topic of fantasies as ideological constructions,[9] would have been a welcome addition to Mah's mostly Foucauldian methodological tool-kit in this book.

Not wishing to detract from the lucidity and cogency of many of Mah's complex discussions, *Enlightenment Phantasies* still leaves something to be desired in terms of its global approach to the practice of intellectual history. The Achilles heel of such overly textualized approaches is that despite their analytic acumen they fall short of connecting a series of cultural producers and their projects effectively to their surrounding social environments, in a manner that would account for their lasting cultural valence and historical significance. Fearful of becoming too "populist," these approaches prefer all too often to walk the well-trodden path of *Geistesgeschichte*, albeit with a poststructuralist twist, and for all their theoretical perspicacity, are prone to produce yet another fantasy of cultural identity.

Notes

[1]. See for instance Alfred Cobban, "The Enlightenment and the French Revolution" in *Aspects of the French Revolution* (New York: G. Braziller, 1968), pp. 18-28; Roger Chartier, "En-

lightenment and Revolution, Revolution and Enlightenment" in *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (London & Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 3-20; Keith M. Baker, "On the Problem of the Ideological Origins of the French Revolution" in *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives*, eds., Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 197-219. The latter approach was most famously argued by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972, 2000).

[2]. Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York: Knopf, 1966, 1969). Mah's engagement with Enlightenment historiography in his introduction, save for the Habermas polemic, is exclusively restricted to its Anglo-American reception in the post-Cold War era.

[3]. Mah had previously addressed this issue in "Phantasies of the Public Sphere: Rethinking the Habermas of Historians," *Journal of Modern History* 72 (2000): pp. 153-182. Regardless of its "liberal" underpinnings, Mah's treatment of Habermas's thesis as paradigmatic for the emergence and development of the public sphere is problematic. Counter-notions to Habermas's primacy of a public literary sphere that gave rise to public political expression have identified, at least in the German case, modes of political association in the early-eighteenth century as the source for the proliferation of a literary market later in the century. See for instance, Wolfgang Hardtwig, *Genossenschaft, Sekte, Vereine in Deutschland; Bd. 1--Vom Spätmittelalter bis zur französische Revolution* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1997), p. 330.

[4]. The language of dissimulation, whose origin Mah rightly places in the court of Louis XIV, also had the purpose of turning the speech act into a shimmering device reflecting royal power, meant to distract rather than to enlighten as part of a rational communicative exchange. See Louis

Marin, *Portrait of the King*, trans. Martha Houle (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

[5]. In an earlier text, Foucault actually drew the comparison between the systemic semiotic shifts in representational language between the sixteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. See Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Freud, Marx," in *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context: from Nietzsche to Nancy*, eds. Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 59-67.

[6]. A different instance, which operated independently of the precepts of neoclassicism in art, but which also played a prominent part in the discourse on the calibration of sensationalism and the economy of emotions, was instigated in Germany in the mid-1780s by the pedagogue and writer Joachim Heinrich Campe (1746-1818), regarding the need to remedy excess *Empfindsamkeit* (sentimentality). Campe's solution was striving towards the same goal--the creation of a harmonious, well-balanced self--but through quite different means than the ones of neoclassical aesthetic education as suggested by Mah's examples. He propagated the advancement of commerce and maximizing of economic productivity as antidotes to effeminizing sensuality, which would contribute to the creation of a rational and emotionally balanced (male) self and a utilitarian social order. See Courtney Federle, "'Die Erhaltung des Gleichgewichts': Defining and Prescribing a Technology of the Self," in *Reading after Foucault: Institutions, Disciplines, and Technologies of the Self in Germany, 1750-1830* ed. Robert S. Leventhal (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), pp. 153-167.

[7]. Mah is correct in noting that Marx's description of the proletariat as an extra-social factor changed in his later writings, such as the *Communist Manifesto*, to denote its immanent social role in historical class struggle. See Mah, *Enlightenment Phantasies*, p. 219, n. 43.

[8]. See, for instance, Mah's baffling assertion that "the [French] Revolution did not introduce new notions of temporality" (p. 159), when one of its most fundamental actions in terms of cultural identity was the introduction of the Revolutionary calendar, to symbolize its break from the temporal order of the Ancien Regime.

[9]. Slavoj Zizek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997).

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