EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Historians use the term "Enlightenment" as both a noun and an adjective. Used as a noun, the term designates a period of exceptionally consistent cultural creativity that lasted from the English Revolution of 1688 to the French Revolution of 1789. When used as an adjective, however, as in "the Enlightenment tradition," the term denotes a specific attitude of mind that gradually gained ascendancy among European intellectuals during that period.

The Enlightenment attitude of mind was complex and internally varied, but it can be characterized roughly as a dedication to human reason, science, and education as the best means of building a stable society of free men on earth. This meant that the Enlightenment was inherently suspicious of religion, hostile to tradition, and resentful of any authority based on custom or faith alone. Ultimately the Enlightenment was nothing if not secular in its orientation; it offered the first program in the history of mankind for the construction of a human community out of natural materials alone.

During the French Revolution and immediately after it, Enlightenment ideals were subjected to searching criticism as the principal inspiration behind the radicalism of the Jacobins. But by mid-nineteenth century those ideals, appropriately revised, qualified, and reconstituted as "Liberalism," had once more been established as the distinctive world-view of Western man. And Western man entered the twentieth century armed with Enlightenment values to face the challenges of mass society and technological culture on a world scale. Thus, the crisis into which Liberal society entered
during the twentieth century was, ultimately, a crisis of the Enlightenment tradition. It is not surprising, therefore, that much of the best contemporary thought takes the form of an attack upon or defense of the original Enlightenment. Today many thinkers believe that there were fundamental flaws in the Enlightenment faith in reason, science, and education. They oppose that faith in the name of irrationality, intuition, and an elitist conception of human nature that reserves education for the genetically gifted alone. Given the central place occupied by the Enlightenment tradition in the current debate over the future of Western civilization, an analysis of that tradition must have not only a historical interest but a pressing current interest as well.

Robert Anchor surveys the Enlightenment in its heroic age—the eighteenth century. His main thesis is that although there were contradictions in Enlightenment culture, these were not so much contradictions within its ideals but between its ideals and the specific aims of the class that represented them in the social, economic, and political arenas during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Throughout the eighteenth century, Anchor maintains, the bourgeoisie, in France especially but also in the rest of Europe, criticized the aristocratic and despotic Old Regime in the name of values that were later incapsulated in the Revolutionary motto: “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity.” Spokesmen for the bourgeoisie justified their appeal to these values on the authority of two, more abstract and more metaphysical, concepts: Reason, conceived not merely as a tool but as a substantive attribute of humanity and Nature, viewed as an autonomous, harmonious, and self-regulating mechanism of material bodies connected by
mathematically definable causal relationships. The Old Regime was dedicated to defending the institution of absolute monarchy and the privileges of a hereditary nobility. It depended upon tradition, custom, and convention for its sanctions. Bourgeois ideologists criticized the Old Regime by holding up an image of a society unencumbered by historical restrictions. Their ideal society would be responsive to the immediate needs and desires of every individual, governed by reason, and would guarantee the life, liberty, and property of all. This image appealed to disaffected elements of literate classes all over Europe: nobility, clergy, and bourgeoisie alike. All the literate classes of Europe promoted the ideals of the Enlightenment during the first half of the eighteenth century, under the misconception that their realization could not fail to benefit them in the way that each desired.

But, Anchor insists, there was a basic ambiguity in the enlighteners' demand for a freer society. In part this was the fault of the philosophes, both aristocratic and bourgeois, who obscured the differences between the rights they demanded for all men and the privileges that they thought it possible to grant them as individuals. Although they spoke of "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity" in terms that appealed to everyone suffering from the inequities of the Old Regime, their conceptions of how those values were to be implemented remained locked within narrowly restricted class aspirations and goals. When an aristocrat attacked the monarchy in the name of freedom, he tacitly assumed that freedom meant a greater opportunity to fulfill himself in peculiarly aristocratic ways, which implied greater restrictions on a restless and aggressive bourgeoisie. Conversely, when a bourgeois intellectual demanded more
freedom for mankind, he tended to identify the freedom of mankind with the aspirations of the middle class in the economic and social fields.

But there was a further ambiguity within the bourgeois class over the meaning of the terms "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity." When middle-class philosophes spoke of the rights of men within a political context, they seemed to be championing a classical, humanistic conception of the ideal citizen, who would suppress his private interests whenever they conflicted with the general welfare of the group to which he belonged. However, when they spoke of the rights of men within an economic or social context, they seemed to assume that humanity was nothing more than a congeries of isolated individuals, each competing with every other in an enmity and strife that lasted unto death.

Anchor holds that these many ambiguities in the Enlightenment ideology were masked throughout the greater part of the eighteenth century by a myth that lay at the very heart of the enlighteners' optimism: the myth of the "hidden hand." This myth assumed that there was a basic harmony of interests among men in the long run, and that it was only necessary to release everyone to pursue freely his own self-interest in order to realize a harmonious social order, similar to that which reigned in nature, in the end. The conviction that harmony was the "natural" product of strife, that unity resulted "naturally" from diversity, underlay the gleefulness with which Enlightenment thinkers undertook destruction of every idea, institution, and value inherited from the older, religiously oriented culture of the Middle Ages. Gradually, however, as the eighteenth century passed its mid-point, the myth of the "hidden hand" was brought under severe criticism. By the end of the century
it had dissipated. The result was that the two contradictory conceptions of human nature, which it had formerly unified, were disengaged from one another; the two classes, aristocracy and bourgeoisie, which had originally promoted Enlightenment ideals in tandem, were mutually alienated from one another; Western European society was sundered into mutually antagonistic classes prepared to destroy one another in a war to the death. This set the stage for the class warfare that characterized the French Revolution during its more radical and its more reactionary phases between 1789 and 1815.

Anchor’s analysis of the Enlightenment tradition proceeds in the following way. After a preliminary discussion of the current debate over the nature of the Enlightenment in the first part, he turns, in the second part, to the social, political, and economic substructure of Enlightenment culture during the early eighteenth century. He concentrates on France, for France’s role was crucial in the development of Enlightenment ideals precisely because it possessed an entrenched aristocracy on the one side and a powerful middle class on the other, with about equal social power by the middle of the century. In Central and Eastern Europe there was no middle class to speak of; in England the middle class had already been assimilated into an essentially aristocratic, but ultimately flexible, social order by the end of the seventeenth century. In France, however, the aristocracy had grown resentful of the restrictions placed upon it by Louis XIV and it was waiting for a chance to regain its lost feudal privileges as soon as the opportunity offered itself. The French bourgeoisie was strong and growing in strength. It resented the privileges that the older aristocracy still possessed, it wanted access to similar privileges, and it had begun to resent the king’s policy of keeping the classes
functionally divided in order to dominate them individually more easily. The bourgeoisie, therefore, was also ready to reorder society when and if the occasion presented itself. And it was especially receptive to any ideas that might be used to support the notion that such reordering should constitute a new kind of society and not attempt a return to a lost and imperfect, aristocratic past.

Bourgeois ideologists found the desired revolutionary ideas in the work of two Englishmen, Newton and Locke, who were regarded as anything but revolutionary on their home ground. Newton was recognized as the greatest scientific genius of his age; he had established, apparently for all time, the essential order, harmony, and self-regulating quality of the physical world. Locke had seemingly shown how society itself could be transformed into a similarly self-regulating mechanism by criticism, reform, and revision of any tradition that prohibited men from fully exercising the rights provided them at birth by nature. Locke’s ideas had been fully worked out as a means of justifying the English Revolution of 1688. In the post-revolutionary situation in which they had been expounded, however, they were less a radical call to action than a consoling rationalization of the revolution that had already occurred. But when the ideas of Newton and Locke were introduced into the highly charged atmosphere of France in the 1730s, they were pregnant with revolutionary consequences; for they struck at the very principles upon which monarchical and aristocratic society were constituted. For the next half century the ideas of Newton and Locke were discussed, debated, and carried to their logical conclusions as potential criticisms of any received tradition, in culture and society. The systematic application of Newton’s philosophy of nature and Locke’s philosophy of society to the traditional culture of Conti-
nental Europe was primarily the work of the French *philosophes*; they, more than any other, gave the distinctive form to the Enlightenment tradition as we know it.

The third and fourth parts of Anchor's essay consist of a detailed analysis of the internal logic of this application. In his consideration of the work of Montesquieu, Prévost, and Voltaire, he traces the transition from the *philosophes*’ original optimism to their later apprehension that perhaps man’s physical nature was not reconcilable with his moral aspirations. He outlines the *philosophes*’ discussions of man’s obligation to the past as against his responsibility to the present, their debate over the conflict of public duties with private rights. He shows how the aristocratic and conservative Montesquieu took a certain heroic pride in the dual obligations under which man labored in his attempts to build a good society on earth; how the gifted Abbé Prévost dramatized the conflict between natural impulses on the one side and moral sensibility on the other in his tender novel, *Manon Lescaut*; how the dynamic Voltaire carried on his fight for human dignity and freedom in the face of a growing conviction that Stoic resignation was perhaps the highest goal to which a serious man might aspire. The essential ambivalence of Enlightenment thought was ruthlessly laid bare by the English philosopher David Hume; Anchor shows how Hume anticipated most of the problems that devotees of the Enlightenment tradition would have to face in the future.

Then, in the fourth part, he analyzes the attempt of the great materialists, La Mettrie, Holbach, Helvétius, and Diderot, to build a free society on the basis of a consistently mechanistic conception of the physical world and man, which foredoomed them to a fall into a crippling fatalism. Here a basic flaw of Enlightenment thinking was driven
home to consciousness. For if, as the materialists believed on the authority of Newton, man was nothing but an aggregation of atomic particles governed by ineluctable laws of cause and effect, then how was it possible to join them together in self-transcending communities of mutual service and love? The materialists could provide no answer to this question, but they did not quit the field without a fight. In Quesnay, the greatest of the Physiocrats, and Diderot, the first modern dialectician, they succeeded in revising the conventional conceptions of society and human nature. Quesnay tried to solve the problem by transposing the inevitable competition between men to the international plane while restricting and directing it in the general interest of the nation internally. Diderot added a new dimension to Enlightenment thinking by his profound psychological inquiries; he concluded that a theory of human nature that encompassed the possible evolution of human consciousness dared conclude that man might be more than mere nature in the long run.

It was the passionate and rebellious Rousseau who raised Enlightenment thought to a new level of moral awareness. Anchor sees Rousseau less as the enemy of the Enlightenment than as its consummation. Rousseau still retained the optimism of the early enlighteners, their fighting and critical spirit, their respect for Nature against custom and tradition, and their vision of a free humanity. Contrary to common opinion, Rousseau even retained their respect for Reason. But Rousseau added to all this a profound analysis of the emotions, the senses, and sentiment, making them the center of human suffering and achievement, and also investing them with the power to direct man in his quest for genuine community. Thus, according to Anchor, Rousseau signals the Enlightenment’s loss of faith in nature
as an ultimate authority in moral matters. Rousseau honored, even worshipped, the "natural" against the "artificial," but he never entertained the hope that man could return to the primitive state of preconscious existence, nor did he desire to return to such a state. He pressed his thought on to the future, to a human world that existed beyond both nature and society, and approximated true community. In Rousseau the Enlightenment produced its most subtle utopian. It also produced the founder of a new, peculiarly modern humanism. Rousseau showed his age that if man wanted a life better than he had, he could not depend upon any transhistorical agency to provide it for him; he would have to create it himself, in pain and suffering, and on behalf of a morality that honored the inner man as well as the outer.

The fifth part proceeds to an analysis of two possible consequences of Rousseau's revelation of nature's inadequacy as a source of moral authority. The infamous Marquis de Sade showed the absurdity of any attempt to base morality on nature. Since nature was neutral, any attempt to live by a naturalistic ethic led to nihilism, so de Sade taught. The German philosopher Kant, by contrast, tacitly recognizing this argument, grounded morality precisely in man's capacity to resist natural impulses. Thus, by the end of the eighteenth century, Kant had rescued man from the tyranny of both society and nature, finding his essential humanity in a concept of consciousness that had been expanded to also include the will in addition to reason. In Kant, Anchor argues, the most creative strains of the English, French, and German phases of the Enlightenment were temporarily synthesized: Hume, Rousseau, and Leibniz all have a place in Kant's system. But the Kantian synthesis was too subtle, too intricate, to weather
the winds of Revolution that swept over Europe in 1789. Kant's synthesis was no sooner achieved than it began to be broken down once more and reduced to simpler elements. This was the work of the German Sturm und Drang, the last phase of the Enlightenment and the launching stage of Romanticism.

During the Sturm und Drang, Enlightenment ideas were reexamined, sublimated, and made a basis for an idealistic humanism that would constitute the axis of Western thought during the next historical epoch. Herder, Schiller, and especially Goethe found in the concept of personal culture (Bildung) a value, which, in their view, took precedence over the narrow hedonism and utilitarianism of the original Enlightenment. Emphasis now shifted to the individual's struggle with nature and society, not in the interest of "bettering" himself, but in the interest of "realizing" himself in the full exercise of his powers, both physical and spiritual. But this was no narrow individualism, as Goethe defined it; individualism found its limit in the ideal Humanity, which Goethe, like Herder, saw fashioning itself over the whole of historical time.

From the deification of Nature to the deification of Humanity—this was the course that Enlightenment thought followed as it made its way from England through France to Germany during the eighteenth century. In that transition Western thought secured some of its most precious principles. But at the same time, if Anchor is correct, those principles had become disengaged from its original carrying class, the bourgeoisie, and all but antithetical to Society in general. While Enlightenment thought had become progressively more idealistic the middle class itself had become more narrowly materialistic in its aspirations. While Enlightenment intellectuals had progressively become citizens
of the world, the bourgeoisie had become increasingly the champions of limited class and national interests. All this prepared Europe for that fatal schism between the intelligentsia and society that characterized the century that followed. The nineteenth century was a century of triumph for the bourgeoisie all over Europe—and the world. But at the time of its greatest triumphs, the middle class found its severest critics in the heirs of the Enlightenment: Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and their followers. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Enlightenment in both its intellectual and its social sides had finally reached its culmination; in the division between intellectuals and society that has plagued this century, the Enlightenment has borne its richest, and most bitter, fruit.

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Author's Note

In all cases where only the author's name appears with a quote in the text—the sole exception being Clough et al., p. 28—the title of the work is given in the bibliography.
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ENLIGHTENMENT
TRADITION