One of the distinguishing features in the historiography of that work we may collectively term "Enlightenment studies" has been a tendency to worry about the taxonomy and classification of the object in question. Where once the Enlightenment was seen by its many historians as at the very least a single thing, largely male by protagonist, mainly philosophical in content and in its origin and expression essentially French, others have spoken of a "decomposed" Enlightenment, yet others of "local enlightenments" with, albeit initially a while ago, one leading commentator, John Pocock, even suggesting that historians ought not so readily to take for granted (as many had) the fact of "the Enlightenment."[1] In the face of such diversification (no matter that it has enriched study of the Enlightenment/enlightenments), the leading Enlightenment historian Robert Darnton has called for a return to more restricted notions of what the Enlightenment was, whilst stopping short of a retreat to Enlightenment essentialism. In so doing, Darnton presents an interesting example of, so to speak, a "reverse shift" in Enlightenment studies, since in his earlier writings he has been a forceful proponent of the Enlightenment as a wider social history of ideas.[2]

John Robertson is very aware of these debates and is, in this book, a significant contributor to them. Read the first and the last chapter here, and one would have a very sound insight into the varied contours of recent Enlightenment scholarship. Take the five central chapters, and one has an informed and scholarly account of the nature and making of political economy as an Enlightenment discourse, most acutely in Naples and in Scotland whose provincial status and local setting is examined even as Robertson traces the connections that sustained that specialized Enlightenment above and beneath the "nations" in question. Taken together, we have a book that offers detailed scrutiny of one theme of the Enlightenment, a clear statement of "the existence of Enlightenment as a coherent, unified intellectual movement of the eighteenth century, whose adherents engaged in original enquiry into the fundamentals of human sociability, and were committed to the cause of bettering the human condition in this world without regard to the next" (p. 47), and a
study of the importance of local context, individually and in comparison, to the explanation of political economy and to his view of Enlightenment.

The intended outcome of his comparison is "the demonstration of similarity amid difference: the presence of a common Enlightenment in the two very different 'national' contexts of Scotland and Naples" (p. 47). For that reason, Robertson effectively begins his account with a survey of the political, economic, and intellectual circumstances in Scotland and in Naples in 1700, for, as he notes, "Without this preliminary account of the material context of thought, the reader will be missing the sense of place which is as necessary to historical understanding—even to the understanding of ideas—as the sense of time" (p. 53). But here-in lies, I suggest, both the many scholarly strengths but also the relative conceptual weakness of Robertson's generally very fine book. In terms of this sense of geography both as "local context" and base against and within which cultures, ideas in general, and discourses of political economy in particular emerge, Robertson provides a detailed examination of the intellectual and textual nature of political economy. His is an account in which the writings and influence of Pierre Bayle, Giambattista Vico, Bernard Mandeville, David Hume, Antonio Genovesi, and Ferdinando Galiani loom large alongside earlier and lesser-known figures such as the Neapolitan political commentator Paolo Doria, and, for Scotland, Sir Robert Sibbald. This is an Enlightenment in different contexts revealed through the close reading of its leading proponents: "What marked the advent of Enlightenment in Naples and in Scotland was the emergence of political economy as a systematic explanation of economic behaviour and guide to policy, on the basis of more or less explicitly Epicurean assumptions about human nature. It was in these terms that the case for Enlightenment was made in the two countries" (pp. 325-326). Leaving aside the questions raised by Robertson's inclusion/omission of the definite article here and elsewhere, the Scotland-Naples political economy nature of (the) Enlightenment is very well done. Building upon his earlier work in this regard, and in so doing, extending the local analyses and conceptual insights of Vicenzo Ferrone and Franco Venturi, Robertson's book is in this respect a substantial achievement and an important contribution.

I am, however, less confident that we can from this study of local settings see a unified and coherent intellectual entity, or, rather, that we should straightforwardly see it to have been so elsewhere and in other respects. If, for instance, we were to consider the connections in political economy between Scotland and Germany, or, to be more accurate still, Edinburgh and Glasgow and Göttingen, what has been revealed from a no less close textual reading but a perhaps greater attentiveness to epistemological processes and recognition of difference is a picture in which the words of Scottish political economists were given different meaning in reception because of their translation than then they had had in initial conception. The context of justification for men like James Stueart and Adam Smith in Germany was different from the contexts of their discovery: the networks of Enlightenment political economy were not the same there as they were for Scotland and southern Europe, and were different still between the institutional settings of metropolitan Europe and the colonial "outliers" in the Americas.[3] Where one theme thus linked local contexts in one comparative setting, it is not clear that it did so in other comparative settings. To be fair, reviewing political economy within Europe as a whole (far less further afield) was not within Robertson's purview. But because the facts of geography elsewhere are always important, we are left with questions about the applicability in other settings of this reading of political economy and the spaces of its making and reception, and with bigger questions about the nature of (the) Enlightenment other than in political economy.
In chemistry, in the natural sciences including natural history and botany, and notably in medicine, rather different local settings were important, different epistolary networks and practices of material exchange sustained Enlightenment above and beyond national context and, in consequence, different conceptions of Enlightenment emerged as, at once, local, national and trans-national cosmopolitan phenomena with different thematic substance. Place matters, as Robertson recognizes and illustrates. So, crucially, does scale and, of course, topic. But where Robertson concludes that "In the two very different 'national' contexts of Scotland and Naples, ? there emerged one Enlightenment" (p. 377) and, from this, "we do not need to follow John Pocock in supposing that different contexts fashioned plural Enlightenments" (p. 377), I would want, simply, to disagree and to do so less for his interpretations and more for their wider implications. What is here revealed as the strength of one set of discursive connections fashioning Enlightenment in two places may–does not–hold for other places, other themes, other scales. Robertson's conclusion, subtitled "The Enlightenment Vindicated?" (pp. 377-405) may hold true for his chosen theme. But a more complete vindication of Enlightenment as everywhere unified and coherent is still some way off precisely because it was not a single or a simple intellectual entity.

Notes


