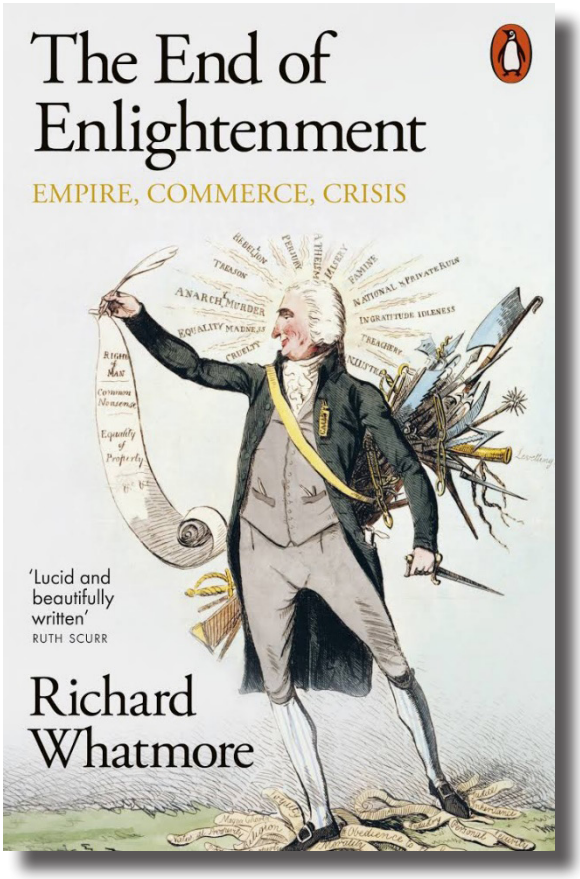
Richard Whatmore, *The End of Enlightenment: Empire, Commerce, Crisis*, London, Penguin Books, 2023, 496 págs.



Richard Whatmore's book *The End of Enlightenment: Empire, Commerce, Crisis* rigorously questions the historiographical narrative that enshrines the Enlightenment as the inaugural moment of Western liberal modernity. Instead of conceiving the 18th century as a period of rationalist optimism that ushered in democracy, human rights, and the progressive secularisation of institutions, the author proposes a historiographical revision that destabilises this teleological framework. Whatmore argues that the dominant image of the Enlightenment, inherited mainly from the Whig and liberal tradition of the 19th century and amplified by both apologetic and critical contemporary readings, is the result of a projection of current values onto a profoundly different historical context. The narrative of inevitable progress, associated with the universal victory of reason and human emancipation, masks the true meaning of Enlightenment philosophical and political interventions.

Whatmore argues that the Enlightenment should be interpreted as a set of intellectual and political responses articulated to solve a specific historical problem, that of social conflict, albeit motivated by religious reasons, since the religious wars of the Reformation. Rather than embodying a belief in the inevitable progress of reason, Enlightenment projects took on an essentially defensive

character. They aimed to preserve tolerance (especially religious tolerance), ensure civil stability, and prevent the resurgence of confessional conflicts. Thus, their purpose was not to usher in modernity, but rather to prevent the repetition of the political and religious catastrophes that had marked European history in previous centuries. The work thus dismantles triumphalist readings. The Enlightenment was, after all, an uncertain and contingent undertaking, continually weakened by the advance of imperial power, the expansion of global trade, and the growing weight of economic and state interests that would eventually absorb and distort it.

One of the central points of the author's analysis is to show that, despite the diversity of political orientations, much of modern historiography is based on a similar set of assumptions when interpreting the Enlightenment. On the one hand, liberal and conservative authors (such as Isaiah Berlin, Michael Oakeshott, and John Gray, among others) tend to present it as the source of the normative values that structure the contemporary political order. On the other hand, the critical tradition, from Horkheimer and Adorno to the post-structuralism of Lyotard and Foucault, sees this period as the birth of an instrumental rationality responsible for colonial domination, racial violence and, ultimately, the totalitarianisms of the 20th century. For Whatmore, however, both interpretations (despite their divergence) mistakenly treated the Enlightenment as a point of origin, either to legitimise or to denounce the contemporary world, retroactively projecting later debates onto a historical context that was not thought of in those terms.

This work by Whatmore also proves that many exponents of Enlightenment thought, such as David Hume, Adam Smith, Edward Gibbon, and Edmund Burke, were aware that their project was at risk and would probably not survive the political transformations of the time. Far from considering themselves architects of a new emancipatory future, they saw the Enlightenment as a last attempt to guarantee conditions for civil sociability in a world increasingly permeated by new forms of superstition that were not, in the 18th century, merely religious in nature. The focus thus shifted from the idea of the birth of modernity to the premonition of an imminent moral and institutional collapse. This picture gives rise to a decisive conceptual redefinition. The Enlightenment does not emerge as a unitary or homogeneous movement, but as a constellation of parallel initiatives, rooted in distinct national and confessional traditions, which shared a common goal.

These efforts manifested themselves in different national contexts — the Scottish, French, German, Dutch, Swiss and Neapolitan Enlightenments (for example) — each articulating its own responses to perceived threats. However, despite this diversity, they all faced the same challenge: the growing fusion be-

tween the state, commerce and military power, responsible for the emergence of competitive commercial empires and the generalisation of war as a structuring principle of international relations.

The failure of the Enlightenment, according to Whatmore, lies precisely here. As political economy became an instrument of imperial expansion and global competition, the values of freedom, trade, and progress were captured by governmental and mercantile elites, transforming into ideological justifications for domination and violence. The Enlightenment ideal of peaceful trade between independent nations degenerated into a logic of conquest and continuous rivalry, consolidating a new form of secularised superstition, the belief in empire as a civilising destiny and in war as the inevitable engine of history. Instead of overcoming religious fanaticism, Europe gave rise to a more sophisticated and destructive political-economic fanaticism.

Whatmore's reading falls within the field of intellectual history and a broader revisionist tradition, engaging in dialogue with J. G. A. Pocock, Quentin Skinner, Dorinda Outram, and Jonathan Israel. The distance taken from these authors' interpretations stems from a refusal to frame the Enlightenment as the origin of modernity, focusing instead on the obstacles and failures of the Enlightenment project itself, at its core. The approach employed combines a contextualist analysis, attentive to the political languages and specific controversies of the period, with a genealogically inspired critique. In this horizon, Hume and Smith, for example, no longer appear as protagonists of a progressive march of reason, but rather as lucid observers of the moral and institutional degradation of Europe in the face of imperial expansion and emerging «global» capitalism.

On the horizon of this interpretation is a thesis with contemporary resonances. The author's effort to reinterpret the Enlightenment as an interrupted project, rather than consecrating it as the founding myth of modernity, allows us to take a fresh look at contemporary political crises. Among these are the resurgence of populism and the return of «imperial» (or territorial) ambitions. Recovering this historicity allows us to recognise the impasses of our time, which in some cases stem from the failures diagnosed in the 18th century.

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