

**Martin Mulso, *Enlightenment Underground:  
Radical Germany, 1680-1720***

(translated by H.C. Erik Midelfort)  
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For the past twenty years Martin Mulso has been one of the leading historians making sense of the world of learning of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. While several of his articles have appeared in English and Italian the majority of his voluminous writings are only accessible in German. For this reason, this translated edition of Mulso's *Enlightenment Underground: Radical Germany, 1680-1720*, which appeared in German in 2002, is a significant event. It makes available to a wider audience an intricate, erudite and rich exploration into the depths and complexities of the German intellectual environment in the forty year period straddling the year 1700. It also stands out as an example of how to combine rigorous archival work, an expansive, dynamic methodology and sophisticated, cautiously ambitious theorising. Working in conjunction, the intellectual scope of Mulso's investigation, his commitment to methodological sophistication, and the pregnancy of the historical moment around the year 1700, haunted still by Paul Hazard's diagnosis of it as the 'crise de la conscience Européenne'<sup>1</sup>, mean this book deserves readership beyond the confines of German early modern Intellectual History.

*Enlightenment Underground* opens boldly with Mulso's ambition: to challenge and revise an entrenched narrative that the German 'Early Enlightenment' was characteristically conservative, a "cautious movement for reform". To disrupt this archetype of moderation he proposes a "clandestine underground"<sup>2</sup>, a substantial if fragmented network of radical German Early Enlighteners, interfacing in a complex way with the moderate mainstream, and integrated into broader European dynamics of philosophical radicalism. With this distinction established between conservative and radical strands of the Early Enlightenment, we are clearly entering the contested influence of Jonathan Israel's monolithic vision of a pan-European philosophically Spinozist Radical Enlightenment at the dawn of modernity. Polemics abound concerning the viability of Israel's thesis; we need not enter these debates here<sup>3</sup>. The

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<sup>1</sup> PAUL HAZARD, *The European Mind: 1680-1715*, London, 1953

<sup>2</sup> MARTIN MULSO, *Enlightenment Underground: Radical German 1680-1720*, p. 1

<sup>3</sup> JONATHAN ISRAEL, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750*, Oxford University Press, 2001; Two critiques, see ANTHONY J. LA VOPA, 'A New Intellectual History? Jonathan Israel's Enlightenment', *The Historical Journal*, 52, 3, 2009, pp. 713-738 and HARVEY CHISICK, 'Interpreting the Enlightenment', *The European Legacy*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2008, pp. 35-57

most pertinent and persistent dimension of the radical-conservative divide maintained in Mulsow's work is its implications for the differing conceptions of religion. To be reductive: conservative or moderate enlighteners sought a unity and coherence of body and mind, reason and faith, or at least emphasized freedom, tolerance and the advancement of reason only to the extent to which it didn't impinge upon religious belief and social stability. In contrast, radical enlighteners more readily questioned the substance of religion, and its relationship to other intellectual and social realms. If rarely openly atheistic, early enlightenment radical thought, drawing upon rationalism and libertinism, established the potential of unbelief, the feasibility of a world without religion.

The almost fifteen years since the German publication of *Enlightenment Underground* in 2002 has overseen a broad recognition of the sustained centrality of theological and religious well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century – an academic 'turn' in part instigated by, and contributed to, by Mulsow's own scholarship<sup>4</sup>. This has given new meaning to the sense whereby shifting perceptions of religion and belief, not a simple move towards secularism, rested at the heart of the intellectual transition from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. *Enlightenment Underground* emerges as an integral component of this scholarly revival. It traces how networks of anti-Trinitarian heterodoxy, often emanating from the Netherlands, found themselves repeatedly at the core of radical thought in Protestant Germany. An anti-platonic critique of metaphysics provoked a re-elaboration of the relationship between faith and reason. Flowing from both of these developments, an articulation of the theological problems of idolatry, superstition and atheism, often animated through historical scholarship, predicated a reassessment of the substance of the religious. Structured as a compilation of case studies, each of which stands alone as an inquiry into a specific controversy or intellectual dynamic, it is the common thread of a contestation spilling out of the fragmentation of religious norms which binds together Mulsow's protagonists and their debates.

Tracing clandestine networks of religious heterodoxy, Mulsow thus leans upon Israel and draws upon his Radical Enlightenment. In the process, however, he provides a substantially more cautious and less iconoclastic picture of the Early Enlightenment as a historical moment. Mulsow does not claim to present a definitive picture, and categories of enlightenment are viewed throughout as historiographical tools and historical constructs, not social realities: "it is difficult or impossible to speak simply of 'radical' 'conservative' or 'modern'"; his German Enlighteners "found themselves between these extremes"<sup>5</sup>. Avoiding anachronism, excavating the spaces between categories, and thus maintaining a nuanced distinction between historiographical

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<sup>4</sup> Bookending this 'turn' see JONATHAN SHEEHAN, 'Enlightenment, Religion and the Enigma of Secularization: A Review Essay', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 108, issue 4, 2003, pp. 1061-1080 and SIMON GROTE, 'Religion and Enlightenment', *JHI*, vol. 75, issue 1, 2014, pp. 137-160

<sup>5</sup> MULSOW, p. 236

structures of analysis and historical structures of life, is ensured through Mulsow's methodological rigour, which is systematically presented in the introduction, and manifest throughout the text. The systematic presentation is useful as a touchstone as we follow the complex pathways Mulsow traces through German intellectual debate circa 1700.

Most refreshing in Mulsow's method, and thus argument, is his humility. The seductive association between the formation of 'the modern age' and intellectual developments circa 1700 – "one of the most overdetermined moments in the history of European man"<sup>6</sup> - draws the historian towards speculation and grand theories. Resisting such a tendency, Mulsow proposes the deployment of "medium range theories" applied in "controlled doses"<sup>7</sup> as a mechanism to understand the ideas of his intellectual protagonists. Reflecting this, he steps back from the 'Great Philosophers' whose canon directs the formation of modern thought. The impact and situated meaning of a Hobbes, or a Spinoza, can only be understood if they are integrated into a more amorphous and multi-layered intellectual landscape, populated by complex networks of individuals and institutions which mediated the transmission and reception of ideas, an environment where theology, philosophy, natural science, jurisprudence and political thought coalesced to form intellectual constellations unfamiliar to the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century taxonomy of learning.

Navigating this landscape requires not broad overviews and loose brushstrokes but penetrative and investigative forays. For this Mulsow deploys both the scale and sentiment of 'microhistory', invoking Ginzburg's insistence upon the 'normal exception', retaining the specificity, complexity and contingency of each page of each text and the circumstances, intentions and influences of each author<sup>8</sup>. His first chapter (The Ambivalence of Scholars: A Jewish Anti-Christian Manuscript and its Path into the German Early Enlightenment) is representative of this mode of scholarship. Mulsow follows the fate of a little known theological manuscript, written in Portuguese, by an Amsterdam Jew, whom he identifies as Moses Raphael D'Aguiar. Cross-referencing between copies held in archives across central Europe, Mulsow traces the origin, dissemination and afterlife of these manuscripts through epistolary exchanges between conservatives and radicals, orthodox and quasi-deist scholars. So doing, the intellectual substance of radical ideas about religion is integrated into the loose formation of intellectual movements. Always beginning with minutiae, and maintain a healthy dialectic between micro and macro, Mulsow demonstrates an affinity between a rigorous microhistory with transnational or networked treatments of scale in history, and shows how both can galvanize the intellectual historian and add nuance to his/her craft.

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<sup>6</sup> JONATHAN SHEEHAN, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture*, Princeton, 2005, p. 32

<sup>7</sup> MULSOW, p. 14-15

<sup>8</sup> MULSOW, p. 29

A Ginzburgian microhistorical approach also interfaces neatly with Mulsow's borrowings from the so-called Cambridge School. Both the first and last page of *Enlightenment Underground* cite the same quote from J.G.A. Pocock – that “history consists primarily of unintended performances” - and the notion that the substance of a text, speech-act or action makes sense only once integrated into an inter-subjective context, where motives, intentions, receptions and misinterpretations not only frame, but to a large extent constitute, its meaning, ripples through the pages in between<sup>9</sup>. This is best captured in Mulsow's reconstruction of the biography of the anonymously penned *Ineptus Religiosus*, which plays the lead in Chapter Seven (Eclecticism and Indifferentism: The Hidden Discourse of the *Religio Prudentum* from the *Ineptus Religiosus* of 1652 to the *Religio Eclectica* of 1702). Composed as a provocative but light-hearted satire, Mulsow shows how the *Ineptus* could just fifty years later be received and redeployed unintentionally as serious and radical scholarship, with wholly paradoxical implications for the ‘ideas’ it enclosed. A similar feat is achieved in Chapter Three (Atheism at the Heart of Orthodoxy: On the Origin and Early Spread of Johann Joachim Müller's *De tribus impostoribus* (1688)) in which Mulsow traces how “atheism as a game and a joking experiment had become atheism as effect”<sup>10</sup>. Ascertaining the subtly ironic or ‘burlesque’ tone of hitherto unexplored, often latin and manuscript texts, and distinguishing the strategic from the playful, the polemical from the erudite, is a challenging task. In each specific case study learning how to unpick these subjectivities and navigate texts which have “dynamics of their own”<sup>11</sup> is fundamental to making sense of how they were used, what they said and to whom. Beyond each specific case, cumulatively such a sensibility contributes to further enhance the sense in which accepted definitions, categorisations and narratives are constructed post facto, and fragily so; “the radical underground”, the very object of Mulsow's analysis, “was constructed retrospectively by those who valued or feared it”<sup>12</sup>

Mulsow thus carves out a dynamic intellectual history. He describes it himself as a merger of the traditional ‘history of ideas’, the history of specific disciplines, and an intellectual sociology, or network analysis. But in this fusion of methods the whole is much more significant the sum of its parts, and among these various methodological mechanisms there is an ideological constant which draws them together. It is a method which reflects a profound respect for the situated specificity of the ideas it explores. It also requires an impressive combination of vast erudition and cerebral agility, moving dynamically and rapidly between intimately understood philosophical and theological problematics which might find manifestation in unexpected places. Early Modern

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 1, p. 307; the Pocock quote is taken from his essay ‘The Concept of a Language and the *Métier d’Historien*: some considerations on practice’, included in *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method*, Cambridge, 2008, pp. 87-105, p. 98

<sup>10</sup> MULSOW, p. 109

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 107

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., P. 306

knowledge didn't submit to simple disciplinary distinctions. But nor was it without logic; rather "it had its own code that we must decipher"<sup>13</sup>.

Working in this investigative mode, and following intellectual dynamics as they unfurl, allows Mulsow to pave a 'via media' allowing him be at once both speculative and rigorous: he sketches intellectual teleologies and structures whose hypothetical clarity is then blurred amidst historical contingency. The lengthy central chapters of *Enlightenment Underground* offer a series of hypotheses which have at their core the problems of the origins of the Enlightenment and the modern. In chapter four (Political Theology: Reason of State, Historical Pyrrhonism and the Critique of Religion) Mulsow traces how a multi-faceted enlightenment cosmology emerged from 17<sup>th</sup> century theological anti-humanism, manifest in a conjunction of mechanism and naturalism alongside a critique of idolatry and pagan religion. Chapter Five (The Destruction of Christian Platonism: Souverain's *Le Platonisme dévoilé* (1700) and Gundling's "Plato's atheos" (1713)) and Chapter Six (Gundling versus Budde: Skeptical versus Conservative Enlightenment) extend this tract, charting how a sceptical, comparative and critical historical method applied to Patristics and the history of religion could lead to a radical historicization of Christianity and an establishment of a providential, progressive, historicist conception of history. The 'eclectic' or 'indifferent' comparison of confessional divisions within Christianity, with Judaism and pagan religions, and their common inclusion into a hypothesised natural or 'worldly' religion, could combine a pure ideal of religiosity with a critique of lay religion and its political function.

There is a common thread through these hypotheses regarding the renegotiation of faith and reason, divine and human, sacred and profane which emerged from the unravelling of confessional and apologetic discourse of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Mulsow can broadly be seen as cohering with Alan Kors' well-established thesis regarding the "orthodox sources of disbelief"<sup>14</sup> in late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century France. Atheism, secularization and modernity were not conspiracies hatched by scheming radicals; rather they were "tentative, experimental, and sometimes even undesired, unintended or only ironically intended"<sup>15</sup> consequences of the simultaneous polemicization, intellectualization and within this the historicization and anthropologization of the realm of the religious in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century. In all its contested manifestations, what we call 'the enlightenment' emerged from this fundamental disruption.

There is, then, a powerful, convincing and satisfying argument at play about the Early Enlightenment in its German manifestation. At the same time, however, the pathways by which the various manifestations of this argument are reached are always

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<sup>13</sup> MULSOW, p. 236.

<sup>14</sup> ALAN KORS, *Atheism in France 1650-1729 – Volume 1: The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief*, Princeton, 1990

<sup>15</sup> MULSOW, p. ix

winding, mediated, interlaced with tangents and densely surrounded by outliers. They emerge from unlikely sources, and draw together seemingly incompatible intellectual dynamics and social blocs. Retaining their hypothetical quality, Mulsow's conclusions preserve a sense of being ideas in progress rather than polemical assertions. This endows them with a creative dynamism; as reader we are not only recipient of Mulsow's wisdom, but also participant in his scholarly investigations and ruminations.

It is to *Enlightenment Underground's* benefit that Mulsow is not ready to retreat from a discourse on modernity: "ridding 'modernity of its burdens'" he claims "is not always helpful. Sometimes we just have to remember the abruptness of the modern paradox"<sup>16</sup>. But it is the "cracks" Mulsow's methodology forces in our picture of the Enlightenment, and of that modernity, "through which we can glimpse new, more ambiguous aspects"<sup>17</sup>. Mulsow's exposition of underground and concealed currents of radicalism asserts the sense in which "with a grain of salt, we could say that the Enlightenment was an escape from ambiguity into clarity"<sup>18</sup>. If at times, the rhetoric of clandestine radical enlightenment is sometimes a little rich, it is Mulsow's retention of that "grain of salt", turning over and decentring this narrative, which allows his text to transcend the polemical historiography of 'Enlightenment Studies'. Ultimately it is the animation of an elegant dialectic between constructive and destructive strategies which makes *Enlightenment Underground* not only an erudite exposition of German intellectuals in the decades around 1700, but also a masterly depiction of the complex integration of thought and action - ideas, human beings and the world.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 111

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 307

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 297