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William Max Nelson, *The Time of Enlightenment: Constructing the Future in France, 1750 to Year One*. Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2021. 224 pp. Figures, notes, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9781487507701.

Review by Meghan K. Roberts, Bowdoin College.

A story scholars sometimes tell about the Enlightenment is that the philosophes were working towards a better future. But how did they think about the future as a category in and of itself? That is the topic of William Max Nelson's *The Time of Enlightenment*. While scholars know well that revolutionaries aspired to usher in a bold new era, utterly unlike the past, Nelson concerns himself with eighteenth-century origins and argues that Enlightenment philosophers began to think about futurity in new and important ways. This is a work of intellectual history that explores the second half of the eighteenth century, with the first four chapters focused on different facets of the Enlightenment before a final chapter on the French Revolution.

Enlightenment scholars often debate whether or not there were many enlightenments or a singular Enlightenment, but whatever conclusion one draws about eighteenth-century history, Enlightenment historiographies are often national. Because of the deep and complicated historiography questioning the relationship between the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, this can particularly be the case for work on the French Enlightenment. *The Time of Enlightenment* is part of this tradition: although the French Revolution is not discussed until chapter five, it is the driving force of the book and the source of its key questions.

In the first chapter, Nelson tackles a major preoccupation of Enlightenment thinkers: the problem of degeneration. Many observers in eighteenth-century France were wracked by anxiety, sure they saw signs of decline all around them. Human bodies seemed ever frailer, more softened, and weakened by the seductive comforts of modern urban life. Morals appeared lamentably lax and getting worse all the time. The consequences of this decline were far-reaching: military defeats, the collapse of the nobility, depopulation. The future looked bleak, and decisive action was required to save it.

But the future these thinkers imagined was constrained. Rather than dreaming up a bold departure from what had been and what was known, the philosophes worked within a clear set of boundaries. The past, present, and future were just not going to be that different from one another. Nelson most evocatively captures this tendency in the introduction, which he opens by discussing Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *L'an deux mille quatre cent quarante: Rêve s'il en fût jamais* (1771), a wildly popular utopian novel set hundreds of years in the future that nevertheless

resembled Mercier's present in important ways. This is emblematic of the philosophes' approach to the future: things could change, but within limits.

Because past, present, and future were fundamentally alike, they could coexist, with different people living the past, present, and future. This is Enlightenment stadial theory, in which human societies evolve and progress—but not in sync. The theory held that a single line stretched from the past to the present, and some people had moved farther ahead. Since this was a theory of development, those perceived as behind other people were seen as fundamentally child-like. These people appeared so backwards that they could be seen as “living monuments”(p. 45) to the past that urban Europeans had left behind. Most interestingly, Nelson analyzes stories that circulated about the Caribs (the name Europeans used for the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean) and in particular a popular anecdote about, to quote Immanuel Kant's version, “the Caribbean who sells his hammock in the morning and in the evening is embarrassed about it because he does not know how he will sleep that night” (p. 49). Foresight emerges here as a key marker of (European) civilization and development; allegedly less developed people would not be able to think beyond the present, but (some) European men could apparently project much farther out. Nelson follows the hammock story through many different texts and iterations, showing how the trope of the Carib represented a range of ideas about development, civilization, and backwardness.

Nelson concludes the chapter by briefly noting that “women, ‘savages,’ animals, children, ‘imbeciles,’ and on some occasions the poor” were considered to be like the Caribs, without the capacity for foresight (p. 59). He rightly notes the major significance of these associations, which “lay at the foundation of nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideas of history, progress, human development, economic development, colonization, and empire, while also playing a significant role in the formation of ideas about race, gender, and class”(p. 59). The brevity with which Nelson makes these assertions is disconcerting. That women were apparently incapable of conceptualizing the future should merit more than a few sentences in a book about how the French conceptualized the future. And with what consequences? Was this idea referenced in revolutionary debates about citizenship? More surprisingly, this chapter does not consider how Europeans thought about Africans or how stadial theory and ideas of historical progress were evoked to justify slavery. That Africans were allegedly “child-like” and in need of European “improvement” was a key apology evoked by both pro- and anti-slavery writers to explain, respectively, why they thought slavery should persist or why abolition needed to happen gradually. But those debates are not discussed here.

In the next two chapters, Nelson considers how these ideas about the future worked in practice. The actors in these chapters still thought of the future as bounded, per Nelson's first chapter, but they were growing more confident about their ability to shape it. Chapter three is about the *tableau économique*, a tool developed by the physiocrats to model how the changes the physiocrats proposed would set France on a new path to a different future. Physiocrats like Quesnay and Mirabeau aspired to make this tableau so obviously persuasive that it constituted an *évidence*; they were less engaged in the business of persuasion, than revelation. They went beyond suggesting that they might know what could happen in the future. Instead, they insisted that the outcomes they foretold were clearly and irrefutably going to happen.

Chapter four turns to natural history, which Nelson notes is a much better area for understanding future thinking than history proper. Here his major case study is Buffon and his efforts to fight

against degeneration through breeding programs for domestic animals. Buffon devoted several years to experimenting with domestic breeding and came to see it as a way to bring about significant changes by which a species could be “altered” or “improved” (p. 109). Reshaping nature was a first foray into reshaping the future, and Buffon came to see this as a project that could have a profound and decisive impact on the animals that humans controlled. These ideas are clearly relevant to other eighteenth-century theories about degeneration and breeding, including theories about breeding humans, but Nelson here stays focused on domestic animal husbandry. However, he has previously published on Enlightenment racial engineering, including Buffon’s ideas about race; that material would have added important dimensions to this discussion.[1] Nelson’s website states that he is finishing a second book on biopolitics that will, I presume, pick up where this book has left off.[2]

Chapter five is in some ways the heart of the book, even if it comes at the end. It examines the French Revolution, looking at revolutionary projects on time as a kind of social engineering. What had been a “distant echo” before 1789 became a “thundering presence” (p. 122). Revolutionaries had a totally new way of thinking about the past, present, and future, coming to believe they could change everything. Scholars such as Lynn Hunt have studied how revolutionaries had a new relationship with time.[3] Nelson focuses our attention how they had a different orientation towards the future. Compared with the previous chapters, this chapter is much more grounded in everyday experience and material culture: festivals, the revolutionary calendar, the seizure of church bells, the metric system, and so on.

Scholars interested in the growing literature on the history of time, progress, and the future will find this book valuable reading. It is a careful but clear work on intellectual history, one with particular relevance for understanding the significance of the French Revolution.

NOTES

[1] William Max Nelson, “Making Men: Enlightenment Ideas of Racial Engineering,” *The American Historical Review* 115/5 (December 2010): 1364–1394.

[2] <https://utoronto.academia.edu/WilliamMaxNelson>.

[3] Lynn Hunt, *Measuring Time, Making History* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008).

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