
Radical Enlightenment

THE term Enlightenment found its way to English discourse only in the nineteenth century, though there were remarks made by English writers and poets during the eighteenth century, celebrating the metaphor of light as in Alexander Pope's oft-quoted lines: "Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night/God said, let Newton be! And all was light." The same motif had been celebrated in the French *Lumière* (light), the Italian *Illuminismo*, the German phrases *Aufklärung und Licht*, *Freiheit und Licht* (Enlightenment and Light, Liberty and light). The light metaphor covered a wide range of positive connotations, including the discovery of the hidden laws of Nature, scientific rationalism and freedom.¹ This chapter is devoted to the light metaphor, the role of intellectuals of the Enlightenment and the term Nature as the code of secular modernity.

2.1 *SAPERE AUDE!* AND THE LIGHT METAPHOR

'*Was ist Aufklärung?*' ('What is Enlightenment?') was the question raised by the monthly periodical *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in 1784. The question was answered by Immanuel Kant in an article that bears the same interrogative form. The main argument in his answer to this question is rendered in only two words: *Sapere aude!* i.e. "Have the courage to use your own reason!" The Enlightenment is thus seen as

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man's release from his self-incurred tutelage, which is nothing but the inability to make use of his understanding without direction from others.²

But neither the Kantian *Sapere aude* nor the light metaphor has an explanatory power that can render the cognitive mapping of the Enlightenment as a complex narrative category. The Enlightenment, according to the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967), is a mental construct or an abstract idea that designates a long historical period, roughly eighteenth-century Europe. In most western languages, the French philosophers of the period were known as *les philosophes*, not philosophers, on the ground that they were not systematic philosophers but intellectuals who admired the natural sciences and showed a considerable contempt for metaphysics. They were influenced by seventeenth-century philosophers like Bacon, Descartes, Locke and Newton. The Enlightenment as an abstract paradigm is often approached as a cluster of three major ideas, namely, Nature, Reason and Progress; all of which refer to the standards and laws that can establish a rational and progressive system as opposed to the "unnatural," and "irrational" burdens imposed by Judeo-Christian traditions. Unlike the latter, the rational Enlightenment envisaged the possibility of reaching a state of perfection without waiting for a second coming of Christ and the Garden of Eden. In this sense the Enlightenment is related to the ideals of rationalism, humanism and the optimistic faith in man's ability to achieve happiness and paradise on earth via a strong belief in science and reason as the fundamental instruments of salvation and human progress.³

The Enlightenment is also associated with Cartesian rationalism, which came later to signify the establishment of universal, essential and ideal standards of science, art and aesthetics. These standards can be seen as a typical representation of the myth of Prometheus, which celebrates the self-sufficiency of human power and the urging drive to place man at the centre of the universe, signalling his ability to discover the laws of Nature and his determination to achieve progress without any reference to teleological or metaphysical terms.

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Bauman traces this Promethean idea and points out that it derives its power from Hesiod's poem and Aeschylus's play. The former attributes Prometheus's punishment to his arrogant attempt to change the pre-established order by cheating the gods in the division of sacrificial meat. The latter, on the other hand, relates his punishment to his brave initiative that made the arts of life, including medicine and mining, available to all human beings. Aeschylus's Prometheus is not represented as a criminal but as a "persecuted hero" who stands for the advance of humanity. He stands for the courageous act that has strengthened the belief in man's ability to control both time and place.⁴

The domination of nature and the rational conquest of space, according to David Harvey, were seen as an integral part of the modernizing project and even a necessary or perhaps a sufficient condition of human emancipation. But the organization of both space and time was not meant to reflect the glory of God but to "celebrate and facilitate the liberation of 'Man' as a free and active individual, endowed with consciousness and will."⁵

Bauman argues that this process involved a relentless war against the tropes of the Other of order: undecidability, incoherence, incongruity, incompatibility, illogicality, irrationality, ambiguity, confusion, undecidability, ambivalence. The war against ambivalence, as Bauman calls it, is the most decisive defining feature of modern life, politics and intellect. The attempt to overcome ambivalence becomes almost synonymous with the attempt to intensify progress, viewed as an 'obsessive [materialist] movement forward' or as the '[materialist] movement with a pointer.' What is common among these metaphors is the emphasis that the western notion of progress is nothing but a linear 'unstoppable movement' against ambivalence and all its negative connotations as if "full clarity means the end of history [and the establishment of the Earthly paradise]."⁶

The metaphor of progress has turned metaphysical eschatology into a secular version immanent in history. *Les philosophes* were obsessed with the idea of progress, and their excessive materialist philosophy usually led to comic reductionism of the complex humanity. D'Holbach, for example, conceived of human history as part of the

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biologically and chemically determined *histoire naturelle*, arguing the spread of Islam can be attributed to Prophet Muhammad's (ŞAAS)* physiology i.e. the particles of his blood, the texture of his fibres, the salts and the proportion of fluid in his system.⁷

2.2 GARDENERS AND LEGISLATORS

The emphasis on rationalism, science and Reason has led Bauman to look for a new metaphor that can be contrasted with the metaphor of the gamekeeper which he used to describe the pre-modern or traditional role of human beings. The advent of modernity required a new metaphor that can describe the new emerging reality. Bauman introduces the “gardener” metaphor to characterize the new role assigned to human beings. Against the traditional role of the gamekeeper is set the modern secular role of the gardener who stands for modern man's effective intervention and the determination of the human will to create paradise on Earth. As Bauman suggests, “modern culture is a garden culture. It defines itself as the design for an ideal life and a perfect arrangement of human conditions.”⁸ Modernity, unlike the long rule of Christianity, “rebuffed the obsession with the afterlife, focused on the life ‘here and now,’ redeployed life activities around different narratives with earthly targets and values, and all-in-all attempted to defuse the horror of death.”⁹ Modernity required adventurous or even rebellious ‘gardeners’ rather than mere humble gamekeepers because a gardener

assumes that there would be no order in the world at all, were it not for his constant attention and effort. Gardeners know better what kind of plants should, and what sort of plants should not grow on the plot entrusted to his care. He [sic] works out the desirable arrangement first in his head, and then sees to it that this image is engraved on the plot. He forces his pre-conceived design upon the

* (ŞAAS) – *Şallā Allāhu ʿalayhi wa sallam*: May the peace and blessings of God be upon him. Said whenever the name of the Prophet Muhammed is mentioned.

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plot by encouraging the growth of the right type of plants and uprooting and destroying all the others (now re-named ‘weeds’), whose uninvited and unwanted presence disagrees with the overall harmony of the design.¹⁰

Keith Tester argues that the word ‘gardening’ was coined by Ernest Gellner (1925-1995) and extended by Bauman as a metaphor for the modern strategies of improvement introduced by the political and the intellectual discourse in the course of the eighteenth century in the attempt to establish a “new and self-sufficient social life.”¹¹ The garden metaphor, however, is as old as history itself. Almost a century before Gellner was even born, T.H. Huxley (1825-1895) accepted the Hobbesian interpretation of Darwinism and used this metaphor in his comparison of the ethical process to the work of the gardener. Richard Hofstadter puts it this way:

Instead of encouraging, horticulture restricts multiplication of the species. Like horticulture, human ethics defies the cosmic process; for both horticulture and ethical behaviour circumvent the raw struggle for existence in the interest of some ideal imposed from without upon the process of nature.¹²

However, unlike T.H. Huxley, Gellner embraced neither the assumptions of Hobbes nor those of Darwin. On the contrary, he represented the garden metaphor in an extremely ironic tone:

Cultures, like plants, can be divided into savage and cultivated varieties. The savage kinds are produced and reproduce themselves spontaneously, as parts of the life of men.... Cultivated or garden cultures are different, though they have developed from the wild varieties. They possess a complexity and richness, most usually sustained by literacy and by specialized personnel.¹³

Bauman maintains that this orientation can be best described through the metaphor of the “geometric grid,” one which he regards as the ruling trope that underlines the intensity of the project of modernity and its attempt to squeeze the world into “geometrically inspired grids.”¹⁴ It comes as no surprise then that the designers of

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utopias chose architecture and urban planning as both the “vehicle and the master-metaphor of the perfect world that would know of no misfits and hence of no disorder.”¹⁵ The metaphors of “architecture” and “urban planning” are used to suggest that the intellectuals and the nation-state were determined to view the material and the social space as a vacuum to be shaped and manipulated effectively. The saddest irony, in Bauman’s view, is that the process of getting rid of ambivalence leads to an endless state of ambivalence and an infinite process of inclusion and exclusion:

Order is continuously engaged in the war of survival. The other of order is not another order: chaos is its only alternative. The other of order is the miasma of the indeterminate and unpredictable. The other is the uncertainty, that source and archetype of all fear. The tropes of the other of order are: undecidability, incoherence, incongruity, incompatibility, illogicality, irrationality, ambiguity, confusion, undecidability, ambivalence.¹⁶

The emergence of western modernity is seen as a marriage of convenience between what Richard Rorty refers to as “foundational politics” and what Bauman refers to as “foundational philosophy;” both aspired to establish unshakable truth, full clarity and absolute perfection. Foundational modernity set its epistemological grounds in all realms of human existence, including politics and the theory of knowledge. Bauman puts it this way:

In the political realm, purging ambivalence means segregating or deporting strangers, sanctioning some local powers and delegalizing the unsanctioned ones, filling the ‘gaps in the law.’ In the intellectual realm, purging ambivalence means above all delegitimizing all grounds of knowledge that are philosophically uncontrolled or uncontrollable. More than anything else, it means decrying and invalidating ‘common sense’— be it ‘mere beliefs,’ ‘prejudices,’ ‘superstitions’ or sheer manifestations of ‘ignorance.’¹⁷

The absolute monarch, according to Bauman, was the first model of the modern state as he transformed the inhabitants from feudal

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subjects into citizens. The “legislating,” “crusading,” and “missionary” authority of the state was so absolute that the king played the “role of God” and both scientists and intellectuals conceived of the society as a “free, unoccupied space,” “a sort of a political no man’s land” and an “empty land to be colonized, given laws, knitted into a selected pattern.”¹⁸ Elsewhere Bauman introduces a key metaphor that shapes his understanding of foundational modernity: “[M]odern rulers and modern philosophers were first and foremost legislators; they found chaos, and set out to tame it and replace it with order.”¹⁹ The legislators are not ordinary human beings but supermen who can transcend the existing reality and examine it from the outside using their God-like gaze. They included:

[T]he benevolent despot; the Legislator; the Philosopher; the Scientist – all of them belonged to the family of Supermen who by dint of miraculous power, omnipotent technology or ability to wrench its secrets from History, were able to unravel and bring to their less endowed fellows the ideas which, in a sense, were ‘not from this world.’ This answer is still very much with us, deep down in the common-sense of the twentieth century, manifesting its presence in whatever has been left of our almost uncritical faith in the ability of science and the scientists to pave the way to a better and more congenial future: though, to be sure, it posed in this latter version a new, but equally vexing and antinomial question of how science, this completely technical-instrumental venture, can possibly tell good from evil.²⁰

Bauman traces the role of the legislator back to Plato’s *The Republic*, emphasizing that the attempt to perform this role is a permanent pattern that culminated in the modern age. Philosophers imagined that unless human beings comply with the world designed according to their “canvas of imaginary bliss,” they will never enjoy absolute peace and the world will become nothing but a “lunatic asylum.”²¹ Unlike Socrates who chose to play the modest role of the interpreter to improve the citizens’ *doxa* through dialogue, Plato, according to Hannah Arendt, aspired to educate the citizens, denouncing *doxa* and assuming the role of the legislator who sets absolute standards, rules and yardsticks.²²

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In order that Bauman thickens the metaphor of the legislators, he traces other significant metaphors introduced by influential figures in European intellectual history. Thomas Hobbes, for example, introduced the metaphor of “the state of nature” in connection with the nasty and brutish life in which the dominant atmosphere is one of “war of all against all” or a struggle of wolves attacking one another; *homo homini lupus*. According to Bauman, this image has a tremendous impact on the last three centuries of European intellectual history as it had been used, more often than not, to justify the discourse on the opposition between nature and passions on the one hand and culture and reason on the other. One of the major consequences of this metaphor, in Bauman’s view, is the “recasting of the way of life of the poor and lowly as a product of human animal nature, inferior to, and at war with, the life of reason”; and therefore, humans are justified to become “objects for cultural gardeners.”²³ The “gardener” and the “legislator” metaphors are meant to highlight the intricate relationship between culture and power. Richard Kilminster and Ian Varcoe uncover this motif in Bauman’s works, showing how he sees modernity as a general structuring or ordering drive, and how the urge to structure has always created new “problems.”²⁴

Bauman stresses that Reason was embraced by the intellectuals of the Enlightenment in order to promote human emancipation and to eliminate prejudice, ignorance, superstition and dogmatism. The saddest irony is that it has led, in the final analysis, to “a new bondage,” “terror,” and “monopolistic knowledge.”²⁵ The liberal vision of cultural assimilation, Bauman believes, is one of the main contradictions of modernity because “the game of emancipation was in fact the game of domination.” The irony that lies at the heart of this matter is that emancipation was not a call for diversity, cultural exchange, cultural diffusion or pluralism but a call for uniformity, homogeneity and comprehensive unification of the population. This orientation led to a growing atmosphere of “intolerance to difference.”²⁶

The saddest irony is that man became an object of disdain and contempt. The contempt for the people, Bauman argues, is a recurrent motif in the writings of de Tocqueville, Diderot, D’Alembert and

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Voltaire. In an ironic tone, Bauman affirms that the image of man as a selfish beast “was very much an axiom to *les philosophes*, who never neglected an opportunity to manifest their disdain for the ignorant, mentally inept masses.”²⁷ This perception of the Enlightenment deconstructs the light metaphor and uncovers the radicalism of *les philosophes* who “saw in the unenlightened world nothing but error, superstition, darkness and barbarism.”²⁸

Bauman reveals the stimulating idea, contrary to dominant secular western and Arab beliefs, that the Enlightenment project was not a noble dream of spreading the light of wisdom and freedom. Rather, it aimed at promoting the ambitions of the state and creating a “social mechanism of disciplining action.”²⁹ The word culture itself became the “master metaphor for the new mechanism of social reproduction – both designed and centrally operated.”³⁰ The Enlightenment is not seen as a metaphor for light, liberty, illuminating reason and freedom. The Enlightenment mapped by Bauman unmasks “instrumental and terroristic reason” as well as “racism of the intellectuals.”³¹

2.3 *LES PHILOSOPHES*: ADVOCATES OF ENDARKENMENT

Like Bauman, Elmessiri was interested in the other face of the Enlightenment. The light metaphor is not different from mainstream metaphors in Western philosophy and politics; it hides more than it reveals. Elmessiri puts it this way:

Light in human consciousness is the opposite of darkness in the same way good is the opposite of evil. Thus the Enlightenment metaphor (light-like thought which forces dark-like ignorance to disappear) does not differ from other common metaphors in philosophical and political discourses that see the world through a set of simplistic and inflexible binary oppositions, such as pigeons/hawks, civil state/religious state, and mechanism/organicism.³²

Elmessiri, unlike Bauman, does not refer metaphorically to the intellectuals as legislators. Rather, he explicitly refers to *Les philosophes* as “advocates of endarkenment” and “seductive carriers” of simplistic

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mechanistic and/or organismic ideas.³³ Unlike Bauman, who puts François Voltaire (1694-1778), Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), Denis Diderot (1713-1784), Jean le Rond D'Alembert (1717-1783), Paul d'Holbach (1723-1789) and Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) in one and the same category on the ground that their contempt for the masses is a recurrent motif in their writings, Elmessiri goes beyond this simple issue and attempts to relate the role of the intellectuals to the ontological and epistemological foundations of modernity. In his attempt to discover the paradigmatic foundation of western modernity, Elmessiri does not hesitate to put Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), John Locke (1632-1704), Baruch de Spinoza (1632-1677), Isaac Newton (1643-1727), Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and many others in one and the same category. The whole philosophical and scientific output of each one of them is discussed in reference to an oft-quoted word or phrase (usually a metaphor) so as to discover the paradigmatic foundation of modernity. The logical consequence is that we will be presented with a seemingly consistent map but one which is also acknowledged to be subjective and biased; especially when no reference is made to the wide interest in developing medicine, physics, mathematics, mechanics and law. The map of the modern world as drawn by Bauman and Elmessiri does not stress the revolutionary republican ideas, the development of the theory of the separation of powers or the advocacy of tolerance among religious beliefs. The comprehensive worldview of the Enlightenment is seen as more important than its details and procedures.

Elmessiri conceives the Enlightenment as “the philosophical basis of comprehensive secularism.”³⁴ Like Bauman, he believes that the roots of the Enlightenment can be traced back to the age of reason in the seventeenth century and the beginnings of the eighteenth century, especially in the writings of Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), Rene Descartes (1596-1650), Spinoza (1632-1677), John Locke (1632-1704), Isaac Newton (1642-1727), and Leibniz (1646-1716). The movement was not confined to a single country and was prominent in France, Germany, England and the United States, respectively: Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778),

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François Voltaire (1694-1778), Montesquieu (1689-1755), Denis Diderot (1713-1784), Julien La Mettrie (1709-1751) and Paul d'Holbach (1723-1789); Christian Wolff (1679-1754), Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), Kant (1724-1804) and Johann Herder (1744-1803); Joseph Priestley (1733-1804), Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), and Adam Smith (1723-1790); Thomas Paine (1737-1809), Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) and Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790).³⁵

Elmessiri, however, argues that the Enlightenment reached its paradigmatic, monistic and rationalistic moment in the thought of the eighteenth-century French *encyclopédistes*. Not surprisingly he focussed only on their materialist philosophy which reflected the mechanistic and/or organismic paradigms of the Enlightenment. In other words, the manifestations of radical Enlightenment are discussed in reference to the writings that celebrate the world as a mechanistic and/or organismic existence: La Mettrie's *Histoire Naturelle de l'Âme* (1745) and *L'Homme Machine* (1748); Claude Adrien Helvétius's *De l'esprit* (1758) and *De l'homme* (1773); Paul d'Holbach's *Système de la nature ou des loix du monde physique & du monde moral* (1770); Pierre Jean Cabanis's *Rapports du physique et du moral de l'homme* (1802); and Marquis de Condorcet's *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1795).³⁶

According to Elmessiri, Rousseau and *les philosophes* tried to seduce man into believing that the state of nature is actually a state of human bliss, a secular Garden of Eden. This vision is seen as a result of, or an interaction between, the metaphorical perception of man in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries:

Hobbes and Machiavelli cautioned us from the outset that man is...a wolf...Spinoza compared man to a piece of stone thrown by a powerful hand...Newton compared the whole world to a perfect machine, a watch that keeps on ticking endlessly and uniformly without any divine or human intervention...Locke compared the mind of man to a *tabula rasa* that indiscriminately registers all sense data.³⁷

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Elmessiri uses the Enlightenment as his point of departure in the critique of modernity in order to show that all the above-mentioned metaphors had a significant impact on the deconstruction of man as promoted by other western leading figures, including, to mention but a few, Adam Smith (1723-1790), Charles Darwin (1809-1882), Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936). Here Elmessiri resumes his argument:

All of this gave rise to Adam Smith's image of man as living in a world regulated by an invisible hand, and a market regulated by the mechanical laws of supply and demand.... Darwin pointed out that Rousseau's Garden of Eden is not machine-like; it is a jungle that achieves harmony through the invisible hand of the struggle for survival and the survival of the fittest.... Freud came along and proved... that the jungle is actually within. Pavlov experimented on dogs, and applied his findings on man.... Man is thereby completely deconstructed.³⁸

This metaphorical mapping is based on the assumption of uninterrupted continuity of the intellectual foundations of modern western thought. Elmessiri is aware of the existence of differences, discontinuities or ruptures but he attempts to go beyond them to find a paradigmatic foundation that supports his major distinction between man and Nature. It is true that Elmessiri's cultural bias as an Egyptian Arab Muslim who is fully aware of the atrocities of the West and its imperial legacy in the Middle East is a key element in the inclusion or the exclusion of details in the representation of the Enlightenment. However, Elmessiri's mapping of the Enlightenment can draw support from twentieth-century western historiography and from western revisionist critics and historians. In other words, it is true that subjectivity and ideology cannot be erased in the process of interpretation, but they are not obstacles to introduce more explanatory and more interpretative paradigms.

The Enlightenment as a metaphor for light, reason and freedom is mitigated and modernity at large is represented as a secular transgression against both God and man. Though aware of the existence of differences, discontinuities and ruptures, critics and historians attempt

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to go beyond them to find a paradigmatic foundation that supports their thesis. According to Jonathan Israel, there were two trends in the Enlightenment movement: Radical *philosophes* and moderate *philosophes*. The latter attempted to counter the former's ambitions to put an end to the entire system of social pressures by making Reason and Nature the ultimate points of reference but the radical mainstream dominated the intellectual scene. The Enlightenment moderate trend "simply proved unable clearly and cogently to win the intellectual battle."³⁹

Elmessiri's critique of the Enlightenment has much in common with the fierce attack launched by twentieth-century historiography against the materialists in general and Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709-1751) in particular. *Les philosophes* as a group have been accused of being responsible for the rise of the totalitarian state, the ills of the twentieth century and nihilism which denied man a special place in the universe. The Enlightenment legacy is reduced to a materialist view that shows perfectly in La Mettrie's fundamental works on the philosophy of nature: *L'Histoire naturelle de l'âme*, *L'Homme machine*, *L'Homme plante* and *Le Système d'Épicure*. The repudiations of materialists as "purveyors of scandalous ideas" are attributed to the fact that they were singled out by Karl Marx, thus making it easy for historians to hold them accountable for the ills of the twentieth century, the practices of communist regimes, the rise of totalitarian governments and even the Holocaust.⁴⁰

This view might be seen as nothing but a reduction of modernity to the "dark side of modern society" which was anticipated by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, originally published in 1944 under the title *Philosophische Fragmente*. This critique was later taken to an extreme by Herbert Marcuse in his *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). Elmessiri might be easily accused of being influenced by the tragic and pessimistic cultural critique of the Frankfurt School, the Weberian critique of rationalism and the metaphors of the 'iron cage' of modernity and the 'disenchantment of the world.' As Bernstein suggests, we can see clearly that twentieth-century critiques of the Enlightenment and rationalism "can be understood as variations

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of Weberian themes.”⁴¹ It comes as no surprise then that Elmessiri has devoted an entire chapter his book *Epistemological Studies in Western Modernity* to the representation and analysis of Weber’s theory of rationalization. Elmessiri is thus close to all western critiques that prophesied that the twentieth century would be the era of rationalization that colonizes and reshapes our everyday life.

The rational materialism of the Enlightenment makes man and/or Nature as the ultimate point of reference. It is attributed to a western discourse promoted by well-known intellectuals who perceived of nature as *kosmos* or *natura*, one which presupposed teleological and anthropic as well as physical meanings. As Dupré suggests, there had been a radical break once the human subject became the source of meaning, reducing nature to ‘subordinate’ and ‘instrumental’ position. Alchemists saw the possibility of reshaping ‘parasitical growth into organic matter’ and mechanist philosophers promoted the belief in the atomistic nature of the universe, the general passivity of matter and the self-supporting and self-moving cosmos.⁴²

Though aware of the Greek legacy of the aesthetic vision of nature as a form of perfection, Elmessiri has decided to represent it as the passive/active ‘matter’ that signals either man’s power to be a superman who can reshape reality or nature’s potential to transform man into a sub-man who cannot transcend its physical and materialist laws. Elmessiri’s argument is based on his belief that with the advent of modernity the idea of nature has been embraced as the ideology of progress rather than an aesthetic form reflecting the perfection of a divine paradigm. This shows in a number of metaphors that can be easily traced and analysed to map the foundations of modern western thought or what he refers to as ‘solid rational materialism’: the human mind as *tabula rasa* (John Locke); the absolute state as the *Leviathan* or a raging dragon (Thomas Hobbes); the world as a machine (Issac Newton); the state as an absolute god (Friedrich Hegel); the world as an iron cage (Max Weber); the world as a botanical organism (Talcott Parsons); and man as Prometheus, Faust, Napoleon, and Tarzan (Nietzschean *Übermenschen*). According to Elmessiri, all the aforementioned western metaphors are sub-metaphors that have to be weaved

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into two major paradigms or metaphors: the mechanistic and the organismic.⁴³

Elmessiri's argument has its roots also in western self-scrutiny discourse. According to *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967), a close examination of the history of western philosophy shows that it has been characterized by the oscillation between the mechanistic and organismic metaphors. Descartes, for example, conceived of animals as pure machines and men as machines with minds, thus making a compromise between his scientific aims and his Christian view of man. It was John Locke, however, who managed to go beyond this mechanistic philosophy and demarcate man from animals, on the ground that animals lack the powers of abstraction and articulation, though possessing some sensory ideas and a degree of reason. Erasmus Darwin, however, introduced a new speculative theory of evolution as a process of filamentation through all plants and animals to man. Later the mechanistic metaphor was reinforced by La Matrie in his controversial book *L'Homme machine* (1748), which mitigated the Cartesian ethical and theological aspects of the human mind. With Charles Darwin, the story of the organismic metaphor reaches its climax, declaring that man is a part of nature, precisely a part of the animal kingdom.⁴⁴ Living organisms and machines are seen as closed, self-sufficient and self-referential systems. This perception precludes not only transcendent metaphysics but also the advocacy for a special method to deal with uniquely human phenomena.⁴⁵

Elmessiri rejected both organismic and mechanistic visions and included them among the metaphors of immanence, which is inconsistent with a monotheistic worldview that espouses the idea of transcendence. Elmessiri emphasizes that the original intention of the Enlightenment was to emancipate man from the shackles of ignorance, to place him at the centre of the universe and to stress his freedom, transcendence and mastery over nature. Ironically, the proponents of the Enlightenment were convinced that man is also an organic part of organic nature and thus governed by the same materialistic laws governing physical phenomena. Hence, no wonder perhaps that the attempt at transcendence has been transformed into immanence, and

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the aspiration for freedom has turned into biological and physical determinism. In short, human beings were not conceived as unique human individuals and were conceived instead as the children of nature.⁴⁶

Elmessiri argues that the metaphor of organismic and mechanistic progress has been transformed into a real driving force of human history. “The advocates of Endarkenment” come to believe that progress is capable of answering almost all questions related to human existence and the ultimate goals of life. More importantly, they tried to impose on the rest of the globe this worldview on the ground that Europe is the best, if not the only, model of progress and the ultimate point of reference against which all other temporalities and human modes of existence are measured. This is why universality and homogeneity were declared to be the ultimate goals of progress and human existence itself. Elmessiri, like Bauman, comes to the realization that progress is almost equated with a movement with a direction towards full clarity, full control, perfect harmony, earthly felicity and, in short, the end of History:

All materialistic utopias (technocratic utopias)...celebrate an entirely idealistic image of man, one who is as perfect as bees, ants and highly systematic animals [an organismic metaphor]. The latter are organisms living logically and mechanically like robots [a mechanistic metaphor] indulged in materialistic rationalization from head to toe.... They do not bear any moral burdens, since they behave according to their mechanical nature, one that recognizes neither good nor evil, neither anxiety nor the grand issues of human existence.⁴⁷

In materialistic utopias, the metaphor of progress has become an essential ingredient of western modernity. The cultural bias of this metaphor shows in denial of the right of traditional localities and foreign cultures to difference and even existence, since the West represents modern culture and the rest stands for so-called pre-modern cultures that are given only three options: colonization, assimilation or extermination.

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Les philosophes or the Enlightenment intellectuals turned metaphysical eschatology into a secular version immanent in history; they were obsessed with the idea of progress and an excessively materialist philosophy. They, especially Diderot, regarded themselves as educators who are capable of teaching magistrates the meaning of justice, the soldiers the meaning of patriotism and the priests the nature of God.⁴⁸

Not surprisingly, Elmessiri saw the myth of Prometheus as the fundamental secular metaphor that can truly describe the orientation of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Prometheus, in Elmessiri's view, is the "symbol of man who rebels against metaphysical powers, rejects their domination, develops science to defeat nature and becomes himself a self-sufficient god."⁴⁹ Elmessiri, however, underscores the main contradiction in the Enlightenment, affirming that its idealistic vision was accompanied, paradoxically, with the perception of man as a child of nature. In a private conversation with the author of this book, Elmessiri puts it this way:

The dream of the human self that can apprehend, dominate and reshape reality was replaced by a self that had been deconstructed and reduced to material elements. Man becomes an indivisible part of a material becoming with no fixity, unity, transcendence or meaning.... [M]aterialist rationalism leads, in the final analysis, to materialist irrationalism."⁵⁰

2.4 NATURE: THE CODE OF MODERNITY

A close examination of the critiques introduced by Bauman and Elmessiri shows that both of them see Nature as the major cultural concept whose thematic content constitutes the code of secular modernity. In other words, the Enlightenment and secularism can be understood only when the term Nature is decoded.

One of Bauman's earliest critical writings is *Towards a Critical Sociology: An Essay on Common Sense and Emancipation* (1976), which is a unique critical attempt at deciphering the term Nature as the basic code of secularism. The relevance of the term Nature to secularism is

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traced back to Francis Bacon who grasped, four centuries ago, the elusive dialectics of nature: Nature is only subdued by submission. In order that Bauman explains this struggle between man as the subject and Nature as the object, he introduces the metaphor of the sculptor (man/the subject) and the stone (nature/the object):

Men experience nature in the same dual, equivocal way in which the sculptor encounters his formless lump of stone: it lies in front of him compliant and inviting, waiting to absorb and to incarnate his creative ideas – but its willingness to oblige is highly selective; in fact, the stone has made its own choice well before the sculptor grasps his chisel. The stone, one could say, has classified the sculptor's ideas into attainable and unattainable, reasonable and foolish. To be free to act, the sculptor must learn the limits of his freedom: he must learn how to read the map of his freedom charted upon the grain of the rock.⁵¹

According to Bauman, when this metaphor is extended so as to embrace the totality of the human condition, life then becomes the art of the possible, and science as the elimination of the impossible, the suppression of the unrealistic and the exclusion of morbid questions. This understanding of the relation of science to nature is extended by Bauman to the realm of human action in view of Max Weber's analysis of the necessary rules and laws of the bureaucratic machine that confronts individuals as a true reflection of a merciless and unchangeable Nature:

In as much as science eliminates questions which lead to God, the scientifically informed action eliminates acts which lead to irrationality. Both employ nature, or nature-like necessity, as their lever. The price they willingly pay for the gain in efficiency is the agreement never to question its legitimacy. To be sure, this legitimacy cannot be questioned by science, just as it cannot be challenged by a rational action. Both are what they are in so far as nature remains the realm of omnipotent and unchallengeable necessity.⁵²

In this context, Bauman refers to the conclusions reached by Comte de Buffon and Denis Diderot, respectively: (1) "Everything

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that can be, is” and (2) “opposed to nature, opposed to reason.” These statements, in Bauman’s view, do not just equate Nature with the inevitable and the unavoidable but also with the appropriate, the appropriate, the good, the sacred and the undefiable:

Nature supplies not just the boundaries of reasonable action and thought: it supplies reason itself. All valid knowledge is a reflection of nature. The power of man consists in his ability to ‘know’ what he cannot do. Science is there to teach him exactly this. This is the only way in which science ‘is’ power.⁵³

Western modern thought, at least since Rousseau, has applied this concept of Nature to society. The latter became the locus of highest authority, the supra-human power, the Sovereign, the Ruler and the Legislator in charge of crushing the resistance of selfish bestiality. This image of man as a selfish beast to be tamed was an axiom to *les philosophes* whom Bauman compared to legislators in charge of setting the rules of secular truth-seeking and of legitimizing the centralized power of the state and its civilizing mission.⁵⁴ As modernizing elite, they launched a “cultural crusade” to redefine all cultural values and styles that they saw as signs or stigmas of backwardness, retardation or, in extreme cases, of insanity.⁵⁵ *Les philosophes* aspired to establish “the kingdom of Reason,” but their “enlightened radicalism is revealed as the drive to legislate, organize and regulate, rather than disseminate knowledge.”⁵⁶ The Enlightenment was thus very crucial to the “enthronement of the new deity, that of nature, together with the legitimation of science as the only orthodox cult, and scientists as its prophets and priests.”⁵⁷

The deification of society was complete with the emergence of sociology as the theory of modernity, especially in the writings of Emile Durkheim. This deification came within the context of the rapid secularization of French social and political life, a process which was so thorough that the will of society became “sufficient ‘ratio’ for moral commandments.” Society became the only foundation, measure, and authority behind morality. The “liberating surrender” to God was replaced with the liberating surrender to the domination of society.

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God is not quite dead in this context as Nietzsche would have it; He is just marginalized and replaced by a new authority.⁵⁸

Like Bauman, Elmessiri argues that secularism in its solid phase is characterized by a struggle between two worlds: homo-centric or man-centred world and nature-centred world. In the liquid phase of secularism, the struggle ends in favour of the nature-centred world. The following comparison underlines Elmessiri's mapping of the central tendencies of the two overlapping worlds:⁵⁹

Man-centred world	Nature-centred world
Man as the centre of the universe	Nature as the centre of the universe
Man as a subject Nature as useful instrument	Man as an object Man as an instrument of Nature/matter
Humanistic secular absolutes	Materialist secular absolutes
Imperialistic Reason (science & ethics without metaphysics)	Pragmatic Reason (functional & one-dimensional man)
Superman (Hitler, Stalin, etc.)	Subman (Adolf Eichmann)
Humanistic socialism	Scientific socialism
Humanistic utopia	Bureaucratic machine
Freedom in socialism and capitalism	Unfreedom in socialism and capitalism

Solid modernity, in Elmessiri's view, secularized Christian and non-Christian value systems, and it was characterized by a fierce struggle between these two paradigms, thus giving rise to humanistic secular absolutes (the movement of history, the will to power, the will of the people, the spirit of the people, the organic people or *Volk*, the white man's burden, the civilizing mission and the absolute state), and materialistic secular absolutes (historical determinism, ethnic determinism, the law of supply and demand, market/factory, interest or pleasure, laws of nature, ethnicity, class, and economic interests). God

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was thus replaced with different secular absolutes, including “Logos,” “society” and “the proletariat.” As for the metaphysical notions of the Hereafter, Resurrection and the Day of Judgment, they were replaced with such secular notions as “the verdict of History,” “the end of History,” “the technocratic utopia” and the “Earthly Paradise.”⁶⁰

In the liquid phase of secular modernity, the idea of transcendence is entirely eradicated, since the struggle between the subject and the object ends. The subject dissolves in the object, and the object dissolves in the subject. Causality, according to Elmessiri, is replaced with discontinuity, chance, and indeterminacy. The centrality of man and nature ends in favour of the centrality of perpetual becoming; all centres are deconstructed. This new condition might be seen as a sign of perfect pluralism, yet it is in fact a process of atomistic fragmentation that underlines the reign of relativism and the disappearance of such notions as truth, goodness, right and beauty. It is a transformation from “solid monism” (whether man-centred or nature-centred) to “comprehensive liquid monism” which recognizes no limits or constraints. According to Elmessiri, the possibility of transcendence as a result of the struggle between a man-centred world and nature-centred world is marginalized and even eliminated in “the age of liquid and comprehensive immanence.”⁶¹

Elmessiri was so obsessed with decoding the term “nature” that he regarded it as his major philosophical question in decoding the essence of secular modernity. In the mid-1960s, Elmessiri wrote a study in English entitled “Competitive Capitalism and the Natural Man,” which underlined the role capitalism played in transforming man from a complex human being into a mechanical being governed by the laws of nature and consumption.⁶² When Noam Chomsky visited Cairo in 1994, Elmessiri admired his humanistic discourse, yet he did not accept his conclusions because they implicitly reduce man to the world of nature/matter. It is precisely for this reason that Elmessiri asked Chomsky the following rhetorical questions: “What is Nature? Do human beings have something that distinguishes them from Nature or are they merely part of it and cannot transcend it?”⁶³ On another occasion, in Berlin at *Haus der Kulturen der Welt*, Elmessiri had a heated

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debate with Mohammed Arkoun. The latter was advocating the dominance of the natural sciences whereas Elmessiri saw this dominance as a sign of the loss of man, stressing instead the need to emphasize the distinction between the natural sciences and the humanities. Elmessiri used this occasion to lavish praise on Immanuel Kant and representatives of the Frankfurt School who advocate the duality of man and nature. He even concluded his talk with the following strong statement: "I, as a Muslim intellectual, find myself a rightful heir to Kant and the Frankfurt school."⁶⁴ The contribution of the Frankfurt school in decoding the term "nature" helped Elmessiri decipher the term nature; and therefore, he did not hesitate to describe this critical school as the "best critique of comprehensive secularism and relativism."⁶⁵

Though the idea of nature can be represented, from an Islamic perspective, as an aesthetic form reflecting the perfection of a divine paradigm, it is coded and decoded here as the ideology of progress. This act renders the terms "nature" and "matter" (thus naturalism and materialism) in a negative light and prepares the reader to suspect this ideology which, according to William Connolly, places both human and non-human nature at the disposal of humanity as material to work on.⁶⁶

Elmessiri argues that modernity oscillates between two major paradigms or metaphors: the mechanistic and the organismic. The former represents the world as a machine whose motion is given by an external force whereas the latter portrays the world as a living organism whose growth is directed by an internal force. Both of them, however, exclude human potential for transcendence and celebrate the world of matter/nature. The "dominant paradigm" in modern western civilization oscillates between these two major metaphors.⁶⁷

This view is also dominant in western critical discourse, especially when the rise of mechanistic philosophy went beyond the metaphysical connotations that Aristotle and the Scholastics attached to matter and nature. This philosophy, according to Louis Dupré, did not attempt to appeal to teleological arguments or final causes, emphasizing instead mathematical deduction. In other words, mechanism is a closed,

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autodynamic and self-generating system indifferent to any external influence, even though all that occurs within it is effected by a transcendent source of motion. The significance of this philosophical orientation lies in the fact that it conceived of the possibility that the human mind as the single source of meaning can capture all reality, one which is governed by identical mechanistic laws.⁶⁸ The turning point in the intellectual history of the West, according to Hannah Arendt, came when the image of organic life development emerged in place of the image of the watchmaker. This image led to the disappearance of the split between subject and object, one which is inherent in human consciousness and in the Cartesian opposition of man to a surrounding world.⁶⁹

The focus on these changes in perception and worldviews is meant to show that the appearance of secularism is related to a deep structural and epistemological transformation of western societies and their perception of man, nature and history. Elmessiri's aim is to show that neither the mechanistic paradigm nor the organismic one is consistent with an Islamic worldview:

The mechanistic metaphor cannot express the monotheistic vision as it assumes that the universe is nothing but a machine running [by an external force] aimlessly and without any purpose. Even the organic metaphor (the world as a plant or an animal) is impossible to be in harmony with monotheism as it sees the world as a closed and coherent totality [functioning by its inner laws] with no *lacunae* separating its constituent parts [only absolute and solid causalities], that is, as a self-sufficient and self-referential world.⁷⁰

Elmessiri rejects the solid and absolute causalities of the comprehensive organic and mechanical paradigms because they aspire to control human existence and to put an end to History in the same way a merchant deals with the market or a scientist deals with the materials of his experiment:

Both [mechanistic and organismic] paradigms help to generate a kind of knowledge that allows for an entire control of and mastery over reality ('imperialistic

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knowledge’); such knowledge resembles the merchant’s knowledge of the market which helps him predict the prices and the dynamics of the market. It also resembles the knowledge of a scientist who cannot carry out any experiment unless he entirely controls all variables and excludes uncontrollable factors. The knowledge sought by both paradigms is non-human; it aspires to explain everything, it leaves no spaces for other possibilities, and its results must be scientific or virtually final and absolute.⁷¹

In his attempt to uncover the cultural prejudice and epistemological bias of the metaphor of mechanistic and organismic progress, Elmessiri argues that it presupposes the existence of a linear universal human history and introduces the accumulation of knowledge and the control of human resources as the *telos* of human existence. Neither mechanical movement nor organismic growth is goal-oriented or teleological; both are monotonous operations indifferent to the unique notions of value, success, failure and choice.⁷² Progress is almost equated with a movement with a direction towards full control, perfect harmony, earthly felicity and, in short, the end of History. This perception is not restricted to capitalist societies as it has also penetrated the worldview of Marxists, socialists and communists. Not surprisingly, Elmessiri, the formerly Marxist intellectual, draws our attention to the horrible fact that Marx, who repudiated injustice and exploitation and whose writings are littered with expressions and terms such as “human essence,” “alienation” and even “transcendence,” applauded the British colonization of India, and that Engels applauded the French colonization of Algeria. Elmessiri’s critique of the notion of progress in both its capitalist and Marxist versions distances him from his former affiliation with Marxism and brings him closer to cultural bias as an Arab Muslim amidst western imperial legacy and Israeli occupation. It is hardly surprising that Elmessiri does not exclude Zionism from the ideology of materialist progress, especially when its adherents claimed that they had turned the desert green, thus justifying the injustice and oppression of the entire Palestinian nation.⁷³ Elmessiri’s position led many of his disciples, friends, colleagues and Arab scholars to identify him as a proponent of a new Islamic discourse, a defender of Arabs and Muslims

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on the fronts of imperialism and Zionism. In 2004, this view was endorsed by many of Elmessiri's critics, disciples and friends in a two volume-work published in Cairo and entitled *Fī 'Ālam Abdul Wahāb al-Mesīrī: Ḥiwār Naqdī Ḥaḍārī* [In the World of Abdelwahab Elmessiri: A Critical Civilizational Dialogue]. The same reception can be traced in another work published in Damascus in 2007 under the title *Abdul Wahāb al-Mesīrī: Fī 'Uyūn Aṣḍiqāihi wa Nuqāḍihi* [Abdelwahab Elmessiri in the Eyes of his Friends and Critics].

As we mentioned before, the same critique of the idea of progress is embraced by Bauman, thus distancing himself from his former affiliation with Marxism. The socialist critic of capitalism, in Bauman's view, was "modernity's most faithful and effective friend" and whatever the ugliness of its capitalist edition, modernity need not be disparaged. This ideology of progress is closely related to the end of History thesis; it is nothing but a linear "unstoppable movement" against ambivalence as if "full clarity means the end of history."⁷⁴ It represents a "radical break in universal history" and became "the reference point for the interpretation of the *telos* of history" giving itself the legitimacy and the right to "colonize the future in the same way it had colonized the surrounding space;" all other temporalities are seen as "retarded, underdeveloped, immature, incomplete or deformed, maimed, distorted and otherwise inferior stages or versions of itself."⁷⁵

The progress metaphor is a major tool of mapping the mechanism of secular modernity, its ambitions and consequences. This metaphor, according to Eric Voegelin, played a significant role in the modification of the Christian idea of perfection, which is no longer conceived as a supernatural realm that can be reached only through grace in death by the sanctification, a notion which is clearly related to the notion of the pilgrim's progress. The progress metaphor and its utopian implications have been celebrated in Western discourse: Immanuel Kant (the unending progress of mankind); Nicolas de Condorcet (the unending progress of history and its acceleration through a directorate of intellectuals); Thomas More (the notion of utopia); Auguste Comte (the idea of a final state of industrial society under the temporal rule of positivist intellectuals); and Karl Marx (the notion of a final state of

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the classless realm of freedom through the rise of the communist man).⁷⁶

Though Elmessiri did not refer to Eric Voegelin and his critique of the progress metaphor, it is still possible to trace his influence on Elmessiri. The first Western critic Elmessiri refers to in his search for revisions of secularism is the American Jewish writer Irving Kristol, dubbed as the “godfather of neoconservatism.” Kristol is the missing link between Elmessiri and Voegelin. It is Kristol who turned to Voegelin’s works to support his attacks on liberalism and the secular view of history. Secularism, according to Kristol, is more than science; it is a “religious view” which proceeds to make “metaphysical and theological inferences.” By embracing this secular religion (*Ersatz Religion* or alternative religion in Voegelin’s terminology), man can make or create himself (the deification of man). Playing the role of God, man can understand natural phenomena, control them and use them rationally to develop his condition on Earth. This is how this secular religion, according to Elmessiri, developed the idea of progress and became the ultimate framework of both liberalism and socialism.⁷⁷ As we will see in the next chapter, the critiques introduced by Voegelin can be regarded as Elmessiri’s starting point in representing modernity as a gnostic narrative.