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FORUM

The German Enlightenment

In the last few decades, research on eighteenth-century German intellectual history has undergone major changes. Prominent scholars of a previous generation, such as Jürgen Habermas and Reinhart Koselleck, tended to view the Enlightenment in Germany as a relatively late phenomenon, tame and apolitical in comparison to other parts of Europe. In his later work, Koselleck himself revised his early and vehement critique of Enlightenment authors as hypocritically subverting the political sphere, as well as his almost exclusive focus on masonic lodges as venues of Enlightenment sociability (in *Critique and Crisis* of 1959). From a different ideological angle, and drawing on Immanuel Kant's views of public debate, Habermas saw the Enlightenment in Germany as a late bloomer which was only partially and insufficiently politicized (in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 1962). Earlier notable twentieth-century interpretations were largely abstracted from the eighteenth-century historical scene. Critics of the Enlightenment such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1944) and its advocates like Ernst Cassirer (in *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, 1932) regarded it first and foremost as a set of ideas that could be examined with scarce attention to the socio-political contexts of their production.

From the 1970s onwards, interdisciplinary research on the Enlightenment in Germany (and elsewhere) began to focus on the nuances of eighteenth-century thought across Europe while grafting intellectual analysis onto an increasing awareness of the complex mechanisms involved in the production of knowledge, the use of media, and the socio-political conditions in which they took place. From the 1970s to the 1990s, scholars such as Rudolf Vierhaus, Werner Schneiders, and Horst Möller extended the range of authors, topics, and positions considered as part of the Enlightenment. More recent work by Andreas Gestrich, Hans Erich Bödeker, Ursula Goldenbaum, and Steffen Martus (among many others) placed the Aufklärung on a par with its Scottish and French equivalents. It is now clear that German Aufklärer were self-consciously engaged, from the late seventeenth century onwards, in attempts at political, educational, legal, and religious reform. Though many contributors to the German Enlightenment held academic positions, the main thrust of the Aufklärung was – just as in France, Britain, or Italy – directed not at professional scholars (Gelehrte) but rather at the general educated public (Gebildete).

However, the term Enlightenment (or Aufklärung) remains heavily contested. Even when historians delimit the remit of the concept, assigning it to a particular historical period rather than an intellectual or moral programme, the public resonance of the Enlightenment remains high and problematic – especially when equated in an essentialist manner with modernity or some core values of the West. To discuss recent research on the Enlightenment, different views of the term, and its ideological use in public discourse outside academia (and sometimes within it), *German History* invited **Thomas Ahnert** (University of Edinburgh), **Iwan-Michelangelo D'Aprile** (University of Potsdam), **Elisabeth Décultot** (University of Halle-Wittenberg), and **Simon Grote** (Wellesley College, Massachusetts) to participate in a Forum. The conversation was convened and edited by **Avi Lifschitz** (University of Oxford).

1. **Is it still possible or legitimate to talk about a distinctly German Enlightenment in light of recent research on the interconnectedness of the European intellectual world and the increasing focus on transnational and global history?**

Décultot: In order to answer to this question adequately, I first need to briefly outline my definition of Enlightenment within the diverse range of meanings assigned to the term. For reasons of space, I shall begin apodictically by saying that I understand Enlightenment as an epochal concept. This apparently unspectacular definition refers to two circumstances. First, Enlightenment is a term intended to refer to a *period* which facilitates or effects a fundamental operation of historiography, namely the division into longer or shorter time segments, selecting a particular time unit from the chronological continuum. I must, however, emphasise – and this is my second point – that I do not understand the Enlightenment as the sum *of all* events that took place during this era, but rather in the full sense of the word as an epochal *concept*, i.e., as a category sustained and conditioned by certain hermeneutical prerequisites and which – based on these prerequisites – allows for a certain *access* to the epoch in question. In other words, the Enlightenment is not the eighteenth century itself, but rather emerges from a certain *reading* of this epoch.

The basis for this access are historical developments, agents, and intellectual approaches in the long eighteenth century, which at the time were only rarely associated explicitly with the concept of Enlightenment (or with the terms Aufklärung or Lumières). Many historians of the Enlightenment regard Montesquieu's *Esprit de Lois* as a milestone of political ideas in the Lumières period, but the word Lumières never appears in this work. The fact that this work is regarded today as part of Enlightenment history is thus the consequence of a retrospective interpretation, whose foundations and prerequisites must be sought in an understanding of the Enlightenment as an epochal concept. And the Enlightenment has always been highly contested as an epochal concept, especially in Germany, where it was already being disputed in the nineteenth century.

These remarks are by no means intended to question the legitimacy of this term as a historical category, since historical writing – as the works of Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur, among others, have demonstrated – is always the result of a certain *mise en récit* and as such a construct fundamentally shaped by the historian's intellectual structures, his or her mental map, so to speak.

Traditionally, historians tended to study the European Enlightenment in separate countries, that is as French, British and German Enlightenments. Such a national approach lives on in the most recent literature, such as Steffen Martus's book *Aufklärung. Das deutsche 18. Jahrhundert* (2015) shows. National divisions persist even in publications such as the *Dictionnaire européen des Lumières* (1997) or the historical lexicon *L'illuminismo. Dizionario storico* (2007), which take a supranational approach. The work in recent years that has dealt most intensively with the problem of the relationship between the Enlightenment as a supranational intellectual movement on the one hand and individual national Enlightenments on the other is perhaps Heinz Thomas's *Handbuch Europäische Aufklärung* (2015). There, the Enlightenment is understood as a European movement, which, while particularly vibrant in Western Europe (in Britain and France), also manifested itself in many other European (or European-influenced) nations and regions.

Studies that explicitly focus on the *exchange* between individual European regions or the actors and pathways of trans-European communication (via

correspondence, institutions etc.) are less common. Thus an institution such as the Berlin Academy of Sciences, which in the second half of the eighteenth century was an important site of communication between various manifestations of the European Enlightenment, was long explored solely through a nationally restricted, Prusso-centric lens. A history of relations of exchange between the individual European Enlightenments, and especially between the German Enlightenment with its neighbours, thus remains to be written.

Ahnert: The emphasis on the interconnectedness of the European intellectual world is perfectly compatible with references to a German Enlightenment, just as it is legitimate to speak of a French, a Scottish, or an English Enlightenment. Early modern nations were not the only units in the interconnected world of the Enlightenment, but intellectual exchange took place regularly across boundaries that were national, at least in a loose sense of the word. Nations might be defined by political borders, or by differences in the main language of vernacular publications. Religious confession could also contribute to differentiating them from each other. National differences mattered in the circulation of texts, people, and ideas, because the translation from one natural language to another, but also from a particular context in one nation to another in a different nation, affected the ways in which intellectual and cultural exports from one country were used and interpreted elsewhere.

The characteristics of different nations were also the subject of debate among eighteenth-century thinkers, who, like humanist scholars before them, commented on the distinctiveness of various national communities. The differences they described were not necessarily the same as those identified by modern scholars. What is important is that national differences were of interest to them. They might even express admiration for other nations, or feel called upon to defend their own against outsiders. Christian Thomasius's introductory remarks in his lecture on the imitation of the French are evidence of such concerns, as are reactions to the plagiarism dispute between Leibniz and Newton, or Herder's comments on French culture.

Some intellectual currents are best understood as transnational phenomena, which extended across several early-modern nations and had an existence above national contexts. Scholars have, for example, argued for a transnational Arminian Enlightenment (J. G. A. Pocock) and a transnational Radical Enlightenment (Jonathan Israel). Yet Enlightenment thought was influenced by the division of the European intellectual world into loosely defined nations and eighteenth-century thinkers' perceptions of national differences.

Grote: It is indeed still legitimate to talk about a distinctly German Enlightenment—and I say this as an intellectual historian who finds transnational approaches extremely appealing. One reason for this appeal, familiar to me from my own work, is that a transnational perspective can aid intellectual historians in the reconstruction of historical debates. Such reconstruction typically involves delineating multiple, more-or-less contemporary historical positions on a question addressed by a range of authors. This is a technique of great critical power, in part because it allows us to revive once-credible but hitherto forgotten alternatives to now-familiar ideas, and to illuminate the complexity of issues that have, for various historical reasons, become oversimplified in present-day discussion. A transnational approach to the reconstruction of historical debates allows us to illuminate more of those debates' complexity, or to make more convincing arguments about how the debates were actually conducted, or to assess the degree to which a particular way of approaching a

problem was nationally specific. A transnational approach also reflects the reality that many topics were being discussed in the eighteenth century (as in other centuries) in a philosophical, theological, or otherwise learned vocabulary absorbed from authors, ancient and modern, common to the university curricula and learned discourse of many countries.

I see such an approach as entirely compatible with a more local focus, one that keeps in mind the fact that authors and their publishers were producing texts for multiple audiences: local, regional, and global. Many German authors were taking positions in debates that they knew were active among non-German authors, and they understood that their contributions to those debates might well be acknowledged and responded to by authors in other countries. At the same time, many of those same authors were also hoping to shape beliefs and policy more locally by writing for audiences close to home: politicians, colleagues, or others within a single city, for example, or their own university students. And publishers, of course, were happy to produce books that would appeal simultaneously to a variety of groups who might buy them for a range of different reasons. This fact of multiple audiences, impressed upon me by my own recent forays into book history, is what gives me confidence that approaching intellectual history from a transnational perspective need not be at odds with our recognizing the local significance of the texts and authors we study — including for audiences that we could reasonably identify as German in terms of geography, language, or connection to a political body such as the Holy Roman Empire.

D'Aprile: I remember a European history conference a few years ago at which a few participants became embroiled in a very serious dispute over whether eighteenth-century Bratislava was a Slovak, Hungarian, or German city. This is just one example of how anachronistic distinctions are being discussed under the pretext of historicisation, distinctions that have rather little to do with the eighteenth century but everything to do with the national myths of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The fact that such archaisms and homogenising ideologies are being powerfully recycled again for political ends nowadays does not make them any more historically correct. Is Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger's splendid recent book about Maria Theresa a contribution to the history of the German or the Austrian Enlightenment?

References to a German, Scottish, Amsterdam or Parisian Enlightenment, in contrast, can only ever be (more or less precise) conceptual shorthand for the attempt to localise the trans-European and transnational Enlightenment discourse in its field-specific variants on the ground. In this sense there is no contradiction between the 'transnational turn' and the 'topographical turn' in the history of the Enlightenment; Steffen Martus's extensive study of the 'German eighteenth century', for example, can teach us a good deal about the local particularities of the Enlightenment in the Holy Roman Empire. Those interested in the multifarious European entanglements of the German Enlightenment will probably turn to the works of Elisabeth Décultot, and Martin Mulrow has shown the degree to which specific, regionally focused debates in the early Enlightenment in Germany exist within a global intellectual history that extends well beyond Europe's borders.

2. **If we can still define a specifically German Enlightenment, what are its main characteristics? How is it distinguished from Enlightenment movements in other countries?**

D'Aprile: If we proceed from the assumption that the German Enlightenment cannot be defined historically in terms of a political, cultural, religious or even linguistic unity, some of its specific characteristics such as polycentrism, multiconfessionalism or multilingualism emerge *ex negativo*. They do not apply solely to the German Enlightenment, but at least equally to the entire region of central and eastern Europe, where they are of decisive importance. The political fragmentation of the Holy Roman Empire with its weak central power led to the formation of numerous centres of the Enlightenment: courts and royal capitals, commercial cities, universities and academies with their varying field conditions and discourse formations. Overlapping confessional Lutheran, Calvinist, Pietist or Catholic Reform Enlightenment movements crossed territorial borders. The German Enlightenment would be inconceivable without the Haskalah or Huguenot exile networks, which played an essential role in the formation of the Enlightenment from the late seventeenth century to the reform debates of the late Enlightenment. And the German Enlightenment cannot even be understood as a German-language Enlightenment if we are not to exclude by definition some of the fundamental texts at its core, such as Christian Wolff's Latin works, Moses Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings, or the French texts written by Leibniz, Frederick II, or Alexander von Humboldt. Multilingualism as an important trait of the German Enlightenment is also evident in the outstanding role played in it by translations and adaptations – to a far greater degree than in France or Britain. This is true both quantitatively, as reflected in the number of translations, and qualitatively with respect to the evolution of specific positions. The latter point is particularly manifest in the omnipresent contemporary labels applied to proponents of the Enlightenment who were known by such monikers as the 'German Hume', the 'German Voltaire' or the 'German Addison'. Ever since the writings of Leibniz and Wolff, German Enlightenment thinkers repeatedly imagined China as an enlightened model state; in light of their vibrant practice of adaptation, they might actually be regarded from a historical perspective as the so-called 'European Chinese' of the eighteenth century.

Ahnert: National boundaries are important to understanding the effects of the exchange and circulation of ideas on Enlightenment thought, but it is difficult to generalise about the nature of the German or any other national Enlightenment. Like any Enlightenment in a particular geographical region, the German Enlightenment stood for a variety of intellectual positions. It cannot be derived from a set of core, essentially German beliefs. The disagreements between various Aufklärer were often as deep as those between some Aufklärer and thinkers in other parts of Europe.

Certain structural features did set apart the Enlightenment in the German lands from that in some other parts of Europe. One of these is the role of universities. Many of the main representatives of the German Enlightenment, from Thomasius to Wolff, Lichtenberg, and Kant, were university professors, though others, like Leibniz or Lessing, were not. The German lands were also distinctive in having an unusually large number of universities. England and France, by contrast, had far fewer, and a far smaller proportion of the thinkers associated with the Enlightenment there taught at universities. Universities were also prominent elsewhere, in the Scottish Enlightenment, for example, where thinkers such as Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith, Hugh Blair, Adam Ferguson, or John Millar held academic teaching posts. But in other respects the situation there was very different from that in the German-speaking lands. Scotland was much smaller than the Holy Roman Empire. The great number of

universities in the German lands was a product of the religious division and political fragmentation of the Empire. Scotland, by contrast, was a small, confessionally homogenous kingdom within a much larger British state.

The Enlightenment in the German lands was also characterised by the fact that it developed in many different intellectual centres, in territories that enjoyed a certain degree of political autonomy. These centres might be courts, universities, learned societies, or academies. The existence of these many centres increased the opportunities for official patronage, support, and employment for the Aufklärer. It also seems to have created some degree of freedom for intellectual dissent. When Christian Thomasius was forced to leave Leipzig, he found a position in Halle; when Christian Wolff was expelled from Halle he was offered a position at Marburg. The failure to suppress the Wertheim Bible, a rationalist translation of the Pentateuch by Johann Lorenz Schmidt (1737), was also related to the polycentric political structure of the Empire.

Décultot: If we understand the Enlightenment – following my reply to the first question – as an epochal concept, the second question can be understood as one about the specificity of works on the Enlightenment era in Germany in contrast to other European and non-European countries.

According to a view of Enlightenment strongly influenced by Kant, one peculiarity of the German history of ideas in this period seems to lie in the understanding of Enlightenment as primarily an individual, epistemological process, presupposing both the autonomous and the critical or self-critical application of thought. The main protagonist and proponent of this cognitive process is the individual (not the group); its genuine site is the university; its most important media are books and periodicals; its central discipline is philosophy, followed by theology. This last point perhaps explains a further peculiarity of this German concept: that anti-religious polemic, atheism, and systematic materialism play a smaller role in the history of the German Enlightenment than for example in that of its French counterpart. In Germany, radical forms of the Enlightenment – as represented by Hermann Samuel Reimarus – developed mainly underground, as demonstrated in Martin Mulso's research. The German Enlightenment is thus largely understood as a process tightly connected to scholarship as an institutionally secured means of organising the generation and dissemination of knowledge. Finally, viewed against the background of the historiography on the French *Lumières* as well as the British Enlightenment, there seems to be somewhat weaker focus on the question of the practical effect of Enlightenment ideas in non-scholarly circles.

Grote: What makes this question difficult to answer, I think, is that finding the main characteristics of the German Enlightenment is not simply a matter of observation. Rather, it requires that we presuppose a general definition, at least as a starting point for our investigations. Given the state of the field, this is not easy. Reflecting the heterogeneity of current scholarship on the Enlightenment more broadly, scholarship specifically on the German Enlightenment offers a wide variety of more-or-less mutually exclusive options, each of which tends to lead to a focus on different texts, people, or other historical phenomena.

The open question of how to position the philosopher Christian Wolff and his putative eighteenth-century German adherents vis-à-vis the Enlightenment illustrates the difficulty. In identifying a German Enlightenment, one option has been to look for exemplars of freethinking, atheism, and other beliefs widely subject to state

suppression and circulated in various clandestine ways. This approach can easily lead to a focus on figures such as the so-called radical Wolffians of the mid-century. It produces a portrait of a German Enlightenment that, while distinguished by the peculiarities of Wolffianism as a set of philosophical commitments and practices, is nonetheless at least somewhat compatible with the ‘radical’ Enlightenments that scholars such as Margaret Jacob and Jonathan Israel have delineated with reference to France, the Netherlands, England, and other places.

Another option has long been to focus on what some theologians and social scientists call a modernization or naturalization of Christianity: an increasing regard for natural human cognition, as applied to the study of human history and the natural world, as the most reliable — or indeed the only reliable — instrument for the acquisition of knowledge and for the authorization of interpretations of the Bible. From this perspective, represented by Karl Aner’s still-fundamental *Theologie der Lessingzeit* (1929), the so-called ‘conservative’ or ‘theological’ Wolffians look like bearers of Enlightenment. More recent research has located various Jewish and Catholic theologians within the same general framework.

There is of course a range of other options in addition to these. For many historians of philosophy, Immanuel Kant remains the archetypal Enlightenment figure; whereas other historians have presented Christian Thomasius as a representative of an Enlightenment very different from those Enlightenments represented by Wolffians or by Kant. Still others have invited the incorporation of a broader range of conflicting ideologies within the German Enlightenment by defining it in terms of social structures or discursive norms, or by identifying it, very generally and theologically non-specifically, with a commitment to the perfection of human beings, human institutions, and human communities. This last hallmark has found favour with historians aiming to categorize German Pietism as belonging to the Enlightenment.

Each of these options has been championed by distinguished historians, has underlain fruitful research agendas, and has produced excellent scholarship. So how to choose a definition? How, in other words, to choose a German Enlightenment? One’s choice depends largely on what particular vision of modernity one believes the word Enlightenment should denote. Most of the current options have a particular political valence recognizable to today’s readers; they focus our attention on resistance to an overbearing or authoritarian state, or on rational religion, or on religious toleration, or on scientific approaches to the acquisition of knowledge, or on innovations of one kind or another. They pick out a particular modernization narrative, often in order to give comfort or hope to today’s adherents of whatever ideology seems to occupy the end-phase of that narrative. As someone who — naively — has tended to see himself as apolitical in his scholarship, and who has only recently begun to think seriously about his own scholarship’s political implications, I would still find it difficult to insist that we attach the term *Enlightenment*, with all its rhetorical power, to one vision of modernity rather than another. At the same time, I sympathize with those scholars who have been resisting an ecumenical, survey-type approach that bundles all the current scholarly options together under the heading ‘the Enlightenment (or ‘the German Enlightenment’), allowing the term Enlightenment to encompass nearly all imaginable ideologies, and thereby — so it seems to me — robbing it of its rhetorical and analytical potency.

3. What is the relationship between intellectual debates (generated by Enlightenment authors) and political change in eighteenth-century Germany?

Grote: Again, the answer to the question of the relationship between Enlightenment and political change can vary radically depending upon one's definition of Enlightenment and which authors one sees as its representatives. Here, the current scholarly disagreement about whether to encompass Pietism within the Enlightenment illustrates this variability in the case of early eighteenth-century Brandenburg-Prussia. The decision by King Friedrich Wilhelm I to expel Christian Wolff in 1723 was clearly the result of the king having been influenced by debate within his circle of advisors, which included sophisticated representatives of positions that contemporaries were characterizing as Wolffian or Pietist. August Hermann Francke, Pietist *par excellence*, seems to have swayed the king decisively. The traditional historiography, which assigned Pietism at least implicitly to some version of a counter-Enlightenment, presented the king as having acted in opposition to the Enlightenment as represented by Wolff, such that the entire incident could be pointed to as an indication of Enlightenment's political weakness before 1740. But now it has also become acceptable, following accounts by scholars such as Ian Hunter or Martin Gierl, to categorize Francke and Wolff as representatives of competing Enlightenments or of a single, broadly defined Enlightenment. Within this framework, the king must be seen as having made a choice among positions within an Enlightenment debate about educational and broader societal reform. From this perspective, the incident begins to look like an example of Enlightenment authors dominating court and university rather than struggling with their enemies for influence.

D'Aprile: Political change proceeded slowly in the eighteenth-century German principalities, and it was still influenced throughout by corporate conflicts and reform attempts within the absolutist princely states. Even within this framework, reforms – for instance along the model of Turgot – could not be implemented, or only in the short term, as the example of Josephinism in Austria shows. A political application of farther-reaching Enlightenment reform objectives in the direction of legal equality or the removal of the privileges and powers of the estates is only observable after the Napoleonic challenge and the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire in the early nineteenth century – if we ignore unstable republican attempts under French protection such as the Mainz Republic.

If we enquire into the historical significance of intellectual debates within this change, it is important to take account of their relationships of political, social, and economic interdependence. Ever since writers such as Heinrich Heine began reflecting historically on the German Enlightenment as a period, they repeatedly drew attention to the discrepancy between ideas and social reality as well as to a certain intellectual 'surplus' within the German Enlightenment. The fact that these ideas nevertheless did not float in a vacuum, but very much represented certain social and political energies, can only be reconstructed if we locate them precisely in media, material culture, institutions and discourses. To that extent, I would respond to this complex question with the methodological argument that we should expand the history of political ideas to encompass suitable methods drawn from social and media history. Conversely, on the basis of their knowledge of the central political positions of the eighteenth century, intellectual historians can provide correctives to the

dissolution of the political within some models of cultural studies. Only by combining the two can we adequately discuss the meaning of certain ideas in the changing political spectrum of the Enlightenment.

Ahnert: In 1790 Carl Leonhard Reinhold wrote that ‘[o]f all European states, Germany is the one most suited to a revolution of the mind and the least suited to political revolution’. That statement has been quoted by some to suggest that a peculiarly German gap existed between enlightened ideals and political practice. There was certainly little transformative political change in the eighteenth-century German lands until the invasions by the French revolutionary armies at the very end of the century overturned the legal and institutional structures of the Empire. It is often implied that Enlightenment debate should have led to political change, and that its failure to do so in the German case calls for an explanation.

Enlightenment authors in the German lands did not on the whole wield formal political power, though there were some possible alternatives to more formal modes of political representation. Private societies and clubs, like the Berlin *Mittwochsgesellschaft*, for example, could serve as venues for enlightened debate, and sometimes the members of such associations were also state officials. But the relationship between debates in these societies and political practice was far from straightforward. Rulers did not take political decisions in response to discussions in them. Those members who were also state officials rarely advocated far-reaching political change.

Some historians have argued that Enlightenment authors hoped to influence rulers by contributing to the formation of public opinion, as another alternative to more formal kinds of political representation. But the relationship between this public opinion, which was never uniform and not always particularly enlightened, and political practice was diffuse. Authors might appeal to the tribunal of public opinion, but it is not clear that actual public opinion had the power to cause political change, or, if it did, that the change would conform to Enlightenment principles.

It is sometimes suggested that Enlightenment authors’ lack of political influence produced a pent-up demand for political change, or that it led intellectuals to withdraw from active political engagement altogether and devote themselves to the pursuit of apolitical, cultural activities instead. The absence of enlightened political change however does not seem all that remarkable when it is compared to the situation in other parts of Europe. The caution and conservatism of German Enlightenment authors was not that different from the attitudes of the general run of Enlightenment thinkers elsewhere – in Scotland, for example, or even France, where the French Revolution at the end of the century has sometimes obscured the relative lack of political radicalism among the *philosophes*. Although Enlightenment debate may on particular occasions have inspired political change, there is no necessary or even strong connection between the two.

Décultot: To me it is actually striking that many territories of the eighteenth-century Holy Roman Empire were marked by a dynamism that already began in the seventeenth century. This dynamism was characterised by the attempt to enforce greater efficiency in state administration, and particularly to strengthen the central hubs of power. The reforms enacted in Prussia in the course of the eighteenth century stand out here, along with Josephinism in the Habsburg lands. It is completely unsurprising that this ‘modernisation’ of absolutism also took up the current discourses of the day, and that state reforms sought legitimacy by referring to the

figure of the wise, rational, or enlightened monarch. We need to ask, however, whether the transformation of the state really occurred in and together with the age of Enlightenment. To be sure, the principle of religious tolerance, which could rely on the writings of prominent Enlightenment authors such as Lessing, attained a new resonance in political practice, but in Germany this had been the order of the day since the end of the Thirty Years War (at least in relations among the various Christian confessions). What was new was also the growing significance of an educated public sphere made up of both the nobility and the middle classes – and associated with it the necessity, more than previously, for the various governments or monarchs to present at least some semblance of a progressive image. Frederick II, as author of the *Anti-Machiavel* and public interlocutor of Voltaire, was especially innovative in this area. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, other princes (for example Anna Amalia und Carl August in Weimar or Prince Franz in Dessau) sought to shape their public image by means of ambitious cultural policies.

4. How do you see the interface between Enlightenment, Weimar Classicism, and Romanticism; can we determine when the German Enlightenment ‘ended’?

Ahnert: Enlightenment, Weimar Classicism, and Romanticism are closely related phenomena which overlap and blend into each other. Yet Weimar Classicism and Romanticism are often contrasted to the Enlightenment because they are both considered reactions, in different ways, to rationalist, modernising, and emancipatory ideas that continue to be associated with Enlightenment thought. Weimar Classicism has been described as a kind of illiberal, elitist movement, whose members withdrew from politics and turned to cultural activity instead. Romanticism is seen as a reaction against the supposedly excessive rationalism of Enlightenment thinkers.

The similarities and continuities between all three of these intellectual currents are, however, stronger than is sometimes acknowledged. Although Romantic authors presented themselves as critics of the Enlightenment, their rhetoric often masked an indebtedness to earlier Enlightenment ideas, on which they drew heavily. Weimar Classicism is best understood as one expression of Enlightenment culture in the German lands rather than as a distinct movement. The disagreements between a thinker like Basedow and a representative of Weimar Classicism such as Goethe, for example, reflected two varieties of Enlightenment thought rather than a conflict between two clearly separate intellectual currents.

The belief that Enlightenment, Weimar Classicism, and Romanticism are distinct from each other is often tied to a narrow definition of Enlightenment, according to which the Enlightenment was committed to certain key principles such as philosophical rationalism and liberal, progressive political and social ideals in particular. Weimar Classicism, with its lack of interest in political and social activism, and Romanticism, with its hostility to excessive rationalism, appears to be excluded from that definition. But so would large parts of German eighteenth-century thought, if this strict definition of Enlightenment were applied to them.

In fact, Enlightenment, in the German lands as much as anywhere else, was a diffuse intellectual and cultural phenomenon which embraced a great variety of ideas and beliefs. The term ‘Enlightenment’ is perhaps best used in a very loose sense, to refer to the sum of the debates and ideas of the period from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries, rather than to any coherent, well-defined intellectual

programme. Enlightenment in that broad sense includes mutually contradictory positions, all of which, however, are equally characteristic of that period.

Like all historical periodisations, ‘the Enlightenment’ is to some extent no more than a convenient label. Yet there are good reasons to date the end of the Enlightenment to the first decades of the nineteenth century. Although there were significant intellectual continuities between the age of Enlightenment and the mid- to late nineteenth century, there was an important change in that the Enlightenment began to be viewed increasingly as a past phenomenon. The fact that contemporaries would no longer have considered themselves to be part of ‘the Enlightenment’ makes it difficult to apply that term to the intellectual and cultural history of the period after the 1810s.

Grote: Naturally, locating the end of a historical period requires us to have a clearly defined concept of the period whose end we are attempting to locate. That said, a periodizing label developed by specialists interested in one thing may get reused, with a different definition, by another group of specialists interested in tracking the trajectory of something else. And once a carefully defined periodization comes into common usage, it can be hard even for scholars of the period to remain fully conscious of the distinctions among its original definitions and prevent it from drifting into a more casual and either purely temporal or at least opaquely multivalent label. Like Enlightenment, Romanticism is of course a classic example of this last phenomenon, as Arthur O. Lovejoy famously explained over fifty years ago. At the same time, because some period labels have not drifted as far as others, periodization varies significantly among the many disciplinary perspectives from which research on eighteenth-century Germany is being done today.

Décultot: In German historiography, the dividing line between the Enlightenment and the epochal concepts that followed (Weimar Classicism or Romanticism) is generally located in the final decade of the eighteenth century. The reason for this division is the increasingly harsh criticism of what was described as stifling rationalism, or of a manner of disseminating popular philosophical knowledge associated with the concept of Enlightenment.

That Goethe himself – for instance in his early and also late critique of Sulzer as a representative of Enlightenment aesthetics – sought to distance himself from the ‘errors of the so-called Enlightenment’ contributed quite substantially to the construction of a historiographical break between Enlightenment and Classicism. And Novalis’s rebellion against the ‘priests’ and ‘mystagogues’ of the Enlightenment, who allegedly erased ‘every trace of the sacred’ and stripped ‘the world of colourful ornament’, provided the basis for the introduction of a historiographical break between the Enlightenment and a supposedly anti-rationalist Romanticism. Such divisions were widespread in historiography, especially nineteenth-century literary history.

It should, however, be emphasised here that such historiographical divisions, demarcated by epochal concepts, always have a performative character, i.e., that by simply referring to such breaks between individual eras they generate almost automatically these very divisions. They do so in two respects: first, they contribute to an excessive emphasis on what is new about the nascent period, while at the same time ignoring continuities – for example between Classical or ‘Romantic’ concepts on the one hand, and the philosophical, political, and anthropological thought of the Enlightenment on the other. Not infrequently, the figures who confirm such

continuities, and who cannot be clearly categorised using the various epochal concepts in question, are treated as rather peripheral – in this case Johann Gottfried Herder, Carl Philipp Moritz, Christoph Martin Wieland or Jean Paul.

The epochal divisions in question unfortunately also exhibit this performative character with respect to scholarly practice. In academia, such epochal concepts tend to produce autonomous areas of competence: among literary scholars, for instance, specialists in Weimar Classicism are frequently insufficiently familiar with the Enlightenment period as a whole because it is not considered part of their own field of expertise.

D'Aprile: It is fortunate, however, that nowadays we rarely have to debate whether Schiller or Herder were figures of Enlightenment as opposed to Classicism or Romanticism. Parallel developments in the late eighteenth century, which are described using labels such as Weimar Classicism or early Romanticism, refer mainly to local and temporally circumscribed or mainly literary phenomena of 'high culture'. They are thus far more narrowly conceived than the notion of the Enlightenment era. A number of additional terms are also in circulation for the period of upheaval around 1800, including an 'Age of Revolution', Koselleck's *Sattelzeit*, or the Foucauldian shift from epistemes of representation to historical epistemes. Each of these terms stresses particular points of view. The similarly oft-used epochal term 'around 1800' seeks to counter the adoption such an essentialist point of view, seemingly aiming at the mere simultaneity of various tendencies. In the literature on the Enlightenment, there now seems to be a broad consensus that one can speak of a 'long eighteenth century' of the German Enlightenment. The realisation of certain political reforms in Prussia in the period after 1806, the intellectual debates over the French Revolution, or the various forms and formats of the 'popular Enlightenment' are developments that reach into the nineteenth century and are usually subsumed under the term 'late Enlightenment'. The end of the long eighteenth century cannot be located in a specific year or event, but it would be hard to find a historian who considers the period after 1830 to be part of the German Enlightenment, quite simply because intellectual discourse was framed then by the new conditions of accelerated technological change and the recent formation of an industrial class society.

5. How is the Enlightenment, and particularly the German Enlightenment, used (or abused) in public discourse outside academia — and what can historians contribute to such debates?

Décultot: Even as it was used in the eighteenth century, the term Enlightenment was already a battle cry or at least a slogan that pointed to a programme that was somehow devoted to the idea of perfectibility. To that extent, it does not bother me in principle when the term is still (or yet again) used nowadays in a broader public arena outside academia. Drawing connections between current and eighteenth-century debates can even be useful, because it helps to prevent the history of the eighteenth century from becoming a lifeless mass of facts slumbering in dusty archives.

I do expect scholarly discourse, however, to avoid making anachronistic comparisons or simply equating our time with the eighteenth century. Such comparisons can lead to a trivial reductionism that treats the Enlightenment as the launch pad of modernity. Far more dangerously, they can lead to the opposite conclusion that – against the background of our present-day values – there was no

eighteenth-century Enlightenment at all, for instance because its proponents were not sufficiently devoted to women's equality or, by the standards of today's postcolonial studies, did not cultivate a consistent anti-colonial discourse.

Within such debates on the concept of Enlightenment, I see scholars' central task as helping to avoid anachronism, stressing the differences and continuities between the present and the eighteenth century, and above all revealing the complexity of this epochal concept and its applications.

D'Aprile: The question of the use and abuse of the term Enlightenment is not simply limited to the broader public discourse outside academia. Ideological or simply instrumental uses of the Enlightenment can be found both inside and outside universities. Indeed, one of the main critiques offered by eighteenth-century Enlightenment authored was aimed to show that narrow-mindedness and arrogance were no less prevalent in academic circles than elsewhere; see, for example, the omnipresent criticism of scholars in the German Enlightenment ever since Thomasius.

As in other debates over the politics of history, only historicisation would help. However, historicising here does not mean adopting a neo-Rankean concept of 'showing what actually happened' but rather a two-way process of reciprocally tailoring categories and the use of concepts while reconstructing historical reality. The reciprocal relationships of interdependence between epistemological interest and object construction is evident not least from the history of the reception of the Enlightenment in nineteenth- and twentieth-century German academic historiography, which is teeming with arbitrary reductionism, stereotypes, and denigrations of the Enlightenment era because it was meant to represent the Other (by turns British, French, or Jewish) of an alleged German national character. To mention two more recent instances of abuse: the different versions of the old thesis of the 'decline of the West' present the Enlightenment as something of 'our own', which is now threatened by the Other, generally 'Islam' but more generally the 'non-European' or the 'non-Western' – whether in Pegida's street version or in the academically dressed-up version found in books bearing titles such as *How We Are Squandering the Achievements of the Enlightenment*. Or, in the tradition of the Counter-Enlightenment, authors deny that there was ever such a thing as the Enlightenment at all, declaring instead that religion or 'cultural identity' is the driving factor in history. By contrast, the Enlightenment is condemned as a mere propaganda trick of self-styled intellectual elites from the eighteenth century to the present. What both approaches share is their ahistorical cultural essentialism. Historians who study the Enlightenment should at least point out the over-simplification, one-sidedness, and distortion inherent in such historical constructs as well as their links to the relevant epistemological and power interests, whether in the academic field or in public discourse.

Ahnert: In public discourse the Enlightenment continues to be regarded, and usually celebrated, as a key moment in the transition to modernity. As a result, non-academic discussions about the Enlightenment have a tendency to mutate into debates about the benefits and disadvantages of modernity, understood in a particular way. The defenders of modernity will emphasise the importance of, for example, rationalism, tolerance, scientific and technological progress, and political and economic freedom, all of which, it is said, are modern values that were promoted or even invented by the Enlightenment. Critics of modernity will accuse its defenders of shallow optimism and of turning a blind eye to the harmful effects of modernity, among which they may include the environmental costs of technological change, a casual disregard for the

dangerous uses to which scientific discoveries can be put, a narrowly economic understanding of well-being, or an arrogant belief in the superiority of ‘the West’ over other cultures. The conflation of Enlightenment with a certain kind of modernity also explains why in recent years the Enlightenment has been held up as an antidote to religious (mainly Islamic) fundamentalism and political populism.

Like modernity, the Enlightenment has been criticised for being naïve or dishonest about its true nature. But critics and defenders alike often agree on what the Enlightenment is supposed to represent, which is, above all, an optimistic belief in secular reason, human progress, and various other ‘modern’ values. The disagreement seems to be mostly over whether that belief is valuable and well-founded, or superficial and even hypocritical.

This identification of the Enlightenment with modernity unfortunately tends to limit the range and nature of the questions that are asked about the Enlightenment as a historical phenomenon. Crude presentism in public discourse is a common problem for historians, but it seems to be especially pronounced in the case of the Enlightenment because its intellectual importance for the contemporary world has been emphasised so strenuously for such a long time.

Public discussion about the German Enlightenment is also hampered by the fact that not much is known about it outside specialist academic circles. There is little awareness of the main figures of the German Enlightenment. Immanuel Kant and Frederick the Great may be familiar names, but few others are. Understanding of the more general characteristics of the German Enlightenment is also very limited. When a broader opinion about the German Enlightenment is expressed, it is likely to be a variation on the *Sonderweg* theory, implying that German thinkers in the eighteenth century were more concerned with cultural pursuits than with practical social and political matters.

Although there are connections between the eighteenth century and the present, they are not as obvious or direct as is often suggested in public discourse. The contributions historians can make to this discourse are limited. Their most useful comments are likely to reflect a difficult balancing act between developing a more nuanced understanding of the Enlightenment as an historical phenomenon and nurturing public interest in it.

Grote: In current non-academic public discourse, I see far less interest in the German Enlightenment than in the Enlightenment more generally. Nor do I notice in the popular press much attention to the different historical contexts or the precise distinctions between the views of the continually invoked canon of Enlightenment authors, such as Kant, Voltaire, Rousseau, or Adam Smith.

In and of itself, of course, painting with a broad brush does not need to involve making historically false claims. Nor, as far as I can see, do the rigorous historiographical standards that we uphold, insofar as we represent the profession of historians, forbid us from using historical research to intervene in ethical or political debates, let alone from making arguments that reflect specific moral or political values. In fact, because the very term ‘Enlightenment’ is so value-laden by virtue of its close connection to concepts of modernity, it is hard to imagine how a historian could make an argument about it that does not reflect a certain set of values. In Enlightenment studies, therefore, as in so many other areas of historical research, citizenship (and I speak now as an American citizen) and membership in the historical profession may not be fully separable.

For these reasons, I do not see historians as professionally bound to play only

a sceptical, deflationary role in public discourse, pointing out exceptions to general assertions about the Enlightenment and providing reminders that the present is in so many ways unlike the past. Among the contributions historians are well positioned to make, in addition to supplying often badly needed scepticism of this type, is to draw on their own experience developing and analyzing modernization and other historical narratives, in order to help a broader public see how narratives such as those connected with the Enlightenment get constructed and how they can be assessed: that is, how their authors almost invariably adduce historical facts in connection with pre-conceived concepts and values, and how the standards by which we can and should assess the truth of the former are not fully applicable to the latter.