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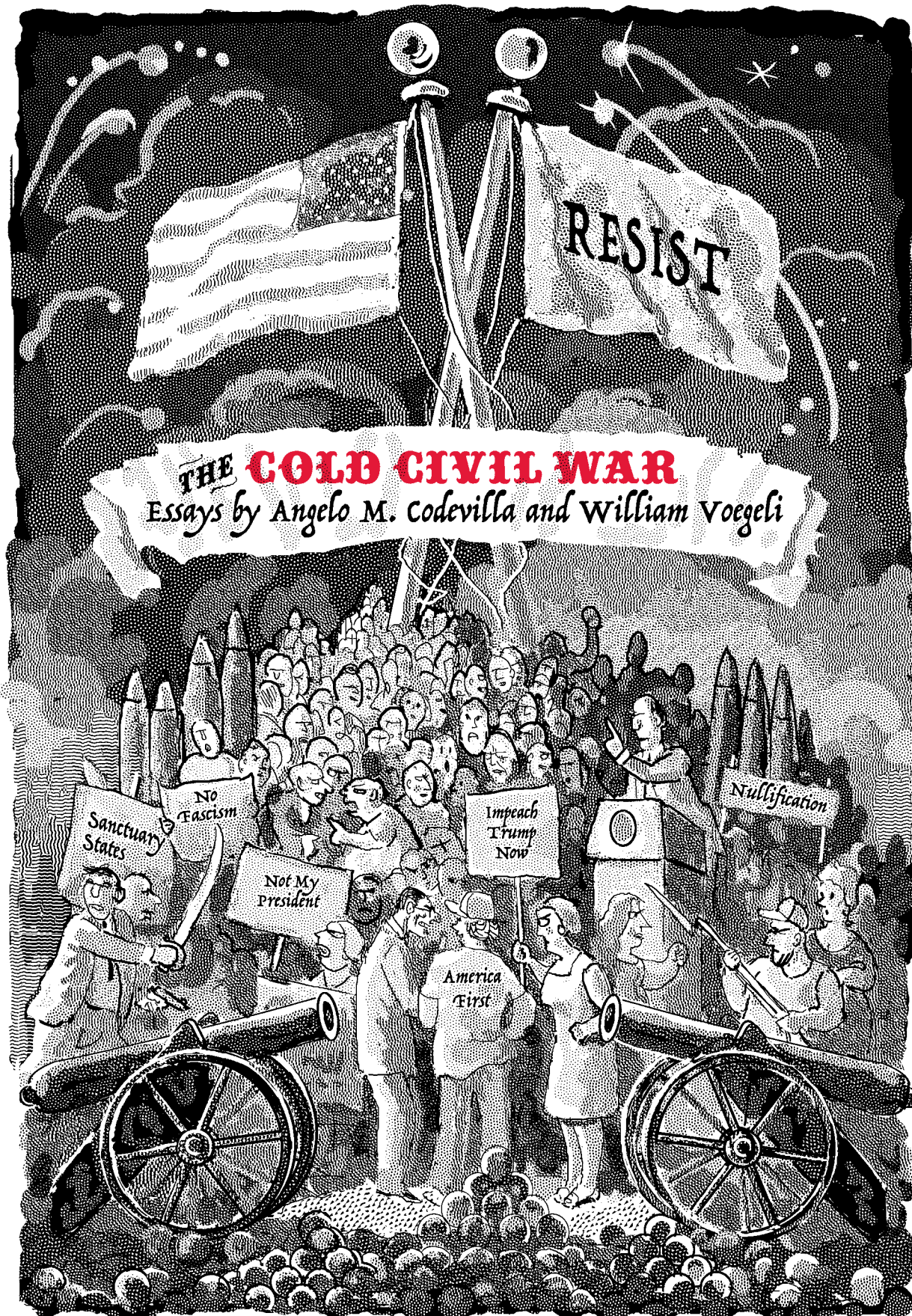
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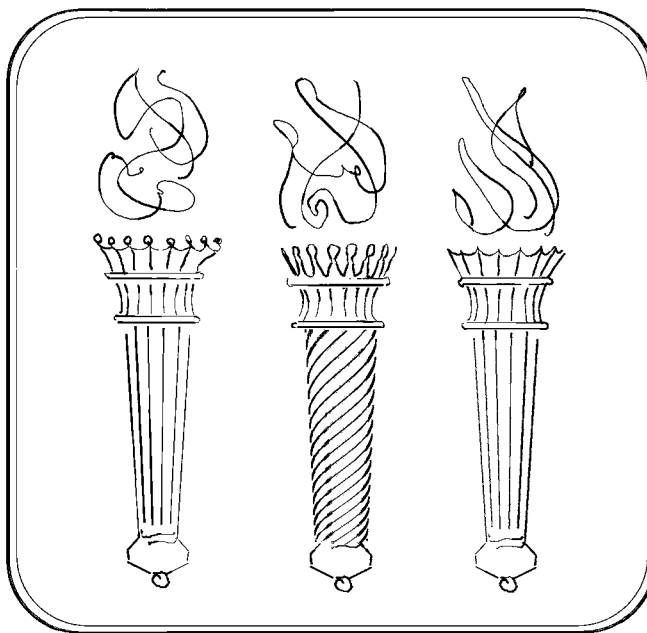
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REREADING THE ENLIGHTENMENT

American Enlightenments: Pursuing Happiness in the Age of Reason,
by Caroline Winterer. Yale University Press, 368 pages, \$35



TAXONOMISTS HAVE A PLACE FOR EVERYTHING and are intent on putting everything in its proper place. Yet despite their earnest efforts, they sometimes are obliged to entertain second thoughts and reconsider their classifications. New evidence may arise from DNA analysis or the fossil record or further field observations. Species once seen as distinct may now be merged, or a particular species subsequently split apart. Long-time birdwatchers may recall that when they first started observing, the Snow Goose and the Blue Goose were thought to be two species; later these were better understood as color morphs of the same species. For a couple of decades the beautiful Baltimore and Bullock's Orioles were lumped together under the colorless name Northern Oriole, only later to be restored to their original separate identities. Perplexity dogs classifiers of flora as well. The challenges posed by the grasses and goldenrods and even some maples keep taxonomists busy indeed. Be they lumpers or splitters, taxonomists keep finding certainty and finality just beyond reach.

Matters are no better for historians. Consider the ambiguity attending periodization. And when it comes to using abstract nouns to characterize a movement or an era, parallels may be suggested that mislead as much as

they help. Alexis de Tocqueville's observation holds good: "An abstract word is like a box with a false bottom: one puts in it the ideas one desires and one takes them out without anyone's seeing it." Time was when historians of thought could speak with confidence and without embarrassment of *the* Enlightenment. But fashions change, and the proliferation of distinct national enlightenments has proceeded apace. In the hands of intellectual historians the Russian, Prussian, Italian, German, French, English, Scottish, Anglo-American, and Ibero-American enlightenments all have distinct stories to tell. The plural in the title of Caroline Winterer's new book, *American Enlightenments*, announces in effect that she is prepared to outdo even the most avid splitter. In doing so, this distinguished professor in the humanities at Stanford University aims to overcome the ahistorical aura that 20th-century Americans have wrapped around their most prominent revolutionary founders. Responding to national anxieties generated by the posture of a nuclear-armed Soviet Union in the Cold War, some American historians contrived a tale that endowed the men of 1776 and 1787 with a unitary purpose, one that shaped and happily continues to shape an enlightened people dedicated to freedom, democracy, and unending progress. Winterer

finds this pleasing myth insupportable once one takes the trouble to understand the language, thought processes, and aspirations of those 18th-century people as they understood themselves. The truism that the past is a foreign country may be trite, but it's also true. This book reinforces the good advice that tourists should keep their eyes and minds open when traveling abroad; they might learn something.

WINTERER ESCHEWS USING 20TH-century concepts that hinder our seeing "the complex and contradictory processes of enlightenment that were in fact at work." Her densely researched account points us not to a movement or a political program but to an emerging awareness that the texture of life need not be as it is, that improvement is indeed possible, and that the sum of public and private happiness might thereby be enhanced. The marker of this new awareness is, according to Winterer, English speakers' invention of new uses for the words *enlightened* and *enlightenment* "suddenly in the second half of the eighteenth century." Light might come not only from above as in a revelation, but more predictably from an assiduous study of the natural world. The bulk of this book consists of "core samples of eighteenth-

century conversations,” wherein rival concepts vied to explain perplexities posed by an awareness of a newly expanded world. These “conversations,” it must be said, were not located solely or even primarily in fashionable salons. Winterer is astonished by the sheer variety of people who “joined in the large, baggy conversation of enlightenment.” The accidental discovery of an entirely unknown hemisphere had led to a prolonged commerce of material objects, along with evidence of peoples and practices that profoundly unsettled prevailing beliefs. This book brims with details of enormous networks of economic and intellectual exchange, with chains of correspondence between center and periphery that led to new conduits of information.

THE EUROPEANS’ ATTEMPTS TO ASSIMILATE and make sense of this flood of new evidence from the New World are documented in Winterer’s various chapters, as are the responses of those living on the front lines. “The American setting for the ideas that became known as enlightened helped determine what could be imagined, articulated, and realized there.” Living at what they regarded as the very edge of the civilized world and being ever mindful of their status as colonials, the Americans yearned for more.

In scrawled marginalia and hasty sketches as much as in somber tomes and blistering pamphlets, Americans from many quarters poured out their excitement, their awe, their wonder at the possibility that they might set the world on fire. That they pinned their hopes to endeavors that in some cases seem strangely unexalted or obscure to us today—the origin of fossil shells, the meaning of Aztec temples, the proper manure ratios for planting turnips—reminds us that the great undertaking of enlightenment in eighteenth-century America that seems so familiar to us today has in many ways slipped from our fingers.

Winterer’s assiduity in trying to recover that earlier understanding is manifested in this volume’s 46-page bibliography, a feat that affords two collateral benefits. Anyone working as a bibliographer in a serious research library could do worse than checking whether a book of this character could have been researched using the resources of her own library and by taking advantage of the surge in digitalizing archives and correspondence. Further, any graduate student on the verge of exploring one of the many topics touched on in this book

would likely find in this copious list some book or monograph that might serve as an entry way to learning about needs and opportunities for further research on that subject. For all this the author deserves thanks.

AN EVALUATION OF THE COGENCY AND adequacy of this book’s argument overall has to be more qualified—and this, partly for reasons traceable to this project’s underlying methodology. The seductions of being able to manipulate large digitized data sets tend to obscure the vast gap between the things being counted and measured—in this case, the frequency of certain words and combinations of words—and the objects we are really trying to recover—in this case, an earlier age’s conceptual understanding. There is no one-to-one correspondence of words to concepts, and there is much reason to presume that, formerly, people were able to entertain certain concepts with a vocabulary quite different from our own. Given the many possible metrics of connection, the results of this huge data-dredging exercise are inherently

American Enlightenments describes the emergence of a new thought, one with a profoundly unsettling legacy.

unstable. Others have spoken at length on the limitations of digital humanities, and Winterer herself recognizes that however serviceable algorithms may be, they do not supersede the humanist’s traditional work. An informed human intelligence exerting judgment and control still has to engage with texts. The question, then, is quite plainly: how well does this book read texts?

American Enlightenments describes the emergence of a new thought, one with a profoundly unsettling legacy. At some point the world no longer appeared fixed, given, frozen in place. An all-powerful Being’s “*Fiat!*”; followed by that Creator’s declaration that his handiwork was good, even very good; reinforced by the teaching and moral authority of an omnipresent clergy; and celebrated as such in music and art for well over a millennium—all this succeeded in muting murmurs of discontent with the existing order of things, but could not expunge them. Amends might be made in the life to come (Calvinists weren’t so sure), but there was little in religious, philosophical, or political thinking to encourage di-

rect remedial action against the miseries and injustices in this world. Yet before the 18th century had run its course, Winterer explains, a new disposition of mind had emerged, one that led human beings tentatively to expect some success in improving what was given. Buoyed by a combination of despair and hope, folk who thought of themselves as enlightened believed that unassisted human reason aided by the collection and sober analysis of factual evidence might indeed make this world of ours a better place. Hovering over the horizon are the collection and quantification of census and survey data, statistical analysis in the service of determining the means most likely to promote the real interests of the inhabitants, political economy in its most comprehensive sense, and think tanks. We are there!

WHAT WE DON’T LEARN FROM THIS ambitious work is the backstory of where, when, and how this bracing prospect of human efficacy, sufficiency, and continual improvement arose. It is no small task to persuade others to search for facts instead of seeking the purposes of an inscrutable God even though the new evidence may turn out to yield *more* uncertainty. “Doubt rather than certainty was the constant companion of enlightened hope.” Nonetheless, this new disposition of mind might suffice perhaps to diminish belief in the importance of the Biblical account and to allow concern with the doctrinal differences of contending Christian sects to recede and finally vanish. This book relates how, more and more, civilized men found themselves insensibly sliding away from Scripture and speculation and turning instead toward the explanatory force of empirical evidence. But Winterer stops well short of showing readers that this shift was neither an accident nor an unintended consequence. A closer look at her treatment of Thomas Jefferson brings some of her omissions to light.

Like a number of other figures discussed in this book, Jefferson is portrayed as oscillating between hope and anxiety. Avid promoter though he was of the scientific study of American geology, he is said to have “despaired” of finding the causes of how the earth’s physical features were formed. Yet he was satisfied that the Bible’s story of a universal deluge could account for nothing and that further speculation on the matter is “too idle to be worth a single hour of any man’s life.” Jefferson took to heart the disdain for all things American implicit in the assertion propounded by European savants such as the Comte de Buffon that animals common to both the old world and the new are smaller in the latter and that European animals introduced and domes-

ticated in America degenerate as a species. Jefferson's verbal refutation of what he calls a "proud theory" fills many pages in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* while his wordless refutation lies in the sheer size of native American fauna prominently displayed in Monticello's entry hall. The facts would speak for themselves. Confidence, not anxiety, marks Jefferson's studied nonchalance when defending the experiments of Pennsylvania and New York in dispensing with an established church. "They flourish infinitely. Religion is well supported; of various kinds, indeed, but all good enough." In that "good enough" Jefferson betrays an untroubled satisfaction with a purely human or secular approach to all matters religious. In other respects he surely had many promptings for anxious and restless nights: the prospects of the black descendants borne by his mistress that he still held in slavery, the prospects of his white descendants saddled with unmanageable debts incurred over his lifetime of consumerism and endless home improvement projects, the prospects of his country during the controversy over the status of Missouri which he likened to hearing a fire bell sounding in the night. But of the *rightness* of his convictions regarding religion with a lower profile, and the authority of a fact-based science, and the assured future of the doctrine of natural rights—of these Jefferson had no doubt. The ground for his confidence is in full view in a letter of February 15, 1789, commissioning the painting of a triptych bearing the portraits of Francis Bacon, John Locke, and Isaac Newton (still on display in Monticello). "[A]nd as I consider them as the three greatest men that have ever lived, without any exception, and as having laid the foundation of those superstructures which have been raised in the Physical & Moral sciences, I would wish to form them into a knot on the same canvas, that they may not be confounded at all with the herd of other great men."

IT SAYS MUCH ABOUT WINTERER'S DELIBerate foreshortening of the perspective by which she would have us understand the 18th-century enlightenments that Thomas Hobbes, René Descartes, and Pierre Bayle are

mere name-droppings in this text; that Locke, Newton, and Baruch Spinoza are barely more; that the profoundly destabilizing essays in Jean d'Alembert and Denis Diderot's *Encyclopédie* are passed by except for some quotations from economist François Quesnay and a trivial entry on Mexico City; and that the name of Sir Francis Bacon is altogether absent. To be sure, Winterer was not obliged to write a book on the philosophy of the 18th-century enlightenments. But in failing to account for the allegedly sudden emergence of a new disposition of mind, she leaves readers only with variants, subspecies, perhaps even species, but no genus to make sense of the whole. If you were looking for an initiating moment—a declaration that men should reject despair, enlist the "vexations of art," and entertain sober hope that they can not only improve on nature, but possibly even master it—you would find that clarion call to arms precisely in the concluding aphorisms of Book 1 of Bacon's *Novum Organum*. If you were looking for a projection of a technologically advanced society with discernable albeit muted dehumanizing features, Bacon's *New Atlantis* gives you much to ponder. Bacon launched a project that he famously expected to come to the relief of man's estate. A long succession of thinkers became his acolytes and joined in promoting that project. Eyes were to be opened to new possibilities. Age-old certainties were to be unsettled and subtly undermined, either by good arguments or plausible ones, or (for want of anything better) by satire or mockery.

IT CANNOT BE DENIED THAT GREAT AND not-so-great men yearned to become members of the Republic of Letters promoted by Bayle, no matter that they lived far from rich and ostensibly civilized European metropolises. Something more than vanity drove Jefferson to have a little mountain in the Virginia Piedmont decapitated and a noble exemplar of Palladian calm and order erected on it—and all this in view of the wilderness of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Similarly, even earlier, something more than vanity drove the bishop of Puebla and his successors to create a vast public library, the

Biblioteca Palafoxiana, house it in a stunning masterpiece of Baroque architecture—all this in view of three volcanos in the Mexican hinterland. The Republic of Letters was a siren call to people of different religious and political persuasions. What they shared was a deep conviction that we human beings can do better for ourselves and others by thinking more clearly, having more regard for the effectual truths about this world, and joining in a collective enterprise of inquiry and civil discourse. The physical embodiments of that philosophical stance were the private library and the cabinet of curiosities, both of which are discussed by Winterer and are strikingly reimagined in Puebla City's Museo Internacional del Barroco. Each might be a sanctuary from the chaos and inanities of a fractured world. It was precisely in such a cabinet that Jean Bodin situated his *Colloquium heptaplomeres de rerum sublimium arcanis abditis* (*Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime*), an imagined conversation in which a Catholic, Jew, Lutheran, Calvinist, Muslim, skeptic, and philosophic naturalist discuss divine things and disagree with civility, even as wars of religion rage outdoors.

Caroline Winterer has written a learned, thought-provoking work. The light she means to cast on 18th-century thinking does not, however, match the intensity and luminosity that distinguish those many engravings that Diderot commissioned for his *Encyclopédie* to illustrate its articles on the mechanical arts. By illuminating and identifying all relevant processes of production, his artists have left no places of concealment. Once brought out of the shadows all mysteries dissolve. Winterer has chosen to suppress a discussion of the foundational philosophic thinking that energized a movement and gave it a political agenda. Her offering, consequently, remains a work done in chiaroscuro.

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