

Aspects of Enlightenment

*Social theory
and the ethics of truth*

Thomas Osborne



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Aspects of enlightenment

“This is a fascinating, lucid and highly original book. It consists in a sustained sideways look at the dominant controversies in social theory. It shows how the antinomies of modernism and postmodernism, scientism and relativism are unsustainable. Social theory is redefined as a critical practice of enlightenment, conceived as an ethics of knowledge rather than dogmatic rationalism.” *Paul Hirst, Birkbeck College, London*

Aspects of enlightenment is a reconfiguration of the terrain of contemporary social theory. Attacking the centrality of notions of modernity and postmodernity in contemporary theory, Thomas Osborne argues that the proper subject matter of social theory is enlightenment. However, he departs from traditional accounts locating the vocation of social theory in the system of values established in the original Enlightenment by the French *philosophes* and others. Rather, he argues eloquently for the ethical status of enlightenment and for the place of the intellectual as the embodiment of particular kinds of critical ethos.

Outlining a social and critical theory geared to opening out specific problems in the practical “fieldwork” of enlightenment, Osborne illustrates his approach with case studies that consider the critical aspects and implications of scientific, therapeutic and aesthetic kinds of enlightenment.

This distinctive and sparkling study of the nature of the social sciences and their relationship to the question of enlightenment will be essential and provocative reading for students and scholars of social and critical theory, philosophy, sociology and the human sciences.

Thomas Osborne is Lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of Bristol. His work in the fields of critical theory, epistemology and the history and sociology of medicine has appeared in *Economy and Society*, *The Journal of Historical Sociology*, *Social Studies of Science*, *Social Science and Medicine*, and *History of the Human Sciences*.

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Thomas Osborne
University of Bristol



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For J.M.O.

The world in which one thinks is not the same as the world in which one lives.

Gaston Bachelard

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Preface

This book is about truth, criticism and ethics. It is concerned with the controversy over the consequences of various kinds of anti-foundationalism in social and critical theory, even affirming—albeit in a particular way—the *uses* of some restricted kinds of anti-foundationalism. It is concerned with the varied kinds of criticism that are available to the social sciences and social theory, and with the varied purposes and ends of such kinds of criticism. Above all, and to cut a long story short, it is concerned with the problem of *enlightenment*.

I wanted to write this book because of a certain dissatisfaction with some of the terms of debate in the social sciences and in contemporary social theory. It seemed to me, as I know to many others and in many different ways, that these fields were divided by a rather unproductive stand-off between competing positions—foundationalism and anti-foundationalism, realism and relativism, modernism and postmodernism, sensible (often German) rationalists and irresponsible (usually French) post-structuralists and so forth—which, while generating certain lucrative amounts of intellectual drama, tended nevertheless to make something of a mockery of each other. This book is by no means a studied or scholarly adjudication over these positions. Rather the notion of enlightenment, though hardly original, is intended neither as a synthesis of, nor exactly as an advance over, them but, more pragmatically, as a means of bypassing much of the substance of these debates altogether so as to get on to other things; so that we can begin to act again as “grown-ups” in these difficult matters of truth and criticism.

Perhaps the best way to think about the purposes of this book is as an *excursion*—the term is used advisedly—on some themes raised in Michel Foucault’s late and famous essay, “What is enlightenment?”. That is where Foucault insists that the idea of enlightenment should be understood as a general *ethos* or attitude rather than as a specific dogma (Foucault 1984a; cf. Foucault 1996). This book is, in effect, a rather personal elaboration of the consequences of such a view. Note that this makes of enlightenment a very general question; and one that is strictly speaking distinct from questions about *the* Enlightenment, that is about that period in intellectual history characterized by the great names of figures such as Rousseau, Voltaire or Montesquieu.

If some aspects of Foucault’s thought about enlightenment are a stimulus to a certain amount of what follows, this book is emphatically not a “Foucauldian” work, whatever that would mean. In any case, it is nothing like a crib or a commentary on Foucault’s texts. Foucault is not even mentioned that much. Happily, the only part of the book that actually addresses Foucault’s work in a direct kind of way is Chapter 5, and his followers and critics alike may well be somewhat underwhelmed by what is said there, not least

because the Foucault that makes an appearance is not perhaps the usual, erstwhile trendy one. The sort of Foucault that appeals to me is not, anyway, the Foucault that appears in the cribs; the subversive continental philosopher, the arcane prophet of transgression, the iconoclastic poststructuralist, the meta-theorist of power, the functionalist theorist of social control, or the gloomy prophet of the totally administered society. These sorts of Foucault can all safely be forgotten. The Foucault that motivates much of this book—more often than not behind the scenes—is a much more buttoned-up animal: an ethical thinker with a Kantian heritage, a good modernist rather than a fad-dish postmodernist, a rigorous and not so unconventional historical epistemologist concerned with the “immature” human sciences and, most unlikely of all, even something of an Anglo-Saxon empiricist *manqué*. This, then, is not the naughty, transgressive Foucault, but rather—as I once heard it described—Foucault with his clothes on. This book is a homage to that, still generally unknown or unimagined, Foucault.

Now, Foucault was a philosopher by vocation. Yet he was a philosopher who brought to bear a particular force of attention on the social and human sciences. This has led some people to conclude that Foucault was some kind of sociologist. As will become clear, I think this is a big mistake—or, if Foucault was a sociologist, he was a particularly bad one. Yet on the other hand, it is not exactly the “philosophical” Foucault that animates the following pages. Many books have been written about Foucault as a philosopher, but this—mercifully for those who have been well-trained in that discipline—is not one of those. Rather, the Foucault who appears, in so far as he does actually appear, does so above all in the guise of the critic of the social, human and other sciences, which is to say, not as someone who dismisses the possibility of such sciences as a matter of principle but someone for whom the status of such sciences was a constant source of reflection and questioning, even self-questioning. This is not to say that I think that these questions of the social and human sciences were Foucault’s only concern; it is only that such are the predominant concerns of this book. And that is why readers will find fewer discussions of philosophy and philosophers in this book than discussions of questions relating to particular issues in social theory, and to the limits of certain kinds of sociological explanation.

Now, social theory is not, for the purposes of what follows, quite the same thing as sociology. Sociologists typically investigate something called society; but that is not necessarily what social theorists do, or should be doing. If the book is quite critical of various kinds of sociology, this is not because it aims to be one of those supercilious enterprises in “theory” that seeks to legislate them out of existence, but in that it seeks to isolate some of their explanatory limits in relation to particular problems. That is why most chapters include discussions of various limitations of certain sorts of sociological thought; of what I call “epochal” sociology, of the idea of a “science of society”, of the idea of a radical or a critical sociology and so forth. The book does not condemn sociology; but in attempting to isolate some of its limits in various ways, it does seek to open out a space for social theory as an enterprise more or less distinct from sociology as such. This is not to dismiss sociology. For instance, I think that the effect of this separation is not least to rescue the idea of the “project”: that is, the idea that sociology and the social sciences might actually be of some *use*, as opposed to being mere receptacles of an endless and pointless swirl of gratuitous “interpretations”. It is not, then, that I wish to damn sociology—far from it—but rather to praise social theory.

This may well be social theory of a peculiar kind. Perhaps this book would be hard to describe as an orthodox exercise in social theory. This is partly because it may seem that social theory is not quite the right term for the discipline that I am addressing; the term “critical theory” would perhaps be preferable but I have not, in general, used it because of the specific connotations that it already has; partly because it often relates to quite specifically *literary* kinds of criticism and partly because it is more generally used to refer to a particular, justly celebrated, school of thinkers. So the term “social theory” will have to do, just so long as this “critical” element is understood to be implicit within it, even definitive of it. But perhaps this book is also unorthodox because it is not one of those wide-ranging diagnoses of the *Zeitgeist* or critical annihilations of all one’s opponents that readers have come to expect from social theory books. In fact the book is rather critical of the hubris that lies behind certain kinds of social theory, and argues that the discipline—if it is to be a “discipline” as such—might do well to turn itself upon a central, restricted object of conceptualization. Now, there is no doubt that social theory might be envisaged in all kinds of terms, and as being about many things. This book argues that one of its central concepts might be—indeed, *is*—the concept of enlightenment. It is really an exercise in imagining a social theory that would be devoted to this question.

The kind of social theory that is imagined here is not devoted to big, macho theorizing of the continental—or pseudo-continental—variety. Nor even is the implication of the position on enlightenment that I outline here that social theory should be concerned with the development of positive “theories” about enlightenment. It is rather that, as I say in the conclusion, social theory might do well to consider itself to be a generically parasitic discipline. By that I do not mean that social theory, as so often these days, should be devoted to endless and depressing second-hand commentary (‘Foucault says this... Habermas says that... Haraway says this... Rorty says that...’), but—and no doubt this constitutes its “social” aspect—that it should entail a kind of ongoing fieldwork in our existing practices of enlightenment. This kind of social theory would be parasitic, then, with regard to the kinds of enlightenment that already exist or aspire to exist. A commitment to such a parasitic spirit explains why, on the one hand, the central chapters of this book (Chapters 2 to 4) are not commentaries in social theory but are devoted to the assembly of some rather selective pictures of specific aspects of enlightenment, and why, on the other, so much of this book is concerned with tendencies in the actually existing social sciences—for not least of the functions of an “autonomous” social theory might be to reflect on the status of the claims of the social sciences themselves to certain kinds of enlightenment. Although there is little or no philosophy involved in this parasitic approach to things, it might help to regard the way I go about the question of enlightenment here as analagous to the approach to big topics like meaning, time or thought in certain kinds of post-metaphysical philosophy; that is, not to attempt a theoretical excavation of the topic but to describe it when in use; to treat of enlightenment not like an engine idling but when it is doing work.

This approach is guided not least by the conviction that enlightenment is something that, as it were, by definition cannot reach a final definition. If rationalist models of enlightenment will not do—as this book insists—this is not necessarily to take the rather irrationalist view that all attempts at definition are themselves bad. But it is to adopt a certain nominalism about enlightenment, a nominalism that, oddly enough, leads to a

kind of realism, because our only option becomes not to theorize about enlightenment but to attempt to picture it at work. This is not, however, an entirely pointless exercise in normative terms. It is, in fact, intended to provide some *relief* from some of our characteristic anxieties over the question of enlightenment.

These kinds of anxiety could be given many names. Scepticism, relativism, anti-foundationalism and postmodernism all spring to mind as good candidates. All point to a similar theme with regard to the question of enlightenment. They provoke the worry that truth is not perhaps what it was, hence that all is not well in the house of criticism. There are two caricatures of a position in relation to this kind of anxiety. The one is to embrace it with all one's passion, and to avow a wholesale anything-goes postmodernism. The other is to bolt down the hatches, denounce the renegades and insist on the powers of reason and the rights of critique. Actually these are not wholly caricatures. In any case, this book, in refusing either option, takes a double stand in relation to these questions.

First, in seeking to avoid the blackmail of being either for or against enlightenment, I adopt a *deflationary* perspective with regard to questions of truth and criticism. By this I mean an approach that says that things are not necessarily as drastic as they may seem in contemporary "theory": an approach that seeks to take the heat out of some of the extremes of controversy that beset social theory and the social sciences, an approach that bids that we adjust our ideas to at least some of our existing practices. Just as certain non-aligned socialists used to have as their slogan that they owed allegiance to "neither Washington nor Moscow", so the motto of this book might be put crudely as "neither realist fideism nor postmodernism". This is not to say that the book is one of those programmatic endeavours which seeks to tell the uninitiated "how it should be done". On the contrary, one of its basic contentions is that we already have plenty of good practices in the social and human sciences, and that things are not quite as bad in theory—as distinct from the world itself, which because it is in many respects quite awful, has substantial need of the social sciences—as many seem to think; indeed, that we do not have to fear that the sky is about to fall on our heads at any or every moment. And with regard specifically to social theory, the purpose of this book is to contribute to a reconfiguration of a discipline that is in effect already there, not to succumb to the hubris of attempting to reinvent social theory from scratch, to provide a swingeing critique of everything that has gone before, or to re-evaluate all values.

Second, the book discusses the meaning of the attitude of a *critique* of enlightenment. I claim that the idea of such a critical attitude might be—indeed, *is*—quite central to social theory, and that such an idea needs to be distinguished from varieties of postmodern anti-foundationalism and should even be seen as an internal aspect of enlightenment itself. This book is very much concerned with this notion of a critical attitude to enlightenment. Perhaps what is most distinctive about this idea is that it is an *ethical* notion. That is, ethics in a very broad sense; recalling Foucault—ethics as *ethos* rather than morality. This book makes much of the idea of an ethics of truth, an ethics of enlightenment, an ethics of critique.

It could be said that the notion of ethics here is made to do rather a lot of things, perhaps too many. But the book is neither a contribution to ethical philosophy nor, in itself, an ethical work propounding a particular ethical or moral point of view. The usage of the notion of ethics is intended to be only suggestive of a general space of concerns; to insist on an ethical concern in matters of truth is to contrast such a concern with political

or ideological or even epistemological concerns. It is also to stress the *difficulty* that is inherent in a commitment to different styles of telling the truth, or different styles of enlightenment; that such concerns are as much an “ordeal” as they are an application of pre-existing principles. Finally, and most important, the terminology of ethics is intended to signify something restricted and *deliberate*: that is, something that is not “ethical” in the sense that it guides all aspects of the conduct of our life but, on the contrary, something which might involve a deliberate break from everyday life; to submit to an ethic can mean a temporary retreat into a particular commitment, and deliberately and rather artificially even at the expense of other commitments. The idea of an attitude of ongoing enlightenment critique is ethical precisely in this latter sense.

Because of this ethical concern, readers will find that the book is quite oriented in places to questions of teaching and education. It does not offer a “theory” of education, but it does seek to discuss what kind of values or effects we might expect from the teaching of a discipline like social theory. This can make the discussion seem perhaps more programmatic than it is meant to be, almost at times as if it were a matter of something like moral questions. But the very last thing I mean by the idea of an ethical or “educational” concern is anything to do with morals or morality. This book does not offer a morality of anything, and certainly not of enlightenment itself. To be concerned with ethics is not the same thing at all as assuming for oneself some kind of moral authority; on the contrary, it is rather to throw that kind of attitude—including that kind of *political* attitude that is often called “ethical” today, for instance in various forms of dubious, intrinsically moralistic, communitarianism—firmly into question. And if this book is itself very much about the idea of an *ethos* that would seek, at its limit, to hold everything into question that might conceivably be held into question, this does not imply the boring, self-indulgent and ultimately pointless advocacy of a morality of endless questioning as such. As for teaching such a thing, that would scarcely be less irresponsible and immature than informing our interlocutors once and for all that, having found the right and final road, we had finally come upon and grasped, as if in our very hands, the truth itself.

Acknowledgements

Given the fact that the references in this book are meant to be minimally indicative rather than absolutely comprehensive, my first duty is to thank all those people whose work I have plundered for my own ends and to apologise to them if I have done so carelessly, or worse, if I have anywhere neglected to acknowledge the act of the plunder itself. Meanwhile, Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, Ian Hacking, Ian Hunter and—more than anyone—Nikolas Rose have motivated this book in ways they do not know, and would probably not much like. The fact that I take the liberty of thanking them—without their consent, and even though none of them have seen this book—cannot unfortunately be used to imply any kind of endorsement of it on their part, or even necessarily the slightest interest in it. They are certainly not to blame for anything. More secure thanks—albeit for things that may not always have seemed of any direct relevance to this book—are due to Andrew Barry, Catharine Edwards, Alan Irwin, Judith Osborne, Aaron Ridley, Ralph Schroeder, George Davey Smith, Judith Squires, Lisa Tamlin, Charlie Turner and Irving Velody, as well as to my unforgettable friend Ivan Connor who, though he never saw or knew anything of this book, somehow found himself present in its pages. David Owen read through the whole thing and I am most grateful to him not least for the many specific ideas, concepts, formulations and references that he has given me. Thanks also to James Brown, to an anonymous reader at UCL Press, and to Caroline Wintersgill who commissioned the book and who—in spite of her misgivings that my title made it seem as if I were more a devotee of Andrew Lloyd Webber than of Max Weber—was the source of many essential modifications to its structure and argument. I also owe a debt to the kindness of colleagues at Bristol, and in particular to Steve Fenton who initiated a period of leave for me to write this book, thus enabling me to take more or less constant benefit from the invaluable intellectual inspiration of Samuel and Imogen.

Introduction Of *enlightenmentality*

A spectre is haunting the social sciences: *enlightenment*. Everywhere the extent to which “we” are enlightened—whether such a “we” refers to “we” moderns (or postmoderns), “we” Westerners, “we” Europeans, or even “we” citizens of the world—is the focus for debate and controversy. There are some for whom the very idea of enlightenment is a sham, an excuse for the machinations of cultural experts and bureaucrats of all sorts, those who would even oblige us to be free. Others claim that enlightenment is our only hope in an age of violence, exploitation and despair; that merely to criticize enlightenment is to submit willingly to degeneracy. But whether we think of ourselves as being for or against enlightenment, what is certain is that the *concept* of enlightenment—the space of concerns that such a concept designates—is itself a key point of orientation for all those concerned with the status of the knowledges that we possess or pursue. This is so even if the *word*—enlightenment—is not often used. Rather, the conversation of enlightenment is taking place wherever people are concerned to debate or agonize over the links between truth and power, belief and ethics, knowledge and society, expertise and freedom, expression and redemption, and wherever they attempt, as all those who work in the social sciences must, to take a stand on such questions. In this sense at least, postmodern talk of being beyond enlightenment is certainly premature; we are all of us beholden to “enlightenmentality”. As the philosopher, Kant, observed in his famous essay on the subject in 1784, we do not live so much in an enlightened age as in an age of enlightenment: that is, an age where enlightenment is a central cultural aspiration if not a demonstrable, existing reality (Kant 1970:54).

This introduction seeks to situate the question of enlightenment in quite a rapid, indicative and impressionistic way, and then to sketch some of the main themes of the rest of the book. What is enlightenment? And why should it matter to the social sciences and to social theory in particular? In its broadest, most banal, sense, the notion refers to the application of reason to human affairs; enlightenment would be the process through which reason was to be applied to all aspects of human existence, above all in the name of freedom. The period of *the Enlightenment*—which usually means the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment—gave birth to the modern human and social sciences and their central ambition; to render freedom into rational form as an ordering principle in society (Kumar 1979; Hamilton 1996). The great thinkers of the Enlightenment all believed that reason as opposed to superstition or dogma was the one sure basis of a free and just society. The social sciences were centrally implicated in this project. Indeed we might say that the social sciences have a double interest in enlightenment, as subject and as object; on the one hand, in that they themselves are putative *agencies* of enlightenment, on the other in that, from the eighteenth century onwards, part of the *reality* of modern societies has been this will to enlightenment itself.

Blackmail

The social sciences have clearly found this double relation to be a difficult one. On the one hand, Auguste Comte's ideal of a sociology that would replace philosophy as the queen of the sciences has clearly not materialized. The very fact that sociology aspires to be an "-ology" of anything makes it rather laughable to a lot of people. In any case, the social sciences have not constituted themselves as the indispensable handmaiden of the enlightened society. On the other hand, those same disciplines have had some harsh things to say about the ideal of enlightenment itself. Indeed, many practitioners of the social sciences now appear to believe that the ideal of enlightenment has proved itself to be more of an iron-cage than a realm of freedom. Hence the struggles on the part of many thinkers—especially those associated with postmodernism—to escape from the logic of enlightenment itself, to denounce enlightenment and all its offspring. And hence the sense that today many in the human sciences find themselves to be stuck in the blackmail of a veritable *politics* of enlightenment. This is a politics in the strict sense of the term, one structured on the friend/enemy distinction that Carl Schmitt held to be at the heart of all politics; a resolute logic of being either for or against (Schmitt 1996). And hence, consequently, the anxiety of many in the social sciences and elsewhere who do not quite know where they should stand in relation to this politics.

Part of the inherent difficulty of such a politics is that the meaning of enlightenment itself does not seem to be entirely stable. People mean different things by it. Consider two such versions of enlightenment; the historical and the attitudinal.

There is the historical question of *the* Enlightenment. That is not the main subject of this book, and those who want scholarly treatments of Enlightenment thought should go no further and look elsewhere (Cassirer 1951; Gay 1966, 1972; Hampson 1968). It is not *entirely* irrelevant to our concerns, however. For instance, a popular question in social theory and the social sciences is the extent to which it can be said that the principles established during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment are living or dead today. Even here, it all depends on how the Enlightenment is defined; above all, whether we take what is really quite a narrow view of the matter, focusing on the work of Rousseau, Montesquieu and Voltaire and the French *philosophes* between 1715 and 1789, or a far wider view taking us beyond France and, in terms of periodization, back to Descartes (cf. Gay 1972; Porter & Teich 1981; Hulme & Jordanova 1990:3). The wider our definition of the Enlightenment, the wider will be those core principles which will be selected as being definitive of it. On one such definition, the Enlightenment is just a family of intellectual ideas that emphasized the primacy of reason in the organization of social and political life. The thinkers of the Enlightenment shared a passion for the application of reason to all things, a love of science, a belief in and commitment to progress, the distrust of all superstition and the religious organization of life, and a veritable faith in the powers of freedom to improve the human condition and bring humanity ever closer to a realization of its essential nature.

We can regard enlightenment in this way. But there are also limitations to such a view. One is the fundamental limitation of equating—or trying to equate—the Enlightenment with a substantive or specific *dogma*. If we take an historical view of the Enlightenment

and its legacy, we will find particular points of view taken on the part of the *philosophes* and others. But we would be hard pressed to locate a single, central doctrine of Enlightenment other than in rather negative terms. Reason itself can be a dogma; that of rationalism *per se*. But for the most part, and in spite of most subsequent commentaries on the matter, the thinkers of the Enlightenment were not advocates of the rationally ordered society; in fact, even the most “sociological” of them, such as Montesquieu or Adam Ferguson, cannot really be described as scientists of society at all—that had to wait for a later generation, indeed for Henri Saint-Simon and Comte himself. If, as postmodernists tell us, the dream of a rationally regulated society is now dead, then that is not a crisis of enlightenment as such but a crisis of a kind of sociological rationalism, which, in any case, has been in crisis since its inception. When enlightenment and when *the* Enlightenment is equated with sociological rationalism, or with rationalism of whatever kind, it is all too easy to dismiss it out of hand and find ourselves in the quagmire of denunciations of the social uses of reason in any form; stuck, that is, in a certain anti-enlightenment blackmail.

There are some—on both the Left and Right of the political spectrum—who, adopting this kind of logic, appear to believe that the recent collapse of communism and even of welfarism in the liberal societies of the West has signalled the end of the enlightenment project. This, for example, is the position of the political philosopher John Gray. He writes that the dream of an abstract theory of justice is now redundant because it adheres to what can now be seen as a spurious doctrine of universality, that people are potentially the same in all places, thus undermining all the essentials of cultural difference and diversity (Gray 1995; cf. Bauman 1992a). Such a viewpoint has an affinity with those doctrines that tell us that we are at the end of history, meaning that the great ideological battles of rival universalisms are now at an end and that all that remains are differing cultural conditions, habits and traditions (Fukuyama 1990, 1996; cf. Hirst 1989). For Gray and the other theorists of “endism”, we are now beyond enlightenment, and effectively released from it; whereas to adhere to the principles of the Enlightenment is effectively to align ourselves, whether we like it or not, with the fateful forces of communism or totalitarianism.

But if there is a blackmail of anti-enlightenment there is also a blackmail of enlightenment itself. The great German philosopher, Jurgen Habermas, for instance, famously upbraided some of the French post-structuralists for their “young conservatism”. They had turned their back on the Enlightenment in the name of relativism, irresponsibility and subservience to the *status quo* (Habermas 1985). For Habermas, it seems as if even to be quizzical of enlightenment immediately comes to run the risk of waking up in bed with the established order, and what could be the better mark of the renegade? To turn one’s back on the Enlightenment was to turn one’s back on progress, or on hope itself.

Negative enlightenment

Is there a way to escape these forms of blackmail? For Michel Foucault, enlightenment—this time, firmly with a lower case “e”—is best seen more as a kind of ethos or “attitude” than as a determinate series of historical doctrines. For one of its defining features is less

a doctrinal core than a kind of negative principle; just the fact that enlightenment problematizes itself, that it is generically *self-conscious*, that it is liable to turn inward upon itself, to problematize its own fortunes (Foucault 1984a; Gordon 1986a; Hulme & Jordanova 1990:1). That, anyway, is the feature of enlightenment that will be our focus of concern in this book. I propose to call this critical ethos of enlightenment in its extreme form, the principle of negative enlightenment; the principle that holds that to be enlightened may even entail that we do not know what enlightenment is. As Ernst Cassirer observed, “the permanent results of this philosophy do not lie in teaching which it develops and tries to formulate as its body of dogma” but rather just in the general attitude of being forever attentive to the need to “break through the rigid barriers of system” (Cassirer 1951:vi, ix). An analysis of enlightenment would be concerned to capture precisely this reflexive or negative character of enlightenment itself; to capture enlightenment, so to speak, as it regards its image of itself. As such, the analysis of enlightenment—even the *critique* of enlightenment—would be generically *on the side* of enlightenment in so far as it sought to conduct a permanent destabilization of enlightenment itself; to question enlightenment is an aspect of enlightenment and not necessarily an act of hostility towards it.

Critique of enlightenment

The correlate of the negative character of enlightenment, then, is a critical attitude to enlightenment. This book is fundamentally concerned with the character of such an attitude, with the kind of discipline that might be devoted to it, and equally with what differentiates it from other, perhaps less apparently peculiar, habits of criticism. At its most extreme the idea of a critique of enlightenment can entail the deliberate negation of enlightenment altogether. But not all forms of critique are necessarily this severe. In any case, it needs to be emphasized from the outset that, whatever its character, the idea of such a critique is in fact a difficult or, at least on occasion, a potentially eccentric affair. For in questioning the status of enlightenment, we do indeed run the risk either of damning it out of sight altogether or—perhaps worse—turning it into an excuse for postmodern triviality. Take as an instance of the former, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s celebrated work, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1986). For them, the legacy of enlightenment had been inverted and reason had become the tool of the domination of nature. Drawing as much upon Max Weber as upon Marx, they argued that enlightenment was itself the force that had led to the nightmares of fascism and the totally administered world. There are affinities here with later viewpoints such as those of the social theorist, Zygmunt Bauman, who argues that the Holocaust, far from being an aberration of Western civilization, was the coherent consequence of the very principles of our rational modernity in the West (Bauman 1986). Adorno and Horkheimer’s own dialectical approach in fact insulated them somewhat from the more romanticized, not to say naïve, uses to which this argument has been put in the subsequent iron-cage versions of the thesis that have been quite popular in the social sciences and beyond. Similarly, it would be unfair to chalk up Peter Sloterdijk’s *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1987) as a straightforward instance of post-modern trivia-mongering, although it is a brilliantly idiosyncratic diagnosis of such a move. Sloterdijk’s target is the cynical “enlightened

false consciousness” that has gripped the postmodern intelligentsia (well-off and miserable at the same time, as the blurb has it) in recent decades; a sensibility he would seek to replace with a dionysiac sense of laughter and *kynicism*.

Although it is not the strategy adopted in this book—which is not unfortunately the barrel of laughs that it might have been—the strategy of laughter might certainly be one way to transcend the varied blackmails of enlightenment. No doubt that would be only one of many ways, and—correlatively—I do not claim any stark *necessity* for the attitude that is outlined here. Not reading this book is unlikely to do anyone any harm; its purpose is only to bring some relief for those who feel the need from the blackmail of enlightenment and—most of all—from the logic of binarism that such blackmail presupposes. For such blackmail is always just a question of stark alternatives, of a logic of *either/ or*. It is essential to escape from this sort of binarism simply because *not* to escape it is to remain perpetually trapped in a cycle of what is best just called *immaturity*, a rather childish polemicism; in a perpetual state of firing blanks at our enemies without ever taking responsibility for the difficulty of cultivating a considered—as opposed to a kneejerk—attitude to the status of truth and the possibilities of criticism. Caught in such a logic of binarism, we define our position in relation to the projected position of the others. Hence the polemical character of the debates over enlightenment. We always position *ourselves* as the enlightened one; it is always the others that are unenlightened.

Postmodernism

This binary politics of enlightenment has been particularly in evidence in the case of the parallel debate in social theory over modernity and postmodernity. There is blackmail over modernity and postmodernity as well as over enlightenment. In fact the two debates are closely linked, and those who espouse postmodern epistemologies are often convicted of being opposed to enlightenment. But a certain amount of pointless heat has been generated by this controversy. As a sociological category, that is, as a descriptive term for an entire social formation, postmodernity is not very promising. Being opposed in binary form to modernity, the category necessarily overdramatizes social change and is, besides, more or less self-defeating in that it is not supposed to be a totalizing, sociological category at all. But taken in a narrower cultural sense, the category is at best harmless enough. Epistemologically it is certainly interesting. Jean-Francois Lyotard’s notorious *Postmodern Condition*—which set the terms of the whole postmodernism debate—is really an imaginative book about the culture of knowledge in post-industrial societies which makes the case that the structures of the sciences have radically changed in recent times. But Lyotard’s book does not function as a complete sociological description of any known society but, as its title states, a “report on knowledge”, and it is best left that way (Lyotard 1984a).

Notwithstanding this rather qualified sympathy with Lyotard, this book is not a contribution to postmodern social theory. But nor is it the usual witch-hunt against postmodernism (Eagleton 1996; Norris 1996). As with any witch-hunt, the purpose here is usually to bolster some outdated ideology rather than to extinguish one’s enemies altogether. Indeed, one usually gets the sense in the vigorous diatribes against postmodernism that the polemicists of modernity need their postmodern counterparts

fully as much as the seveneenth-century Church needed Galileo. In fact, a great deal of the very voluble resistance to postmodernism that one sees in social theory and the social sciences just takes the form of expediency; that is to argue that if we go along with the epistemological views of the postmodernists—whether right or wrong—we will fall into the self-defeating aporias of relativism and critical impotence. In short, for many, the fear appears to be that the sky will fall on our heads. But this is a misguided view to take. It is misguided epistemologically because although we can always point to the inadequacy of postmodern arguments, this does little to get away from the fact that *all* theories have internal problems of justification. Even rationalist theories, such as those of Emile Durkheim for instance, typically suffer from problems of circularity; that the conclusions and diagnoses are usually contained in the premises, while non-rationalist theories have difficulty connecting ought and is at all. The self-congratulatory jeers at postmodernism usually apply to those who jeer themselves.

Perhaps the most intractable problem, however, has to do with periodization. To read some of the professional anti-postmodernists, we sometimes feel as if until 1950 or the reabouts there were no imponderables at all in the house of epistemology. As if Sir Francis Bacon or C.S. Peirce, not to mention Montesquieu, Kant, Hegel, etc. had never existed. The fact is that if the sky were going to fall on our heads it would have done so a long time ago (cf. Toulmin 1990).

None of this is to say that things are easy in the world of theory. In fact it is just the opposite. It is rather to say that things are difficult and have always been so and that what is required is a critical ethos that is attuned to this very difficulty. But what makes things more difficult is if we choose to work with loose categories rather than concepts. I think that the modernity/postmodernity couple is just such a category. It masquerades as a realist sociological concept but in fact, as I shall argue in the next chapter, is not very promising as such. In discussions about modernity and postmodernity there are only rarely substantive discussions about the sociological aspects of such categories; rather what occurs is a proliferation of neologisms in seemingly empty space. Modernity and postmodernity are essentially idealist concepts and they do not work well at the level of society (cf. Giddens 1991a; Woodiwiss 1997). To take a sociologically realist view of modernity and postmodernity is arguably to come up with the realization that neither exist.

Realism and enlightenment

But enlightenment is another matter. The view that I put forward in this book is that instead of talking about modernity and postmodernity, social theorists would do better to restrict their discussions to questions of enlightenment. There really *is* such a thing as the question of enlightenment, even if it is a question that cannot promise—thank goodness—a finished solution. I think that we need to be realist about enlightenment. But to take such a realist attitude requires, oddly enough, a certain restricted idealism. That is because the reality of enlightenment is that it is an aspiration, an ideal, a spirit and it needs to be analysed in just such terms. I think that the debate over modernity/postmodernity is better translated out of its sociological idiom to become a debate about enlightenment. Crudely speaking, modernists like Habermas are saying that

enlightenment is not dead; postmodernists like Bauman or Gray are saying that it is. Both, in a sense, inhabit a sociological idiom; both regard the status of enlightenment as reflecting a whole kind of society, be that modern or postmodern. But with all these thinkers we are still, in effect, in the provinces of blackmail. Enlightenment is presented to us as a kind of subjective preference or choice: albeit a choice on which we stand to be judged.

This brings me back to Foucault. As I said, he wanted to escape the logic of this blackmail of enlightenment altogether. Perhaps he failed to do so, but the attempt was important. He was not very much interested in the project of a “science of society”; indeed, as I indicate in Chapter 5, to think of Foucault in anything like sociological terms is really to misunderstand him. He was a philosopher but not perhaps in an orthodox sense; rather he was the doyen of a particular kind of genealogical thought, a critic of enlightenment (Gordon 1986; cf. Chapter 5 below). The idea of enlightenment, said Foucault, always runs the risk of becoming dogma. Once it has become dogma, it has ceased to be enlightenment for enlightenment—is best understood not as a determinate doctrine but as a kind of negative ethos, a sort of will to exit (*Ausgang*), or escape—or just to keep moving. Foucault too would resist the usual dichotomies between modernity and postmodernity; if modernity exists it is not a sociological or epochal concept.

I wonder whether we may not envisage modernity rather as an attitude than as a period of history. And by “attitude” I mean a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task. A bit, no doubt, like what the Greeks called an ethos. And consequently, rather than seeking to distinguish the “modern era” from the “premodern” or the “postmodern”, I think it would be more useful to find out how the attitude of modernity, ever since its formation, has found itself struggling with attitudes of “countermodernity”. (Foucault 1984a:39)

I think that Foucault’s position can serve not least as a stimulus for distancing ourselves from the blackmail of enlightenment towards what might precisely be called—perhaps incongruously in the light of Foucault’s own supposed philosophical affiliations—a realist view of enlightenment.

It is realist in the popular if not the strictly philosophical sense; it aims to be pragmatic, in-the-world, *mature*—social theory for “grown-ups”, to paraphrase Stanley Cavell. Foucault’s attitude saves us from having to take a position on those big sociological questions about modernity and postmodernity. It rescues us from the binarism and blackmail of enlightenment or anti-enlightenment. But it is realist too in the sense that it is to embrace the fact that, pragmatically-speaking, we *are* committed to enlightenment; that we do live in an age of enlightenment, an age in which enlightenment is at least *in question*, if not an enlightened age as such. There is, indeed, a sense in which even to engage in the debate over enlightenment is in fact to come down necessarily on the side of enlightenment itself. Otherwise, why would it be worth tackling our opponents through the public use of reason? The political theorist, John Gray, for instance, likes to

think of himself as being post-enlightenment, but this is clearly not a wholly irrationalist or *anti*-enlightenment position simply because it cannot be one; he still clearly believes in justice and the good society; even it that society is “good” precisely in so far as it eschews the aspirations of perfectibility (Gray 1995:30).

Now, something that is quite striking about these positions on the character of enlightenment is their *projective* character. The enlightenment debate is almost always couched in projective terms; what is stated is an ideal position intended to count as enlightenment. Here the basic discipline is philosophy or at least what is sometimes just called “theory”. We are looking for foundations for our position, even and especially if, like the influential philosopher Richard Rorty, we have our doubts about the possibility of foundations in the first place; in which case we are looking for a kind of substitute for foundations (Rorty 1989). Most such foundational discussions are situated, then, at a general, theoretical level—very often they take the form of commentary. There is a healthy publishing market for such material, centred on informing the curious as to what kind of enlightenment they should or should not adopt (Dews 1987; Habermas 1987a; cf. Hoy & McCarthy 1994; Kelly 1994). This market is littered with good intentions, sophisticated analyses and nonstarters, for instance what is rather misleadingly called the “Foucault–Habermas” debate.

In contrast to this sort of material, I suggest a more literally realist turn. I think that one of the consequences of Foucault’s argument about enlightenment as “ethos” is that rather than a philosophical approach to enlightenment, it invites us to take something more like an empirical, medical or diagnostic one. Doctors diagnose by decomposing the elements of a condition, thus producing a profile of the disease—its characteristics, the possible forms of treatment, the prognosis. In order to be realist about enlightenment we do not need some abstract, foundational or anti-foundational theory of enlightenment but a diagnostics of enlightenment as it already exists. Rather than building a theory of enlightenment from the ground up, or providing endless commentary on the thoughts of others, social theory might do better to take a deliberately parasitic attitude, and look to the practices of enlightenment that we already have. Hence the particular, perhaps rather vulgar kind of realism I am advocating invokes a “worldly” attitude to enlightenment; a critique of impure reason (see Chapter 1 below).

Let me now give an indication of some of the orientations that such a worldly attitude might take, by previewing in what remains of this introduction some of the main themes of this book.

Aspects of enlightenment

If we are to be diagnostic about enlightenment, the concept needs to be broken down into some of its constituent parts. How do we dissect our enlighten-mentality? As with all forms of dissection there may be many ways and so, at the risk of boring readers with excuses and special pleading, I now very briefly stress the limits of the particular strategies of dissection that are at stake here. If this book focuses in particular on three substantive aspects of enlightenment—those associated with science, therapeutics and art (Chapters 2 to 4)—this is not because these are to be regarded somehow as transcendental domains. It is rather that they represent particular kinds of *provocation* to the idea of an

ongoing critique of enlightenment that might be so central to social theory. Other domains or practices could, obviously, have been chosen, but these aspectual domains are provocative because they are domains in which the intersection of questions of truth and criticism are especially problematic—difficult, ambiguous and hence exemplary. It may even be the case that these domains or their equivalents have been accorded transcendental status—for instance, in Kant’s trinity of pure, practical and aesthetic reason—precisely because of this exemplary character which is really just of a conventional, historically conditioned sort.

So in focusing on the fields of science, therapeutic reason and art I do not mean to suggest that no other fields might be considered, or that the material I do address might not be cut up in different ways. I do not consider, as I might have done, aspects of enlightenment in the media industries, in management and business, in the sphere of politics, in bureaucratic fields or even, as would no doubt be possible, in religion. Another omission that people will notice is the question of gender; except that it is not really an omission at all precisely because we cannot imagine the question of gender as a mere aspect of enlightenment when really that question is an ongoing dimension of all such aspects. But if that question is scarcely considered even in terms of a general dimension of this sort, that is because—as the conclusion to this book seeks to indicate with regard to, among other things, some features of contemporary feminism—the question of gender, while being certainly *crucial* to all sorts of matters of enlightenment (as instanced by all the achievements of gender studies, women’s studies and so forth), is not, dare I say it, all that *provocative* in relation to such matters.

This is emphatically not a dismissal of gender questions in general. Anything but. It is rather to say that if the critique of enlightenment is to take as its territory precisely those aspects of enlightenment that are most difficult, most insoluble, then the question of gender scarcely qualifies simply because to be *against* enlightenment in gender matters is not particularly “interesting” in any way but is simply to be *unenlightened*, which is to say, straightforwardly deplored. That is not to say that there is nothing of interest here for those who are interested in gender matters. In very general terms, it seems to me that a replacement of all those big, macho, epochal, build-everything-from-the-ground-up approaches that we see in the world of “Theory” (with a capital “t”) in favour of critical approaches that are more mundane, parasitic and more messily within-the-world would not be without interest for those who notice and regret the fact that such “Theory” is almost exclusively the province of people who just happen to be men.

Even the areas I do manage to discuss are obviously problematic. Addressing the scientific spirit, as I do in Chapter 2, for instance, brings with it limitations that will be obvious. I focus on the natural sciences and the “central case” of the laboratory sciences; but this misses all sorts of scientific enterprises such as the biological or life sciences, or vital questions to do with the technological aspects of science. But my intention is not to produce anything approximating to a “general theory” of enlightenment; rather, the three aspects of enlightenment that I do consider are of particular interest in relation to the concerns of this book not least in so far as they are each domains which seek to evolve certain kinds of truth that are specific to themselves, domains to which social theory and the social sciences have been drawn whether by way of application or critique and which therefore serve well to throw the status of these disciplines themselves into question, and

domains in which the theme of a critical attitude to enlightenment can be pictured at its most provocative, hence most salient.

My three aspects of enlightenment are, no doubt, provocative in different ways; science because it has traditionally been held up as the epitome of enlightenment, therapeutics because the therapies seek to aid humans themselves to enlightenment but with uncertain effects, and art because, no doubt, of its very ambiguity in relation to the idea of enlightenment, either as a reaction to or as a projected, if alternative, embodiment of that idea. The social sciences have been drawn to all three domains by way of critique; science has been subjected to the analyses of sociologists such as Bruno Latour, the therapies and the human sciences by Foucault himself and by those influenced by him such as Nikolas Rose, and art by theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu and others. In each case, issues of criticism are especially problematic, partly because those who subject these areas to critique often appear to be prone to a degree of uncertainty concerning the status of their own critical positions, and partly because each area of enlightenment is itself already a critique of some or other aspect of the world. But the point about my discussions of these kinds of enlightenment is not to close these problems of critique once and for all, nor to provide “theories” of each of these domains, but rather to sketch some restricted aspects of the kinds of critical dilemmas that are typically encountered within them and, if anything, to show why such dilemmas might be seen as *ordinary* consequences of their own internal logics. My aim is at once to complicate our understanding of some of the varied meanings of enlightenment and—perhaps more importantly—to deflate some of the interpretations of the consequences that such complexity might be said to bring.

Now, quite often, it is just *science* that is held up to be the embodiment of enlightenment as such (see Chapter 2). This is true even of anti-enlightenment critics of science. Such a perspective on science often entails a rationalist view of enlightenment. I want to insist that to take a realist view of enlightenment is not to take a rationalist view of it. Science is not the all-determining form of all reason; both the philosophy and the sociology of science have perhaps been rather prone to making the mistake of designating it as such. But science is neither a methodology nor just a sociological institution; rather it is most “real” as an aspiration of enlightenment. That is to say, science is real in this sense only at the level of the *spirit* or the *ethos* of science. What is required is a realism of that spirit or ethos. Such a realism will lead, if anything, in the opposite direction from that of an anti-science perspective. There may be such a thing as a culture of science; but we do not live in a “scientific culture”, that is, a culture entirely determined by science. That very idea is to submit to a category mistake. I argue that scientific enlightenment is a limited rather than a universal thing; and that science has no intrinsic or inevitable moral implications of its own, even though the very idea of science has ethical preconditions, and that the deployment of anti-foundational arguments—such as those of Bruno Latour—can serve to praise science rather than to damn it.

Science is not the only apparatus of enlightenment, although it often seems to serve as the implicit measure of them all. To focus exclusively on science is to run the risk of fetishizing certain aspects of Western reason. The West becomes synonymous with Science (as, for example, in the work of Ernest Gellner, Francis Fukuyama and, on some readings, Max Weber). Certainly, from that perspective, other forms of reason lose their specificity or lend them-selves to designation merely as pseudo-sciences. The therapeutic

disciplines have often been labelled as such; and, in many cases, many do no doubt fall short of the standards that would be required of “scientific” forms of discourse (see Chapter 3). Foucault put this down to the fact that the disciplines, as he called them, had not gained autonomy from their origins in the politico-judicial model of the Inquisition whereas the empirical sciences had managed to escape these origins (Foucault 1979:226–7). This at least suggests that the therapeutic disciplines need to be analysed in their own right, and not as by-products of scientific rationalization. However, my verdict will not necessarily parallel Foucault’s complaint as to the “petty, malicious minutiae of the disciplines and their investigations”. It is not that the Enlightenment discovered the Liberties *and* invented the disciplines; but rather that the disciplines are themselves an aspect of enlightenment, albeit one pertaining to a different logic to that of science. We need to avoid the naïve kind of approach that subjects all the disciplines to the formulae of science and thus so easily to anti-enlightenment prejudice.

Clearly, to insist on a non-rationalist theory of enlightenment reason is likewise to make room for analyses of forms of impure reason that are at some distance from the great models of science and philosophy. Since the early nineteenth century, and largely in reaction to tendencies inherent within the Enlightenment, the world of art has accorded itself the status of a peculiar kind of enlightenment (see Chapter 4). Romantics like Freidrich Schiller drew on the aesthetic paradigm to reconcile the twin pillars of subjectivism and objectivism; and, in our own times, Habermas has defended the legacy of enlightenment by recourse to the old idea of a redemption through art, while Foucault—in more anti-romantic vein—wrote of an aesthetics of existence, a principle of aesthetic creativity that was beyond moral codes and norms of knowledge (Habermas 1985:12; Foucault 1989). I think that whereas we need a non-rationalist understanding of scientific enlightenment, the domain of art benefits from a dose of rationalism. Of course, art can be a model of anti-enlightenment, the positing of a domain of truth and reconciliation beyond that of reason as such; but, equally, aesthetic reason might be seen as a field of a certain rational *logic* of the aesthetic, a logic that—so long as it avoids the prejudice of aestheticism—might be enacted as a model, however limited, of enlightenment in domains beyond the artworld itself.

Much of my discussion of practices of enlightened reason is directed against the sociologism of approaches that regard the telos of forms of reason solely in the light of the social characteristics of those who purvey reason: the experts, the intellectuals or whoever. Yet any realist approach to enlightenment has to consider what could be called the question of enlightenment as a vocation; that is, the question as to *who* is speaking when we speak in the name of enlightenment. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment was, not least, an intellectual phenomenon. It was inconceivable without the emergence of a new, loose-knit corps of authorities who saw themselves speaking in the name of a universal reason that owed no—or few—proprietary dues to Church, patron or State. Indeed, the status of the intellectual is intrinsically tied to this meaning of enlightenment; the intellectual is the figure who is delegated or who delegates themselves to speak in the name of enlightenment, and to dramatize the continuing conscience of it (Chapter 6). But I argue that the question of enlightenment as a vocation is not a sociological question exactly. It is not a question of attributing a social function to a particular kind of intellectual voice but of indicating the extent to which the intellectual voice is the function only of a stylization of enlightenment principles. Hence to be realist about the

intellectual voice is not to produce a structural sociology of the intellectual field and still less to produce a rationalist theory of intellectual power and its dissemination, but to analyse the varied agency of reason as it is embodied and individuated, by particular kinds of intellectual persona. In the end, it is even to defend the very idea of the intellectual.

Negative anthropology

This, then, is perhaps a peculiar sort of realism. But in the name of what does it speak? It is certainly not the critical realism that has been quite popular in social theory over recent years (Outhwaite 1987). This holds that the function of realism is to criticize reality from a particular perspective—usually that of a wholly just, classless society. That is all very well, even if such views always seem to contain an implicitly utopian moment. In fact, I argue that to take a realist approach to enlightenment also entails a utopian moment, albeit of an obviously different sort from that of critical realism (Chapter 1). This should not be surprising for it is often said that utopianism is the correlate of realism. The realist analyses the world as it is and then projects another, different world as an alternative; or, at least, that “other” world is the baseline for our purchase on the present state of reality. But what is the nature of that utopianism here? In a nutshell, I think it should be described as being counterfactual, “anthropological” and ethical rather than sociological.

I argue that the subject matter of a critical analytics of enlightenment—and of social theory—should not be with the structure of society so much as with the changeability of human capacities; it is anthropological rather than sociological in the sense that its concern would be more with the theme of human nature than with a science of society as such (Chapter 1).

If this critical attitude to enlightenment is anthropological in its concern with human nature, this entails—at least at its limit—what can be called a *negative* anthropology (cf. Honneth and Joas 1988:8, quoting Kamper 1973:26). Such an anthropology starts from the limit-assumption, the regulative ideal, that humans might be wholly given over to culture, to self-definition from the ground up; that their nature might even consist in having no nature. This assumption, though based on realist premises, is ethical rather than realistic. It is not *realistic* because humans are given over to traditions, to habit, to settled ways of living, to genetic determinations, and are shaped by their biology, their gender, by conventions, by their environment—all this before they can become cultural beings in imposing their own values, freely chosen or not, on themselves and the world. But it is ethical in so far as one of the value-orientations of a cultural science will be precisely with a problem-aticization of humans *in so far as* they are cultural beings of this sort. In other words, it is a perspective that would, in effect, *will* humans to become cultural beings. It would seek to speak in the name of the cultural aspect of humans; and that is why the fully “negative” version of a critique of enlightenment—as, for example, in the genealogies of Foucault—might sometimes cultivate a certain unreality of perspective for deliberate, ethical ends. But the task of such a perspective of negative enlightenment, in a normative sense, might be to bring reality itself somewhat closer to what is demanded by such an ethic.

Ethics of enlightenment

When I say that part of the peculiarity of the idea of an ongoing critique of enlightenment is that it is ethical in character, I do not mean that this critical attitude should be thought of as pertaining to a whole way of life, but that it properly takes the form of a deliberate and restricted exercise that we perform on ourselves in rather determinate circumstances. This makes it quite distinct from some varieties of postmodernism. The critic of enlightenment in this sense might be compared with the “ironist”, as described by the philosopher, Richard Rorty, who takes what might initially look to be a similarly contingent view of the world. For Rorty, ironism entails the embracing of a principle of contingency with regard to all things—culture, language, truth, the self. To be enlightened is, in effect, to acknowledge contingency. The difference from the perspective that is outlined in this book is that Rorty clearly regards ironism as a *general* rather than a deliberately restricted outlook on life, something like an ironist form of subjectivity, a morality, a complete epistemology or an ironist “worldview”. The sceptical attitude of the sort of critique of enlightenment that this book is concerned with is not, as I see it, quite like that (Rorty 1989; see Chapter 1); its utopian moment does nothing to debunk the actual findings of the sciences or disciplines themselves; indeed, even though it imagines things as being completely otherwise, it can seem to leave them, in some aspects, more or less completely intact.

Indeed, I think that one of the pay-offs of such a negative view of enlightenment would be precisely that it retains a certain distance from postmodern or “ironic” understandings of truth. I say that such a view is ethical, as we have seen, in the limited sense that it entails a restricted value-orientation—that associated, at its limit, with negative anthropology—that it pushes to an extreme with a certain deliberation. As such, it is much more like an exercise than a determinate, nomological “doctrine”. It is something that we do for *strategic* reasons; to invoke reminders that we are cultural beings and that, being so, we need to keep the search for a way out constantly on our mind. The negativity of a critical attitude to enlightenment does not, on this view, *prove* that humans are pure culture. Rather it imagines them to be so, and enjoins humans to push such an imagination to the limit in the interests precisely of a renewal of cultural imagination. But in so far as it is an exercise, then just as after any exercise, we have to dust ourselves down or change our clothes and get back—if hopefully with renewed powers of judgement—to the business of living. In the interests just of everyday security we cannot imagine ourselves—as do the postmodernists, even as a matter of morality—to be in the flux of culture through all the duties of the day, as if there were no such thing as knowledge or things that were good. In this sense, we might be forgiven for describing the idea of a critique of enlightenment in terms of moral education; but it would not educate the whole person but only deliberately place in question certain aspects of our cultural make-up. Cultural criticism of this sort is not itself a whole way of life—we do not enter a monastery to do a negative critique of enlightenment. However, we might enter a classroom or a lecture-hall (see Chapter 6; cf. MacIntyre 1990:218).

We can no doubt find instances of a critical attitude to enlightenment—and of negative enlightenment—quite happily at work in philosophy, literary criticism, history, sociology, art, even in the physical sciences. There is no exclusive disciplinary privilege accorded to such an attitude, and it is very rare even for any discipline or work to be

exclusively a contribution to it. There are—partial—exceptions. In the conclusion to this book I argue that social theory might be the discipline to take this critical attitude as a particular concern. As for individual thinkers, Weber and Foucault come to mind (Chapter 5). Both devoted their attentions quite specifically to the elaboration of something like a science of culture that was also a critique of enlightenment and which, in Foucault's case, appears to take on the guise of a full-scale negative attitude to the question of enlightenment. But these figures should not be seen as “founders” or “master-thinkers” of this kind of work. It is rather that aspects of a critique of enlightenment can be discovered, and illustrated, in their works; and that each exemplifies, for all their very fundamental differences, a certain possible orientation to such a discipline, a form of exemplification that is itself exemplified by the fact that they cannot be pinned down and reduced to any singular or determinate form of discourse, that each have had many self-proclaimed followers and disciples but no singular school, it being seemingly impossible to “follow” either without doing a certain amount of more or less regrettable kind of violence to their work.

Finally, I want to reiterate that the negativity entailed in the very idea of a critique of enlightenment does not mean that we have to adopt a “negative” view of enlightenment in the sense of being resolutely post-or anti-enlightenment. On the contrary, it is rather that enlightenment is itself embodied by a certain negativity towards itself. This negativism takes us in the direction of a concern with the genealogy of practices of enlightenment in particular contexts. For if the purpose of enlightenment is to realize freedom, part of that role has to be with the limits of our current realizations of freedom. It is this aspect of this book that makes it more—or rather less—than a work in abstract “theory”, but rather a contribution to a sort of *fieldwork* in the spirit of enlightenment in some of its worldly aspects.

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