

Pre-proofed copy. The final version appears in Laurence Brockliss and Ritchie Robertson (ed.), *Isaiah Berlin and the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 51-66 <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/isaiah-berlin-and-the-enlightenment-9780198783930>

Between Friedrich Meinecke and Ernst Cassirer: Isaiah Berlin's bifurcated Enlightenment

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Since the turn of the millennium Isaiah Berlin's construction of the Counter-Enlightenment has attracted much scholarly attention, giving rise to controversies over the historical significance and philosophical aims of what Berlin depicted as a coherent, mostly German movement.¹ Berlin drew a sharp contrast between the Counter-Enlightenment, championing relativism and the incommensurability of values, and a Franco-British Enlightenment allegedly besotted with the sovereignty of reason and its ability to provide unitary answers to all important questions. The focus of these recent debates on the opposition to the Enlightenment may be attributed to the title of Berlin's renowned essay of 1973, 'The Counter-Enlightenment' – and to the links he made between his own arguments for value pluralism and the figures he described as enemies of the Enlightenment (especially Vico and Herder).

Additionally, Berlin's posthumously published collections of essays, *The Roots of Romanticism* and *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, deal with Romanticism and its sources, which Berlin traced back to the Counter-Enlightenment. When he dedicated independent essays to authors widely regarded as Enlightenment thinkers, such as

I am grateful to Henry Hardy for his expert guidance through Berlin's unpublished papers and correspondence, and to Laurence Brockliss and Ritchie Robertson for the opportunity to reflect in detail on Isaiah Berlin's Enlightenment. Helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper were provided by Joseph Mali, John Robertson, and audiences at Wolfson College, Oxford (March 2014) and the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (April 2015).

¹ See especially IBCE; Robert E. Norton, 'The Myth of the Counter-Enlightenment' and Steven Lestition, 'Countering, Transposing, or Negating the Enlightenment? A Response to Robert Norton', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68.4 (2007), 635-681; Norton, 'Isaiah Berlin's 'Expressionism,' or: 'Ha! Du bist das Blökende!''', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69.2 (2008), 229-247; Zeev Sternhell, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, trans. David Maisel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 372-421; Joseph Mali, 'The Invention of the Counter-Enlightenment: The Case for the Defense', in *Knowledge and Religion in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Honor of Michael Heyd*, ed. Asaph Ben-Tov, Yaacov Deutsch, and Tamar Herzig (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 205-228.

Hume or Montesquieu, it was mostly in order to stress elements in their works that could be later appropriated by the Counter-Enlightenment rather than to outline an intellectual overview of the Enlightenment itself.²

However, the description of a coherent Counter-Enlightenment necessitated the erection of an intellectual straw man termed ‘Enlightenment’, and this construct remained largely intact throughout Berlin’s career. As T. J. Reed argues in this volume, while Berlin professed his general adherence to Enlightenment values, he was usually reluctant to engage closely with its ideas.³ In this essay I shall reconstruct the contours of Berlin’s concept of the Enlightenment rather than its rival – even if this reconstruction has to rely, at times, on distinctions made in Berlin’s works on the Counter-Enlightenment. I would also suggest a hitherto largely neglected source for this distinction: Friedrich Meinecke’s two-volume work of 1936 on the origins of German historicism, published in English in 1972 with a preface by Berlin. Whereas Meinecke’s book has been curiously absent from most recent discussions of Berlin’s Counter-Enlightenment, I shall argue for its significance in the formation of Berlin’s portrayal of eighteenth-century Europe as sharply divided between two intellectual factions. Linking unpublished letters and notes by Berlin to his more familiar overviews of the Enlightenment and its critics, this essay also compares Berlin’s affirmative use of Meinecke’s work to his critique of Ernst Cassirer’s approach to the Enlightenment. By situating Berlin’s Enlightenment next to its portrayals by these German contemporaries, we may perceive more clearly the underlying structure of his own account.

I. Enlightenment and its ‘other’

Isaiah Berlin’s first sustained attempt to provide a general outline of eighteenth-century philosophy took place long before the publication of his renowned account, in the early 1970s, of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment. In his first book, a biography of Karl Marx (1939), Berlin outlined the intellectual background of Marx’s thought as a combination of a scientifically based theory of society, which he ascribed to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and a more teleological, Hegelian view of

² See, for example, ‘Montesquieu’ and ‘Hume and the Sources of German Anti-Rationalism’, in AC 130-161 and 162-187.

³ CIB 70-1. Cf. Berlin’s exchange with Mark Lilla, TCE 493-511.

historical development. In this early work the main thrust of eighteenth-century thought, or ‘semi-empirical rationalism’ as Berlin called it, was ‘boundless faith in the power of reason to explain and improve the world, all previous failure to do so being explained as ultimately caused by ignorance of the laws which regulate the behaviour of nature, animate and inanimate.’⁴ The later monist view of reason – Berlin’s claim that for Enlightenment thinkers there was only one sort of reason (a phenomenon, capacity, or measure) which they allegedly applied to all human communities in all periods – was already present in his biography of Marx. Here the young Berlin argued that for eighteenth-century thinkers, ‘since reason can never be opposed to reason, all private and public conflict is ultimately due to some irrational element’ that had to be removed. The quasi-eschatological conclusion of this worldview was clearly drawn: ‘Once this has been achieved, the path is clear to the millennium’ (KM 37).

Materialism was presented as a mainstream Enlightenment belief, La Mettrie providing only an extreme example of this allegedly typical current of eighteenth-century thought. The determinism inherent in a materialistic view of nature and man was a problem, but according to Berlin, the radical intellectuals of the nineteenth century took from their Enlightenment predecessors the confident belief in ‘the immense power of rational education to rescue the masses of mankind from their present miseries, to institute a juster and more scientific distribution of the world’s goods, and so to lead humanity to the limits of attainable happiness’ (KM 39). The genealogy was clear as well: Voltaire, Hume, and Rousseau directly moulded ‘the climate of opinion which formed the character of the revolutionaries of 1789’ – a generation characterized by ‘its absolute moral and intellectual integrity, securely founded upon the belief that the truth must ultimately prevail because it is the truth’ (KM 39).

Modern democrats as well as nineteenth-century radicals were heirs to this legacy – but not without the intervention of a movement of ideas opposed to the Enlightenment. As David Leopold points out in this volume, the major figure here was Hegel and especially his philosophy of history, influenced by ‘the Romantic philosophy of Kant’s successors’ which had been forged into ‘an almost official German faith’ in the wake of Napoleon’s defeat and the emergence of German thinkers from a period of wounded intellectual pride. It is significant to note that

⁴ Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx*, 5th edition, ed. Henry Hardy, foreword by Alan Ryan, afterword by Terrell Carver (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 35. Henceforth KM.

already in this early work, Berlin bundled Immanuel Kant together with the Romantic movement while denying Germany any sort of Enlightenment comparable to France's. Kant's dogmatic slumbers, abruptly interrupted by David Hume, represented the general torpor of eighteenth-century intellectual life in Germany. It was only around the Revolutionary Wars that German authors arose from an inertia stretching from the mid-seventeenth century to around 1800: 'Germany, spiritually and materially crippled by the Thirty Years' War, was, at the end of a long and sterile period, beginning to produce once more, towards the end of the eighteenth century, an indigenous culture of its own' (KM 42). French influence was limited mostly to Rousseau's passionate cultural critique. Berlin portrayed Hegel as leading the opposition to the Enlightenment in modifying the 'peculiar legacy of German historicism' which insisted on examining phenomena in their fullest historical contexts against past background and as anticipating the future. Extending the idea of the uniqueness of individual character to entire historical periods, Berlin's Hegel opposed an empirical view of smooth progress by insisting on the necessity of struggle and wasteful destruction in the course of history (KM 46-55). Marx was, for Isaiah Berlin, very much a product of Enlightenment empiricism clad in Hegelian forms and theses (KM 56). Berlin's view of the Enlightenment proved durable: in different formulations throughout his career it would be presented as a concoction where a large dose of British and French empiricism (Locke, Hume, Voltaire, Condorcet) was mixed with naïve French and German rationalism (Descartes, Leibniz). The opposing force, however, significantly changed its configuration: if in the Marx biography it was a nineteenth-century movement centred on Hegel and variously influenced by Kant and the Romantics, later it would be relocated within the eighteenth century. Berlin's encounter with Meinecke's thesis on the origins of historicism, I would suggest below, may have been a major reason for this temporal shift.

Another major exposition of Berlin's conceptualization of the Enlightenment can be found in the introduction to an anthology he edited in 1956, entitled *The Age of Enlightenment: The Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*. Berlin chose all the texts and provided commentaries; his selection attests to his views on the age. More than 80 pages were dedicated to Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*; almost a hundred to Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*; Berkeley received some 45 pages, while all other authors had to do with no more than five pages, where commentary

was often longer than the original text. Smith, Burke, Gibbon, Diderot, Montesquieu, and Rousseau were all conspicuously absent; Voltaire was represented by a single short paragraph on Locke from the *Philosophical Letters*, and Condillac by one page from his *Treatise on Sensations*. On the German front, the picture was even more peculiar: not a word by Leibniz, Wolff, Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Kant. The anthology ended with Hamann and Lichtenberg, the only representatives of the eighteenth century in Germany, who were sharply set aside from the other authors. Hamann, notwithstanding his admiration for Hume and acquaintance with Kant and Herder, was introduced – like Vico later – as ‘a solitary, isolated thinker’ resisting ‘the very powerful stream of eighteenth-century scientific enlightenment’ (AE 272, 275). Lichtenberg was likewise presented as an original thinker whose work ‘set up trains of thought very unlike the normal sensible sentiments of the eighteenth century’.⁵

Berlin’s introduction is focused on the unfortunate mistake of the Enlightenment as he saw it: the wish to apply to human affairs the methods of both the formal-deductive sciences and the inductive-experimental ones. According to Berlin, the laws of mind and society had to approximate those of nature, so that ‘to every genuine question there were many false answers and only one true one; once discovered it was final – it remained forever true; all that was needed was a reliable method of discovery’ (AE 16). Berlin’s Enlightenment began in the seventeenth century with the great enthusiasm for reason in Descartes’s and Newton’s works – and it did not undergo significant change for more than a century: ‘This epistemological bias characterized European philosophy from Descartes’s formulation of his method of doubt until well into the nineteenth century’. Only Kant put an end, Berlin argued in 1956, to the rather naïve belief that ‘Men were objects in nature no less than trees and stones; their interaction could be studied as that of atoms or plants’ (AE 27). There were ‘dissidents’ who did not agree with this atomistic picture; Berlin conceded that organic notions could be found in Diderot, Maupertuis, and Bordeu, while Johnson and Burke, Hamann and Herder, and to some degree even Montesquieu and Hume were not atomists. Yet on the whole, ‘these remained isolated

⁵ Ibid., 276. In a note of December 1978 to a new edition of the anthology, Berlin sought to explain Kant’s exclusion. Though he belonged to the Enlightenment, Berlin argued, central strands in Kant’s thought entered the Counter-Enlightenment; Kant would therefore be more appropriately included in the following volume of the series – an anthology of nineteenth-century philosophy. (Berlin, ‘Author’s Note’, *The Age of Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), unpaginated.)

doubts' (AE 28). Here too, before Kant there was no great difference between – on the one hand – Locke, Hume and the French empiricists, and – on the other – the rationalist followers of Leibniz and Wolff (AE 28). The introduction did end with a brief albeit powerful tribute to the Enlightenment: 'The intellectual power, honesty, lucidity, courage and disinterested love of the truth of the most gifted thinkers of the eighteenth century remain to this day without parallel. Their age is one of the best and most hopeful episodes in the life of mankind.' Yet this compliment was preceded by a different conclusion, much more in line with the tone of the whole essay. According to Berlin, the Enlightenment may have been useful in countering prejudices and superstitions; 'But the central dream, the demonstration that everything in the world moved by mechanical means, that all evils could be cured by appropriate technological steps, that there could exist engineers of human souls and of human bodies, proved delusive' (AE 29). Much of the intellectual courage of eighteenth-century thinkers was therefore misplaced; an implicit yet strong link was made in the anthology between what Berlin regarded as eighteenth-century scientist naivety and twentieth-century political delusions.⁶

The dating back of the opposition to Enlightenment ideas is signaled most clearly in 'The Counter-Enlightenment', which also opens Berlin's 1979 collection of essays *Against the Current*. In its first sentence Berlin declared that 'Opposition to the central ideas of the French Enlightenment, and of its allies and disciples in other European countries, is as old as the movement itself' (AC 1). It actually extended as far back as the ancient Greek sophists who insisted on the relativity of human customs against the generalizing thrust of Platonic philosophy, and was further heralded by such early modern sceptics as Charron and Montaigne. In this article Berlin demonstrated his awareness of greater nuances in eighteenth-century thought than he had hitherto acknowledged. Shaftesbury and Vico, as well as Edward Young, Edmund Burke and even Rousseau, Hume, and Montesquieu were all credited with contributions to the relativizing trend that would flourish as the Counter-Enlightenment. Herder was even allowed to have had a 'genuine affinity' with the 'wayward and imaginative' Diderot.⁷ Kant contributed significantly to the Counter-

⁶ On Berlin's place within the postwar philosophical critique of Enlightenment, see John Robertson's essay in this volume and his *The Enlightenment: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 122-124.

⁷ For Vico: AC 4-6; on the impact of Shaftesbury, Young, Burke and Rousseau on Hamann: *ibid.*, 9; and on Herder and Diderot: *ibid.*, 12.

Enlightenment by initiating ‘a cult of moral autonomy’ (AC 15). Yet despite these occasional qualifications, all such authors were interpreted as aberrations from and exceptions to Berlin’s outline of the Enlightenment, which – despite the temporal displacement of the Counter-Enlightenment – remained largely unmodified. Hume, Kant, and virtually every French author (before Bonald and de Maistre) were allegedly taking part in one and the same endeavour, ‘the rational and experimental method which Descartes and Galileo had inaugurated, and which for all their doubts and qualifications even such sharp deviationists as Montesquieu, or Hume and Rousseau and Kant, fully and firmly accepted.’⁸ Herder, however, was excluded from this camp and squarely located within the opposition due to his early writings, ‘in spite of the fact that in later life he attempted to construct a theory of history in which the whole of mankind, in a somewhat vague fashion, is represented as developing towards a common *Humanität* which embraces all men and all the arts’ (AC 12). Such deviations as there were did not matter: rationalists and empiricists, Leibnizians and Lockeans, Shaftesbury and Kant, Montesquieu and Diderot, were once again engaged in a single project – and here Berlin significantly resorted five times to the term ‘Natural Law’ as transcending any exceptions within the Enlightenment.

Nevertheless, despite profound differences of outlook, there was a wide area of agreement about fundamental points: the reality of natural law (no longer formulated in the language of orthodox Catholic or Protestant doctrine), of eternal principles by following which alone men could become wise, happy, virtuous, and free. One set of universal and unalterable principles governed the world for theists, deists and atheists, for optimists and pessimists, puritans, primitivists and believers in progress and the richest fruits of science and culture; these laws governed inanimate and animate nature, facts and events, means and ends, private life and public, all societies, epochs and civilisations; it was solely by departing from them that men fell into crime, vice, misery (AC 3).

⁸ AC 19. This attitude may also be attested in one of the collections of Berlin’s unpublished notes on the Enlightenment. Berlin made there a general comment on eighteenth-century thought at the end of his notes on Helvétius: ‘Enlightenment entails headmasters. 18th century progressives do not really believe in either liberty, fraternity or equality. They are anti-democratic. Only tepidly pro-republican.’ (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Berlin 611, Folio 198) Helvétius was criticized by contemporaries such as Diderot, but Berlin chose here to generalize a trait of the Enlightenment from a particularly radical thinker, while treating alternative French voices as ‘deviationists’ (in the 1973 essay on the Counter-Enlightenment).

It is important to remind ourselves of Berlin's construction of the Enlightenment as a courageous if deterministic and ultra-rationalist movement and his frequent exclusion from it of anything that exuded originality of thought, moral autonomy, and pluralism. Research over the last 30 years has exposed the multifaceted character or the unity in diversity of the Enlightenment.⁹ It is now clear that many of the elements ascribed by Berlin to the Counter-Enlightenment were, in fact, part and parcel of Enlightenment thought in different locations – and that a central current in the Enlightenment was from the outset anti-Cartesian. Leibniz and Vico criticized Cartesian epistemology early in the eighteenth century, and this critique was carried on throughout the century and across Europe. It is difficult today to ignore general patterns in Vico and Herder and their views on shared values across different periods – or, likewise, to discount discussions of particularity and untranslatability in Montesquieu and Condillac. The diversity of the Enlightenment cannot be reflected by a simple seventeenth-century attempt to apply the methods of mathematics and physics to all human affairs. Yet the point here is not to fault Berlin for failing to take into account recent research, much of which has been published after his death; it is rather to emphasize the tenacity of his early view of the Enlightenment. Berlin's understanding of the Enlightenment as a monist, anti-pluralist movement proved remarkably resistant even to his own increasing awareness of exceptions to this portrait in the essay on the Counter-Enlightenment and to correctives issued by colleagues such as Peter Gay.¹⁰

⁹ Among many other relevant titles, see Peter H. Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999-2015); Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples, 1680-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). See also my own argument that the linguistic embeddedness and historical situatedness of all forms of life were a common Enlightenment theme – in *Language and Enlightenment: The Berlin Debates of the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁰ See Berlin's response to Gay's point that Enlightenment thinkers were not a 'monolithic group' at a lecture of 11 February 1975 at Wolfson College, Oxford: Berlin, 'Some Opponents of the Enlightenment', in Henry Hardy (ed.), *The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library*, at <<http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/nachlass/opponents.pdf>>, 1-5 (accessed 26 October 2015). Gay had delivered on 28 January 1975 a lecture (as part of the same series at Wolfson) under the telling title 'The Enlightenment as Counter-Enlightenment'.

II. Meinecke's *Historismus* and Berlin's Enlightenment

The enduring force of this particular construction of the Enlightenment may be traced back to Berlin's profound and longstanding admiration for Friedrich Meinecke's work. Indeed, most of the points made in Berlin's earlier works on the Enlightenment – but especially in the 1973 essay comparing it to its enemies – were distilled in his foreword to the single-volume English edition of Meinecke's *Die Entstehung des Historismus* (originally published in 1936 in German in two volumes). In his preface to the English translation, Berlin presented Meinecke's work on German historicism almost as an autobiography, for he saw the author as 'the last great representative of this tradition'.¹¹

Besides the preface to Meinecke's *Historism*, the extent of Berlin's appreciation of Meinecke cannot be fully estimated on the basis of his published work. In various articles and chapters, Berlin referred repeatedly to two main issues or metaphors. One is Meinecke's observation in *Die Idee der Staatsräson* that Machiavelli had thrust a sword (sometimes replaced by a dagger) in the body politic of the West by highlighting the chasm between political and individual morality (AC 39). The other reference is to Meinecke's view of Voltaire as 'the banker of the Enlightenment' – an author who assesses the value of all past phenomena according to his own currency and exchange rates.¹² These sparse references may explain why Meinecke did not attract much scholarly attention in recent debates over the Counter-Enlightenment.¹³ In his article 'The Myth of the Counter-Enlightenment' (2007), for example, Robert Norton argues that Berlin took at face value the scholarship of a group of German authors, writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who described the emergence of a so-called German Movement (*Deutsche Bewegung*). This was a late eighteenth-century movement of ideas allegedly opposed to a simplistic and over-

¹¹ Berlin, 'Foreword', in Friedrich Meinecke, *Historism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook*, trans. by J. E. Anderson, revised by H. D. Schmidt (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), x and xvi.

¹² Ibid., 90; Berlin, 'Two Notions of the History of Culture: The German versus the French Tradition', first of three Gauss Seminars delivered at Princeton in 1973, accessible at Hardy (ed.), *Berlin Virtual Library*: <<http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/nachlass/origins1.pdf>> (accessed 17 October 2015).

¹³ Norton refers to three main potential sources of this notion: Wilhelm Dilthey's inaugural lecture in Basel (1867), 'Die dichterische und philosophische Bewegung in Deutschland 1770–1800'; an essay by Dilthey's student Hermann Nohl, 'Die Deutsche Bewegung und die idealistischen Systeme' (1911); and Rudolf Unger's book of the same year, *Hamann und die Aufklärung* (Norton, 'Myth', 652–656). In Mali and Wokler's volume, Meinecke is mentioned only by Roger Hausheer – albeit generally as an heir of the Counter-Enlightenment rather than a direct influence on Berlin (*Berlin's Counter-Enlightenment*, 38, 41, 47). In a similar manner Zeev Sternhell provides an overview of Meinecke's *Historism* as itself a continuation of the Counter-Enlightenment legacy; structural similarities are mostly limited to Berlin's essay on Machiavelli (*Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, 103–117; 407–408).

rationalist French Enlightenment. Meinecke is not mentioned in Norton's article, yet I would suggest that it is through him that Berlin was exposed to the main arguments of the *Deutsche Bewegung* and came to pit a simplistic Franco-British Enlightenment against what he regarded as its sharp criticism in Germany.

Berlin's unpublished correspondence reveals that that he was instrumental in exposing Anglophone audiences to Meinecke's book on the origins of historicism, which he had held in great esteem at least since the 1950s. In 1958, two years after editing the Enlightenment anthology, Berlin exhorted publishers to embark on the project of issuing English editions of Meinecke's major works beyond *Die Idee der Staatsräson* (1924), which had been published as *Machiavellism* in 1957. In a letter of 9 May 1958 to Stephen Toulmin in Leeds Berlin provided recommendations for books on the history of ideas for an unspecified 'Routledge project':

If you want to spread your net a little wider I should warmly recommend the magnificent works of Meinecke – he is the only historian in Europe in the last fifty years worth reading – only one of his books has been translated into English – under the title of *Machiavellianism* – but both the book on historicism and the one on the emergence of a national State are masterpieces and it is a great shame they are not translated. Decent histories of ideas are as you well know very rare birds, and though I tremble to say it perhaps something on Hegel would not be out of place now.¹⁴

When Berlin was consulted in 1962 by Hans Kohn about a series entitled Milestones of Thought, he was once again confident: 'I'm sure that what is really needed is translations of the major German works – for example, the whole untranslated corpus of Meinecke.'¹⁵

This degree of admiration and enthusiasm is reflected in the preface to the eventual translation of Meinecke's work on historicism. Meinecke's impressive and undeniable achievements as a historian need not be diminished by a sober acknowledgement of his more compromised engagements during – and views on – the *Kaiserreich*, the Weimar Republic (which he accepted in a lukewarm fashion as a

¹⁴ Berlin to Stephen Toulmin, 9 May 1958, transcribed from Berlin's Dictabelt recording (held in the British Library, ref. C1226/63, playback copy F4211). Copyright: The Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust, 2016.

¹⁵ Berlin to Hans Kohn, 11 October 1962, in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Berlin 262, fols. 56–57. Copyright: The Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust, 2016.

Vernunftrepublikaner), and the Third Reich. After the Second World War, in his analysis of the rise and downfall of the Nazi regime, Meinecke presented it as a ‘Satanic’ hijacking of the proper German Spirit. In *The German Catastrophe* (*Die deutsche Katastrophe*, originally published in 1946), one of Meinecke’s suggestions for German regeneration was a return to religion – which would involve ‘not merely tolerance but respect for all the churches, creeds, sects, and religious movements which have a share in the common religious heritage of the Christian Occident’. In the same chapter, he referred to ‘our common oppression under the heathenism of the Third Reich’ – but this point concerned, again, only Protestants and Catholics.¹⁶ The striking absence here of any mention of the Jews and their fate under Nazism was preceded by making them co-responsible for the virulence of German antisemitism. Part of the success of Hitler’s populism was explained by reference to Jewish demeanor: ‘The Jews, who were inclined to enjoy indiscreetly the favorable economic situation now smiling upon them, had since their full emancipation aroused resentment of various sorts. They contributed much to that gradual depreciation and discrediting of the liberal world of ideas that set in after the end of the nineteenth century.’ It was therefore the Jews’ ‘negative and disintegrating influence’ that made fellow Germans ignore their positive achievements, according to Meinecke.¹⁷

In his preface to *Historism*, Berlin was willing to condone and discount such views. For him, Meinecke’s nationalism was tempered by the fact that he was ‘not prepared for inhumanity’.¹⁸ The final judgment in 1972 remained overwhelmingly positive:

Meinecke was an unswervingly honest man, and although the prejudices of his time and class shine through, his unerring – sometimes painful – consciousness of where the true moral centre of gravity of a given social or moral situation lies, seldom fails him. This together with his prodigious learning and feeling for the complex web of ideas, movements, institutions, events and personalities of the principal actors makes his account of the rise of German historical thought a still unsurpassed classic.¹⁹

¹⁶ Friedrich Meinecke, *The German Catastrophe: Reflections and Recollections*, trans. Sidney B. Fay (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 114, 113.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁸ Berlin, ‘Foreword’, xv.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, xv.

Indeed, Berlin introduced Meinecke to his English readers as carrying forth the task of the Counter-Enlightenment in his ‘unsuperseded classic’ of 1936. According to Berlin, ‘Meinecke is intensely anxious not to fall into the errors he castigates in the hated Natural Law, mechanistic, all-levelling, eighteenth-century Encyclopaedist tradition.’²⁰

The main idea of Meinecke’s protagonists, according to Berlin’s preface, was the insight that each human group possessed ‘its own individual laws of growth, its own unique ‘organic’ character’. In short, as Berlin summarized Meinecke, the values of some human groups were incommensurable with those of other societies or periods, and were therefore the only basis for their explanation and justification.²¹ The concept of Natural Law – which could mean many different things in the eighteenth century itself – was employed by Berlin in the preface to *Historism* in a sense similar to Meinecke’s, as a marker of everything German thinkers transcended in their attention to the particularity and autonomy of historical phenomena and individuals. As Meinecke emphasized in his own Preliminary Remarks, ‘the essence of historism is the substitution of individualizing observation for a generalizing view of human forces in history’ – it discovered a new feeling for the individual. Though anticipated by various thinkers across Europe, it was essentially a German movement.²² The notion of Natural Law in Meinecke’s *Historism* permeated different historical periods from ancient Greece to the eighteenth century and even the present – again, in a manner identical to its usage by Berlin in the Counter-Enlightenment essay (which appeared only a year after his preface to *Historism*).

In particular, it was the prevailing concept of Natural Law, handed down from antiquity, which confirmed this belief in the stability of human nature and above all of human reason. Accordingly, it was held that the pronouncements of reason, though they could certainly be obscured by passions and by ignorance, did nevertheless, wherever they could free themselves from these hindrances, speak with the same voice and utter the same timeless and absolutely valid truths, which were in harmony with those prevailing in the universe as a whole.²³

²⁰ Ibid., xii.

²¹ Ibid., xi.

²² Meinecke, ‘Preliminary Remarks’, in *Historism*, lv.

²³ Ibid., lvi.

Long before Berlin, Meinecke stressed a Franco-German divide extending from the late seventeenth century to the nineteenth. Here too was the confident identification of French eighteenth-century thought with Descartes, largely ignoring the widespread dissatisfaction with his physics and epistemology (especially from the 1740s onwards). Meinecke argued that the new self-conscious subject of Descartes – and of ‘the subsequent French working under his influence’ – was ‘not yet the individual subject in all its manifold historical forms, but a generalized subject, the abstract man of Natural Law. And the universal laws discovered in him therefore only served at first to confirm the upholders of Natural Law in their dogmatic certainty that it held the key to understanding human affairs.’²⁴ Even the subsequent empirical stress on the senses and the observation of concrete human facts did not help the lamentably naïve Enlightenment authors. Initially, Meinecke claimed, the Cartesian belief in innate ideas revealed by reason went into the melting pot, replaced by the desire to study human phenomena in an ‘unprejudiced way’. This trend led to a greater appreciation of the passions and the irrational, but unfortunately it also turned the human mind into a *tabula rasa*. The mind, therefore, lost its activity and spontaneity. The Anglo-French Enlightenment, according to Meinecke, remained ‘in bondage to a mechanical causality, which now proceeded to transfer its triumphant advance from the field of the natural sciences to that of the humanities’. Eighteenth-century naturalism was, for him, only a version of the old Natural Law, which in its turn was ‘really nothing but the law of reason and a belief in reason’.²⁵

The principal ideas underlying Berlin’s portraits of the Enlightenment, especially from 1956 onwards, are all manifest in Meinecke’s account. Particularly apparent is the somewhat cavalier fusion of rationalism with empiricism into the same phenomenon because philosophers in both camps appealed to reason (albeit in very different senses). Another striking similarity is the recurring reference made by Meinecke and Berlin to Natural Law as a constant intellectual firmament, virtually unchanged since antiquity yet under different guises, which was decisively rejected only by Herder and his companions. Both authors saw all references to Natural Law in the Enlightenment as mere reincarnations of earlier versions of absolute truths (including Stoic cosmic laws and Thomist divine jurisprudence). Finally, Berlin’s shifting of the opposition to the Enlightenment from nineteenth-century Hegelian

²⁴ Ibid., 3.

²⁵ Ibid., 4.

philosophy to the eighteenth century itself – so evident in the 1973 essay on the Counter-Enlightenment – is one of Meinecke’s main points: Meinecke’s proto-historicist protagonists and their forerunners were coeval with the Enlightenment. According to Meinecke, the first critics of the Enlightenment were Shaftesbury, Leibniz, and Vico, who were all born between 1646 and 1671, and died between 1713 and 1744. In *Historism*, this outlook and the accompanying periodization were heavily emphasized:

But it is a remarkable fact that it was just at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the great movement of Enlightenment, starting in England, was about to pursue its victorious advance, that there grew up simultaneously in England and Germany, and soon afterwards in Italy, new movements of thought, containing the potentiality to transcend this Enlightenment, whether represented by the English empiricists or by the French rationalists.²⁶

This passage makes it clear that the story related in Meinecke’s book is about two parallel movements within the eighteenth century. This was an account of a struggle between the empiricists and rationalists west of the Rhine, on the one hand, and, on the other, the profound German authors east of the river who perceived the living forces and unique individuality encapsulated in each human being and every human community.²⁷ The general lack of scholarly attention to the structural similarities between Meinecke’s historicism and Berlin’s Counter-Enlightenment may be attributed to the spiralling number of meanings historicism itself acquired; by the mid-twentieth century, historicism or ‘the historical school’ had come to represent mainly the academic historians of nineteenth-century Germany, from Ranke to Meinecke himself. Yet Meinecke’s account of the emergence of historicism dealt with two contemporary Enlightenments, or rather – in Isaiah Berlin’s own terminology –

²⁶ Ibid., 5.

²⁷ In the introduction to the second part of his study, Meinecke separated such German authors as Winckelmann, Kant, Lessing, Neologist theologians and the historians of the Göttingen School from both the foreign Enlightenment and the first proto-historicist thinkers (Möser, Herder, Goethe). Meinecke made great efforts to exclude from the latter group two thinkers in particular: Lessing (among whose works Meinecke analyzed only *Nathan the Wise* and *The Education of Mankind*) and Winckelmann. The latter, like Lessing, was relegated to the camp of Germans who were still weighed down by perfectionism. Yet unlike Lessing, Winckelmann’s work was credited with being ‘an outcome of the new German spirit in concert with the reaction already under way against the prevailing Romano-French normative outlook.’ (Ibid., 247)

an Enlightenment and a Counter-Enlightenment existing at one and the same time but separated by clear national boundaries.

III. Cassirer as a counter-example

In 1958, as mentioned above, Berlin wrote to Stephen Toulmin that ‘decent histories of ideas’ were ‘very rare birds’. This observation made Meinecke’s *Historism*, in Berlin’s eyes, a unique work against the background of anything else written on the Enlightenment in the preceding decades. Despite his dense and at times opaque style, Meinecke’s chapters, according to Berlin, ‘demand a good deal more of the reader than the sweeping generalisations of bolder and often more superficial historians of ideas’ – those who, unlike Meinecke, did ‘fall into the errors he castigates in the hated Natural Law’.²⁸ In his foreword to *Historism*, Berlin did not explicitly name these superficial or undemanding historians of ideas. However, given the qualities he prized and praised so profusely in Meinecke’s account of the eighteenth century, there seems to be a clear candidate for this undesirable position: a historian of ideas who did not split the Enlightenment into two opposing camps but tried to find common intellectual denominators across trends and national cultures while paying less attention than Meinecke to the concrete moorings of eighteenth-century authors. At the opposite pole to Meinecke and his protagonists stood Ernst Cassirer and his attempt to salvage a cross-European, common intellectual ferment under the title of Enlightenment.

Berlin met Cassirer in 1933, when the latter delivered a series of lectures on the philosophy of law at All Souls College, Oxford, as an academic refugee (before moving to the University of Gothenburg in Sweden in 1935). In 1933 Berlin described Cassirer in a letter to Adam von Trott as a ‘lucid, interesting, and learned’ lecturer, although he did not resist the temptation of poking fun at the German outsider who was apparently baffled by Oxford’s complexities.²⁹ Yet it is not too clear whether at this point Berlin had read Cassirer’s book on the Enlightenment,

²⁸ Berlin, ‘Foreword’, xii.

²⁹ Berlin to Adam von Trott, 26 October 1933, in *Flourishing: Letters 1928-1946*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Chatto & Windus, 2004), 62. In the following month Berlin wrote to Diana Hubback: ‘I can’t refrain from telling you how puzzled I was 10 minutes ago when, in the middle of this letter, Prof. Ernst Cassirer called to ask if his Seminar was to take place at Christmas. Before that I hope I said politely: he looked at me as tho’ I was quite mad. Christmas turned out to be Christchurch which you guessed already.’ (Berlin to Hubback, 30 October 1933, in *Flourishing*, 64. On Cassirer’s accent, *ibid.*, 91.)

published in Germany in the previous year (1932). By 1951 – when Cassirer’s book first appeared in English – Berlin had already formed his views on the intellectual outlook of the eighteenth century, probably after his engagement with Meinecke’s thesis.

Berlin’s review of Cassirer’s *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, published in 1953, is arguably one of his most scathing published pieces. Employing the vocabulary he would use twenty years later to praise Meinecke, Berlin referred in 1953 to ‘demanding’ and ‘undemanding’ histories of ideas:

Cassirer wishes to convey a general atmosphere and outlook, and does so, in language which is clear, elegant, readable, above all agreeable, and intellectually not at all demanding; but the clarity is not that of dry light, but of water.³⁰

The review remained on a general level, criticizing Cassirer’s methodology and alleged naivety in his attempt to present an all-encompassing analysis of different ideas and movements across Europe under the aegis of Enlightenment. Berlin did not expose his readers to Cassirer’s actual arguments and particular points. Unlike Meinecke and Berlin, for example, Cassirer emphasized Diderot’s organic physics and his interest (alongside Maupertuis) in Leibniz’s dynamics³¹; he reconstructed a new Enlightenment concept mediating between the general and the particular (‘The new whole is organic, not mechanical’)³²; and argued that Helvétius did not represent the Enlightenment, as had often been argued – for he was frequently criticized by contemporaries such as Diderot and Turgot.³³ Crucially, Cassirer fully integrated Leibniz, Kant, and German aesthetics into the Enlightenment, demonstrating their impact in France and England rather than setting off one culture against another. This integrative overview was enabled by Cassirer’s account of the new meaning of reason in the eighteenth century; in *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* it was far from a dead abstraction, blind to any particularity. In terms that are reminiscent of Lessing and Kant, Cassirer sharply distinguished between the seventeenth-century use of

³⁰ Berlin, review of *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* by Ernst Cassirer, *English Historical Review* 68 (1953), 617-19 (p. 618). Berlin’s assessment was much more critical of Cassirer than Meinecke’s own review of the original German edition. Despite understandable disagreements on the Enlightenment’s sense of history and concerning Rousseau, Meinecke called Cassirer’s ‘excellent’ book a ‘masterpiece’ (*Historische Zeitschrift* 149 (1934), 582-586).

³¹ Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 34-35.

³² *Ibid.*, 31.

³³ *Ibid.*, 27.

‘reason’ and what the Enlightenment understood by it:

Reason is now looked upon rather as an acquisition than as a heritage. It is not the treasury of the mind in which the truth like a minted coin lies stored; it is rather the original intellectual force which guides the discovery and determination of truth. This determination is the seed and the indispensable presupposition of all real certainty. The whole eighteenth century understands reason in this sense; not as a sound body of knowledge, principles, and truths, but as a kind of energy, a force which is fully comprehensible only in its agency and effects.³⁴

Cassirer’s understanding of reason as a force or an energy rather than a body of principles and truths – ‘a concept of agency, not of being’³⁵ – was a far cry from Berlin’s and Meinecke’s view. It may be that Cassirer’s thrust here was excessively generalizing, allowing him to link too many diverse phenomena and authors through his concept of reason. Yet the attention to philosophical detail and Cassirer’s customary exclusion of local contexts had a clear socio-political background, which Berlin did not mention to his readers in 1953. To argue openly and decisively for the significance of the Enlightenment in Germany of 1932, against the rising tide of *Lebensphilosophie* and chauvinist particularism, was a bold move. Cassirer did not try to conceal his motives: one of his explicit objectives was to silence the Romantic slogan of a ‘shallow Enlightenment’.³⁶ But there was more to the book’s aims in the twilight of the Weimar Republic:

No account of the history of philosophy can be oriented to history alone. The consideration of the philosophic past must always be accompanied by philosophical reorientation and self-criticism. More than ever before, it seems to me, the time is again ripe for applying such self-criticism to the present age, for holding up to it that bright clear mirror fashioned by the Enlightenment. Much that seems to us today the result of ‘progress’ will to be sure lose its luster when seen in this mirror; and much that we boast of will look strange and distorted in this perspective. But we should be guilty of hasty judgment and dangerous self-deception if we were simply to ascribe these distortions to opaque spots in the mirror, rather than to look elsewhere for their source.³⁷

One of Cassirer’s means of persuasion was his insistence on the ‘Germanness’ of the Enlightenment, or on the centrality of German thinkers within the cross-European

³⁴ Ibid., 13.

³⁵ Ibid., 14.

³⁶ Ibid., xi.

³⁷ Ibid., xi.

movement – as opposed to the Romantic view of the Enlightenment as a foreign affair, resisted and countered in the German mind. He had already made this point, somewhat tortuously, in a putative history of republicanism which he delivered as a lecture on Constitution Day in 1928. In that lecture, Cassirer cast Leibniz as the unlikely originator of the idea of a republican constitution that found its way to British America and France before returning to Germany to receive its ultimate manifestation in Kant's *œuvre*. The point was that the republican idea was no external intruder in German intellectual history. Cassirer wished to counter contemporary views of much liberal and constitutional thought as 'un-German' by suggesting that republicanism grew (also) on German ground and flourished in German idealist philosophy. As such, it could be reclaimed as a genuine element of the local cultural legacy; Cassirer was no mere *Vernunftrepublikaner*.³⁸

His efforts were diametrically opposed to Meinecke's and Berlin's emphasis on an essentially German movement (proto-historicism or Counter-Enlightenment) confronting a Franco-British Enlightenment. Berlin argued in his preface to *Historism* that Meinecke's protagonists were 'acutely conscious of their own German roots in the Reformation, in Pietism and the visionary movements that preceded it, in the localized, provincial, tradition-bound social, political, and religious life of German cities and principalities'; above all, they were 'acutely aware of the differences between their world and the universalism and scientific rationalism deeply embedded in the outlook of the civilisations west of the Rhine'.³⁹ Adhering to Meinecke's interpretation of the eighteenth century, Berlin was troubled by Cassirer's attempt to present the Enlightenment as a general European phenomenon despite differences of shade and colour among particular thinkers and between national cultures (which were indeed acknowledged by Cassirer). In his review of *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Berlin spoke of Cassirer's 'even and gentle evening light' that makes all shapes 'slightly hazy and melt into each other too easily'.⁴⁰

The reviewer clearly longed here for a philosophical drama, for two opposing factions – the Enlightenment and its other, or the advocates of what he and Meinecke called Natural Law engaging battle against proto-Romantics, pre-historicists, or

³⁸ Cassirer, 'Die Idee der republikanischen Verfassung. Rede zur Verfassungsfeier am 11. August 1928' (1929), in Cassirer, *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften (1927-1931)*, ed. Tobias Berben, vol. 17 of *Gesammelte Werke – Hamburger Ausgabe*, ed. Birgit Recki (Hamburg: Meiner, 2004), 291-398.

³⁹ Berlin, 'Foreword', x.

⁴⁰ Berlin, review of Cassirer, 618-619.

Counter-Enlightenment thinkers. Cassirer struck his reviewer as someone writing with a ‘special sensibility to concealed connections and affinities, for transitions and cross currents’, but also with ‘a rooted distaste for sharp delineation and the drawing of firm distinctions between ideas or thinkers’. While conceding that a cross-European interpretation of the Enlightenment might avoid ‘the sins of exaggerated contrasts’, Berlin pronounced that ‘like all efforts at conciliation, it can only be achieved at some sacrifice of the critical faculty’. Readers wishing to know more about the sharp conflicts of the eighteenth century had to turn elsewhere; the review was concluded by a call for ‘a more ice-cutting account of this crucial period in western thought’.⁴¹ Berlin’s own account of the age was, of course, much more ice-cutting. His essays on eighteenth-century thought orchestrated a dazzling scene of colliding theories and clashing ideas. Even if numerous exceptions had to be made, as in the 1956 anthology or the 1973 essay, the overall picture did not change. For Berlin outlined nothing less than a revolution of the mind, in a similar manner to the author he deemed ‘the only historian in Europe in the last fifty years worth reading’.

Though born in 1909, Isaiah Berlin was a child of the nineteenth century. He cherished its great literature, admired its music, and loved the dramatic scene of its ideas: Marxists pitted against liberals, socialists and utilitarians versus conservatives, and utopian revolutionaries opposed to careful realists. The twentieth century, most of which he personally witnessed, offered no less a spectacle of ideas at war. The Enlightenment – and especially its alleged rival, the Counter-Enlightenment – provided him with ammunition for his own struggle against totalitarianism in the name of value pluralism. Yet as demonstrated by situating his Enlightenment next to Meinecke’s and against Cassirer’s, Berlin tended to view the eighteenth century through Romantically tinged spectacles. These spectacles made him project onto the Enlightenment later ideological contrasts, dividing it dichotomously into conflicting and barely commensurable factions. Eighteenth-century intellectual life merits a more nuanced examination today – without ignoring differences or sacrificing the critical faculty.

⁴¹ Ibid., 619.