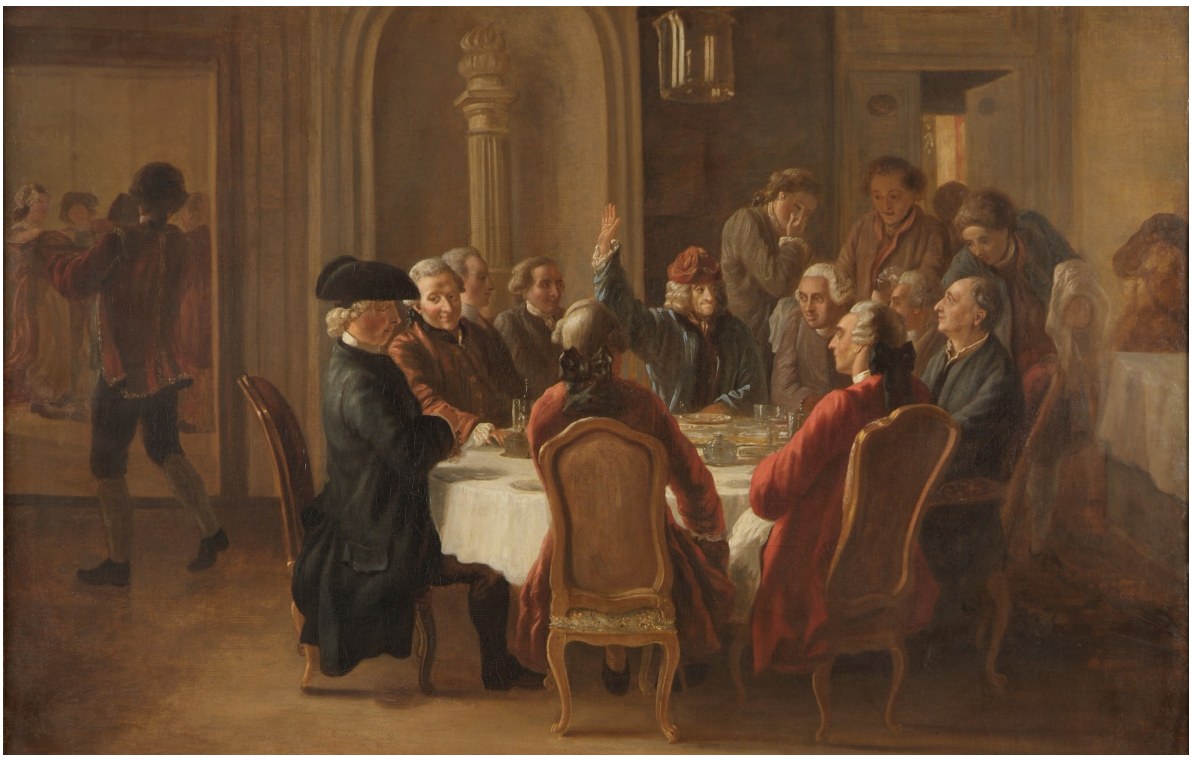
HISTORY AND VALUES

We are all children of the Enlightenment

Philipp Blom



'Un dîner des philosophes', Jean Huber (1772). Font: Voltaire Foundation, Oxford

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I

I grew up as a child of the Enlightenment and was lucky enough to live in a house full of books. That fired up my imagination, albeit sometimes in quite unexpected ways. An example: like all fourteen-year-olds, I found life overwhelming and inexplicable, so I reached into the bookcase and found Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. I'd heard it was a great book and hoped philosophy would explain my life to me, in plain language and with rules. In a way, the whole thing was sublime and sounded very impressive but it made me feel perplexed. My life was upside-down, but the great Kant's system had nothing to say about it. Like many hopeful readers both before and after me, I put the book to one side, disappointed.

And yet there was one idea I fell desperately in love with —I was, after all, at the right age— which was the claim that I could trace a path through this chaotic world and that the map I needed wasn't to be found in a holy scripture, not in a library or in a myth, but in me, in my reason, in my ability to think, an ability that everyone has and is as natural as breathing. That first intellectual love has become a lifelong, albeit not always a smooth relationship with methodical thinking, a strange long-distance relationship with those brilliant ideas of people who are long dead.

For me, the most important encounter of this kind was with the irresistibly sensual and astute Denis Diderot in pre-revolutionary France, who became known as the editor of the great *Encyclopédie* and who, in his letters, literary texts and essays, wrote of and conceived a radically humanist world view.

Diderot and other authors of the 17th and 18th centuries lived at a time when the brightest minds were just beginning to feel the first winds of modernity.

With them, I learned that neither the Enlightenment nor philosophy consists of a catalog of doctrines and thick books, but rather of a landscape of debates, provocations, proposals, and experiments. Philosophy is, as the Swiss philosopher Barbara Bleisch puts it, 'risky thinking'.

In a world where the power of the throne and altar was absolute, these thinkers dared to question and rethink everything and even themselves. They weren't intimidated by censorship or the secret police and even risked becoming strangers in their own land and to their own family as a result of their scandalous thoughts about religion and human dignity. In spite of these often very real dangers, clear thinking proved irresistible and has shaped our present: human rights; *liberté*, *égalité*, *fraternité*; life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; democracy, natural science, the liberation of slaves, the end of church domination and the emancipation of women would have all literally been unthinkable without the Enlightenment.

II

'We are all children of the Enlightenment.'

This creed has meanwhile degenerated into a stock phrase. Politicians, journalists, and historians all talk as if it were a matter of course. Yet it's precisely the present that's quite obviously refuting such beliefs, for since the end of totalitarianism there has never been such a far-reaching and powerful attack on Enlightenment in Western countries as there is today. Enlightenment is an attempt to respect critical thinking and to respect facts more highly than opinions, prejudices, feelings, traditions or dogma. But this principle is suddenly on the defensive: at a time of fake news when factual knowledge is repelled by filter bubbles, when an American president surpasses himself on a daily basis as a liar, and when, in the same country, 'well-founded rumors' are used to stir up the old myth of a Jewish global conspiracy, there's no need to elaborate any further.

Universal human rights, too, have long since been bundled up together as a kind of rhetorical appeasement. For it goes without saying that there are two classes of human rights in the world: those born in the wealthy West have more rights, more freedoms, more opportunities —and all at the expense of others.

Christoph Ransmayr, who recently returned from Rwanda, puts it this way:

'Without the ore and rare earth mined here, without the gold and silver and diamond mines and countless other mineral resources, without the crops harvested here, without the labour of millions and millions of slaves and low-paid workers, Europe would probably be far from the paradise that these streams of refugees admire and long for…'

This paradise, like all paradises, is under threat. Universal thinking and universal human rights have been replaced by a retreat to the self, to the nation, to borders. Freedom, equality and solidarity are obviously only attractive or enforceable when protected by high walls and barbed wire. They are *our* freedom and *our* equality.

But what's this freedom worth if it requires not knowing anything, not being informed but rather settling back and chewing the cud? And what's the appropriate response to citizens who clearly find their responsibility tedious, their freedom too exhausting and their equality suspect, who prefer truth by feeling rather than by considering?

In this context, the sentence 'We are children of the Enlightenment' takes on a different meaning. The stress is increasingly placed on the first word and it's supposed to mean: *We* are children of the Enlightenment. In other words, not Muslims, not foreign invaders because they're not like us; they're unenlightened, they can't be integrated, they should stay put. We want to keep what we have; we want to stay the way we are. That's how Enlightenment becomes a weapon for maintaining the *statu quo* of the rich and powerful.

III

The dismantling of the Enlightenment extends far beyond Europe. Autocratic states are emerging all over the globe; authoritarian structures and nationalistic identities we'd thought had been surmounted long ago are now becoming a program or practice; truth and science are losing validity and voluntary stupefaction is spreading.

Perhaps this is simply a reaction to the fundamental changes occurring in society within just three generations. After progression comes regression. Three hundred years ago it was easy to believe in progress; today the side effects are beginning to overwhelm its original intention, and so progress itself can become its opposite. Perhaps this is the beginning of the end for enlightened societies. After us comes ethnic pluralism.

We're moving among the scenery of the Enlightenment like actors with the wrong script on a stage designed for a drama that was played out long ago.

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But why is all this happening now, at a time when fewer people are starving than ever, fewer people are dying violent deaths and our countries are more prosperous and safer than ever before? Because more and more people are getting scared.

More and more people are afraid of losing their property and status, of losing a familiar world, of losing hope. More and more people see a growing gap between the official reality characterized by liberalism and what they themselves are experiencing. The global economic order has mutated into a bitter parody of the enlightened thoughts it invokes. It's replacing rationality with rationalization, universalism with the global market, human freedom with consumer product choice, and equality with statistical standardization. Citizens' rights become warranties because, in this world, you don't need a passport but a credit card.

On a global scale, this parody of the Enlightenment has shattered the old social structures and, in the words of the Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, it has created a 'liquid modernity' in which societies, markets, ecosystems, and identities are in constant turmoil. This parody lies behind some of the fear seeping into our societies.

Change is accompanied by hypocrisy. Politicians and economists talk about economic growth, about innovation and productivity, about full employment and prosperity, but at the same time fewer and fewer people are earning more and more, while an increasing number of people realize there's no better future waiting for them, that they have to work for the system but that the system doesn't work for them.

An increasing number of people feel that the artificial political idyll of the post-war period is over, that history has returned to Europe with all the shady underbelly we thought had long since been defeated, and with its lifelong companion: the all-dominant market. As a result, the future is no longer perceived as a promise but a threat. We won't get any richer, safer or more privileged. The best hope for our societies has, therefore, become to avoid the future at all cost and to live in a never-ending present. But this future has long since come to us: in the form of warmer winters and clever algorithms, but it has come to us on foot and in boats, in the form of people. Rich societies can buy time to postpone big changes, but they're buying it on their children's credit.

IV

In the face of this constant and continuous destabilization, no wonder so many people have to contend with fear, and more and more people are looking for alternatives to a system that cannot appease such fears, that offers no real grounds for hope. But liberal democracy has one thing in common with religion: it can only exist if enough people believe in it.

In fact, however, an increasing number of people are retreating —from democracy, from responsibility, from all the posturing about freedom, equality, and solidarity. It's a retreat

from the global market to Fortress Europe. The play being acted out among the scenery of the Enlightenment is threatening to slip entirely out of our hands.

V

We say ‘We are all children of the Enlightenment’ and use this sentence as a kind of umbrella against the unknown. We are descendants of pioneers who risked something to provide us with a comfortable life with chartered rights, a generation of heirs who secretly consider themselves morally superior because their ancestors were once courageous. Maybe it’s time for us finally to grow up. Growing up always means facing one’s own fears. Given the politics of fear and hatred that is also becoming increasingly prevalent in Europe, it’s high time we realized that,
in addition to global warming, another climate change is taking place today: a change in the civilized and often unwritten rules and attitudes that make democracy possible.

Liberal democracy is a very young and fragile form of government, a historical experiment with an open outcome. Democracy as we understand it has only existed for a few decades in many European countries, while in others it has long been actively eroded. It’s not a natural state, but instead constantly runs the risk of degenerating into a mere backdrop, into a kind of theatre to legitimize autocrats.

Democracy cannot create the conditions it needs to exist by itself. It depends not only on strong institutions but also on less clearly definable prerequisites: a certain basic understanding, a kind of decency, self-control, respect in dealing with others and a respect for facts. If these conditions are undermined, democracy will be thrown into turmoil and eventually collapse. That’s why it’s so dangerous that we live in anxious societies. Anxious people think differently; they have a different perception of the world to that of confident people. The people whose profession and strategy is to manipulate voters and consumers know only too well that whoever controls fear also controls people.

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Hence, the climate of opinion is almost unexpectedly shifting away from ideas such as human rights and freedom towards identity and security in a hostile world, and thus from discussion to confrontation. Against this threatening backdrop, the rationalist Enlightenment is fading into a silhouette with a powdered wig.

VI

So has the Enlightenment become obsolete? Has it been hopelessly compromised by its proximity to power? Or, indeed, as some argue, was it actually a mistake, a historical folly?

Enlightenment is risky thinking. And we, the heirs, don't want to take that risk anymore. We don't really want a future; we just want our privileged present to never end, even though it's visibly crumbling and falling apart all around us.

In order to shape whatever the future brings, and not suffer as a consequence of it, we need something more than new technologies and improved efficiency, no high walls and no deterrence. We need to transform the Western way of life because only when people have a realistic reason for hope will fear to disappear. To this end, we need the courage to take risks again when thinking about the world and our own position in it. Enlightenment is more necessary than ever, but not in its narrow rationalistic form or as an economic parody.

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For my special friend, the encyclopaedist Denis Diderot, the fulfillment of life in the mid-18th century was not rationality but *volupté*, sensuality, pleasure. We don't live by reason alone; we literally owe our lives to desire, to *Eros*, which drives us daily to carry on, which gives us the courage to overcome setbacks, to seek new ways to communicate with others. But sensuality is not competition between rational individuals. Desire and empathy need, indeed they seek out communication and touch, they create debate and solidarity. I am human because I desire, because I feel compassion for other people, and I can therefore only live well if others do so, too. And, suddenly, an ethic arises from desire. Enlightened thinking begins to speak to our passions —and even to our fears.

VII

What if a new, urgently needed Enlightenment was to begin by restoring passion? What if we saw ourselves as passionate beings? What if we could learn to see ourselves as enlightened people in the light of science as *Homo sapiens*, as a species that shares 98% of its genetic make-up with chimpanzees and whose special gift —a kind of symbolically abstracting cunning— has made us unexpectedly successful and numerous in just a few millennia? Then we would realize that we're *not* above nature but *within* it. We would realise that we're not the crowning achievement of creation; that the Earth is not subservient to us but that we're a tiny part of a complex system that will continue to exist without us. *Homo sapiens* would learn to see themselves as a highly interesting but problematic ape that isn't always wise enough to use its passion or intelligence sensibly, and an ape that, in spite of, or even because of all its technological achievements, craves belonging, stability and meaning now more than ever.

But since the stability of Western societies is based on constant economic growth, *Homo*

sapiens are forced to constantly satisfy their artificial but ravenous appetite. This hunger can only be satisfied at the expense of others —something many of them have realised, and they would rather have a seat at the banquet than starve. This is also how global migration arises.

Meanwhile, economic performance is growing and growing, and society, government, and the country is therefore successful, at least according to the official view. From the perspective of nature, however, the situation looks quite different. Culturally, one of our most important partner organisms is yeast, enabling people to produce things like bread, beer and wine for thousands of years. Yeast is a single-celled type of fungi that multiplies exponentially by devouring sugar, continuing on and on, insatiable, until all the resources are used up when it chokes on its own excretions and starves to death. At an individual level, fungi have not produced a Mozart or Shakespeare but, collectively, we humans seem to have learned little more than yeast over millions of years of evolution. We're devouring ourselves until we choke. But, unlike fungi, *Homo sapiens* can change their behavior through understanding, imagination, and empathy, perhaps enabling a future in which economics is seen as part of ecology and people as apes with a tendency to hopelessly overrate themselves. That would be risky for our prosperity and the status quo. *That* would be enlightening.

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A fourteen-year-old today will inherit a world with immense risks. But anyone who's willing to turn the dynamics of enlightened thinking against the dogma of the present, who's willing to think for themselves and to engage in risky thinking, can become part of a future that's worth living in, not as a child or as an heir, but as part of nature, as a compassionate ape —with a passion for a good life.

Philipp Blom

Philipp Blom is an historian, novelist and journalist. He studied history, philosophy and Jewish studies in Vienna and Oxford. He is the author of several best-selling books, such as *The Vertigo Years* (2008) or *Fracture: Life and Culture in the West* (2017), which deal with the European cultural history of the early twentieth century. He also authored the book *A Wicked Company: The Forgotten Radicalism of the European Enlightenment* (2010). In his latest works –*Nature's Mutinity* (2019) and *What is at Stake* (2021)– Blom reflects on climate change, digitalization and democracy.