



The Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments

By Gertrude Himmelfarb



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One of our most distinguished intellectual historians gives us a brilliant revisionist history.

The Roads to Modernity reclaims the Enlightenment—an extraordinary time bursting with new ideas about the human condition in the realms of politics, society, and religion—from historians who have downgraded its importance and from scholars who have given preeminence to the Enlightenment in France over concurrent movements in England and America. Contrasting the Enlightenments in the three nations, Gertrude Himmelfarb demonstrates the primacy of the British and the wisdom and foresight of thinkers such as Adam Smith, David Hume, Thomas Paine, the Earl of Shaftesbury, Edward Gibbon, and Edmund Burke, who established its unique character and historic importance. It is this Enlightenment, she argues, that created a moral and social philosophy—humane, compassionate, and realistic—that still resonates strongly today, in America perhaps even more so than in Europe.

This is an illuminating contribution to the history of ideas.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Himmelfarb, a leading neoconservative historian of ideas (*One Nation, Two Cultures*, etc.), takes on the ambitious project of reclaiming the Enlightenment from what she sees as delusionary French thinkers and restoring it to the (apparently) virtuous moderation of the English. The French Enlightenment, she claims, was excessively preoccupied with reason and insufficiently concerned with individual liberty; the *philosophes* idealized Man in the abstract but despised the common man. In contrast, a distinctively humane British Enlightenment was underpinned by ideals of social virtue: compassion, benevolence and sympathy. These thinkers were tolerant and pragmatic, convinced that private self-interest and public welfare were ultimately compatible. Their legacy, Himmelfarb argues, exerts a major influence on contemporary U.S. culture. Himmelfarb's book is both sophisticated and accessible, and makes some valuable revelations: Adam Smith's hostility to the "business class"; Burke's antipathy to British rule in India. One wonders about the value of the term "Enlightenment" when it is so broad as to encompass John Wesley, and the author's exaltation of the English-speaking philosophical tradition appears particularly problematic in her treatment of the American Enlightenment. Was the American Civil War, allegedly fought in defense of liberty, any less terrible than the infamous Terror? Nonetheless, this is a book with important ideological implications that deserves to be read and debated across the political spectrum.

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

Reclaiming the Enlightenment would be an ambitious challenge for any historian, but it is perhaps even more daunting for one so closely identified with a particular brand of politics (neoconservatism). No one questions Himmelfarb's credentials for tackling the job: she is professor emeritus at the City University of New York and the author of nine books. But she takes some hard lumps for attempting to link the Enlightenment to the current American political scene (one reviewer dubbed her "an apologist for the Bush administration"; another accused her of knowingly "reading her own political agenda into the text of the past"). Is it any wonder that the more conservative critics provided raves and liberals gave sharp critique? Detractors felt Himmelfarb ignored historical facts inconvenient to her viewpoint. Ultimately, as its mixed reviews illustrate, *The Roads to Modernity* succeeds in at least one area: inspiring impassioned debate about a controversial new idea.

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From [Booklist](#)

Himmelfarb's earlier books (*The De-Moralization of Society*, 1995, and *One Nation, Two Cultures*, 1999), established her as a talented intellectual historian most deeply concerned with, and by, modern moral and social mores. Her latest book is more muted in its engagement with the postmodern academic culture wars, if only because she is confident that her side has already won. Analyzing the traditional stalwarts of Enlightenment thought in America (Jefferson, Paine), France (Tocqueville, Voltaire, Diderot), and Britain (Locke, Smith, and, somewhat surprisingly, Burke), Himmelfarb presents a cogent case for the chronological priority and philosophical primacy of the British model in shaping the philosophy of reason and liberty on the cusp of modernity. Essentially, she would like to see the Enlightenment wrestled away from the French and away from academics who would deconstruct its intellectual foundations in favor of social and economic explanations for the genesis of modern political thought. *Brendan Driscoll*

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Users Review

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