

The left's Enlightenment origins

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For over a century, the left has owed its political identity and major political victories to a critical adherence to the Enlightenment. This is why, Stéphanie Roza argues, abandoning this legacy is dangerous.

Reviewed: Stéphanie Roza, *Lumières de la gauche* (The Left's Enlightenment), Paris, Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2022, 304 p., 22 €.

What the left's history teaches us

"The Left's Enlightenment" (*Lumières de la gauche*): the book's title summarizes the author's argument. The left will be lucid only if it is careful not to deviate from the values to which it owes its birth: those of the Enlightenment. For Stéphanie Roza, these values boil down to three: rationalism, universalism, and progressivism. She first presented this triptych in her previous book, *La gauche contre les Lumières?* (The Left against the Enlightenment?)¹ She denounced the political and ideological aporia of left politics that purported to reject these principles. Roza's most recent book is a related project. Drawing on a detailed historical analysis, she shows that it was by drawing on an ideological matrix rooted in the Enlightenment--with rationalism, universalism, and progressivism as its watchwords--that the left has been able to wage its characteristic social and political struggles, from the French Revolution to the Second World War. Roza offers historical evidence that seems irreproachable: she considers

¹ Stéphanie Roza, *La gauche contre les Lumières?*, Paris, Fayard, 2020.

one "progressive" political thinker after another, across different times and places, each of whom proves that it is not only possible, but necessary to reconcile progressive causes with emancipatory goals and Enlightenment values. Citing historical examples,² she shows that one cannot stray from any one of these principles without deviating from the others. The stakes of Roza's argument are clear: by recalling a long tradition, she seeks to remind the left of its historical values. Criticism of these values, she suggests, is the reason the left finds itself in a state of crisis.

Three left values

Roza opens her book by noting that the left was born at the beginning of the French Revolution. The revolutionary period and the left share, she maintains, the same Enlightenment legacy. The latter consists of three values that inherently promote progressive political action and thought. Roza finds it difficult to imagine how positions that favor political, economic, and social change benefiting the dominated³ could be articulated without this foundation, which constitute the left's historical basis and identity. The values in question have already been mentioned. What Roza means by them merits clarification. Definitions are particularly important given that, in the present context, these values have been attacked by postmodern philosophers and thinkers, for whom they have meanings that are quite different than they do for Roza.

To what is Roza referring when she declares that universalism, rationalism, and progressivism constitute the unescapable matrix of any possible leftist thought and action? Throughout the book, Roza shows that the existence of human rights presupposes a degree of *universalism*. It should be seen as a "legal and moral universalism or humanism"--that is, those qualities that recognize human beings as endowed with a dignity that entitles them to be defended, regardless of the circumstances in which they find themselves. Far from representing the edification of a model of humanity that seeks to impose itself forcefully on others, the universalism defended by Roza does not seek to negate minority experiences or difference. Rather, it is an inclusive universal that enables common endeavors. In affirming the necessity

² Roza makes this point by analyzing the "test" cases of Proudhon, Sorel, Berth, and other left Nietzscheans, from pages 133 to 146, then from 177 to 220.

³ This is the definition that Roza gave to the left in her previous book: the left is defined as a "series of positions that, since the French Revolution, has explicitly sought to subvert the existing (political, social, and economic) order to the benefit of the dominated," 14.

of rationalism, Roza does not embrace a conception of reason that is divorced from reality, nor does she proclaim unequivocal faith in technological progress. Rather, for Roza, rationalism is the "affirmation of "[the] primacy of rational argument over all other authority" (p. 15). Put differently, she claims that critical reason should be the common standard, making it possible, for instance, to evaluate a government's actions, rather than embracing an indeterminacy of judgment that would sanction abuse. This rationalism presupposes that reality can be thought and described, at least to the point that it becomes possible to act on reality by modifying it. Rationalism also provides the rules of interaction and agreement, without which political debate would be impossible.

Finally, by progressivism, Roza means "the faith in humanity's capacity to deliberately improve its condition."⁴ She also calls it "meliorism." In this way, she refers to a project of general improvement, the exact opposite of a skeptical or fatalistic attitude towards economic, social, and political realities. Eschewing charges of utopianism or abstraction (that is, an outlook that overlooks concrete obstacles to political progress), Roza defines meliorism as the attitude embraced by anyone who believes that human action can bring change--perhaps not a perfect society, but a better one. Far be it from us to criticize an author who has defined universalism, rationalism, and progressivism in these ways and who sees them as essential to left-wing political thought and action.

Critically embracing the Enlightenment's legacy

In her book, Roza identifies two critical positions that the left has adopted towards values inherited from the Enlightenment. The first consists not in criticizing these values *per se* but in focusing on failures and inadequacies in their implementation. The goal of this critique is to identify new ways to achieve and realize them more fully. This was the left's attitude from the French Revolution to the Second World War. The second critical position is far more radical. It consists in turning against these values and rejecting them as inherently flawed. For Roza, this attitude was inaugurated in 1944 with the publication of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. I will return to this point below.

⁴ Ibid.

Until this moment, Roza demonstrates, by considering a vast array of political ideas, left-wing movements saw themselves, despite their diversity, as forming a common movement, consisting in the pursuit of "the project of extending and realizing Enlightenment principles, without ever calling into question, whether politically or conceptually, their framework or general spirit" (p. 21). For these leftists, political, economic, and social problems should never be conceived as due to inadequate principles, but rather as a failure to apply them in real life. While some leftwing thinkers have been critical of the Enlightenment and the Revolution, it is not because they bequeathed to nineteenth-century political thought impractical or inadequate principles, but rather because they *only* proposed principles--which must be made effective, lest they remain purely declamatory.

Roza opens her book with two striking examples that illustrate this idea. In England, it was in the name of a universalism inherent in human rights that Mary Wollstonecraft demanded equal rights for women and campaigned so that the latter would be understood as the hallmark of universal humanity, to which women belong. In Saint Domingue, it was in the name of the same universalism that Toussaint Louverture demanded, in a spirit of logical consistency, the abolition of slavery. Both Wollstonecraft and Louverture sought to give the principle of the universality of human rights its full reality--that is, its real field of extension, without which the *Universal* Declaration of human rights would be either contradictory or purely formal.

While specific articles of the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man--which is inherently founded on universalistic assumptions--have been contested (for instance, those concerning property), most critical work about it by leftwing thinkers during the nineteenth century denounces its formalism and emphasizes the need to realize its ideas in practice. The point is to implement these rights, to make them effective, to insist that they have purchase on reality, and make available the resources required for their implementation. In France, all leftist thinkers, ranging from utopians to communists by way of socialists, seemed to agree. Emphasizing political, economic, and social means, they sought to end the scandal best summed up by Charles Fourier, (in a quote cited by Roza), who wondered about the value of declaring equality in a society in "which the people decorated with the title of sovereign has neither break nor work."⁵ Roza lists the different forms of this position by French, German, and Russian political thinkers. Their faith in the possibility of real social progress was not refuted, any more than was adherence to the universalism inherent in human rights. Reason

⁵ Charles Fourier, *Théorie de l'unité universelle*, OC, III, p.159-160, quoted by Roza, p. 68.

was used as the primary tool for constructing theories seeking to alter reality and achieving a critical understanding of political, economic, and social realities. Those that Roza calls the "children of Enlightenment" (p. 129) seem to share, beneath their heterogeneous doctrine, the same sense of accomplishment, the realization and occasional correction of values inherited from the Enlightenment.

Understanding a rupture

The left's critical adherence to Enlightenment values took a decisive turn at the end of the Second World War. This critical attitude underwent a radicalization that resulted in the deconstruction and radical rejection of these values. While Roza notes the anti-Enlightenment positions of thinkers such as Proudhon (p. 133-146), Sorel (p. 208-214), Berth (p. 215-220), and, more generally, those who are known as left Nietzscheans (p. 177-215), the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) is unprecedented in its radicalness. The break with the tradition to which the left had previously adhered took the form of a theoretical rupture. Roza writes: "thus Adorno and Horkheimer launched, in 1944, a new chapter in the left's theoretical history, as Enlightenment and anti-Enlightenment partisans faced off within it (p. 291; these are the book's final words). Turning its back to the principles of universalism, rationalism, and progressivism, this new attitude, Roza maintains, condemned its proponents to a political sterility that, in the worst-case scenario, was complicit with conservatism. Reason as a tool for assessing reality was rejected as essentially totalitarian. Universalism was denounced for flouting the historical and cultural differences that define peoples and rejected for having served as an instrument of domination. For over half a century, anti-Enlightenment grievances have been widespread and active on the left.

Conclusion: Time to stop blaming the Enlightenment?

By no means does Roza deny that these values have lent themselves to dangerous uses with serious consequences. But she asks her readers if the misuse of a principle should result in it being condemned without qualification. Doesn't this amount to throwing out the baby with the bathwater? Doesn't it lead to depriving

ourselves of essential political frameworks under the pretext that they may be used in an unenlightened manner? It would be a shame if the negation of these values resulted, even unintentionally, in the emergence of conservative positions on the left--a consequence that Roza fears. Rather than turning away from the Enlightenment legacy, Roza asks us to cultivate these values, with an eye to our predecessors.

We would, however, like to conclude by clarifying one point: are the rationalism, universalism, and progressivism that Roza attributes to the left identical to the Enlightenment's rationalism, universalism, and progressivism? Even if they are, does this affiliation imply they are identical? One may have reasonable doubts about this claim if one reads a text like Voltaire's *Historical Praise of Reason*.⁶ The rationalism Voltaire professes is conceived as an almost infinite vector of progress, an invaluable tool that, in the name of civilization, must be brought to every people. Very explicitly and (in our view) unironically it employs a conception not only of rationalism, but also universalism and progressivism that is far more engaging than the versions defended by Roza and whose colonial aura prevents us from promptly embracing it.

One could always argue that this text is not representative of Enlightenment beliefs, which in any case are not characterized by doctrinal or theoretical unity. Yet this is precisely our point: is it necessary to interpret the left's commitment to the values of rationalism, universalism, and progressivism as Roza defines them as a commitment to *Enlightenment* values? Roza clearly shows that rationalism understood as an instrument for the assessment and critical understanding reality, progressivism as an essential belief for whoever wishes to make the world a better place, and universalism as a defense of the equal dignity of all human beings are values that the left cannot dispense with. Is it not sufficient to demonstrate that these values are indispensable, without seeking to attribute them to the Enlightenment--a far more perilous undertaking, given this movement's diversity and its theoretical and ideological ambiguity?

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⁶ Voltaire, *Éloge historique de la raison*, in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, Garnier, 1877, vol. 21, p. 513 to 522.