Intellectual and Political Elites of the Enlightenment: Some Introductory Notes

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The main topic of this collection of papers is the complicated interaction between political and intellectual elites in the Enlightenment. The authors analyze the system of intellectual communication, the activities of academic and other social institutions, and also certain cases from the rich histories of the structures of power in various countries.

The name of the epoch of Enlightenment is defined by the metaphor of light. Light proper as a symbol of the divine presence had always been one of the cultural archetypes, but from the eighteenth century it started to ‘illuminate’ other sides of life. The political elite of the past had been served by intellectuals such as scholars and poets, who had been treated and paid as craftsmen, but the new epoch raised learning and intellect to the rank of ‘new noble virtues’. Erudition was valued highly at European courts and it opened a way up the social ladder, together with good birth and wealth. Good education and citizenship of the Republic of Letters acquired high social status, and to be enlightened became as essential, as being courageous, lucky and successful. Knowledge became a luxury and, like other kinds of luxuries, became an integral part of the highest elite’s consumption. Sovereigns and their entourages began to converse with philosophers, to write philosophical treatises, to demonstrate their patronage of scholarly institutions, and to

1 Lumières (Fr.), Aufklärung (Germ.), Illuminismo (It.), etc.
initiate the creation of such institutions. In certain countries, in Russia, for instance, the ideas of the Enlightenment were apprehended and propagated by the nobility, that is, by the ruling elite. It became apparent mostly in the reigns of Peter the Great, who established Petersburg Academy of Sciences, of Elisabeth Petrovna, whose favourite, Ivan Shuvalov, together with polymath Mikhail Lomonosov established the first Russian university, and of Catherine the Great, who actively patronized sciences and corresponded with the most distinguished European intellectuals of the time.

Among the greatest figures of this age who regarded themselves as intellectuals or at least as people who supported enlightenment, the sciences and arts were the rulers of major European states — Russia, Sweden, Prussia, Spain, Portugal, Austria, France — Catherine II, Gustav III, Frederick II, Charles III, Joseph I, Joseph II, Louis XVI.

Jonathan Israel convincingly shows how the ideas of the Enlightenment influenced the system of ideas in modern society. He categorizes the Radical Enlightenment (the theoretical sources of which he sees in Spinoza and Spinozism), the Moderate Enlightenment, and the Counter-Enlightenment. For the Radical Enlightenment, it is philosophical reason that shows what is right and what is wrong. It is the only true and reliable guide in human life, when morality, humanistic and social values are in question. The Moderate Enlightenment believes that science and philosophy can conceive and evaluate only part of the reality. All that is beyond the reach of reason — the spiritual and divine world — should be discussed according to the principles of tradition and authority, the Revelation and theological truths. The Counter-Enlightenment denies any possibility of a free search for the truth by human reason. It insists that real guidance for human life, especially in the spheres of moral principles and political doctrines, systems of values and vital orientations, should be found in religious judgments. The Counter-Enlightenment does not refute scientific theories, but considers them dependent on religious dogmas.

Israel writes that the Radical Enlightenment, as represented by Spinoza, Bayle and Diderot, developed principles which became the foundations of modern society, namely, democracy, equality of the sexes, the equality of races, freedom for different ways of life, freedom of thought and speech, religious tolerance and freedom of the press.

Israel's intellectual model makes it possible to see the heterogeneity of the Enlightenment from the point of view of the ideas born at that time. Besides, every country had formed its own unique balance.

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2 Israel 2001; Israel 2006; Israel 2011.
of institutions of power and academic institutions, together with social structures to secure intellectual communication.

Academic institutions and various cultural institutions, such as newspapers and magazines, together with theaters, cafés, and private salons, where a free and easy exchange of ideas was possible, played important roles in the development and distribution of ideas. They forged and spread widely held public opinions, values and tastes. Madame Geoffrin’s literary salon in Paris was one of the most illustrious in 1750–1777. D’Alembert, d’Holbach, Diderot, Montesquieu, Stanislas Poniatowski, Horace Walpole, Adam Smith, Ben Franklin and many other eminent intellectuals of that time from France and other countries were guests of her salon. Catherine the Great corresponded with Madame Geoffrin, and the Russian empress took the lead in the exchange of letters.³ Catherine’s letters were certainly widely discussed in the salon, and this provided the empress with an opportunity to influence public opinion on many political issues and to sharpen her intellectual reputation among enlightened Europeans.

In addition to personal, intimate correspondence, the epistolary dialogue, which was intended to have a public, literary and socially important character, was also quite wide-spread. The space of the epistolary communication of the Enlightenment resembles the modern blogosphere. Perhaps the most famous ‘blogger’, who had among his ‘commentators’ royal personages, was Friedrich Melchior Baron von Grimm (1723–1807), who was the author of a handwritten newspaper Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique. Among his ‘friends’ we see Catherine II, Gustav III, Louisa Ulrika of Prussia (Queen of Sweden between 1751 and 1771 as the spouse of King Adolf Frederick of Sweden), the King of Poland Augustus III, and others.⁴

Being the ‘moderator’ of the intellectual network by which he distributed among his titled ‘subscribers’ scholarly and political news, Grimm acquired wealth, nobility with the title of baron. A modest pastor’s son from Regensburg, he became the Court of Saxe-Gotha’s envoy at Paris (1775–1792) and minister plenipotentiary of Russia at Hamburg, Bremen and Luebeck (1796–1798).⁵

³ Aldis 1905, 384.
⁴ Smiley 1947, 44–46, n1.
⁵ Строев 2004.
Representatives of the intellectual elite often became involved in complex and contradictory relationships with the political elite, and, sometimes, like Leibniz, entered court service. The authors of this collection thoroughly explore the intellectual contacts of their heroes and give various examples of intellectual communication between thinkers and grandees.

Hanns-Peter Neumann in his paper tells us about the correspondence between Christian Wolff with his Maecenas Ernst Christoph Count of Manteuffel and shows how the philosopher had to present himself as a specific social or intellectual type in order to propagate reliably what he and his adherents called the ‘truth’ of his philosophical worldview. They also discussed the idea of creating a popular Philosophie pour l’usage du beau sexe. Henrika Tandefelt, Krisztina Kulcsár, and Nick Treuherz dedicate their papers to ‘enlightened monarchs’ Gustav III, Joseph, II and Frederick II and realities of their governing.

Mathias Persson writes about the intellectual atmosphere at the Royal Academy of Turku. Robert Collis analyzes the system of intellectual communication between high-degree Freemasonry in Catherine the Great’s Russia. Some themes of the Enlightenment in Russia and the role of the noble elite in it are examined in papers by Alexander Woronzoff-Dashkoff, Tatiana Artemyeva, and Mikhail Mikeshin.

References