



The Party of Humanity: Essays in the French Enlightenment

Peter Gay

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Often the target of uninformed or hostile criticism, the Enlightenment has been characterized as "shallow and pretentious intellectualism" and "unreasonable contempt for authority and tradition." In this provocative book--at once a scholarly study and a vigorous polemic--Peter Gay sets out to shatter old myths, to sort out illusion from reality, and to restore the men of the Enlightenment--Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot--to the esteem they deserve.

The nine related essays in *The Party of Humanity* fall into three divisions: three are on Voltaire, presenting the great *philosophe* as a tough-minded, realistic man of letters who tried to reshape his world, rather than as a merely brittle and shallow wit. Then, three essays discuss the French Enlightenment as a whole and seek for the unity underlying the diversity of tempers and attitudes among its leaders. The last three, which include Mr. Gay's well-known critique of Carl Becker's *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers*, challenge some widely accepted views of the Enlightenment. The longest chapter here is a detailed examination of Rousseau and his reputation among his interpreters.

What all nine essays have in common, apart from their portrayal of the *philosophes* as serious and engaged partisans of humanity, is that they are essays in the social history of ideas; they all treat ideas as inseparable from the specific social and cultural setting from which they emerge, and which they affect.

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