

***The “Enlightenments” and the “Counter-Enlightenments”:
From the French Revolution to the Contemporary World***

In this workshop, we would like to introduce to the recent reconsideration of the Enlightenment by the philosophical and historical literature, which poses serious objections to the many (and sometimes wholly unfair) critiques that postmodernists, liberals, feminists, multiculturalists, conservatives, etc. have risen against it, especially, in the second half of the twentieth century.

We would like to concentrate for instance on the concept of “Radical Enlightenment” as proposed by Jonathan Israel, who in the last years, together with other authors (Darnton, Bronne, Todorov, Blom, C. Jacob, Muslow, etc.), has completely revolutionized the studies concerning the philosophical of late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The monumental work of Israel obliges us to rethink the image of the Enlightenment as a “unitary movement”, an image defended by most of its enemies but also by the majority of Enlightenment scholars of twentieth century, such as Cassirer, Gay, Berlin, Hazard, etc.- In contrast, Israel proposes that the late sixteenth century and eighteenth century by a tension between three philosophical forces: the “Moderate Enlightenment” (represented by Locke, Montesquieu, Turgot, Voltaire, etc.), the “Radical Enlightenment” (Spinoza, Diderot, d’Holbach, Condorcet, Helvetius, etc.) and the “Counter-Enlightenment” (the so-called “anti-philosophes” and Rousseau). According to Israel, each philosophical current will advance its own program concerning, among others, the political regime, the role of (positive) religion, the rights of women, imperialism, political economy and the extent of equality and freedom. The tensions between these three contradictory “programs” will take concrete political form in the modern revolutions (in the Netherlands, the United States and Latin America) but especially during the French Revolution, where the conflict between moderates, (Mirabeau), radicals (Condorcet) and counter-enlighteners (Robespierre) became palpable.

The importance of readdressing the Enlightenment is not just historical. We would like to make the point that, since the Enlightenment and its unprecedented “revolution of the mind”, the political culture of the West (and beyond) is, to put it roughly, driven by a dynamic of “Enlightenment revolutions” and “counter-revolutions”. In fact, without taking into consideration this dynamic it is (almost) impossible to explain not only the philosophical developments of the last centuries but also the virulent (and universal) reappearance of religious fundamentalism, of new forms of fascisms, of economic authoritarianism, etc. in the contemporary world.

In this sense, apart from the work of Israel, this workshop would welcome also perspectives related to Enlightenment, such as the reception of early French Enlightenment by German Idealism (Kant, Hegel, but also Marx or Nietzsche), the Dialectics of Enlightenment (Horkheimer, Adorno), the Enlightenment debate between Habermas and Foucault, or the current analysis and proposals (Žižek, Badiou, Agamben).

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