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1

The Setting

SPACE EXPANDED AND FILLED A NEW

BETWEEN 1500 AND 1700, Westerners discovered two new worlds: one in the heavens, the other on earth. These discoveries coincided with and helped further a vast expansion of commerce that brought yet more peoples and places into the Western orbit. Celestial and terrestrial space were reconfigured. Making sense of these monumental discoveries required new thought and language.

Christianity had to rise to the intellectual challenge presented by the new spatial reality. The findings of the new science displaced the earth from the center of the universe and thereby raised doubts about all traditional explanations. The discovery of new continents and peoples had an even more immediate effect. Why did the new peoples being discovered believe what they believed, having never heard the Christian message? Some could be converted; others not so readily. Missionaries discovered an almost unimaginable variety of beliefs and soon began to debate the meanings of this diversity. Did everyone have a notion of God, or were some newly discovered peoples natural atheists? The Greek and Roman authorities

long revered in Europe had not the slightest inkling of the existence of the Americas. Western peoples could no longer rely on the coherence and order long provided by Christian theology. In this way, the new spatial realities provided the setting wherein enlightened ideas first emerged.

Physico-theology was one of the first attempts to give coherence to the physical reality of a mathematically knowable world. Its conserving goal was to augment piety and exalt the Grand Architect, to redefine the coherence and order of Christianity. The new physics of the seventeenth century—heliocentric, mechanical, and mathematical—could reinforce the theology of order and providential design. Science in the service of Christian orthodoxy became a goal championed particularly by English natural philosophers, Francis Bacon, Robert Boyle, and most remarkably Isaac Newton (figure 1). They aimed physico-theology against the new heresies of the age: atheism, deism, and materialism. In doing so, they fashioned what became a moderate version of enlightened ideas that embraced science, eschewed doctrinal quarrels among Christians, and endorsed religious toleration.¹ The voices of physico-theology constituted the chorus that emanated from the liberal segment of the Church of England. Thanks in good part to Samuel Clarke, Newton's friend and interpreter, this segment exerted influence everywhere in Protestant Europe through personal contacts and translated sermons.

By the end of the war-torn seventeenth century, more than a science-based Christian orthodoxy was needed. The political crises of the century—revolution in three kingdoms of the British Isles, the removal of Spanish authority in the northern Netherlands, the devastation in Central Europe caused by the Thirty Years War—required new responses to political reality. Hobbes, Locke, the English republican and Commonwealth



FIGURE 1. Isaac Newton, whose science became one of the anchors for enlightened thought. (ID# 1775740). Courtesy of Bridgeman Images.

men, and not least, in the Dutch Republic, Grotius and Spinoza attempted to redefine the political order and, in the process, confounded aspects of Christian orthodoxy. They laid the foundation upon which enlightened approaches to society and government would rest. Each in his way refused to endorse

monarchical absolutism and the divine rights of kings. They invested the power of the state in social arrangements that offered security, the protection of property, and justice in return for the consent (however tacit) of the governed. Even Hobbes rested state power on a contract among the people to embrace the mortal god, Leviathan.

Aside from war and revolution, there were still other challenges to spatial order and coherence. The spread of money had the effect of revolutionizing the production and consumption of all commodities, creating new transactions, histories, and affairs. In European society, new forms of urban association emerged, and these conferred upon participants, as John Dewey wrote many centuries later, the means “of unlocking energies hitherto pent in.”² In short, faced with new dynamics and social arrangements, Europeans and later American colonists responded with language that reordered their understanding of spatial reality. To give but one example, late in the eighteenth century Thomas Jefferson broke out of the classical republican vision he inherited to argue that rather than being small, a republic could stretch across an entire Continent, from sea to shining sea.

Space conquered and negotiated by the imperialist impulse introduced unprecedented power relations between subject and conqueror. The European nation-states and then the newly created American state possessed sophisticated armaments and armies, ships and horses—accompanied by disease and the will to enslave. Their sometimes brutal actions, when reported, forced European minds in the direction of distant peoples and customs that needed to be understood. Whether the Spanish absolutist monarchy or the Dutch republican government undertook or endorsed imperialist ventures to extend their power, every occasion required knowledge of the spaces,

peoples, and heavens. Never before in Western history had such an expansion of spatial knowledge been both possible and necessary.

Therein lay the roots of the Enlightenment: the unintended consequence of commercial and state-sponsored expansion. Paradoxically, as the power of absolute monarchies and the clergy that supported them grew in Europe—augmented as they were by global conquest—inventive responses to new spatial realities multiplied. Their combined weight secularized space and removed not only its boundaries but also its supernatural powers. They undermined belief in heaven and hell and the authority of absolutist regimes. By the 1770s, major theorists from the Scottish school in Edinburgh to the French *philosophes* in Paris furthered the corrosive process by providing new vocabularies that denigrated empires, state-supported orthodoxies, and the clergy who benefited from them.

The combined impact of the subversive literature that began in the 1650s and continued into the 1790s ultimately delegitimized courts and monarchs. From the clandestine literature, early in the century to the abbé Raynal, Diderot, Rousseau, the abolitionists in its last quarter, and Herder and Kant in the 1790s, every support for unchecked authority in church and state, as well as empire, had been challenged, mocked, dismissed, or decried as immoral.

Early in the period, travel literature, complete with engravings, told of new peoples in the Americas and Africa about whom both the Bible and ancient writings had been entirely silent. Their novelty was matched only by the strangeness of their behavior. The Spanish conquerors found indigenous people in what we now know as Mexico who practiced human sacrifice, wore little clothing, and occasionally ate their victims.³ The space opened by new peoples and continents fired

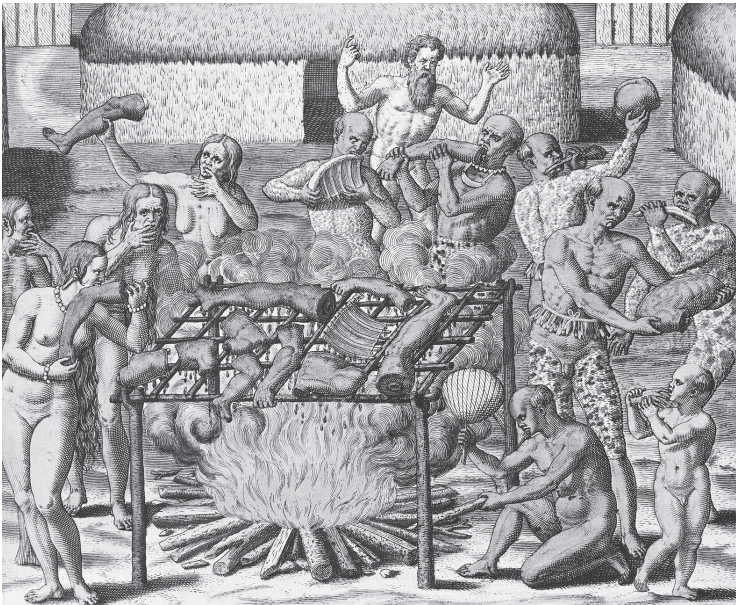


FIGURE 2. De Bry's depiction of cannibalism. Theodore de Bry (1528–98) (ID# 164722). Courtesy of Bridgeman Images.

imperialist fantasy, to be sure. Just as important in the *longue durée*, imperial space also licensed bold and heterodox free-thinking in the service of trying to make sense out of the previously unimaginable.

Images of these new Amerindians were widely circulated by German and Dutch printing houses, among which the de Bry family in Frankfurt produced the most striking and bloodcurdling (figure 2). Such imagery only emphasized the challenge faced by the Iberian Church and monarchy, whose declared purpose was the conversion and “civilizing” of the indigenous peoples. The ultimate irony of the European expansion into global space—accompanied by such sanctimonious intentions—lay



FIGURE 3. Ferdinand Alvarez de Toledo eating a child. Courtesy of Wikimedia.

in the gradual undermining of European religious certainty and political authority. It became possible in Dutch propaganda, for example, to depict the Spanish authorities as tyrants and baby-eating cannibals (figure 3). Anti-authoritarian responses to European conquest and exploitation emerged only gradually

as people tried to make sense out of the recently discovered earthly and heavenly spaces.

No less exotic than the Americas, China and Africa also entered European consciousness, but they elicited wildly different responses. By and large, the Chinese were respected for the longevity of their civilization, and freethinkers even compared Buddhism to the natural religion that they espoused. Such was the approach taken by Bernard Picart, engraver, and Jean Frederick Bernard, writer and publisher of the first even-handed attempt to understand all of the known religions of the world, *Ceremonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* (1723–43) (figure 4).⁴

Africa was actually far less known than North and Central America, yet even there Picart and Bernard tried to understand the religions of people never personally experienced. Illustrations of ceremonies in honor of their deities appear along with pages describing birth and death ceremonies. The Picart-Bernard effort became justly famous as the first attempt to relativize all religions. This conclusion was the exact opposite of what the Christian missionaries at work on every continent had intended.

After roughly the year 1600, literate Westerners (and many of the illiterate) knew that vast, new, and inhabited continents filled large portions of the globe. Thinking about the world outside Europe had commenced irretrievably. But the expansion of space did not stop there. Looking into the heavens entailed new knowledge about their structure—even if thousands still doubted the Copernican system that placed the sun at the center of the universe. Also by 1700, the highly educated knew that there now existed a mathematical law to explain how the force of universal gravitation ordered the heavens and made them knowable. The almanacs might still talk about the role played by the stars in determining human fate, but followers



FIGURE 4. Frontispiece to the *Ceremonies et coutumes*, illustrating all the world's religions, with only the Catholic Church being depicted in a negative light.

of Newtonian science thought little about such influences for which no solid proof existed. At one time, heavenly space possessed the power to influence the health and well-being of mortals. After 1687, space in the *Principia* is empty and neutral, as desacralized as Henry VIII's former monastic lands.⁵

The macrocosm of global and heavenly space framed the growing diversity of public space in the microcosm of European cities.⁶ The “public sphere,” “civil society,” and “sociability” are all terms used to describe the relatively new spatial associations available to urban dwellers. Drawn to cities by ever-expanding markets, merchants, lawyers, stockbrokers, ladies of the *salon*, denizens of coffee shops and cafés stayed to see and be seen, and to read the burgeoning supply of newspapers and journals. They invented and filled urban spaces separate from court and king as well as from family dwellings (figure 5). When so occupied, they said their efforts aimed to correct “the want of a regular and publick encouragement of learning.” Small societies would publish books by their members, enhance their profits, all the while instituting “a republic of letters for the promoting of arts and sciences.”⁷

By midcentury, a London social life could revolve solely around eating clubs and the pub life that went with them. In the 1770s, John Wilkes dined nightly with the governing elite of the city and frequently, as his diary notes, at a “Tavern with the supporters of the Bill of Rights.” The Beef Steak Club, the Irish Club, and the Antigallican Club helped fill the spatial vastness of Wilkes's London, where Benjamin Franklin occasionally joined in the festivities.⁸ By the second half of the century, if not well before, the task of policing and spying on this or any other great metropolis had become formidable. The city also offered a visual feast for the curious, as brilliantly captured by artist and engraver William Hogarth (figure 6).

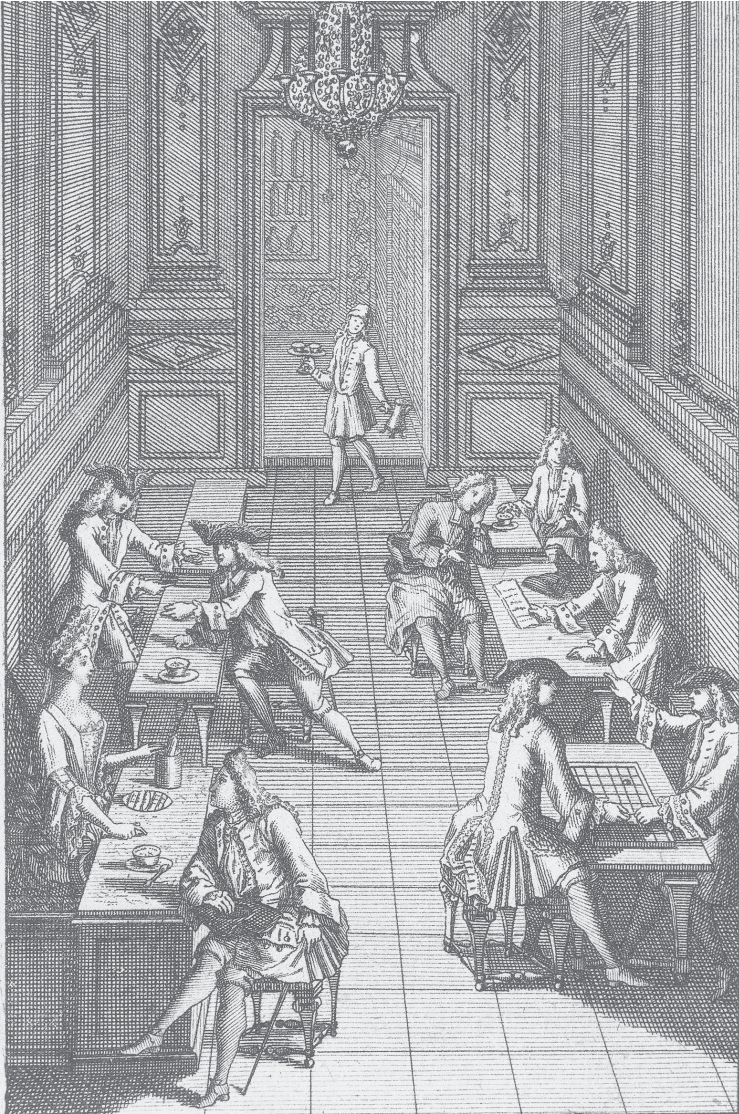


FIGURE 5. Early eighteenth-century example of casual sociability.
Bernard Picart (ID# 516565). Courtesy of Bridgeman Images.

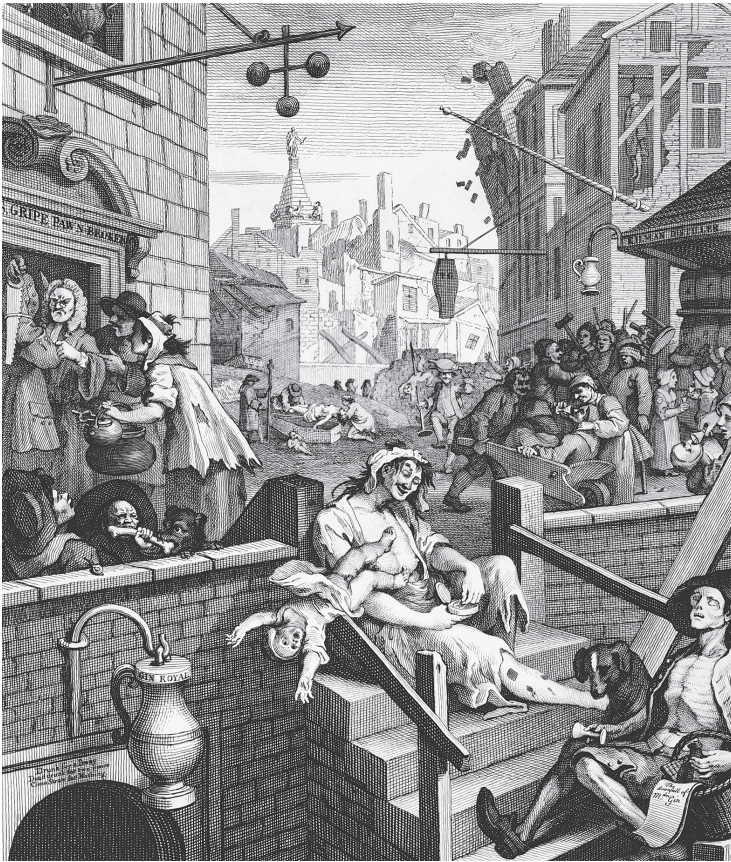


FIGURE 6. Hogarth's representation of the foibles of Londoners. *Gin Lane*, William Hogarth (1697–1764) (ID# 265846). Courtesy of Bridgeman Images.

Most aptly named, *The Spectator* burst upon the London literary scene in 1711 and was an instant success. The journalist as spectator saw himself as living “in the World, rather as a Spectator of Mankind, than as one of the Species; by which means I have made myself a Speculative Statesman, Soldier, Merchant, and Artisan.” He dared to take on so many roles in part because

he claimed to have visited every city in Europe.⁹ His *métier* as gossip, raconteur, and man-about-town signaled a new urban vitality. Not surprisingly, the Dutch cities were among the first to imitate the originally English genre of spectatorial literature.¹⁰ So too, new world cities like Boston sported imitations that claimed to be the work of a society of gentlemen. There, in 1727, the journal *Proteus Echo* sought to satisfy the curiosity of “All Mankind,” for they “burn with an unquenchable Ardour after Knowledge.” It sought to provide “Publick usefulness.”¹¹

Cities were also the natural habitat of publishers and would-be philosophes. In the period after 1650, cities from Amsterdam to Paris, Edinburgh to London grew in size and continued to do so throughout the century. In the seventeenth century, Naples was also one of the largest cities in Europe, and we know that in this period Italian bookshops, cafés, and even hat shops bristled with anti-clerical and anti-doctrinal gossip (figure 7). The Inquisition barely kept up with the irreverent banter to be found in such public spaces.¹²

The reality of global space framed not only civil society but also the imaginary realm of mercantile life. The central lobby of the Amsterdam City Hall, built between 1648 and 1665, contains a marble floor in which images of the two hemispheres of the world are inlaid in copper. Statues grace the scene and lay out themes such as “Peace,” “Providence,” and “Righteousness.” The mercantile elite of the city walked upon this floor while discussing news and global trade.

Less grand in size or aspirations, other cities throughout Europe with more than 30,000 people—like Newcastle, The Hague, or Berlin—became more numerous. Strasbourg, Danzig, and Breslau sported around 40,000, and Vienna had about 100,000. If the curious could afford books and find coffee houses where the like-minded gathered in relative anonymity—only cities of

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