

**DARING TO KNOW:  
SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS ENCOUNTER THE ENLIGHTENMENT**

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"What is enlightenment?" asked the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. "Sapere Aude!" [Dare to know!] was his conclusion. The Enlightenment is a basic reference point in the history of western civilization. It is traditionally identified as the intellectual cornerstone in modern European and American history. But recent scholarship has challenged students to reconsider the very nature of the Enlightenment and its broader impact. For example, Robert Darnton has widened the range of sources by addressing the works of less famous but more popular writers of the period.<sup>1</sup> Who was their audience, and how were they received? Some historians focus on the sharp disagreements among eighteenth century writers and question whether intellectual currents of that time can accurately be considered enlightened.

This past summer thirty secondary school teachers dared to take a penetrating look at the Enlightenment. Those educators were selected to attend a summer seminar which addressed the topic "The Enlightenment Revisited: Sources and Interpretations." The four-week institute, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), was conducted on the campus of California State University, Long Beach. Professors William Weber (History), Donald Schwartz (History) and Clorinda Donato (French and Italian) directed and administered the project. In an effort to recruit outstanding secondary school teachers from across the United States, the project directors sent more than 4000 notices to

various secondary school districts and social studies organizations. Teachers of advanced European history classes were especially solicited. The process of selecting thirty candidates from among eighty-five applications was extremely challenging. The selection committee was impressed by the quality of the applicants. Most of the teachers who expressed interest in the program held advanced degrees and some had published extensively. Some, who had particular knowledge and expertise on the Enlightenment, hoped to gain an even greater understanding of the period. Other applicants wanted to attend the institute because they felt they knew little about the philosophes and welcomed the opportunity to become better versed in the Enlightenment.

Ultimately, the project directors chose thirty participants from varied backgrounds in terms of geography, age, and academic expertise. Most were high school social studies teachers, but also selected was a reading specialist, a French language teacher, an art historian and five English teachers. One out of three taught at a private institution. Some were veterans of previous NEH sponsored institutes whereas others had no such experiences.

The thirty selected entered the seminar with fairly conventional assumptions and impressions concerning the Enlightenment. Typical was the comment of one participant who said that she traditionally taught that enlightened thought led to the French Revolution. "I have often suspected that this was far too neat an explanation of extraordinarily complex events," she acknowledged, "yet it certainly makes history seem quickly

comprehensible to my students." Such a neat framework of causation was but one facet of the Enlightenment that would be tested in the four weeks that followed. Other issues raised during the course of the seminar included: was the Enlightenment truly an Age of Reason, rationality, and natural law? Was the movement democratic or elitist? Were proponents of the Enlightenment atheists? What shape did enlightened thought take in France? In England? In the United States? In Italy?

As a starting point, a month prior to the start of the program participants were required to read monographs on the Enlightenment by Peter Gay and Norman Hampson.<sup>2</sup> The readings during the four weeks included interpretive works by Darnton, John Pocock, and George Boas. The bulk of the reading material, however, consisted of primary sources from major figures in the French, English and Italian enlightenment, as well as lesser known but important writers. Thus in addition to works by Kant, Locke, Hume, Voltaire, Diderot and Beccaria, participants read from John Toland, Giuseppe Parini, Antonio Genovesi, and Shaftsbury. The sources included numerous works that were previously untranslated in English. The teachers also read excerpts from popular periodicals such as the Spectator and the Universal Journal.

The institute was conducted from 9 AM to 3 PM daily. Morning sessions addressed some of the interpretative issues noted above. Typically, a member of the project faculty would lecture for the first hour. At times guest lecturers were invited to address their own research interest related to the theme of the institute.

Visiting scholars included Jacques Revel from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, Lawrence Klein from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and Kate Norberg from the University of California, Los Angeles. Following the initial presentations, participants would divide into five study groups to discuss specific sources read the previous night.<sup>3</sup> The thirty teachers would then reconvene and each sub-group would report on their interpretation of the reading assigned. Thus when the British Enlightenment was introduced, one group analyzed an article by Roy Porter<sup>4</sup>, a second group dissected John Locke's views on toleration<sup>5</sup>, while other sets of teachers read from Hume, Thomas Sherlock, and Thomas Bisse respectively.<sup>6</sup> The project faculty posed questions that encouraged participants to reflect further on the meaning and significance of the source under investigation. Open-ended questions invited the teachers to think critically about the sources and to reformulate their ideas and assumptions concerning the Enlightenment. This inquiry approach generated considerable discussion and debate among participants.

Afternoon sessions were devoted to the question of how these new insights could be transmitted and translated to the students of the thirty selected teachers. One member of the project faculty who had extensive experience in secondary school curriculum development helped teachers to create learning activities related to the theme of the institute. Participants were charged with developing such material individually and in groups. Each activity addressed a specific topic related to the Enlightenment,

and contained sources for students to interpret. Such material included political and philosophical tracts, poetry, and illustrations. The resulting compilation will be printed in a bound volume and will be disseminated to interested educators at professional conferences. Among the topics that will be included in the learning activities are: 'The Role of the Salon and Coffeehouse in the French and English Enlightenments'; 'Were the Philosophes True Philosophers or Illogical Extremists?' and 'How Did the Enlightenment Account for Evil in a World Governed by a Benevolent God?'

The NEH firmly believes that participants in institutes can best process information through the technique of writing. Consequently, there is a writing component to all NEH-funded projects. In the Enlightenment program, therefore, teachers were required to submit weekly journals in which they were to reflect on the work of the seminar. Journal entries contained comments on the quality of the readings, lectures, and discussion groups. Furthermore, the entries provided faculty with valuable feedback concerning the operation of the institute, and allowed them to make necessary adjustments. An additional writing exercise required participants to submit an interpretative essay on a topic related to the theme of the institute. Titles of essays submitted at the end of the program included: 'Locke, Rousseau and Montesquieu: Enlightenment Philosophers in the Federalist Papers'; 'The Journal of an Afterlife in the Heavens With John Locke and Francois-Marie Arouet'; 'No Tolerance for Intolerance: Locke's Letter on

Toleration, Voltaire's Toleration, and Diderot's Intolerance'; and 'Thomas Jefferson: Man of the Enlightenment or Enlightened American Political Product?'. .

Participants came away from the institute with greater insights and understandings and they became aware of how contemporary scholars have challenged traditional interpretations of the Enlightenment. At the final session the teachers compiled a enumerated misconceptions that were dispelled during the course of the project. The list included the following items:

- o that France was the Enlightenment;
- o that the Enlightenment was pagan or atheistic;
- o that the Enlightenment was egalitarian;
- o that the Enlightenment could be equated with progress and optimism;
- o that the Enlightenment brought on the French Revolution;
- o that the philosophes were essentially polite.

In the final evaluation for the institute, one participant wrote that "I no longer regard the Enlightenment as a uniform movement. This project has made me re-consider how I think about the movement and its impact on European history. In sum, the summer seminar was a most enlightening experience." "Sapere Aude!"

## ENDNOTES

1. Robert Darnton, "In Search of Enlightenment: Recent Attempts to Create a Social History of Ideas," Journal of Modern History, 43 (1971), pp. 113-133; "The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Prerevolutionary France," Past and Present, 51 (1971), pp. 81-115.
2. Peter Gay, The Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Paganism, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1966); Norman Hampson, The Enlightenment, (London: Penguin, 1982).
3. See Appendix for syllabus and reading list.
4. Roy Porter, "The Enlightenment in England," in Roy Porter and Mikul S. Teich, eds., The Enlightenment in National Context, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 1-18.
5. John Locke, A Letter on Toleration, (Oxford: Clarendon Press), pp. 53-77.
6. David Hume, The Natural History of Religion, (Oxford: Clarendon Press), pp. 143-73; Thomas Sherlock, Letter to the Clergy and People of London on the Occasion of the Late Earthquake, (1750); Thomas Bisse, Musick the Delight of the Sons of Men (1726).

Hinweis des Herausgebers: Der Verfasser dieses Berichts hat noch einen Anhang beigelegt: "The Enlightenment Revisited: Sources and Interpretations. Syllabus and Daily Activities". Dieser Anhang ist deshalb besonders wertvoll, weil er die vollständige Lektüreliste der Teilnehmer enthält. Sie ist erstaunlich breit und international offen. Leider geht sie über den für dieses Heft zur Verfügung stehenden Raum weit hinaus. Wer diese Lektüreliste einsehen will, kann sie sicher bei dem Verfasser, aber auch bei mir erhalten. Ich bitte um Verständnis!

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