

Review Feature - One Family, One Destiny

Written by Anthony Szczurek

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2014/06/17/review-the-enlightenment-and-why-it-still-matters/>

ANTHONY SZCZUREK, JUN 17 2014

The Enlightenment: And Why It Still Matters

By: Anthony Pagden

New York: Random House, 2013

A History of International Political Theory: Ontologies of the International

By: Hartmut Behr

New York: Macmillan, 2010

One Family, One Destiny?

Today, the assertion that all individuals on Earth share a common nature as well as a common world is a banal one. But was it always so? When ancient peoples from different lands met each other, did they consider each other human beings like themselves, despite the dissimilar languages, customs, and skin colors? Or is the idea of a unitary human nature, the idea that we are all in this together, a modern one? If this seems more like an anthropological, rather than a political, question, one should be reminded that in modernity, the two are often conflated. By this I mean that the fact that self-recognition of each other as all part of the same species seems to necessitate the analogous recognition that we need to share the same values, form of government, and existential goals as well.

The two books under consideration here agree on this proposition, but sharply diverge in terms of how they reach this conclusion, with one claiming a continual, progressing lineage of a universalized political back to the ancient Greeks and continuing until the 19th century. The other claims the idea of a universalized human nature only arose with the Enlightenment and its focus on reason and science. What seems like a philosophical or anthropological question quickly becomes a political one, since if there is one humanity, should not everyone be subject to the same underpinning governance frameworks and concepts? And if not, what arguments can be used? Both books under discussion here concern the history of ideas regarding our conscious realization of our status as a species, both in nature and politics.

Disputes over the legacy of the Enlightenment have existed at least since the Romantics of the late 18th century, but gained considerable strength in recent decades with the development of postcolonial, poststructural, and postmodern studies. Yet many of the principles that the project conceptualized and solidified continue to undergird many commonplace understandings of what it means to for phenomena to be political or social, and even what it means to be human, both in and out of the West. In general, the Enlightenment's adherents charge it with the advent of a generalized skepticism aimed at the foundations of the previous social and political order in Europe, namely the Church and absolutist government, in order to, for the first time, realize the potential of humanity at large in its teleological destiny towards a reasoned, secular, scientific, and brighter world. Its many detractors lay at its feet the many horrors of the modern era: nationalism, colonialism, racialism, neo-liberal globalization, and genocide. In *The Enlightenment: And Why It Still Matters*, Anthony Pagden throws his hat in with the advocates of the former camp, situating the overarching novelty of the era in terms of the realization in both philosophy and the sciences that a universal human nature exists regardless of location, custom, or ethnicity.

Pagden

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Pagden, Professor of Political Science and History at UCLA, begins by exploring the antecedents of the Enlightenment. Since St. Augustine in the fifth century C.E., theology had been the major vehicle for intellectual inquiry in Europe. Its focus was not on the production of knowledge as such, but the preservation and reinterpretation of previous thought. However, with the discovery of the Americas, the onset of the Reformation, and the long-running European Wars of Religion of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the dominance of the Church as the primary authority regarding order and knowledge waned. Specifically, the roots of the Catholic conception of the law of nature, which supposedly guided the behavior of all beings in creation, including human beings, were disclosed in terms of the contextual political frameworks they were developed within, principally ancient Rome and late antiquity Western Europe. This shift notwithstanding, non-European and non-Christian societies were still subject to a natural law that, first with the work of Thomas Hobbes' and Grotius' characterizations of the human as forming societies out of an egotistical sense of security in greater numbers and then with Samuel Pufendorf's notion that societies were created because of the inherent inclination of human beings to foster social relationships with each other, became increasingly pared down.

As Europeans were granted more agency in their everyday lives, several thinkers, Voltaire in particular, increasingly attacked religion in general, with the result being not exactly a flourishing of atheism, but instead a shift towards religion becoming an increasingly private, rather than public, matter. To better understand why and how people did what they did, new natural and social sciences were developed in an attempt to apprehend the world's various cultures and their respective customs. While very few people had ever considered those from other lands to be outright *inhuman*, it had long been common to hold that while all people were human beings, created by God, the very obvious social and political variations existed because of societal circumstance and context with different peoples ranked hierarchically in order of level of civilization so far attained. Every culture, in effect, had its own destiny to follow. Pagden asserts that it was not until the Enlightenment, however, during which "savages" from the New World and Oceania were brought back to Europe and interrogated, that many of the day's thinkers saw the movement as the vanguard of humankind's progression as a *whole*, including those considered "behind" the level reached by Europe.

Pagden correctly cites this intellectual transformation as the origin of the concept of "human rights," through which all human beings are held to be subject to the same potential for progress towards "civilization" and therefore are entitled to certain political, social, and economic standards and protections. As Europe looked around the world, the closest in terms of civilizational progress to itself it found was China, a technologically advanced empire, but one under the tutelage of a despotic government that supposedly stifled its people's "natural" inclinations towards "liberty." If, however, China and other societies could be properly educated and shown the errors of their traditions, they could join their European brethren in enjoying the fruits of civilization, and there would be no cultural or political barriers to the natural human inclination to affiliate with one another and join in a universal society. Unfortunately, with the development of republican governments across much of Europe came the regressive chaining of each state's people with their particular ruler and, through him (once in a while, her), the creation of a nation with a particular destiny, separate from all others.

Following from the ancient Stoic philosophy of the individual being situated in increasingly larger circles of social affinity, from family to humanity at large, most Enlightenment thinkers, at least for the time being, believed the nation to be a necessary evil in that it, among all other collective social forces yet utilized, effectively engaged all citizens in the political machinations of their society (even if at a considerable distance for the majority of the population). Eventually, it was believed that, through commerce and cultural exchange, all nations and their respective peoples would recognize their natural affinity for each other and join together in some form of larger world society, thereby outlawing the possibility of war. Many thinkers of the period yearned for this eventual endpoint, including Immanuel Kant, William Penn, Voltaire, and Jeremy Bentham. Of course, this could only happen if non-European cultures could be brought along to follow in the continent's footsteps and instill a sense of secularism and reason.

Behr

If, for Pagden, the Enlightenment represents the first time in human history that the manifold expressions of the human condition were joined together in a global march towards a single realization of civilization, the next book

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takes a divergent route. In the *History of International Political Theory*, Hartmut Behr, Professor of International Politics at Newcastle University, considers a much wider and divergent history of ideas, regarding the Enlightenment not as the *first*, but the *last* era to support a universal ontological politics before the onslaught of the particularist nation-state. Indeed, he finds evidence of this universalist thought all the way back in Thucydides' explanation of the origins of the Peloponnesian War: not only because Sparta became fearful of Athens' growing power and influence in the region, but also because Athens broke a peace treaty in effect between the two. Behr elaborates this point by explaining the universalist principle of a mutually derived peace treaty: only by relying on a principle outside of particularist statist concerns could multiple parties sustain a treaty in good faith. The Roman orator Cicero asserted the universality of certain political frameworks and principles as appropriate to all peoples, regardless of context, as long as they nurtured reason and the ethically based conscience as characteristics inherent in all human beings as creatures different from animals. This not only leads to a framework of universally minimal laws, but a recognition among all peoples of their natural affiliation towards one another. Behr continues to see this tendency expressed through the early Christian thinkers, with Aurelius Augustine and Thomas Aquinas's focus on the existence of a universal ethical principle, again inherent in all human beings through the power of reason, to form societies based on justice.

However, upon reaching the Enlightenment era, Behr claims a shift in political thought from universal to universalistic took place. While the former pertains to certain principles that are naturally inherent to all human beings, the latter holds the same principles, but argues they can only be realized through human agency. In this way, Behr agrees with the general line of Pagden's thesis of the Enlightenment being the era in which human agency began to trump natural law as the dynamic force in human progress, highlighted most clearly in the work of Hobbes and Kant. In regards to the former, Behr rails against the prevalent conception in International Relations of Hobbes as an unrepentant realist and instead convincingly makes the case that, for Hobbes, a strong universalistic trend in his theories is present so that all states, no matter the cultures they encompass, have the potential to create societies based on human reason. As for Kant, his work represented the last bastion of universal/universalistic thought before the Hegelian particularism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Kant still tried to think of the international as integrated into some kind of *telos* of universal mankind and humanity, and understanding his attempt as a study of the conditions of the possibilities of such teleology strictly forbids stigmatizing Kant as an "idealist" or his *On Perpetual Peace* as a work of "idealism" in international political theory, opening up a dualism between (such kind of) "idealism" and "realism." [i] In other words, Kant's thought continues to embody the ongoing debate within IR between the idealists who conceive of a humanity-wide telos and the realists who are wedded to particularism.

Behr's distaste for the particularism the nation-state represented and its occlusion of the prior two thousand years of holistic, universal/universalistic political thought is clear. At several instances, he bemoans the "failure" to engage with the dynamism that universal/universalistic political thought supposedly apprehends, as opposed to the rigid essentialist ontology of national particularism. He concludes the book with a plea for scholars to reengage with the pre-nineteenth century universal/universalistic thought as a way of "reactivating" these notions so as to challenge the violence, both material and epistemological, that particularist thought has wracked upon the world for the past two centuries.

Conclusion

Both authors should be lauded for the breadth of the scholarship represented in these two works, especially Behr. In both of these works, the reader is exposed to coherent, well-argued, and comprehensive explanations of the epistemological lineages that continue to so shape the contemporary world. However, both authors are less successful in terms of challenging certain assumptions common to Western political thought, namely ignoring the worth and importance of engaging with non-Western ontologies and epistemologies as *political* thought.

For Pagden, the idea that the Enlightenment was almost thoroughly a positive phenomenon goes without question. His all-too-brief explications on critiques of the Enlightenment would be better termed as caricatures, briefly identifying "enemies" of the era alternatively as "postmodernists" and "radicals," those looking forward to "some

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revivified version of the Middle Ages” and “Muslim extremists.” The fact that the Enlightenment occurred within a specific temporal and spatial context, and that its principles were more often than not (and continue to be) violently imposed on both citizens and Others alike, seems to make little difference since these principles are simply the right ones for human beings to live by.

Behr, though considering a much wider temporal context, similarly remains securely within the intellectual lineage of the “West.” An interesting critique could be developed from the fact that, for Behr, the nationalist particularism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries seemed to come out of nowhere, having little to do with its universal/universalistic antecedents.

A more comprehensive approach for both authors would have necessarily included non-Western thinkers and voices. A comprehensive study of the Enlightenment should include the parallel epistemologies found in some Indian and Chinese political thought (to name only two), as well as the way the project has been (positively and coercively) disseminated and received around the world. A comprehensive history of international political theory would similarly have sought voices from the entire “international,” not just a slice of it.

These deficits originate in the assumption that what the non-West most often offers is not *political* or even *philosophical* thought as conceived of in the West, but wisdom and tradition (often corrupted or decadent). This realization has, of course, been around for some time, but it is only in recent decades that such arguments have been increasingly engaged with. Thinkers such as Edward Said [ii], Ashis Nandy [iii], Antony Black [iv], and Farah Godrej [v], just to name a few, have opened our eyes to the wealth of knowledge and experience that necessarily *and* ethically must be included in any concept of what is considered good, evil, political, private, etc. To do otherwise means to continue ignoring the existence of countless societies and individuals.

References

[i] Behr, Hartmut. 138.

[ii] Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1978)

[iii] Nandy, Ashis. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983)

[iv] Black, Antony. *A World History of Ancient Political Thought*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009)

[v] Godrej, Farah. *Cosmopolitan Political Thought: Method, Practice, Discipline*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)

About the author:

Anthony Szczurek is a Ph.D. student in the Alliance for Social, Political, Ethical, and Cultural Thought (ASPECT) program at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. His interests include international relations theory and comparative political theory.