



# Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity

*By Darrin M. McMahon*

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Critics have long treated the most important intellectual movement of modern history--the Enlightenment--as if it took shape in the absence of opposition. In this groundbreaking new study, Darrin McMahon demonstrates that, on the contrary, contemporary resistance to the Enlightenment was a major cultural force, shaping and defining the Enlightenment itself from the moment of inception, while giving rise to an entirely new ideological phenomenon--what we have come to think of as the "Right." McMahon skillfully examines the Counter-Enlightenment, showing that it was an extensive, international, and thoroughly modern affair.

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- Rank: #563577 in Books
- Brand: Darrin M McMahon
- Published on: 2002-07-18
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.10" h x .70" w x 9.10" l, .90 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 288 pages

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

History has often overlooked the men and women who resisted the triumphal progress of Western society toward Reason: spiritual Luddites, it seems at first glance, hoping to smash the ideological machinery of atheism and democracy. But in this sophisticated deconstruction of conservative opposition to the Enlightenment, McMahon, a fellow in history at NYU, re-envisions intellectual history from 1750 to 1830 as an ideological dialectic foreshadowing the culture wars of our own time and helping to define modernity. As McMahon shows, many Catholics saw Voltaire and his ilk as harbingers of degenerate hedonism, a diabolical menace to church, state and family. These anti-philosophes accused their enemies of practicing the very intolerance they condemned, and were convinced that danger lurked in philosophic fanaticism. Their horrified voices, audible from the mid-18th century on, became louder as the Enlightenment gathered momentum. Unable to stop the French Revolution, their protests seemed prophetic to many when idealism turned to terror. The ghost of Counter-Enlightenment ideology has been conspicuous in more recent times in Spain, Italy and Latin America, just as the specter of leftist violence has been repeatedly invoked. McMahon's argument is deeply versed in recent scholarship; his prose is polished, and the book is illustrated with compelling examples of visual propaganda (notably, Voltaire caught in flagrante delicto). While this title lacks the mass appeal of Simon Schama's *Citizens* or other narrative-oriented histories of the revolution, its relevance to conservative-liberal tensions in the U.S. make it worthy of broad intellectual discussion.

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### Review

"excellently researched and elegantly written study . . . . Using the theoretical and methodological tools forged in the last three decades of enlightenment scholarship, McMahon enriches our understanding of *antiphilosophie* by broadening the focus of inquiry to include names of largely forgotten men and women from varying geographical and confessional backgrounds whose opposition to the values of the Age of Enlightenment helped to define it as an intellectual movement. What we are looking at in this important study of the dialectics of Counter-Enlightenment is, in fact, the genesis of the European political Right from its last decade of the *ancien regime* to the postmodernist era."-- *The Historian*

"A well-written study...of an early culture war that will not be unfamiliar to us today -- a war of mutual simplification and caricature spiraling downward into suspicion and hate....Presents a useful genealogy of a brand of conservatism that remained influential through the mid-20th century, and, more pressingly, a rough template for a host of counter-Enlightenment ideas that are with us still today, from Cambridge to Kabul."-- Wall Street Journal

"[I]n this sophisticated deconstruction of conservative opposition to the Enlightenment, McMahon...reenvisions intellectual history from 1750 to 1830 as an ideological dialectic foreshadowing the culture wars of our own time and helping to define modernity."--*Publishers Weekly*

"This well-researched and beautifully written study applies insights of recent Enlightenment historiography to the heretofore neglected area of the anti-philosophes." --*Choice*

"Beyond its chronological breadth and the relative novelty of its subject, this book has much to recommend it. Well-written and deeply researched, it takes up important historiographical questions. McMahon's work answers Roger Chartier's question about whether the existence of the Enlightenment was merely a fragment of the revolutionaries' imagination."--*Journal of Social History*

About the Author

Darrin M. McMahon Term Member Council on Foreign Relations

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