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**Crisis and Criticism: “the Enlightenment” and Democratic Identity
in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries**

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Edited on behalf of the Faculty of Historical and Cultural Studies
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The history of human rights and democracy is a major field of activity in which the Faculty of Historical and Cultural Studies at the University of Vienna is engaged. Gerald Stourzh, professor emeritus of modern history and one of the most renowned Austrian historians of his generation, has prominently positioned the history of human rights and democracy at the University of Vienna during nearly three decades of research and teaching. At the same time, his academic achievements in the field have provided profound and lasting incentives internationally. In the annual *Gerald Stourzh Lectures on the History of Human Rights and Democracy* distinguished scholars present new insights in this field and put them up for discussion.

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Abstract

*In the twenty-first century, “the Enlightenment” is referenced globally when it comes to democratic identity. While criticism of the concept has become more intense and broader in the course of the decolonization of thought, echoing the passion of the debates on Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1942–1944), calls for a regeneration of “the Enlightenment” have not been abandoned. This lecture explores the historical question of how the widely accepted nexus between “the Enlightenment” and democratic identity came about and how it has been able to assert itself against fundamental criticism. The title, “crisis and criticism”, refers to historical crises since the late nineteenth century in which “the Enlightenment” is evoked and to the criticisms which have never gone away but have constantly changed directions. How should “we” deal with “the Enlightenment” in the twenty-first century? An attempt to answer this question will be made at the end of the lecture.*

Preliminary Remarks

The present text largely reflects my farewell lecture¹ at the University of Vienna on 16 November 2021. It was given in the wake of my book *Gesellschaftliche Orientierung. Geschichte der “Aufklärung” in der globalen Neuzeit (19. bis 21. Jahrhundert)*,² which can be consulted for extensive sources and references. In this text I limit myself to referencing quotations, specific sources and research publications.

A brief word on the key terms in the title to my lecture: I use “crisis” in the common sense in which certain historical constellations are usually termed a crisis. “Criticism” alludes to the method of criticism developed in the course of the Enlightenment. However, unlike Reinhart Koselleck in “Critique and Crisis” – his doctoral thesis at the University of Heidelberg from 1954, which was published in 1959 and subsequently has achieved renown³ – I do not examine the “pathogenesis of the bourgeois world”, as his subtitle announced. My subject is much broader. “Enlightenment”, particularly in the established term “*the Enlightenment*”, is a shifting construct. My lecture principally refers to the intellectual

¹ A recording of the lecture is available at: <https://gerald-stourzh-vorlesungen.univie.ac.at/vorlesungen/2021-wolfgang-schmale/>. All websites quoted in this text were accessed on January 7, 2022.

² Wolfgang SCHMALE, *Gesellschaftliche Orientierung. Geschichte der “Aufklärung” in der globalen Neuzeit (19. bis 21. Jahrhundert)* (Historische Mitteilungen, [Beihefte 103](#), Stuttgart 2021) [Societal Orientation. The History of “the Enlightenment” in Global Modernity (from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century)].

³ Reinhart KOSELLECK, *Kritik und Krise. Ein Beitrag zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt* (Freiburg/Munich 1959). English translation: Reinhart KOSELLECK, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Oxford/Hamburg 1988).

positions crucial to the development of democracy that emerged during the eighteenth century and were subsequently interpreted in one way or another. During the same time, the canon of texts to be quoted has been increasingly changing. I understand “democratic identity” mainly as the internalisation of certain values, which is admittedly a variable dependent on its time and context; today, these are values as set out in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union.⁴ I also understand it to mean the exercising of formal democratic practices and respect for these practices – another time- and context-dependent variable. In short: the self as a democratic practice. Hence, I examine “identity” from the perspective of practices; in the lecture, I must restrict myself to a certain brevity and will focus more on discursive practices.

Democratic Regression

In 2007, the philosopher Robert Loudon wrote in his book *The World We Want*, in a vein comparable to the optimism of Francis Fukuyama in 1992⁵:

As regards republicanism, the strong growth of democracy in today’s world surely counts as one of the few uncontested bright spots in any audit of the fate of Enlightenment ideals. In the course of two centuries, humanity has moved from 0 to 120 electoral democracies, which means that at present, slightly over three-fifths of all sovereign states are electoral democracies. Of all the ideals examined in this study, democracy has received the highest level of realization in the post-Enlightenment world.⁶

In 2021, “edition suhrkamp” published a book by the two political scientists Armin Schäfer and Michael Zürn entitled *Democratic Regression*.⁷ The work considers the exact opposite of the progression Loudon and others had observed one or two decades earlier.

Indeed, current developments would appear to give cause for pessimism. The Arab Spring has failed. Even Tunisia, where it was possible to democratise the political system, is reverting to an autocracy under the elected president, Kaïs Saïed, ironically a constitutionalist. In 2020, Belarus finally became a dictatorship once again, so too the Union of Myanmar, while Hong Kong, the Russian Federation, Turkey and many other states are

⁴ Consolidated version (2016) of the Treaty on European Union (Lisbon 2007): <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12016ME%2FTXT>.

⁵ Francis FUKUYAMA, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York 1992).

⁶ Robert B. LOUDON, *The World We Want. How and Why the Ideals of the Enlightenment Still Elude Us* (Oxford/New York 2007) 211.

⁷ Armin SCHÄFER, Michael ZÜRN, *Die demokratische Regression. Die politischen Ursachen des autoritären Populismus* (Berlin 2021).

democracies in name only, Hungary has an autocratic system, and in Poland the PiS party is taking over all three previously separate powers. In several EU member states, right-wing populist parties have gained in strength, rhetorically claiming to be the better democrats while wherever they are in government they are undermining democratic institutions, as Schäfer and Zürn demonstrate.

There are many more signs giving even greater cause for pessimism – for instance, the former head of government of a Central European Alpine republic has repeatedly made verbal gaffes such as on 6 October 2021, when without giving names he denounced those who respect the judiciary as people who (verbatim) “gush about the rule of law”.⁸ It is hard to imagine a more contemptuous statement. Accordingly, one would also have to denounce the philosopher Immanuel Kant as someone who “gushed about the rule of law”, since in the first part of *The Metaphysics of Morals* of 1797⁹, in which he expounds upon his legal doctrine, he allowed himself to describe defining features of the rule of law that remain valid to this day.

Enlightenment and Democracy: Some Fundamental Problems

The idea that modern democracy, the rule of law and human rights owe their foundations to the philosophy of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century is widespread, and by no means only in Europe or the USA, but throughout the world, as evidenced, for example, by articles in various European, North, Central and South American, African or Asian newspapers. In the present phase of democracy’s global regression, it is striking that in some countries there are increasingly frequent calls for a revival of the Enlightenment or the defence of the Enlightenment in the interests of defending democracy. Robert Darnton, for instance, entitled his article in *The New York Times* of 27 December 2018 “To deal with Trump, look to Voltaire. Advice from the Enlightenment”.¹⁰

In the nineteenth century, “democracy” was not a word with positive connotations in large parts of Europe; rather, democrats were labelled radicals and for a long time they were

⁸ Wording of the former Austrian Federal Chancellor Sebastian Kurz in the news broadcast ZIB2 of 6 October 2021. Report in Die Presse online, 6.10.2021 (22.52): <https://www.diepresse.com/6043949/bundeskanzler-kurz-in-der-zib-2-verstehe-nicht-warum-immer-ich-schuld-sein-soll>. In German: „für den Rechtsstaat schwärmen“.

⁹ Immanuel KANT, *Die Metaphysik der Sitten. Erster Theil. Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Rechtslehre* (Königsberg 1797). Latest English edition: *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Moral*, ed. and trans. by Christopher BENNETT, Joe SAUNDERS and Robert STERN (Oxford/New York 2019).

¹⁰ Robert DARNTON, To deal with Trump, look to Voltaire. Advice from the Enlightenment. In: *The New York Times* December 27, 2018: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/27/opinion/trump-voltaire-enlightenment.html>.

also persecuted and locked away in a fortress, if possible. Responsibility for these purportedly democratic aberrations was placed at the door of the proponents of the Enlightenment. Quite apart from the fact that this restorative and repressive political strategy was unsuccessful in the medium term, it actually only confirms the view that the Enlightenment and democracy are closely related.

But how are Enlightenment and democracy related and what are the consequences of their connection? There are very different, opposing views on this, which I shall briefly outline:

A few weeks after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the philosopher Giovanna Borradori held discussions with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida in New York, which she published in 2003 under the title *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*. The situation required orientation, and she wished to provide some. In her introduction, one of her observations was: “Habermas and Derrida agree that the juridical and political structuring international law and existing multilateral institutions grows out of the Western philosophical heritage grounded in the Enlightenment, understood as a general intellectual orientation anchored on a number of key texts.”¹¹ Who doesn’t immediately associate “key texts” with Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of the Laws*, Rousseau’s treatise *The Social Contract* or Kant’s *Perpetual Peace*, to name just three renowned works of the Enlightenment published between 1748 and 1795? Presumably, many will agree that such key texts gave rise to an “intellectual orientation” represented in the common key terms of national sovereignty, democracy, tolerance, the rule of law, human rights, the separation of powers, peace, liberty, happiness, progress, etc.

Borradori neatly summarises a widespread view. She also stands between two approaches that lend special emphasis to individual aspects she has listed. For instance, in his 1,083-page book of 2011, *Democratic Enlightenment*,¹² Jonathan Israel discusses a remarkable number of texts that served as intellectual orientation or could do so today, while others, beginning with Robert Palmer’s *The Age of Democratic Revolution*, the first volume of which appeared in 1959, have placed more emphasis on the practical and revolutionary aspects.¹³ Here we might also mention James T. Kloppenberg’s *Toward Democracy of*

¹¹ Giovanna BORRADORI, Introduction, in: *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago 2003) 1.

¹² Jonathan Irvine ISRAEL, *Democratic Enlightenment. Philosophy, Revolution and Human Rights 1750–1790* (Oxford/New York 2011).

¹³ Robert R. PALMER, *The Age of Democratic Revolution. A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800*, vol. 1: *The Challenge*, vol. 2: *The Struggle* (Princeton, N.J. 1959/1964).

2016;¹⁴ he gave the fifth Gerald Stourzh Lecture in 2013.¹⁵ Kloppenberg traced ideas and practices from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.

Borradori's wording "grows out of the Western philosophical heritage" is in conflict, however, with a global analysis of the Enlightenment that focuses on its non-Western roots. In critical postcolonial discursive positions, the Western heritage is considered a given that is to be overcome. This leads us to the field of approaches critical of the Enlightenment.

Currently, criticism of the Enlightenment principally plays an important role in the context of a decolonisation of thought. This criticism continues what was voiced by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written in the USA between 1942 and 1944,¹⁶ insofar as it concerns assumed causal relationships between the Enlightenment and modernity, colonialism, slavery, racism, and discrimination leading all the way to totalitarianism.

The criticism of colonial thinking and its historical roots also plays a role in academic research. Nevertheless, every argumentation, be it for or against the Enlightenment, wrestles with the problem that there was no such thing as "the" Enlightenment. Rather, "the" Enlightenment is a retrospective construct the internal structure of which constantly changes over time.

Not least, the canon of key texts is constantly in flux. For instance, female Enlightenment thinkers and women's rights activists such as Olympe de Gouges or Mary Wollstonecraft, to name just two, have received increasing attention since the 1980s. The same holds for Enlightenment thinkers from regions other than Europe or North America. In the Indian context, one might name the two rajas Ram Mohan Roy and Serfoji II, who promoted an Indian Enlightenment in close exchange with Europe at their courts.¹⁷ Another shift in interests is denoted by the term "Islamic Enlightenment", which emerged around

¹⁴ James T. KLOPPENBERG, *Toward Democracy. The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought* (Oxford/New York 2016).

¹⁵ James T. KLOPPENBERG, *Tragic Irony: Democracy in European and American Thought*. 5th Gerald Stourzh Lecture on the History of Human Rights and Democracy 2013, online at https://gerald-stourzh-vorlesungen.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user_upload/p_%20gerald_stourzh/vortraege/2013.pdf and <http://phaidra.univie.ac.at/o:397699>.

¹⁶ Critical edition: Max HORKHEIMER, Theodor W. ADORNO, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. In: Max Horkheimer: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5: "Dialektik der Aufklärung" und Schriften 1940–1950, ed. by Alfred SCHMIDT, Gunzelin SCHMID NOERR (Frankfurt am Main 1987). English translation used: Max HORKHEIMER, Theodor W. ADORNO, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, ed. by Gunzelin SCHMID NOERR, trans. by Edmund JEPHCOTT (Stanford, Cal. 2002).

¹⁷ See, for instance: Savithri Preetha NAIR, *Raja Serfoji II. Science, Medicine and Enlightenment in Tanjore* (New Delhi 2012).

1990, partly in the course of studies on transformations in the Ottoman Empire.¹⁸ This term is not without controversy, however.

In the European context, there has been growing interest in someone like Anton Wilhelm Amo:¹⁹ Amo was originally from today's Ghana, was taken to the Netherlands at the age of three, and from there to the Wolfenbüttel court. He later studied and taught at the Universities of Halle, Jena and Wittenberg. In the 1740s, he returned to Ghana, where he died a few years later. One of the subjects he worked on was the legal status of Africans based on discrimination in Europe. The Abbé Grégoire wrote the first survey of black Enlightenment thinkers in 1808. He dedicated his book²⁰ on literature by Africans in various European countries and the USA to around a hundred Enlightenment figures, male and female, who had opposed the slave trade and slavery.

Hence, the positions currently adopted and disseminated to the broader public with respect to the relationship between the Enlightenment, democracy, the rule of law and human rights are contradictory. In essence, the dispute is about “democratic identity” – on both sides. Those who wish to decolonise thinking want to reinforce democratic identity just as much as those who wish to secure democracy by explicitly evoking the Enlightenment.

All critics and defenders of the Enlightenment assume that its key texts provide intellectual orientation, of either a democratic or anti-democratic nature. With respect to the dynamics of practice, one camp emphasises democracy's historical genesis from resistance and revolutions from the seventeenth century onwards, while the other emphasises the considerable deficits of the same developments and their overlap with colonialism. Ever-new disputes seem predestined to emerge from this contradiction.

We can speak of the “dialectic of the Enlightenment” not only in the sense intended by Horkheimer and Adorno, but also in the sense that in times of crisis, which are boom times for criticism, the Enlightenment is disputed particularly fiercely. Often there is insufficient recognition of just how present the dispute about the Enlightenment was and still remains in the context of the great political dispute.

¹⁸ The main impetus was provided by: Reinhard SCHULZE, *Das Islamische Achtzehnte Jahrhundert: Versuch einer historiographischen Kritik*. In: *Die Welt des Islams* 30:1-4 (1990) 140–159.

¹⁹ Most recently: Stefan KNAUß, Louis WOLFRADT, Tim HOFMANN, Jens EBERHARD (eds.), *Auf den Spuren von Anton Wilhelm Amo. Philosophie und der Ruf nach Interkulturalität* (Bielefeld 2021); Jacob Emmanuel MABE, *Anton Wilhelm Amo: The Intercultural Background of his Philosophy* (Nordhausen 2014); William E. ABRAHAM, *Anton Wilhelm Amo*. In: Kwasi WIREDU (ed.), *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Blackwell Companions to Philosophy 28, Malden, Mass. 2006) 191–199.

²⁰ Henri Jean-Baptiste GREGOIRE, *De la Littérature des Nègres, ou recherches sur leurs facultés intellectuelles, leurs qualités morales et leur littérature; suivies de notices sur la vie et les ouvrages des Nègres qui se sont distingués dans les Sciences, les Lettres et les Arts* (Paris 1808).

This dispute is a dispute about the Enlightenment with the aim of the “enlightenment of the Enlightenment”. But the real aim of the “enlightenment of the Enlightenment” is negotiating democratic identity. I would like to put it even more pointedly: it is only this dispute, the “enlightenment of the Enlightenment”, that has always lent the development of democratic identity its dynamics. In the various times of crisis since the nineteenth century, reference to the Enlightenment serves the criticism with which the crisis is to be overcome, while at the same time the Enlightenment is the subject of criticism because it is considered not to be part of the solution to the crisis but the cause, or at least part of it. The problem of democracy is always present in this dispute; without this historical disputational constellation there would be no democratic identity. Or, to put it another way: in countries where such a dispute is lacking or only weakly manifested, democratic identity may be in bad shape.

In what follows, I explore three periods, the late nineteenth century, the mid-twentieth century and our own time, examining for each period a European and a non-European example of crises. Admittedly, these are not just any crises. Of course, such investigations will not allow me to “prove” my theses, but I can nevertheless illustrate them and in so doing hopefully create a basis for discussion.

Exemplary Explorations

Exploration 1

I begin my first exploration with a crisis with which most readers will be familiar with, a crisis in France in the late nineteenth century – the Dreyfus Affair. For this crisis, we can speak of the emergence of a democratic identity essential for the reconnection to the Enlightenment. In this crisis we encounter what I have already termed a “great political dispute”.²¹

1870 saw the Franco-Prussian War, which led France to form the Third Republic. On the other side of the Rhine, the German Empire was founded. After an initial difficult consolidation phase, the French Third Republic increasingly evoked the principles of 1789, while Bismarck and later Wilhelm II positioned the Empire as the antipode to such principles.

²¹ On the following, see the chapter “Praktiken – Dreyfus-Affäre”. In: SCHMALE, *Gesellschaftliche Orientierung*, 108–114.

The Third Republic struggled with considerable internal enemies: monarchists, right-wing extremists and anti-Semites. In 1894, the Jewish captain Alfred Dreyfus was accused of spying for the German Empire and convicted on the basis of false evidence. So obvious was the falsification after its discovery and public exposure several years later and so enormous the damage the judiciary inflicted upon itself with its scandalous sentence that republicans felt increasingly called upon to save the rule of law and democracy. Not only did the Dreyfusards, as the supporters of the convicted and his family soon became known, eventually have the captain rehabilitated – in 1906 – but they also transformed the Republic. In 1898, a group of Dreyfusards founded the French League for Human Rights, initially in order to show solidarity with Dreyfus. Their activities soon expanded, however; they were able to establish themselves as the driving force behind the further development of French democracy and the implementation of human and civil rights. Around 1930, they numbered some 180,000 members and were thus one of the largest and most influential civil society organisations. They served as the model for the foundation of around thirty such leagues in other countries well into the interwar period, including in Austria (1926) and in – usually French – exile.²²

The French League evoked the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789, which was considered the testament of the Enlightenment. During the Dreyfus Affair itself, reference was also made to Voltaire and his vehement journalistic efforts of the 1760s in support of the Protestant Calas, who had been sentenced to death, and the young Chevalier de la Barre, who had been executed for alleged blasphemy. One of the League's cofounders and later president, Victor Basch, frequently quoted, among others, Immanuel Kant and his treatise *Perpetual Peace*. The Dreyfus Affair saw the socialisation of many young adults with ideas on democracy and human rights, including democrats who would later rise to prominence such as the socialist Léon Blum and the Catholic Jacques Maritain, who helped determine France's path after the Second World War and who were respected internationally.

Let us now shift from Paris to Beirut, at roughly the same time.²³ Throughout the nineteenth century, the Turkish and Arabic world of the Ottoman Empire underwent transformations in which engagement with French Enlightenment texts played an

²² On the history of the Human Rights Leagues, see Wolfgang SCHMALE, Christopher TREIBLMAYR (eds.), *Human Rights Leagues in Europe (1898–2016)* (Historische Mitteilungen, Beihefte 98, Stuttgart 2017).

²³ On the following, see SCHMALE, *Gesellschaftliche Orientierung*, 101-108.

important role. Since the late nineteenth century, Arabic has often referred to these transformations as the “Renaissance” or “Enlightenment”.²⁴

In practice, the nineteenth century saw the Arabic area free itself from the Ottoman Empire, a process that went hand in hand with debates on modernisation and the development of ideas of nationhood. The driving force were elites in the Syrian-Lebanese area. A prime example of these developments is provided by the two-volume study by Dagmar Glaß on the Arabic monthly journal *al-Muqtataf* (“The Chosen One” or “The Selection”), founded in Beirut by Ya’qūb Ṣarrūf and Fāris Nimr in 1876.²⁵ In 1885, its place of publication moved to Cairo. The two editors had attended the Syrian Protestant College, the predecessor to the American University of Beirut. The journal last appeared in December 1952.²⁶ It discussed science and religion as well as the Arabic language and its modernisation, and it also published debates on Darwinism and on the position of women in society and women’s rights, in which female readers participated as well. Other frequent topics were socialism and economics.²⁷ From the later nineteenth century to the First World War, opposition was also expressed towards the European colonial powers, particularly England and France.

These developments go hand in hand with engagement with the writings of European Enlightenment thinkers. Voltaire, for instance, became increasingly popular in Egypt from the 1840s onwards.²⁸ Allied to this was the rediscovery of their own Islamic philosophical traditions. For instance, a connection was made with respect to intellectual history between Ibn Ruṣd/Averroes and the European Enlightenment, a connection which, incidentally, is still recognised to this day. One could also point to the esteem in which Mustafa Kemal Atatürk held Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, for instance.

²⁴ The term “Nahḍa” (Renaissance) emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and became more common towards the end of that century. Peter HILL, *Utopia and Civilisation in the Arab Nahda* (Cambridge/New York 2020) 2–3; Jens HANSEN, Max WEISS (eds.), *Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age. Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda* (Cambridge/New York 2016) Introduction. The term “Nahḍa” is usually translated into German and other languages as “Renaissance”, but also as “Awakening” or “Enlightenment”. For discussion of the term and the key features of the “Nahḍa”, see: the article “Nahḍa” by N. TOMICHE. In: Peri J. BEARMAN et al. (eds.), *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Second edition 2012. DOI: 10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_5751. Another word with a similar meaning is “tanwīr” (enlightening). “Tanwīr” and “Nahḍa” are often seen as similar, but in general “tanwīr” is used more to denote intellectual movements and debates since the 1980s and 1990s. Elizabeth Suzanne KASSAB, *Enlightenment on the Eve of Revolution. The Egyptian and Syrian Debates* (New York 2019) passim.

²⁵ Dagmar GLAß, *Der Muqtataf und seine Öffentlichkeit. Aufklärung, Raisonement und Meinungsstreit in der frühen arabischen Zeitschriftenkommunikation*, 2 vols. (Mitteilungen zur Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte der islamischen Welt 17, Würzburg 2004).

²⁶ GLAß, *Der Muqtataf*, vol. 1, 11–12; for the German translation of the name, see p. 11.

²⁷ The debates in the journal are discussed in the second volume of GLAß, *Der Muqtataf*.

²⁸ Moustafa MAHER, *Zur Voltaire-Rezeption im arabisch-islamischen Kulturraum am Beispiel Ägyptens*. In: Brigitte WINKLEHNER (ed.), *Voltaire und Europa. Der interkulturelle Kontext von Voltaires “Correspondance”*. Unter Mitarbeit von Roman REISINGER und Elisabeth SCHREINER (Tübingen 2006) 387–403.

The French historian of Japan Eddy Dufourmont has examined the global dissemination of Rousseau's writings, among which the *Social Contract* enjoys special status, and summarises:

[I]t often seems to be the case that the wish to make people familiar with democracy is connected to the wish to create a nation. The relationship between these personalities [= cultural mediators; W.S.] and the government of their respective countries often contributes to the decision to translate Rousseau. In the countries examined, this wish usually went hand in hand with the aim of resisting the European invasion. Rousseau's reception may have occurred against France's will, as in Vietnam, while in Japan the translations were produced with the approval of the French republicans. The actors of the Arabic Renaissance, the supporters of the Kemalist republic, the Japanese, Chinese or Vietnamese nationalist liberals – they were all inspired by Rousseau's political writings.²⁹

Not only around 1900 but also in the middle of the twentieth century, those Enlightenment texts that are especially associated with democracy are used as arguments reinforcing resistance to colonialism. Here the Enlightenment was certainly not considered the cause of the problem; it was heralded as part of the solution that was the creation of a democratic nation state.

Exploration 2

For the second exploration, let us transport ourselves to the time immediately after the Second World War, when the process of European Integration began in Western Europe and the process of decolonisation began in Asia and Africa.³⁰ Thinking of the Enlightenment, democracy, human rights and the rule of law as bound together underwent a boom after the

²⁹ “Les motivations des uns et des autres ne sont pas nécessairement explicites mais il apparaît souvent qu'à la volonté de faire connaître la démocratie s'ajoute une volonté de construction nationale, et le rapport de ces individus avec le gouvernement de leur pays respectif constitue souvent un enjeu pour justifier le choix de traduire Rousseau. Cette volonté s'accompagnant le plus souvent dans les pays traités d'un désir de résistance à l'invasion européenne, la réception de Rousseau a pu se faire contre la volonté même de la France (Vietnam), alors même qu'au Japon les traductions se faisaient en accord avec les républicains français. Que ce soient les acteurs de la renaissance arabe, les tenants de la république kémaliste, les libéraux nationalistes japonais, chinois ou vietnamiens, tous ont trouvé matière à inspiration dans les textes politiques de Rousseau.” Cf. Eddy DUFOURMONT, Un nouveau “Problème Jean-Jacques Rousseau”: la diffusion des textes du citoyen de Genève hors d'Europe. In: Eddy DUFOURMONT (ed.), *La circulation des textes politiques de Rousseau en Asie et dans les mondes arabe et turcs* (Bordeaux 2017) 5–9, quotation on p. 8.

³⁰ On the following, see SCHMALE, *Gesellschaftliche Orientierung*, specifically the sections “Europäische Integration und Aufklärung”, 117–127; “Entkolonialisierung und Aufklärung”, 127–131; and “UNESCO 1948”, 131–138, in the chapter “Praktiken”.

Second World War, when it was a matter of overcoming the most comprehensive crisis in history. Fundamentally, the dispute about the Enlightenment intensified in this period. It became tangible in the context of the UN and UNESCO discussions in the preparation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed on 10 December 1948, it became tangible in the studies on the relationship between Enlightenment and totalitarianism and the temporally parallel efforts for European Integration, and it became tangible in decolonisation.

I begin this exploration with an example from the European Integration process. Speeches in the Council of Europe, formed in 1949, often paid homage to the Enlightenment. By way of illustration, let us consider a speech by Edouard Herriot (1872–1957), who opened the first session of the Council of Europe’s Consultative Assembly on 10 August 1949 as its provisional president.³¹ He was also president of the French National Assembly. In the interwar period, Herriot had already intensively advocated European collaboration, culminating in the concept of the “United States of Europe”. In the initial euphoria, people believed that the Council of Europe could be the start of such United States.

It was the ideal time and place for very fundamental thoughts. Herriot described, as it were, the esprit of the newly founded institution: “We wish simply to join forces in order to defend the two great achievements of human civilisation: liberty and the law. [...] In the late eighteenth century, under the influence of some Englishmen, Italians and Frenchmen, a strong current of liberalism was already flowing through the countries of Europe. In his philosophical dialogues, Voltaire defends [...] the necessity of what he calls mutual support. [...]”³² Later in his speech, Herriot turned to the German question, distinguishing between a Germany of the age of Enlightenment and the National Socialist era: “We are aware of the immense contribution Germany has made to science, literature, the arts, to progress as a whole. She gave the world Immanuel Kant and his project of *Perpetual Peace*, Kant, the defender of human rights who wrote the admirable line: ‘Politics must bend its knee before morals.’”³³ Herriot also mentioned Beethoven, who celebrated “brotherhood among men”. The elements of the Enlightenment he selected point to the Herriot who as a young man

³¹ See Conseil de l’Europe (ed.), *Les voix de l’Europe. Sélection de discours prononcés devant l’Assemblée parlementaire du Conseil de l’Europe 1949–1996* (Strasbourg 1997) 4–9.

³² “Nous voulons simplement nous associer pour défendre les deux plus grandes acquisitions de la civilisation humaine: la liberté et le droit. [...] Déjà, vers la fin du XVIII^e siècle, sous l’influence de plusieurs Anglais, Italiens et Français, un puissant courant de libéralisme traverse tous les pays de l’Europe. Voltaire, dans ses dialogues et entretiens philosophiques, défend ... la nécessité de ce qu’il appelle l’entraide. [...]”

³³ “Nous connaissons bien la contribution immense que l’Allemagne a fournie à la science, aux lettres, aux arts, à tous les progrès. Elle a donné au monde Emmanuel Kant et son *Projet de Paix perpétuelle*, Kant le défenseur des droits de l’homme qui a écrit cette admirable phrase: ‘La politique doit plier le genou devant la morale.’”

during the Dreyfus Affair in France joined the Dreyfusards. He ended the section on Germany with an exclamation: “If Germany would once again become faithful to these high examples, how gladly would we work together with her to create a liberal Europe.”³⁴ A Germany drawing on its own Enlightenment tradition would be a welcome partner.

In the course of striving for independence during the twentieth century, key Enlightenment texts were used to argue against the colonial powers. This was precisely in line with the intentions of many Enlightenment thinkers, who opposed unlawful rule. In the discussions concerning the Indian constitution in the mid-twentieth century, it was not least Anglo-American Enlightenment thinkers such as Thomas Paine and his treatise on human rights that were cited, as Bidyut Chakrabarty’s book *India’s Constitutional Identity* (2019) demonstrates.³⁵ The preamble to the Indian constitution of 1950 lists key terms in the following order: Justice, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.³⁶ This would appear to be a literal allusion to the key terms of the French Revolution. The American constitution of 1787/1789 was studied precisely.

The literature often cites Hô Chi Minh, who in proclaiming independence in Hanoi on 2 September 1945 evoked the basic and human rights set out in the wording of the American Declaration of Independence of 1776 and the French Déclaration of 1789.³⁷ He demanded the very rights and values of civilisation of which France, the colonial power (1941–1945, together with Japan), considered itself the leading representative while permanently disregarding them.³⁸

Concerning the discussions on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it can be observed that the question of the dominance of epistemologies examined by Dipesh Chakrabarty³⁹ took a backseat to pragmatic approaches and the Enlightenment was partially historicised so that it no longer had a role to play. The stronger focus on the Enlightenment we encounter in today’s debate on the decolonisation of thought clearly did not develop until after the end of the Cold War, remaining marginal during the 1950s and 1960s, despite all assumptions.

³⁴ “Si l’Allemagne était fidèle à ces hauts exemples, avec quel empressement nous travaillerions avec elle à l’organisation d’une Europe libérale.”

³⁵ Bidyut CHAKRABARTY, *India’s Constitutional Identity. Ideological Beliefs and Preferences* (Routledge Studies in South Asian Politics 18, Abingdon/Oxon/New York 2019).

³⁶ For the wording of the Indian constitution of 1950, including all amendments, see:

https://www.constitutionofindia.net/constitution_of_india.

³⁷ Cf. Jan ECKEL, *Die Ambivalenz des Guten. Menschenrechte in der internationalen Politik seit den 1940ern* (Göttingen 2015) 270.

³⁸ Cf. Stéphanie ROZA, *La Gauche contre les Lumières?* (Paris 2020) 112.

³⁹ Dipesh CHAKRABARTY, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Reissue, with a new preface by the author (Princeton, N.J. 2008 [1st ed. 2000]).

The European and American post-war era was a time of critical works such as Horkheimer's and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* or Jacob Leib Talmon's *Totalitarian Democracy*, which were not specifically critical of colonialism in their thrust, however. The Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno argued, made reason a "universal tool for the fabrication of all other tools, rigid and as calamitous as the precisely calculated material production, the results of which for human beings escape all calculation".⁴⁰ The consequences of this reinterpretation of reason as a "universal tool for the fabrication of all other tools" are exemplified principally by a present characterised by totalitarianism, world war and industrial mass culture. This leads to their work's core motif of seeking to understand how the horrifying manifestations of totalitarianism the authors had witnessed had become possible.

In *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (1952), Jacob Leib Talmon (1916–1980), who was from a Jewish family from Rypin (Poland), developed a perspective that remains fruitful to this day.⁴¹ His core thesis is as follows:

This study is an attempt to show that concurrently with the liberal type of democracy there emerged from the same premises in the eighteenth century a trend towards what we propose to call the totalitarian type of democracy. These two currents have existed side by side ever since the eighteenth century. The tension between them has constituted an important chapter in modern history, and has now become the most vital issue of our time.⁴²

The argumentational axis has since shifted somewhat insofar as the criticism of totalitarianism within the criticism of the Enlightenment has largely transformed into criticism of colonialism.

The crisis of the post-war era thus produces various constellations. Herriot illustrates the traditional affirmative reference to the most renowned Enlightenment thinkers in relation to democracy. A similar situation can be observed in the first phase of decolonisation after the war, when sovereign democratic states were created. Talmon differentiated between different types of democracy, all of which are rooted in the Enlightenment, including those that lead to totalitarianism. Horkheimer and Adorno, on the other hand, deconstruct "enlightenment" *in general* as well as "the Enlightenment" of the

⁴⁰ HORKHEIMER, ADORNO, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 23.

⁴¹ Jacob Leib TALMON, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London 1952). Foreword dated "Spring 1951 The Hebrew University, Jerusalem". For a critical German edition, see: Jacob L. TALMON, *Die Geschichte der totalitären Demokratie*, 3 vols., ed. by Uwe BACKES (Göttingen 2013). In his introduction (vol. 1), Backes outlines Talmon's life.

⁴² TALMON, *Totalitarian Democracy*, 1.

eighteenth century *in specific*. For without the unsparing exposure of the pitfalls, “enlightenment” cannot become an instrument of democracy. And it was ultimately possible to historicise the Enlightenment and turn to contemporary problems without it.

Exploration 3

This brings me to my third exploration, to our present times. Some scholars have been showing greater scepticism regarding the degree to which one can evoke the Enlightenment. Since the Black Lives Matter movement, scholarly criticism of the Enlightenment practised in the course of decolonisation has received greater public attention than was previously the case. At its heart, the sometimes quite polemical criticism takes aim at “the Enlightenment” as an instrument of rule of white property-owning men. In other words, it takes aim at the pillars of hegemonial masculinity founded upon the Enlightenment and their enormous consequences since the nineteenth century.

The political-philosophical substance of this criticism can in part be traced back to Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. There, the two philosophers wrote: “Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity.”⁴³ This takes aim at what is usually termed “modernity”. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s criticism, for instance, is that in the colonies this led to the repression and suppression, if not the annihilation, of non-European epistemologies and legitimised the colonial powers’ self-proclaimed mission of civilising the colonised and, with it, violent excesses.

This criticism has been deepened in various fields, for instance with respect to racism. As an example, I need only name the 1997 reader *Race and the Enlightenment* by Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze.⁴⁴ The reader gathers relevant excerpts from texts by Carl von Linné, Buffon, Hume, Kant, Herder, Blumenbach, the *Encyclopédie* and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Jefferson, etc. But Eze was not the first to draw attention to these texts by Enlightenment thinkers; we need only consider Hannah Arendt’s careful examination of the development of the concept of race from the eighteenth century to imperialism in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*,⁴⁵ written in the USA between 1944 and 1951. For Arendt, the

⁴³ HORKHEIMER, ADORNO, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1.

⁴⁴ Emmanuel Chukwudi EZE (ed.), *Race and the Enlightenment. A Reader* (Malden, Mass.1997 [reprint 2009]).

⁴⁵ Hannah ARENDT, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York 1951). On this study, see SCHMALE, *Gesellschaftliche Orientierung*, 269–273.

Enlightenment doesn't play the central role it does for her contemporaries Horkheimer, Adorno or Talmon.

However, the criticism of the Enlightenment is by no means only an intellectual debate, but also plays out in the streets. There have recently been mass protests against Hume, Kant and others. Kant statues have been vandalised, and the University of Edinburgh stripped its Hume Tower of Hume; it is now named after its address in George Square.

In 2017, there was heavy conflict at the London School of Oriental and African Studies.⁴⁶ Students belonging to a group by the name of "Decolonising Our Minds"⁴⁷ questioned the "Western" philosophers from Plato to Kant ("white men"). The initiative must also be seen against the backdrop of the university's foundation in 1916 in the context of British colonialism.⁴⁸ The students are from around 130 countries. Their criticism is that political science and philosophy nevertheless discuss almost exclusively European authors. They thereby deconstruct the *grand récit* of the Enlightenment, for instance by emphasising its entanglement with colonialism and racism. In this respect, Jonathan Israel remarked when asked by *The Guardian* in 2017 that the focus on the Enlightenment in general was too one-sided, since the radical Enlightenment figures were rather overlooked. In the case of these figures (d'Holbach, Diderot, Raynal and others), the accusations were wide off the mark, and it was necessary to be aware that the radical thinkers were much more "the Enlightenment" than monumental figures such as Locke, Voltaire, Kant etc.: "The Radical Enlightenment was 'without question the starting point for the anti-colonialism of our time'. In Israel's view, what he calls the 'package of basic values' that defines modernity – toleration, personal freedom, democracy, racial equality, sexual emancipation and the universal right to knowledge – derives principally from the claims of the Radical Enlightenment."⁴⁹

A survey of the global press could contrast this criticism with countless newspaper articles whose tenor is decidedly traditional in its affirmation of the Enlightenment.⁵⁰ It suffices to provide four examples linked to the subject of democratic identity: The *Indian* newspaper *Mumbai Mirror* published a short article on 6 October 2019 reporting on a new book by the former Supreme Court of India judge Markandey Katju:

⁴⁶ For a detailed report, see: *The Guardian* 19 February 2017

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/feb/19/soas-philosophy-decolonise-our-minds-enlightenment-white-european-kenan-malik>.

⁴⁷ <https://web.archive.org/web/20210723185438/https://soasunion.org/activities/society/8801/>.

⁴⁸ <https://www.soas.ac.uk/news/newsitem115783.html>.

⁴⁹ *The Guardian*, 19 February 2017: <https://tinyurl.com/pcaxmct9>.

⁵⁰ For detailed discussion, see the chapter "Orientierung" in SCHMALE, *Gesellschaftliche Orientierung*, 307–314.

An ideological struggle similar to that launched by thinkers like Voltaire and Rousseau is the need of the hour in India before great political changes can happen, says former Supreme Court judge Markandey Katju in his new book 'The Shape of Things to Come: An Impassioned View'. "In India, a powerful attack in the realm of ideas has to be launched against feudal ideas and customs to sweep away centuries of feudal and irrational filth and falsehood, which is widespread in the country. And this is the job of patriotic, modern-minded intellectuals," he has argued.⁵¹

The Kenyan paper *The Star* published a critical report on 30 May 2019 concerning a failed programme supporting schools in the country's regions that were poor, remote and affected by drought. Under the article, Voltaire was cited: "Quote of the Day: 'We must cultivate our garden.' Voltaire. The French Enlightenment writer, historian and philosopher died on May 30, 1778."⁵²

On 24 November 2019, the Nigerian newspaper *The Nation* provided a critical analysis of the country's sluggish efforts to fight corruption. One of its criticisms was that

Going forward, the letters and spirit of the constitution should be obeyed to the letter. Getting lawmakers mixed up in performance of executive function does violence to the spirit of presidentialism, at the heart of which is Separation of Powers as propounded by Monsieur Montesquieu. Our lawmakers must be content with their assigned roles, ensuring that departments and agencies of government function optimally.⁵³

On 12 November 2019, the Turkish magazine *Dünya Bülteni* (World Bulletin) published a long article by Mahi Çelik on the life and work of Voltaire with the headline "The courage of knowing Voltaire".⁵⁴ Voltaire is portrayed as an incisive critic of the circumstances of his time and as a kind of father to the Enlightenment. The themes are tolerance, basic freedoms, religion (deism, atheism and criticism of the Church). The article does not specifically call for courageous deeds of a political nature or otherwise; those who study Voltaire can draw their own conclusions.

In many countries, the affirmative reference to the Enlightenment in the public political discourse plays a large role, as in France, where in this respect the tradition rooted in the Dreyfus Affair still prevails. Presumably, the most prominent participant in this

⁵¹ <https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/news/india/india-needs-ideological-struggle-like-voltaires-rousseau-katju/articleshow/71461639.cms>.

⁵² <https://www.the-star.co.ke/opinion/leader/2019-05-30-fund-school-feeding-scheme-to-fight-poverty/>.

⁵³ <https://thenationonlineng.net/commendable-act-2/>.

⁵⁴ <https://www.dunyabulteni.net/kultur-sanat/voltairein-bilmek-cesareti-h453100.html>: Mahi ÇELİK, "Voltaire'in bilmek cesareti", Kitabın Ortası dergisi, Kasım 2019, sayı 32.

discourse is the French president Emmanuel Macron. In his speech on the evening of his election victory on 7 June 2017, he said, “L’Europe et le monde attendent que nous défendions l’esprit des Lumières.”⁵⁵ In 2020 he also took the radical Islamist terrorist attacks in France as an occasion to call for a defence of the Enlightenment. He has continued to do this on many more occasions.

The frequent presence of Enlightenment thinkers in the mass media only makes sense if it can be assumed that the public have at least an elementary grasp of their names and what they stand for. In this context, it is interesting to take a look at Wikipedia. In its self-description, Wikipedia considers itself part of the mass media and is one of the twelve most frequently visited websites. It offers around 300 versions in different languages, albeit with different degrees of coverage.⁵⁶

A simple search reveals that the most renowned Enlightenment male figures and to a lesser extent its most renowned female representatives are looked up on Wikipedia much more often than today’s intellectuals – than contemporary Enlightenment thinkers, as it were. Let us consider a few rough examples based on statistics for the last six-and-a-half years or so since 1 July 2015 (up to and including 10 November 2021):

Immanuel Kant: around 33.8 million articles viewed in 164 languages; Jean-Jacques Rousseau: around 29.3 million in 145 languages, Mary Wollstonecraft: 5.5 million in 92 languages, the Mexican revolutionary and Enlightenment thinker Miguel Hidalgo 7.5 million in 51 languages, the Bengali reformer Ram Mohan Roy 6.6 million in 50. Consider by way of comparison a list of today’s Enlightenment thinkers who evidently enjoy a global reception: Michel Foucault: 18.5 million in 87 languages; Jürgen Habermas: 6.9 million in 72 languages, Judith Butler: 5.2 million in 63 languages, Francis Fukuyama: 3.6 million in 58 languages; Anne Elizabeth Applebaum: 1.6 million in 32 languages; Dipesh Chakrabarty, a big name in the humanities, 217,000 in 11 languages. To put it briefly: none of today’s intellectuals – not even those in the top 100 issued by *Foreign Policy* annually – come anywhere near the upper echelons of the hit list of Enlightenment thinkers; only Foucault can compete with the middling representatives.

The Enlightenment figures constantly cited in newspapers and frequently searched for on Wikipedia or a search engine such as Google are people who even upon mere cursory inspection made a significance and lasting contribution to the foundations of the democratic constitutional state and the rule of law, the foundations of societal reform or the foundations

⁵⁵ Cf. Antoine LILTI, *L’héritage des Lumières. Ambivalences de la modernité* (Paris 2019) 9.

⁵⁶ For detailed discussion, see the section “Globales Publikumsinteresse an 33 Aufklärer*innen” in the chapter “Orientierung”, in SCHMALE, *Gesellschaftliche Orientierung*, 291–306.

of the sciences and economics. In the course of their reception, they have been identified more with certain ideas and less with others. For instance, the “separation of powers” as a fundamental principle and Montesquieu seem virtually inseparable. Kant stands for “perpetual peace”, the definition of “enlightenment”, the prevailing idea of reason and the rule of law. Rousseau stands for the sovereignty of the people and democracy, Voltaire for tolerance and freedom of opinion, Cesare Beccaria for the abolition of torture and the death penalty and for a more human penal code in general, Olympe de Gouges for equality between the sexes and the struggle against slavery, Thomas Paine for human rights, etc.

What all these Enlightenment figures have in common is that they are associated with ideas and activities that have undergone sustained development beyond the specific context of their time, and were and still are capable of being transferred in manifold ways into new and culturally different contexts. They represent what connects our own era with the epoch of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. If we take the reception of ideas as the yardstick, this historical Enlightenment has since become de-occidentalised, to the extent that it ever was occidental, and globally applicable.

Conclusion

My three temporal explorations would suggest that the historical disputational constellation known as the “enlightenment of the Enlightenment” in the context of debates about democracy has prevailed for over 200 years. Times of crisis are boom times for this constellation. It can be established that such disputational constellations have existed in many regions of the world. They are not a specifically occidental phenomenon.

In my lecture I have implicitly used France as a classical example since a trajectory can be traced and filled from the Dreyfus Affair to our times. The dispute is always there, even during the German occupation of France and in the Resistance movement. The situation is not necessarily the same in all countries and parts of the world as in France, it varies, but that would have to be the subject of more precise research. It can be expected, however, that in the Maghreb countries, for instance, the trajectory is more consistent than in some European countries. Another distinction that must be made is whether the dispute is held only by minority groups or already has a mass societal basis.

Nevertheless, those Enlightenment ideas that are connected to our present-day understanding of democracy have become global heritage and are evoked the world over. The criticism of “the” Enlightenment hardly changes the fact. It is impossible to predict whether or not the image of David Hume, Carl von Linné and others will permanently suffer

from charges of racism. But even if that were the case, new names and their texts have of course since entered the global canon of “key texts”, works that have always represented some of the foci of today’s debate, such as non-discrimination, gender equality and justice, anti-racism, anti-colonialism, etc. A point of criticism remains, however, that the readiness to consider non-European names and texts with respect to their ideas, impact and reception is growing but is still weak.

Unlike the canon, what does *not* change is the remaining evocation of the Enlightenment, the debate’s connection to various Enlightenment thinkers. This means that we are certainly not living in a post-Enlightenment age, as is often claimed. Admittedly, one has to pose the question as to whether democratic identity could be established without the help of the disputational instrument of the “enlightenment of the Enlightenment”. In their book to which I referred in my introductory remarks, Schäfer and Zürn observe that the performance of democracies is, on the whole, perceived as mediocre, and by various social groups as poor. Of course, this varies from country to country and from period to period. Undoubtedly, the best way to secure and reinforce democratic identity would be if a large majority perceived democracy to be functioning well and performing. But this is not the case, and *that* it is not the case also contributes to democracy’s regression. In this sense, the “enlightenment of the Enlightenment” as an instrument of dispute possesses the character of a societal strategy for achieving the necessary reinforcement and securing of democratic identity despite regressive tendencies. However, this will only work where the instrument of dispute is implemented as such. If we look at it like this, in scholarly research too we are doing exactly the right thing when we critically debate the Enlightenment, not behind closed doors but quite publicly.

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