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Antoine Lilti, *Actualité des Lumières: Une histoire plurielle*. Paris: Fayard, Collège de France, 2023. 80 pp. €12.00 (pb). ISBN 9-78-2213725901; €4.99 (eb). ISBN 9-78-2213728261.

Review by David A. Bell, Princeton University.

This slender volume is not a new monograph by Antoine Lilti, but rather the text of the lecture he gave in December 2022, to inaugurate his chair at the Collège de France. Many colleagues will already have seen the lecture in person or online (the video is available [here](#)), but the text is worth pondering, both for its astute and provocative framing of that fraught topic, “the Enlightenment,” and as a document of a remarkable career (one that still has many years to go). It captures Lilti in motion, between his roots in social history and a newer trajectory influenced both by Anglo-American intellectual history, and by the style of historical-philosophical investigation pioneered by Michel Foucault.

Lilti’s first book, *Le monde des salons* (2005), fell squarely within the paradigm Robert Darnton called “the social history of ideas.”[1] Following both Darnton and his own mentor Daniel Roche, Lilti drew on exhaustive archival research to reveal the deep imbrication of a key Enlightenment institution—in this case, the “salon”—in the hierarchical social order of France’s Old Regime. Despite legends that grew up later, Lilti argued, the eighteenth-century salon did not exist as a distinct institution of the Enlightenment, dominated by *philosophes* and steered by *salonnières* who saw their principal role as an intellectual one. It formed part of a much broader pattern of “worldly” (*mondain*) sociability, ruled by the aristocracy, and in which *philosophes* occupied a distinctly subordinate position. Provocative and controversial, the book impressed both through the brilliance of the analysis and the sheer weight of the evidence, and it made Lilti’s career.

His next book, *Figures publiques* (2014), remained largely within the social history paradigm, but with a difference.[2] This time, he did not take on an institution so much as a concept, that of the “public sphere” as theorized by Jürgen Habermas. In Habermas’s classic account, the eighteenth century saw the emergence, both in print and in social institutions, of a realm of critical, rational, free discussion, an ideal version of which Immanuel Kant immortalized in his great essay “What is Enlightenment?”[3] Focusing his book on “the invention of celebrity” in Western Europe and North America, and the enormous adulation directed at figures such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Benjamin Franklin, David Garrick, and George Washington, Lilti argued that the public sphere was at least as much obsessed with personalities as with ideas. Furthermore, as he put it: “l’espace public démocratique et l’espace public médiatique sont

indissociablement liés.”[4] The book had the ambition not only of grounding ideas in their social historical context, but also of reconsidering an intellectual and political moment.

Even before this book had appeared, Lilti had taken an important step towards engaging more closely with the history of Enlightenment ideas themselves, in the manner of Anglo-American intellectual historians (in France, such investigations had long remained the province of literary scholars and philosophers). He did so in a long, meticulous, and quietly devastating review, for the journal *Annales* in 2009, of Jonathan Israel’s history of the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on a “radical Enlightenment” that traced back to circles around Benedict Spinoza in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic.[5] Notably, he insisted that Israel should not have taken invocations of Spinoza as proof of the philosopher’s influence in the eighteenth century, given the way that “Spinozism” functioned as a portmanteau insult during the period. He also argued that the particularities of Dutch political culture severely limited, *pace* Israel, the influence that less well-known countrymen of Spinoza such as Franciscus van den Enden and Adriaan Koerbagh exerted outside of their homeland. In the review, Lilti also already invoked many themes that appear in his inaugural lecture: post-colonial critiques; the “plural approach to the Enlightenment”; the fraught relationship between the Enlightenment and “modernity.” And he asked: “comment articuler histoire de la philosophie et histoire culturelle des productions intellectuelles?”[6]

Over the next several years, even while completing and publishing *Figures publiques*, Lilti wrote several more essays and reviews in the same vein as the review. In 2019 he put revised versions of them together, along with several entirely new pieces, into an ambitious volume entitled *L’héritage des Lumières: Ambivalences de la modernité*. [7] A critical first chapter entitled “Le défi postcolonial” engaged directly with critiques of the Enlightenment for fostering racism and imperialism. In the vein of Tzvetan Todorov and Sankar Muthu, Lilti directed particular attention to “universalism,” tracing different, competing expressions of the idea in Enlightenment and French Revolutionary history.[8]

*Actualité des Lumières* follows directly from this work. It takes universalism as a principal theme, while also asking the very large question of how the Enlightenment should be understood today. In response, Lilti first briefly reprises aspects of his career, deftly summarizing recent work in the social and cultural history of the Enlightenment, and on the “public sphere.” He then turns to postmodern and postcolonial critiques, and seeks, while acknowledging their force and importance, to answer them.

Lilti at first seems to offer a straightforward, even surprisingly traditional definition of the Enlightenment: “Au cœur de ce que nous appelons ‘les Lumières’ réside en effet l’idéal d’une émancipation par le savoir.” (p. 25). But this simple sentence conceals a host of ambivalences (“ambivalence” itself is a favorite Liltian word). How does Enlightenment knowledge emancipate? Does it do so like a powerful spotlight, shining the fierce beam of a single universal truth into the darkness, dissipating clouds of ignorance and superstition? Or does it do so in a dialogic manner, as individuals from different backgrounds and standpoints confront their different views of the world to each other? Lilti himself clearly leans towards the second of these meanings, which he illustrates with a lovely line from Merleau-Ponty: “l’incessante mise à l’épreuve de soi par l’autre, et de l’autre par soi” (p. 43). He shows how eighteenth-century European authors themselves used this dialogic approach, for instance in Diderot’s *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*, and its presentation of a speech by an aged Tahitian denouncing European

imperialism (although as Diderot slyly has another character remark: “il me semble y retrouver des idées et des tournures européennes”).[9]

And then there is Lilti’s phrase “ce que nous appelons ‘les Lumières.’” It does more than simply underline the point that “the Enlightenment” is a retrospective construction. Lilti’s entire lecture, with its title *Actualité des Lumières*, insists that we cannot unquestioningly accept the *philosophes*’ own descriptions of what they were doing. In an important sense, the Enlightenment, remaining as it is so central to conceptions of modernity, has never entirely ended (a point Lilti also made by choosing as the title of his chair: “Histoire des Lumières, XVIIIe au XXIe siècle”). Understanding this moving target requires a different sort of dialogic confrontation, one between multiple pasts and presents, bringing to bear contemporary senses of what human emancipation entails. Lilti therefore prefers to speak not of “universalism,” but of “universalization,” as peoples around the world appropriate and give new meanings to ideas and practices once associated with a small number of European writers. And these new meanings are most definitely plural: “Pluraliser les Lumières est la condition même de leur universalisation” (p. 46).

But this hope of recognizing plural, multiple enlightenments runs up against a major problem, which *Actualité des Lumières* points to, but does not have the space to examine fully. From the start, the European Enlightenment was an object of contention. Very soon, to use Lilti’s own word, it became a “combat” (p. 26). And while the dialogic pursuit of knowledge naturally generates a plurality of meanings, combat tends to generate something very different: polarization; two camps; us and them. It has always been striking the extent to which caricatures of “the Enlightenment,” whether emanating from Christian conservatives or postcolonial radicals or others, have tended to coalesce around a few very familiar tropes: instrumentalism; humans as machines; hyper-rationalism; hatred of faith, spirituality and tradition. What one group of critics decries as “atheist” another condemns as “Western,” but the indictments substantially overlap. Meanwhile, individuals who feel targeted by these indictments naturally fall back on a similarly narrow field of ideas and slogans to express why the Enlightenment must be defended. Around the world, even as different cultures have tried to develop distinct Enlightenments of their own, the relentless, bulldozer forces of globalization have tended to smash them back together into a small number of camps.

As Lilti himself notes in his lecture, nowhere has this polarization taken place more sharply and more explicitly in recent years than in France. In particular, following the terrorist attacks of 2015, self-proclaimed “republicans” conflated republicanism and Enlightenment into a single, rigid package: civic equality; secularism; freedom of speech; opposition to “communitarianism,” all without any recognition of cultural difference or structural racism. Lilti found himself briefly a target of such “republicans” after *Le Monde* published extracts from his inaugural lecture under the title “Pluraliser les Lumières est la condition même de leur universalisation,” and trolls attacked him on Twitter as a purveyor of “wokisme” and “la pensée américaine.”

It will be interesting to see, in coming years, how Lilti moves on from the impressive, concise statement of his position that he has delivered in this inaugural lecture. How will he develop the theme of multiple, plural Enlightenments? How will he integrate intellectual history and the deeply-archival social history that he has practiced so well in the past? How will he deal with “les combats des Lumières”? These are all open questions for the moment, but thanks to the Collège de France making its lectures [freely available online](#), French speakers around the world can come along for the ride.

## NOTES

[1] Antoine Lilti, *Le monde des salons: Sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2005). Darnton popularized the concept of the “social history of ideas” in “In Search of the Enlightenment: Recent Attempts to Create a Social History of Ideas,” *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 43, no. 1 (1971), pp. 113-132.

[2] Antoine Lilti, *Figures publiques: L'invention de la célébrité (1750-1850)* (Paris: Fayard, 2014).

[3] Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Berlin: Neuwied, 1962).

[4] Lilti, *Figures publiques*, p. 293.

[5] Reproduced in Antoine Lilti, *L'héritage des Lumières: Ambivalences de la modernité* (Paris: Seuil, 2019), pp. 223-68. The works reviewed were Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), and Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[6] Lilti, *L'héritage des Lumières*, p. 224.

[7] See note 5 above.

[8] Tzvetan Todorov, *Nous et les autres: La réflexion française sur la diversité humaine* (Paris: Seuil, 1992); Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

[9] Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres complètes de Diderot*, ed. Jules Assézat, 36 vols. (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1875-78), vol. II, p. 218.

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