

Do the People Benefit from Being Deceived?

A Debate on the Politics of the Enlightenment

Conference; The Interdisciplinary Centre for European Enlightenment Studies at the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg (MLU)

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In 1780 the “*belles lettres*” class of the Royal Prussian Academy of the Sciences published its prize question: *Est-il utile au Peuple d’être trompé?* Whether the people drew benefit from being deceived –a question that sparked a vigorous debate, in which the political implications of the Enlightenment were addressed. At its root, it was a question of whether Enlightenment and Government pursued common interests, whether deception was needed to safeguard the former, or rather whether the latter was compromised by deception. In these debates, we sense a growing scepticism toward the Enlightenment at the end of the 18th century, as well as certain ambivalences and tensions to which it had given rise. German Enlightenment found itself in a precarious position which tied the fight against prejudice with the subordination under state authority, the generally ambivalent relationship of the Enlightenment to “the people”, their belief in and scepticism toward the power of truth. The debate still possesses relevance today in view of the growing crisis of the public sphere and one of intensifying dispute regarding the political value of science, in which the Enlightenment is often explicitly cited. Consequently, the conference wishes to use the outcome of the debate on the prize question as a stepping-stone to discuss the politics of the Enlightenment in general and its relevance today.

Even 18th-century contemporaries were aware that the prize question and subsequent discussion were as historically significant as they were scandalous. Inquiring about the benefit of deception had not been the first choice. In fact, the Academy had already agreed on a different question, but bowing to pressure from the Prussian king, decided to pose this highly political question instead. Considering that in his youth, the Prussian king had sworn off deception in politics in *Anti-Machiavel* and that only a short while thereafter did Kant designate it the century of the Enlightenment, it speaks volumes that it was the Prussian king himself who pressured the Academy to address the subject of deception and illustrates the precarious nature of the Enlightenment.

Over forty responses were submitted, all of which addressed the key terms of the question – i.e. “*tromper*”, “*utile*”, and “*Peuple*”. For example, is deception the same thing as a lie? Are there instances in which deception is necessary, legitimate or unavoidable? Can misleading the people be of tactical or strategic benefit? Does a benefit to the people correspond to general benefit, and does it simply consist of the happiness of all, or does it imply more? And who exactly is the “people”, what role does the “multitude” of uneducated play with respect to all subjects of the state?

In these debates, participants drew from the foundations of classical knowledge as well as proposed new ideas: the Platonic notion of an ideal state, the recollection of the trial of Socrates and the cautionary tale it offered, the various tropes of the wise lawmaker, the notion of a *religio duplex*, i.e. a two-pronged religion, one for the masses and one for the initiated, knowledge of the forms of governance, but also semiotics, popular philosophical ideas of the public realm, and the progress of education. It turns out that the matter of deception tied into many other central discussions of the Enlightenment: prejudices, the fight against superstition, the limits of knowledge, misconceptions related to the use of language, the human pursuit of happiness and the relationship to religion, upbringing and its limits etc. The responses also varied in terms of form, which reflect the diverse discursive manifestations of the Enlightenment – from catechistic discussion to instructive philosophical discourse to an essay in the expressive style of emotionalism.

The respondents also broached explicitly radical aspects of the politics of the Enlightenment. For instance, can the commonweal develop by itself or does it require guidance? Is the Enlightenment compatible with such guidance, should it inform it, or can it only occur under its protection? And how would things develop? Would the Enlightenment make dominion superfluous, did dominion always require (greater) Enlightenment, or did both develop independently from one another? If knowledge and power mutually influenced each other, did knowledge then serve to enhance power, or rather was knowledge diminished by power? The heated, controversial nature of these questions was reflected in the Academy's decision to split the prize in half – one was awarded to Rudolf Zacharias Becker who categorically rejected the benefit of deception, and the other to Frédéric de Castillon who argued that deception was unavoidable in certain situations.

It was not the answers, but rather the ensuing debate that left a lasting mark in history. In the discussion on where the benefits for the people differed from that of the ruling class, the basic contours of an ideological theory began taking shape. The necessity of deception played as important a role in the construction of radical Enlightenment as the discussion about its appropriate form in the public sphere. For instance, not only does David Friedrich Strauss defend Hermann Samuel Reimarus' decision not to publish his *Schutzschrift*, he concludes his *Leben Jesu, kritisch betrachtet* with a piece of advice to modern theologians not to include his opinions in their sermons. In the end, even the figure of the "intellectual" is situated between truth and power.

The basic question regarding the relationship of power and truth has found its way once again to the centre of academic discourse. How do we reconcile our relationship with knowledge and truth in post-democratic societies – especially in view of the erosion of the supposedly self-evident interplay between social discourse, political institutions and the media-driven presentation of the public sphere amidst a crisis of political participation and social consensus? What role should experts play, and what role should the media play? Is truthfulness an inviolable value or does it inherently serve special interests? When even disciplinary responsibilities are called into question as doubt is cast on long-accepted paradigms of political and social science, and calls grow louder for an alternative, more radical and open-minded political thinking, then the discussions on the Enlightenment, which were undisciplined in many respects, are once again a matter of topical relevance.

The conference will begin by examining the debate surrounding the prize question and then consider its further implications – also beyond the 18th century. The focus should be on the diversity, ambivalence and complexity of the discussion. Presenters can concentrate on individual submissions, specific questions, concepts or lines of argumentation applied in the discussion. Several possible aspects are mentioned in the following.

The public sphere and secrecy

The public sphere has always been a central and fundamental principle of the Enlightenment and is manifested in the debate conducted here in terms of how explicitly the functional issue of “public benefit” with its legitimising impact blends into the debate itself. However, the public sphere had already become the object of criticism by the end of the 18th century, for example in satires on the publishing business, in the increased appreciation of secrecy, in the criticism of popular philosophy, and in the differentiation between the scholarly and private, or the oral and written public spheres. Teasing out these tensions could help us better understand the ambivalences of the current discussions regarding the public sphere and the media.

Political theology

Almost all the submissions addressed the question like two sides of the same coin: the necessity to deceive in politics and in religion. Like most proponents of the Enlightenment, they regarded religion as a central source of public morality, yet they also polemicised against superstition and enthusiasm as misguided forms of religion, often explicitly citing the Reformation as a predecessor of the Enlightenment. It was debatable, therefore, whether religion required the deception of the all-too-feeble human intellect, or rather whether deception should be regarded in this field as especially dangerous for the same reason. Especially from a post-secular perspective, such discussions can serve as an occasion to re-assess the relationship of privatised religion and public opinion.

The philosophers and the masses

In the submissions to the prize question, there was much talk about the deception of the masses. As a rule, the authors assumed the role of a third party positioned between the people and the rulers, in part an observer, oftentimes a counsellor, sometimes a translator or an advocate. In this position, not only did they define the task of philosophy in society, but also proposed and discussed various models of the Enlightenment – from the top down, or bottom up, the enlightenment of power, enlightenment through power, enlightenment in protection of power etc. In this respect, it would be worth identifying the prerequisite, often symbolically expressed and unspecified presuppositions and rhetorical strategies of these proposals which they humbly submitted on behalf of their readers – the educated “we”. This is perhaps even more important than the provocative question that motivated many of the respondents, some of whom addressed the obstacles and forces of resistance confronting the Enlightenment – were they doing this consciously or were they perhaps deceiving themselves?

Aesthetics of deception

Many of those, who one would possibly have to deceive, are controlled by sensuality, passions and imagination. In this sense, deception possesses an aesthetics of its own, which was the subject of several submissions. The question we must ask is how this aesthetics is related to other central concepts of the Enlightenment: prejudice, superstition, illusion etc. If deception is occasionally necessary, is it not natural to a certain extent? Does it possess its own logic? And if the “imaginary institution” of society is always based on a form of necessary deception, how can one – back then as today – talk about this deception without having to deny it outright or entirely fall victim to it?

Topicality

Most of the submissions discuss the benefit and harm of deception not only in general terms, but also with respect to the present. They function as a diagnosis of the times, on what the Enlightenment has achieved and what remains to be done, on counter-reactions and on a potential deterioration – whether in terms of moral rectitude or the Enlightenment itself. One would have to explore the corresponding context of these diagnoses in order to gain a fuller understanding of the discussed subject matter. At the same time, one could assess the topicality of these – and especially in view of the increasing prevalence of the gestures and habits of the Enlightenment today.

Location:

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