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Daniel Brewer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the French Enlightenment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. xvi + 244 pp. Bibliographical references and index. \$29.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-107-62614-0.

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In general, I have no requirement that historical study be relevant in any immediate or practical way (and certainly not in any crassly vocational or market-value way that kowtows to the nihilistic managerial ideology that so dominates our society these days) in order to be worthy of the time spent on it. Curiosity is enough for the good of my soul. But the history of the French Enlightenment has rarely enjoyed freedom from proleptic considerations of it. The historiography of this period (or movement, or event, or whatever it really is) has long dwelt under the shadow of assumptions about its critical relevance to our present circumstances. Many still see the Enlightenment and its specific French aspect as an originary point, in fact, of the present in its especial world-significance as “modernity,” whether one takes the optimistic view of Ernst Cassirer or the “gloomier” one of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (p. 10).^[1] So, in introducing the *Cambridge Companion to the French Enlightenment*, Daniel Brewer asks the question of “the Enlightenment today?”—in fact, that is the title of his essay—and ponders the issue of the French Enlightenment’s special relevance to us now, not just as a historical curiosity: “It is doubtless not possible to rid ourselves fully of the lens of the present when reading the texts of the past,” he writes, but the “question thus arises, how might we read the Enlightenment otherwise than in terms of an oppositional, demystifying, secularizing and modernizing narrative?” (p. 5). Brewer does not ask the question, however, of why would we want to. Perhaps that seems too obvious, for we are in a curious time now, not so easily definable, in which the old ideal of rational modernization seems quaint at best, absurd at worst, and certainly no longer convincing. Modernity as the outcome of the Enlightenment, and as the telos of history, is like a dream from which we have awakened, and now we are faced with a world of hard reality in which there is no goal, and we do not know where we are going, unless it is toward dystopia. In waking from the dream, however, have we become truly post-modern and thus ironic and cynical about the old narrative, or is it that now we must face the fact that we were never modern to begin with?

Brewer backs away from such questions, however, and instead focuses on the direction of Enlightenment historiography, which since the 1970s has often sought to challenge the old modernizing narrative of secular rationalization. This move, of course, is proper to introduce a volume of essays in the Cambridge Companion series, which advertises its volumes as “authoritative guides, written by leading experts, offering lively, accessible surveys to major writers, artists, philosophers, topics, and periods.”^[2] *The Cambridge Companion to the French Enlightenment* certainly fits the bill, and in the interests of full disclosure, I will admit that I think this is an important book. Addressing themes in the history of the French Enlightenment from the sciences to aesthetics, religion, and gender, Brewer and his colleagues have succeeded in creating a collection that should be a reference point for anyone interested in the history of the Enlightenment era, and critical reading for graduate students and advanced undergraduates in Enlightenment history seminars. At the same time, however, in considering all the essays of the volume in light of Brewer’s initial question of “the Enlightenment today?” I cannot help feeling that an opportunity might have been missed. As Brewer notes, the tendency of the greater

part of contemporary historiography has shifted to the social and cultural history of the Enlightenment, and the big, powerful ideas that moved history in an earlier or anyway apparently outmoded historiography are now heavily contextualized within cultural, social, and material conditions that appear to have greater ontological weight in the network of agency that drives history forward.

Big ideas, thought and expressed by people, do not often move history on their own in the new historiography. More primary and powerful are things like social institutions (salons, academies, coffee houses), practices (forms of exchange, modes of behavior), and spaces (urban, domestic, global). And yet, as much as I enjoy coffee houses, both past and present, it is the big ideas that drew me to the study of the Enlightenment in the first place. Judging by many of the essays in this volume, other historians also feel the attraction to Enlightenment-era thought, but trends in historiography more or less insist that we regard ideas as emergent properties of the social and cultural contexts that made them possible, and any historical transcendence they have is a result of our own concerns, not the concerns of those who first expressed those ideas. Well, fair enough. As Brewer himself comments, “no understanding of the past can claim such objectivity, to be a view from nowhere,” and the “spatial turn” in recent Enlightenment historiography hints at the hegemonic, even oppressive power of contemporary globalization on the consciousness of historians examining the past for the origins of the present (p. 11). We apparently still view the Enlightenment as the origins of our modernity, but instead of a modernity-narrative of progress toward rationalization and secularization, we seek the narrative of globalization and the hegemony of capitalism. Perhaps this is a result of seeing the Enlightenment as a time period or era, not as an intellectual and even moral project, but it certainly reveals a sort of pessimism about the power of our ideas in history.

Antoine Lilti’s essay “Private Lives, Public Spaces,” perhaps more than any other contribution to the volume, displays the pessimism with ideas and thinkers as historical agents. Lilti concludes that the new social and cultural historiography of the Enlightenment reveals that the “intellectual history of the Enlightenment turns out to be inseparable from social history,” and more, that “the emergence of a critical public space was based on social conditions that allowed for solitary reading and independent reflection, while the new ideal of individual subjectivity took shape in reaction to the demands of sociability and to multiple forms of publicity” (pp. 26–27). The notion that public criticism was “based on” the social development of the private seems to assume the ontological priority of the socio-cultural over the intellectual, and also that the private-public dichotomy was somehow entirely new in the Enlightenment. But what about the persistence of the ancient Roman notion of “privatus” and “publicus,” not to mention the revival of ancient Stoic ideals of individual subjectivity? Perhaps a conception of agency as dynamic and dispersed is what Lilti really means, because earlier in the essay, he notes that “Enlightenment individuals and ideas infiltrated existing structures (academies, salons, cafés) and created others (Freemasonry, reading circles, clubs)...” (p. 20) That sounds an awful lot like agency to me, and ultimately I cannot resolve the apparent inconsistency in Lilti’s thought-provoking essay.

Andrew Curran’s insightful survey of the development of Enlightenment-era anthropology as a modern social science reinforces, whether intentionally or not, an interpretation of historical change in which agency is dynamic and dispersed into what Curran terms a “nexus.” While it often seems that the term of choice these days for theorizers of agency is “network” (as in Actor-Network Theory), the term “nexus,” from the Latin *nectere*, to bind together, might be a preferable way to conceptualize the connection between the many agents and actors that move history. Curran writes, for example, “During the Enlightenment era, a nexus of institutional, political, colonial and epistemological forces effectively canonized Western civilization in general and an increasingly biologically based notion of *civilized man* in particular” (p. 41). Enlightenment anthropology, that science from which the contemporary (modern?) discipline developed, emerged in a nexus of agential forces, which helps to explain the lack of consensus in its goals, styles, and methods. In other words, instead of suggesting that the social, cultural, economic, or intellectual has ontological priority, perhaps they are ontologically flat.

I think Paul Cheney's survey of the importance of "Commerce" in the Enlightenment possibly supports this "nexus" interpretation of agency in history. Cheney suggests that while the rise of global commerce and changing patterns of consumption and product availability altered the environment within which thinking Enlightenment-era people lived and worked, they were hardly passive bystanders in the transformation of their world. Rousseau railed against the corruptions of rising luxury, while Montesquieu defended it, and Fénelon urged agrarian reform. The market "liberated urban consumers by breaking down social hierarchies" (p. 50) while the physiocrats worked to implement policies that affected the functioning of the commercial world. Still, one gets the feeling overall from Cheney's essay that commerce itself is the more powerful agent, and thoughtful people were at best only free to make a nudge here or there to the environment that had formed around them over the course of time. "For most contemporary observers, commercial monarchy was a *fait accompli* in eighteenth-century France," writes Cheney, and "The material benefits of commercial expansion were disputed and fretted about in certain quarters, but never seriously called into question" (p. 57). This seems a reasonable enough conclusion: big social forces are, after all, so big and powerful, what can a few people do about them? So, indeed, "modernity," as we now understand it, consists in the formation of a capitalist economic environment so pervasive that no one, either in the eighteenth century or now, can seriously imagine an alternative world? "It's the economy, stupid!": the catch-phrase of modernity. In the face of its awesome power, the individual is weak and ineffectual.

Well, maybe in Science we mere humans achieve something important—another (more laudable?) goal of Enlightenment: rational understanding and control over nature and our fate. But as J. B. Shank points out in his exemplary essay on "Science," there was no such thing as "Enlightenment Science," and what he terms a "retrospective philosophical understanding of science, Enlightenment, and modernity" has shaped historical scholarship by imposing a supposedly monolithic "Science" on a past where it did not exist. Of course, recent scholarship, Shank reminds us, has helpfully broken with that old retrospective understanding in various ways. Having lost our faith in the narrative of modernity, I guess we are now freer to understand the sciences in the Enlightenment more on their own terms, or at least in a weaker, less monolithic way that mirrors our contemporary experience. Too my surprise, however, Shank proposes that we should now examine the sciences in the Enlightenment from the point of view of two "personae" of the era: the *philosophe* and the "proto-modern eighteenth-century scientist." Okay, *philosophe* is all fine and good, but as there was no Science in the eighteenth century, just sciences, there were no scientists (modern or proto-), just *savants*. Of course, in many ways Shank does mean "*savant*" when he writes "proto-modern scientist" because he cites the emerging disciplinary specialization in the Royal Academy of Sciences. Fair enough: we are not wrong to see the *savants* of the Academy as precursors to contemporary scientists (I once published an essay on this subject, in fact).^[3] But at the same time, I think many *savants* were also *philosophes*, although Shank denies this and argues that most *savants* were not *philosophes*, but only a few "hybrid" identities such as d'Alembert and Condorcet, who practiced a disciplined science as "Enlightenment scientists" and invoked "scientism" as *philosophes*. According to Shank, classic Enlightenment scholarship, blinded by its prolepticism, conflates the two identities (which indeed may be a problem), and yet in my reading it seems that Shank in this case is committing the greater sin against history. The notion of "hybrid" Enlightenment identities is to my mind a rather torturous imposition of contemporary views about what science is and what the Enlightenment is on people in the past. What Shank calls Enlightenment scientism, I think I might term without anachronism *philosophie*, and there was certainly no consensus among Enlightenment figures about its value or even its precise definition, although the people I have enjoyed studying, such as Condorcet (whom I just do not see as a "hybrid"), were proponents of it.

Maybe the problem with the historiography of the Enlightenment is twofold: we no longer feel like we can change the world actively, and yet we still feel that this era we are in is somehow special and in need of a historically-described origin of its singularity. In his essay, "Political thought" one of the best scholars of French thought of the past few decades, Dan Edelstein, presents an incredibly useful

overview of political philosophy in the Enlightenment, pointing out its continuation of seventeenth-century debates, and its addition of the notion of “sensibility” to the rationalist, neo-Stoic language of earlier thinking. Edelstein also helpfully clarifies the degree to which eighteenth-century political thought was not generally revolutionary in its goals until the financial crisis of the 1780s made revolution possible. He describes the *philosophes*, however, as “subversive conservatives” who “articulated self-consciously ‘progressive’ political agendas but to a large degree remained fairly conformist” (p. 79). I wonder whether by avoiding the imposition of such contemporary ideological categories on an era where those categories did not yet pertain, we might obtain both a better sense of how Enlightenment thinkers actively pushed their political agendas, and how their era was different from our own. Or, alternately, would we only end up with an Enlightenment history that is alien to our own experience and expectations? Would that matter?

The issue is important beyond traditional political thought, as Julie Candler Hayes’s essay, “Sex and gender, feeling and thinking: imagining women as intellectuals,” and Charley Coleman’s essay, “Religion,” make clear. The myths and teleologies of Enlightenment historiography have often tended to obscure the place of women and religion. As Hayes argues, women’s liberation may have suffered setbacks in the eighteenth century, not advances, despite the struggles of many women to make themselves heard. And far from a triumphant emergence of modern secularism, the Enlightenment is, as Coleman argues, perhaps better understood in terms of the theological debates that underlay its political, economic, and scientific contributions. Maybe everything we thought we knew about “modernity” and its origins is wrong, and far from modern or postmodern we are in fact still medieval (Jacques le Goff might have agreed with such a conclusion).^[4] Furthermore, if we continue to believe that our ideas (and thus ourselves) lack agency, must we not assume that the overturning of the old teleology does not actually point to our having arrived at a better (more true) understanding of history, but instead only the rise of a new governing paradigm over which we seem to have little or no control?

Such a depressing implication moves as the undercurrent of Jennifer Milam’s essay, “Art and aesthetic theory: claiming Enlightenment as viewers and critics,” in which she examines the rise of art criticism from the understanding of the Enlightenment not as an intellectual movement at all, but as a process. Here, enlightenment is not an ideological or philosophical set of principles that *philosophes* sought to formulate and apply to socio-political reform, but instead a claim to a certain kind of expertise spread widely to the “public” and away from its traditional center of authority through the opening of art consumption to a larger audience. More or less the same implication underlies Thomas DiPiero’s examination of “Enlightenment literature,” where the formation (*sui generis*?) of new genres like the novel promoted new forms of readership, individual subjectivity, and even truth and representation. Without the agency of literature, which encouraged the “art of thinking and expressing oneself,” critique, and thus liberty itself, could not exist (p. 151). That’s a tall order for a novel.

To be clear, what I am writing here is not intended as criticism of the essays that make up this volume, all of which are quite exemplary, but a struggling attempt at metacriticism: I do not think that by rejecting the rationalization-secularization modernity narrative in favor of some other narrative we necessarily arrive at a truer understanding of the Enlightenment. We are just shifting our interpretive focus according to a different idea of modernity, one in which we are, unfortunately, particularly powerless. I wonder what would happen to historiography if we could reject the idea of modernity altogether in any form. Would that allow us possibly to read the present from the past, rather than the other way around? At issue is not whether we might understand the past more objectively, but whether we might understand ourselves more deeply.

Stéphane Van Damme’s essay, “*Philosophe*/philosopher,” is, therefore, the one I was looking for in this volume (it is also, unfortunately, the least accessible to more general readers, I think). The typical distinction between a philosopher and an Enlightenment *philosophe* relies on disciplinary definitions and boundaries that Van Damme argues have to be totally abandoned. “Instead of taking fixed definitions as

its starting point," he writes, "this chapter will map the work of their production..." It seems to me this approach is less likely to fall into prolepticism. In Van Damme's reading, then, there are many complexly interacting historical variables, such as the increasing autonomy of natural philosophy, state censorship, increased use of vernacular writing, the development of a critical public sphere, and the desire of men of letters to "invent a range of techniques that would enable them to exercise free speech without risking imprisonment" (p. 160). Such a "nexus" of powers, and others, forged the *philosophes* as they understood themselves, but the *philosophes* as a cult of great writers only developed afterwards, in the time of the French Revolution and later when writers and thinkers whose works were problematic and even scandalous in their own times received national commemoration, and eventually, mythic greatness in the development of the modern world narrative.

So, the past creates us and then we re-create the past, which I suppose is almost a paraphrase of Karl Marx from the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Downing Thomas's essay, "Music," drives the point home. There is no real reason to miss the word "Enlightenment" in the title, because what Downing writes about is just eighteenth-century music. There was nothing particularly enlightened about music in the eighteenth century, and none other than Rousseau wrote that "French singing is nothing but non-stop barking ... the French have no music and never will" (p. 172). Perhaps some composers of opéra "played on the themes of feeling and sympathy that were increasingly attractive to Parisian audiences" (p. 174) but it is not clear to me at least that that makes it "Enlightenment" music. Although, as Downing notes, music changed considerably in the eighteenth century, both in the ways it was played, composed, and heard, it was the nineteenth century that witnessed the development of "pure" instrumental music played and heard more in the manner in which we enjoy it now, although still considerably differently. To be sure, "[c]onnections between music and the Enlightenment are discernible at various points during the eighteenth century," (p. 181) but it seems that our contemporary appreciation of music from that time has little, unless retroactively, to do with that music's special attachment to the origins of our modernity.

The same issue of connection underlies "Architecture and the Enlightenment," as Anthony Vidler entitles his essay. Although Ernst Cassirer was convinced that architecture underwent a massive transformation in the eighteenth century as philosophes stimulated architects with their ideas, and Michel Foucault saw in Bentham's Panopticon the dark side of Enlightenment spatial power and discipline, Vidler reminds us that no one has written a sustained treatment of the relationship of architectural thought to Enlightenment thought. Why? At least one reason, he suggests, is because of the tendency of historians in recent decades to shy away from the history of thought. Should one assume, then, that if there were an Enlightenment architecture or an architecture of Enlightenment, it was not consciously considered, intellectualized, or theorized? Vidler rejects that notion and surveys the history by considering what philosophes wrote about architecture, and how architects responded. What he finds is interesting, although hardly surprising: architectural thought in the eighteenth century was highly intellectualized, and considered both by traditional literary philosophes and architects from various philosophical avenues.

It is very hard to avoid the history of active intellection, and the agency of both thinkers and their ideas when considering the French Enlightenment. That does not mean, however, that we should tip historiography back toward a pure history of ideas. As I stated above, I think maybe a flat ontology is preferable, and Anne Vila's essay "Medicine and the body" suggests such an approach to me. In terms of the medical history of the Enlightenment era, Vila reminds us, in the 1960s "the field's reigning interpretive model was a triumphalist sort of retrospective that emphasized ideas emanating from 'great men' more than their practical repercussions for flesh-and-blood patients" (p. 200). The history of medicine "from below" that is written "these days," shaped as it is by "sociology, cultural anthropology and phenomenologist philosophy" has "embodied" medical history, and helpfully revealed the nuances of history. The story of the Enlightenment is rarely the teleology of modernity, whatever version of modernity you prefer. Yes, some medical writers were "*médecins philosophes*," but other "prominent

physicians had an ambivalent or even disapproving attitude towards the aristocratic salon culture that was ground zero for the Enlightenment..." (p. 201). In other words, if historians could avoid teleological and proleptic considerations of the French Enlightenment, and maintain an attitude, or interpretive focus, that is open to the multiplicities of agency, is it not possible to develop a more nuanced understanding of history? Ideas in this historiography would still matter a great deal as agents, not just as an emergent property of the supposed real drivers of history, but as part of the "nexus" of agency that drives history forward.

A question that arises, I think, is whether the French Enlightenment would still *matter* if one were to adopt an ontologically flat interpretive mode. In the philosophy of history I propose, the French Enlightenment would cease to be the origins of modernity, however that modernity might be defined, because we were never modern or comprehensively defined by any notion of "modernity." And the actors that drive history forward would depend largely on the interpretive focus of the historian telling a history because there are probably too many actors and agents for the historian to consider them all. The historian picks the agents that best tell the history she wishes to tell. In so doing, the French Enlightenment does not cease to matter, but it does not matter more than other eras in history.

Although this excellent volume does not contain a formal concluding essay, it does fortunately end with Charles Withers's brilliant essay, "Space, geography and the global French Enlightenment." Here, Withers takes seriously the great ideas of the French Enlightenment as actors in their own right—big ideas *matter* to people, they make a difference in the world—but without reverting to a naive intellectual history that grants ontological priority to ideas. By taking into account not just who, what, and when, but also where, Withers points out the ways in which historiography that considers space and geography "illustrates that ideas do not 'float free' but are 'grounded' in particular sites and social settings" (p. 215). The idea of "groundedness" is not to suggest that ideas and thoughts do not act in the world, but that they must be translated from site to site and from medium to medium, and in the process are mediated and transformed. The result is that we must recognize that the French Enlightenment was not one thing at all, nor necessarily an era or an event, nor yet a set of specific ideas coming from any particular or singular direction (like France). Instead it was an "uneven production and mixed reception of variant 'species' of Enlightenment in different institutional and social settings" (p. 215). These species of Enlightenment thought, culture, and practice coexisted and interacted over space and time, and hardly reached all spaces. The Enlightenment was not the origin of modernity because it was never *one* thing, just as we supposed-moderns are not one thing, either.

Of course, I still wonder whether the "spatial turn" that Withers explains so clearly is not just another example of some dominant cultural paradigm shaping our perceptions and thus our historiographical interests without our conscious choice. Maybe historians are increasingly interested in spaces, sites, and globes (or just one globe) only because we live in a time of websites, public spaces, and global communication. In that present, maybe it seems natural to apply the hegemonic paradigm of the present on to the past. Maybe. If so, then the only way to avoid mental slavery is to be a methodological anarchist where, as Paul Feyerabend said, "anything goes." [5] By all means, space matters in historiography, but I do not think it is any more true or more capable of illuminating the true motors of history than other heuristic strategies. The Enlightenment today? If only.

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NOTES

[1] Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C.A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951); Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1947).

[2] www.cambridge.org/features/companions

[3] G. Matthew Adkins, "The Renaissance of Peiresc: Aubin-Louis Millin and the Post-Revolutionary Republic of Letters," *Isis*, 99.4 (December 2008): 675-700.

[4] See Jacques Le Goff, *Must We Divide History into Periods?*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

[5] Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 19.

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