

The Enlightenment: Nature, History, and Genius

Seminar veranstaltet von
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Teilnehmer: Peter Boerner (Wissenschaftskolleg), Rainer Gruenter (Wissenschaftskolleg), Wolf Lepenies (Wissenschaftskolleg), Sergio Moravia (Florenz), Roland Mortier (Brüssel), Nicholas Phillipson (Edinburgh), Wolfgang Pross (München), Rosalynne Rey (Paris), Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann (Berlin), Rudolf Vierhaus (Göttingen), Robert Wokler (Manchester)

This seminar was organized with the dual purpose of discussing new research being done in three chosen areas of eighteenth-century studies and integrating these findings into a more comprehensive definition of the Enlightenment. The subjects in question were changes in the concepts of nature and science, new ideas of history, and the emergence of the concept of genius. They were picked partly because they were central to the organizers' research, partly because it was felt that they have been incorrectly integrated into standard discussions of Enlightened thought, and partly because they could allow a truly interdisciplinary dialogue to emerge. It was hoped that during the seminar each of these problem clusters would be discussed, a context of relations between associated ideas could be proposed and their interrelations investigated. Each of the invited participants had done significant research in one or more of these areas, though from different perspectives. Three sessions of the conference were devoted to the principal areas of interest and a fourth—open to a larger public—dealt with a general redefinition of the Enlightenment. In all, the discussions proved extremely stimulating. Participants located areas of basic agreement about subjects that did not seem at first to be related and succeeded in defining avenues of research for further development and refinement.

1. *Nature and Science:* Papers presented by R. Rey, S. Moravia and P. H. Reill. All three analyzed the shift in scientific sensibilities that occurred during the last half of the century, primarily in France, Germany and Scotland. This shift first occurred in the "life sciences" but spread to others including psychology, anthropology, chemistry and geology.

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Central to this endeavor was the concern with redefining the nature of living bodies and forces. This led to a research program centered around the ideas of "organization" and the animal economy, both of which proposed alternative concepts of system, combination and classification to those of the previously dominant model of iatromechanism. Closely allied to these concepts were the ideas of individuality, *sensibilité*, and purposeful dynamic development. Man was seen as an organized, dynamic entity, able to act autonomously. In addition to a rehabilitation of the instincts, the notion of sympathy assumed new prominence, since it could account for cooperation of bodily organs not in immediate contact with each other; by extension, it could be used to explain human actions within a "social body". Since the life scientists rejected the existence of simple, uniform categories and the search for ultimate causes, they also evolved a new methodology based on comparison, analogical reasoning and phenomenology.

2. *History*: Papers by W. Pross and R. Wokler. The two authors analyzed three leading historical-anthropological writers of the late eighteenth century, Herder (Pross), Kames and Monboddo (Wokler). Though radically different, all three emphasized the interrelationship between ideas in the life sciences and theories of history and society. All three dealt with questions of birth, custom, socialization and development. Herder was the most thorough-going in his attempt to combine the natural with the moral sciences, with his governing concept of organization, which he applied (by analogy) to culture. Thus, in culture as in nature there is a movement from simplicity to complexity. But each of these cultures is also influenced by the environment in which it is rooted. Hence, as nature expressed itself in different forms so man — seen by Herder as (in Pross's terms) *homo symbolicus*—expressed himself in different cultural systems. Kames and Monboddo focused their attention more specifically upon the nature/nurture dichotomy. Although they differed widely about the character of human nature and of primitive man, both stressed the influence of socialization, of education and of custom in shaping human potentialities. For both, also, it was activity, or "exercise in freedom", which insured that further development occurred.

3. *Genius*: Papers by R. Mortier, W. Schmidt-Biggemann, J. Hope Mason. The participants analyzed different aspects of the way in which genius was perceived in the late eighteenth century. Mortier focused on the differing concepts of genius propounded in the *Encyclopédie*, and advanced by Helvétius and Kant. Whereas the *Encyclopédie* stressed genius's irrationality, Helvétius attributed it to circumstance, and Kant severely restricted its significance. Schmidt-Biggemann traced the stages of

the development of the notion to self-validating genius from Shaftesbury through Hamann, Herder and Young. The major impulses for this development were the collapse of external norms (of nature and/or poetics) and the transformation of the divine world into the historical world. Hope Mason contrasted ideas about genius in Britain and France to those in Germany, relating the first to imagination (always a problematic faculty) and the second to intuition (perfect knowledge, as possessed by angels).

4. *General Session:* An attempt was made by the two organizers to present in short papers the general themes they believed linked these three areas. The most important were the notions of the temporalization of nature and the moral world, of organic conjunction, of self-generating activity (the concentration on active, goal-directed forces and drives), and of the increasing concentration upon imagination in the need for determining truth. It was argued that taken together these features amounted to ways of thinking about the world and man that differed significantly from that associated with the early stages of the Enlightenment. Formal comments were presented by W. Lepenies, N Phillipson and R. Vierhaus, and these were followed by a lively but inconclusive general discussion. There was much disagreement over the extent to which such generalizations were either possible or desirable, and the specific claims being advanced became subordinate to conflicting views of what the Enlightenment as a whole was or might have been.

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