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Enlightenolatry and the Promotion of Eighteenth-Century Studies in the United States

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Abstract. Peter Gay's two-volume study, *The Enlightenment. An Interpretation* (1966/69), won the National Book Award in 1966, where its tendentious version of the Enlightenment was embraced as a moderate, hopeful response to the radicalized public sphere of the 1960s. This essay argues that the constellation of ideas celebrated as the "Enlightenment" in Gay's work have provided an enduring template for 21st century Enlightenolatrists like Steven Pinker, whose *Enlightenment Now* (2018) slavishly follows Gay's argument. The persistence of Gay's "undead text," in sense of Daston and Marcus (2019), suggests an additional and troubling dimension to eighteenth-century studies beyond the "wide" and "deep" eighteenth centuries as theorized by Nussbaum (2003) and Roach (2007).

Keywords: Enlightenment, Peter Gay, Steven Pinker, American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, Columbia University, campus protests, 1968, public humanities, Columbia University Seminar in Eighteenth-Century European Culture, Undead texts.

I have come to talk about the phenomenon of Steven Pinker, and his soft-headed, politically-soothing conception of the Enlightenment[1]. But I need to establish how his form of Enlightenolatry first took root at the very founding of Eighteenth-century studies in the United States. To begin, I must lay my scene at Columbia University in the 1960s: April 23, 1968, to be exact. The college had been brought to a standstill by student protests that would grow to include an estimated 1100 student and community activists. Waves of student unrest convulsed the campus that spring, and the NYPD were called in to forcibly clear the campus of protestors not once but twice. Early morning raids on April 30 and then May 22 led to hundreds of arrests amid shocking scenes of police violence. This is widely known: Columbia was one of the most significant sites of US campus protests in the 60s, but I'd like us to zoom in to find the eighteenth century making a surprising cameo. Direct

[1] This essay was first delivered as a talk at the 16th Congress of the International Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies in Rome, Italy, July 7, 2023. It is drawn from a longer article, A. Coppola, *Enlightenolatry from Peter Gay to Steven Pinker: mass marketing enlightenment and the thick eighteenth century,* «The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation», 62, 2021, 3-4, pp. 355-383. <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/56/article/906891>. This talk is reprinted in *Diciottesimo secolo* with permission of the University of Pennsylvania Press.

your eye to window of 202 Low Library one evening shortly after the first occupation began: there you'll see, fluttering across the sash, an incongruous billow of long black robes as a figure bounds up from the turf and into the window of the President's office, where the leadership of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) had barricaded themselves.

That figure was Orest Ranum, historian of 17th and 18th century France, a recently tenured Associate Professor and a rising star in the Columbia Seminar in Eighteenth-Century European Culture that had been meeting since 1962. His influential study of the changes in urban life and institutions at the French capitol, *Paris in the Age of Absolutism: An Essay*, had come out that year, and as the director of Columbia's Contemporary Civilization first-year studies program, he cut a distinctive figure on the radicalized campus, teaching classes in full academic regalia. Like many faculty who identified as centrist liberals, he had «scrambled to stop the sit-ins». As Ranum explained in a 2010 interview, «I did that as dramatically as I could: I held over their heads ... the possibility of a counterrevolution at Columbia. Rather than accept a radicalized university, [US] society would snuff out the university»[2]. According to Ranum, he was just attempting to mediate an end to the dispute, and speak up as a voice for moderation and rational, incremental change. However, in return for his kind offices that night Ranum was the target of a shocking revenge. During the May occupation, one of the SDS leaders, J.J. Jacobs, broke into Ranum's office, ransacked his files and set them on fire[3].

This much is historical fact. But I can't help but hear symbolic, even mythic, resonances in this story. I find myself reimagining Ranum as a kind of avatar for the Enlightenment itself as it signified in 1968. That is to say, I think of Ranum much in the way Ranum himself treats «Jean», his composite figure of a rural youth coming to Paris to escape poverty, who stars in the stirring, if admittedly artificial, portrait that engrosses the opening pages of Ranum's recently published monograph, *Paris in the age of absolutism: an essay*. And so I have to ask: what is so telling about this entirely tragic story of a renowned Enlightenment scholar, in the full regalia of his intellectual authority and privileged class position, bounding optimistically through the windows of a revolution whose fires are literally raging all around him? I believe we can learn a great deal about the place of the Enlightenment in public discourse – at the moment of Eighteenth-century studies emergence as an academic field, at the moment of a global convulsion of radical politics – in this Quixotic gambit to reign in the forces of radical revolution with reasoned critique that endorses progress but counsels moderation.

Columbia University, at this moment, was not only one of the most consequential flashpoints of US campus unrest, it was also a key node in the development of Eighteenth-century studies in the American academy. While other historians place its origins with the start *Eighteenth-Century Studies* journal in 1968, or with the group of scholars who returned from the 1967 ISECS congress determined to create an American Society, or even as far back as the founding of the *Johnsonian News Letter* (1940)[4], the Columbia University Seminar in Eighteenth-Century European Culture played a key role in shaping the course of Eighteenth-century studies in the states. As I will show, the work to emerge from the Seminar was instrumental in shaping the 'enlightenment' as a matter of concern in the wider culture.

Founded in 1962 by faculty members at Columbia[5], the seminar began as working group to develop what became Peter Gay's two volume study, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, whose first book, *The Rise of Modern Paganism,* was published in 1966. Modeled on Samuel Johnson's Club, the group was comprised of scholars drawn from different fields who were recruited for their unique expertise. At the first meeting, Gay delivered a lecture that gave a précis of his argument. The second meeting was devoted entirely to critique and commentary on it. The rest of the sessions for the first couple of years were papers by other seminar members which attempted to refine and extend the intellectual project[6].

Gay wished to reclaim the Enlightenment as the point of origin for 20th century liberal values by articulating a stadial history of a vivifying and liberating «spirit of criticism» that originated in Greek and Roman

[2] Quoted in J. Castellucci, *The night they burned Ranum's papers,* «Chronicle of Higher Education», 14 February 2010. See also Cox Commission, *Crisis at Columbia: report of the fact-finding commission appointed to investigate the disturbances at Columbia University in April and May 1968*, Vintage, New York 1968.

[3] J. Castellucci, *Ranum's papers*, cit. SDS long denied responsibility, and Castellucci criticizes the credulity of prominent leftists at the time who asserted that the students couldn't possibly have done such a thing and that it must have been the work of the police. The truth came out with the publication of Mark Rudd's memoirs, *Underground: my life with SDS and the Weathermen*, William Morrow, New York 2009.

[4] D. Greene, *The ASECS's early years: a personal memoir,* in *The past as prologue: essays to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of ASECS*, ed. by C.H. Hay and S.M. Conger, AMS Press, New York 1995, pp. 3-17.

[5] E. Powers, *Critiquing the enlightenment,* in *A community of scholars: seventy-five years of the university seminars at Columbia,* ed. by T. Vinciguerra, Columbia University Press, New York 2020, pp. 16-29.

[6] A historical list of papers presented to the Columbia University Seminar in Eighteenth-Century Culture is available on the seminar website, <https://universityseminars.columbia.edu/seminars/eighteenth-century-european-culture/>.

antiquity and then reemerged in the Eighteenth century when society «regained its nerve». In his polemical history, a host of forces converged to enable what Gay terms «a little flock of philosophes» to come together and articulate a common, progressive, secular vision for social improvement. These philosophes' «volatile mixture of classicism, impiety, and science» cohered in a more-or-less unified philosophical and political program that Gay identifies as 'the' Enlightenment – singular, capital 'E' – whose legacy has been unfairly despised and misunderstood:

> Ever since the fulminations of Burke and the denunciations of the German Romantics, the Enlightenment has been held responsible for the evils of the modern age, and much scorn has been directed at its supposed superficial rationalism, foolish optimism, and irresponsible Utopianism. Compared to these distortions, more superficial, foolish and irresponsible than the failings they claim to castigate, the amiable caricature drawn by liberal and radical admirers of the Enlightenment has been innocuous: the naivete of the Left has been far outweighed by the malice of the Right[7].

It's worth unpacking that last formulation: «the naivete of the Left» and the «malice of the Right». Gay was writing at a time before Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of enlightenment* was widely taken up in the American academy; an English translation only appeared in 1969[8]. Few then were willing to consider how Enlightenment rationality might be seen, not as the opponent of, but as a precondition for Fascism and 20th century exploitation capitalism. Thus, the malicious «Right» invoked by Gay is a conflation of 18th century counter-enlightenment traditionalists, as exemplified by Burke, with their apparent 20th century inheritors: the nativists, the religious conservatives, the John Birchers, the autocrats, the strongmen. But it's the «naivete of the Left» that I think is most important here, for Gay's whole project is to fabricate a tendentious, artificially coherent, and deliberately moderate Enlightenment. In Gay's telling, critique incrementally built upon critique across the «three generations» of philosophes to produce a «growing radicalism[9]», but that radicalism had limits: Rousseau must be placed beyond the pale of his «little flock», for example, for being too extreme, too impatient. And that whole French Revolution fiasco – well don't blame our guys. Rather, Gay's soothingly moderate position is that «The philosophes were simultaneously at peace and at war with their civilization».[10] The Enlightenment was orderly, incremental, efficacious, universal and inevitable.

The problems with this formulation were apparent enough for those that went looking for them at the time. In James Leith's searching 1971 review of Gay's project in *Eighteenth century studies,* he wrote:

> Gay's strange weaknesses and peculiar imbalances—... the minimization of the Christian legacy, the expulsion from the orthodox flock those considered too extreme or too crude, ... the exaggeration of the empirical nature of their thought, the overestimation of their cultural relativism, the failure to point out limitations to their toleration, the soft-pedaling of their proposals for manipulating the mind through art or education, ... the refusal even to acknowledge the moral crisis precipitated by the search for autonomy, and the evasion of any consideration of links with the French Revolution—all have a common origin: his determination to show that the philosophes are the source of most that is wholesome in modern western thought[11].

This is strong stuff, and I am struck by how proleptic these critiques are. The self-satisfied obliviousness that Lieth diagnoses at the heart of Gay's project would prove to be the trigger for and target of an entire generation of scholarship that sought to reckon with the repressed violence, colonial and domestic, that forged and sustains the modern liberal order.

Yet by the time Leith wrote this, Gay had brought the second volume to press, 1969's *The Science of Freedom,* as well as completed a number of ancillary projects: a mass-market 'children's book' on the Enlightenment for the Time/Life «Great ages of man» series, as well as a polemical philosophical dialogue entitled *The bridge of criticism*, where his mouthpiece, Voltaire, debates Lucan and Erasmus to advocate for a fresh application of the methods of the philosophes in the 20th century: «a new span of the bridge of criticism», as Leith puts it, «like the one that Gay believes pagan thinkers once threw across the swamp of belief to progressive Eighteenth-century intellectuals»[12].

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[7] P. Gay, *The enlightenment: an interpretation. The rise of modern paganism*, Knopf, New York 1966, p. ix.

[8] M. Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno, *Dialectic of enlightenment,* tr. by J. Cumming, Continuum, New York 1969.

[9] Gay, *Enlightenment/paganism,* cit., p. 17.

[10] *Ibidem*, p. 27

[11] J. Leith, *Peter Gay's enlightenment,* «Eighteenth-Century Studies», 5, 1971, 1, pp. 157-171: 171.

[12] Leith, *Gay's enlightenment,* cit., p. 170. See P. Gay, *The age of enlightenment*, Time-Life Books, New York 1966; P. Gay, *The enlightenment: an interpretation. The science of freedom*, Knopf, New York 1969 (the second volume of Gay, *Enlightenment/paganism)*; and P. Gay, *The bridge of criticism: dialogues among Lucian, Erasmus, and Voltaire on the enlightenment - on history and hope, imagination and reason, constraint and freedom - and on its meaning for our time*, Harper & Row, New York 1970.

Most importantly, by this point Gay's first volume of *The Enlightenment* had won the National Book Award for History and Biography in 1966. Indeed, Gay's distinctive configuration of Enlightenment values and methods struck a profoundly resonant chord in the late 1960s. Not just critically praised in the liberal Establishment press, this book became a popular bestseller that was taken up by book-of-the-month clubs and pushed out to the bed-stands and coffee-tables of President Lyndon Baines Johnson's Great Society. By December 1966, it was on *The New York Times*' list of recommended books for the holidays[13]. By January 1967, advertisements for the Book Find Club were touting Gay's *Enlightenment* as one of the featured choices in their «Any 3 Books Free» trial membership promotion. A second book club would advertise it within a month[14]. On January 31, Gay's book was shortlisted for the National Book Award[15], and it took the prize at the award ceremony in March 1967. Against the background of the civil rights movement and the metastasizing dispute over the Vietnam War, Gay's book was warmly embraced for its call for the public use of reason and the rosy account of its liberating effect. The jury praised it for having «conducted a brilliant new synthesis of our intellectual heritage from the 18th century» and, echoing the section of Gay's Preface quoted above, for having «successfully defended that heritage from the malice of the Right and the naivete of the Left"[16]. As the very words of the prize committee make clear, Gay's work was championed precisely because it seemed to offer hope of a middle way, a moderate but progressive path forward. Here was a guidebook for moderates to navigate the treacherous waters of public discourse as cities erupted in violent race riots that summer, and campuses descended into open revolt, with the rough-beast of revolution slouching along its terrible course, seemingly wherever you looked. One could see how, just one year later, the sensible path of rational, enlightened critique might seem like just the kind of practical advice one might tuck up into the sleeve of one's academic robe before bounding into the lion's den of incipient revolution, seeking to counsel those wild young bloods with a safer, middle way.

As Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown stated in their landmark 1987 collection, *The new eighteenth century*, many of the leading practitioners of Eighteenth century studies continued to that day to «adopt the Eighteenth-century's liberal humanism, empiricism, or Enlightenment ideals[...]as their own commonsensical position without much reflection on the ends for which they are employing these philosophies»[17]. Since that volume, there has been a wealth of work that has reassessed our Enlightenment legacies through the study of what Nussbaum later termed a 'wide' Eighteenth century that «resituate[s] Eighteenth-century studies in a spatially and conceptually expanded paradigm»[18]. And yet that wealth of rigorous scholarship has barely made a dent in what Annelien de Dijn has called «the iron grip of [Peter Gay's] modernization thesis over our historical imagination»[19]. This is acutely the case when we consider how tenaciously this debunked, paste-board Enlightenment retains its hold on the popular historical imagination. Gay's *Enlightenment* is an «Undead Book», to borrow Lorraine Daston and Sharon Marcus' term[20], insofar as Gay's book may not be read very much anymore, but its ideology stalks among us still in the works of Steven Pinker.

One need look no further than Steven Pinker's *Enlightenment now: the case for reason, science, humanism and progress.* The Johnstone Professor of Psychology at Harvard University is a specialist in cognitive science and psychology, but he has captured an unprecedentedly large platform with books that grapple with the largest-imaginable questions, only to arrive at iconoclastic yet soothing conclusions: On balance, on average, in the grand scheme of history – *when you look at the numbers* – violence is in decline, and we have enlightened modernity to thank for it. As Bill Gates gushes in his jacket blub–offering what's practically a koan of neoliberal modernity – «the world *is* getting better, even if it doesn't always feel that way»[21].

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[13] E. Fremont-Smith, *Books of the times: specialist books for specialized generalists*, «New York Times», 16 December 1966, p. 45.

[14] The free book promotion appeared in Display Ad 799, «New York Times», 8 January 1967, p. 293; Gay's book also was featured in the ad for The Readers Subscription book club, Display Ad 903, «New York Times», 19 February 1967, p. 296.

[15] *31 'leading nominees' chosen for the national book awards,* «New York Times», 31 January 1967, p. 28.

[16] The National Book Award committee published an excerpt of the 'Citation of the Judges' in a newspaper ad it placed in the *Times* to promote Gay's winning book. Display ad 136, «New York Times», 9 March 1967, p. 37.

[17] *The new eighteenth century: theory, politics and English literature,* ed. by F. Nussbaum and L. Brown, Methuen, New York 1987, p. 9.

[18] *The Global Eighteenth Century*, ed. by F. Nussbaum, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2003, p. 1. Cf. particularly S. Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: colonialism and agency, 1688–1804*, Duke University Press, Durham 1999; S. Kaul, *Eighteenth-century British literature and postcolonial studies,* University of Edinburgh Press, Edinburgh 2009; and R. Sudan, *The alchemy of empire: abject materials and the technologies of colonialism*, Fordham University Press, New York 2016.

[19] A. de Dijn, *Politics of enlightenment: from Peter Gay to Jonathan Israel,* «Historical Journal», 55, 2012, 3, pp. 785-805: 786.

[20] L. Daston and S. Marcus, *The books that wouldn't die*, «Chronicle of Higher Education», 17 March 2019.

[21] S. Pinker, *Enlightenment now: the case for reason, science, humanism and progress,* Penguin, New York 2019, unpaginated front matter. Cf. *The White Album*, where Joan Didion recalls a comment dropped in a chance encounter with a proselytizing motel owner as «a more cogent

In *Enlightenment now,* Pinker attempts to take an ostensibly objective and true measure of the state of a whole host of factors affecting to human welfare: life expectancy, sickness and disease, food scarcity and famine, poverty, war, interpersonal violence, legal systems and equality, access to education, and democracy, to give just a partial list. Across the board, and with the help of some seventy graphs that may jog and weave but ultimately trend up – way up! – Pinker inevitably finds reasons to take heart and look on the bright side. While it might be fashionable to grouse that «the institutions of modernity have failed and every aspect of life is in a deepening crisis», Pinker insists that the long arc of history has actually bestowed upon us countless «gifts we take for granted: newborns who will live more than eight decades, markets overflowing with food, clean water that appears with a flick of a finger and waste that disappears with another, pills that erase a painful infection, sons who are not sent off to war, daughters who can walk the streets in safety, critics of the powerful who are not jailed and shot, the world's knowledge and culture available in a shirt pocket»[22]. Never mind that not all newborns are born into conditions where they can expect to enjoy eighty laps around the sun, or that abundant food and clean water and a non-poisonous environment are by no means vouchsafed to all in the second decade of the 21st century. Pinker's book is intended to be a reproach to «an obliviousness to the scope of human progress». In Pinker's gospel, suffering and inequality are at historic lows, and the apostles of light are optimizing all the time. Best to get with the program and view «the world's problems against a background of progress that it seeks to build upon by solving those problems in their turn»[23].

That program, of course, is the Enlightenment. Actually, it's best to put what Pinker has in mind in air-quotes, because Pinker's 'Enlightenment' is as airy and ideological a construction as you care to find. Pinker's definition of the Enlightenment itself is mobile, but clearly has to do with the power of 'reason', 'science' and 'humanism' to secure 'progress.' A seven and a half page chapter entitled "Dare to Understand" – riffing, of course, on Immanuel Kant's famous essay in response to the question, *What is Enlightenment?* – quotes the physicist David Deutsch, the historian David Wootton, the sociologist Robert Scott, and the political scientist James Scott, as well as offers bon mots and maxims, *passim,* from Kant, Montesquieu, and the economist Ludwig von Mises. Pinker name-checks Spinoza, Hobbes, Hume, Condorcet, Diderot, D'Alembert, Rousseau, Vico, Beccaria, Voltaire, Sant-Pierre, Washington, Madison, and Hamilton, but, aside from Kant, only Adam Smith merits more than the invocation of a bare name[24]. Indeed, if nuanced historical analysis is lacking, if a detailed engagement with the complicated and ambiguous texts that the actual *philosophes* wrote is absent here, we can hardly blame Pinker, because that is by design. For his objective is to simply champion an ideology: «In fact, it's the ideals of reason, science, and humanism that I'm endorsing, and I use 'the Enlightenment' as a handy rubric for that set of ideals (since their most vehement and enduring expression can be found in that era)[25]».

Pinker claims that he is producing no simple-minded book of «Enlightenolatry» – his word, mind you – because, hey, «some were racists, sexists, anti-Semites slaveholders or duelists». Their shortcomings are just evidence that they were «born too soon to appreciate some of the keystones of our modern understanding[26]», but that mighty engine of infallible progress, Enlightenment-with-a-capital-E, is their great legacy. What gets pasted together from a tendentious selection of quotations from the breezy parade of secondary sources in his twenty footnotes – is a two-dimensional Light-of-Reason-Emerging-from-Darkness narrative in the «iron grip» of de Dijn's modernization thesis that's lifted straight from the playbook of Peter Gay[27].

question than it might at first appear, a kind of koan of the period». For Didion, the late 1960s' solipsism and denial was precisely encapsulated in the statement, *If you can't believe you are going to heaven in your own body and on a first-name basis with all the members of your family, then what's the point of dying?* J. Didion, *The white album*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York 2009, p. 46.

[22] *Ibidem,* p. 4-5.

[23] *Ibidem,* p. 5.

[24] *Ibidem,* pp. 7-14.

[25] *Steven Pinker: counter-enlightenment convictions are 'surprisingly resilient',* «Quilette», 20 April 2018, <https://quillette.com/2018/04/20/steven-pinker-counter-enlightenment-convictions-surprisingly-resilient/>.

[26] Pinker, *Enlightenment now*, cit., p. 14. I take the term 'Enlightenolatry' from Pinker himself, who claims that the ideological advocacy of a historically-inaccurate buzzword is precisely not what he is up to in his book. I beg to differ.

[27] de Dijn, *Politics of enlightenment*, cit., p. 786. There are 29 sources cited in Pinker's crucial first chapter, where he lays out the intellectual foundation of his project, yet less than half are from university presses. The example of D. Wootton, *The Invention of Science: A New History of the Scientific Revolution,* Penguin, London 2015, is instructive: Wootton's non-peer-reviewed popular history of science attempts to roll back a generation of research into the social construction of scientific knowledge and the impact that material, artisanal and cultural practices had on the making of scientific facts. John Henry's review essay in *Isis* takes issue with Wootton's focus on vindicating the reality of scientific discoveries, and his assertion that science advances from one true discovery to the next, concluding the book exhibits an «aura of whiggishness, or even of teleology». Wootton's «belief in the importance of discovery, and the way culminating discoveries lead to progress» lead him to «self-serving» «dismissals» of prominent relativist philosophical and sociological approaches. J. Henry, *The scientific revolution: five books about it,* «Isis», 107, 2016, 4, pp. 809-817.

Like Gay, Pinker's first principles of Enlightenment begin with an embrace of Reason and flight from Superstition that is ascribed to the triumph of a secular worldview. As he marshals his forces in 'Dare to Understand', the crucial first chapter that lays out the Enlightenment ideals that provide the intellectual grounds for his argument, he begins by championing secular rationalism: «If there is anything the Enlightenment thinkers had in common, it was an insistence that we [...] not fall back generators of delusion like faith, dogma, revelations, authority, charisma, mysticism, divination, visions, gut feelings, or the hermeneutic parsing of sacred texts[28]». Never mind that the notion of a wholly secular Enlightenment has been thoroughly debunked[29], much less the notion that there was a single Enlightenment in the first place[30]: no complexities and ambiguities will disturb this ideological purity. The liberating effect of a radical secularism is, of course, is a bedrock precept for Gay as well, central to the argument of his great work but – perhaps more tellingly – the focus of an entire chapter in his Time/Life volume, *The age of Enlightenment*[31]. Indeed, a closer look at the structure of Pinker's argument in *Enlightenment now* indicates a surprising reality: it follows Gay's *Age of Enlightenment* in near lock-step, as if Pinker borrowed the *inventio* and *dispositio* of his argument from the pop-intellectual picture book of the mid-century scholar.

For example, Pinker goes on to explain that his second ideal is «science», which he warrants with reference to Wootton's teleological and presentist sketch of the supposed absurdities that an «educated Englishman» would have believed in 1600 and that would have been swept aside by the triumphant progress of science: «he believes that a murdered body will bleed in the presence of a murderer ... he believes that the shape, colour and texture of a plant can be a clue to how it will work as a medicine». Never mind that the long history of empiricism is replete with now discredited ideas that carried epistemological value at the time, and that those ideas and practices had a formative influence on the now-accepted science that followed[32]. Never mind that the field of science studies has demonstrated that knowledge production is necessarily contingent, emergent and socially-constructed, and never inevitable[33]. To be fair, before any of these developments in the history, sociology and philosophy of science had gained traction, Gay also began his book with science – chapter one of *The age of Enlightenment* was entitled *The Practical Philosophers* – but there he actually gives a more nuanced explanation of the force of the new science through an admittedly hagiographic account of Isaac Newton, which casts him in that familiar role of stringent empiricist who transformed natural inquiry by refusing to frame/feign hypotheses[34]. But like Gay, after his peon to the liberating powers of scientific progress, Pinker goes on to claim that the next pillar of Enlightenment was the rise of a «science of man» which sought to apply the tools of empiricism to the minds, hearts and actions of men[35]. (Gay's third chapter is *In Search of the Ideal Society*, and his fifth covers *The Science of Man*).

After praising the *philosophes* for «their belief that there was such a thing as universal human nature, and that it could be studied scientifically» – «they were cognitive neuroscientists ... they were evolutionary psychologists ... they were cultural anthropologists»[36] – Pinker

[28] Pinker, *Enlightenment now*, cit., p. 8.

[29] Cf. M. Portuondo, T*he Spanish disquiet: the biblical natural philosophy of Benito Arias Montano*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2019. Even Jonathan Israel, the most prominent exponent of a grand unifying narrative of the Enlightenment today, distinguishes a core Spinosist Radical Enlightenment from the moderate, Deistic Enlightenment of figures like Montesquieu, Voltaire and Locke in his three-part revision of Gay, *Radical enlightenment: philosophy and the making of modernity, 1650–1750,* Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001; *Enlightenment contested: philosophy, modernity, and the emancipation of man, 1670–1752,* Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006; and *Democratic enlightenment: philosophy, revolution, and human rights 1750–1790*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011.

[30] Cf. J.G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism & Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and especially the proceedings from a symposium held at the CUNY Graduate Center that featured both Pocock and Israel. As Israel phrased it in his remarks, Pocock seeks «to convince us that [the Enlightenment] occurred in "too many forms to be comprised within a single definition and history, and that we do better to think of a family of enlightenments"» as opposed to «a common transatlantic phenomenon that in some sense made the world anew». J. Israel, *J. G. A. Pocock and the "Language of Enlightenment" in his «Barbarism and Religion»,* «Journal of the History of Ideas», 77, 2016, 1, pp. 107-127: 107 e 109.

[31] Chapter two of Gay, *Age of enlightenment*, *supra*, is entitled *A religion of rationality.* This illustrated popular history was produced as part of *The Great Ages of Man* series, edited by Russell Bourne.

[32] Pinker, *Enlightenment now*, cit., p. 9, citing D. Wootton, *Invention of Science*, cit.. Cf., for example, L. M. Principe, *The secrets of alchemy,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2012.

[33] Cf. particularly S. Shapin and S. Schaffer, *Leviathan and the air-pump: Hobbes, Boyle and the experimental life,* Princeton University Press, Princeton 1985; B. Latour, *Science in action: how to follow scientists and engineers through society,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1987; I. Hacking, *The social construction of what?* Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2000; J. Golinski, *Making natural knowledge: constructivism and the history of science* University Press of Chicago, Cambridge 2005; and K. Barad, *Meeting the universe halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*, Duke University Press, Durham 2007. Indeed, the whole notion of 'progress' in the sciences has been unmasked as an ideological delusion. Cf. particularly B. Latour, *We have never been modern*, Engl. transl. by C. Porter, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1993; and D. Haraway, *Staying with the trouble: making kin in the chthulucene,* Duke University Press, Durham, 2016.

[34] Cf. Pinker, *Enlightenment now*, cit., pp. 9-10, to Gay, *Age of enlightenment,* cit., pp. 1-29.

[35] Cf. Pinker, *Enlightenment now*, cit., p. 10, to Gay, *Age of enlightenment,* cit., pp. 52-64 and pp. 100-110.

[36] Pinker, *Enlightenment now,* cit., p. 10.

asserts that the third pillar of Enlightenment is the rise of «humanism» (Gay, avoiding Pinker's puzzling anachronism, writes in his chapter four about a *Vogue for Sentimentality*[37]). Pinker assures his readers that «a humanistic sensibility impelled the Enlightenment thinkers to condemn not just religious violence but also the secular cruelties of their age, including slavery, despotism, executions for frivolous expenses such as shoplifting and poaching, and sadistic punishments». Indeed, he asserts that «the Enlightenment is sometimes called the Humanitarian Revolution, because it led to the abolition of barbaric practices that had been commonplace across civilizations for millennia»[38]. In this rose-tinted history, Pinker doesn't just get his facts wrong: plenty of Enlightenment figures actively supported slavery and other depredations. Pinker in fact sounds rather like Gay when he chillingly assures his young readers in *The Age of Enlightenment* that «the Industrial Revolution was also immensely beneficial. New factories brought employment to areas long sunk in economic stagnation. And the new machines, as brutalizing as they were, did give regular work to many laborers who had only been casually or occasionally employed. These were only the immediate, obvious benefits»[39].

I won't have time today to review the astonishing symmetry between Pinker's 2019 bestseller and Gay's 1966 children's book, but I review the detailed points of overlap in the full version of this talk, which was published in 2021 in volume 62 of the American journal, «The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation»[40] My point is, that this infantilizing approach is very much by design. Ultimately, Pinker's book sells because it offers salve to those with enough comfort and privilege to be able to believe that no one has any real grounds to complain about their lot, and that everything will work out fine in the end. In short, Pinker is being lionized because he is providing what Stuart Carroll, writing about Pinker's 2011 book on violence, has termed «Comfort History»[41].

I can think of no better way of ending this essay than to play this prominent 2019 example of comfort history against the work that effectively established the genre. For Gay, writing in 1966, it was the leftists of his day, not the conservatives, who stood accused of soft-headed Enlightenolatry: then, his scorn was reserved for the «Naivete of the Left». Nevertheless, Gay's formulation of those critics' shortcomings seems to take the exact measure of Pinker's project, and the naivete of his followers on the Twenty-first-century Right, whether they be reactionary conservatives or libertarian technocrats, driven by «superficial rationalism», «foolish optimism», or «irresponsible Utopianism»[42]. Whichever handle you pick it up with, the essence of the appeal – whether in Pinker's America or Gay's America – is that it allows the champions of Enlightenment to stake out a position as the «encircled, non-ideological defender of the vital center»[43]. The palliative care of comfort history is an old Enlightenment family recipe.

[37] Pinker, *Enlightenment now*, cit., pp. 10-11, to Gay, *Age of enlightenment,* cit., pp. 76-86.
[38] Pinker, *Enlightenment now*, cit., p. 11, citing, passim, L. Hunt, *Inventing human rights: a history,* Norton, New York 2007, and S. Pinker, *The better angels of our nature,* Viking, New York 2011.
[39] Gay, *Age of enlightenment,* cit., p. 108.
[40] A. Coppola, *Enlightenolatry from Peter Gay to Steven Pinker: mass marketing enlightenment and the thick eighteenth century,* «The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation», 62, 2021, 3-4, pp. 355-383. <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/56/article/906891>.
[41] S. Carroll, *Thinking with violence,* «History and Theory», 55, 2017, pp. 23-43: 24.
[42] Gay, *Enlightenment/paganism,* cit., p. ix.
[43] W. Epstein, *Counter-intelligence: cold-war criticism and eighteenth-century studies*, «ELH», 57, 1990, 1, pp. 63-99: 76.