
In the last few decades, the plural character of the Enlightenment has become a scholarly commonplace. Beginning with studies on the national colorings of Enlightenment in the 1980s and moving from there to social, ideological, and localized studies of Enlightenment movements, contemporary scholarship now affords a rich and complicated perspective on intellectual developments in the eighteenth century. Whatever coherence ‘Enlightenment’ may have as an overarching concept must now be won from careful engagement with the particular movements, individuals, and groups that scholars have brought recently into focus.

Michael Carhart has succeeded admirably in recovering the intellectual agenda of one important group of (mostly) German figures associated with the ‘Göttingen School’ of the late eighteenth-century. Carhart uses the term loosely. Though Göttingen and its university feature prominently in the narrative, Carhart is also deeply interested in parallel developments in French and English contexts. Indeed, one of the chief merits of the book is the insightful and erudite way that Carhart reaches beyond the boundaries of the ‘school’ in order to illuminate its central features and set it in wider European context. In doing so, he offers a compelling account of what one reviewer featured on the book jacket (John Zammito) has called “yet another rival enlightenment.”

At the heart of this movement was an approach to the human sciences that Carhart calls “collective particularism.” Carhart traces the implementation of a scholarly program across several disciplines, including theology, law, and anthropology. Various figures inhabit Carhart’s story, including well-known figures like Herder and Heyne and lesser-known “dusty-dry pedants” like J. D. Michaelis and J. G. Eichhorn. It is a story with two trajectories: a longer, more tentative one connecting Göttingen to the modern social sciences (see Carhart’s concluding chapter) and another, more limited one that isolates and examines the rise of a new approach to the humanities in and around Göttingen. As Carhart tells it, the approach of the Göttingen School took up precisely where the abstractions and speculative systems of the *philosophes* ran aground. Carhart’s pedants addressed moral, philosophical, and political questions by turning their attention to “the collective development of the human mind” in *particular* societies (7) and to understanding society in terms of the “unique genius of a given
In short, they became students of “culture.” In a skillful and well-documented *Begriffsgeschichte*, Carhart concludes that the “idea of *cultura animi* is as old as Rome. But the idea of culture is only as old as the Enlightenment.” (26)

To illustrate this move toward “collective particularism,” Carhart offers case studies of figures whose scholarly lives illustrate a common pattern: “Each chapter in this book depicts a rejection of universal principles and a turn toward particularism in the study of real, historical, and unique nations.” (22) In chapter one, “Orienatlism and Reform,” Carhart pairs two scholars, the orientalist J. D. Michaelis and the jurist Johann Jakob Moser. In their respective studies of Mosaic and German public law, both scholars illustrated the close relation between laws and their particular cultural settings, lending support to the idea that reform must come to societies gradually and from the bottom up. Chapter two probes “culture and the origin of language.” Carhart begins with a fascinating discussion of Enlightenment research on feral children, connecting it to a shift in the study of language. Herder, Karl Franz von Irwing, and J. C. Adelung illustrate the dramatic effect of the concept of culture on efforts to penetrate the mystery of language. In chapters three through five, Carhart examines the searches for the historical Plato (chapter three), Homer (chapter four), and Moses (chapter five). Classical and biblical studies played an essential role in fostering the “historical particularism” for which Göttingen became known. Here Carhart does an excellent job of presenting the homologous character of these historical searches, using close examination of Heyne, Winckelmann, Eichhorn and like-minded others (Wood and Goguet) to illustrate how a critical, inductive, and particularistic mode of inquiry allowed scholars to manage the cultural authority of the Western tradition, to retain it without being stifled by it. The work of Christoph Meiners features prominently in chapters six, seven, and eight. Meiners is, in many ways, the central figure in the book. With vivid detail and erudite discussion, Carhart uses Meiner's work on ancient history and “anthropology” (the scientific use of travel reports in the study of human societies) to round out his narrative. According to Carhart, Meiners ultimately came to believe that, “owing to the overwhelming forces of society and environment, there was no such thing as human nature. There was only human culture.” (12)

One of the book's most important contributions, then, is the establishment of a connection between the study of culture as a new phenomenon and the irenic, gradualist, and reform-oriented political sensibility so