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David W. Bates, *Enlightenment Aberrations: Error and Revolution in France*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002. xiii + 255 pp. Notes and index. \$39.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8014-3945-0.

Review by Alan Williams, Wake Forest University.

This is an ambitious book. Having apparently set out to write a conceptual history of error during the Enlightenment (p. vii), Professor Bates claims, in consequence, to have performed at least three more daunting tasks. He has, he believes, offered a fresh view of the Enlightenment, redefined the Enlightenment's relation to the Revolution's violence and to modernity, and marked what he takes to have been fundamental shifts in the intellectual history of the West since the Enlightenment.

In his opening chapter Bates begins this labor by furnishing a brief but intelligent overview of Enlightenment historiography. As Bates sees it, most of those who have written about the Enlightenment can be sorted into one of two camps: those who admire it, and those who don't. To the first group belong postwar liberal academics such as Peter Gay, those younger historians who appreciate the movement's various forms of sociability, Habermas (with qualification), and some recent postmodernists who have discovered in the work of the philosophes unexpected playfulness, complexity, and a potential for subversiveness. To the second Bates assigns Adorno and Horkheimer, Foucault, and a bevy of other postmodernists, plus a number of feminist and post-colonial theorists. Differ though they might, both groups agree that the essential characteristic of the Enlightenment was its confidence in reason, and both see modern Western culture--modernity--as having its origins in this confidence. For the critics this faith is ultimately hubris, a hubris that produces human beings with both the inclination and the capacity to destroy what they cannot master. For those who admire the Enlightenment, this same faith in reason does not tempt us to brutality, but instead furnishes an antidote to irrationality and ignorance, our real enemies. While Bates acknowledges the power and scope of both views, he finds them inadequate: the critics, because they fail to appreciate the value of rationality in the modern world; the admirers, because they are unwilling to acknowledge, or even think about, the possible connection between reason and violence--the violence of the Revolution and that of the modern world.

Bates argues that the way past these shortcomings is to shift our focus. Preoccupied with reason and, perhaps, with its presumed product, truth, we have ignored the other, the marginalized, potential outcome of reason's exercise, namely error. Once we turn our attention in this direction, we will see that the eighteenth century was "obsessed with error" (p. 24) and that "'truth' is really parasitic on its supposed negation" (p. viii). For help in grasping the meaning error would have had for the *philosophes*, Bates turns in his second chapter to the etymology of the term and to metaphor. In the eighteenth century, he finds, error retained some of the original sense embodied in the Latin root *errare* and the French *errer*, the sense of a wandering accompanied by adventure. For the Enlightenment, though, the wandering associated with error was not aimless; it was rather aberration--repeated but progressive departure along a path that runs on toward unseen (perhaps unseeable) truth. Thus, the Enlightenment conception of error has positive connotations. While error is, indeed, a failure to attain truth, it--or rather the awareness of it--is also always an achievement, a step forward, a foundation for belief in

progress; and because any survey of the past reveals that much of what one generation regarded as “truth” became error for the next, error must be seen as inevitable and as the only guise in which any of us get to imagine we have glimpsed a truth that, like the postmodernist’s meaning, is always deferred. For Bates, then, it is not a widely shared confidence in reason—something all human beings have—that defines the Enlightenment but rather faith in a particular view of truth—a truth no one can possess, one that “must itself remain absent” (p. 18). It is this conception of truth (approached only by the error he calls to our attention) that links the Enlightenment to modernity, for it is the source of “a modern idea of knowledge defined by failure, conflict, and risk, but also hope” (p. 18).

Having explored the Enlightenment’s view of error and truth in chapters two and three, Bates moves on in the succeeding three chapters to try to link this view (and so the Enlightenment) to the Revolution. He draws primarily on four figures to make his case: Condorcet, Sieyès, Robespierre, and Saint-Just. If I understand Bates (and I confess I’m not sure I have), seeing the connection requires us to remember that, as with the *philosophes*, the revolutionaries believed in truth, albeit an absent truth. Politics for them was not a game, not a contest over the possession of authority, not a means for conciliating conflicting interests; it was the serious business of moving toward this truth by way of innumerable aberrations. However, since some aberrations are useful and some not, the task of politics became creating a “space” within which the nation could be protected from “unproductive error” (p. 16). Whether that space was to be within new institutions, as Sieyès thought, or within the individual psyche and conscience, as Robespierre believed, it was essential that in that space progressive error be protected from error that was not. So rather than acknowledge the potential utility of various perspectives, the revolutionaries fought one another in the name of truth, there being no visible standard—political truth being beyond ken—by which to decide among them. Most revolutionaries understood that they, like their opponents, were condemned to political error; but in their own aberrations they saw that side of error that was the imperfect form of truth, while in their opponents’ views they found only the dark side of Enlightenment error—the deviation from truth. Here, Bates seems to believe, is the link between the Enlightenment and the subsequent violence of the Revolution, not in an abandonment of reason for irrationality, as the Enlightenment’s admirers believe, nor in a fatal commitment to a kind of reason that must eliminate whatever it cannot refashion to fit its categories. “The logic of Enlightenment error,” he says, “made conflict inevitable” (p. 16).

Bates’s claim to have marked important alterations in the relatively recent intellectual history of the West is implicit in the concluding two chapters of his work and in an epilogue. He believes that the Enlightenment did constitute an important break with the past in that it produced a new view of truth and a new valuation of error. Truth became something to seek, not something one could possess; and error, in its inevitability, became not only a failure to attain truth but a mark of progress toward it and a promise of its existence. The Revolution left this view of truth and error untouched, and it persisted in both the counter-revolutionary and post-revolutionary thinkers whom Bates treats in chapters seven and eight.[1] The break came later in the nineteenth century, perhaps, he suggests, when Laplace developed a theory of the distribution of errors that made it possible to fit aberrant data to a curve and thereby prepared the way for people to begin speaking about what was normal. Truth—the graphic average—previously hidden by variation, was now revealed, something to be grasped. “It was only in the nineteenth century, and not in the Enlightenment...that some direct access to truth was thought possible” (p. 249). Here, then, not in the eighteenth century, lie the origins of a “destructive rationality” (p. 248), “a ruthless instrumental logic” (p. 247), prepared to believe error and aberration could be eliminated altogether.

If such a view of truth and its relation to error are what we mean by modernity, then it is the work of the nineteenth century, not the eighteenth. Bates suggests that while Nietzsche, Freud, and Durkheim attempted, in one way or another, to restore the Enlightenment’s respect for complexity and its belief in a truth more mysterious than that found in many currents of nineteenth-century thought, their heirs among the postmodernists have abandoned truth of whatever sort. Among them, Bates says, “wandering

is celebrated in its own right, and disconnected from any notion of truth that could limit or define it" (p. 254). In the face of the intellectual futility and crisis he sees characterizing our own time, Bates concludes by suggesting we might do well to turn to the French thinkers he has treated, men from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries who could see that error and aberration had two faces, who knew that, while both were inevitable and deficient, they also embodied what each of us could manage on the road to truth.

The *philosophes* would have applauded this view and seen in it further reason for tolerance. So do I. Nonetheless, I have three reservations about Bates's work. First, there is the evidence on which it rests. Bates contends that what makes the Enlightenment important to a history of error and important in the intellectual history of the West is that it reconceived humanity's relation to truth. As we have seen, truth was something no one would ever see, except in the imperfect form, or guise, of error. Truth itself lay always beyond the voyager's horizon. To found such a significant contention, one critical for the argument of his book, Bates relies primarily on his scrutiny of a number of articles in the *Encyclopédie* and on his reading of d'Alembert and Condillac. I will leave to others who know Enlightenment texts better than I to decide whether the view of truth and error Bates has extracted from these three sources does justice to eighteenth-century beliefs; but given all Bates tries to do in this work, my own sense is that we should treat his perspective on the Enlightenment as an intelligent attempt to provoke us rather than as an extended effort to persuade.

Second, there is his attempt to connect the Enlightenment, as he conceives it, to the Revolution. If my attempt to summarize his views on this matter was not perspicuous, I can only say I did my best. I see, I think, that believing in the reality of a general, unitary will made the contest to represent it as accurately as possible a serious one for those engaged and that revolutionaries may well have desired to limit the degree of inevitable error present in any of their concrete formulations. But I do not see why "the logic of Enlightenment error" made conflict rather than humility inevitable. What beyond commonplace presumption led an individual or a faction to believe that its insight was productive error and that of their opponents unproductive, to use a distinction Bates employs? Indeed, Bates suggests that it was just such presumption (or delusion) that impelled Robespierre to terror "when he implicitly declared himself the privileged organ of the nation, of truth itself. Here, Robespierre strayed at his own peril from the Enlightenment understanding of error" (p. 161). In Robespierre's case, then, it appears it was not the logic of Enlightenment error that led him to violence, but a failure to recall that logic—a failure induced by insufficient self-doubt.

Third and last, Bates leaves me confused about the scope and meaning he wants to give to the term "error" that figures so prominently in his work. In what is "a conceptual history of error" (p. vii) or a study of "the structure of error" [his italics] (p. 18), we find that, once we enter the world of politics and revolution in chapter four, error (which, like truth, I take to be a property attributable to statements, propositions, or beliefs) becomes "a deviation from the pure will of the general interest" (p. 76). Error begins to shade into another sort of property, namely difference, which, while applicable to propositions and beliefs, can be applied to all sorts of things, including forms of behavior and being itself. And if "difference" (and, sometimes, "plurality" as Bates proceeds) begins to take the place of error—or be equated with it—identity and unity begin to replace truth as objects of Bates's attention. By the time he has finished, individual particularity, division within a political community, moral transgression, and variety in the natural world all appear to have become, in some sense, manifestations of error.

What Bates has given us may not be so much a study of error or its structure as a view of an intellectual world in which one set of terms—error, difference, variation, the multiple, the temporal present, the concrete, the deviant, the physical, the particular—were seen as analogous in that they were all viewed as imperfect, but inevitable and valuable, forms of their opposites. It may be that Bates gives "aberration" priority over "error" in his title in an attempt to find some category broad enough to subsume all the terms associated with error in the cluster I have listed above. Still, what relationship Bates means to

suggest the Enlightenment saw between error and these other, increasingly prominent terms remains obscure. He does remind us that, in an article on “evidence,” the *Encyclopédie* suggests that error arises from abstraction. But does this mean error is abstraction—or plurality or difference? I am not sure.

I am sure, though, that Professor Bates has produced a bold and stimulating book, one that will require and reward more than a single reading. In retracing eighteenth-century ground he has certainly found sufficient kindling to start a discussion. But, given the ultimately humane and generous spirit of his work, I am sure he also hopes to have found enough material to light a path for all those among us who so often lose our way.

NOTES

[1] To a greater extent than the revisionist historians of the Revolution, Bates believes the revolutionaries recognized both the inevitability of their own error and the fact that the divergent views of others were not necessarily evil (see, for example, pp. 104, 116, 118).

Alan Williams
Wake Forest University
awill@wfu.edu

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