American Enlightenments: Pursuing Happiness in the Age of Reason

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In his 2013 book, *The Enlightenment: And Why It Still Matters*, Anthony Pagden devoted a chapter to the European 'discovery' of 'man in nature', partly through their study of the individual men whom French and British explorers brought back from their voyages to the South Pacific. Pagden framed his book as a provocative defence of a disdained subject, the Whiggishly unitary 'Enlightenment' with a capital 'E'. But his study also emphasised, as few historians had done before, that 'the Enlightenment' was entwined with such alien encounters. It was not a process of inward reflection, but of integrating new knowledge that crossed borders and vast distances. What's more, this process depended upon empire. Its most integral technology was not the microscope, or even the printing press, but the ocean-going ship.

Louis-Antoine de Bougainville's voyage to Tahiti took place late in the 18th century, when enlightenment was already well under way. One could imagine its exploratory impulse as a product of the new era of scientific curiosity, something that radiated outwards from the European centre until it encompassed the globe. It is that image that Caroline Winterer sets out to challenge, in a book that defiantly revokes the capital 'E,' and adds an 's' for good measure. Her account revolves around the notion that enlightenment did not provoke these strange encounters: it *began* with them. The invasions of America launched by successive European empires, beginning in the 15th century, created the sparks from which an age of intellectual revolution took light. Enlightenment, as Winterer puts it herself, was 'a phenomenon of the age of empires'.

Encountering the New World as a geological landscape and an ecological environment, colonists transmitted observations that spurred Europeans to rethink what they knew about the natural world. Finding fossilised seashells in the Appalachian mountains that matched those in the Alps helped widen the growing fissure between church doctrine and natural philosophy. It pushed those who speculated on the earth's formation to imagine ever longer, larger-scale processes, unmoored from the story of Noah's flood. The very existence of America, outside the scope of Biblical knowledge, disrupted traditional patterns of understanding, driving the invention of new theories to fit growing mounds of data. Even more than its rocks and shells, its human civilizations demanded explanation. The cities, customs, and gods of America reflected strange light back on the invading Europeans, posing questions about human nature and history's laws.

American Enlightenments does not dwell on the processes of conquest and colonisation that lay behind these encounters. Winterer prefers to highlight the networks of mutual inspiration and collaboration: the books, drawings, and samples that traversed the Atlantic world of letters. She tells the compelling story of the Codex Mendoza, a pictographic account of Aztec life which fell into the hands of French privateers, then the English imperialist Richard Hakluyt, before finding its way to the Bodleian Library in the mid-17th century, where like so many other dusty items 'it was soon forgotten'. It was partly through reproductions of the codex that European antiquarians, and later citizens of the United States, debated the merits of ancient American civilization. Yet such debates were never merely academic. 'The losers in this new narrative', as Winterer points out, 'were the modern Indians of North America', whose culture was made to look barbarous by comparison.

Power shapes the production of knowledge just as much as knowledge guides the use of power, as critics of 'the Enlightenment' have long since taught us. That was never so true as in the case of statistics. By recasting native peoples as a single, discrete, and ultimately doomed category – a process Winterer describes in her fourth chapter – European and Euro-American statisticians helped to render them an object of pity, disdain, and ultimately conquest. From this angle, the theories of stadial progress pioneered in 18th-century Scotland, which see humankind developing from hunter to shepherd, farmer to civilised merchant, appear as a brutally instrumental form of knowledge. Taken up in the United States, they paved the way for policies of removal and expropriation as surely as did the footsteps of Lewis and Clark.

Enlightenment's relationship with empire was also, necessarily, a relationship with slavery. 'Scientific knowledge', Winterer writes, 'began to flourish in the seventeenth century alongside slavery in Britain's expanding Atlantic empire'. Scientists and slave-traders were often one and the same, while *philosophes* like Thomas Jefferson found time for their instruments because of the service of their slaves. Forced encounters on the slave ship and plantation furnished Europeans and colonists not only with labour, but with new objects of study, and new connections to one another. Winterer reminds us that Jefferson's contemporary Landon Carter may have had many books, but he owned twice as many slaves. In spite of antislavery polemics both secular and Christian, 'no consensus emerged about what it meant to be enlightened about slavery'. By the 19th century the label could be claimed by its champions as well as its opponents.

In fact there is little consensus to be found among Winterer's plural American enlightenments. She is on the whole more interested in learned controversy than the broad strokes of popular culture. On the question of religion, this leads her to focus on radical thinkers rather than the main lines of American religious thought. Pursuing her broader thesis – that encounters between Europe and America were key triggers of intellectual upheaval – Winterer shows how efforts to understand non-Christian 'mythologies' led *philosophes*, including Thomas Paine, to turn the same methods on Christianity itself. The legacy of these enlightened debates was to make 'religion a subject shared among all humanity and not just Christians', she concludes. Still, in the 19th-century United States, faith was more likely to remain a weapon of empire and exceptionalism than a badge of shared humanity.

By then, of course, the United States was indeed exceptional. It was a republic in a world of monarchies, and a fragile one at that. In the closing chapter of *American Enlightenments*, Winterer draws on the work of Brendan McConville and Eric Nelson to illuminate the prominence of monarchy in the cultural life of British North America. Her point is to show that enlightenment did not spring from republicanism (in spite of some Americans' claims), or vice versa. European thinkers tended to put more faith in enlightened despotism than the popular will, and many in the new republic joined them in bemoaning the people's ignorance and lack of virtue. Only a very few 'enlightened' men were democrats, and only in the age of the robber barons, Winterer suggests, did the United States bring forth a respectably enlightened elite.

For all the subsequent claims about moral uplift and the genesis of liberal values, then, enlightenment as Winterer reports it seems to have been less about creating universal ideals and more about cultivating practical knowledge. Many late-18th-century American gentlemen thought the same. Provincials in British

North America may have been followers rather than leaders in the trend for scientific agriculture, but with independence emerged a new and more critical need to ‘participate robustly in the Atlantic commerce of crops and ideas’. Debates over the balance between industry and agriculture in the new republic served to underscore the vital role of the state in determining relations of production and commerce. The science of political economy, however unsettled its conclusions remained, was the great triumph of 18th-century thought.

From the field to the counting-house, technologies of agricultural improvement and financial wizardry transformed the 18th-century world far more than Paine's radical atheism or Montesquieu's denunciation of slavery. The exploitation of new sources of wealth – including from slave labour and conquered territories – characterised the transition from a global *ancien regime* to an enlightened, modern world. Such advances were of a piece with the new geographic and anthropological knowledge that sprung from European encounters with America and its original inhabitants. This was quite simply knowledge with a purpose – the relentless conquest of the natural and human world; the creation and maintenance of empire.

In her effort to challenge an outmoded ‘diffusionist paradigm’, which made America the mere recipient of what emerged out of the European centre, Winterer sometimes appears to strike a pose of breezy cosmopolitanism. If enlightenment was really a transnational phenomenon and not simply the product of white minds, then perhaps it can be celebrated as a common gift, ‘shared among all humanity’ just like religious mythology. *American Enlightenments* belongs to a trend for shaking up old topics with a transnational twist, something that seems all the more important in an age of rising nationalist sentiment around the globe. But such a gloss risks painting over the lines of violent force that – as this book helps show – actually made enlightenment possible. For every settler ‘pursuing happiness’ in the 18th and early 19th centuries, a world of suffering was close by.

Whatever grand rhetoric we might latch onto, the creation of the United States cannot stand as a postcolonial moment. As its generals and politicians, businessmen and poets, not to mention its explorers and its scientists, knew all too well, the nation's destiny was an imperial one. Both before and after independence, rich, ambitious men had fantasies of continental empire. Their quests for knowledge were parts of a larger quest for power – and the nation they helped forge became the ‘most enlightened nation in the world’ not by relinquishing the patterns of the Old World, but by forging a new centre, and a new periphery to be exploited.

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