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Vincenzo Ferrone, *The Enlightenment: History of an Idea*. Trans. Elisabetta Tarantino. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015. xvi + 216pp. \$29.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN. 978-0691161457.

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How welcome it is to have Vincenzo Ferrone's *Lezioni illuministiche* available in English, even if under a slightly misleading title. Calling it "*The Enlightenment: History of an Idea*" is a teaser. A comprehensive study of the Enlightenment's career as object of historical scrutiny is indeed badly needed, and there are elements of this in *Lezioni illuministiche*. Certainly few scholars are better equipped for such an undertaking than Ferrone. But this slender book, first delivered as a series of lectures at the Collège de France and published in Italian in 2010, is not the sweeping survey implied by its English title. Ferrone's aim is more circumscribed: essentially, to criticize what he regards as a flawed approach to the study of the Enlightenment and to sketch out a superior alternative. Ferrone's criticism is directed at what he regards as a confusing compound of philosophical and historical analysis, which has enjoyed a perdurable appeal in Anglo-American scholarship. His alternative draws not only on his own distinguished work, but on a broader Italian tradition of writing on the Enlightenment. Two generations ago, Ferrone's teacher Franco Venturi left an enduring mark on the field with his own lectures on *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment*.<sup>[1]</sup> If we are lucky, *The Enlightenment: History of an Idea* will have a similar impact.

A specter is haunting post-1989 Europe, Ferrone declares in his introduction, that of the Enlightenment: "It looks sad and emaciated, and, though laden with honors, bears the scars of many a lost battle. However, it is undaunted and has not lost its satirical grin" (p. vii). It is indeed the exit of revolutionary Communism from the historical stage that has restored the Enlightenment to actuality: "We have finally started to untie the crucial knot constituted by the hoary old question of the link between the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, which has been a dogma and the beating heart of European historical consciousness until now" (p. viii). Among the salutary results for scholarship on the subject has been a renewed emphasis on the *late* Enlightenment in particular, which reached its climax in the decade preceding the French Revolution. For Ferrone, this was the "laboratory of modernity," when the Enlightenment's greatest gifts to the modern world, above all "the distinctive language of the rights of man," were forged: "This book was written in part to defend this noble legacy against recurring attacks from the enemies of the Enlightenment, in the awareness that the search for historical truth can and must still have a public function" (pp. xi, xiv).

However, even with Communism gone and the mortmain of the French Revolution lifted, a further obstacle lies in the way of an accurate historical understanding of the Enlightenment. The snare is epistemological rather than political—the recurrent temptation to treat the Enlightenment as simultaneously a *philosophical* and a *historical* phenomenon. One source of the confusion lies in a well-intentioned identification with the object of study on the part of scholars, brought home to Ferrone when, on completing his dissertation in 1977, Venturi welcomed him into the company of "Enlightenment people." But subsequent work on Croce convinced him of the dangers of what he calls

“the paradigm of the Centaur... the way in which philosophers in thinking of the Enlightenment mix together history and philosophy.” An adequate defense of the values of the Enlightenment today requires a sharp separation between the two, as well as renunciation of “those historiographical nationalisms that have caused so much grief in the last century” (pp. xv-xvi).

Appropriately, then, *The Enlightenment: History of an Idea* is divided into two parts, the first tracking the fortunes of “the philosophers’ Enlightenment” in seven short chapters. In Ferrone’s view, the existence of “the Centaur”—half-philosophical, half-historical hybrid—is what distinguishes the idea of “the Enlightenment” from comparable historical categories such as “humanism,” “Renaissance,” “Baroque,” or “Romanticism.” If its conditions of possibility can be traced to Kant, the real progenitor of “the Centaur” was Hegel, for whom the Enlightenment was the climax of the millennial struggle between faith and reason, their final contradiction—embodied in the tragedy of the Reign of Terror—resolved in his own philosophy of “reconciliation.” From this starting point, the evolution of the “philosophers’ Enlightenment” divided into two sharply opposed tracks. On the left, Marx embraced and developed Hegel’s conception of the Enlightenment as a decisive stage in the history of human emancipation. On the right, Nietzsche told the opposite story, seeing the Enlightenment as the ultimate expression of the will to power. Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* attempted to bridge the gap, combining Marx’s critique of “bourgeois” ideology with Nietzsche’s unmasking of the Enlightenment cult of reason.[2]

It was then left to Foucault, in our time, to restate Nietzsche’s rejection of the Enlightenment at a higher and purer pitch. The result has been to leave us with a field seemingly divided in two, with philosophers such as Habermas and Rawls advocating on behalf of the “unfinished project” of the Enlightenment, facing off against Foucault’s heirs, “a vast and vociferous army of theoreticians of the postmodern, who for a while now have missed no opportunity to pronounce the death of the Enlightenment and the end of the modern world” (p. 42). To make matters worse, Ferrone asserts at the end of Part I, these rival “Centaur” have today been joined, improbably enough, by a *theological* variant of the species. Reverting to the great clash between Cassirer and Heidegger earlier in the century, Ferrone argues that the latter has now found unlikely descendants in the promoters of the idea of a “Catholic Enlightenment,” whose ranks include Romano Guardini and the pre-papal Joseph Ratzinger.

Such is the bestiary that confronts any student of the Enlightenment. Fortunately, there is a remedy at hand, to which Ferrone turns with relief in Part II of the book: “The Historians’ Enlightenment.” Ferrone acknowledges that philosophical inspiration has contributed much to Enlightenment studies in the past, as the work of Cassirer, Carl Becker, or Reinhart Koselleck demonstrates. What is needed today, however, is to set aside all such philosophical presentism, once and for all: “The correct question to ask a historian is not ‘What *is* the Enlightenment?’ but rather ‘What *was* it?’” (p. 57). The answer is no longer to be sought, as it was for Cassirer, in a common commitment to Newtonian physics or materialist mechanism on the part of eighteenth-century thinkers. Recent research has established that Enlightenment philosophy of science was far too various for that. Nor, at the other end of the chronological spectrum, is the Enlightenment to be linked directly to the great political upheaval that followed on its heels. Nothing has been more damaging to the field, in Ferrone’s eyes, than the persistence of the reductively teleological “Enlightenment-French Revolution paradigm.” Happily, however, all that can be left behind today. For the accumulation of some forty years of scholarship—ranging from Venturi’s “political” interpretation and the new “social history” of the 1960s to the “cultural turn” of the 1980s and the international collaborative enterprise in which Ferrone participated in the 1990s—has left us with an infinitely finer-grained and more accurate picture of the “cultural revolution” that was the Enlightenment.

Ferrone sketches the contours of that revolution in the last three chapters of the book. The Enlightenment, in this view, was essentially a form of *humanism*, but a thoroughly *modern* humanism, which had broken decisively with its classical and Christian forebears by cutting all ties to revealed

religion. There is no need to privilege atheism *per se* in explaining the process of displacement and disenchantment that made this possible. As Venturi argued long ago, the decisive moment was the arrival of deism, which dealt a “double death” to God, either vaulting deity into a distant sky or embedding it in nature itself. The motto of the Enlightenment remains Diderot’s ringing declaration in the *Encyclopedia*: “Man is the sole point from which we begin, and to which all must be brought back” (p. 110). As for the chronology and geography of the Enlightenment, Venturi’s refinement of Paul Hazard’s notion of a profound perspectival shift early in the century has stood up well. What recent scholarship permits, however, is a re-writing of the end of the story. For, far from petering out in the fashion suggested by Robert Darnton, the Enlightenment actually reached its climax in the quarter-century that separated the end of the Seven Years’ War and the start of the French Revolution.[3] With the terminal crisis of the Old Regime as a backdrop, a new generation of brilliant minds stepped forward: Raynal, Condorcet, Beaumarchais, Mozart, David, Goya, Filangieri, Pagano, Jefferson, Franklin, Lessing, Goethe, Paine, Jovellanos, Radishchev. Two features above all characterized their “Late Enlightenment”: “the sudden and momentous politicization of the Republic of Letters and the gradual move towards neo-naturalism in every field of knowledge” (p. 143). These were the years of Jean Starobinski’s “invention of liberty,” whose greatest fruit and legacy to posterity was the turning of “natural right” into “political right,” with Voltaire’s late judicial campaigns, Beccaria’s *On Crimes and Punishments*, and the American Declaration of Independence major milestones on the way. A good deal remains to be discovered about the Late Enlightenment, Ferrone concludes, its politics in particular, which “seemed designed to provoke clashes and increasingly clear-cut rifts between moderates and radicals within the Republic of Letters.” But much is at stake, since it is only by treating the Late Enlightenment “in its autonomy as a historical era that was grappling with the crisis of the *Ancien Régime*” that we may “finally emerge from the shadow cast by the French Revolution” (p. 153).

With this profile of the Late Enlightenment, Ferrone’s *Lezioni illuministiche* ended. But its translation has given him the opportunity to add an extended afterword, situating his views in relation to current Anglo-American thinking, above all, to the multi-volume enterprise of Jonathan Israel.[4] Ferrone stresses that his own work belongs to a characteristically Italian tradition of intellectual history, whose most distinguished representatives include, besides Venturi, Arnaldo Momigliano, Eugenio Garin, Paulo Rossi and Furio Diaz.[5] He also emphasizes how much the interpretation of the Enlightenment outlined in Part II of the book owes to his work with the international team of historians that produced *L’Illuminismo: Dizionario storico*, the book he co-edited with Daniel Roche.[6] As for the organizing figure of Part I, Ferrone points out that “Centaur” is an English makeshift for what had been “*ircocervo*” in the original: a descendant of Aristotle’s fictive “goat-stag,” introduced in *On Interpretation* in order to illustrate an entity that was knowable, although non-existent.[7] For the better part of two centuries, the study of the Enlightenment has been dominated by similarly mythical *ircocervi*, philosophical-historical hybrids, each of them recognizably patterned on the Hegelian original.

With the collapse of Communism, Ferrone imagined that the time had arrived to give a decent burial to all these fantastical creatures. Instead, they have somehow continued to multiply. Indeed, as if in compensation for the miraculous birth of a “Catholic Enlightenment,” we now have before us an effort to revive the most old-fashioned of *ircocervi*, on a gargantuan scale. The one novelty of Jonathan Israel’s ongoing project has been to substitute “Spinozism” for older understandings of the philosophical pivot on which the Enlightenment supposedly turned, namely, Cassirer’s Newton-Kant paradigm or Koselleck’s Hegelian dialectic. Otherwise, Israel’s conception of the “Radical Enlightenment” is as pure an embodiment of an *ircocervo* as one could hope for, right down to his insistence on its teleological connection to the French Revolution. Ferrone concludes by issuing a polite but firm *fin de non recevoir* to Israel: “Far from being a project single-mindedly aimed at the goal of modernity, entirely encompassed and accomplished under the banner of Spinoza’s monism, the Enlightenment is more accurately understood as a cultural experience defined first and foremost (and this probably remains so to this day) by the values it has bequeathed to us. It is a *laboratory of modernity*, a process that may have stalled at times but that was never entirely suppressed, nor ever brought to a conclusion once and for all” (p. 172).

No brief summary can convey all the pleasures, and instruction, that accompany a reading of *The Enlightenment: History of an Idea*. Not the least of its attractions is the fact that Ferrone wears his immense erudition lightly, expressing himself in a prose that is as ludic as it is lucid, joining clarity to wit in classic Enlightenment fashion. Two of his books have so far appeared in English, his first from 1982 as *The Intellectual Roots of the Italian Enlightenment: Science, Religion, and Politics in the Early Eighteenth Century*, and his magisterial study of Filangieri from 2003 as *The Politics of Enlightenment: Constitutionalism, Republicanism, and the Rights of Man in Gaetano Filangieri*.<sup>[8]</sup> So it is a double boon to have *The Enlightenment: History of an Idea* in hand because it makes an ideal introduction both to the work of its author and to the distinguished tradition of scholarship of which he is now the leading heir and representative.

As for critical comment on it, only a small handful of practitioners are in a position to pass any kind of judgment on the interpretation of the Enlightenment that Ferrone outlines in Part II. A manifesto for a re-casting of the entire field, full appraisal of it would require a command over the discipline, and its history, that few other than Ferrone himself possess. The most that might be attempted in this brief space is a remark or two about the framing device used to introduce his idea that the principal obstacle to accurate historical capture of the Enlightenment has been interference from a “philosophical” direction, symbolized by a succession of hybrid *ircocervi* or “Centaur.” The image is a charming one, which few readers of Ferrone’s chief targets—Hegel, Nietzsche, Horkheimer and Adorno, Foucault—would be able to resist altogether. Still, it is worth noting that, Aristotle aside, recourse to the terminology of the *ircocervo* or “Centaur,” the supposedly “mythical” hybrid, is never less than polemical, often revealing as much about the labeler as the labeled. There is no better illustration of this than Croce himself, who famously deployed the term in his critique of Guido Calogero, dismissing the latter’s conception of “liberal socialism” as an *ircocervo*. If some combination of fear and loathing doubtless lay behind Croce’s use of the label, what might be said of Ferrone’s?

A sense of its logic, and its limitations, might best be seen by returning to the contrast Ferrone draws between his own interpretation of the Enlightenment and that of Jonathan Israel. Most readers will sense that the opposition between the two projects seems curiously exaggerated and are not nearly so antithetical as Ferrone suggests. After all, both historians present the Enlightenment as the watershed event of modern history, with the advent of “modernity” *tout court* for Israel and the “laboratory of modernity” for Ferrone; both vehemently reject “pluralist” readings of the Enlightenment—especially the idea of “national” Enlightenments—insisting instead on the fundamental *unity* of the movement; while both also privilege a specific strand or moment within a unitary Enlightenment—Radical or Late—between which there is considerable overlap; finally, both situate their work in a post-1989 context, which, in their view, calls for a robust defense of the Enlightenment and its values, those of “human rights” above all.

For Ferrone, of course, Israel remains a Centaur *par excellence*, his Radical Enlightenment the distilled essence of Spinoza’s philosophy, which is in turn portrayed as the “one big cause” of the French Revolution. But to accuse Israel of bending the stick too far in a philosophical direction may be too generous by half. One of the most common complaints, in the tidal wave of criticism that has greeted his books, is that Israel shows so little interest in philosophy itself, beyond depiction of an obviously caricatural “Spinozism” which, tellingly, bears not the slightest relation to the multiple appropriations of the *Ethics* and the *Theological-Political Treatise* in twentieth-century Continental philosophy. No reader of Israel will be put in mind of Hegel, Nietzsche, Horkheimer and Adorno, or Foucault, not to mention Althusser, Deleuze, or Negri. Things are altogether different with Ferrone, who, in point of fact, has a much better claim than Israel to the label of *ircocervo*. If his interpretation of the Enlightenment is far superior to Israel’s, it is owed precisely to its *philosophical* depth. Whatever final judgment we make of Ferrone’s conception of “humanism,” it is plainly founded on an impressive grasp of the entire history of Western philosophy, from antiquity to the present. If further evidence of the depth and breadth of his

intellectual commitments were needed, one need only consult Ferrone's recent genealogy of the idea of the idea of "human rights," the most detailed and convincing that we now possess, or his extended critical analysis of the contemporary notion of a "Catholic Enlightenment." [9] The first, far from burying the "Enlightenment-French Revolution paradigm," might be said to breathe new life into it. The second is an intervention in contemporary intellectual and political affairs difficult to imagine coming from the pen of Israel.

Where do these considerations point? Perhaps to something like this: Ferrone is certainly not wrong to suggest that the Enlightenment occupies a singular place among the categories that define the shape of early-modern and modern European history, nor is he mistaken about the reasons for the difference. If the Enlightenment plainly possesses an actuality in contemporary intellectual life that is long gone for concepts such as the "Renaissance" or "Reformation," "Baroque" or "Romanticism," the explanation is not far to seek. Its own greatest philosopher specified three value-domains marked by intense disagreement: the realms of epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics. Two centuries later, the efforts of Kant and his successors notwithstanding, the same conflicts over the foundations of knowledge, morality and politics, art and beauty, persist unchanged. For better or worse, the Enlightenment is still not quite "over"—a hope expressed, of course, in the belief that the major interpretations of it to date can be described as so many philosophical-historical hybrids, which we can now set aside in order finally to approach its historical "truth." Perhaps someday, but for now it is safe to predict that *ircocervi* will continue to stalk this part of the earth. The example of Ferrone's own work, especially in light of its contrast with that of Jonathan Israel, suggest that our best hope for the moment is not to bid farewell to the Centaur, but rather to produce better, more compelling versions of it. If Kant's motto for the Enlightenment was "*Sapere aude*," our own for its study remains a modest variation on it: "*Il ircocervo è morto, viva il ircocervo!*"

#### NOTES

[1] Franco Venturi, *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

[2] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

[3] Ferrone's reference is to Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968).

[4] See Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670-1752* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750-1790* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from the Rights of Man to Robespierre* (Oxford and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[5] For representative examples in English, see Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography (Sather Classical Lectures)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) and *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Eugenio Garin, *Renaissance Characters*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); and Paulo Rossi, *The Dark Abyss of Time: the History of the Earth and the History of Nations from Hooke to Vico*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) and *Logic and the Art of Memory: the Quest for a Universal Language*, trans. Stephen Clucas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). It is a pity that nothing from the indispensable *oeuvre* of Furio Diaz seems to have been translated into English. But see, *sopratutto*, *Filosofia e politica nel Settecento francese* (Turin: Einaudi, 1962)

and *Dal movimento dei lumi al movimento dei popoli: L'Europa tra illuminismo e rivoluzione* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1986)

[6] Vincenzo Ferrone and Daniel Roche, eds., *L'Illuminismo: Dizionario storico* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1997). Contributors included Margaret Jacob, John Pocock, Roger Chartier, Jean Starobinski, Georges Benrekassa, Lynn Hunt, Dena Goodman, Raymond Birn, Furio Diaz, Michel Delon, Edoardo Tortarolo, and Giuseppe Ricuperati.

[7] A footnote early in the text explains the choice of “Centaur” for *ircocervo*: “In the original Italian version of these lectures the term used to describe the Enlightenment’s double nature is *ircocervo*, i. e., the Aristotelian ‘goat-stag.’ In Italian, this word is glossed as ‘a fabulous animal, half goat, half stag; the idea or thing that is intrinsically contradictory, impossible, and therefore nonexistent’ . . . We believe that ‘Centaur’ brings this across more clearly to an English-speaking audience, as long as no ‘hierarchical’ or ‘qualitative’ difference is inferred between the two aspects of the ‘animal.’” (p. 173). Possible alternatives would have included “chimera” or “gargoyle.”

[8] Vincenzo Ferrone, *The Intellectual Roots of the Italian Enlightenment: Newtonian Science, Religion and Politics in the Early Eighteenth Century*, trans. Sue Brotherton (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 1995); and *The Politics of Enlightenment: Constitutionalism, Republicanism, and the Rights of Man in Gaetano Filangieri*, trans. Sophus S. Reinart (London and New York: Anthem Press, 2014)

[9] See *Storia dei diritti dell'uomo. L'Illuminismo e la costruzione del linguaggio politica dei bodern* (Roma and Bari: Laterza, 2014); and *La strano Illuminismo di Josph Ratzinger: Chiesa, modernità e diritti dell'uomo* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2013). The first originally formed part of the lectures that make up *Lezioni Illuministiche*; the second is resumed in chapter seven of the same.

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