

H-France Salon  
Volume 7 (2015), Issue 3

Peter Gay, a remembrance

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Peter Gay, who passed away on May 12 at age 91, was one of the great intellectual historians of the past century. Historians of France know him best for his marvelous two-volume study of the Enlightenment, but his work spanned modern times. His more than three dozen books included a seminal study of Weimar culture, a landmark biography of Sigmund Freud, trenchant essays on the writing of history, and rich explorations of the “bourgeois experience.”

But the Enlightenment – and, more particularly, the French Enlightenment – always remained at the heart of Peter’s preoccupations. When he called Freud “the last *philosophe*,” he meant the phrase very seriously. He saw Freud continuing in the tradition of the great eighteenth-century thinkers, systematically applying empirically-based reasoning to the grandest of all subjects – the mind – for the benefit of humankind. And when Peter himself trained as a lay analyst and developed his own method of applying Freudian psychoanalysis to the study of history, it was because he saw himself, too, as an Enlightenment writer of sorts.

Peter’s strong identification with the Enlightenment arose naturally from his background. Born Peter Fröhlich in Germany, soon after the foundation of the Weimar Republic, he grew up in a secular Jewish home that was deeply steeped in German culture. Like so many German Jews of his generation, he knew how much he and his ancestors owed to the great movements of thought of the eighteenth century, which, as he saw it, had released German Jewry both from the heavy weight of discrimination and from subservience to its own religious traditions. The fact that Germany itself embraced murderous enemies of Enlightenment and of the Jews, forcing Peter’s family to flee the country in 1938, only strengthened his attachment to Enlightenment ideals (His family just barely missed sailing on the *St. Louis*, whose passengers mostly died in the Holocaust after countries in the Western hemisphere refused it entry, forcing the ship to return them to Europe).

It was not just the German Jewish background, though, that shaped Peter’s thought. After a brief stay in Cuba (where he learned English in part by listening to radio broadcasts of baseball games), he made his way to the United States and eventually to a teaching position at Columbia, where he fell under the warm shadow of the American historian Richard Hofstadter. Along the way, he acquired a deep attachment to America and to forms of history writing that ranged capaciously across broad swathes of culture and society. Although he had a deep appreciation for Ernst Cassirer’s study of the Enlightenment, the young historian who had now translated his name to Peter Gay was not going to follow Cassirer in writing intricate studies of pure thought. Eventually calling his own work “the social history of ideas” (a phrase Robert Darnton would famously modify for his own use), Peter sought to portray the thinkers he studied in colorful detail as living, breathing figures driven by very human passions and ambitions. He succeeded brilliantly in doing so, with the result that his books acquired an enviably wide readership. Peter was an enormously talented writer, who also could reflect marvelously on the craft of history-writing, especially in *Style in History*, one of his best books.

All these aspects of Peter’s thought came together in his masterpiece, the two-volume study of the Enlightenment that appeared in the late 1960s. Wonderfully readable and engaging despite its considerable length, filled with vivid portraits, it breathed with a deep respect for the *philosophes* and what they had set out to accomplish. No book annoyed Peter more than Carl Becker’s *The Heavenly City*

of the *Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, which had waspishly suggested that despite their loud protestations against organized religion, the *philosophes* had ended up transposing the beliefs and mental habits of the medieval scholastics into an only superficially secular setting. To the contrary, Peter asserted in *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*. The *philosophes* were true “modern pagans” who threw off the shackles of orthodox Christianity and invented the modern “science of freedom.” But unlike Cassirer, who saw the Enlightenment leading towards German idealism, Peter saw it culminating in the American Revolution, which he called “the program in practice.”

The theme of the revolt against the Christian father in *The Enlightenment* already foreshadowed Peter’s serious engagement with a psychoanalytic and, indeed, Freudian approach to history. His subsequent investigation of “the bourgeois experience” in five volumes, which he wrote after moving from Columbia to Yale, would put this engagement front and center. The first volume in particular attracted enormous attention with its careful investigation of Victorian sexuality, which did much to dispel the myth of repressed female sexuality among the Western middle classes of this period. Many historians criticized Peter for bringing the methods of the analyst’s couch to bear upon historical documents, but in his splendid book-length essay *Freud for Historians*, Peter insightfully countered that all historians, whether they know it or not, approach their sources with a theory of how the mind works. It is up to them whether or not to develop that theory in a systematic manner that takes the fruits of psychological science into account.

Peter’s oeuvre did not end with these two massive projects. Writing with an ease and fluency that other historians can only envy, he also found time to compose his biography of Freud and to reflect back in several books upon the Germany of his childhood. Among them was a touching memoir, *My German Question: Growing Up in Nazi Berlin*, which included surprisingly happy recollections, especially of attending the 1936 Olympic Games. It was difficult for Peter fully to express the magnitude of the disaster that had overcome the world into which he had been born. In an introduction he composed to his wife Ruth’s history of the Jews in Germany, he wrote that “the history of German Jewry ends in a minor key.”

Peter’s style of history, which owed much to older American models like Hofstadter’s, and his conventionally liberal politics, made him a tempting target for critics in the 1970s and 1980s. Social historians such as Darnton called for historians of the Enlightenment to put aside Peter’s erudite surveys of the pinnacles of its thought and to return to the archives. Postmodern historians found Foucault a better guide to the history of sexuality than Freud. Following J.G.A. Pocock, a new generation of historians of the Enlightenment questioned the unity of the phenomenon. They asked whether Peter’s interpretation, which had focused tightly on a “little flock of *philosophes*” located mostly in Paris, adequately accounted for the many forms Enlightenment thought had taken across the Atlantic world, including religious and conservative forms.

But Peter’s work very much deserves re-reading. Enormously learned, gracefully written, thought-provoking, and intensely humane, it remains a luminous and useful guide to the worlds of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. While few historians today would accept his interpretation of the Enlightenment without serious modification, there are few if any other works on the subject that match it in ambition, verve, and sheer intellectual quality.

In person, Peter was very much a man of the Enlightenment, in the best and most humane sense. He put great emphasis on intellectual sociability, and during the many years he taught at Yale, the frequent dinners and parties he and Ruth held at their house in Hamden were high points of the year for anyone lucky enough to be invited. Their warmth, generosity, and wit were legendary. And the house in Hamden itself perfectly expressed Peter’s ideal of the well-lived life, since its centerpiece was a magnificent two-story library he himself had designed (the fruits of *The Enlightenment* put to the best

possible use). I was fortunate to be his colleague for several years in the 1990s and remain intensely grateful to him and Ruth for their friendship and support. He will be sorely missed.