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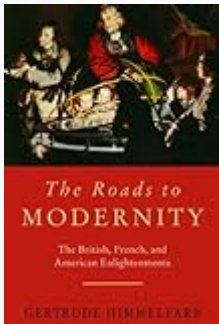
Which enlightenment?

by Keith Windschuttle

A review of *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments* by Gertrude Himmelfarb

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BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Gertrude Himmelfarb

The Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments

Knopf, 304 pages, \$25.00

Although it has already attracted a series of reverent reviews befitting a work by one of today's most eminent practitioners of history, this book is still more important than it looks. Gertrude Himmelfarb has called her latest volume *Roads to Modernity: The British, French and American Enlightenments*. It can be read as a provocative and persuasive revision not only of the intellectual era that made the modern world, but also of the concepts that still largely determine how we think about human affairs today.

In particular, it explains the source of the fundamental division that, despite several predictions of its imminent demise, still doggedly grips Western political life: that between the left and the right. From the outset, each side had its own philosophical assumptions and its own view of the human condition. *Roads to Modernity* shows why one of these sides has generated a steady progeny of

historical successes while its rival has consistently lurched from one disaster to the next.

Most historians have accepted for several years now that the Enlightenment, once popularly characterized as the Age of Reason, came in two versions, the radical and the skeptical. The former is now generally identified with France, the latter with Scotland. It has also been acknowledged that the anti-clericalism that obsessed the French *philosophes* was not reciprocated in Britain or America. Indeed, in both these countries many Enlightenment concepts—human rights, liberty, equality, tolerance, science, progress—complemented rather than opposed church thinking.

Himmelfarb has joined this revisionist process and accelerated its pace dramatically. She argues that, central though many mid-eighteenth-century Scots were to the movement, there were also so many original English contributors that a more accurate term than Scottish would be British Enlightenment.

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Moreover, unlike the French who elevated reason to the primary role in human affairs, British thinkers gave reason a secondary, instrumental role. In Britain it was virtue that trumped all other qualities. This was not personal virtue but the “social virtues”—compassion, benevolence, sympathy—which the British philosophers believed naturally, instinctively, and habitually bound people to one another. In the abstract, this difference might seem merely one of degree but, as it worked itself out in the subsequent history of the Continent and the British Isles, it was profound.

In making her case, Himmelfarb defines the British Enlightenment in terms that some might find surprising. She includes people who in the past have usually been labeled part of the Counter-Enlightenment, especially John Wesley and Edmund Burke. She assigns prominent roles to the social movements of Methodism and Evangelical philanthropy. Despite the fact that the American colonies rebelled from Britain to found a republic, Himmelfarb demonstrates how very close they were to the British Enlightenment and how distant from French republicans.

These differences have remained to this day, and over much the same issues. On the one hand, in France, the ideology of reason challenged not only religion and the church but all the institutions dependent upon them. Reason was inherently subversive. On the other hand, British moral philosophy was reformist rather than radical, respectful of both the past and present, even while looking forward to a more enlightened future. It was optimistic and had no quarrel with religion, which was why, in both Britain and the United States, the church itself could become a principal source for the spread of enlightened ideas.

In Britain, the elevation of the social virtues derived from both academic philosophy and religious practice. In the eighteenth century, the professor of moral philosophy at Glasgow University, Adam Smith, was more celebrated for his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) than his later thesis on the wealth of nations. He argued that sympathy and benevolence were moral virtues that sprang

directly from the human condition. In being virtuous, especially towards those who could not help themselves, man rewarded himself by fulfilling his human nature.

Edmund Burke began public life as a disciple of Smith. He wrote an early pamphlet on scarcity which endorsed Smith's *laissez faire* approach as the best way to serve both economic activity in general and the lower orders in particular. His Counter-Enlightenment status is usually assigned for his critique of the French Revolution, but Burke was at the same time a supporter of American independence. While his own government was pursuing its military campaign in America (and, at the same time, suspending habeas corpus at home), Burke was urging it to respect the liberty of both Americans and Englishmen.

While some historians have been led by this apparent paradox to claim that at different stages of his life there were two Edmund Burkes, one liberal and the other conservative, Himmelfarb disagrees. She argues that his views were always consistent with the ideas about moral virtue that permeated the whole of the British Enlightenment. Indeed, Burke took this philosophy a step further by making the "sentiments, manners and moral opinion" of men the basis not only of social relations but also of politics.

Apart from the different philosophical status they assigned to reason and virtue, the one issue where the division between the British and Continental Enlightenments was most sharply contrasted was their attitude to the lower orders. This is a distinction that has reverberated through politics ever since. The radical heirs of the Jacobin tradition have always insisted that it is they who speak for the wretched of the earth. In eighteenth-century France they claimed to speak for the people and the general will. In the nineteenth century they said they represented the working classes against their capitalist exploiters. In our own time, they have claimed to be on the side of blacks, women, gays, indigenes, refugees, and anyone else they define as the victims of discrimination and oppression. Himmelfarb's study demonstrates what a façade these claims actually are.

The French *philosophes* thought the social classes were divided by the chasm of poverty and, more crucially, of superstition and ignorance. They despised the lower orders because they were in thrall to Christianity. The editor of the *Encyclopédie*, Denis Diderot, declared the common people had no role in the Age of Reason. "The general mass of men are not so made that they can either promote or understand this forward march of the human spirit." Indeed, "the common people are incredibly stupid," he said, and were little more than beasts: "too idiotic—bestial—too miserable, and too busy" to enlighten themselves. Voltaire agreed. The lower orders lacked the intellect required to reason and so must be left to wallow in superstition. They could be controlled and pacified only by the sanctions and strictures of religion which, Voltaire proclaimed, "must be destroyed among respectable people and left to the *canaille* large and small, for whom it was made."

In Britain and America, by contrast, the chasm between rich and poor was bridged by the moral sense and common sense the Enlightenment attributed to all individuals. Everyone, including the members of the lower orders, had a common humanity and a common fund of moral and social obligations. It was this social ethos, Himmelfarb argues, that in the English-speaking world was the common denominator between Adam Smith, Edmund Burke, secular philosophers, religious enthusiasts, Church of England bishops, and Wesleyan preachers.

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“Man is by constitution a religious animal,” Edmund Burke famously wrote in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. For Burke, religion itself—religious dissent in particular—was the very basis of liberty. The Wesleyans went one step further and also made it the basis of social reform.

John Wesley’s great mission was intended to be not only the spiritual salvation of the poor but also their intellectual and moral edification. There was no conflict between reason and religion. “It is a fundamental principle with us,” Wesley argued, “that to renounce reason is to renounce religion, that religion and reason go hand in hand, and that all irrational religion is false religion.” It was only by “religion and reason joined” that “passion and prejudice” and “wickedness and bigotry” could be overcome.

In pursuit of their mission, the Methodists produced a huge volume of literature not just on Christianity but on grammar, medicine, electricity, natural history, Shakespeare, Milton, Spenser, Locke, and other classics. Himmelfarb observes: “The whole of this quite extraordinary publication industry, comprising books, pamphlets, and tracts on a variety of subjects and directed to different levels of literacy and interest, constituted something like an Enlightenment for the common man.”

Methodists also took the initiative in the distribution of food, clothing, and money to the needy, paid visits to the sick and to prisoners in jail, and set up loan funds and work projects for the unemployed. By the end of the eighteenth century, the example of Wesleyanism had spawned an Evangelical movement within the Church of England that appealed largely to the middle and upper classes. As well as movements for prison reform, education and poor relief, the Evangelicals led the campaign that eventually lobbied successfully for the abolition of the slave trade.

In the American colonies, the first Great Awakening, the religious revival of the 1730s and early 1740s, paralleled the Methodist revival in Britain. The contrast with France was dramatic. In seeking respite from the religious passions of the Old World, Himmelfarb writes, the Americans did not, like the French, turn against religion itself. Instead, they incorporated religion into the mores of society. They “moralized” and “socialized” religion, turning its energies into movements for voluntary association, local organization and, ultimately, the politics of liberty.

In Britain and America, those who wrote about social reform and those in government who could do something about it were either the same people or else people cooperating closely with one another. In France, however, the *philosophes* were unconstrained by practical

considerations about how their ideas might be translated into reality. They were all the more free to theorize and generalize precisely because they were less free to consult and advise.

This profoundly affected the political consequences of their ideas. The *philosophes* initially decided that enlightened despotism would be their political instrument of choice. "Enlightened despotism," Himmelfarb argues, "was an attempt to realize—to enthrone as it were—reason as embodied in the person of an enlightened monarch, a Frederick enlightened by Voltaire, a Catherine by Diderot." The failure of these attempts subsequently produced the theory of the "general will" that legitimized the terror of the French Revolution. The people, in whose name the revolution purportedly acted, was a singular abstraction, represented by an appropriately singular and abstract general will. "In effect, the theory of the general will was a surrogate for the enlightened despot. It had the same moral and political authority as the despot because it, too, was grounded in reason, a reason that was the source of all legitimate authority."

Within England itself, there were supporters of the French Enlightenment whose theory and practice ended up little different to that of the *philosophes* they emulated. Himmelfarb has a chapter on British radical dissenters, much of which is devoted to the pathetic case of William Godwin, whose writings denigrated emotions and sexuality as irrational but whose personal life was a tangle of both. As in France, the English radicals devised theories about the education of children, but their only contribution to education reform involved the schooling of the middle and upper classes. Godwin's wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, wanted girls to be educated with boys, but her thoughts were confined to those who could afford to go to boarding schools.

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Meanwhile, education for the poor became an important cause for Methodism and Evangelicalism. The eighteenth-century essayists and politicians Joseph Addison and Richard Steele thought the founding of charity schools for the children of the poor were "the glory of the age," the "greatest instance of public spirit the age has produced." They were followed by Sunday Schools which, until the mass education movements of the nineteenth century, were the main source of instruction for the lower orders in reading, writing and arithmetic.

These education reforms reflected the same sensibility and ethos that inspired the other British philanthropic movements. They derived from the Christian principle, reaffirmed by British moral philosophy, of the natural equality of all people. In his treatise on the wealth of nations, the subject of Adam Smith's title was not the modern nation state. He meant the people who composed the nation, especially the "lower ranks." It was their well-being, their "wealth" that would be promoted by a progressive political economy. Smith wrote:

No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the greater part of the members are poor and miserable. It is but equity, besides, that they who feed, clothe, and lodge the whole body of the people

should have such a share of the produce of their own labor as to be themselves tolerably well fed, clothed, and lodged.

In Britain and America, the Enlightenment was both a theoretical and a practical expression of this outlook. Religion, moral philosophy, and their egalitarian assumptions shaped the era. They worked together for the common cause: the material as well as the “moral reformation” of the people. *Roads to Modernity* reveals more clearly than any previous book on the subject the environment in which these ideas and practices were born and how firmly they still mold the moral sense and common sense of the English-speaking world today.

Keith Windschuttle's latest book is *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One, Van Diemen's Land 1803–1847* (Macleay Press).

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