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“Enlightenolatry from Peter Gay to Steven Pinker:
Mass Marketing Enlightenment and the Thick Eighteenth Century”

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During the Cold War period, against the backdrop of rising radicalism at home and metastasizing conflicts abroad, eighteenth-century studies was institutionalized in the United States as an interdisciplinary knowledge project that derived its cultural capital—both within the academy and across American society—by pursuing an agenda of what might best be termed “Enlightenolatry”: the construction and advocacy of the Enlightenment as “the source of most of what is wholesome in modern western thought,” as James Lieth (1971) tartly observed at the time.

This essay investigates one of the foundational texts of this movement, Peter Gay’s *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (1966/69), which won the National Book Award for History and Biography in 1966. Gay’s project was so compelling in its time because it constructed a version of the Enlightenment that offered a moderate, hopeful response to a fractious public sphere and pervasive fears of American decline. It is especially important that we recover the conditions within which Gay wrote his masterwork at Columbia University under the auspices of an innovative, interdisciplinary seminar he co-founded, since it is to that time and place that we can trace not just the origins of a formulation of an ideologically-inflected Enlightenment whose “iron grip” has “in one form or another [. . .] continued to exercise its hold over Enlightenment scholarship until the present day” (de Dijn 2012). The Columbia University Seminar in Eighteenth-Century European Culture was also a critical node in the organization of eighteenth-century studies as a then-unique interdisciplinary field of inquiry

In the context of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, Gay’s book was warmly embraced by the Establishment for endorsing the public use of reason and offering a rosy account of its liberating effect. The National Book Award jury praised it for having “conducted a brilliant new synthesis of our intellectual heritage from the 18th century” and having “successfully defended that heritage from the malice of the Right and the naivete of the Left.” 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, liberal path forward.

Jump-cutting between scenes from the Cold War and 21st century culture wars to assess the deployment of Enlightenolatry in response to progressive activism, this essay reveals that the Enlightenment played a surprising cameo in the 1968 Columbia protests, which occupied university buildings on two occasions and devolved into what can only be described as a bloody police riot when protesters were forcibly cleared from campus. During a global convulsion of radical politics, at the moment when eighteenth-century studies was being organized as a critical

field of inquiry, a renowned scholar of the long eighteenth-century, who had already pledged to interpose himself between the cops and the protesters in the event of a police action, stepped up to mediate an independent solution to the crisis by confronting the Students for a Democratic Society leadership who were holed up in the University President's office (Castellucci, 2010). When Orest Ranum literally bounded through the windows of a revolution—dressed, as was his custom, in full academic regalia—what can we learn about the place of the Enlightenment in public discourse from this extraordinary gambit to reign in the forces of radical revolution with reasoned critique that endorsed progress but counseled moderation?

By recovering the formulation and cultural positioning of Gay's *Enlightenment* in its time, we will be better equipped to understand and respond to the deployment of a powerfully resonant, if profoundly distorted, version of "Enlightenolatry" being peddled by non-specialist public intellectuals like Steven Pinker in his *Enlightenment Now* (2019). According to Pinker, the Enlightenment started the inevitable and inexorable march of progress, and there is really nothing left for progressive critics to do but shut up and get out of the way. All graphs trend up, all progress is real and inevitable, and any doglegs and switchbacks are noise in the system, local aberrations that smooth out in the curve when you take the long view of things. In Pinker's gospel, suffering and inequality are at historic lows, and the apostles of light are optimizing all the time.

It turns out that the palliative care of what Stuart Carroll (2017) has called comfort history is an old Enlightenment family recipe. Gay's masterwork is best understood as an "undead text" in the terms of Sharon Marcus and Lorraine Daston (2019). A closer look at the structure of Pinker's argument in *Enlightenment Now* indicates a surprising reality: it follows the outline, in near lock-step, of *The Age of Enlightenment*, a flashy trade book that Gay wrote for Time/Life as part of their Ages of Man series. It is as if Pinker borrowed the *inventio* and *dispositio* of his argument from the pop-intellectual picture book of the mid-century scholar. For all the symmetries to be found in these texts, these authors' greatest point of overlap is that both insist that what the world needs now is a healthy re-inoculation of Enlightenment. In so doing, whether in Pinker's America or Gay's America, the champion of Enlightenment stakes out his ostensible position as the "encircled, non-ideological defender of the vital center" (Epstein 1990).

By now, as scholars of the long eighteenth century, we have become accustomed to thinking in terms of what Felicity Nussbaum (2003) has called the "wide" eighteenth century, a field of study that extends far beyond the geographies and concerns of Europe and North America. We have also become sensitive to the enduring impact and persistence of the signal developments in our time period, what Joseph Roach (2007) has deftly termed the "deep" eighteenth century that "isn't over yet." Roach is exactly right—all too right, actually, if we consider the death grip of Enlightenolatry on our public discourse today and the sheer obstinacy of public intellectuals like Steven Pinker who promulgate this ideology as if it were fact. At this point, we might as well call it what it is. This coagulation of outdated myths about Enlightenment reason and its liberating powers—which gums up the hard, uncomfortable and utterly essential work of evaluating our eighteenth-century legacies—is not the long, not the wide, not the deep, but the *thick* eighteenth century.