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Harold Mah, *Enlightenment Phantasies: Cultural Identity in France and Germany, 1750-1914*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003. xii + 227 pp. $39.95 U.S. £23.95 (cl). ISBN 0-8014-4144-7.

Review by K. Steven Vincent, North Carolina State University.

French and German intellectuals have frequently attempted to define what was distinctive about their respective cultures. This was especially true during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, when issues of national identity were intimately tied up with competing claims of cosmopolitanism and/or linguistic uniqueness and when the upheavals of the Revolutionary wars threatened the configuration and even existence of some "nations." Since this time, cultural identity has remained at the heart of intellectual formulations of competing European nationalisms. Harold Mah's new book focuses on these efforts in France and Germany from 1750 to the outbreak of the Great War. His main argument is that cultural identity in both of these national traditions involved idealizations of character that were, at their core, "phantasies." Moreover, these fantasies (to use a more common spelling) were internally unstable--"multiple and self-conflicted," "porous, inconsistent, and changeable" (p. 3). They were riddled with anxieties and fears and prone to fall apart under the pressure of events.

Mah makes this argument through an examination of how certain key intellectuals used concepts such as civility, progress, and classical beauty--figures and texts that, we are told, were "chosen according to their prominence and the exemplary roles they play in the development of certain identities" (p. 13). Elegantly written, the book is consistently informative about the individual authors and texts examined, with excellent pages on Johann Gottfried Herder, Jacques-Louis David, Johann Winckelmann, and many others. Its general thesis is that traditional historiography has given us overly simplistic pictures. Instead of the distinctive self-consistent national identities depicted in this literature, French and German writers, artists, and thinkers "performed" cultural identities that were expressive of convolutions and paradoxes. Mah writes:

The study of the eighteenth century now shows that era to be neither the coming together of intellectuals into a single, unified liberal movement nor fully definable by any single, fixed character. The eighteenth century can be looked on as a field of intellectual and cultural movement and conflict between contradictory terms of identity. The constant fusion and friction of ideas produced identities that were in crucial senses uncertain or unstable (p. 11).

This interpretation is a useful corrective to naïve stereotypes concerning national character, national identity, and natural cultures. It descends from and builds upon scholarship of the past few decades that has insisted that the European Enlightenment was a complex affair that took on a variety of forms--forms that, in different locations and at different times, diverged fundamentally on central issues of epistemology, religion, politics, and economics. And it sympathetically and usefully draws from postmodern concerns about close readings that are able to uncover contradictions, oppositions, and slippages within texts and culture.

Whether this perspective is adequate for historical analysis is more controversial. The general argument of the book is that the European Enlightenment was inherently unstable because it was informed by terms and discourses that were inherently deficient, defective, and conflicted. In fact, Mah's conclusion about the European Enlightenment parallels his conclusions about the culture of other historical

periods. We learn in later chapters of the book, for example, that Friedrich Nietzsche and Thomas Mann lived with conflicts similar to those of their Enlightenment predecessors.

Such a conclusion, in itself, is hardly objectionable. It is certainly true that most writers and intellectuals (and, no doubt, most of us) have "identities" that are informed by overlapping elements that strain against consistency and logical coherence. Moreover, it is illuminating to have these tensions analyzed in a sensitive and intelligent way. The danger, however, is that such an analytical framework will privilege the same themes regardless of historical conditions. The danger is that it will gloss over historical specificity, neglect movement and change, and diminish the importance of the uniqueness of individual personalities. And it runs the risk of assuming that if there are tensions within an individual's identity, this individual will never settle into a firm intellectual conviction.

Take, for example, Mah's discussion of Herder, one of his central figures. Mah correctly suggests that the depiction of Herder as a consistent proponent of German cultural nationalism is inadequate. We know, from previous scholarship (and as he reminds us), that Herder was a precocious intellectual who, even as a young man, was fascinated by the way in which language and sociability were important vehicles for molding a group into a unitary nation. We also know that he was fascinated with French culture and language, and that in 1769-70 (in his mid-20s), he traveled to Nantes and Paris in hopes of participating in a culture that was, by reputation, worldly, sociable, oral--he hoped to find, in short, the vibrant cosmopolitan world of the salon so valorized in recent scholarship about the "public sphere." What Herder experienced, however, was the discomfort of the cultural outsider. Because his spoken French was inadequate to participate comfortably in the quick-wittedness of *le monde*, he felt a paralyzing sense of verbal inadequacy. This very quickly was transmuted, in Herder's thought, into a defiant moralism that indicted the reigning norms of French sociability and (closely connected in his mind) the "logic" of the French language. Shortly after his visit to France, he went to Strasbourg, met Goethe, and helped compose some of the seminal works of the *Sturm und Drang*, of German cultural nationalism. The French experience, it seems, launched Herder into his mature reflections about the relationship between language, sociability, social power, and national culture.

How does Mah depict this intellectual development? He shocks the reader at the beginning of his book with the claim that Herder, "the foundational figure of German cultural nationalism . . . turns out to be a critic of German nationalism and a believer in French cultural superiority" (p. 3). What we know, as indicated above, is that Herder in his mid-20s flirted with French cultural worldliness. Mah elevates this into a permanent element of Herder's personality and orientation: "The young Herder's particular phantasy of French civility shows with particular clarity that he was not a unified subject, in possession of a fixed identity, but a persona in flux, driven by clashing terms and problematic discourses of the self" (p. 17). Herder, in short, was burdened with an unstable identity: "Drawing on conflicting and problematic terms and discourses of identity, he traversed them as a series of displacements from one to the other, driven by the conflicts between them or the problems within them" (p. 40). His French experience, in particular, demonstrates his conflicts:

[A]s he ponders his feelings about French culture, he is brought to the recognition that it in fact seems to incarnate in its ever-present sense of derivativeness and extravagant presentation a pure principle of displacement and the deceptions, disappointments, and uncertainties that displacement entails. Herder's analysis of the attractions and problems of refined French culture constitutes in this sense the *reducio ad absurdum* of his shuffle of identities; it brings home with particular clarity his experience that identity is not the presence and fullness of pleasing sensuous refinement, or the realization of austere civic virtue, or the happiness and prosperity of enlightened commerce, or the fulfillment of national character, but one's removal from those or from any other putative essence (p. 40).

This makes Herder sound a lot like modern poststructuralists. More information about Herder's biography would, I suspect, suggest something quite different: how, after his brief fascination with

French cosmopolitanism, he settled into an embrace and defense of German cultural nationalism. Whatever strains we wish to claim informed his "identity," he himself had no problem adopting an intellectual position to which he remained committed--namely, that membership in a national language community was the crux of identity.

Overlooking biographical detail in favor of textual oppositions is characteristic of Mah's general approach. In the pages on Germaine de Staël, to give a second example, Mah depicts Staël's works as exploding with unresolved tensions and binary oppositions: "Staël seems to be not just a structuralist *avant la lettre*, but a compulsive one, seeing the world as a proliferation of oppositions, one summoning up a series of others" (p. 149). He also writes:

Staël's work in general and *On Germany* are thus cleft by contradictory ideas and loyalties. As a critic of civility's deceptions and putative immorality; she elevates the German. But when she remembers the pleasures of the French salon, she deplores the German's social ineptitude and celebrates French sociability (p. 148).

Mah is focusing, in this last quotation, on the fascinating issue of Staël's assessment of salon sociability and civility, and the related issues of morality and politics. And, as Mah insists, it is difficult to make the disparate writings of Staël expressive of a logically consistent message on these issues. But is this a question of her being "a structuralist *avant la lettre*" who sees the world "as a proliferation of oppositions" or simply a function of her being an astute observer of how the Revolution transformed the nature of salons and aristocratic sociability? There is certainly a case to be made for the latter. Before and during the early years of the Revolution, Staël argued that salon sociability would encourage and sustain emotional security, practical knowledge, and political insight. Salons were depicted as the social centers for the moderation of passions, the teaching of civility, and the cultivation of political skills. During the late Directory and the Empire, however, she became more wary, an assessment that reflected the fact that, especially after the advent of Napoleon, independent salons were progressively choked off. Those few salons that continued to meet, in Staël's opinion, had become miserable spectacles where (as she put it in a letter to Benjamin Constant) "a labyrinth of interests and ambitions" prevailed.[1] In short, she believed that these centers of intellectual curiosity and humanitarian enthusiasm had degenerated into centers of selfish interest and personal ambition. They were no longer places where discussion of serious matters could be frankly conducted. The point is that understanding the changes in Staël's stance *vis-à-vis* salons requires more than noting a "proliferation of oppositions" in her written work; it requires carefully situating her statements in the relevant biographical and historical context.

In his critical examination of previous historiography of the European Enlightenment, Mah implies that scholars who look hard for coherence tend to exaggerate coherence. One might suggest that the opposite scholarly orientation courts a similar, but opposing, danger: exaggerating conflict and friction. *Enlightenment Phantasies* provides a superb analysis of the tensions and contradictions in the thought of some important European thinkers. It is less satisfying in its characterization of how these tensions and conflicts are to be understood historically. There is little evidence in the book or in the footnotes that justifies transforming Herder or Staël, for example, into proto-poststructuralists.

Mah commendably resists the temptation of embracing a comprehensive master narrative. He is less successful avoiding the embrace of a comprehensive master theme--the instability of identity. In a curious way, Mah, for all his postmodern sensitivity, follows a methodology most famously associated with Arthur Lovejoy, who recommended tracing the histories of "unit ideas."[2] Mah traces an idea--the instability of identity--that Lovejoy never emphasized, but the approach is remarkably similar. Is Mah a postmodern reincarnation of Arthur Lovejoy?

NOTES

[1] Staël to Constant (27 octobre 1815) *in Lettres de Mme de Staël à Benjamin Constant* (Paris: Kra, 1928): 261.

[2] Arthur Lovejoy taught philosophy for nearly forty years at the Johns Hopkins University. He was the founder of the *Journal of the History of Ideas* and the author of numerous works, including *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936) and *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1948).

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