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Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. xii + 262 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-19-513685-3.

Review by Jay M. Smith, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In *Enemies of the Enlightenment*, Darrin M. McMahon mounts what should be a fundamentally unsurprising argument, namely, that the French Enlightenment, and the Revolution that partially derived from it, faced staunch opposition from the start. That such a commonsensical argument can now be hailed as a remarkable breakthrough in the history of modern political culture—at least, so say the overzealous admirers pressed into promotional service on the book’s dust jacket—is testament to the great influence of the discourse-centered political and cultural histories that emerged out of revisionism (and post-modernism) by the 1980s. Although the revisionist orthodoxy actually has been subjected to steady criticism for at least ten years now, its compelling and elegantly presented arguments continue to provide a convenient foil for those who wish to rescue from neglect ideas, people, developments, or events that once figured prominently in historical understanding of the French Revolution but fell from view after the 1970s. McMahon’s little-known band of “anti-philosophes” is surely among the most important of these forgotten forces, and he understandably uses some of the over-reaching claims of revisionism to throw into relief both the presence and the power of conservative thinkers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Two of the totemic arguments of late revisionism come under assault in McMahon’s book. First, McMahon disputes Roger Chartier’s provocative claim that the Revolution “invented” the Enlightenment in order to provide itself legitimating forebears. McMahon shows with abundant evidence that the defenders of tradition under the old regime had identified the Enlightenment (going generally by the name of *philosophie*, *l’esprit philosophique*, or *philosophisme*) as the eighteenth century’s principal agent of change long before the Revolution. If the Enlightenment was an “invention,” a concept to which McMahon himself actually shows a strong attachment, it was the invention of its enemies as much as of its admirers, for it took definitive shape in the minds of its fearful and resentful targets, many of whom were anxious to do battle in Manichean fashion against the purveyors of the dangerous new ideas.

McMahon’s greatest concern, however, is to challenge François Furet’s famous and influential argument that the Revolution “invented” its enemies to provide discursive justification for its natural terroristic proclivities. Having established in his first chapter the breadth and ferocity of the opposition to the philosophes and their ideas after 1750, McMahon examines in a chapter on the early Revolution the anguished rhetoric of the conservative opponents of Revolutionary change between 1789 and 1792. Because it confirmed their worst fears of the social and political effects of the philosophical spirit, and even fulfilled in many cases specific predictions of the calamities that would ensue from the spread of such destabilizing ideas (Charles-Louis Richard had declared in 1785 that the philosophes’ writings “had no other goal than to arm citizens against their kings” [p. 28]), conservatives naturally viewed the Revolution as “the realization of philosophy” (p. 56). Drawing on a familiar stock of ideas and

arguments, they attacked the Revolution immediately as an unfortunate emanation of the Enlightenment and as a plot hatched by philosophes and their minions, who had steadily conspired against “throne and altar” for decades. Echoing and extending the recent argument of Timothy Tackett, McMahon argues convincingly that conspiracy fears were born with the Revolution and that the rhetoric of conspiracy proved at least as appealing to the Right as to the Left.[1]

McMahon’s most satisfying chapters address the aftermath of the Reign of Terror and the development from the late 1790s of a consolidated right-wing that defined itself always in opposition to *philosophie*. Through publications such as the abbé Barruel’s wildly successful *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire du jacobinisme* (1797) and La Harpe’s *Du Fanatisme dans la langue révolutionnaire* (1797), conservative thinkers responded to the horrors of the Revolution by articulating an intellectually consistent “Counter-Enlightenment reaction” (p. 106) that extended its influence throughout Europe and the New World. The post-Revolutionary version of “anti-philosophe discourse” (pp. 95-99, 127-47, 157-70) used the atrocities of the Terror to dramatize the need to defend religion (especially Catholicism), kingship, and the patriarchal family against the destructive assault of *philosophie* and its cunning spokesmen.

Significantly, McMahon demonstrates the continuity of this line of argument from the 1790s through the period of the Restoration, when the enemies of Enlightenment adopted a political stance that, until 1824, was clearly more ultra-royalist than that of the king himself (p. 158). The Right’s steady drumbeat of alarmist rhetoric, which was intended to prevent the resurgence of *philosophie* and thereby forestall the return of anarchy and evil, both reflected and generated a vigorous liberal response to the conservative repudiation of Revolutionary principles. The emergence of a Constitutional party, the growing intellectual leadership of men such as Constant, Lafayette, Lafitte, and Manuel after 1816, and the horrifying assassination of the Duc de Berry in 1820 convinced traditionalists such as Félicité de Lamennais that liberalism was merely “a reincarnation of the *philosophisme* of old” (p. 164). The reappearance of Enlightenment thinking, and the re-publication of Enlightenment texts, following the Restoration inspired a determined and institutionalized propaganda campaign that helped transform the Right and the Left into fixed and implacable foes. The Right suffered a new defeat in 1830, but McMahon reasonably argues that by that point the French counter-Enlightenment had already developed “a structure of opposition and a set of recurrent themes” that would characterize the thinking of the French Right throughout the modern era (p. 195): “Long after the reign of the Ultras had come to an end, their ideas endured, finding their way into the panoply of right-wing ideologies that would dot the French and European landscape in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (p. 200).

McMahon uncovers the “enemies of Enlightenment” and spells out their basic ideological dispositions with considerable skill and industry. His argument that modernity was a product not of the Enlightenment per se but rather of an originary dialectic between Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment (pp. 200-201) is useful and thought-provoking. But his overriding thesis of continuity, which seems to work perfectly well for the period after the Terror, is much less convincing in his treatment of the period that links the old regime to the Revolution. In his analysis of the age of Enlightenment, McMahon fixes on the conservatives’ oft-reiterated opposition to *philosophie* to establish a linguistic bridge between counter-Enlightenment and counter-Revolution. But instead of subjecting to close scrutiny the contemporary meanings of *philosophie*, and following the process by which conservatives arrived at their particular definition of the term, McMahon simply permits the relatively small number of virulent anti-philosophes to define the Enlightenment’s parameters and to convey its essential meaning. Oddly enough, the reader never sees the *Encyclopédie*’s clinical and restrained definition of *philosophie*, nor does McMahon present any other evidence that might suggest how the Enlightenment was understood by the philosophes or by the many readers who read their work with sympathy or mixed feelings. The whole phenomenon of the “conservative enlightenment” is never even considered as a possibility.[2] Instead, the Enlightenment is represented—through the vitriol of its mainly clerical “enemies”—as the work of Helvétius, Holbach, the *Encyclopédie*, and especially, Voltaire.

Not surprisingly, then, when the critics of Voltaire and company attacked *philosophie*, they attacked materialism, atheism, Anglomania, and the dangers of insubordination.

McMahon knows that these ideas do not represent the full range of the Enlightenment. He notes repeatedly that the anti-philosophes were “simplistic and reductive,” and he reminds us that their Enlightenment was only a “construction, a linguistic creation” (pp. 27, 47). But by reading back into the Enlightenment the unity of purpose that it later acquired in the eyes of so many opponents of the Revolution, he inevitably creates a dichotomy between *philosophie* and its adversaries that only obscures the arguably more important divisions that existed *within* the Enlightenment. By reporting uncritically, for example, a typical accusation from the *Journal ecclésiastique* that the philosophes were all “apologists and defenders of *luxure* (p. 37),” he succeeds in showing the strength of the perception—held by some people—that the Enlightenment and modernity necessarily stood for rampant materialism and the shameful neglect of moral virtues. At the same time, though, he egregiously ignores the raging debate within contemporary political economy, and within all philosophical circles, about the nature and desirability of commerce, luxury, and the pursuit of material interests. As Sarah Maza has noted, very few eighteenth-century writers can be counted as defenders of luxury, and philosophes as diverse as Montesquieu, Diderot, Rousseau, Mably, and Holbach all lamented the corruption of the age and yearned for moral renewal.[3]

Mark Hulliung, whose work evidently escaped McMahon’s attention, has argued persuasively that the oppositions between virtue and interest, personal integrity and society, sentimentalism and reason, and money and morality were all embedded within the Enlightenment project from the very beginning.[4] Clashes between these concepts in the literature of the eighteenth century, says Hulliung, actually reflected an “auto-critique” of the Enlightenment, a simultaneous embracing and doubting of materialism and reason that reached its fullest expression in the writings of Rousseau but also left many traces in the writings of his philosophe interlocutors, including Diderot and d’Alembert. Had McMahon thought harder about the many different ways in which the ideas of “the Enlightenment” could be opposed or promoted, he would have been able to do more than note the apparently coincidental similarities between the assumptions of his “anti-philosophes” and those of Rousseau and other “classical republicans” (see pp. 35, 51). He might also have recognized that what he represents as a quintessential counter-Enlightenment pronouncement in 1787—one that called for the banishment of luxury, the reinvigoration of morals, the promotion of patriotism, and the strengthening of the subject’s attachments to king, country, and duty (p. 41)—also characterized the thinking of a great many future Revolutionaries, all of whom had been influenced by programs of reform elaborated within one or more of the Enlightenment’s various idioms.

McMahon claims that, in 1789, the Revolution’s “most radical proponents” and its “most vehement enemies” needed each other, for their “constructions” of their adversaries worked as mirror opposites, confirming the veracity of the charges they leveled at one another (p. 76). Unfortunately, McMahon’s own construction of a dialectic of opposing “discourses”—languages that were evidently self-perpetuating, and had no necessary connection to “social reality” (p. 47)—obscures all the subtle shades of enthusiasm, opposition, and confusion that marked the first years of the Revolution. The Terror, and the contrast between the Terror and the seemingly moderate period that came before it, eventually gave to the Revolution a relatively restricted set of meanings around which parties and modern ideologies would endlessly coalesce; the roots of many of the ideas driving those parties and ideologies can indeed be traced to the pre-revolutionary era, as McMahon ably demonstrates. But to understand how the meaning of the Revolution and its memory became the galvanizing force of modern French politics, one still needs to focus on the conflicts that arose from within the contradictory legacy of the Enlightenment itself. Between 1789 and 1794, the Revolutionary generation confronted a series of mostly unanticipated choices presented to it by circumstance and the sheer variety of Enlightenment thought: individual freedom or the general will, equality or the defense of property, constitutional monarchy or republic, scientific rationality or virtuous patriotism. In making their choices,

revolutionaries repeatedly redefined the Enlightenment, creating new “enemies” all the time. By retrospectively projecting on to the later eighteenth century the existence of stable and enduring parties of “proponents” and “enemies,” McMahon establishes clear lineages for the modern Right and Left, but he does so at considerable cost, for he leaves out most of the process by which certain images of the Enlightenment (and not others) became assimilated to the Revolution for the rhetorical purposes of modern politics.

One hates to close discussion of a smart and provocative book by pointing out errors, but numerous misspellings (pp. 9, 10, 42, 45, 103, 122, 155, 177, 207, n. 25), adventures in punctuation (pp. 37, 105, 159), inconsistencies of form (egotism on p. 37, egoism, p. 169), and even mysterious type-setting mistakes (p. 61) provide continuing evidence of the editorial failings for which Oxford University Press has recently become famous. The weak editorial oversight almost surely reflects a desire to hold down costs. That motive might explain, for example, why the press chose to leave out a bibliography (useful only for scholars), but nevertheless agreed to include a substantial set of mostly perfunctory illustrations (useful for enticing those always suspicious undergraduates.) For McMahon’s sake, may OUP sell enough books to warrant a revised edition some day.

NOTES

[1] Timothy Tackett, "Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of the Terror, 1789-1792," *American Historical Review* 105 (2000): 691-713.

[2] See, for example, Bolingbroke's *Political Writings: The Conservative Enlightenment*, ed. Bernard Cottret (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: MacMillan Press, 1997).

[3] Sarah Maza, "Luxury, Morality, and Social Change: Why There Was No Middle Class Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century France," *Journal of Modern History* 69 (1997): 199-229.

[4] Mark Hulliung, *The Autocritique of Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Philosophes* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

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