

The

WORLDS

of

AMERICAN
INTELLECTUAL
HISTORY

Edited by

JOEL ISAAC

JAMES T. KLOPPENBERG

MICHAEL O'BRIEN

JENNIFER RATNER-ROSENHAGEN

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THE WORLDS OF AMERICAN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

Introduction: Opening American Thought

James T. Kloppenberg

LIKE ALL LIVING traditions, American intellectual history simultaneously draws from and challenges its past. Although aspects of contemporary scholarly practice clearly reflect the influence of earlier intellectual historians, those writing history today are acutely aware of the historicity of all ideas. Many early American historians envisioned the United States as a unique force in history, a nation either chosen by God or blessed by circumstances to play a special role in carrying forward the values of Protestant Christianity, or self-government, or liberal capitalism. Twenty-first-century scholars have replaced the assumptions of American exceptionalism—often shared by critics as well as celebrants of the mission of the United States—with altered assessments of the nation's place in world history. Every national tradition of intellectual history has its own peculiar qualities that reflect its unique cultural, socioeconomic, and political heritage. Just as French scholars write the *histoire des idées* in modes and circumstances distinct from those of Germans who study *Begriffsgeschichte*, the history of concepts, so historians of American thought, whether they are writing from within or outside the United States, operate with a different inheritance and different preoccupations from their peers who study, say, China or Nigeria. One of the most important developments of the last half century, however, is the increasing awareness, among those who study intellectual history, that ideas move across borders of various kinds, circulating in multiple cultures and in multiple registers.¹

The historical study of Americans thinking forms the core of this book, yet many of the contributors to this volume follow ideas as they move beyond national boundaries. Even the chapters that focus on individual thinkers situate them in conversation with

individuals and communities of discourse outside the United States. The chapters also enact boundary crossings of another sort by examining the different sites, from museums, courtrooms, and social movements to popular and scholarly books and periodicals, in which people have articulated and deployed ideas, for diverse purposes, within the borders of the United States. Frontiers are zones of confrontation where interactions of all sorts occur, some friendly and mutually enriching, others laden with tension, misunderstandings, and conflict. Borders are designed to exclude as well as contain. Sometimes such exclusions benefit those on both sides. Insiders can achieve a sense of belonging; outsiders can relish membership in their own distinct communities. Exclusions also spring from and intensify the feelings of superiority that foster imperial aspirations, conquest, and colonial or neocolonial domination, forms of arrogance that breed resentment and hatred. Tensions also exist at the boundaries between and within disciplines and other informal discursive communities, and they persist at the boundaries between American history and the histories of other cultures, which the chapters in this book confront—and often cross—with an awareness of the difficulties as well as the possibilities involved.

The diversity of topics and approaches found in this book reflects the editors' decision to invite scholars whose work has varied from studies of individual thinkers or formal arguments to more wide-ranging inquiries into aspects of the social history of ideas. The contributors follow their own interests and use their own preferred methods of analysis. The richness of contemporary intellectual history springs from that diversity. Intellectual historians have always relished being able to move back and forth between close readings of particular texts and efforts to make sense of broader cultural dispositions. That range is on display in this volume, which includes chapters by historians familiar with the disciplines of philosophy, literature, economics, sociology, political science, education, science, religion, and law. Contributors are American historians, whose work has carried them not only across the North Atlantic but also across the South Atlantic to Africa and across the Pacific to South Asia, as well as prominent historians of European thought who are attuned to the transatlantic conversations in which Europeans and Americans have been engaged since the seventeenth century.

Intellectual history has long been, and should remain, a commons rather than a fenced-off reserve. It should be a place where the borders are porous, different voices are heard, various perspectives are offered, and ideas are understood to move freely in many directions. The interactions with other disciplines, with other kinds of historical study, and with other national cultures enrich the study of Americans thinking. That is the concern—in all its particularity and capaciousness—of intellectual historians, scholars with different affiliations and conversation partners who nevertheless remain committed to the discipline of history. Although scholars in disciplines such as philosophy, political theory, literature, and science studies examine many of the same texts as do intellectual historians, their purposes are different in that they tend to view the past more instrumentally: what is the significance of past ideas for us? Historians, although they are inevitably aware of the embeddedness of their

scholarship in the present moment, have a somewhat different objective: they aim to study past thinkers on their own terms. As they study change over time, uncover the evidence of the past in the present, and locate their scholarship in the concerns of their own day, they remain committed to the evidence contained in the historical record. Even though historians should be alert to the particularity of their circumstances and perspectives, they need not abandon the venerable tradition of intellectual history as an exercise in critical analysis, an effort not only to recapture past meanings of texts but also to evaluate the cogency of their arguments and the validity of their claims in the present.²

Of course, no single volume could encompass the full scope of the work being done in American intellectual history today. Many of the chapters stretch beyond the United States, but inevitably regions of the world and entire civilizations are missing. Some of the chapters here offer detailed examinations of particular texts or controversies, whereas others are much wider in scope, but there are certainly varieties of intellectual history not represented here. These chapters, taken together, signal our conviction that the geographical and methodological range of American intellectual history, already wide, is continuing to expand. A different set of contributors might have linked American thinkers with developments in East Asia, Latin America, or the Middle East. Such studies are bound to multiply in coming decades, as work in transnational, international, comparative, and connected history proliferates.³ Another group of scholars might have focused on texts in fields such as architecture or anthropology or on discourses particular to certain American regions, such as the urban South or rural Midwest, or on groups of intellectuals, such as Catholic nuns or Chippewa novelists.

The idea of American intellectual history as a distinct subject has always been problematic. Ever since the European discovery of the western hemisphere, inhabitants of North America have been thinking in relation to other parts of the world. The first European settlers not only brought their own cultures with them but also found that they were trespassing on lands already occupied by native peoples on whose goodwill they depended, with whom they came into conflict, and from whom they took ideas about farming and hunting and also land they seized as their own. Some of those early settlers brought African slaves, and from that institutionalized oppression emerged the racial conflicts so central to American history. As British colonists spread out from the eastern seaboard, they also came into contact with rival settlements established by Dutch, French, Spanish, and other European settlers. Only gradually, and with difficulty, did these people begin to think of themselves as sharing a common culture. Even after they established a new nation, distinct from the British empire, they continued to shape their politics and their culture according to models derived from the Old World, either copying, adapting, or deliberately deviating from what they had inherited.

As the United States expanded across the continent, it incorporated new lands, numerous indigenous cultures, and a vast western territory long occupied by Spanish-speaking peoples, whose influence grows ever stronger today. No sooner had the United States

spread from the Atlantic to the Pacific than did longstanding dreams of global empire again begin firing the imaginations of a generation that reached across the Caribbean and the Pacific to occupy new territories and incorporate new populations. Thus for centuries, the infusion of people from around the world has complicated the notion of a distinctly “American” nation. Rather than being isolated from the rest of the world, American thought and culture has developed in conversation—and in conflict—with the ideas of Europeans, Native Americans, Africans, Latin Americans, and Asians. To study American intellectual history is to study Americans thinking with, and in contrast to, people from all over the world.

The history of the United States is no more—but no less—exceptional than the history of Brazil, Egypt, England, Indonesia, Japan, Mexico, Russia, or South Africa. Like every national intellectual tradition, that of the United States has been shaped by interactions with cultures from around the world, and American thinkers have exerted a shaping force on those cultures as well. Merely mentioning such names as Anne Hutchinson, Margaret Fuller, and Frederick Douglass; Jane Addams, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Kahlil Gibran; Hannah Arendt, Ayn Rand, and Malcolm X; and, more recently, Amartya Sen, Toni Morrison, and Gish Jen suggests the diversity of American thinkers and how many different cultures have influenced—and been influenced by—prominent contributors to American intellectual history.

Consider a single exemplary figure, Francis Lieber (1800–1872), whose writings on the nation-state figure prominently in Duncan Kelly’s chapter. The first professor of political science in an American university, Lieber is best known for his seminal *Code for the Government of Armies in the Field* (1863), which shaped the thinking about military conduct during wartime from the US Civil War through World War II. Born in Berlin, Lieber earned a PhD in mathematics at Jena and encountered Friedrich Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics at the University of Berlin, before he was hounded out of Germany by officials who suspected him of sedition. After a brief stay in England, Lieber settled in Boston, where he befriended prominent writers, such as Jared Sparks and Joseph Story, and politicians, including Charles Sumner and Daniel Webster, and edited the first edition of the *Encyclopedia Americana* (1829–1833). There, he also met Alexis de Tocqueville, whose *Democracy in America* he later translated into English, and who arranged for Lieber to be elected to the French Academy of Moral and Political Sciences. Despite persistent efforts, the Prussian-born Episcopalian Lieber failed to secure the faculty position at Harvard that he coveted, and he spent twenty years teaching at South Carolina College. Like most well-to-do white southerners, Lieber owned slaves, but he peppered his correspondence with critiques of slavery and expressed doubt about the emerging doctrine of white racial superiority. Although he was confident that certain cultures—that of his native Germany, but also those of France, Britain, and even the United States—had moved ahead in the preceding century, Lieber denied that the white race as a whole had made progress, and he acknowledged the injustice of slavery and believed in the moral and intellectual capacities of all races. Passed over for the

presidency of South Carolina College and increasingly wary about war as the South slipped toward secession, the unionist Lieber relocated to New York when he received an invitation, in 1856, to teach at Columbia University. His three sons' loyalties were more divided than his own. Two fought for the Union; one died for the Confederacy.

Like many Americans before and since, Francis Lieber inhabited several distinct cultures. Intellectually, he moved back and forth between the the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) and the humanistic social sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*), especially the emerging disciplines of political science and international law, to which he contributed path-breaking scholarship. If he had seen too much of Prussian autocracy to imagine that Hegel's *Weltgeist* animated German law, his firsthand experience of ordinary people's irrational passions made him skeptical about calls for universal suffrage. He was convinced that women's distinctive qualities disqualified them from participating actively in politics, and his defense of representative democracy aligned him more closely with the ambivalence of Tocqueville, John Stuart Mill, and Anglo-American Whigs and Republicans than with Jacksonians' celebration of the common man. Lieber traveled across the Atlantic many times, read widely in diverse disciplines, and maintained a lively correspondence with prominent American and European thinkers in Boston, Charleston, New York, Philadelphia, London, Paris, and Berlin. Yet in 1851 he wrote to a friend in exasperation, "[I]f I am not American, what am I?" Like many American intellectuals before and since, Lieber inhabited a world of ideas without clear borders. Was he a Prussian or an American; a New Englander, a southerner, or a New Yorker; a slave owner or a critic of biologically-based arguments for white supremacy; a mathematician, a historian, a political theorist, or an international lawyer? Yes.⁴

From Lieber's perspective, attempts to neatly categorize and label persons and ideas fell afoul of the most basic truth of the human sciences: we are all creatures of our time and place, and our ideas are historical artifacts. Although Lieber disputed the supposedly biological basis of late nineteenth-century scientific racism, he never doubted the inevitability of racial hierarchy or patriarchy. He was not alone in being unable to transcend the particularity of his own cultural standpoint. As Lieber put it in the preface to the second edition of his book *Legal and Political Hermeneutics; or, Principles of Interpretation and Construction in Law and Politics* (1880), "[I]t seems evident that mathematics alone can dispense with interpretation, because whenever we are dealing with linguistic expression, we confront the need to interpret and construct meanings."⁵

That insight concerning the centrality—indeed, the inevitability—of hermeneutics has linked most American intellectual historians since Samuel Miller's *A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century* (1803), the first intellectual history written in the United States. Miller surveyed eighteenth-century developments in fields from agriculture to medicine to zoology and from fine arts to geography to mechanics. His reach extended around the world. His account of languages and literatures, for example, included the major modern European languages but also developments in the study of Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Arabic, Persian, Hindi, and Chinese. His overview of modern European

philosophy, albeit schematic, appears surprisingly serviceable even today. After contrasting Descartes and Locke, Miller traced the emergence of Berkeley's idealism, Hume's skepticism, and Kant's attempt to resolve the contradictions between the rationalist and empiricist traditions. Not surprisingly, this old-school Presbyterian divine found the materialism of Helvetius or Condorcet less satisfactory than the forms of common sense philosophy advanced by Scots such as Dugald Stewart, Adam Smith, and Thomas Reid, to whom he devoted several pages of critical commentary. Reflecting on the rise of the novel, Miller observed that fiction might engender sympathy and promote both knowledge and virtue, but he fretted that excessive novel reading too often ended in "intellectual and moral ruin."

Miller particularly applauded developments in the field of history. He noted that a new respect for sources had replaced the reliance on fables that was typical of ancient accounts, and he particularly praised critical writers, such as Voltaire and Gibbon. Most important, the scope of the craft had expanded to include the interpretation of meanings: "The best historians," Miller wrote, have recently "interwoven with their narratives of political and military events" a much wider range of materials, including particularly "valuable information concerning the religion, learning, laws, customs, trade, and every other object tending to throw light on the progress, genius, and condition of different communities." That development, Miller observed, would be appreciated especially by those who understand "how intimately revolutions and other national events are often connected with the current of literary, moral, and religious opinions; and how much a knowledge of one is frequently fitted to elucidate the other."⁶

Throughout *A Brief Retrospect*, Miller reflected on the accomplishments and, more often, the limitations of his own nation. Neither defensive nor triumphalist, Miller noted that America had produced notable artists (Benjamin West, John Singleton Copley, John Trumbull), philosophers (Jonathan Edwards), and historians (Cadwallader Colden, David Ramsay, Jeremy Belknap), but he conceded that the new republic fell short in many respects, and he never pretended that the intellectual achievements of the United States placed it on a par with the Old World. It was one nation among many, playing its part, making its own contributions to human history. By explaining the difference between history as chronicle and history as it should be practiced, as a species of cultural critique, and by insisting that an adequate account of the eighteenth century should at least attempt to encompass all disciplines and all cultures, *A Brief Retrospect* set the course for an expansive conception of American intellectual history. From Samuel Miller until today, American intellectual historians have studied ideas in a wide range of national and cultural contexts.

Yet it would be a mistake to minimize the distance that separates contemporary scholars from their predecessors. Samuel Miller shared Scottish Enlightenment assumptions concerning the link between social, economic, and moral progress; and Francis Lieber aspired to attain the one and only "true interpretation." Compared with the more thoroughgoing historicism of Wilhelm Dilthey and more recent, even more radical, versions

of hermeneutics that deny the possibility of adequately taking into account one's own cultural predispositions, Miller's and Lieber's worldviews differ from those of our own day. Increasingly suspicious of progress and self-conscious about racialized, gendered, and class-inflected sensibilities, most contemporary academic historians have traded their predecessors' confidence for skepticism. Yet, if self-consciousness has replaced the swagger of nineteenth-century intellectual historians, what persists is the desire to understand the complex, dialectical relation between ideas of all sorts and the dynamics of history.

Only a decade after Lieber's *Hermeneutics* appeared, William James made the interpretation of immediate experience the central argument of his classic *Principles of Psychology* (1890). His arguments in this work help explain the persistent fascination of American intellectual historians with the philosophy of pragmatism that James developed over the next two decades. Both the continental rationalist and British empiricist traditions, James argued, had misconceived the inherently value-laden and therefore inescapably social, cultural, and historical quality of experience, which meant that the emerging social sciences should study human behavior with tools and within frameworks that neither introspection nor physiological psychology could provide. James and his allies John Dewey and George Herbert Mead formulated powerful critiques of the dualisms of mind and body, self and other, ideas and behavior, persistent dualisms that would bedevil so much twentieth-century scholarship and contribute to the short-lived fracturing of historical analysis into the rival camps of "social" and "intellectual" history. Variations on these pragmatists' insights concerning experience and the provisional nature of values have proliferated in recent decades, as scholars ranging from E. P. Thompson to Jürgen Habermas, from Thomas Kuhn to Clifford Geertz, from Joan Scott to Lynn Hunt, and from William Sewell Jr. to Dipesh Chakrabarty have abandoned the idea that behavior can be separated from beliefs or explained solely by gender, race, or socioeconomic conditions. When social historians began refashioning themselves as cultural historians, once-formidable barriers thought to separate the study of social action from ideas began to fall. That process has accelerated with the growing appreciation that the idea of "culture" as an integrated whole must be complicated by acknowledging the fluid and multidimensional nature of what James called the "pluralistic universe" that all humans inhabit. The constitutive role of thinking in human life has become more widely accepted in disciplines from cognitive science to evolutionary psychology, and in discourses from subaltern to gender studies.⁷

If recent developments have contributed to a renewed engagement with ideas in all their diversity and historicity, that awareness has marked the work of American intellectual historians ever since Miller's *Brief Retrospect*, and the contributions to this volume reflect that legacy. Yet readers will notice that certain themes run through many of these chapters. The first is the theme that links the chapters in Part I, frames of analysis, such as the Enlightenment, women's rights, cosmopolitanism, and racial solidarity, that have long served to organize inquiries into American intellectual history.

Having shown in her first two books the persistence of the classical tradition in early American culture, and having participated in major projects detailing the role played by Americans in the eighteenth-century Republic of Letters, Caroline Winterer opens this volume by interrogating the utility of the concept of an “American Enlightenment.” Winterer shows how the idea of an American Enlightenment first emerged as a Cold War project and was remodeled in the 1970s for use as the starting point of a national culture of Protestant democracy. Although the adjective “enlightened” appeared frequently in Miller’s history of the eighteenth century, he never used the noun. In recent decades, as European historians have presented a plurality of Enlightenments, an early modern Atlantic world has become a common frame of reference instead of a distinctly American modernity that has yet to take shape. Winterer concludes her chapter with a sketch of an Enlightenment for our times that encompasses both what is American and what is transnational, thereby announcing this book’s theme of interrogating boundaries, in this case at the dawn of the American Republic.

In “The ‘Woman Question’ in the Age of Mass Democracy,” Leslie Butler approaches the issue of boundary crossing by examining how historians have overused the paradigm of “movements” —that is, shared moments of reform—and thereby failed to see that many intellectual influences on reform came obliquely, through the efforts of those examining different “problems.” Her chapter shows how European observations of American democracy, notably those of Alexis de Tocqueville and Harriet Martineau, influenced the idea of women’s rights in the mid-nineteenth century by shaping the ways in which American activists, such as Catharine Beecher, understood the interdependence of women’s roles, domesticity, and democratic theory and practice.

In his chapter Nico Slate examines the national, racial, and ethnic boundaries crossed in the twentieth-century creation of “colored cosmopolitanism.” He excavates the lost history of the phrase “of color,” tracing how, when Third World feminist and environmental-justice activists turned to notions of color in the 1980s and 1990s, they did so without taking into account the earlier transnational concept of a colored world. Slate’s chapter thus combines the perspectives of the transnational and the subaltern by analyzing the curious life cycle of an idea that gained traction precisely as the geopolitical world in which it developed gave way.

Jonathan Holloway’s chapter focuses on boundary crossings between intellectual and public history. He shows how, in recent years, museum curators in England, Africa, and the United States have enlisted Paul Gilroy’s paradigm of a “black Atlantic” to understand diasporic black experience and its relevance for the study of Western modernity. Holloway thus investigates how a transnational “unit of analysis” can lay bare hidden histories, replacing absences with testimony concerning the history of slavery and how it should be understood by multiple publics today. Taken together, Winterer’s, Butler’s, Slate’s, and Holloway’s chapters show how cutting across and subjecting to critical scrutiny the categories of analysis preferred by contemporary scholars lead to new perspectives on some indispensable but too rarely interrogated concepts.

The chapters in Part II provide different perspectives on the gradual expansion of the spheres within which thinkers have addressed questions of justice and obligation. Although they range from critiques of slavery that emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to the metamorphosis of the ideas of civic virtue and individual rights to more recent discussions of global justice, an interest in the shifting meanings of ethical and political ideas—within and beyond the United States—connects these four chapters. Yet such transformations do not show a clear trajectory of progress. Indeed, several contributors note that despite the centuries-long broadening of ideas about justice, the embrace of that rhetoric in much of the developed world has occurred at the same time as the persistence or even worsening of global inequality.

Opening a series of chapters on justice and responsibility, Margaret Abruzzo's chapter, "Sins of Slaves and Slaves of Sin: Toward a History of Moral Agency," continues to probe the theme of borders by showing how antebellum Americans, when seeing themselves as moral agents, were anxious to establish boundaries, to connect freedom with self-control, and to find a way to escape man's propensity to be a "slave to sin." Exploring the conceptual overlap between slavery and sin in literature and nonfiction, she analyzes depictions of two types of sinners: on the one hand, the drunkard, libertine, prostitute, or gambler, who seemingly could exercise full moral agency but failed to do so, and on the other hand, enslaved African Americans, who were often characterized as lacking full moral agency because their circumstances so sharply circumscribed their behavior.

Duncan Kelly's chapter shows how the nation-state came to be redefined and reified in the era of the United States Civil War. He examines a conversation between Americans, Europeans (notably, Johann Kaspar Bluntschli), and migrants (Francis Lieber and others who had fled Central Europe after the revolutions of 1848), which later became the primary focus of American political science. Lieber contended that civilized states engaged one another within a threefold matrix (the nation, the international, humanity), whose tendency was progressive and enlightened. Exploring the origins of a process Dorothy Ross examined in detail in her classic study *The Origins of American Social Science* (1991), Kelly shows how nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideas of American exceptionalism neglected that third dimension of humanity.

Samuel Moyn's chapter, "The Political Origins of Global Justice," like Kelly's, uncovers the role of particular thinkers in the transformation of arguments concerning justice, particularly about the growing gulf between the rich global north and the poor postcolonial south since the 1960s. Moyn explores the late twentieth-century shift from the initially radical impulses motivating subaltern calls for a New International Economic Order to the sentimentality of "we are the world" charity. Moyn focuses on the political theorist Charles Beitz, the central figure in this crucial but little understood transformation of calls for global justice within the academy. He shows how the framing of individual rights within a neoliberal paradigm transformed initially sweeping demands for radical economic change. Debates about social justice had limited salience once they were circumscribed within the scholarly community that concerns itself with the

Hobbesian sphere of international relations. Confined within that domain, arguments about global justice had a negligible impact on the growing gulf between rich and poor.

The chapters in Part III address questions concerning the relation between philosophy and intellectual history. As work in cultural history has exploded, many scholars have focused on a wider range of people thinking. Yet close reading of difficult philosophical texts remains a central concern of many intellectual historians, as it was for Arthur Lovejoy and Perry Miller, two of the scholars who helped shape the field in the middle decades of the twentieth century. The chapters in this section illustrate the persistence of this form of inquiry.

American ideas have not always been well received in other cultures, sometimes because they have been thoroughly misunderstood. That has surely been the fate of American pragmatism, a philosophy caricatured and savaged in France by Émile Durkheim, in Britain by Bertrand Russell, and in Germany by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Although William James had plenty of philosophical allies throughout the Atlantic world, his work generated at least as much criticism as appreciation, largely because of misunderstandings that began with the publication of *Pragmatism* (1907) and continue to the present day. Francesca Bordogna's chapter examines the uses and abuses of James's ideas by self-anointed "magic pragmatists" in Italy. These thinkers transfigured a pragmatism born of democratic commitments into ideas of power and self-fashioning that would later become part of the political and aesthetic basis of fascism. Bordogna's chapter illustrates the diversity of the worlds in which American ideas have found a home. It is also a reminder that appropriations of ideas, even by enthusiasts, sometimes transform those ideas in ways that make them all but unrecognizable to their creators.⁸

Although the longing for wisdom has driven many American thinkers into the thinking life, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen shows in her chapter that this longing is curiously missing from historians' accounts of twentieth-century American thought. Without abandoning intellectual historians' traditional commitment to the study of professional thinkers, Ratner-Rosenhagen shows how directing attention to popular conceptions of wisdom and to the practices sustaining its quest can broaden the field. Using the glossy midcentury magazine *Wisdom* as an "agenda-setting source," she encourages historians to rethink intellectual hierarchies and selection criteria for records of moral inquiry, while remaining attentive to intellectual practices and the forms through which professional thinkers found nonscholarly audiences.

In recent years, many American intellectual historians have drifted away from the debates within academic philosophy. Whereas many of the best recent studies in the field are concerned with building bridges to cultural history, the history of science, transnational history, and the digital humanities, Joel Isaac, in his chapter, demonstrates the enduring fruitfulness of an older orientation toward philosophy and social and political theory. Isaac probes the more recent history of ideas about sympathy and compassion examined by Margaret Abruzzo in her discussion of antebellum reform. Beneath the

apparently “apolitical philosophical anthropology” of Anglo-American ordinary language philosophy, Isaac’s chapter discloses faint echoes of Enlightenment ideas about moral sentiments, such as pity, that led indirectly toward the philosophy of John Rawls.⁹

What normative claims can intellectual historians make on the basis of their historical scholarship? Historians have grappled with this question since the eighteenth century, as Samuel Miller made clear in *A Brief Retrospect*, but in her chapter Sophia Rosenfeld provides some new answers. Ranging backward from Tocqueville to the Enlightenment and forward from Arendt to our own day, Rosenfeld shows how historical reflection on the mind and society can motivate timely interventions in contemporary disputes about value, truth, and politics. Rosenfeld rejects the notion of a sharp division between historical scholarship and philosophical inquiry, thereby reestablishing a connection taken for granted before the professionalization of the humanistic disciplines in the early twentieth century.

Part IV explores the persistent tension between religion and science and the equally persistent search for meaning and value. From Enlightenment thinkers’ emphasis on reason and sympathy through many contemporaries’ confidence that science will at last solve the puzzles of consciousness and responsibility that have engaged philosophers since the ancient world, modern thinkers have examined the relation between the human and the nonhuman and wrestled with the challenge of grounding the value judgments that people of all cultures inevitably make.

The intellectual history of the post–Second World War United States has typically separated studies of religion from studies of science and technology. The emergence of science as a source of cultural and political value in postwar America is usually framed in terms of a contrast between “high liberal” enthusiasm for technical politics and New Left critiques of value-free social science. In his chapter, Andrew Jewett shows how, in response to the rise of totalitarianism, conservative and religious thinkers challenged earlier understandings of science as an integral feature of American democratic culture. By transforming science into “scientism,” a nihilistic threat to the fundamental values on which all stable civilizations were said to rest, such critics upended the status of science in America and fueled recent attacks on scientific liberalism, which now come from the Left, and from secular universities, as well as from conservative religious communities. As Jewett’s chapter shows, the meanings attached to the ideas of modernity and science and religion and secularization have been unstable, as have been the alignments of champions and critics in the debates over how they should be understood and evaluated.

The global resurgence of religious belief in recent decades has prompted many thinkers to reassess the adequacy of the secularization thesis to explain the process Max Weber called the “disenchantment of the world.” In his chapter, which makes clear that many European and American social and political theorists now belong to a single discursive community, Peter Gordon traces the decades-long development of John Rawls’s and Jürgen Habermas’s ideas about philosophy and religion. After showing why they differed on the adequacy of Rawls’s theory of justice, Gordon explains why Habermas

has recently urged his fellow atheists and agnostics to show greater respect for the still-vibrant and “inspiring” contributions of religious traditions. The chapter concludes with Gordon’s reflections on the reasons why Habermas nevertheless insists, as Rawls did, that in a democracy all citizens, religious as well as secular, must embrace norms of fallibilism, toleration, and pluralism that challenge the convictions of many religious conservatives.

The word “secularization” has many meanings, as Jewett’s chapter shows. Whereas Gordon concentrates on two prominent philosophers wrestling with the status of religious faith in North Atlantic democracies, David Hollinger marshals evidence from recent sociological studies to argue that despite noisy protests by religious believers, the process of secularization continues its apparently inexorable advance in the United States, as it does in Western Europe. Notwithstanding the surprising and little acknowledged success of liberal Christians and Jews in shifting twentieth-century American culture toward the ideals of pluralism and toleration, an achievement that Hollinger believes has been underappreciated, he contends that such believers, whether they know it or not, contribute, through their embrace of fallibilism, to the continuing secularization of the world.

This volume stands in a long line of historical inquiries into American thought. Much has changed since Samuel Miller published *A Brief Retrospect* and Vernon Louis Parrington (1927) and Perry Miller (1939) began publishing the very different studies of American thought that helped establish the boundaries of the field in the early twentieth century. Much has even changed since John Higham and Paul Conkin edited *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (1979), which set the agenda for a generation of scholars. Part V of this volume includes three chapters that exemplify distinct approaches to the historical study of ideas that have been especially prominent in recent decades. These chapters offer prospective as well retrospective visions of the field and its borders.

Daniel T. Rodgers addresses the central theme of this book by explaining how, partly because of the recent conversation between intellectual and social historians in many cultures, “motion” has become a central motif in intellectual history. Rodgers shows how the nation-state, conceived as an intellectual, cultural, legal, and political project, has come to be seen as inadequate for capturing the ways in which people express themselves. Yet Rodgers explains how this trespassing also remains a phenomenon within the nation-state, which has its own endlessly crossed and re-crossed internal boundaries.

Sarah Igo’s chapter illustrates what intellectual history might look like if scholars were to take their cues from the everyday concepts, frameworks, and cultural practices they study. Following the history of the term “privacy” as it traversed lines long thought to divide American intellectual life—high from low, legal from popular—Igo argues that her methodology of “free-range intellectual history” is particularly useful for studying the many historical ideas that sneak out of their disciplinary or institutional pens to become “publicly claimed” and “popularly shaped.” Like Rodgers, Igo considers this

expansion of the scope of scholars' inquiries to be long overdue. Samuel Miller, who was as interested in innovations on the farm and in the workshop as he was in ethical philosophy or musical composition, and Merle Curti, who studied frontier communities as well as philosophical communities, would have agreed with her.

Where do things stand now? In the concluding chapter, Angus Burgin explicitly focuses on the evolution of the field of American intellectual history since the 1979 Wingspread conference, which led to the publication of *New Directions in American Intellectual History*. Especially interested in the field's shifting boundaries, Burgin shows how the Wingspread historians felt compelled to rein in the grand ambitions of the postwar generation of historians of ideas, and how recent scholarship has tended to overrun the narrower boundaries established by the contributors to *New Directions*. Burgin's chapter ends with a meditation on the many border crossings—geographical, disciplinary, and conceptual—that now interest American intellectual historians, precisely the questions explored, in one way or another, by all the contributors to this book.

The division of the chapters into these five groupings, it must be noted, is merely heuristic. These, too, are boundaries, made to be crossed. Most of the chapters in Parts II, III, and IV address the questions about historians' analytical categories raised by the chapters in Part I. The meanings of sin, cosmopolitanism, justice, wisdom, sympathy, truth, science, secularism, and faith are as problematic and historically variable as the categories of enlightenment, gender, and race. Most of the chapters, either implicitly or explicitly, also address the issues of methodology discussed in Part V. Every piece of intellectual history embodies some approach, or some hybrid of approaches, to the study of people thinking in time.

Two further themes help unify the chapters. The first is the contributors' self-conscious attention to the value-laden quality of American intellectual history. Although they do not share a common perspective on the stance historians should take in relation to that normative dimension of their work, the contributors do share an awareness that intellectual history can never be simply descriptive, or neutral, because of the value-laden nature of the thinking that they are committed to studying and helping readers understand. The second common theme is attentiveness to the relation between the present and the past, a perennial feature of American historical writing that first became explicit in nineteenth-century German hermeneutics but has been characteristic of American historical writing at least since Samuel Miller. Maintaining a balance between fidelity to one's sources and awareness of one's own cultural moment requires acknowledging the persistence of that challenge. It is better to face the unavoidable contemporary significance of historical scholarship than to be immobilized by anxieties about the alleged dangers of "presentism" or the impossibility of ever achieving perfect objectivity. No matter how deeply devoted they are to respecting the integrity of the evidence they uncover, historians can never shed their skins or transcend their own time and place. The chapters in this book represent interventions into twenty-first-century American culture

as well as exemplifications of historical scholarship. No boundary stands between those two objectives.

NOTES

1. Two recent collections illuminate these issues: Darrin McMahon and Samuel Moyn, eds., *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), contains essays focusing on the peculiarities of different national traditions and the differences among competing methods of intellectual history. Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, eds., *Global Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), expands the frame to include discussion of cultures and ideas long overlooked by Eurocentric scholars. Strikingly, even though most of the contributors to both collections live and work in the United States, American intellectual history plays no part in either volume.

2. I have addressed these questions in two recent essays: James T. Kloppenberg, "Thinking Historically: A Manifesto of Pragmatic Hermeneutics," in "Forum: The Present and Future of American Intellectual History," ed. Thomas Bender, *Modern Intellectual History* 9 (April 2012): 201–16; and James T. Kloppenberg, "A Well-Tempered Liberalism: Modern Intellectual History and Political Theory," *Modern Intellectual History* 10 (November 2013): 655–82. For a spirited argument concerning the critical dimension of intellectual history, see Peter E. Gordon, "Contextualism and Criticism in the History of Ideas," in McMahon and Moyn, *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, 32–55.

3. Examples include Jessica Ching-Sze Wang, *John Dewey in China: To Teach and to Learn* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007); Hongliang Gu, *The Misreading of Pragmatism: The Influence of Dewey's Philosophy on Modern Chinese Philosophy* (Shanghai: Huadong Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, 2000); Sor-hoon Tan, "How Can a Chinese Democracy Be Pragmatic," *Transactions of the Charles Peirce Society* 47, no. 2 (2011): 196–225; Donald S. Lopez Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri La: Tibetan Buddhism in the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Julian Gewirtz, *Partners in Reform: Western Economists and the Making of China's Socialist Market Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, forthcoming); Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); David Engerman, *Know Your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America's Soviet Experts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Betty S. Anderson, *The American University of Beirut: Arab Nationalism and Liberal Education* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011); Adam Ewing, *The Age of Garvey: How a Jamaican Activist Created a Mass Movement and Changed Global Black Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); and Ruben Flores, *Backwoods Pragmatists: Mexico's Melting Pot and Civil Rights in the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

4. Francis Lieber to George Hillard, June 23, 1851; Francis Lieber Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA. On Lieber's life and his career in South Carolina, see Michael O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life in the American South, 1810–1860*, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), particularly, 1:73–89. The quoted passage appears on page 74. For Lieber's arguments concerning women's place and the promise of representative democracy, see Francis Lieber, *Manual of Political Ethics, Part 2: Political Ethics Proper* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1839), 249–70, 467–520.

5. Francis Lieber, *Legal and Political Hermeneutics; or, Principles of Interpretation and Construction in Law and Politics*, 3rd ed., ed. William G. Hammond (1839; St. Louis: F. H. Thomas, 1880), vii, as well as 71–109, 172–81, and 220–25. For Lieber's defense of representative democracy, see *Civil Liberty and Self-Government*, 3rd ed., ed. Theodore D. Woolsey (1853; Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1888).

6. Samuel Miller, *A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century: Part the First; in Two Volumes; Containing a Sketch of the Revolutions and Improvements in Science, Arts, and Literature during That Period*, 2 vols. (New York: T. & J. Swords, 1803), 2:399, 341.

7. See William H. Sewall Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Judith Surkis, "Of Scandals and Supplements: Relating Intellectual and Cultural History," in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, 94–111; and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Post Colonial Thought and Historical Difference*, 2nd ed. (2000; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008). Subaltern studies scholars' increasing interest in what Chakrabarty calls "history 2," history that complicates Marxism by taking seriously the particular cultural values shaping agents' points of view, leads either toward Heidegger or Dewey, who taught two of the most influential Asian activists of the mid-twentieth century: both Hu Shih, central to China's May Fourth movement, and B. R. Ambedkar, the father of India's Constitution, studied with Dewey and credited him with shaping their ideas about democracy.

8. The most thorough analysis of the mangling of American pragmatism by European thinkers remains Hans Joas, *Pragmatism and Social Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); for a brief recent overview, see John R. Shook, "F. C. S. Schiller and European Pragmatism," in *A Companion to Pragmatism*, ed. John R. Shook and Joseph Margolis (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 44–53.

9. Multiple paths, ranging from the critical theory of the Frankfurt School through the social imaginary explored by Charles Taylor, Cornelius Castoriadis, and Claude Lefort, lead from positivism toward the sort of qualitative or normative analysis Isaac examines. But as Isaac's chapter shows, those are not the only routes toward renewed concern with ethical inquiry. Although the path leading from such insights toward a fully realized analytic political philosophy remains unmapped, the American philosopher Robert Brandom has suggested in his recent work that bringing together insights from Kant and Hegel, the phenomenology of James and Dewey, and Wittgenstein's concept of "forms of life" may inaugurate a post-analytic "second Enlightenment" of the sort Isaac suggests in the conclusion of his chapter. See Robert B. Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing: Towards an Analytic Pragmatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Robert B. Brandom, *Perspectives on Pragmatism: Classical, Recent, and Contemporary* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

PART I

Frames

1

What Was the American Enlightenment?

Caroline Winterer

WHAT WAS THE American Enlightenment? And was it really all that enlightened?¹ I have been asked these questions more than once in recent years as I completed a book entitled *American Enlightenments: Pursuing Happiness in the Age of Reason*.² The questions are usually asked anxiously, the updated and Americanized versions of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's famously gloomy thesis that the Enlightenment was the cradle of totalitarianism.³ Amid persistent racism, sexism, poverty, ignorance, and inequality in the United States today, how can we claim that we are heirs to a movement so grandly called the American Enlightenment?

These are hard questions for Americans to answer because the American Enlightenment—since its birth as a concept during the post–World War II era—has been part of America's civil religion, collapsing easily into the inspiring political ideals of the founding era. The sociologist Robert Bellah, who in 1967 popularized the idea of civil religion, invoked the secular saints Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson as embodiments of an enduring and particularly American mix of Protestantism and Enlightenment.⁴ “The words and acts of the founding fathers,” he argued, “especially the first few presidents, shaped the form and tone of the civil religion as it has been maintained ever since.”⁵ Likewise, John Gray singled out the United States as the exception to his otherwise depressing assessment of the legacies of the Enlightenment “project” (a term invented in the 1980s by Jürgen Habermas and Alasdair MacIntyre to take stock of the Enlightenment's unsettling moral consequences).⁶ “In the late modern period in which we live,” wrote Gray, “the Enlightenment project is

affirmed chiefly for fear of the consequences of abandoning it. Except in the United States, where it has the status of a civil religion, it carries little positive conviction.”⁷

In short, unlike the European Enlightenment, which is oppositional and therefore friendly to radical interpretations, the American Enlightenment is foundational, and its scholarly approaches less adventurous, because it is penned by nationalist imperatives. Constraining for scholars, the American Enlightenment has been energizing for the public. Because it blends so easily with the founding ideals of the American Revolution, it supplies modern Americans with a vocabulary and a historical framework that facilitates a national conversation about lofty aspirations. In the *New York Times* in 1996, for example, Henry Louis Gates Jr., distinguished between “the European Enlightenment’s dream of reason and the American Enlightenment’s dream of civil liberty.”⁸ For those Americans who measure the present by the yardstick of this chosen past, the American Enlightenment has not ended. It exemplifies the idea that some histories are ongoing conversations rather than completed events. Immanuel Kant argued for the idea of enlightenment as an ongoing process in 1784. “If we are asked, ‘Do we now live in an *enlightened age*?’ the answer is, ‘No,’ but we do live in an *age of enlightenment*.”⁹ Peter Gay’s synthesis of the Enlightenment extended Kant’s ongoing enlightenment to the shores of America, where Gay saw “the program of enlightenment in practice.”¹⁰

To ask what *was* the American Enlightenment is therefore also to ask what *is* the American Enlightenment? This chronological double duty presents two challenges. The first is to capture the major intellectual shifts of the eighteenth century in terms recognizable to the actors who did not use the term “American Enlightenment” as a descriptor of their era. They, rather, strove to be “enlightened,” a state of being. Yet regardless of whether we accept the modern invention of the American Enlightenment, it is a historical fact that there existed in the eighteenth century in North America a cadre of people who self-consciously strove for something they called “enlightenment” in a variety of intellectual, political, scientific, cultural, and social endeavors. They used the terms “enlightened” and, to a lesser extent, “enlightenment” to describe the process of becoming emancipated from non- or pre-rational modes of thought and of working, with the aid of reason, for a sunnier future for humanity. The second challenge is to attend to our modern interest in the idea of an American Enlightenment, one that became so pressing that historians and philosophers coined the term “American Enlightenment” in the post–World War II era. The term enjoys broad popularity today, both inside and outside academia.

This chapter surveys the career of the idea of the American Enlightenment since its birth in the middle decades of the twentieth century. It shows that the American Enlightenment has long been a barometer of contemporary American anxieties. Beyond that, however, little about it has been clear or stable. This problem has played out not so much as a turf war but as turf uncertainty, as scholars have struggled to determine the meanings of America and of enlightenment. The chapter concludes with some of my own reflections on how we might now approach the American Enlightenment.

THE COLD WAR AMERICAN ENLIGHTENMENT

The idea of a historical epoch called the American Enlightenment was born in the post–World War II era as a response to contemporary political and intellectual anxieties. This was not the first time that the Enlightenment had been taken up as an American response to urgent political threats. In *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (1932), Carl Becker had unabashedly invoked the relevance of the Russian Revolution and the ominous advance of communism abroad. But Becker was chiefly concerned with the Enlightenment as a European event, whose epicenter was the cushioned salons of Parisian *philosophes*.¹¹

By contrast, the post–World War II invention of the American Enlightenment suggested that America, like Superman (who was invented around the same time), would fight for truth, justice, and the American Way.¹² Forged in the Cold War moment, the idea of the American Enlightenment positioned the United States as the heir to an ideological tradition that could shield not just the United States but the whole free world against the totalitarian threat.¹³ Daniel Rodgers has observed that the Cold War era was one of enormous moral urgency and high seriousness, as the divide between the free and communist worlds opened into two incommensurable and antagonistic societies locked in struggle. “Freedom was at the center of Cold War political rhetoric,” he writes, with freedom imagined as highly social and public, embedded in a context of larger purpose.¹⁴ This moral urgency mobilized the partisans of the new American Enlightenment. Shuddering at the looming threat of totalitarianism abroad, they painted the United States as a bastion of freedom, the last redoubt of Western civilization. Cultural and intellectual anxieties were also at work. The idea of the American Enlightenment arose at roughly the same time as courses in American civilization and American studies; all were at some level attempts to transcend disciplinary borders and to grasp what was relevant for modern Americans about their national history.¹⁵ Midcentury also represented a moment in which Protestants and Jews attempted to overcome sectarian boundaries in order to write about the great, big thing that was America.¹⁶

These hopes and fears inspired a number of studies of the American Enlightenment in the two decades after 1945. The most important early scholar was Adrienne Koch, who embraced the American Enlightenment as a defense against the Soviet Union. Today Koch has been almost entirely erased from the canon, a story that deserves further investigation and a fact that was already being lamented in the 1970s. Koch appears to have been encouraged to take up the theme by her Columbia University professor Herbert W. Schneider, who had included a section entitled “The American Enlightenment” in his *History of American Philosophy* (1946). According to Schneider, the American Enlightenment “contains the heart of our heritage as a people and our deepest tie to the rest of humanity.”¹⁷

Koch’s achievement was to embellish this statement in a series of publications over the next several decades. The message, more or less, was this: the American Enlightenment

was enlightened because it represented the ideal of a free, democratic society, the opposite of Soviet totalitarianism. Koch went on to publish numerous books on eighteenth-century America, including one of the first in American history to contain the term “American Enlightenment” in its title, *Power, Morals, and the Founding Fathers: Essays in the Interpretation of the American Enlightenment* (1961).¹⁸ Four years later, she put the term in the main title, when she published the massive anthology *The American Enlightenment: The Shaping of the American Experiment and a Free Society* (1965).¹⁹

Created amid high anxiety about the fate of civilization, Koch’s two books smolder with the urgency of the Cold War moment. She believed that the United States “is one of the two greatest powers in the world today; that what we do will affect not only our own survival but the fate of Western civilization as well.” The Cold War pitted America’s “open society” against “Communist tyrants,” the “society of the concentration camp and slave labor,” and “the aggressive total power of the Soviet Union.” The meaning of Koch’s otherwise cryptic main title—*Power, Morals, and the Founding Fathers*—thus becomes clear. Power without morals failed to harness the good residing within “free men.” But power with morals became the weapon for “undoing the oppression that exists in a total society.”²⁰

Koch had little interest in Christianity as a powerful organizing force in American history. Her concern, like that of other secular Jewish intellectuals such as Louis Hartz, was to chart the birth and flowering of democracy.²¹ Christians are few and far between in her books, though the Puritans make a few cameo appearances. Instead, her Enlightenment—tightly penned to the politics of the half century from 1765 to 1815—is peopled by what she called the “Big Five”: John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison, each of whom got a chapter highlighting their pragmatic wisdom, happiness, power, and liberty. Her anthology excerpted the mostly political writings of only those five, for it was their “vision” and “spirit” that underlay the “free society” and “democratic civilization” of modern America.²² As these quotations suggest, Koch’s books sometimes seemed so firmly rooted in present concerns that the eighteenth-century-ness of the Enlightenment faded away.

Adrienne Koch was not the only US-based historian to craft the American Enlightenment in this manner. *The Ibero-American Enlightenment* (1971)—billed as “the first book ever to be published devoted to the Ibero-American Enlightenment”—used the Cold War idea of “thought control” as its major analytic device. In the introduction, A. Owen Aldridge announced the utterly different problems facing historians of the Latin American and Iberian Enlightenments: “They must take into account the largely successful efforts at thought control exercised in these areas by both church and state.”²³ Even the European Enlightenment got a Cold War retread. Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was reissued in English in 1972 with a new preface explaining that the Cold War political division of the world into “immense power-blocks, set objectively upon collision,” warranted continued vigilance to support “the residues of freedom.”²⁴

The insistent Cold Warishness of these first US works on the North American and Latin American Enlightenments doomed them to a short shelf life. Reviewing Koch's work in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, Trevor Colbourn chided Koch for comparing the founding fathers of the United States and the Soviet Union. "Miss Koch has a message. She feels her essays can help us meet the problems of today's divided world . . . This is not the most persuasive or attractive aspect of an otherwise welcome book."²⁵

As the 1970s arrived, the Cold War vision of the American Enlightenment seemed increasingly passé. Undaunted, Koch's generation dug in their heels and rejected not just the Soviets but 1960s radicalism ("infantilism") on the home front.²⁶ In 1970, a year before she died of cancer, Koch published an Independence Day swan song to the American Enlightenment that read as a manifesto to trust no one under thirty. "[A]lthough some radicals today shout obscenities at the great American revolutionary statesmen, they count on the protection of the principles of free speech, equal opportunity and individual liberty the revolutionary leaders bequeathed to us."²⁷

THE AMERICAN ENLIGHTENMENT AT THE BICENTENNIAL

The time was ripe for a new American Enlightenment. As though on cue for the US bicentennial, four major publications appeared in 1976 and 1977 to form what one reviewer called a "swirling lazy susan of enlightenments for us to sample."²⁸ All these works benefited from the general benediction of the history of ideas that the bicentennial seemed to permit. Here was a chance to stage a comeback against the reigning social history.

First came a special issue of the *American Quarterly* entitled *An American Enlightenment*. The issue's editor, Joseph Ellis, conceded that some intellectual historians hoped "to see the last cliometrician strangled with the magnetized tape from the last computer."²⁹ Yet he urged historians of ideas to make peace with social history and plow the fields of their own Enlightenment as energetically as Europeans did theirs. Three books also appeared and were often reviewed together: Donald Meyer's *The Democratic Enlightenment* (1976); Henry May's *The Enlightenment in America* (1976); and Henry Steele Commager's *The Empire of Reason* (1977).³⁰

Of the three, Commager's *Empire of Reason* was the most celebratory. Here was an American Enlightenment with deep roots in the seventeenth century that culminated in the "spectacular achievements" of the American Revolution.³¹ Commager argued for a diffusionist vision of the Enlightenment, with Europe and America forming coherent and often unified blocs of opinion and attitudes (a reflection of Commager's belief in an "American mind").³² Commager's American Enlightenment was "invented" in Europe and then "realized" in America. The Enlightenment had "terminated" in Europe in the reactionary movements of the post-French revolutionary era. But in America "there were no ancient tyrannies to overthrow, no barriers of tradition or poverty or ignorance

to surmount, and few iniquities—except the prodigious iniquity of slavery—to banish.” Carried along in lively, fluid prose, Commager’s Enlightenment ranged far more broadly than Koch’s, to the Pacific voyages of Joseph Banks and the anthropological theories of Lord Monboddo. But like Koch, he singled out the founding moment as the embodiment of the American Enlightenment. “That was, everywhere, the most remarkable achievement of the Americans—they took old familiar ideas that no other people had ever put into effect, and institutionalized them.”³³ Commager ended on a celebratory note, as the triumphs of the founding era and reason marched into a golden future.

By contrast with Commager’s optimistic, secularizing, and political American Enlightenment, Donald Meyer and Henry May offered a religious American Enlightenment and a gloomier appraisal of its fate in the nineteenth century. Unlike the godless French Revolution (and its godless modern counterparts, the Soviet and Chinese revolutions), the American Revolution, the finest product of the American Enlightenment, had blended reason with revelation. Meyer sketched out the broad picture in his *Democratic Enlightenment*. Barely footnoted, and rooted mostly in secondary sources, the book was a series of meditations on religion, philosophy, and politics rather than a sharply analytic monograph. It was especially focused on moral philosophy, the subject of an earlier book by Meyer.³⁴ His thesis was that the radical, critical edges of the American Enlightenment were blunted as they met the ascending democracy, muscular nationalism, and evangelical Protestantism of the nineteenth century. As befitted this narrative, Meyer ended on a biblical note. Americans had not always lived up to the ideals set forth during the Enlightenment, but the “moral legacy” of the movement ensured that Americans clung to their idealism. “Like God’s blessing on the children of Israel,” Meyer concluded, “our national ideals are at once our pride and our curse.”³⁵

Publishing his magnum opus on the American Enlightenment a year later, Henry May dismissed his student Meyer’s book in a single footnote and then cast himself as the creator of American Enlightenment studies. “[T]here is no good book on the Enlightenment in America,” he announced, “indeed no general book at all.”³⁶ May famously proposed a four-part progression of Europe-based Enlightenments disembarking in America: moderate, skeptical, revolutionary, and didactic. The book’s title captured May’s diffusionist theory: the Enlightenment was born in Europe and had spread, like so many waves of immigrants, to America. This was an Enlightenment in America, not an American Enlightenment.

Henry May’s most lasting achievement was to insist on the importance of religion. “It is not about the Enlightenment *and* religion,” he wrote of his book, “but rather about the Enlightenment *as* religion.” The airy expansiveness of this rather oracular formulation allowed May to give free reign to Christianity’s many influences during an era that Koch had thoroughly politicized and secularized. Even though he was speaking of the eighteenth century, May’s pronouncements on religion in the Enlightenment took on a universal quality. Religion was everywhere, always, a primal element of the human condition. “Even, or rather especially, when society seems reasonably stable and

reasonably progressive,” he explained, “human beings long for fulfillment, reassurance, and certainty.” The great skeptics of the Enlightenment—Voltaire, Helvétius, d’Holbach, Hume—were no match for this basic human hunger. “When one looks closely at the instances of ‘French infidelity’ in America presented by contemporary alarmists or, with different emotions, by later liberal historians,” May went on, “one finds some of the evidence melting away.”³⁷

May’s preoccupation with religion had several sources. One was intellectual. The book drew from the great syntheses of American religious history that had been published in the previous decades, especially those of Sydney Ahlstrom, Alan Heimert, Sidney Mead, and Perry Miller.³⁸ But it also had an avant-garde source: the anthropology of Clifford Geertz, identified by John Higham as “virtually the patron saint” of the Wingspread conference of 1977.³⁹ Geertz’s influential book *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) had cast anthropology not as an empirical science but as a semiotic act. “[M]an is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun,” Geertz wrote, urging “thick description” as the best method for unraveling the mysteries of human behavior in its many contexts.⁴⁰ By 1977, the publication of May’s book was a year behind him, and he used the conference to reflect on its gestation in his mind. May explained that he had absorbed Geertz’s insight that religion was not a strongbox of specific dogmas and creeds but instead “a set of symbols endowed with ultimate authority and tremendous motivating power.”⁴¹

Hence May’s memorable argument: there was no need for Americans to fight with religion during the American Enlightenment because faith was the very air they breathed. It might sometimes mix with the heady vapors of infidelity wafting westward from the *philosophes*, but always in America a basic religiosity was felt to be (as Geertz put it in his definition of religion) “uniquely realistic.”⁴² The message was reassuring for modern Americans. Whatever godless doctrines the Soviet Union might be brewing, midcentury Americans could find an antidote in their national legacy of healthfully mixing Protestant religion and Enlightenment rationalism.⁴³ Ironically, one reviewer of *The Enlightenment in America* critiqued May for being insufficiently Geertzian. Citing Geertz, Joyce Appleby complained that the 355 men and women in May’s book “hold ideas; they rarely create with them, feel constrained by them, fight with them.”⁴⁴

Personal struggles may also have influenced May’s decision to cast religion as the central drama of the American Enlightenment. Agnostic as a young man, May had drifted into more formal Christianity in the 1950s. “I had to believe in something,” he recalled in his memoir.⁴⁵ He read Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich and became “interested in religion.”⁴⁶ *The Enlightenment in America* may have reflected some of May’s own ambivalent feelings about organized religion. “My sympathies are with those who are not sure that they understand themselves and the universe rather than with those who make hard things easy,” he argued. “I do not think that either the formulae of any kind of Enlightenment or the creeds of traditional Christianity express the whole truth about human nature.”⁴⁷ In his Wingspread essay, he further pursued this train of thought.

"What I am going to say about this subject is personal, because I think history-writing is a rather personal business," he revealed to the group.⁴⁸ One reviewer suggested that what was personal was May's animus toward Adrienne Koch and her secular Enlightenment. "Although May and the late Adrienne Koch were colleagues at Berkeley for more than a decade," observed Michael Kammen, "he barely acknowledges her contributions to our understanding of American political theory between 1765 and 1825. Indeed, one almost feels that he has attempted to bypass her life's work by constructing an alternative American Enlightenment to hers."⁴⁹

Reviewers greeted May's book with both praise and dismay. They cheered the apparent triumph of a distinctively American Enlightenment, one that promised to correct the Eurocentric assumptions of previous chroniclers such as Peter Gay.⁵⁰ With its long chronology thrusting the Enlightenment deep into the seventeenth century, with its attention not just to New England but to the Middle Colonies and the South, with its luminous prose and precise vignettes of major and minor figures, Henry May's book was sufficiently magisterial that it finally gave Americans something to rival the great European syntheses of the subject.⁵¹ But reviewers were put off by its antiseptic quality. It was never quite clear why the ideas of the American Enlightenment had been worth fighting over, let alone dying for. The book was "unexciting" (Drew McCoy), "a disappointment" (Stephen Stein), in fact "fundamentally disappointing" (Rush Welter).⁵²

In retrospect, it is also clear that May's book suffered from bad timing. It seemed to fit nowhere in the great bipolarity that emerged in the wake of Bernard Bailyn's *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967) and Gordon Wood's *Creation of the American Republic* (1969).⁵³ While May seemed to be blandly proposing that the Enlightenment had also happened in America, these other works suggested that under the American Revolution lurked a wholesale *ideology*, complete with conspiracy theories and paranoia. Neither Wood nor Bailyn wrote off the Enlightenment, but they downgraded its importance in the larger drama of the American Revolution. Bailyn, for example, needed to diminish the shaping influence of the Enlightenment in order to clear a path for his own thesis: that apprehensive colonial Americans had fused the writings of radical thinkers of the English Civil War and their eighteenth-century interpreters to forge a "comprehensive theory of politics" that discerned in new British taxation policies nothing less than a conspiracy to deprive the colonists of their liberties. Enlightenment authors, widely read as they may have been, were "neither clearly dominant nor wholly determinative."⁵⁴ Unlike the ideologically generative English Civil War writers, Enlightenment thinkers "did not create new social and political forces in America. They released those that had long existed, and vastly increased their power."⁵⁵ A few years later, J. G. A. Pocock's *Machiavellian Moment* (1975) built on this ideological reading by offering an ambitious regional (Atlantic) genealogy for a "republican tradition" that allegedly stretched back to the Renaissance.⁵⁶ This "republican synthesis" school was generally understood to be opposing a "liberal tradition" school described by Louis Hartz, who had posited a

Lockean liberal tradition as the explanation for American politics from the revolutionary era forward.

By the time May's book appeared, a Manichean balance of power between a "republican synthesis" bloc and a "liberal tradition" bloc was locking into place. Generations of graduate students plowed through the required reading on what essentially became liberalism-republicanism systems theory. In this, the American Enlightenment had no place.⁵⁷ May's endnotes in *The Enlightenment in America* suggest that he recognized that the train had left the station without him. "Pocock's rich and complex book reached me after I had completed my own."⁵⁸

WHAT WAS "AMERICAN" ABOUT THE ENLIGHTENMENT?

The post-World War II idea of an America whose meanings could be discerned and celebrated had collapsed by 1980, and with it, the ambitious American Enlightenment it had upheld. The crumbling of the great books tradition of the American Enlightenment has allowed more specific treatments of the subject to flourish in the last three decades. These have added immensely to our understanding of the complexities of the long eighteenth century in North America and the Caribbean. In the late 1980s and 1990s, postmodernism encouraged studies of the literature and language of the American Enlightenment. More recently, there have been biographical studies of major people; works on religion, women, and science; local studies of the Enlightenment's effects in particular places in British America and the early United States; and two recent articles in flagship journals that synthesize the historiography of the American Enlightenment.⁵⁹

But precisely because the idea of a great, exceptional America has waned, it is now more important than ever to ask whether it is useful to hunt for what is particularly "American" about the Enlightenment. In fact, the problem of national particularity has also preoccupied the larger field of Enlightenment studies for the last thirty years. Scholars have wondered whether we can speak only of enlightenments in the plural instead of the Enlightenment, singular. Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich spurred this debate, in 1981, in a collection of essays that addressed national and confessional differences in the Enlightenment.⁶⁰ More recently, John Robertson has argued against the pluralizing impulses in Enlightenment studies. His comparative analysis of the two European peripheries of Scotland and Naples proposes that there was far more intellectual coherence in the Enlightenment than previously believed. His case studies show that physically distant kingdoms could share commonalities, especially in the discourses on political economy and society. Robertson's title puns on his major argument: the case-study method of examining the Enlightenment reveals "the extent and depth of the differences of context" and thereby achieves "a richer, 'thicker' historical description of Enlightenment in both places."⁶¹

Questions of local particularity and commonality bedevil the American Enlightenment. Depending on the context, “America” means not just British America and the United States but all of the Americas, a region much larger and more diverse than Europe. Moreover, it was common in the eighteenth century to use the term *America* as a synonym for the whole of the New World, so we do violence to the eighteenth-century idea of America by limiting it to one part. Yet documenting the Enlightenment of the whole of America would be difficult in the extreme: it would require expertise in multiple languages, archives, and national histories that are not easy to master. Even if we concede that both British and Spanish America had robust Enlightenments, it is difficult to know how one might begin to compare them. When put side by side, “the Spanish American Enlightenment lagged behind its British American equivalent,” J. H. Elliott argues.⁶² What is more, Spanish American historiography has long wrestled with issues that were of less concern in British America, such as the usage of the term “enlightened despotism.”⁶³ Even today, the historical profession remains divided along imperial lines when it comes to the study of the Americas: rarely do North Americanists and Latin Americanists train together in doctoral programs.

Yet the payoffs of an expanded, hemispheric notion of “American Enlightenment” are enticing. The Americas in the long eighteenth century shared important commonalities. No other region within the Enlightenment’s reach was at the same time so far from Europe, so dominated by colonial status for so long, so populated by indigenous peoples, and so shaped by chattel slavery. Americans both north and south often wrestled with common texts, such as the Abbé Raynal’s controversial polemic *L’Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (1770). And, contra Elliott, comparison can do more than assign relative speed and progress. In his recent study of Enlightenment writing in Spanish and Mexican Texas, Raúl Coronado has warned not just against center-periphery models of Enlightenment (what we might call the “spatial” Enlightenment) but also against the dangers of aligning Enlightenments in a temporal dimension (what we might call the “temporal” Enlightenment). The Enlightenment, he writes, was “susceptible to multiple temporalities that may lead to familiar forms but with contents that have had distinct genealogies.”⁶⁴

The place of the Americas in the Enlightenment has recently been influentially treated by J. G. A. Pocock as part of his larger project on the Enlightenment, *Barbarism and Religion* (6 vols., 1999–2015). This series represents his attempt to overturn the idea of a unitary Enlightenment, especially one centered on French *philosophes*. Instead, he proposes a “family of Enlightenments” and sees the Enlightenment as “a number of movements in both harmony and conflict with each other.” Pocock defines the Enlightenment by two characteristics, both more political and sociological than intellectual: first, as the emergence within Europe of a system of states and commercial societies that enabled it to escape from the deadly wars of religion without falling under the sway of a single monarch; and second, as programs to shrink the power of churches as disturbers of the

peace of civil society. Pocock sees the Enlightenment as a story that the eighteenth century told itself about this new state of affairs—hence his preoccupation with historical narrative strategies. He is particularly interested in the juxtaposition of civil history (an event-driven narrative about the rise of law, liberty, and civilization) and philosophical history (everything else that did not conform to these documentary requirements: a static painting, or *peinture*, as Pocock calls it).⁶⁵

Standing at the center of Pocock's decentering project is Edward Gibbon and his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (6 vols., 1776–1788). Pocock charges that modern historians banished Gibbon from the Enlightenment because he was neither French nor in agreement with the *philosophe* enterprise. Pocock acknowledges the problems of a Gibbon-centered view of the Enlightenment: "Gibbon is at its centre only in the sense that its definitions constantly recur to his position in it; there are of course many aspects of Enlightenment not considered here, for the reason that they are not relevant to him nor he to them, but their absence carries no message that they are not important."⁶⁶

Having justified six volumes on Gibbon, Pocock argues that the man and his work were neither un-enlightened nor counter-Enlightenment for telling a different kind of history than those of historians (Voltaire, David Hume, William Robertson) safely nestled in the Enlightenment pantheon, who were "concerned with the exit from the Christian millennium into a Europe of state power and civil society; the *Decline and Fall* is exceptional in confining itself to the way into that millennium." As Pocock sees it, two hundred years before Peter Brown popularized the term "late antiquity," Gibbon was already carving out such a period to make the point that the twin cancers of barbarism and religion lurked at the fall of Rome. In Pocock's view of a decentered, plural Enlightenment, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* shows the multiplicity of Enlightenments, not just geographically—in that it was written by an English historian living in Switzerland about a largely Mediterranean topic—but also intellectually, by embodying the thesis that the Enlightenment was not merely about rebelling against religion. Rather, the Enlightenment was also about coming to terms with the force of religion in creating Europe. Gibbon was an unbeliever, just like Voltaire. But by telling a story of medieval origins rather than early modern outcomes, Gibbon became the great ecclesiastical historian, writing of religion not as "mere darkness and absurdity" (Voltaire's preferred register), but as "an active self-understanding force."⁶⁷

Sidelined for three volumes, the Americas and other imperial peripheries move to the center of Pocock's story in volume 4, which is subtitled "Barbarians, Savages and Empires." Here Pocock argues that while the idea of the *barbarian* was as old as antiquity, the idea of the *savage* was invented chiefly in contact with the Americas. Reconceiving the fifth-century CE sack of Rome as a founding moment, Pocock casts barbarians as constructive agents of modernity who replaced the ancient world of paganism with a post-pagan, religion-infused late antiquity. By contrast, modern-day savages were savages because they fit nowhere in the European project of writing history: they appeared

to lack law, liberty, and civilization and so failed to find a place in the Enlightenment project of history writing. They could be nothing but *peinture*, the objects of static, philosophical history. Thus the spectacular paradox of the modern savage: the concept was created by modernity itself as the creature who lacked history and any possibility of achieving modernity.⁶⁸

For Pocock, the periphery of the Americas is less a geographical periphery than a narrative one. The physicality of the place itself—its peoples and geography—dwindles in importance. For this reason, Pocock refuses the idea of “creole patriotism” advanced by David Brading and Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra. Both have argued that American-born scholars in Spain’s New World colonies advanced alternative historical frameworks and constructed archives that cast doubt on the European Enlightenment’s universalizing historical narratives.⁶⁹ Pocock will have none of it and casts the paradigm as the interpretive error of premature nationalism. “[T]he question may still be asked how far creole and clerical scholarship, even at its impressive best, possessed the archaeological resources necessary to build up an erudition and philology” equal to “the historiographic intellect in Europe.”⁷⁰ He gives short shrift to what Antonello Gerbi called “the dispute of the New World,” even though this debate captivated European *érudits* (most famously Buffon) and obsessed North American and South American intellectuals in the eighteenth century.⁷¹ For Pocock, European historical strategies remain “at the centre of the picture.”⁷²

“Their absence carries no message that they are not important,” Pocock asserts of other aspects of the Enlightenment, but reading his interpretation of the Americas, it is hard to see how this can be true.⁷³ History writing was important to the Enlightenment and its conception of itself, but it did not capture the entire field of intellectual transformation known in this age that called itself “enlightened.” Pocock’s conception of the Americas is set up so as to exclude by definition other forms of inquiry, or to find them wanting. The problem of American archives, questions, and archaeological resources remains unprobed.

By contrast, historians of Spanish America have argued that the active presence of local New World realities pressed on major questions of the Enlightenment. “Local” is taken to mean especially two things: first, the demographic, geographical, political, or economic features of the Americas, whether as continuations of European features or exceptional to the Americas; and second, the desire in Europe and America for first-hand knowledge of the Americas. These criteria are reminders that Europe, too, was animated by local impulses; in fact, the universalizing rhetoric of the Enlightenment can be seen as a local, homegrown European product.

David Weber’s *Bárbaros: Spaniards and Their Savages in the Age of Enlightenment* (2005), for example, establishes the presence and sheer demographic weight of Indians in Spanish America as a major Enlightenment question. Weber focuses on what he calls the “unconquered” Indians who were settled on the many frontiers of Spanish America. Even in the late eighteenth century, fully 250 years after Hernán Cortés took