

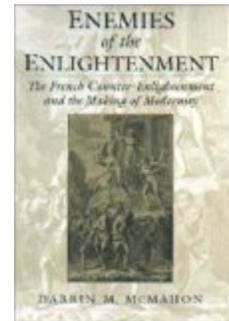
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Darrin M. McMahon. *Enemies of the Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. xii + 262 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-513685-2.

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Self-consciously approaching the subject from the context of our contemporary world, which appears to be doing its best to mock “the Enlightenment assumption that the ‘darkness of fanaticism’ would naturally give way to the ‘light of reason’” (p. ix), Darrin McMahon’s study of the “culture wars” between the French *philosophes* and their enemies before, during, and after the French Revolution makes two important contributions to our understanding of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and our contemporary situation. In the first place, McMahon provides an exceptionally comprehensive and balanced account of the “anti-*philosophes*,” their concerns, their writings, and their political activities. Secondly, his way of looking at the dynamics of cultural cleavage as a profoundly dialectical process helps make intelligible the rhetorical violence of the clash between the Enlightenment and its enemies and the physical violence of the French Revolution as well as providing a valuable perspective on the deep hatreds and terrorist violence that seem increasingly to characterize the global culture clashes of the early twenty-first century.

As McMahon points out in his Introduction, the “enemies of the Enlightenment” have received relatively little attention from historians. R.R. Palmer, in his classic 1939 study *Catholics and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France* which McMahon cites, had observed “that the thought of the Age of Enlightenment, more than that of any equally important period in modern history, has been studied from writings which express only one side of the question” (p. 8). Until recently, Palmer’s assertion still held true. It was only in 1973 that Isaiah Berlin gave the term “Counter-Enlightenment” common currency.[1] Palmer’s account, however, was selective and

incomplete, and focused entirely on the “men of ability,” thus, in McMahon’s words, “occluding the radical rage and vehemency that moved a great many of the Enlightenment’s opponents” (p. 8). Berlin’s Counter-Enlightenment, on the other hand, was primarily German, and his interest too was limited to “men of ability.” McMahon contends that what we need to do is “move beyond the confines of great thinkers and timeless thought, applying to the study of the Counter-Enlightenment the same tools that have been developed by students of the Enlightenment itself in the last thirty years” (p. 9). Acknowledging his debt to the work of Keith Michael Baker and Robert Darnton among others, McMahon attempts a “social history of ideas,” venturing out and down into the broad world of the Counter-Enlightenment, a world inhabited by “militant clergy, members of the *parti d, vot*, unenlightened aristocrats, traditionalist *bourgeois*, Sorbonne censors, conservative *parlementaires*, recalcitrant journalists, and many others ... the so-called fanatics of the Enlightenment catechism” (p. 6).

McMahon’s successive chapters offer an in-depth exploration of the dynamics of hostility between Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment as it developed from the early decades of the eighteenth century (Chapter 1), exploded in mutually condemnatory revolutionary and counter-revolutionary rhetoric and conspiracy theories from the early months of 1789 (Chapter 2), spiralled into the massive and bloody violence of the Terror that confirmed an internationally constructed Counter-Revolutionary image of the Enlightenment and the Revolution as a satanic plot against religion and monarchical order (Chapter 3), evolved in the context of literary politics during the early years of Napoleon’s reign as he allowed Counter-Enlightenment writers to oppose the in-

fluence of the Ideologues (Chapter 4), and hardened during the Restoration period into the permanent hostility between the Right (long Catholic and monarchist) and the Left (whether Liberal, Socialist, or Communist) that has characterized French (and to a considerable extent European) politics to this day (Chapter 5). In tracing the history of this “immensely influential French Counter-Enlightenment movement,” McMahon believes that he is “writing a chapter in what is, at once, the history of France, the history of Europe, of the New World, and in certain respects the history of modernity itself” (p. 16).

This is a richly textured study with the narrative illustrated by well chosen citations from contemporary sources of all kinds (books, pamphlets, sermons, plays, poems, letters, diaries, newspapers, and journals), the printed sources evaluated for influence on the basis of circulation figures, editions, and print runs, and the argument strengthened by frequent reference to the best of relevant recent scholarship. Each chapter is so packed with new information and significant conclusions that it is extremely difficult to provide an adequate summary, even in an extended internet review.

In his chapter on eighteenth-century origins, contradicting Isaiah Berlin’s emphasis on Germany and philosophy, McMahon stresses the extent to which the Counter-Enlightenment was French and religious. “It stands to reason,” he suggests, “that the reaction to the Enlightenment should also have occurred first in the place of its birth and been spearheaded by the very institution—the Catholic Church charged with maintaining the faith and morals of the realm” (p. 9). In part because their deepest concern was religious (and thus concerned with matters of ultimate importance), and in part because they linked the threat posed by *philosophie* to the political disruption that Protestantism had brought to France, the counter-attack of the anti-*philosophes* was from the beginning characterized by a rhetoric of extreme alarm. Though historians today stress the diversity of views and themes within the Enlightenment, its enemies, constructing what was the first coherent portrait of *philosophie*, rapidly developed an “anti-*philosophie* discourse” that identified its dangerous characteristics. *Philosophie*, they charged, sought the destruction of religion, endangered social morality (by its materialism, sexual immorality, individualism, and denigration of the family and paternal authority), social hierarchy, the monarchy, and all political authority. The anti-*philosophes* early on persuaded themselves that they were involved in “an unprecedented war of world-historical importance, a metaphysical fight to the death”

(p. 460).

Well before 1789, the anti-*philosophes* had put together the constituent elements of a nascent ideology, one that stressed the importance of the Catholic religion for the maintenance of social order, portrayed religion as a natural ally and buttress of monarchy, and developed a self-conscious defence of tradition, convention, and historical prejudice. And yet, this ideology was not wholly “conservative” insofar as its proponents saw many things in the France of their day that they did not want to conserve. They forever decried the moral decadence of their society (and may in fact have contributed to its decline by underscoring its shortcomings), and tended to look back to a mythic golden past (often situated in the reign of Louis XIX). In other ways, the Counter-Enlightenment was quite “modern.” As much as they might bemoan the flood of publications that came to characterize the High Enlightenment, by producing their own counter-literature, the anti-*philosophes* used the same modern media in the same public arena as their opponents.

As the century wore on and the *philosophes* seemed to triumph (symbolized by Voltaire’s “apotheosis” in Paris in 1778), despite their opponents’ best efforts to raise the alarm (periodic Assemblies of the Clergy kept warning the monarchy of the dangers of “bad books,” the monarchy, the Sorbonne, and the high courts had attempted control through censorship, and anti-*philosophie* writers, often subsidized by the Church, had produced a flood of opposing books, pamphlets, and journals), frustration and rage grew apace. In fact, of course, the institutions that should have upheld the old religion and the old political order were in serious disarray for much of the century. By the time the monarchy attempted serious reform in the 1780s, the anti-*philosophes*, embittered by decades of seemingly fruitless struggle against the ascendant Enlightenment, were inclined to assume the worst, seeing in even the mildest reform, premonitions of horrors to come.

>From the beginning of 1789, even before the Estates-General actually met, the categories of anti-*philosophie* discourse were extended to explain the causes of the upheaval, which was seen both as a providential punishment for France for having embraced *philosophie* and as the consequence of a plot to destroy both throne and altar. Both proponents and opponents of change tended from the beginning of the clash to explain opposition to their own positions as the consequence of dastardly conspiracies. McMahon illustrates the process with chapter and verse from the statements of both sides,

and argues that an appreciation of this dynamic is essential to understanding the course of the Revolution. "Such contentions" of conspiracy, he writes, "fed one another, seeming to give substance to the fears of the radical revolutionaries, just as their own rhetoric seemed to give substance to the fears of the Revolution's most militant opponents." He concludes: "It is in these mutually reaffirming apprehensions the dialectical logic of competing conspiratorial claims that one should look for insight into the Revolutionary dynamic and ultimately the terrible violence that was its product" (pp. 64-5).

For the enemies of the Enlightenment, the course of the Revolution quickly confirmed their suspicions. Anti-*philosophes* were particularly upset by the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen", which they interpreted as a direct product of *philosophie*, and the assault on the Church. Though many anti-*philosophes* became involved in various counter-revolutionary activities, their effectiveness was severely hampered by deep divisions of opinion among themselves, ranging from advocacy of a return to integral absolutism to proposals to remake society in some ideal image. Most were at odds with the crown as well. Nevertheless the revolutionary dynamic tended to enhance the power of extremists on both sides of the political divide. On the Right, conspiracy theories moved towards encompassing Protestants, Jansenists, and Free-Masons as partners with the *philosophes*. By the end of 1791, the scope of revolutionary change lent plausibility to their charges: the nobility had been abolished, the Church split, the king had tried to flee, the forces of anarchy had been unleashed in town and country, and terror was predicted. The worst fears of the anti-*philosophes* were confirmed by the second "apotheosis" of Voltaire in July 1791 with the elaborate ceremonies that saw the transfer of his remains from Ferney to the newly renamed Pantheon.

Developments dating from the fall of the monarchy in August 1792 further justified the most dire predictions of the enemies of the Enlightenment. The establishment of a Republic, propaganda decrees proclaiming the readiness of the new Republic to assist all peoples to "regain liberty," the coming of war against the Revolution's external enemies, civil war between revolutionaries and their internal enemies, the establishment of the Terror, the ideological crusade to rid France of all vestiges of its Catholic and monarchical past (the renaming of streets, cities, and individuals), and the campaign to "dechristianize" France, were seen as the ultimate revelation of the Enlightenment's true character. Because expression of opposition views became too dangerous within France, the

propaganda war against the Enlightenment and the Revolution was taken up beyond the frontiers. Sustained by migr, nobles and clergy, Counter-Enlightenment writers now portrayed themselves as vindicated prophets. The Abb, Augustin Barruel, for example, who had long propounded conspiracy theories on the origins of the Revolution, in 1797 published in both London and Hamburg a massive four-volume *M,moires pour servir. l'histoire du jacobinisme* that went through four revised French editions by 1799, was translated into six other European languages, and appeared in countless other editions by 1814. An international coterie of (mainly Catholic) authors took up similar themes of conspiracy, charging the *philosophes* and their revolutionary disciples with fanaticism, intolerance, libertinism, moral transgression, atheism, materialism, and subversion of throne and altar. And in a movement akin to the twentieth-century disenchantment with Marxism of formerly Leftist authors (such as Arthur Koestler), *philosophie* became the "God that failed" to former *philosophes* such as Jean-Francois La Harpe, who in 1790 had appeared before the National Assembly to claim responsibility for the *philosophes* in bringing about a "grand and happy revolution," but by 1797 published a much reprinted work that parroted the anti-*philosophie* line in its interpretation of the Enlightenment and its disastrous revolutionary consequences.

Following Napoleon's seizure of power, changed circumstances in France provided new opportunities for Counter-Enlightenment publicity. Napoleon's policies of reconciliation, embodied particularly in the Concordat of 1801, his inclination to perceive anti-*philosophie* writers as a useful counter-weight to the Ideologues, the return of many lay and clerical migr,s, and a revival of religion and its re-valorization by writers such as Chateaubriand provided an atmosphere favourable to the promotion of traditional values—the importance of religion for social stability and personal happiness, the importance of a careful censorship of dangerous opinions, and the restoration of patriarchal authority over children and women. Although the Emperor's growing despotism in the second half of his reign, his quarrel with the pope, increasing limitations on the press and publications generally, and his justified fear that anti-*philosophie* writers were promoting royalism, led to tensions and increasing restrictions, McMahon concludes that these writers "nonetheless successfully forged in France the essential outlines of an antiliberal ideology that was, in itself, new," and that with the Restoration would form "the intellectual underpinnings of the Ultra-Royalist Right" (p. 152).

The Restoration when it came failed to satisfy many

on the Right who had hoped for a more decisive repudiation of the Revolution and its ideology. For as Joseph de Maistre astutely observed at the time, Louis XVIII had not ascended the throne of his ancestors, but that of Bonaparte. Accepting a Charter (a constitution) that preserved the essential elements of equality before the law and basic civil liberties (such as relative freedom of the press), and pursuing a policy of “forgetfulness” that sought to heal the divisions left by the Revolution and Empire, the restored monarchy proved a frail reed to those who remained convinced of the link between *philosophie* and the horrors of the Revolution. Despite a brief period of ascendancy following the Hundred Days when an Ultra-Royalist majority in the chamber pushed through a considerable purge of the bureaucracy and more or less openly sanctioned an extralegal White Terror against former revolutionaries, by September 1816 the king’s decision to dissolve the intransigent *chambre introuvable* (elected during the immediate reaction following Napoleon’s second fall) and follow a temperate course aiming at national reconciliation demonstrated to the Catholic Right that the situation remained perilous. Scandalized to discover that the government would do nothing to prevent the publication of multiple cheap new editions of the works of *philosophes* such as Voltaire and Rousseau, church officials and their lay allies sought to meet what they saw as a life or death challenge by fostering the production and distribution of “good books,” and sponsoring dramatic and emotional “missions” throughout France, events that were climaxed on a number of occasions by public book burnings in which the newly re-catechized faithful were encouraged to “sacrifice” their collections of philosophic books. Convinced that the “Liberals” who were now winning seats in the assembly were in fact their old *philosophe* adversaries in new clothing, the Ultra Right was quick to portray the 1820 assassination of the Duc de Berry, the heir to the throne, as the consequence of Liberal conspiracy and ultimately the Enlightenment.

Though encouraged in the early 1820s by a period of political reaction following Berry’s assassination, by the “miraculous” birth of a new heir some months after his father’s death, and by the 1824 accession to the throne of the pious Charles X, much more favourable to their vision of Christian monarchy than Louis XVIII had been, the longer term prospects for the Catholic Right continued to worsen. Charles X’s inept attempts to strengthen the bond between throne and altar (a lachrymose coronation ceremony at Rheims, a Sacrilege Law prescribing the death penalty for the defamation of religious prop-

erty (never enforced), and efforts to indemnify migrants for property seized during the Revolution, to provide a greater role for the church in public education, and to regulate the press), provoked a wave of anti-clerical defiance that horrified devout Catholics and contributed to his own downfall. By the eve of the Revolution of 1830, as McMahon characterizes the situation, “the Catholic Right had retreated ... into a role that it had played before: that of Cassandra” (p. 187).

McMahon’s concluding chapter includes a fine harvest of reflections on the character, “modernity,” failures, and heritage (both in France and in the worldwide Catholic community) of the phenomena that he has chronicled so well. Perhaps the most significant relates to the modernity of the dialectic of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment. “Whereas the Enlightenment summoned its enemies into existence through its unprecedented attack on revealed religion, the Counter-Enlightenment in turn ‘created’ the Enlightenment as the specter and source of modernity’s ills, reaffirming religion’s place in the modern world and prescribing a program to heal it that was both idealistic and radical” (p. 200). This dialectical process, McMahon contends, can be seen, “collectively, as constitutive of modernity” (p. 202). He suggests that this understanding of modernity as encompassing such dialectical processes can help us appreciate the nature of the contemporary clash between movements of religious nationalism (in Iran, Algeria, Mongolia, India, and elsewhere) and the Western secular ideology that has provoked them.

One might criticize McMahon’s tendency to stress the more extremist examples of Counter-Enlightenment discourse. There were, after all, many examples of Catholic writers and journals whose response to the challenge of *philosophie* was moderate and balanced. McMahon himself acknowledges the existence of a European-wide “Catholic Aufklärung” (p. 25), and admits that Jeremy Popkin’s study of *The Right Wing Press in France, 1792-1800* shows that attempts to discriminate between good and bad *philosophes* were more common in these journals than blanket condemnations of *philosophie* (p. 229, n 51). Similarly, a writer like Joseph de Maistre, whose works would long be treasured by hard-line Catholic royalists, had been sympathetic to some aspects of Enlightenment thought, and was much more sophisticated in his understanding of the politics of the Revolution, the Napoleonic era, and the Restoration than the shibboleths of anti-*philosophe* discourse might suggest. Still, given the context of extremist influence in the dialectical process he is describing, McMahon seems justified in stress-

ing the more simplified (and even simplistic) features of Counter-Enlightenment rhetoric. He certainly leads readers to reflect on the hazards of combatting modernity in the name of religion and on the dangers of becoming involved in a downward spiral of mutual distrust and hostility.

Note

[1]. Berlin's article on "The Counter-Enlightenment" was first published in the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (Scribners: New York, 1973), II:100-112, and subsequently republished in a collection of his essays, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (Viking: New York, 1980), ed. by Henry Hardy.

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