

John Hope Mason

Kreativität und Aufklärung



Geboren 1943 in England. M.A. Cambridge University. Forschung und Veröffentlichungen auf dem Gebiet der Geistes-, Ideen-, Begriffsgeschichte, insbesondere der europäischen Aufklärung. Adresse: 1, Wendover Court, Chiltern Street, London W 1 M 1 HD, England.

1. The general purpose of my work is to examine how the modern value of creativity developed — how and why people came to believe that to be "creative" was good, and what they meant by that. While it is reasonable to suppose that human beings have always been creative, creativity as a value only arose in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. That is to say, while creative individuals were previously admired, their specifically creative abilities did not become the model for general behaviour, creativity was not seen as the highest human attribute. Only as human beings began to move out of a world in which they relied for both material and spiritual well-being on a non-human Creator, and began to see themselves as making their own world for themselves, did this new value begin to emerge. In other words, this development is integrally connected with that transformation of values which occurred in the 18th century — the Enlightenment.
2. A major problem in pursuing this work lies in these two words — *creativity* and *Enlightenment*. Because both are charged with assumptions and presuppositions; each has come to epitomise a particular attitude to human nature. One of the principal benefits of my stay in Berlin was to reveal to me how pervasive these assumptions are. My lecture at the Kolleg was praised for its lucidity, but almost no one seemed to understand it.
3. "Creativity" for me is a descriptive term which I define as follows — "acting in or on the world in a new way". Its two essential components are human agency and innovation; it is not limited to making. The history I am in the process of writing is in no way a triumphalist *Heilsgeschichte*. On the contrary. The modern belief about creativity, the ortho-

doxy which we find from the mid-19th century onwards (common to both Marx and Matthew Arnold), has two principal features: it associates creativity mostly with artistic and cultural activity, and it sees it as wholly admirable, desirable and beneficial. I regard both these features as misconceived and erroneous, and I wish to show how these misconceptions arose. One of the most instructive ways of doing this is to contrast 18th century developments in Britain and France with those in Germany. My previous work has dealt mainly with the former. My stay in Berlin enabled me to learn more about the latter, both from contacts with other scholars (especially the Conference I co-organised with Peter Hanns Reill) and from the experience of being in Germany.

4. "Enlightenment", for historians of the 18th century, refers to a movement of ideas which gave a new emphasis to freedom and to human potential. In different countries the emphasis was different, and the extent to which 'Enlightenment writers' belief in freedom and human potential also meant rejecting religion or praising reason varied enormously. This variety is still widely ignored or overlooked. As a result, the caricature view of Enlightenment which was constructed by the Romantics tends to prevail. In Germany this problem is particularly acute, Kant being the quintessential Enlightenment figure but Goethe and Herder being excluded. Useful work is being done on this subject but the old taxonomy still has life in it.

5. At this point the historian of the 18th century becomes the citizen of the late 20th century, for this life reflects a current need. "Enlightenment" in this perspective is the whipping-boy for two contemporary movements — the first religious and the second post-modernist. I would depict their relationship in terms of three *Weltanschauungen*:

1. Religious, traditional.
2. Individualist, rational.
3. Post-modernist, playful.

Both 1 and 3 identify 2 with the Enlightenment, 1 attacking 2 for its irreligion, and 3 attacking 2 for its claim to more-than-local truth. In turn, 2 opposes the anachronistic intolerance of 1 and the anarchic solipsism of 3. From the point of view of 1 the individualism of 2 is indistinguishable from the anarchism of 3, and from the point of view of 3 the rationalism of 2 is indistinguishable from the traditionalism of 1. (These are, of course, wild generalisations; but whoever wanted a tame generalization?) Representatives of both 1 and 3 were present at the Kolleg. Both naturally looked on me as a representative of 2. But in important ways I am not.

6. The historian looks at the 18th century and selects as the most significant features of that period the demand for freedom and the belief in

human potential (both of which are intimately connected with the developing interest in, and emphasis on, "creativity"). The contemporary looks back from the late 20th century and conflates aspects of the 18th century with aspects of the 19th century (especially utilitarianism and positivism); this mixture he labels "Enlightenment values". He stresses, above all, individualism and rationalism.

I regard this attribution of rationalism (positivism etc) to the 18th century as historically insupportable. However, individualism was omnipresent in the 18th century and central to those values which I, as a historian, wish to use to characterise the Enlightenment. This does not mean, however, that what I regard as good history is also an article of faith. On the contrary. For there was a void at the heart of the 18th century enterprise. And for me the identification of this void is a major concern.

7. As you cross the great plain which stretches from the North Sea to the Ural Mountains you come to an island. Unlike other islands it is surrounded not by water but by land. To reach it you must leave the Land of Plenty and pass through the Land of Limitations.

The journey through this Land of Limitations is strictly controlled. You may travel only on a certain route, at a limited speed. When the journey is over you experience an enormous relief. You want to indulge in Plenty. But then you realise that you are on an island. Everywhere there are limits. Even to Plenty.

Life on this island exists in some suspended, intermediate state. At times I think it resembles that state of the past, Byzantium; at times I think it resembles that state of the future, Disneyland.

In the long cold months of winter I used to go down to Wannsee and look out over the frozen lake. I needed emptiness. And there I found some, under a grey sky. But it was a limited emptiness, and as such it did not satisfy. In fact I wanted more than emptiness, I wanted *terra incognita*. None left.

I went to Berlin to study the past. Perhaps also I saw an image of the future.