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Re: Guardian Article on Monday 10th April 2006

Dear Madeleine

Today's article "The convenient myth that changed a set of ideas into western values" has caused me to reflect.

The crux of my thesis is that inasmuch as 'the Enlightenment' is a consistent set of propositions or a collective current of thought at all, which is disputable, it is not just rooted in a historical period, but is also a contemporary developing idea. We need to distinguish the phases of its development, and the type of systems of thought and ideologies that have appropriated its essence. Such appropriations may run counter to the original idea itself.

That it might be sensible to treat 'the Enlightenment' as partitioned into different historical periods and different senses is not unusual in terms of concepts which have a wide currency. For example, the idea that Abraham had of 'God' is probably quite different from what a rational thinker would subsume under that idea today, if indeed she accepted the concept at all. There are other examples. Scientists sometimes go wild at the appropriation of the word 'Theory' by sociologists. The word 'Realism' can have multiple meanings. For example, a political realist might believe that he can construct and manipulate the world by his own will, which I would interpret as Schopenhauerian fascism – 'the world is my will, my representation' – as if we are not born and will not die. An external realist, on the other hand, of which I would include myself, might believe, for example, that whereas what we see is actually situated in the brain, that the table which I can see here has an external reality independent of my observation of it, or indeed of any human observer whatsoever. These are quite separate ideas living under the same term.

That the word 'Enlightenment' might have multiple meanings should not constrain the way we talk about it, any more than that the word 'copper' can be used to describe an element of atomic number 29 or alternatively a policeman.

You are right to locate the classical Enlightenment in thinkers such as Locke, Hume and Voltaire. As a thinker of today, I do not find myself in much philosophical sympathy with the first two. These thinkers were reacting to the political, practical and philosophical issues of their era. It seems to me that Voltaire in 'Candide' – with the recurring parody of the theme 'all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds', is reacting to the philosophy of Leibniz. Another significant thinker is Kant – not only

of the 'Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics' and the 'Critique of Pure Reason', neither of which, despite their fundamental historical importance, is a possible point of view for the philosopher of today - but also the author of 'Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals' and 'Perpetual Peace' – philosophical works closer to the political and ethical problems of the age.

Surely if you mention Voltaire you should mention Rousseau, friend of atheist d'Alembert, the mathematician and assistant to Diderot on the 'Encyclopédie'?

There is also a modern sense of the term 'Enlightenment' – which I will distinguish from the contemporary appropriations that you mention in your article. This is historically situated as a development of the Marxist (I would prefer to say post-Marxist) 'Frankfurt School' of philosophy of Adorno, Marcuse and others. If Adorno can be described as a nihilist, rejecting both modern capitalism and the inherent Stalinist communist mutation embodied in the GDR, it is to Jürgen Habermas, in reaction to such a nihilist world-view born of the fascist catastrophe, that we can ascribe many current philosophical/political themes in contemporary Germany and elsewhere, of democracy and communication. In particular, it has been the explicit programme of Habermas to resurrect in terms of today the project of 'the Enlightenment'.

That leads to the contemporary situation. There seem to be certain fuzzy ideas centring around a 'clash of civilizations'. I will not go into its historical genesis, of which I am unclear. Someone once suggested to me that it was first mooted by the former Shah of Iran. You seem to claim, which is a new linkage to me, that ideas of 'Enlightenment' are now percolating through to ideas on the 'clash of civilizations', and even those who in the same breath refer with equanimity to 'the war against terrorism'. I have written elsewhere on such topics, and have no wish to regurgitate them at length here. Let us, at least for the duration of this article, agree to compartmentalise such ideas under a 'third heading of the Enlightenment'.

I am at one with you, if that is the case, of not ascribing Islam (or Christianity, for that matter) as being inherently anti-democratic. I do not equate fundamentalist Islam (or fundamentalist Christianity) with terrorism. Nor do I observe a non-integration of Muslims in our society in a way that the mosque is considered in a way that is different in terms of being a part of our society as from the church, the synagogue or the temple. There is some racism in our society, and it distresses me to see some members of the police, and in effect from some people in the security services, the Home Office and some politicians, pandering to it, sometimes in a form that is anti-Islamic. I see some problems of integration (sometimes from language difficulties leading to isolation, rather than cultural ones) from some relatively new groups to our society that are not necessarily Muslim, that are solvable, in a way that historically for similar groups has been solved. These are problems of adjustment, not of incompatibility, and are usually minor. Our 'multiculturalism' enhances our society and does not detract from it, and I am happy with that.

I would like to end with an anecdote, which I hope is not typical, but might be the tip of an iceberg. It happened last Friday. I noticed someone called 'Bob' at the University of Sussex. He is a member of the Labour Party. He asked me what I was doing, and I not very successfully described a mathematical theory I was involved

with. I then asked him what he was doing, and he said he was researching advice to the British Government on policy to Syria. He mentioned 'the clash of civilizations', and seemed, although I cannot remember the exact words, intent on contributing to a solution of this 'problem'. He pointed out a recently released paper by an advisor, whom he assumed was a neo-con, to Dick Cheney that he had on the table. I asked him, since he was researching Syria, whether he spoke Arabic. No. He invited me to read part of a book by two Israeli authors on Hamas that he also had with him. Would not a wider reading of articles on Hamas be of interest to him? The book was impartial. I did not ask him if he knew any Syrians.

Kindest Regards

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