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Critical Global Studies and Planetary History: New Perspectives on the Enlightenment

Abstract: Though doing so invites methodological problems, the concept of ‘the Enlightenment’ is nevertheless in need of widening: it can no longer be reduced to any one historical period; nor can it be restricted to Europe. As a process of rationalization, scientification, technification, secularization, or democratization, forms of Enlightenment can be identified in many periods and regions. I wish to argue here that an expanded meaning opens up opportunities for an enhanced and interdisciplinary Enlightenment research. On the basis of two recent approaches to the Enlightenment—by Felicity A. Nussbaum and Dipesh Chakrabarty—I will try to show the interdependency of period and process notions, and ponder the ways in which they inform one another. A combined reading of both approaches shows how they might serve as models for a specific form of interdisciplinary global history in the heritage of the Enlightenment.

It has often been remarked that—more than other period concepts of history—the concept of the Enlightenment is characterized by a semantic double structure: it signifies on the one hand the historical period of the eighteenth century, and a transepochal and still ongoing process of rationalization on the other. This double meaning (or even double concept) was given its canonical formulation by Jürgen Habermas’s notion of the ‘project of Enlightenment’ (Habermas 1990). Whereas historians and philologists in recent decades have tried to narrow down the concept and to radically historicize the Enlightenment by limiting it to objects of the eighteenth century, the broader understanding of the Enlightenment was left to sociologists, political scientists or the field of literary studies. Robert Darnton’s attempt to reduce the Enlightenment to a specific movement in Paris and a specific type of historical agent against an ‘industry of the Enlightenment’ (Darnton 2003)—or Quentin Skinner’s methodological remarks, already formulated in the late 1960s against the myth of continuity of (not only Enlightenment) ideas (Skinner 1969)—are only the most prominent examples of these attempts. In the decades after the 1980s, one often emphasized the distances between now and then in an attempt at warding off the danger of an ideological

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misuse of the Enlightenment: the non-Enlightened aspects of the eighteenth century have been stressed, and occultisms, esotericisms, and the persistence of religions and superstitions have been examined to show the discontinuities, rather than a simple scheme of plain modernization since the eighteenth century.¹

Nonetheless all these pleadings for historicization and contextualization could not prevent the Enlightenment being understood in its broad meaning: as a process of rationalization, scientification, technification, secularization, or democratization. In this sense, forms of Enlightenment can be identified in periods or regions other than the European eighteenth century: one can speak of Islamic Enlightenments in the eleventh century as well as considering that perhaps, nowadays, the Enlightenment has its place in Latin America rather than in Europe.² Especially the broader and science-transcending discussions in the public sphere refer to a wide understanding of the Enlightenment and indicate the ongoing social relevance of the concept of the Enlightenment as a project.

Indeed, despite all the methodological problems that professional historians have with such a widening of the concept, they on the other hand know that there are no naked facts that can be reduced to the eighteenth century, or any historical period. Positivism might be a methodological presupposition, but can also turn into an ideology of mere facts. Historization alone doesn't prevent ideology, and can be even more ideological than constructions that make explicit their cognitive interest and standpoint. From its questions posed to the past about the theories that are applied, to questions of reception and impacts, historiography is always transcending the narrow context of the examined period. This is especially true when questions of intellectual history are touched upon, and when the ideas of a period—as in case of the Enlightenment—have a normative surplus that transcends the end of the eighteenth century. It is not by chance, that in the very last years, beneath a vivid positivist research on details of the eighteenth century, some of the most inspiring approaches have been based on a broad understanding of the Enlightenment that aims to think of the concept of period and the concept of project together. The newly emerging global history discourse has proved especially fruitful in this respect.

Authors from postcolonial, postmodern, and subaltern studies discovered the Enlightenment. Jacques Derrida tried in some of his last essays to mediate

1 See, for instance Neugebauer-Wölk (1999). Most recently, Luise Schorn-Schütte argued against a plain narration of modernity (2009).

2 In an interview with the *New Left Review* in January 2010, Eric Hobsbawm answered the question if there are any vivid Enlightenment traditions with a reference to Latin America: "Certainly in Latin America, politics and general public discourse are still conducted in the old Enlightenment—liberal, socialist, communist—terms." (*New Left Review*, 61, 2010, p. 13–14)

between a critique of Enlightened universalism and a salvation of reason through the concept of an 'Enlightenment to come' ("*Le 'Monde' des lumières a venir*") (Derrida 2003). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak made a similar attempt with her concept of the Enlightenment as an 'enabling violation' (Spivak 2008, pp. 8–9). From a different perspective, Zev Sternhell tries to show in his engaged study on *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition* that there is not only a transtemporal process of Enlightenment, but also a Counter-Enlightenment tendency that is defined by a cultural and national essentialism, starting in the eighteenth century with Edmund Burke and Herder and lasting until today (Sternhell 2006). Last but not least, Daniel Fulda and his team at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Research on the European Enlightenment (IZEA) in Halle have examined underlying 'cultural patterns of the Enlightenment' emerging in the eighteenth century and lasting until the present day (Fulda 2010).

In my contribution, I wish to argue that the double meaning of the Enlightenment is not only a danger but at the same time opens up opportunities for an enhanced and interdisciplinary Enlightenment research that goes beyond the narrow borders of an academic historical or philological reconstruction of a past period that is presumed to have nothing to do with our contemporary concerns. On the basis of two recent approaches to the Enlightenment—by Felicity A. Nussbaum and Dipesh Chakrabarty—I will try to show the interdependency of period and process notions, and ponder the ways in which they inform one another. Felicity A. Nussbaum pleads for an enhanced and globalized view of the eighteenth century in order to overcome traditional Euro-centric interpretations of that period. She argues that such a reinterpretation of the pre-history of globalization in the period of the Enlightenment also allows us to modify our contemporary understanding of these processes in the direction of a pluralized view of multiple ways to modernity (1). Whereas Nussbaum's starting point is thus a historical reinterpretation of the eighteenth century, one of the most prominent current postcolonial critics of the Enlightenment's Eurocentrism, Dipesh Chakrabarty, rediscovers certain universal notions of the eighteenth century—namely the idea of a universal history of mankind as a species—in order to face contemporary global challenges such as climate change, and tries to reformulate them with respect to a modification of basic postcolonial methodological assumptions. He argues that the cultural diversity and plurality axioms of postcolonialism have to be mediated with an anthropological and biological deep history of the human species as a whole (2). Both approaches can serve as models for a specific form of interdisciplinary global history in the heritage of the Enlightenment.

Felicity A. Nussbaum's research program of Critical Global Eighteenth Century Studies

In the introduction to her standard volume on questions of Enlightenment and Globalization, *The Global Eighteenth Century*, Felicity A. Nussbaum gives an outline of the possibilities and limits of non-Eurocentric eighteenth century studies. She develops her approach to what she calls 'critical global studies' in opposition to a linear narrative of globalization and modernization. She calls this narrative—starting in the Enlightenment and ending up in today's globalized world—a kind of European victory history. Based on some insights taken from postcolonial studies and the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment's universalism, she pleads for a pluralization, specification, and modification of the traditional triad of European Enlightenment, modernity, and globalization. This, she contends, is a precondition for a critical view on imperial forms of globalization and gender hierarchies, as well as for the acknowledgement of indigenous forms of knowledge or for giving a voice to subalterns or minorities: "In particular, postmodern thinkers, Marxist theorists, and, more frequently, feminists and historians of race, have significantly complicated our understanding of the genealogy of human difference." (Nussbaum 2003, p. 6)

What makes Nussbaum's approach an important argument in our context is her assumption that it is just such an enhanced understanding—a broader historical reconstruction of the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment—that enables at the same time a genealogical deconstruction of monocausally structured Eurocentric understandings of globalization:

Critical global studies helps us to understand that the unmodified term 'globalization'—like 'modernity'—is inadequate in reflecting its many historical meanings, and imprecise in conveying the complexities of varied social, economical, and cultural conditions in their specific geographical locations. (Nussbaum 2003, p. 5)

The tasks of such a program of enhanced study of the eighteenth century would be:

[to] analyze the European encounter with other populations throughout the world and offer ways to think critically about the imperative of that [European] imperial project... [and to] query the boundaries of national histories and literatures that have limited our understandings to reconsider sexual and racial intermingling, religious encounters, the exchange of goods and diseases, indigenous knowledge, and the real and imagined mapping of the earth's domain. (Nussbaum 2003, p. 1)

These global crossings, encounters, exchanges, transfers, appropriations and diffusions are at the root of the European Enlightenment, which can itself be defined as an accelerated and enhanced “movement of ideas across borders and over time” (Nussbaum 2003, p. 2), rather than as a fixed set of genuinely European ideas. European travelers, emperors and scientists didn’t come to the extra-European world with ready-made models of an Enlightened society, but rather, the global experience is at the root of concepts that are generally seen as genuinely European and/or Enlightened. World travelers such as James Cook, Louis Antoine de Bougainville, Georg Forster, or Alexander von Humboldt and their reports initiated broad debates about the state of nature and the critique of European societies that otherwise would not have taken place. In addition, ‘defining elements’ of the Enlightenment such as state sovereignty, nation-based citizenship, and modern economic institutions were, even in eighteenth-century Europe, far from being fully elaborated, and even farther from actual implementation.

Examining these exchanges can show that distinctions between centers and peripheries, European and non-European, and modern and premodern societies are often retrospective divisions that have no reference to the specific historical situation. For example, as Jürgen Osterhammel has remarked, eighteenth century agricultures and so-called premodern societies in Europe as well as elsewhere (his example is China) are based on similar structures, and may have had more in common then than they do in the era of industrialization and capitalism (Osterhammel 2009, p. 21). Often the borders are drawn within Europe—e.g., in respect to Ireland or Eastern Europe where ‘savages’ were identified in one’s own country—but also, Great Britain was often not seen as part of Europe.

Since ideas about Europe have never been homogenous or uncontested, there are no fixed borders between Europe and non-Europe, but always, historically as in the present, constructions against the background of specific interests. In the eighteenth century, the world was not composed of essentially distinct cultures—of a European or western center and a non-European periphery. Rather, it would be much more precise to speak of hybrid and transeuropean cultural spaces, such as the Eurasian Russian or the Ottoman Empire in the East, the United States or Latin America as transatlantic spaces, or Mediterranean regions such as the Maghreb, with its mixture of Turks, Christians, and Jews, or of Moors, Arabs, Bedouins, Berbers, and Kabyles in the South.

In this way the center-periphery distinction and traditional forms of empire and world systems-theory can be shown as Eurocentric shortcomings. Empire-building has not been a European monopoly: there are and have always been various forms of non-European empires, such as the Arab, Ottoman, Mughal

and Qing empires (and many more), as John Darwin has shown in his recent comprehensive history of global empires (Darwin 2008).

While the center-periphery formula is problematized, the concept of modernity becomes pluralized within critical global studies. In the place of a single model of progress, one can speak of different phases of globalization. In critical global studies, the emphasis would be put on discontinuities and historical ruptures rather than on linear conceptions of progress. The models underlying this approach are the concepts of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2002) and of different phases of globalization. Walter Mignolo and Ottmar Ette, for example, interpret the Enlightenment as a second phase of European expansion after the conquests of the 15th and 16th Centuries (Mignolo 1998). Following this periodization, the Enlightenment can be defined as a specific form of reflection on—and partly also a critique of—the earlier European expansion projects and of previous forms of colonialism (Muthu 2003; D'Aprile). In addition, it can be seen as a not only politically but also scientifically motivated measurement of a world that had already been widely discovered before (Despoix 2009).

What Nussbaum formulates for eighteenth century studies has been undertaken in a similar way by authors like Christopher Bayly, Jürgen Osterhammel and John Darwin in the general field of global historiography (Osterhammel 2009; Darwin 2008; Bayly 2005). All these recent approaches can be seen as critical global studies following the insight that a non-Eurocentric perspective is a crucial necessity in global history.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's research program of Planetary History

Whereas Felicity Nussbaum applies insights from modern postcolonial theories to the study of the eighteenth century in order to come to a modified understanding of current globalization, historian Dipesh Chakrabarty goes the other way around. In a series of recent articles, Chakrabarty, one of the most important and prominent founding fathers of postcolonialism (along with Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak Homi Bhaba), tries to reformulate or even rehabilitate aspects of the Enlightenment's historical thinking in the face of current environmental challenges and crises.

According to Chakrabarty, these challenges require a rethinking of the Enlightenment's project of a common universal history of mankind or of the human species, first developed in the eighteenth century. In this respect, Chakrabarty claims that the Enlightenment's universalism cannot only be seen as an

expression of the Euro-Atlantic world's claim to hegemony, but is at the same time a very important means for criticizing the consequences of this hegemony—among them, today's Climate crisis as an effect of the industrializing the world: "I'm against any ideas of hierarchies of civilizations but the idea of one common civilization of humanity on this planet seems to me an important part of our anti-colonial heritage." (Chakrabarty 2010, p. 10, my transl.)

In his article on *Humanism in an Age of Globalization*, Chakrabarty points to a crucial difference between the 20th and the 21st Centuries (Chakrabarty 2008, pp. 74–90): whereas the 20th Century was characterized by the question of race, the 21st will be shaped by the global challenge of climate change. Because of this new situation, he claims, every reflection on globalization processes has to take into account questions of planetary history. Whereas (postcolonial) thinking on globalization is concerned with the historical and cultural differences, questions of colonialisms, racisms, and classisms on the one hand and tolerance, cosmopolitanisms and intercultural dialogue on the other, planetary history instead always thinks of humanity in the sense of a unity of the species. Human beings are construed in the latter as members of a species who are characterized by a general—even if unequal and diverse—pursuit of happiness, through which they destroy their own biosphere and thus the foundations of their existence (Chakrabarty 2010, p. 146). This leads Chakrabarty to the conclusion that his former theoretical approaches to globalization, such as "Marxist analysis of capital, subaltern studies, and postcolonial criticism over the last twenty-five years, while enormously useful in studying globalization, had not really prepared me for making sense of this planetary conjuncture within which humanity finds itself today." (Chakrabarty 2010, p. 199)

In his 2009 article in the journal *Critical Inquiry*, bearing the title *The Climate of History*, Chakrabarty gives the most explicit outline of his program of a new planetary history (Chakrabarty 2009, pp. 197–222). What makes our current situation different from all other periods in history, according to Chakrabarty, is the fact that humans are able to destroy the foundations of their own existence, and thus that the old distinction between natural history and human history cannot be upheld any longer. Humans are no longer simply part of nature, or 'biological actors', but have now gained the status of 'geological actors'. Therefore, it is not enough to write an environmental history (*Umweltgeschichte*) in which the interdependencies between humans and their environment are described; rather, what is needed is a new kind of planetary history. Chakrabarty calls this new period of history, in which mankind has become a geological actor, 'Anthropocene'—a term that is intended to convey its planetary significance through analogy to geological periods like Holocene or Pleistocene. Earth processes and questions of human or cultural history have gained a new status of interdepend-

ence in this new era. This different situation requires us to bring together deep structures of history with cultural and often very short-term developments, thus compelling a collaboration of the natural sciences (such as biology or anthropology) with history. The traditional categorical separation between them two cannot be kept up any longer:

'Human behavior is seen as the product not just of recorded history, ten thousand years recent, but of deep history, the combined genetic and cultural changes that created humanity over hundreds of [thousands of] years.' [...] Without such knowledge of the deep history of humanity it would be difficult to arrive at a secular understanding of why climate change constitutes a crisis for humans. Geologists and climate scientists may explain why the current phase of global warming—as distinct from the warming of the planet that has happened before—is anthropogenic in nature, but the ensuing crisis for humans is not understandable unless one works out the consequences of that warming. The consequences make sense only if we think of humans as a form of life and look on human history as part of the history of life on this planet. (Chakrabarty 2009, pp. 205–6; quoting Wilson, Edward O. [1996]: *In Search of Nature*)

Chakrabarty uses two arguments to refute the objection advanced by historians that culture and nature (the history of mankind and the history of nature) are categorically different things since the former is based on freedom and agency, whereas the latter is not—an argument that has been part of the basic assumptions of the theory of history since Vico's axioms. In the amalgamation of biological and cultural models, they see a biologist reduction and essentialism of cultural and social processes. Firstly, Chakrabarty (quoting Daniel Lord Smail) points out that the historical deep structure models of natural sciences are not determinist models, as can already be shown in the most prominent example, the Darwinian evolutionary model:

Species, according to Darwin, are not fixed entities with natural essences imbued in them by the Creator. ... Natural selection does not homogenize the individuals of a species. ... Given this state of affairs, the search for a normal ... nature and body type [of any particular species] is futile. And so it goes for the equally futile quest to identify "human nature." (Chakrabarty 2009, pp. 214–215)

Secondly, natural scientists also concede that the capacity of reflection changes with changing environments. Just as Karl Marx and others assumed that with changing classes in society, a class consciousness would develop, these natural scientists think that the same is true for changing geo-biological environments. They are convinced that on the basis of environmental change, different learning processes and experiences of failures and catastrophes, humans will learn to develop a self-consciousness of species. In this respect, natural scientists also

speak the ‘language of Enlightenment’, as Chakrabarty calls it (Chakrabarty 2009, p. 215).

Nonetheless, Chakrabarty’s aim is not that we should all become natural scientists. Rather, he believes that the contribution of natural scientists to the understanding of deep structures of species history has to be accompanied by a critical genealogy of global capitalism since the eighteenth century. After all, it was the process of capitalized and industrialized globalization that led to climate catastrophe, without being planned by a specific actor. So global reflection on the height of the challenges has to bring together planetary history with a critical history of globalization. As it is sketched by Felicity A. Nussbaum, one could add:

The task of placing, historically, the crisis of climate change thus requires us to bring together intellectual formations that are somewhat in tension with each other: the planetary and the global; deep and recorded histories; species thinking and critiques of capital. (Spivak 2003, p. 213)³

At the end of his article, Chakrabarty outlines his program of a new global reflection, which he calls ‘negative universal history’. Even if we don’t have any historical experience of mankind as a geological actor, we have to face the fact that we have become one. Despite all inequalities in dealing with the costs of climate change, and even if it is an unintended consequence of human actions, climate change is characterized by the fact that everyone will be affected by it. In contrast to the universal history of the eighteenth century, we have come to know that there is no “Hegelian universal arising dialectically out of the movement of history, or a universal of capital brought forth by the present crisis.” We always have to start with the perspectives and experiences of local actors and thus the universal that ‘cannot subsume particularities’ exists only in a negative way: in the common consciousness and knowledge that take the form of a ‘shared sense’ of the possibility of a geological catastrophe. In this situation, the Enlightenment becomes increasingly significant: “in the era of the Anthropocene, we need the Enlightenment (that is, reason) even more than in the past.” (Spivak 2003, p. 211) Only through scientific analysis—meaning the collaboration of natural and cultural sciences—can the effects of the actions of the species as a whole be understood.

³ For the difference between ‘globality’ and ‘planetaryity’ from another perspective, see also Spivak’s concept of ‘planetaryity’ in: Spivak (2003, pp. 1–102).

Conclusions

Nussbaum and Chakrabarty both operate with a wide concept of the Enlightenment, and both approaches show interesting and promising ways of overcoming the fruitless opposition in Enlightenment research of historical-philological to theoretical-systematical approaches. Nussbaum elaborates to what extent a differentiated, widened, and more complex study of the eighteenth century can lead to a modified understanding of our own ideas of globalization. Chakrabarty, in his model of planetary history, outlines an overarching conception combining postcolonial theory with geo- and life-sciences.

Both open up interdisciplinary fields for Enlightenment research. As Peter Reill has shown, the “close correspondence between nature and humanity” (between nature and culture) is one of the crucial significances of Enlightenment thinking and acting, from the beginning of the paradigm of mathematics and physics in the late 17th century up to the vitalist theories at the end of the eighteenth century (Reill 2005). The key concepts and main projects of the Enlightenment—such as the history of species, holistic models of natural and human history, pre-evolutionary theories, or conceptualizations of world markets, political economy, or of a society of knowledge, as developed by Maupertuis, Buffon, Diderot, Herder, Kant, A. Smith and many other Enlightenment authors—could thus be reread with respect to systematic questions related to what Chakrabarty calls the Anthropocene. At the same time, these questions have to be combined with a critical history of knowledge. The key concepts of the Enlightenment can be shown in their genealogy as results of enhanced global circulations, as well as of specific relations of power. Their presumed universality (in the sense of trans-temporal truths) can be deconstructed in order to make way for a view of these concepts as constructions and narrations produced in a specific historical situation. Models of natural history, natural philosophy or natural sciences can be shown in their interdependency with social, cultural and economical interpretations as well as with leading metaphors and narrations of their times.

As one example for a critical genealogy and discourse analysis of current challenges, one could refer to Joseph Vogl's works on the *poesis* of capitalism, of the *homo economicus*, and of global financial crises since the eighteenth century (Vogl 2008; 2010). In a historical-systematical vein, Göran Therborn tries to give an introduction to planetary thinking in his most recent publication, combining insights from geology, biology, economy, sociology, and history to form a ‘beginner's guide’ to the world, addressed to all of us who are used to identifying with our family, country or continent, but among whom “most of us are beginners on the planetary terrain of humankind” (Therborn 2011, p. ix). Such re-

flections pay tribute to what Eric Hobsbawm calls a ‘genuinely global history’ in the spirit of the Enlightenment: “neither within the humanities nor the natural and mathematical sciences, nor separated from them, but essential to both.” (Hobsbawm 2002, p. 297)

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