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Dare to Exit Again: Retracing Enlightenment in a Post-History World

It is so comfortable to be immature.
—Immanuel Kant

"Man as man doesn't need any culture: but he needs enlightenment," wrote Moses Mendelssohn in his 1784 essay "On the Question: What Does It Mean to Enlighten?,"[1] published in the journal *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, in which, only three months later, Immanuel Kant would publish his famous "Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?" Both philosophers were responding to the pastor Johann Friedrich Zöllner's insistence that one must first clarify the concept of "enlightenment" before one could begin to enlighten; Zöllner raised this issue in an essay published in the same journal earlier.

Merely a Matter of the Past?

Mendelssohn's claim that we don't need culture, but rather enlightenment, might sound very strange today, somehow too radical to be taken seriously. Yet it is precisely this exclusive either/or that makes it more relevant to us than it was to its author's contemporaries. For Mendelssohn, enlightenment had a universal meaning. It was the theoretical side of what he called in German *Bildung*, and what we can translate as "formation" or "self-formation," which includes the notion of education.[2] Culture, on the other hand, represented the practical sphere of *Bildung*. Mendelssohn explained it by using the metaphor of a piece of land that can be cultivated in terms of being made capable of producing things useful for mankind. The most important difference between enlightenment and culture, however, is culture's social meaning. While enlightenment is of interest to humans *as humans*, beyond any social differences among them, culture cannot be indiscriminately applied to all human beings. Rather, it concerns the sphere of social life determined by class

and profession; it concerns human beings as citizens of a state. Only as a member of society—literally as a part of the social body (*Glied der Gesellschaft*)—can one participate in culture, can one improve or polish it in accordance with the class-specific and profession-specific duties and rights of each citizen, or, as we would put it today, in accordance with the particular way of life of each class and profession. Culture coincides with the existing social order. Only in conformity with this order it can fulfill its *telos* and become the culture of a nation. For Mendelssohn, culture is entirely a social phenomenon, and as such it is also a force of social conformism, not a force of rebellion against the existing order.

And what about enlightenment? Curiously, the universal and theoretical part of Mendelssohn's idea of *Bildung* hasn't been as historically successful as its practical cultural counterpart. The Enlightenment finished its brief career as a historical epoch shortly after Mendelssohn and Kant conceptualized its praxis: the end of the so-called Age of Enlightenment is usually dated to the last years of the eighteenth century; more concretely, it terminates with the French Revolution in 1789. Thus, enlightenment is for us first of all a phenomenon of the past. This determines the way we deal with it today. In contrast to Mendelssohn and other thinkers of enlightenment from the eighteenth century, who were reflecting on its actual manifestations or, in the role of its agents, representing its claims and introducing its principles into contemporary reality, we perceive the phenomenon of enlightenment retrospectively and historically. Either we expose the dialectics of its legacy which still informs our present, search for its truths in archives, contrast its glorious achievements with its colossal failures, or guess our future from the traces it left behind. We are unable to regard enlightenment as coming from an otherness that was once called "the new," as Mendelssohn did two centuries ago. Our thoughts on the Enlightenment might be more profound than Mendelssohn's were, and our findings on its true character might be more accurate. The intellectual tools and methods we deploy to understand it might be more sophisticated. But we cannot feel again what Mendelssohn enjoyed when he endeavored to answer the question "what is enlightenment?"—namely, the excitement of addressing a matter performatively. His words were meant to change the world he lived in, or, to put it more precisely, they were meant to enlighten the reality he found too dark.[3] We can remember what he and his fellow enlighteners said and did, but we cannot

repeat it. Enlightenment is for us today no more than an element of the (Western) world's cultural heritage, which, as such, we can preserve, analyze, identify with, and share, but never live. Even if we see its light still shining in our present, it is nothing more than the Enlightenment's message from beyond, resembling those lights in the night sky that come from stars that died long ago.

The fate of culture after Mendelssohn's time, on the other hand, couldn't have been more different. Not only has it survived historically; it has survived history itself, and is today better off than ever before. How was this possible? What is it that made culture so resistant to the eroding force of time, so capable of expansion, growth, and influence?

The More Obscure, the More Social

Cultural theorist Georg Bollenbeck has distinguished two dimensions of the German Enlightenment concept of "culture": the first is that this concept was highly undetermined, that is, one could hardly know to what the concept actually referred; the second was that the concept was extraordinary effective socially.[4] Bringing both dimensions into causal relation, one might say that it is precisely because of its referential indeterminacy that the social use of the concept of culture was so effective.[5]

Thus, in the middle of a historical project that proclaimed light as its ultimate value—evoking metaphorically the transparency of social life and the clarity of human knowledge—a parallel concept arose whose essential feature was the very opposite, namely, the indeterminacy of its meaning, its vagueness and opacity. It seems, moreover, that it is precisely this feature that gave the concept of culture decisive advantage over the concept of enlightenment, securing its historical survival. Opacity is, much more than transparency, intrinsic to social being, not only on the practical surface of social life—where various particularities are caught in a constant struggle whose outcome cannot be foreseen—but also on the level of the very ground of society, which is no less contingent and therefore irreducibly obscure. We might say that culture, as it was conceived of by Mendelssohn and his time, was much more sociable than enlightenment, its conceptual partner, in the project of *Bildung*. It conformed more to the very idea of the social, but was

also more socially conformist. It is therefore no wonder that culture, being better equipped than enlightenment, easily won the struggle for historical survival.

This is why the awareness of enlightenment's historical defeat must be regarded as constitutive of the general condition in which we live and reflect today on the concept and its ambiguous legacy. (This defeat was already long ago brilliantly proclaimed by Horkheimer and Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.) But there is another, even more important side of this condition, and we seem to remain unware of the historical—or better yet, transhistorical—importance of it. We know that there is a general trouble with history today. We still remember well Francis Fukuyama's spectacular announcement of the end of history from a quarter century ago. But we curiously forget that the fatal defeat of history that Fukuyama announced was at the same time the triumph of something else—yet another triumph of culture. In the infinite space of post-historical time, among the ruins of industrial modernity and the graveyards of grand narratives and what once was society, there is nothing left—no ideology or utopia, no social class or political movement—to challenge culture's sole claim to power.

Since the eighteenth century, which discovered culture's effective social dimension, the concept of culture has evolved into the ultimate—that is, the first and the last—ground of all social relations, which appear today "either ontologically subordinated or at least conceptually subsumed under the notion of culture."[6] Take, for example, so-called identity politics, which nowadays has entered the political mainstream, not only when it comes to struggles within a particular society, but also when it comes to global relations among religious communities and supranational normative identity blocks. Already in the 1990s, Nancy Fraser explained identity politics as a paradigm shift from social to cultural concerns, from claims for social justice—i.e., the social redistribution of wealth and resources—to claims for the recognition of cultural identities, nations, races, ethnicities, and genders.[7] Having spread throughout all spheres of modern society, saturating both local and global politics and reshuffling the major disciplines of modern knowledge, culture also imposed itself as the principle determining economic force, shaping the global condition in which we live. Just to recall, it was Fredric Jameson who nicknamed postmodernism "the cultural

logic of late capitalism." He has consistently argued that the so-called sphere of material production has come to overlap with culture. His words could not be clearer: "Everything, including commodity production and high and speculative finance, has become cultural; and culture has equally become profoundly economic or commodity oriented."[8] But it was not until culture completely seized the temporality of a dethroned history that its power became absolute.

History, a Contemporary of the Enlightenment

What once used to be history—in terms of a past time generated by historical events and their protagonists—has now become merely a matter of *cultural* production and retrospection, a realm over which culture exercises its sovereign rule. So when culture talks today about history, and it seems that no one else is truly interested in it, culture doesn't only talk about itself, it talks *to* itself.[9] Indeed, it is only within culture that the differentiation of historical time dimensions is still possible. The difference between past and present, or between both and the future, makes sense to us today only insofar as it is perceived as a cultural difference. In fact, it is nothing but a perception of different cultures. The past exists for us not simply as the absence of a bygone time, but rather as the presence of a different culture. What thus appears to us as a post-historical temporality is neither empty nor boundless. Instead, it is saturated and diversified by cultural differences and constantly reshaped by the processes of cultural differentiations and hegemonizations. As such, it reflects and rearticulates the power relations of the world in which we live today. Thus follows the dominant pattern of its self-presentation: the time-space of post-history is multiculturally structured. This is what we should have in mind when we hear the famous phrase about the end of history; and this is also what decisively determines what we think of when we refer to the Enlightenment today.

We talk routinely today of the Enlightenment as a *cultural* epoch of the past, having in mind a historical enclosure with particular cultural features and values. Is it possible to say something similar of culture? Has there ever been an epoch of culture? It doesn't seem so. There is no such thing as an epoch of culture. The reason is obvious. In its unstoppable advance, culture has evolved into a "meta-epochal concept" (*Metaepochenkonzept*) that allows us to scan, seemingly without effort, through the most diverse times and

spaces—among them, the time and space of the Enlightenment.[10] This is why, unlike the Enlightenment, culture can no longer be left behind in the past. It seems that it is here to stay forever—even after the world perishes.

Let us make clear what is meant when it is said that history ended in the late twentieth century. "History" here doesn't refer to a period starting at the beginning of time and ending in the summer of 1989, when Fukuyama published his famous article on the end of history in the American magazine *The National Interest*. The history whose end was proclaimed was in fact not so old; indeed, it was hardly two centuries old. It was a contemporary of the Enlightenment. Moreover, it was none other than Enlightenment thinkers who helped this history emerge by "dethron[ing] the old history from its professorial chair," as Reinhart Koselleck has argued.[11] This old history was based on a different temporality, one that was typical for the manageable and transparent space of a closed premodern society. It was a sort of "relative eternity" that followed a constant and repeatable rhythm of natural processes. The time in which people lived didn't differ significantly from the time of their parents and grandparents, so different generations could share one and the same historical experience. This is why historical events back then could be used as examples from which one could learn, and why history was considered a teacher of life, a *magistra vitae*.

But this changed with the Enlightenment. The past and the future got disconnected. It was now history itself that opened a new space of experience. Its temporality was diversified by the different speed and meaning of events. From now on, history articulated itself through times that differed from one another. The measures of its temporality lost their abstract, mechanical form, which was neutral towards historical events and the way people reflected on them. For Voltaire, the century in which he lived was a "century of Enlightenment" (*le siècle des Lumières*), which he clearly differentiated from the century of Louis XIV.[12] The latter he called "*le siècle de Louis XIV*" and described "not as the deeds of a single man Louis XIV, but as the spirit of a man in a century that was more enlightened than ever before."[13] In France, this same eighteenth century is also called the "century of Voltaire" (*le siècle de Voltaire*). None of these "three" centuries lasted exactly a hundred years, and none coincided exactly with either the seventeenth or the eighteenth century, but all three

overlapped significantly: the century of Louis XIV refers to the reign of the French monarch that started in 1643 and ended in 1715; the century of Voltaire refers to the lifespan of the French philosopher (1694–1778); and finally, the century of Enlightenment starts with the death of Louis XIV and ends with the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789.

The Subject of *Cultural* Lack

Summing up in brief, the historical experience of the Enlightenment cannot be separated from the experience of a new history and its temporality, which was no longer an abstract and neutral form within which historical events took place,[14] but an autonomous force able and willing to transform social reality. The Enlightenment, therefore, didn't take place in time, but rather *through* a time, which the Enlightenment itself made historically unique. When history finally emerged as a subject, which it did with the French Revolution,[15] it almost completely subsumed the Enlightenment under its reign. The latter is now seen not as an event in its own right, but rather as an effect of a properly historical event. The Enlightenment is understood either teleologically as a (cultural) step towards the necessary outcome of the eighteenth century—the French Revolution—or simply as its retroactive invention.[16] In his study of *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, Roger Chartier writes that the Revolution attempted to "root its legitimacy in a corpus of texts and founding authors reconciled and united, beyond their extreme differences, by their preparation of the rupture with the old world."[17]

This interpretation of both the Enlightenment and the French Revolution is already written from the perspective of an actual hegemony of culture over all the spheres and agencies of life, and is itself an expression of this same hegemony. It not only reduces the Enlightenment to a retroactively imagined cultural legitimation of the French Revolution; it also presents this Revolution—the historical event in which history is supposed to finally have become a subject—as a subject of lack, or more precisely, as the subject of a *cultural* lack. Let us put the whole drama on the stage so as to better understand it: In Chartier's account of "century of Enlightenment," culture, in terms of the intellectual production of the enlighteners, no longer appears on the scene in a support role next to the starring hero, i.e., history. Rather, it features as an intrinsic, albeit

absent, part of the hero's role, which history has to conjure up in order to conclude its performance. In other words, a historical event cannot be completed without its cultural legitimation; history as it was manifested in the French Revolution cannot become a full-fledged subject without the culture of the Enlightenment rectifying its lack of legitimation.

As we have learned from Lacan, lack is constitutive of any subjectivity. It refers to the inability of a subject to ever realize its aim and achieve its fullness. The subject will always be missing something and will forever remain a subject of lack. The subject will constantly try to eliminate this lack, yet the only thing these attempts can achieve is to cover over the lack at the level of representation.

It is therefore clear that culture cannot make up for what history lacks. But what culture can nevertheless do is cover over the lack in history, even pretending that culture is what made history into a subject capable of transforming social reality.

Seen from this perspective, at the end of the epoch of the Enlightenment—dated precisely to 1789, with the outbreak of the French Revolution—the Enlightenment has already been degraded to a cultural remedy for history's lack of legitimation. At the same time, its alleged cultural essence has imposed itself as the sole cover for this lack, as though nothing else can fill the lack that is preventing history from becoming a subject. So culture becomes the "subject maker" of history—at least from today's point of view, an epoch beyond history where culture no longer makes history into a subject, but itself fulfills, absolutely unchallenged, the role of this subject.

Here one cannot help but ask: Why must revolution root its legitimacy in culture? Why not in the social reality it attempts to change? And what in fact happened to the universal claims of the Enlightenment? Have they ever gained the attention of that history that subjectified itself in the Revolution? Or did they perish instantly in that very event which ought to have socially realized them?

In fact, Mendelssohn recognized the social meaning of both enlightenment and culture precisely in acknowledging, almost explicitly, their historically and politically contingent character. In his reflections on these phenomena and their role in *Bildung*, he was led

‘What is Truth?’: Towards a Theological Poetics

May 31, 2001, by Andrew Shanks

by a normative ideal of social harmony. Only if both enlightenment—the universality of “man as man”—and culture—the particularities of citizens, with their social classes and professions—pervade in a balanced way all levels of society will the goal of building an enlightened and culturally sophisticated nation be achieved. At the same time, Mendelssohn also imagined a totally opposite outcome for the *Bildung* process, namely, that both enlightenment and culture might easily degenerate into their own antitheses. As he wrote, the more precious culture and enlightenment are when they are blossoming, the more disgusting they become when they decay and rot.

But what Mendelssohn could not have imagined was that enlightenment would practically exceed the ideal of social harmony contained within the political universe of Prussian absolutism. In his dream of an enlightened society, there was no place for a history that would soon smash the whole political framework of his ideas. A state, he believed, couldn’t be blessed until within it the essential dispositions of “man as man” harmonized with the essential dispositions of citizens, and until enlightenment spread throughout all levels of society. He couldn’t imagine that history, precisely in imposing itself as a subject practically realized and, in the process, abolishing the feudal estates, would create the very political precondition for the spreading of enlightenment throughout society. The universal claims of enlightenment did not align with the culturally particular claims of citizens in an absolutist harmony, but rather in the praxis of the revolutionary destruction of the old absolutist regime, which made it possible for France’s National Constituent Assembly in August 1789 to adopt “The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen.”

The Arid Terror of Enlightenment

It was history as a subject that causally connected the project of the Enlightenment to the praxis of the revolutionary transformation of social reality, not only independently of the will of the enlighteners, but also far beyond the range of their imagination. Is such a transformation still within the imaginative horizon of our epoch, which legitimates itself precisely by claiming it has left behind forever not only the project of the Enlightenment, but history itself, including the event which once made it a subject—namely, revolution?

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Dec 9, 2014, by John Merriman

The scope of our post-historical imagination is far from limitless. In fact, it is clearly demarcated by a political declaration adopted by the European Parliament on April 2, 2009, which condemned all totalitarian crimes and called for the recognition of "Communism, Nazism, and fascism as a shared legacy."

Ostensibly a merely symbolic gesture, this declaration can actually be understood as the political institutionalization of a cultural and political tendency that, in the words of historian Domenico Losurdo, "represents a historiographical and cultural turn of great significance, a turn that is in a sense epochal."[18] He had in mind a form of so-called historical revisionism whose main argument was formulated in the 1980s by one of its most eminent representatives, German historian Emil Nolde, who explained Adolf Hitler's Nazism as a riposte to bolshevism and claimed that Auschwitz was only a copy of the gulag archipelago. With the European Parliament's resolution, this historical revisionism has become one of the key pillars of the whole ideological edifice of the European Union. Today's Europe has founded its ideological legitimation in opposition to and on the ruins of the two allegedly equally criminal totalitarianisms, Communism and Nazi fascism.

However, Losurdo has shown that the logic of historical revisionism cannot stop at the year 1917, but must necessarily slide further into the past. The main target of historical revisionism, he argues, is "the whole historical cycle running from 1789 to 1917."[19] The revisionist historians, of whom he singles out François Furet, trace Stalinist terror back to its French "origin"—the Jacobin tradition—and locate the problem of the gulag at the very core of the revolutionary endeavour. Moreover, they connect the intellectual atmosphere of prerevolutionary Russia to Enlightenment ideas from a century earlier. Thus, revisionist Richard Pipes writes: "In each case, the 'arid terror' of the *Encyclopédie* or the anti-Czarist intelligentsia paved the way for the subsequent 'bloody terror.'"[20] From the perspective of historical revisionism, the very idea and praxis of radical change, as it is sedimented in the historical experience of both the French and Russian revolutions—in fact, in every revolution—is diagnosed as the primal disease that has led to the general disorder of the modern world, and is directly responsible for most of its self-inflicted horrors.

This ideological reinterpretation of the contemporary world—which, to stress again, has been democratically legitimized and politically

institutionalized—necessarily implies the liquidation of the whole revolutionary tradition from 1789 to the present. In other words, the legacy of revolution(s)—and of the Enlightenment—has no place in our historical experience, for it can be remembered only as a trauma whose pathological effects we must still cure ourselve of. At the same time, this reinterpretation has been made possible by a change in the paradigm of historical research: namely, by the reorientation of the study of the French Revolution, and of the past in general, away from social history and towards cultural and intellectual history. This paradigm shift is itself an effect of a general cultural turn, or more precisely, of the historical triumph of culture over everything that had been brought to life by history, including this history itself.

Under the Principle of Inertia

Culture has turned the entire past into a pathetic monodrama in which culture itself performs alone, changing various historical costumes in accordance with every possible occasion. It can disguise itself as the epoch of Enlightenment and pretend to have prepared and legitimized the French Revolution. It can also restage this event, presenting its protagonists—those *sans-culottes* who fought hard for "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity" (as well as those Russian workers, peasants, and soldiers who, a century later, joined revolutionary councils to radically change the social conditions of their lives)—as a sort of cultural minority struggling for recognition, a minority that mistook its particular "way of life" for a social totality, necessarily leading to all the horrors of totalitarianism.[21] Needless to say, it is again culture that, in the last act of its performance, will shed crocodile tears over the innocent victims of historical revolutions. Hypocrisy is at the very core of today's popular cultures of commemoration, not because there is no reason to mourn over the mass graves left behind by history and its revolutions, but because they pretend to prevent the forces of post-history from filling those graves anew.

After having turned the history of all hitherto existing society into the history of identitarian struggles, culture has brought under its control yet another dimension of time. What in the age of history used to be the future—an open horizon of expectations full of hope and uncertainty—is now a dimension of post-historical necessity in which, despite an enormous acceleration on all levels of social life, nothing really moves and nothing essentially new

happens.[22] In a strange mimicry of nature and its laws, culture has evolved into the principle of inertia that governs the world of post-history. It has become the innate force of the social matter that resists any change and suspends all coincidence and contingency. Culture is today an intrinsically antihistorical and counter-revolutionary concept that has turned societies around the world into hostile containers of so-called shared values that, like natural bodies, endeavor only to preserve the present state, whether it be a state of rest in the form of an essentialized and eternalized identity, or a state of moving forward in the straight line of ideologically depoliticized economic growth.

It is within this context that we should remember Mendelssohn's warning that "the human being as human being" doesn't need culture, but enlightenment. Culture was for Mendelssohn a social phenomenon, and as such it was exposed to historical contingency. It could productively participate in the project of *Bildung* only if it was counterbalanced by enlightenment's universal claims. But it also could fail together with the whole project.

For us, by contrast, society has become a cultural phenomenon, deadlocked in the state of its identitarian idleness. Any claim to its totality, any appeal to the universality of its causes, which might set society in motion or change its course, is immediately repelled by a curious mixture of moralism and cultural forensics that traces such a claim back to the gulag and Jacobin terror, or even further to the core ideas of the Enlightenment. A moralistic, post-catastrophic retrospectivity is the only perspective of a culture for which society is but a particular set of its effects. From this perspective, Mendelssohn's "human being as human being," who does not need culture but rather enlightenment, exists nowhere except in the utopian fantasies of totalitarian ideologies, which our world is supposed to have left behind forever. In fact, it has left behind the history that two centuries ago turned the abstract universalism of Mendelssohn's Enlightenment into a social and political cause, a move with which it established itself as a subject. From the perspective of this history, the "human being as human being" appeared then as a matter of practical and political totalization. It was brought into existence performatively by its own universal claims, like the claim to radical equality, which was theoretically implied in the Enlightenment project and practically implemented in the contingency of historical praxis, becoming finally the very stake of the historical revolutions for

which people killed and died. This is why the “human being as human being” has never been and will never remain innocent. For it cannot but break with the principle of inertia. Any universal claim, when made practically and politically, will necessarily set in motion all that was resting in idleness, and will turn from the track all that was moving forward in a straight line; it will divide any culturally enclosed society, part with any identitarian community, and uproot every identity it comes across. In short, it will open the horizon of radical contingency—the only horizon in which emancipation can take place.

But history, assuming that it still exists, is not a subject anymore. Culture has now acquired this quality, becoming the sole ruler over the realm of post-historical necessity, controling the entire praxis of emancipation and defining its stakes and limits. Yet as a subject, culture is, again, a subject of lack, failing in every attempt to cover over its lack.

There Is a Crack in the Museum of History

Writing about Immanuel Kant’s famous article on enlightenment, Foucault reminds us that the German philosopher defined it rather negatively.[23] Enlightenment is a man’s “exit,” or a “way out” (*Ausgang*) from his self-imposed (*selbstverschuldet*) immaturity, which is for Kant “the inability to use one’s understanding without the guidance of another.” Regardless of what is meant by “guidance of another”[24]—a submission to the dogmas of the Church, or to the principles of absolutist rule—it necessarily implies a specific historical temporality: the time of an old history that circled within the space of a repeatable experience; a history that, after having been set in motion by the miracle of God’s creation, was thereafter driven solely by divine inertia. No human being could halt it or change its direction; nor could human beings claim responsibility for history’s achievements, or take the blame for its failures. This is why, in the time of the old history, no human being could ever come of age. The maturity that Kant evoked is a condition that could never have been brought about simply through the inertia of a time driven from beyond. It required the act of “man’s daring exit” from an enclosed flow of time and its corresponding space of familiar experience; it required not a change in time, but rather a change *of* time, a break with the inert temporality of an old, not-yet-enlightened and not-yet-subjectified history.

But the principle of inertia governs our life again. Only now, it is neither God nor nature, but rather culture that has set in motion post-historical time, that controls its speed and direction or brings it to a standstill. It is culture that has today taken the role of that other without whose guidance we can no longer make a move, neither in our understanding nor in reality. It has become the name for all the experiences we have had or ever will have. Culture has incorporated the historical experience of all hitherto existing society; in the form of so-called cultural heritage, culture represents today all we can know of the past, all we have learned from its class struggles, revolutions, and wars, or from the deeds of its heroes and criminals. And it looks back onto this past with a gaze of complete innocence. Wherever we encounter it, culture seems to always have arrived *post festum* to forensically examine the crime scenes of history, without ever being caught in the act itself. Here we should remember Hegel, who spoke of innocence as "merely non-action (*Nichttun*), like the mere being of a stone, not even that of a child."[25] The self-delusion of innocence is but an effect of the principle of inertia that commands the entire temporality of the post-historical condition.

As is well known, in his post-historical world Francis Fukuyama, the "court philosopher of global capitalism," did not find a place for art or philosophy. Both were superseded by what he called the "perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history."[26] He didn't have to explicitly charge someone with this task, since only culture today can do the job of chief curator, administering and taking care of the archives, narratives, and memories of our past, selecting and arranging them for public display, moderating the discourses commissioned to accompany the events and the shows it organizes in the "museum of history"—the metaphor for our world today—where we can experience this history either as its audience, or as its workers and collaborators. In fact, the only experience of time we can still have under the absolute rule of culture is the inertia of a perpetual present that defies any human control.

However, there must be a lack in the subject we call culture. There must be a crack in the museum of history, a crack that lets in the light. There must be a way out of the absolute hegemony of culture over the social world and its history. There must be an exit from the inertia of a perpetual present, an exit from the self-inflicted

Those Who Dare (Raiding Forces) (Volume 1)

Jul 9, 2014, by Phil Ward

innocence of a post-history that has paralyzed our will to act and change. One just has to dare.

As in Kant's time, the immaturity that prevents us from accepting responsibility—and taking blame—for radically changing the world in which we live is self-imposed. Its cause doesn't lay in a lack of understanding on our part, but in a lack of resolve and courage. This lack is, according to Fukuyama, one of the main features of the post-historical condition. His argument is simple: since we live in a world without history, we no longer need "the willingness to risk one's life for a purely abstract goal," nor any "daring, courage, imagination, and idealism." But we can turn that argument around and say: we do indeed live in a world without history, since we lack the willingness to risk our lives for an abstract ideal, the courage and imagination to break out of the cage of musealized history in which any significant prospect of an alternative has faded away. We are too nervous to meet the challenge of Mendelssohn's daring claim that we don't need culture, but rather enlightenment; and we get frightened to death at the mere thought of social totalization, political universalization, and radical re-historization, which such a claim necessarily implies. It could also be that the reason we live in a world without history it that we don't dare to exit culture as the ultimate horizon of our contemporaneity—today's equivalent of Kant's other without whose guidance we are unable to move, think, or act by ourselves, which he called immaturity. This immaturity, he argued, has become almost second nature to humans. But isn't that what we call culture today—our second nature?

But Who Dares?

We can invert Fukuyama's argument on art and philosophy in a similar way and say: he hasn't banned them from the post-historical world because they are no longer needed, but rather to get rid of our free imagination and our radical claims to truth that alone can prevent the world from being turned into a museum of history, with us locked up inside it.

Unfortunately, we have no good reason to assume that art and philosophy, while having at their disposal plenty of free imagination and profound experiences of truth, will have enough courage to use these against power.

Was it not Kant who, in the same essay in which he praised the courage to think without another's guidance, called for (similarly to Mendelssohn) his contemporaries to obey and venerate an absolutist monarch? Did Kant not say that the freedom he evoked with his idea of enlightenment had already been realized under the rule of this same absolutist monarch, Frederick the Great? Free philosophical argumentation has always gone hand in hand with social and political conformism. Even when philosophy mustered all its courage to find its raison d'être in the project of its realization, the moment of this realization was missed—which is why, as Adorno wrote, it is still alive.[27] There are ample reasons to believe that it is precisely within the boundless sphere of culture that philosophy has found the most comfortable place for its afterlife. Why then should it dare to exit?

As for art, in the same *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, only a year after Mendelssohn and Kant published their answers to the question on enlightenment, Karl Philipp Moritz developed the idea of autonomous art as "the concept of that which is complete in itself." Among the many interpretations of what Moritz's doctrine of aesthetic autonomy meant—beyond the idea of some actual domain of art that is in fact autonomous—there were those who understood it as an attempt to protect high art from the kind of commercialization that overtook literature in the eighteenth century, or as a response to the anxieties about the possibility of a politicized Enlightenment in Germany at the time.[28] In both of these interpretations, the modern concept of art emerges not as a daring exit from the old, but rather as an anxious retreat from the new, falling well short of the Enlightenment's normative claim of resolve and courage. There is, therefore, no reason to believe that art will find more resolve and courage to claim what it most urgently needs today—autonomy from a culture that threatens to instrumentalize it far more than politics ever did in the era of history.

This doesn't mean, however, that art and philosophy can do nothing at all to challenge today's overwhelming triumph of culture. They could, for example, take on the role of those public slaves who, during triumphal processions through ancient Rome, accompanied the victorious general in his chariot and whispered into his ear from time to time: *memento mori,* remember that you will die. To warn culture of its hubris is an important task; however, neither art nor

philosophy will ever make up for the lack that prevents us from exiting the all-embracing horizon of culture—our lack of courage.

Who actually has this courage? Who dares to exit today? Precisely those whom our fear doesn't allow in: those migrants who in waves arrive on the shores of a culture that claims a universality in which there is no place for them. They are arriving nevertheless. And they don't ask to be recognized in the particularity of their own culture, but rather as that which they really are, the social and historical embodiment of those "human beings as human beings" who don't need culture. Moreover, they become these human-beings-as-such precisely when they have nothing to lose except their culture. This is why they know the way out and have found enough resolve and courage to take it. So let them enter and guide us into maturity. And let them bring the light in. If we are human beings too, we won't need culture either. But we will need enlightenment, as they do.

Notes

1 Moses Mendelssohn, "Über die Frage: was heißt aufklären?," *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 1784, 193–200; 193.

2 To understand the German concept of *Bildung*, see Reinhart Kosseleck, "On the Anthropological and Semantic Structure of *Bildung*," chap. 11 in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Samuel Presner et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 170–208.

3 In fact, the German concept of *Bildung*, which is the focus of Mendelssohn's understanding of enlightenment, directly implies the attempt to change the world. According to Reinhart Koselleck, one of the main characteristics of *Bildung* is "that it recasts the sense of an upbringing offered from the outside ... into the autonomous claim for a person to transform the world." Kosseleck, "On the Anthropological and Semantic Structure of *Bildung*," 174.

4 Georg Bollenbeck, *Bildung und Kultur: Glanz und Elend eines deutschen Deutungsmusters* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1994), 87.

5 This is what philosopher Stefan Nowotny claims in his comments on Bollenbeck's findings. See Nowotny, *"Kultur" in der politischen Moderne: Versuch über die Institution eines Begriffs*, dissertation at Université catholique de Louvain, 2012, 23.

6 Ibid., 198.

7 Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the Postsocialist Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

8 Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (London: Verso, 1998), 73.

9 At stake is the well-known self-referential quality of postmodern culture in general. See Benjamin Kunkel, *Utopia or Bust: A Guide to the Present Crisis* (New York: Verso, 2014), 60.

10 Nowotny, *"Kultur" in der politischen Moderne*, 19.

11 Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), 46. When it comes to the difference between the old, premodern concept of history and the new, modern concept, I rely entirely on Koselleck's findings in this book.

12 Ibid., 322.

13 Voltaire, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV, in Oeuvres complete de Voltaire* (Paris: Tome Quatrième, 1838), 1. (Translation mine.)

14 It was not until the mid-eighteenth century that the notion of history (German: *Geschichte*) was used as a collective singular. Before that time the notion of history (*Geschichte*) always meant plural, "histories" (Geschichten). See Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*, 50.

15 Ibid.

16 Here I am paraphrasing Jonathan M. Hess, *Reconstituting the Body Politic: Enlightenment, Public Culture and the Invention of Aesthetic Autonomy* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), 19.

17 Quoted in ibid.

18 Domenico Losurdo, *War and Revolution: Rethinking the 20th Century* (New York: Verso, 2015), 5.

19 Ibid., 4.

20 Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 130. Quoted in Losurdo, *War and Revolution*, 3.

21 "Whole way of life" is how Raymond Willams defined culture.

22 Hartmut Rosa calls this a "frenetic standstill" (*rasender stillstand*). At stake is the perception of an epochal change without a corresponding vision of a new cultural start, without a meaningful connection between the past, the present, and the future. See Hartmut Rosa, *Beschleunigung: Die Veränderung der Zeitstrukturen in der Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), 41.

23 Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 32–50. He refers to Immanuel Kant, "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?," *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, December 1784, 481–94.

24 There are many English translations of Kant's "Was ist Aufklärung?" available online. I simply combine them, using those English words that I find the most appropriate translations of the German original.

25 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 282.

26 Frances Fukuyama, "The End of History?," *The National Interest*, Summer 1989.

27 "Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed." These are the words with which Adorno opens his *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 3.

28 See Jonathan M. Hess, *Reconstituting the Body Politic*, 16.

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