The Process of Enlightenment: essays by and inspired by Hans Erich Bödeker

edited by Ere Nokkala and Jonas Gerlings. Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2024. 440 pp., £75.00 (paperback) ISBN:9781802071863

Vincent Roy-Di Piazza

This version is the author's manuscript, which follows the pagination of the published version. For citation, please refer to the original article as indicated below:

To cite this article: Vincent Roy-Di Piazza (27 Mar 2025): 'The process of Enlightenment: essays by and inspired by Hans Erich Bödeker', *Intellectual History Review*, DOI: 10.1080/17496977.2025.2479239

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17496977.2025.2479239 Published online: 27 Mar 2025.

The Process of Enlightenment is a superlative book. Not only because of its length (440 pages), which exceeds the usual length of works in the *Oxford Studies in the Enlightenment* Series, but also because of its range and the wealth of materials it contains. It is a Festschrift-on-steroids for the German historian Hans Erich Bödeker (born 1944), described by John Robertson as one of the leading "German intellectual historians" of the Enlightenment (2). The volume has sixteen contributions from twelve different authors, combining lengthy historiographical discussions with wide-ranging case studies on Prussia, France, Naples, and Sweden. It introduces and expands Bödeker's approach to the Enlightenment as a process of contested communication and politicization, rooted in and crossing national, cultural and confessional boundaries. Some of Bödeker's classic texts are here made available in English for the first time, and the book does pay tribute, as promised, "to a German tradition rooted in historical semantics, while at the same time querying its present state and future" (v).

As underlined by its two editors, Ere Nokkala and Jonas Gerlings, the volume originated from a 2017 conference celebrating Bödeker's work (xi), and as an effort to consolidate his scholarly legacy. Having spent most of his career as a researcher at the Max Planck Institute for History, Bödeker did not often have the opportunity to teach; yet his formative influence as a doctoral supervisor and collegial scholar is appreciated by many, as evidenced by the contributions to the volume. Bödeker's Enlightenment scholarship has enjoyed a multifaceted European reception. In Germany, his work has been associated with his colleagues Martin Gierl and Rudolph Vierhaus (4), and even with Jürgen Habermas (250). In France he is largely regarded as a cultural historian with affinities to the *Annales* school and the research of Daniel Roche and Roger Chartier (2). In the Nordic countries Bödeker's work has long been linked to Reinhard Koselleck's studies of historical semantics and *Begriffsgeschichte* – the German tradition of conceptual history –, while in the United Kingdom, Bödeker is also remembered for his collaborations with Ian Hampsher-Monk and István Hont.

In terms of structure, the volume is divided in two thematically. The first section features seven essays on the Enlightenment "as a process of communication"; the second includes six essays focused on the Enlightenment as a "process of politicization". Contributions cover Frederick II, Immanuel Kant, Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle, Jean-Baptiste Say, and Johann Paul Friedrich Richter, together with institutions such as the University of Göttingen, the Neapolitan Accademia degli Investiganti, concert halls, and the Swedish parliament. With numerous discussions of religion across the volume, along with dedicated essays from Thomas Kaufmann and Martin Gierl, the Enlightenment's religious dimension is also well represented. While the first part is close to fifty pages longer than the second, this discrepancy does not detract from the overall balance of the volume. The introduction itself is divided in two. It opens with a general essay by the editors, providing a clear definitional approach to the Enlightenment as a "process" (8–9), presenting in this way a helpful historiographical review of Enlightenment scholarship since the 1960s. This enlightening essay (pun unintended) is

complemented by a review essay from Anthony La Vopa, who outlines Bödeker's contribution to the concept of *Aufklärung*, a term which, in Koselleck's words, "by the later eighteenth century, had become an epochal concept that claimed to transcend all epochs" (204).

Bödeker himself provides three contributions to the volume: his first essay, which opens the first section (37), is a translation of his classic "The Enlightenment as a process of communication", first published in German in 1988. The notion of "process", inspired by Norbert Elias' notion of the "civilizing process" (3), is developed as a theoretical tool for historical analysis. The second essay, also translated from German and first published in 2013, opens the politicization section (203), and focuses on Koselleck's arguments about the political dimension of the Enlightenment. The essay provides valuable but not uncritical insights from Bödeker's personal knowledge of both Koselleck and his writings. He notes for example that the views expressed in Koselleck's *Kritik und Krise* (1959) on the importance of secrecy and freemasonry in shaping contemporary political critique at the expense of public discussion (226–7) are no longer persuasive. Bödeker's third essay, "Enlightenment and Modernity" (361), serves as an epilogue for the volume, and provides eleven thought–provoking propositions about the Enlightenment's nature, its historicization, and relation to modernity. Out of the sixteen essays, three were translated from German into English for the volume, a testament to the book's professed goal of furthering access to German intellectual history. It is a valuable endeavor, and Keith Tribe is to be commended for the quality of his translations.

Bödeker's approach to the Enlightenment has aged well. This can be attributed to its middle-ground positioning, dynamically linking the contested notion of a singular Enlightenment with the fragmented landscape of multiple national and confessional enlightenments. On this issue, Bödeker and his German collaborators emphasize they were studying "the Enlightenment in Germany" rather than "the German Enlightenment" (4), thus highlighting their defense of the Enlightenment as an overarching phenomenon. Nevertheless, they also distinguished it from competing, small-scale Enlightenment "projects" (8) characterized by extensive local variations (37). This dichotomy is elegantly synthesized by the editors, who emphasize that while "Enlightenment actors were engaged in specific contexts" this did not prevent them from aspiring "to a more general realisation of Enlightenment" (9). In short, for Bödeker the Enlightenment was more than the sum of its parts: approaching it as a "process" not only requires moving beyond a shared set of ideas and values such as "equality, liberty, individuality, and tolerance" (37) but also "emphasizes the temporal dimension" of the key concept of "progress" (7–8) and involves disentangling the Enlightenment from modernity (367).

This highlights a second key aspect of the volume: namely, its resistance to teleological (or in the words of Herbert Butterfield, "Whiggish") interpretations of the Enlightenment, along with a refusal to see the Enlightenment as a bedrock of modern Western values. Several essays explicitly oppose such interpretations (31, 137, 244–5, 361), with Bödeker himself concluding that the Enlightenment should not be seen "as the dawn of modernity, but rather as the condition of the possibility of modernity." (367). While some of the essays exemplify Bödeker's approach more clearly than others, the editors deserve praise for their remarkable work in bringing all the contributions together, a difficult task considering their wide geographical and topical range. Perhaps some of the longer case-studies might have gained focus by being shorter, which in turn would have allowed the extension of some of the shorter essays. In any case, the volume's wealth of materials is one of its rewarding features, and certainly represents a landmark contribution to the fields of intellectual history and Enlightenment studies. It is a timely, nuanced, and rich addition to current debates on the

Enlightenment, along with its much-discussed relationship to modernity. There is no doubt that the volume's mixture of historiographical discussion and varied case studies will contain valuable insights for students and scholars alike.

Vincent Roy-Di Piazza

Department of History and Ethnology, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

vincent.sg.roydipiazza@jyu.fi; vincent.roy-dipiazza@history.ox.ac.uk

http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5352-7231

© 2025 The Author(s) https://doi.org/10.1080/17496977.2025.2479239