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Xavier Martin, *Human Nature and the French Revolution: From the Enlightenment to the Napoleonic Code*. Translated by Patrick Corcoran. New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2001. v + 292 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$25.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 1-571-81415-9.

Review by Ronald Schechter, The College of William and Mary.

In his *Human Nature and the French Revolution: From the Enlightenment to the Napoleonic Code*, Xavier Martin has produced a thought-provoking book on French attitudes toward human nature from the mid-eighteenth century to 1804. His thesis is simple: French thinkers and politicians throughout the period tended strongly toward the belief that human beings were fundamentally passive, lacking in free will and easily (and rightfully) manipulated. This “reductionistic anthropology,” or view of humanity that reduced people to their physical aspect, sometimes took the form of pure materialism, i.e. the belief that human beings (like everything else in nature) are made up exclusively of matter and do not possess an immaterial soul or mind. The *philosophes* H elvetius (1715-71) and baron d’Holbach (1723-89) were best known for this position, which implicitly repudiated the idea of free will, since it did not exempt human beings from the natural network of causes to which all other matter was subject. Yet Martin maintains that even “spiritualists” such as Rousseau (and on occasion Voltaire), who proclaimed the immaterial (and immortal) nature of the soul, were plagued by doubts that the materialists had sown regarding the freedom of the will and were inclined to view human beings as weak, passive creatures who could and ought to be manipulated for their own good. It was therefore easy for utopians to propose totalitarian schemes of social engineering, from the pedagogical dreams of Rousseau (most famously exemplified in *Emile* to the revolutionary attempts at “regeneration” through festivals and propaganda, and finally to the Napoleonic Code, which Martin sees as yet another project designed to control people.

By arguing that the Enlightenment, Revolution, and Napoleon were totalitarian forces with no interest in liberty, Martin appears to be pounding on an open door. The postmodern onslaught on the Enlightenment is already present in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) by the German philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who similarly saw totalitarianism as implicit in Enlightenment thought and much of whose argument derives from an interpretation of G.W.F. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1806). Similar critiques have become so prevalent that two recent edited volumes have attempted to make sense of the apparent war between postmodernism and the Enlightenment.[1] Regarding the Revolution itself, Martin writes that its “doctrinal negation of free will obliges us to view the Revolution in a far more derogatory light than it is customary or comfortable to do” (p. 90). Comfort aside, it is worth asking what Martin means by “customary.” The revisionist argument against the French Revolution as a liberating force is familiar enough from the works of Fran ois Furet and a host of other historians, and though I happen to share the view that liberty was not at the top of the list of the Revolution’s priorities, I would hardly qualify this as news. Napoleon’s disdain for liberty is less surprising still. To be fair to Martin, his book first appeared in French in 1994. Yet by that point revisionism was so powerful in the historiography of the French Revolution that just one year later

Lynn Hunt felt obliged to question the “almost axiomatic condemnation of the French Revolution” in an “ever-growing body of publications.”[2]

Of course, just because Martin is not the first to criticize the Enlightenment, the Revolution, and Napoleon does not mean that his book lacks interest. Indeed, Martin should be commended for finding a niche in this vast literature and managing to say something original. His contribution is this: to explain the reputedly totalitarian character of French thought from the Enlightenment to Napoleon by examining prevalent views of human nature. But is his argument convincing?

First one must distinguish between Martin’s philosophical-religious arguments and his historical ones. Martin faults “Enlightenment thinking” for “its tendency to go against all the dictates of common sense and stubbornly deny that there exists any active principle within man” (p. 125). Whenever a scholar is reduced to using the stubbornness of opponents as an explanation for their repeated failure to recognize what the “dictates of common sense” should make obvious, it is equally obvious that we have hit upon a matter of dogma. In this case the dogma is the “active principle,” which Saint Thomas Aquinas (1224/25-74) viewed as responsible for free will and claimed to be inherent in human beings. Martin explicitly cites Aquinas as a source of the “Catholic tradition” that Enlightenment anthropology attacked (p. 4). Elsewhere he refers to a “Catholic anthropology” that “stands out as an obstacle in the path of all utopian thinkers” (p. 54) because it regards human beings as fundamentally free and therefore immune to the manipulative designs of social engineers.

Martin’s strong feelings on the question of free will explain his assumption that anyone who would “deny” this principle degrades humanity. Yet there is something very parochial in this way of thinking. One wonders whether the charge of degrading humanity also applies to Calvinists, whose belief in predestination afforded people no more freedom of will than did the materialism of H elvetius and d’Holbach. And what about the Jansenists, who certainly saw themselves as Catholics but also believed in predestination? (Martin makes no mention of the Jansenists.) Even if one grants Martin his conviction for the sake of argument, the problem comes when he imperceptibly transforms a moral-religious argument into a historical one. Martin assumes that the insidious anthropology he identifies with the Enlightenment prepared the way for social engineers such as the revolutionaries and Napoleon to enact their totalitarian experiments on a reputedly passive population. If he is justified in making this leap, then one wonders why the Calvinist Dutch Republic or Presbyterian Scotland did not produce reigns of terror or micromanagers of Napoleonic proportions.

Evidently Martin has attributed too much influence to the doctrine that he claims to have uncovered as “[t]he anthropology of the Enlightenment” (p. 3). Keith Michael Baker cautions intellectual historians against writing “a linear history of doctrines, cast in terms of a necessary logic of ideas, usually with an emphasis on the influence of a particular doctrine or thinker.” He calls this the “‘C’est la faute   Rousseau’ style of interpretation,” alluding to nineteenth-century anti-revolutionaries who reputedly explained the Revolution by saying, “*C’est la faute   Rousseau! C’est la faute   Voltaire!* (It’s Rousseau’s fault! It’s Voltaire’s fault!).”[3] Martin seems to believe that *C’est la faute   H elv etius! C’est la faute   d’Holbach!*

Moreover, the very coherence of Martin’s “anthropology of Enlightenment” is doubtful. To be sure, Martin quotes relentlessly from primary sources; the book has 1278 footnotes, most of them referring to contemporary documents. This very encyclopedic thoroughness, however, has a negative side, since it is impossible to cite so many documents without giving their contexts short shrift. For example, when Voltaire referred to his body as a “machine” and qualified it with adjectives such as “feeble,” “pitiful,” “weak,” “sickly,” and “lamentable,” does this mean we should conclude that he was a mechanist? Does it matter that Voltaire often suffered from ill health and was prone to jesting? Martin does not pause to consider these matters, but rather indulges in special pleading by taking statements literally when they support his argument and discounting them when they do not. Thus, he places a great deal of weight on

Voltaire's references to human beings as "machines" and "mechanisms." But when the *philosophe* professed the opposite opinion, namely that human beings have immaterial and immortal souls, Martin writes, "The immortality of the soul may be a preoccupation which constantly haunts Voltaire but we never see him really believe in it" (p. 17). Why not simply say that Voltaire, who contradicted himself on so many other matters, contradicted himself here as well? Similarly, when examining Rousseau, who fulminated against materialism on many occasions, Martin emphasizes those statements that seem to endorse that philosophy while discounting statements that call it into question. Rousseau once wrote, "All I can see in any animal is no more than an ingenious machine which Nature has endowed with senses so that it can wind itself up...I observe exactly the same thing so far as the human machine is concerned." But when Rousseau added the important qualification, "with this difference, that Nature alone is responsible for all the actions that animals perform whereas man contributes to his own actions as a free agent," Martin suggests that the *philosophe* "does not seem to consider the status of 'free agent' as constituting such a 'difference' that it dispenses us from recognizing that fundamentally 'the same things' can be observed as going on within man as within animals" (pp. 51-52). Faced with a contradiction, he chooses the term that supports his argument.

Ironically, by reducing contradictory statements to a monolithic dogma and by endowing the latter with the extraordinary power to determine the course of history, Martin has written a reductionistic history of a "reductionist anthropology" and a deterministic history of determinism. His book is worth reading because it reminds us of an important aspect of Enlightenment thinking, one that questioned the freedom of the will. But it is important to remember that this was only one aspect of the complex and contradictory Enlightenment view of human nature.

NOTES

[1] Daniel Gordon, ed., *Postmodernism and the Enlightenment: New Perspectives in Eighteenth-Century Intellectual History* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001); and Keith Michael Baker and Peter Hanns Reill, eds., *What's Left of Enlightenment? A Postmodern Question* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

[2] Lynn Hunt, "Forgetting and Remembering: The French Revolution Then and Now," *The American Historical Review* 100 (October 1995): 1119-1135.

[3] Keith Michael Baker, "On the Problem of the Ideological Origins of the French Revolution," in *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 19.

Ronald Schechter
The College of William and Mary
rbsche@wm.edu

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