

# How to study the history of change? The Enlightenment and the Sixties

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In this essay, the historiographies of the Enlightenment and of the Sixties are compared with each other. The two main schools of research of eighteenth-century history are: the new cultural history (or the social history of ideas) and the history of thought. These schools are juxtaposed with the two main scholarly traditions of the history of the Sixties, which are generation research and the history of mentalities. Furthermore, two issues, which are crucial for the understanding of the history of change in both periods, are discussed: the history of nature and the role of history. The most striking difference between the historiography of the Enlightenment and of the Sixties is the role ascribed to philosophy in both periods. A closer look at this difference should lead to a more balanced picture of the importance of ideas in history.

The histories of the Enlightenment and of the Sixties have much in common.<sup>1</sup> Both periods are considered seminal in the history of western civilisation. They represent more than just a movement or a generation, more than just an epoch or a decade. Both the Enlightenment and the Sixties refer to modern values, call on contemporary political debates, and evoke ambiguous feelings in our own times. The legacies of both movements and their message have been vividly debated by both advocates and adversaries. Remarkably, the contending arguments sound rather similar. While advocates of the ideas of the Enlightenment and of the Sixties commemorate decisive moments in the history of emancipation, equal rights, and democracy, adversaries often deplore the beginnings of moral deterioration, eroding standards, and the dwindling power of discernment. Even in recent presidential election campaigns, the Sixties played a crucial role in mobilizing support. In 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy associated the Sixties in a famous campaign speech – while running for president – with the loss of authority, with moral and ethical relativism, and with cynical citizens, who knew just their rights, not their duties. He finished his indictment with: „Je veux tourner la page de mai 68.”<sup>2</sup> And after the media frequently linked Barack Obama with John F. Kennedy, and his speeches with the speeches of Martin Luther King, Obama himself asserted during his

1 I would like to thank H.W. von der Dunk, Rienk Vermij, and the editors for their thoughtful comments, and thank Dick Smakman for correcting my English; all mistakes are mine.

2 Sarkozy on election campaign at the Bercy Sport Palace in Paris (29.4.2007): Piquart, ‘Nicolas Sarkozy veut “tourner la page de mai 1968”’.

campaign that he comes from another generation and does not want to fight the battles of the 1960s again.<sup>3</sup>

Although these social debates often have almost nothing to do with the periods discussed, but all the more with topical questions of modern society, historians should reflect on them, since these debates give insights in the relevance of our research to modern society. Many historians automatically react to these debates with a denial: our specialism is none of their business. Also, many historians easily accuse those colleagues who like to discuss these broader topics of not having visited an archive for a long period. According to the Dutch literary historian P.J. Buijnsters, hell consists of a place where one endlessly reads aloud papers entitled ‘What is Enlightenment’.<sup>4</sup> He warned against studies of the eighteenth century which are motivated by a romantic longing for the primitive. Instead, he legitimated his own studies as ‘an act of historical justice’. There is nothing wrong with his empirical stance. But historians should realise that their idea of historical justice is influenced by topical questions as well. Sooner or later, main topics of these debates seep through in historical writings and affect historiography. Historians do not live on an island. Doing justice on the one hand and an awareness of topical issues on the other could go hand in hand. The important issue is how to do justice to the period in question and how to relate our research to the topical questions in our own times (whatever these topical questions may be).

This essay compares the historiography of the Enlightenment with the historiography of the Sixties. It reflects on the way historians write about formative periods, which are so important for our self-understanding today. The complexity of the subject does not allow me to discuss questions of definition, periodisation, or comparability here. Of course, the two periods – the age and the decade – differ in many aspects, but have much in common as well. Despite these crossovers, the research traditions of both periods differ considerably. In the past decade, the cultural memory of both periods has changed in various ways: Whereas the Enlightenment is often depicted as the birthplace of modernity, the Sixties are generally portrayed more critically as the last utopia.

To compare the different traditions of research, I will distinguish between the two main research schools of dix-huitièmistes today: The new cultural history (or the social history of ideas), and the history of thought. I will juxtapose these two with the two main traditions of historical research of the Sixties, which

<sup>3</sup> Morgan, *What Really Happened to the 1960s*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Buijnsters, ‘Het heilsperspectief van de Verlichting’.

are generation research and the history of mentalities. After having done this, I will discuss the concept of nature and the role of history in both periods, which are crucial for the understanding of the history of change. Interestingly, the main differences in the historiography of the Enlightenment and the Sixties not only lie in the different concepts of modernity, but particularly in the different visions of the importance of philosophy in history. On the one side, philosophy is seen as a powerful generator of modern thought, on the other as just one of the many utopian voices crying needlessly in a social wilderness. Since truth about the role of philosophy in history is undecided yet, I plead for an integrated study of both periods, in which cultural, philosophical, literary, mental, social, economic and political history is not studied separately, but in connection to each other.

### **Enlightenment's Modernity**

Today, the Enlightenment is more alive than ever. Not only since polemicists like Ayaan Hirsi Ali brought the Enlightenment in the position of the Western antipode of the Islam, but also since nowadays many intellectuals locate the foundations of modernity in the Enlightenment (this has not always been the case<sup>5</sup>). While many Enlightenment scholars perceive modernity as a positive impulse, others, such as John Gray, criticise the negative effects of an all-embracing faith in humanity and progress. In postmodernist approaches of the Enlightenment, the main cause for all modern evils is found in the dialectics of progress, and in the technology of terror, from the Jacobin execution program to the Holocaust. Since I question whether this approach is meant to clarify the history of the eighteenth century, or can better be considered as a form of social criticism of our own times, I am happy to leave the discussion about this line of thought to others.

Overall, I see three serious topical approaches to Enlightenment's modernity. The first is the Enlightenment as an emerging public sphere, made possible by a new set of institutions, such as the coffee house, the salon, the Masonic lodge, and the learned society.<sup>6</sup> The object of study is the 'meeting place', be it the salon, or the growing market of journals, books and encyclopaedias. This approach was broadened by historians like Martin Gierl, who not only focussed on the sociability of enlightened criticism, but on the communication process as a whole, including its contradictions, interactions, and antagonisms.<sup>7</sup>

5 See for example Milic (ed.), *The Modernity of the Eighteenth century*.

6 Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*.

7 Gierl, *Pietismus und Aufklärung*; McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment*.

A second approach studies the modernity of enlightened *thought* in various ways. Jonathan Israel, for example, defines modernity as a package of basic concepts and values, such as the primacy of reason (and hence the denial of all miracles and of revelation), democracy, racial equality, feminism, religious toleration, sexual emancipation, and freedom of expression. Israel sees a continuous triangular conflict from the end of the seventeenth century down to the present between three main intellectual blocs on the threshold of modernity: the radical, the moderate mainstream, and the counter Enlightenment.<sup>8</sup> The Enlightenment Israel speaks of is radical, with Baruch de Spinoza as its first and founding author. In line with Israel, Darrin McMahon sees a dialectics of the Enlightenment and the Counter Enlightenment, which proceeded from the early modern period until today. But whereas for Israel the real Enlightenment is the radical Enlightenment, for McMahon the dialectics as such are constitutive of modernity.<sup>9</sup> McMahon, who thoroughly studied the Enlightenment's adversaries, considers the French Enlightenment as a culture war of its own, comparable with the US culture wars between 'politically correct progressives' and 'reactionary fundamentalists' in the 1980s and 90s.

Jonathan Israel follows the Dutch historian Siep Stuurman, developing a 'controversialist approach' which focuses on arguments and debates, instead of finished theories, and on the process of thinking, instead of the worked-out theories of major thinkers. The controversialist approach makes sense, particularly for the Early Modern period, with its pamphlet wars, and its severe theological and philosophical polemics. By broadening the concept of 'argument', Israel includes not just political, legal, and ecclesiastical interventions in polemical debates, but also popular protest. Yet, some critical reviews of Israel's work have appeared, in which he was accused of substituting one doxa for the other by constructing an artificial homogeneous philosophical tradition and a teleology of radical philosophy, from Spinoza to the French Revolution, and beyond.<sup>10</sup> In other words, Israel's modus operandi would be fundamentally unhistorical, resulting in a presentist interpretation with an oversimplified classification of thinkers into 'radical' and 'moderate' camps.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, after the debates initiated by Israel, one can trace a more modest but still ambitious paradigm in the intellectual historiography of the Enlightenment. According to John Robertson, the intellectual coherence of

8 Israel, 'Enlightenment! Which Enlightenment?', esp. 542-543.

9 McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment*, VIII, 200-203.

10 Lilti, 'Comment écrit-on l'histoire intellectuelle des Lumières?', esp. 206

11 La Vopa, 'A New Intellectual History?', esp. 717, 719, 722.

the Enlightenment may be found in the commitment to understanding and advancing the causes and conditions of human betterment in this world. He distinguishes between three lines of enquiry: human nature, material betterment and political economy. The Enlightenment's contribution to 'the modern world' may be judged on the intellectual importance of its reflections of the societies it observed and on the cogency of its recommendations for the improvement of the human condition as it found it.<sup>12</sup> John Pocock, who proposes not to speak of *the* Enlightenment anymore but of multiple Enlightenments, calls this process the growth of a non-theocentric 'philosophy' of civil society, and in a more wide ranging perspective, the conversion of theology into history. According to Pocock, the grand narrative through which Euro-American civilisation relates its history is 'the journey from polytheism through monotheism to secularity'.<sup>13</sup> This turning point in history is in a way comparable to Israel's package of values.



Fig. 1. Cornelis Troost, *Regenten van het Aalmoezeniersweeshuis te Amsterdam, voorstudie* (trustees of the almoner orphanage, preliminary study), Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

12 Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*, 28-29, 43-44, see also: Pocock, 'Historiography and the Enlightenment', esp. 84.

13 Pocock, 'Historiography and the Enlightenment', 96.

Another interpretation of Enlightenment thought is definitely less ambitious in its claims. It does not necessarily see the Enlightenment as a uniform movement, with a fixed set of principles but, more in line with Ernst Cassirer, as an open process of inquiry. After having studied the eighteenth century reaction to mechanical thought, Peter Reill concludes that the Enlightenment might be much more in tune with our own concerns than is usually conceived.<sup>14</sup> He even notes characteristics of Postmodernism in the views of the Enlightenment vitalists, a group of biologists, chemists, and others who studied an early modern variant of what is currently called the life sciences. According to Reill, the vitalists' logic of complementarities, their modest knowledge claims, and their interest in language and meanings provide a model of knowledge that addresses contemporary efforts to escape from absolute solutions without surrendering to total scepticism. Reill warns against the idea of an 'Enlightenment Project', which he considers both deficient and dangerous, since it serves postmodernist criticism. Assuming that the Enlightenment could be equated with the philosophy of absolute reason, enlightened thought is often seen as a principal cause for social deprivation, environmental pollution, eurocentrism, racism, and totalitarianism, all strengthened by rationalisation and efficiency processes. Instead, the actuality of the Enlightenment Reill describes is to be found in a group of open minded researchers, who tried to find answers to questions we still have today.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, his concept of the Enlightenment is surprisingly similar to that of John Robertson.

### **Being modern in the Sixties**

Modernity does not seem to be a big issue for historians of the Sixties who study mainly social and cultural change.<sup>16</sup> Yet, as I will argue, the Sixties were a crucial period for redefining the concept of modernity. While in the Fifties modernity was closely linked to the post-war reconstruction, to modernism and democracy, in the Sixties the concept became contested, associated with two World Wars, economic crises, a Cold War, convulsive decolonisation processes, totalitarianism, and other atrocities of modern society.

Generally, historians studying the Sixties are more concerned with questions of *looking* different, of being modern, trendy, and up to date. Particularly the sound of the Sixties, its pop music, was considered innovative. Seen from a

14 Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment*, 251-256, see also: Baker and Reill (eds.), *What's Left of the Enlightenment*.

15 Reill, 'Rethinking the Enlightenment'.

16 See for the different meanings of modernity: Gumbrecht, 'Modern, Modernität, Moderne'.

wider perspective, one may however question whether pop music in the Sixties really was groundbreaking. Jazz, Blues and Rock & Roll paved the ways and were equally revolutionary. A hit like ‘Love me do’ of the Beatles was not that innovative, the massive attention for the Fab Four was constitutive for a rapidly growing, classless youth culture, which became a profitable market for commercial enterprise. Of course, at the end of the decade, the Beatles had transformed themselves, their music, and their appearance impressively, but the new styles, instruments, sound recording techniques, and video editing, which developed in the second half of the twentieth century at large, are too often solely ascribed to the Golden Sixties.

Tony Judt, author of the famous book *Postwar*, may have been right by stating that the political geography of the Sixties is misleading, that the most important developments did not always happen in the best-known places.<sup>17</sup> The influence of the Beatles in Eastern Europe was in the long run probably even bigger than in the West. Whereas many university students in the West were lured by neo-Marxist theory, their counterparts in the East, who had to face real existing socialism, kept aloof from politics and withdrew into their private spheres.<sup>18</sup> In hindsight, this ‘silent revolution’ may have been as important as the boisterous, high-flown rhetoric in the streets of Paris. From today’s point of view, the student protests, with their sit-ins, teach-ins, and bed-ins, and its predominantly masculine appearance, belong to the rich folklore of history. Particularly the idea of sexual liberation is modified today. In his voluminous *The Sixties*, the British historian Arthur Marwick wondered whether women profited from the new freedom, or, whether the sexual liberation related particularly to the freedom of men to exploit their own fantasies. He concluded that male chauvinism had its positive consequences in providing a stimulus to the nascent women’s liberation movement.<sup>19</sup> On average, even the sex lives of students were not very different from those of earlier generations (sexual liberation was anyway more a Seventies phenomenon).<sup>20</sup>

According to Judt, what changed in the Sixties were the working conditions in the industry, and the still very hierarchical labour relations.<sup>21</sup> Due to a shortage of labour, workers could effectively demand for more influence on the shop-floor. Seemingly, the old working class gradually merged into an ostensible ‘classless’ society. Certainly, the new jobs in the service industry

17 Judt, *Postwar*, 390.

18 Bachmann, ‘Wertewandel und Generationskonflikte’, in: Jürgens (a.o.), *Eine Welt zu gewinnen!*, 118-134.

19 Marwick, *The Sixties*, 804-805, see also 679-724.

20 Judt, *Postwar*, 396.

21 Judt, *Postwar*, 405-408, 447-449.



Fig. 2. Holland Pop Festival Kralingen 1970, Schielandshuis, Rotterdam (photographer unknown)

brought a different type of employment, and different employees. What changed as well was the generation in power. At the beginning of the decade, Eisenhower, Adenauer and De Gaulle were head of government; and Churchill was still a Member of Parliament. At the end of the decade, they were all dead.

Also, Arthur Marwick asserted that we should not exaggerate the extent of change or of novelty in the Sixties. In this period, he did not discern anything of particular importance in terms of economic and diplomatic history, the history of political institutions or even the history of the Third World. The Sixties were neither an economic, nor a political but a cultural revolution. According to Marwick, the main issue was that so many things happened simultaneously. What changed was the visibility of all sections of society: workers, blacks, women, provincials. What changed was the development of a strong civil rights movement, which represented the interests of the blacks, of women and gays.<sup>22</sup>

It is hardly imaginable nowadays that so many clever youngsters in Europe and the States supported the ideas of Castro, Hô, Che, and even Mao, who

22 Marwick, *The Sixties*, 801-806.

at that time was proclaiming a brutal and bloody ‘cultural revolution’. Yet, as the American intellectual historian Richard Wolin argues, French students and intellectuals appropriated Mao to incite grassroots social movements and to reinvigorate civic and cultural life at home.<sup>23</sup> In the Sixties, institutional injustice was questioned seriously; in the social and judicial realm things had changed indeed. The American political scientist Edward Morgan blames the mass media for aggrandising the anthropological features of the protest movement, and for simultaneously downgrading one of the defining qualities of the Sixties, which almost disappeared in public memory: the search for democratic empowerment.<sup>24</sup>

The question of how to relate the Sixties to modernity is complex, since the Sixties were of great importance to the changing philosophical discourse of modernity itself. On the one hand, Jürgen Habermas began to reformulate the Modern Project, for example in his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, published in 1962.<sup>25</sup> On the other, Michel Foucault developed his criticism of power-knowledge relations in modern society since the Enlightenment. His discourse analysis became one of the primary sources of postmodernist thought. Foucault, Derrida, and Roland Barthes published their most important works in the Sixties. Judt expresses his disapproval of the French structuralists by explaining that their theory was not even representational: ‘the social codes or “signs”, that it described related not to any particular people or places or events but merely to other signs, in a closed system.’<sup>26</sup> In a way, Judt may have been close to the mark, but overall he is not doing justice to the influence of the structuralists on historiography and literary theory. Even their most convinced opponents could not deny this.

### **Diffusion of ideas, mentalities and techniques**

While working on this article I came across some particular similarities. In the Enlightenment period, one of the ultimate forms of self expression, the wig, was replaced by a ‘normal’, regular haircut. In the Sixties, something similar happened with headgear, which was until this decade an important indicator of social class or regional heritage.<sup>27</sup> The hat was replaced by a wide, some would say a wild variety of hair styles.

Since the 1980s, the dominant school in Enlightenment research has

23 Wolin, *French Intellectuals*.

24 Morgan, *What Really Happened to the Sixties*, 6.

25 Jürgens, ‘Habermas for Historians’.

26 Judt, *Postwar*, 400.

27 Judt, *Postwar*, 397.

been the new cultural history, or the social history of ideas. The focus of dix-huitiémistes like Roger Chartier, Robert Darnton, Margaret Jacob, and Wijnand Mijnhardt has been on the dissemination of knowledge, on the rise of a public sphere, which eventually culminated into a revolutionary era.<sup>28</sup> Thanks to the ‘diffusionists’, the image of ‘the Enlightenment movement’ has changed from a small group of some twenty five *philosophes* into a populous literary underground, finding its voice in the press, in pamphlets and books. The focus of Enlightenment research was broadened to urban cultures of mostly men, meeting in clubs, coffee houses, fraternities, learned societies, freemason lodges, and salons. Simultaneously, historians explored new sources, such as the reports of censors, the sales figures of booksellers or the self-testimonies, or ‘ego documents’, of children, craftsmen or sailors.<sup>29</sup>

The methodological approach of the ‘diffusionists’ deserves more attention within the discipline of contemporary history. Due to an overload of sources, and in competition with journalists who are interested in contemporary history as well, historians of the postwar period are inclined to use other concepts, such as civil society, which came under discussion in the Sixties, when citizen assertiveness contributed to a new political culture, in which the mass media vividly registered the new vibes.<sup>30</sup>

Remarkably, the image of the wider movement of the Sixties has changed in the opposite direction of Enlightenment research: Until the 1990s, the idea prevailed that one generation changed the Western world. Nowadays, historians realise that the massive protest was often limited to particular groups of students at universities, and to the well-educated social circles in the bigger towns in Western Europe and the United States. Also the working class called for attention; particularly the massive strikes against bad circumstances on the shop floor were of importance. In the historiography, the protest of the Sixties was limited to those two groups – students and workers – rather than spreading in all directions.

Undoubtedly, the dominant school of research of the Sixties studies changing mentalities, manners, fashion, music, leisure, consumerism, in short: the development of a post-material, or post-industrial culture.<sup>31</sup> In the background material culture plays an important role, for example, the mass introduction of

<sup>28</sup> See the discussion between Darnton, ‘Discourse and Diffusion’, and Skinner, ‘On Intellectual History and the History of Books’; also: Kraus, ‘Appropriation et pratiques de la lecture’; and of course: Margaret Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*, and Mijnhardt and Kloek, *1800 – Blueprints for a national community*.

<sup>29</sup> Baggerman and Dekker, *Child of the Enlightenment*; Van Gelder, *Das ostindische Abenteuer*.

<sup>30</sup> James Kennedy, inaugural lecture, in press.

<sup>31</sup> Referring to Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution*. See amongst many others: Marwick, *The Sixties*; Kurlansky, 1968, *The Year that Rocked the World*; Fink, Gassert, and Junker (eds.), 1968: *The World Transformed*.

the long playing record, the transistor radio and television, the growth of car traffic, and the mechanisation of households through central heating, automatic washing machines, refrigerators and vacuum-cleaners, which became available for the middle class, and of course through the introduction of the pill. Historians who study these trends often tend to downtime the importance of 1968 as a turning point in history.<sup>32</sup> They see these trends as part of the long term process of modernisation, starting in the Twenties, or in the Fifties, and continuing into the beginning of the Eighties (the longer Sixties).

The connections made between the introduction of new techniques, a rapidly rising economy, changing ways of life, and changing social values, could be of interest to historians of the eighteenth century. There are many possibilities to do research on new consumption patterns, due to new techniques, a globalising economy, and products from the colonies, which became accessible for the urban elites.<sup>33</sup> This democratisation of consumption blurred stiff social distinctions, which were laid down in interior house styles, dress codes, and even eating habits.

Particularly the role of the fashion industry is of importance, not only since silk and cotton replaced old cloth and set new dress codes, but also since clothing became – more than before – a political topic, as for example the Dutch patriots showed by banning orange dresses and symbols. An emerging civil society gained access to a more complex material culture, which provided new paths, choices and horizons of ordinary people. The improvement of road networks in France, Germany and Great Britain, and of an extended mail coach network, made it much easier to travel in these countries. Possibly, the Dutch Republic benefited relatively poorly from the technical improvement of stage and mail coaches, since it had already developed an extended waterway system.

The enormous technological advancements of the eighteenth century deserve more attention.<sup>34</sup> The rapid developments in the world of electricity and steam engines seems from today's point of view perhaps not as renewing as Newton's law of universal gravitation, but they probably had a bigger impact on contemporaries, since the improvements directly affected the lives of ordinary people. In the long run, the discovery of the Leyden jar, designed to store electricity (1744-46), the lightning conductor (1752), and the steam engine (1763-1775), would prove to be of great value for humanity.

<sup>32</sup> For example: Oldenziel and Zachmann, *Cold War Kitchen*.

<sup>33</sup> Berg, 'From Globalisation to Global History'; ibid., *Luxury and Pleasure*; Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue*.

<sup>34</sup> See also: Holmes, *The Age of Wonder*.

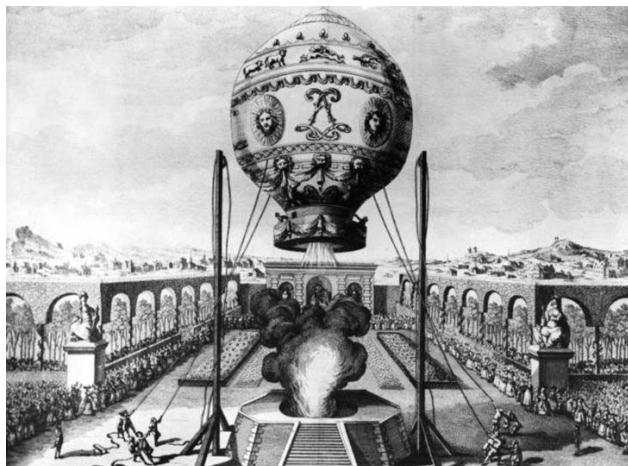


Fig.3. One of the first tethered flights by humans in a hot air balloon, Paris, 19 October 1783, painting by de Claude-Louis Desrais.

Lavoisier's chemical revolution led to the final disavowal of the Aristotelian concept of earth, air, fire and water. In the years 1777-1783, he discovered that fire was not created by 'phlogiston', a substance matter within materials which was set free, but in reaction with nearby oxygen. His concept of air and fire were used in practice immediately. Only six years before the French Revolution broke out, Étienne Montgolfier was the first human who undertook a flight in a hot air balloon. In the same year, 1783, François Pierre Ami Argand designed a lamp with a circular wick and a glass chimney, which lengthened nightlife at home comfortably.<sup>35</sup> One last example of the technical improvements of the century is the enormous improvement of musical instruments.<sup>36</sup> Particularly the invention of the *gravicembalo col piano e forte*, the fortepiano, which developed further into a modern piano in the 1780s, led to revolutions in classical music. Even though Bach, Mozart and Beethoven lived in the eighteenth century, it appeared to be difficult to integrate the revolutions in classical music within the history of the Enlightenment.

### **Intellectual heritage**

For the history of thought, the late Nineteen Sixties and the early Seventies are a crucial period. Traditional intellectual history was criticised by several new schools, such as the French structuralists (particularly by Foucault in his *Les Mots et les Choses*), the German conceptual historians (particularly

<sup>35</sup> Schivelbusch, *Lichtblicke*; Schröder, *The Argand Burner*.

<sup>36</sup> Blanning, *The Triumph of Music*.

by Koseleck in his *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*), the Cambridge school of political thought (particularly by Quinten Skinner and John Pocock in their important essays on meaning and understanding history), and the social history of ideas, about which Robert Darnton already wrote in 1971.<sup>37</sup> It is remarkable how intellectual history is rethought in the short period of 1966-1972 by philosophers, historians of philosophy and social historians.

Recently, Jonathan Israel gave a new impetus to the traditionally strong historical discipline. That his approach, the ‘new intellectual history’, differs from the ‘new cultural history’ is convincingly shown by Israel’s denial of the importance of freemason’s lodges for the Enlightenment. While freemasonry is usually seen as an important disseminator of enlightened ideas, in Israel’s books it is a peripheral phenomenon, since it hardly ever tried to erase distinctions between aristocracy, high bourgeoisie and the common man: ‘arguably, the less said about Freemasonry the better.’<sup>38</sup> While social historians locate the Enlightenment in the Coffee Houses or in the spin-off of the printing press, for Israel modernity is crystallised in the subversive *ideas* of Spinoza and of the Spinozists.

Though Israel’s *Radical Enlightenment* is often presented as a new approach to the history of the Enlightenment, one might claim that the author is the most important representative of an already existing group of Spinoza scholars, who, contrary to Israel, were not prepared to present their findings as a new grand narrative.<sup>39</sup> And probably they were right in the sense that one may after all still ask whether Spinoza could be considered as the most important philosopher of the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century, or, if this torch should be passed over to Descartes, who lived in the Netherlands for more than twenty years. Wiep van Bunge praises Israel for his wide-ranging achievements, but he doubts whether Spinoza’s impact in the long eighteenth century was as big as Israel wants us to believe.<sup>40</sup> He criticises Israel for relying too much in his analysis on Spinoza as *the auctor intellectualis* of the radical Enlightenment, whereas Spinoza’s thought was broadly embedded in the social and cultural context of the Dutch Republic. Also, Van Bunge criticises Israel’s views of secularisation. Spinoza was indeed the author of a secular moral philosophy, but that does not necessarily mean he was an atheist.

Also, Siep Stuurman both praises and criticises Israel. From another

<sup>37</sup> Skinner, ‘Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas’; Pocock, *Politics, Language, and Time*; Darnton, ‘In Search of the Enlightenment’.

<sup>38</sup> Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 865.

<sup>39</sup> Van Bunge; see also: Wielema, *The March of the Libertines*.

<sup>40</sup> Van Bunge, *De Nederlandse Republiek*, 70-86.

point of departure than Van Bunge, Stuurman emphasises the importance of Descartes, particularly of his *cogito*. After Descartes doubted everything for epistemological reasons, others, such as François Poulin de la Barre, doubted the necessity of class differences, as well as the differences in sex or race.<sup>41</sup> But Stuurman also stresses the other side of the coin. The Enlightenment brought a new canon of thought, in which the global authority of the ‘enlightened’ over those who had not yet seen the light is expressed. The Janus face of the Enlightenment is strengthened by a new taxonomy, which gave rise to biological racism, and which remained up until the twentieth century the most important barrier for equality. Since the Enlightenment canon is still part of our own mode of thought, it remains difficult to distance ourselves from this period, to write about it from an outsider point of view.

The many debates, reviews, and conferences on Israel’s work contribute to new lines of thought. Compared to the historiography of the Sixties, these debates make clear how, for the Enlightenment period, ideas are still seen as a power to change the world. This is also the case for those who study the diffusion of ideas, whose subject matter of study is criticism. A good illustration of this is the study of pornographies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which are considered a part of the literary underground and a source of social criticism, linked to cartesianism and spinozism. In these clandestine booklets, one finds hidden debates about moral standards, the power of human urges, and the organisation of society.<sup>42</sup> Comparably, the rapid expansion of pornography in particularly the Nineteen Seventies is still an open field of study. It is linked to a cultural, often radical left-wing avant-garde, who strived for sexual liberation, but it soon developed into a harsh commercial enterprise, which had nothing to do with lofty thoughts.<sup>43</sup> The result is a more enchanted attitude towards these vulgar booklets produced in the Sixties and beyond.

Remarkably, the intellectual history of the Sixties is not yet written. Only in France there definitely is a renewed interest in the subject, since today the French intellectual (the *philosophe*) seems to have passed his prime.<sup>44</sup> Whereas many historians of the eighteenth century eagerly explain the Enlightenment movement by predominantly analysing the works of philosophers like Locke, Hume, Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau, one hardly finds historians who

41 Stuurman, *De uitvinding van de mensheid*, 249-315, 366-370.

42 Leemans, *Het woord is aan de onderkant*, 301.

43 For example: Osterweil, ‘Andy Warhol’s *Blow job*’.

44 Brillant, *Les clercs de 68*; Bourg (ed.), *After the deluge*; Audier, *La pensée anti-68*; and Hirsch, *The French New Left*; for Germany, see: Müller, *Another Country*, and Gilcher Holtey, ‘Kritische Theorie und Neue Linke’.

explain the developments in the Sixties through the works of Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, Noam Chomsky and Alasdair MacIntyre. Contrary to the philosophy of the eighteenth century, philosophy of the twentieth century is not ascribed the power to change politics. A portrait of the philosophical Sixties might provide a vivid picture of this era, also since not all philosophers want to be reminded of the views they held back then. The quarrels among Marxist students about the valuable works of the young Marx, Trotzki, Mao, or Rosa Luxemburg are light-years away from our present-day worries about how to solve climate change, the credit crunch, or the Euro crisis, and how to react to the challenges of globalisation both at home and abroad.

### **Generations**

An important historiographic tradition of the Sixties is the research of generations. Often, those historians who sympathise with the ideas of the Sixties tend to stress the importance of an upcoming young generation which combated the establishment with protest and social critique. For them '68 is often a real turning point in history.<sup>45</sup>

Twentieth century generation research is about the formative experiences of generations, usually in their adolescence, often studied along the lines of key events, such as the wildcat general strike of May '68 in Paris. Behind this idea, the acceleration of time and of the sequence of generations plays an important role. Following Koselleck's idea of a *Sattelzeit*, this process could equally be applied to the period of 1750 to 1850. The political upheaval in the late eighteenth century made a severe impression on people, who experienced a break with the past and an unsure future. The result was that social concepts, such as state, nation, monarchy, democracy and citizen, expressed dynamic processes, with a recent history and a future perspective, instead of a static state of being, often referring to antiquity.<sup>46</sup>

Interestingly, this idea of a *Sattelzeit* is not translated to generation research. Dix-huitièmistes tend to think in terms of networks, circles, social groups, but not so much in terms of generations (except for *Sturm und Drang*, artificially classified in German literature between Enlightenment and Weimar Classicism).<sup>47</sup>

45 Thinking in terms of generations became so dominant that historians even distinguish three generations of the German left wing terror group the Rote Armee Fraction, of which the first generation developed their violent activities already in '68, Klimke, *The Other Alliance*; Righart, *De eindeloze jaren zestig*; see also: Kraushaar, *1968 als Mythos*; Berman, *Power and the Idealists*.

46 Koselleck, 'Einleitung', xv.

47 Indeed, Franco Venture touched briefly on the problem of the chronology and geography of the Enlightenment in Venturi, *Utopia and Reform*, 117-136, also, he wrote about the Sixties of the eighteenth century in: *ibid.*, 'Church and Reform in Enlightenment Italy'.

Is it fruitful to consider the circle of Spinozists as a generation, with their own customs, habits, style, language, and ideas? And was there something like a follow-up generation of Christian Wolff, Voltaire and Montesquieu, born in or around the 1680s? And could we consider the encyclopaedists as a generation? Subsequently, could the important cultural changes in the long eighteenth century be dated in the 1670s, the 1720s and the 1760s and 1770s? If so, under which circumstances – which social, political and economic dynamics – were these new ways of thinking established?

The historiography of the Sixties as a generation conflict, which is, by the way, a contested concept, could shed more light on parallel issues concerning the eighteenth century. The American-Dutch historian James Kennedy turned his eye on the flexibility, and resilience of the Dutch elite.<sup>48</sup> He pointed to the widely shared consensus among the postwar political elites in the Netherlands, who were willing to give in and to accept the challenges of the young generation, since even they admitted that ‘the times they are a-changin’ (although they did not use Bob Dylan’s words to express this feeling). It was not at all hard for the younger generation to convince their fathers of the necessity of political reform.

This brings me to an important topic regarding the history of the eighteenth century: there has been a strong focus on new ideas, new infrastructures and emerging knowledge networks. Of course, these new ideas and institutions had been significant for a new era, although this new era in some cases just dawned more than a century later, for example with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. But to understand the great changes of the century, one should not only focus on new thought, but also on the transformation of old institutions. How did the churches, the guilds, and the aristocracy react to these new ideas, which had come up already in the seventeenth century, and which developed further and received strong support in the course of the eighteenth century? How did these old institutions renew themselves to face the social critique, which came from so many angles? And if they were not able to renew themselves anymore, which happened to the Jesuit Order after its suppression from 1753 onwards, which finally led to the papal ban in 1773, what was the influence of their disappearance (in so many parts of the world)? Some historians think of churches as monolithic Molochs, which always represent the vested interests of the aristocracy. But the dynamics within the churches, within the guilds and within the aristocracy could give

48 Kennedy, *Building New Babylon*.

interesting clues to the rise of the various enlightened milieus as well.<sup>49</sup> Israel's partition of the eighteenth century history into a radical, moderate and counter enlightenment is on the one hand illuminating, since it sheds light on the controversies of the century, but on the other hand it is misleading, since it dismisses unexpected connections, crossovers, and a multiplicity of ideas, which are so typical of the eighteenth century. As the century progressed, all established institutions faced criticism. As Kant asserted, no church or government could survive by just claiming their rights, often obtained in the middle ages.<sup>50</sup> The eighteenth century was not only the century of criticism, but also of self-criticism. Those who lacked this quality would have to give up their positions sooner or later.

### **Historicizing nature**

To understand the important debates of the eighteenth century, it could be helpful to historicise them first, instead of studying them as beginnings of modernity. Perhaps the Middle Ages give better clues to find out what Enlightened people were talking about than our own times. Eighteenth-century intellectual debates were mostly not about Christianisation versus secularisation but about the foundations of knowledge: a controversial debate between those who legitimated their knowledge solely through the *word* of God, the bible, and those who legitimated their knowledge through the works of God, through creation, which in the early modern period is translated as nature (*deus sive natura*), or a form of 'natural religion'. Enlightenment criticism was mostly not directed against Christianity as such, but against clerical epistemology, based on dogmas and formularies, instead of religious intuition.<sup>51</sup> It successfully criticised the current *philosophia aristotelio-scholastica*, which functioned as the metaphysical, logical and scientific underpinning of the prevailing Christian churches. Of course, these debates were not at all free of political connotations.

The clue to understanding the changing discourses of the Enlightenment lies in the eighteenth-century concept of nature, from the changing views of human nature to changing concepts of natural history, natural religion, and natural law. The early modern concept of natural history had nothing to do with modernity. In 1666, Robert Boyle published 'A general Heads for a

49 Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment*; Blanning, *The Culture of Power*.

50 See also Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Vorrede, A 6.

51 It may be called curious that the longstanding European tradition of anticlericalism is interpreted so differently in different periods: Dykema and Oberman (eds.), *Anticlericalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*; Barnett, *Idol Temples and Crafty Priests*.

Natural History of a Country, great or small' in which he distinguished four categories: heaven, air, water, and earth. In describing human beings, part of the section earth, Boyle was primarily interested in the external features, in: "Their Stature, Shape, Colour, Features, Strength, Agility, Beauty (or want of it), Complexions, Hair, Dyt, Inclinations and Customs that seems not due to educations."<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, he showed an interest in the fertility of women, in their hard or easy labour, and in general in diseases and methods of agriculture. This concept of nature changed vehemently after Linnaeus and Buffon, and was a completely different world, when compared to our current concept of nature.

While the seventeenth century was the age of mathematics and mechanics, the eighteenth century eventually became the age of biology and chemistry. Buffon's interest in the way organic matter reproduced itself, in the specific histories of species and the geography of its appearances, turned out to be an initial stage in the formulation of the evolution theory. The vitalizing of nature brought new questions about the origins of life, the character of fire, and the strength of animal magnetism, which represent the changing modes of thought in the eighteenth century. Even within Christian thought, the concept of nature was historicised, for example by German neologists, who studied the natural history of the biblical flora and fauna to prove the historicity of the bible.

Not surprisingly, with the changing views of natural history, the concept of natural religion was vehemently debated, particularly since some philosophers thought it was possible to coexist in a virtuous society without having knowledge of the bible. In his 1721 controversial lecture on the practical philosophy the Chinese, Christian Wolff claimed that the Chinese based their practical philosophy on nature. For Wolff, the Chinese lived according to natural religion, based on natural law; their basic principles of wisdom were comparable with his own Christian views. The idea that a society could live according to the principals of natural religion without having knowledge of the bible, immediately led to a vehement pamphlet war and, after two years quarrelling, to the expulsion of Wolff out of Halle an der Saale.

Yet, even more explosive were the evolving ideas about natural law. In 1753, the Academy of Dijon announced an essay contest on the question what the origin of inequality among men was, and whether this inequality is authorised by natural law. One of the answers came from Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In his *Discourse on Inequality*, the author praised the natural state of

<sup>52</sup> Boyle, 'General Heads for a Natural History of a Country, Great or Small'.

human beings, and explained how inequality evolved in the very early stages of society.<sup>53</sup> With his idea of the *l'homme naturelle*, who lives freely in the woods, Rousseau rewrote history. With his search for the origin of cultures, Herder elaborated on Rousseau's ideas. The new meaning of both 'natural' and 'civil' history had direct consequences for the social role of history within societies: instead of restoring social harmony, history enclosed revolutionary subject matter. After the world, society and nature were historicised, people would be open to social change.

Remarkably, nature, history, and law, were also important fields of change in the Sixties. Particularly the sciences were path-breaking. After the discovery of the double-helix structure of DNA by James Watson and Francis Crick in 1953, biochemistry and molecular biology developed into a totally new form of the life sciences focussing on the level of molecules and cells. Stimulated by the Cold War arms race, computer science and astrophysics developed rapidly. Perhaps as a reaction, in western society a renewed interest in the inner nature of humankind evolved. Many students wanted to withdraw from their parents roots by entrusting themselves to natural healings or to the wisdom of cultures, which were considered more in tune with nature than the depraved Western World. The world of dreams, drugs, or Indian wisdom was deemed more pure than the crowded, polluted towns and regions the students themselves grew up in.

After withdrawing from their own roots, the rewriting of both history and law became important issues for the student movements. The decolonisation process was still in progress and the Second World War was fresh in the memory of many, also of those who were born after the war. Due to notorious trials against former Nazis, the Eichmann process in Jerusalem, and the Auschwitz processes in Frankfurt am Main, which attracted a lot of media attention, Nazi terror became a topical issue in the Sixties. Both history and law were considered disciplines which underpinned the vested interests, which overlooked the lawless and 'the people without history'. Easy as it is to debunk the then dominant neo-Marxist criticism, one should not underestimate the enormous influence of Marxist theory on historiography and on law. Whatever one may think of it, it broadened our scope towards new fields and other people.

### The power of thought and the thought of power

I hope to have shown that a comparison of the historiography of the Enlightenment and the Sixties is fruitful. Historians can learn a lot from

<sup>53</sup> Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine...*

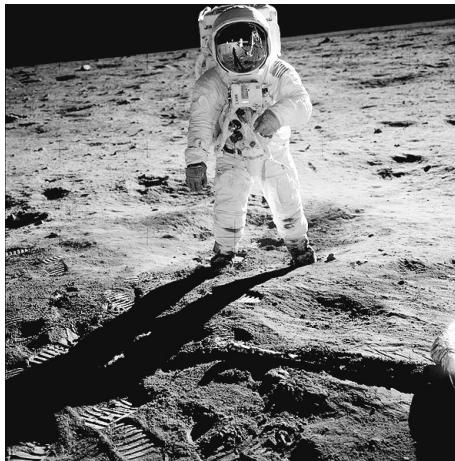


Fig. 4. Astronaut Neil Armstrong takes a picture of his colleague Buzz Aldrin during the Apollo 11 moonwalk in 1969. They were the first humans walking on the moon. National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), ID: AS11-40-5903.

their colleagues who are often working right next door, but are doing things differently. It would be tempting to read a history of the Sixties' literary underground or of its public sphere, or to know more about the eighteenth century changing mentalities, related to technical progress or to the succession of generations.

The most striking difference between the historiographies of both periods is the role ascribed to thought. While the philosophy of the Enlightenment is by many considered formative in shaping modernity, the philosophy of the Sixties is either fully historicised as one of the many peculiarities of a 'wide-eyed generation', or marginalised within the history of academic philosophy. There are several explanations for this dissimilarity. First of all, there are differences in topicality: after two or three centuries, it is easier to value the contribution of those philosophers with whom one disagrees. Many contemporaries have felt the need to disclaim their own former utopian social engagement. It is difficult to predict, but the biographies of key figures, such as Habermas and Derrida, will contextualise their philosophy, and connect their ideas with the social protest of these days.<sup>54</sup> The biographies of the important *philosophes* of the Enlightenment are rewritten repeatedly. Second, the current strong position of Anglo-American analytic philosophy does not encourage an eye for the past of (continental) philosophy: logical positivism, language analysis and cognitive science do not easily go together with an interest in history, let alone in the

<sup>54</sup> Specter, *Habermas, an Intellectual Biography*, and Baring, *The Young Derrida*.

history of the discipline (analytic philosophers often even have a better eye for the future). But the most important reason for the downscaling of the philosophy of the Sixties may be found in the contemporaneous criticism of the Sixties itself. The disenchantment of the *philosophie* is a product of the Sixties. The then new Science and Society movement wanted to get philosophy out of its ivory towers to become useful, applied and pragmatic. What remained is the critical view of the role of philosophy within society. Encouraged by postmodern criticism, philosophers were not seen anymore as secular priests or reliable solvers of future problems.

Then, why is philosophy seen as an important actor of Enlightenment? Why, in the words of Reill, is the thinker chosen as the symbolic representative of the movement, be it Voltaire, Rousseau, Kant, Bayle, or Spinoza?<sup>55</sup> The answer lies in the renewed topicality of the Enlightenment today. Since Western values are contested, and even attacked (9/11), the need is felt to search for the foundations of Western civilisation, for, in the words of Pocock, the development from polytheism to monotheism into a secular culture. While philosophy, or thought, is made too important as the sole force for social change in the Enlightenment, it should urgently be revalued concerning the history of the Sixties.

Already in 1971, Franco Venturi warned against the dominant philosophical viewpoint, which tends to follow the ideas back to its origins, instead of examining its function in history.<sup>56</sup> To get a more balanced picture of the role of philosophy as an actor of change in both the Enlightenment and the Sixties, an integrated study is necessary: cultural, philosophical, literary, mental, social, economic and political history should not be studied separately but in connection to each other. One should not forget how ideas are embedded in cultures, and how these ideas work in specific fields of politics, such as political economy, social welfare, or criminal law. Also when governments remain the same, these specific policy areas could make the difference.

<sup>55</sup> Reill, *Vitalizing Nature*, 252.

<sup>56</sup> Franco Venturi, *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge 1971), see also James Schmidt, ‘Misunderstanding the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’’, Venturi, Habermas, and Foucault’, *History of European Ideas*, 37, 1, 43-52.

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