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1 City, History, Enlightenment

The Enlightened City

In his pioneering 1932 study on the philosophy of the Enlightenment, Ernst Cassirer offered one of the first systematic refutations of the widely held conception of the eighteenth century as an “unhistorical age.”¹ The legend of Enlightenment antihistoricism has long since been laid to rest, but the precise character of historical consciousness in this period and its relationship to our current thinking on history continue to provide scholars with a productive area of inquiry. With regard to the German intellectual tradition, something of a consensus has emerged in the past few decades, according to which the latter half of the eighteenth century must be seen as the crucial moment in the evolution of modern historical consciousness. Of particular importance for the establishment of this consensus has been a renewed interest in conceptual history and especially the work of Reinhart Koselleck, whose 1975 essays on “History” and “Progress” in the encyclopedia *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* serve in many respects as the starting point for discussions of the topic.² Koselleck’s specific terminological analyses have also been supplemented by the work of a number of other scholars in social, intellectual, and cultural history. Their investigations of the new group of professional historians working in the period as well as of the general public’s increasing interest in historical topics provide additional evidence of a paradigm shift in ways of thinking the relationship between past, present, and future.³

The current study addresses the question of eighteenth-century historical consciousness from a perspective that has thus far received little attention and that takes its methodological inspiration from the fields of literary and cultural studies. It is my contention that textual representations of the urban experience, in particular those which address the newly minted Prussian capital of Berlin, played a crucial role in the emergence and articulation of new paradigms of historical understanding in this period. Partly as a re-

sult of more frequent travel to European capitals and partly because of the growth of cities within Germany, urban development came to be recognized by German intellectuals as a historical phenomenon worthy of attention. This recognition led to a flurry of publications after 1750 on various aspects of city government, on the advantages and (more commonly) disadvantages of big-city life, on the relationship between the country and the city, and on the cultural consequences of Germany's lack of a national capital. At the root of these representations are questions inextricably intertwined with historical thinking—questions regarding the meaning of rapid temporal change, the value of tradition, and the opposition between the supposedly eternal truths of nature and the shifting fashions of the city. What I hope to establish in the pages that follow is that eighteenth-century Berlin, perceived as a site of both progress and regression, as a hub of enlightenment as well as a hideout for obscurantists, raises these historically charged questions even as it defies any attempt to find easy answers. Efforts to provide appropriate textual mediations of urban life, in other words, give rise to precisely the kind of nuanced historical reflection that has recently come to be seen as characteristic for the German Enlightenment.

An investigation of the historical-theoretical implications of eighteenth-century conceptions of urban space might seem an ill-considered project. After all, the very idea of the enlightened city as it emerged in the period has frequently been viewed as synonymous with an absence of history. At least as far back as Descartes, who uses the example of a rationally planned metropolitan district to illustrate his new epistemology in *Discourse on the Method* (1637), the ideal city is conceived in opposition to history. The philosopher, it will be remembered, is forced to spend a winter in Germany, where he passes the time reflecting on the nature of perfection. With regard to the city, he comes to the following conclusion: “Again, ancient cities which have gradually grown from mere villages into large towns are usually ill-proportioned, compared with those orderly towns which planners lay out as they fancy on level ground. Looking at the buildings of the former individually, you will often find as much art in them, if not more, than in those of the latter; but in view of their arrangement—a tall one here, a small one there—and the way they make the streets crooked and irregular, you would say it is chance, rather than the will of men using reason, that placed them so.”⁴ Like the ideal philosophical system that the author elucidates later in the work,

the ideal city as depicted here is essentially ahistorical, the eternally valid construct of a single, unified, rational subjectivity.

This Cartesian model remains a powerful force in eighteenth-century Germany, as can be seen in both the writings of professional urban planners and in the numerous reflections on existing cities found in the travel literature from the period. One of the more striking examples of its continued influence is an article by the author Friedrich Wilhelm Taube, a German jurist who held a variety of private and governmental positions in Germany and Austria. His commentary on the relative beauty of various European capitals, "Thoughts on the Beautification of Cities, with a Historical Report on How the Most Distinguished Capitals in Europe Have Been Gradually Improved and Beautified since 1763," appeared in *Deutsches Museum* in 1776. Taube's conception of urban beauty proves noteworthy for its representative character. The brief descriptions of the various European capitals reveal an ideal based on classicist aesthetic principles of symmetry and balance, principles that fortuitously coincide with the exigencies of good hygiene and the unhindered circulation of both individuals and commodities. Beauty and utility are meant to coexist in perfect harmony. Among his favorite adjectives are not only "beautiful" but also "regular" and "clean," and he criticizes the "tasteless ornaments" that one finds on the houses of merchants and artisans in London. According to Taube, "Nothing makes a city more appealing than large, well-ordered public spaces that are kept clean, are surrounded by attractive houses, and have a fountain in the center, or some other kind of water sculpture, or a garden, or even just a green lawn with a pretty statue."⁵

Striking in this context is Taube's obvious distaste for the historical city, something he shares with Descartes. He laments that the old city center of Vienna, like that of Paris and London, has evolved over time and is thus characterized by "a wild chaos of randomly arranged alleyways and houses," shocking the traveler who has arrived there expecting to discover its beauty.⁶ Markedly superior are those cities—he names Karlsruhe, Mannheim, Erlangen, St. Petersburg, and Lisbon—that have been founded or reconstructed more recently and have thus benefited from the advantages of modern urban planning. Taube's zeal for the new gives his article a slightly apocalyptic undertone, an impression that is strengthened by the occasional biblical reference. Often one has the sense that he would prefer to raze entire cities and rebuild them rather than tinker with beautification projects; his

discussions of the improvements made to Paris after the 1666 fire and Lisbon after the 1755 earthquake are a case in point. As the author notes, with an optimism that suggests an unshakable confidence in divine providence: “To be sure, it is always a sad fate for any city to meet with devastation; however, a better, more orderly reconstruction generally follows thereafter.”⁷

Taube’s essay presents an image of the ideal city that is central to the urban discourse of the Enlightenment. The emphasis on circulation, cleanliness, order, and symmetry, which combines classical and Renaissance architectural models with a more contemporary interest in social engineering, appears time and again in eighteenth-century representations.⁸ Given the extent to which the ideal of a rationally planned urban space dominates the literature of the period, it is not surprising that this ideal has often been equated with the “enlightened” city as such.⁹ What has too often been ignored, however, and what Taube’s article also makes clear, is the fact that the ideal almost always appears together with the opposing urban reality, that it is used as a standard against which to measure the real progress toward its realization. By focusing on only one of the variables in the equation, scholars have often overlooked a crucial element in the eighteenth-century urban imaginary—namely, the extent to which representations of the ahistorical and rationalized ideal city are always intertwined with reflections on historical change and development in the real city. In the case of Taube’s article, the title alone serves to indicate the way in which authors insert their representations of the city into longer-term historical narratives. It is possible to discern at least two important and closely related temporal levels in this context. On the one hand, the juxtaposition of the rationally planned new city and the old city center illustrates the sense of a break with the past and a heightened awareness of the historical specificity of the contemporary. At the same time, however, both the representation of the rational city as an only partially realized ideal and the sensitivity to the burden of the past embodied in the city center suggest a sense of historical process.

Thus, in its very renunciation of history, the rationalized cityscape reveals a crucial aspect of the historical-theoretical function of the city in eighteenth-century Germany. The well-ordered city serves as a concrete reminder of the superiority of the modern age, an age whose ability to impose rational order on the built environment marks a qualitative break with the chaos of the past. It also serves as a marker for the march of progress. As we will see, both this recognition of a qualitative difference between past and

present and the belief in the possibility of progress to which it gives rise have come to be viewed as key elements in the evolution of historical consciousness in the period.

If Descartes's city offers a model of one major interface between eighteenth-century historical consciousness and urban experience, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's depraved metropolis offers another. Here as well, the urban environment becomes a kind of cipher for modernity; indeed, in this case the connection is explicit and undergirded by a historical-philosophical framework of decline.¹⁰ For Rousseau, the city is the catastrophe of civilization in miniature, a catastrophe exemplified not merely in the built environment but also in the city's institutions and its residents. Large cities are sites of conspicuous consumption, empty diversions, and dangerous perversions. As he writes in the 1758 *Letter to M. d'Alembert*: "In a big city, full of scheming, idle people without religion or principle, whose imagination, depraved by sloth, inactivity, the love of pleasure, and great needs, engenders only monsters and inspires only crimes; in a big city, where morals and honor are nothing because each, easily hiding his conduct from the public eye, shows himself only by his reputation and is esteemed only for his riches; in a big city, I say, the police can never increase the number of pleasures permitted too much or apply itself too much to making them agreeable in order to deprive individuals of the temptation of seeking more dangerous ones."¹¹

Here Rousseau is arguing for the value of the theater in a city like Paris, because, by occupying the residents for two hours a day, it helps to reduce the amount of time spent on even more despicable activities. Similar attacks on modern urban life can be found in other texts, as well. Certainly the most insensitive is his response to Voltaire's poem on the Lisbon earthquake, where he interprets the damage done as evidence of the unnatural character of large cities, but *Emile* and the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* are also peppered with jabs at the city dweller.¹² In social terms, Rousseau views city residents as dissimulating degenerates, lacking the physical and moral strength of peoples of antiquity and interested in nothing but corrupt pleasure and their own self-aggrandizement. In economic terms, they appear as parasites who depend on the hard work of those in the country and repay their benefactors with scorn and contempt.¹³

Rousseau's influence on eighteenth-century German letters is pervasive, and his critique of civilization lurks behind much of the German writing on the city in the period.¹⁴ These essays and articles show little of the en-

thusiasm for urban modernity that one finds in Taube, but they nonetheless follow Rousseau in positing the city as the crucible of that modernity and thus indicate another point of intersection between urban experience and historical consciousness. In this case the focus is on the seemingly unbridgeable gap between degenerate present and idealized past, an ideal that writers sometimes attach to Greek and Roman antiquity and sometimes push back to the hazy origins of humanity. One finds a compelling example of this perspective, together with its peculiar spatial and temporal displacements, in a 1782 essay entitled “On Conception and Education in Berlin.” In keeping with the Grecophilic spirit of the age, the essay begins with a reference to antiquity, as the author asks how the Athenians could have been both beautiful and strong despite their inclination for sensuous pleasures. The reason, he claims, is to be found neither in the Greek climate nor in the Greeks’ emphasis on physical exercise, but rather in their ability to harness the formative power of the imagination. The author then shifts his focus to northern Europe, comparing the modern Berliners with the seven-foot-tall warriors who were supposedly their forbears and asking: “How can we have fallen so far? How did we lose the colossal size and enormous strength of our fathers?”¹⁵ His answer takes the form of a quasi-scientific examination of the negative impact of cultural refinement on human physiology, and the institutions of urban life serve as the basis for illustrating his point. In another shift that reveals the imbrication of spatial and temporal frameworks in the period, the author asks his reader to imagine a “Nordic colossus” exposed to the galleries, concerts, or theaters of Berlin. Confronted with the refined art and music of the modern city, the savage would react with total indifference, because his crude sensory apparatus would be unable even to register their subtle pleasures. In the case of the theater, he would react with the wild enthusiasm of one who cannot distinguish illusion from reality. The author’s point is not to ridicule the vulgarity of this imaginary visitor to the city. On the contrary, he stresses the extent to which a society and educational system that emphasize art and artifice rather than physical activity leads to degenerate bodies and overwrought nerves, such that even the unborn child is threatened. In the words of the author, “And thus a corrupt and infirm world conceives and educates an even more corrupt and unhealthy posterity.”¹⁶

The examples of Descartes, Rousseau, and their German disciples demonstrate that eighteenth-century discussions of the city nearly always en-

tail reflection, whether implicit or explicit, on historical-theoretical issues. In both Taube and the anonymous article on Berlin, the city as built environment and as institutional nexus becomes an occasion for reflecting on the specificity of the contemporary, a specificity that is positively charged in Taube and negatively charged in the “Education” essay. In light of the rupture that characterizes modernity in these texts, one is tempted to take recourse to Ernst Bloch’s now classic notion of “nonsimultaneity” and argue that the eighteenth-century city appears as a site where past and present are spatially coexistent, thereby fostering a sensitivity to historical change. As we will see, this idea is indeed crucial for understanding the eighteenth-century urban discourse in Germany. The problem with such a notion, however, is that it presupposes a conception of history as a linear totality, a kind of number line onto which the relative positions of various temporal phenomena can be mapped. Yet what makes the late eighteenth century so fascinating in this context is that such a linear, evolutionary understanding of history is only beginning to take shape. The remarkably tenacious conception of the Enlightenment as characterized by a naive belief in human progress (or, in the case of Rousseau, decline) fails to do justice to the complexity of historical consciousness in this period, as does the equally oversimplified notion of a shift from a cyclical to a linear framework for grasping historical change.¹⁷ There can be no doubt that eighteenth-century thinkers were concerned with the mutability of social and intellectual phenomena; indeed, this recognition was a necessary precondition for the critiques of traditional authority so central to Enlightenment thought. The historiographical implications of this concern, however, whether changes are understood within the framework of an ahistorical Christian theology, a transhistorical natural law, a natural cyclicity, or a linear conception of human progress, vary from individual to individual and situation to situation. To this extent, Cassirer’s early evaluation of the period, as a time in which the “conditions of possibility” of history were still under investigation, retains its validity. As Cassirer writes, “The eighteenth-century conception of history is less a finished form with clear outlines than a force exerting its influence in all directions.”¹⁸

In eighteenth-century Germany, encounters with the city provide commentators with an opportunity to work out the contours of this multifaceted historical force. To be sure, they do not provide the only opportunity. Concern with the nature and meaning of historical change suffuses discussions

and representations of a wide-ranging array of eighteenth-century institutions. One obvious and important example is global exploration, which gives rise to the identification of various non-European peoples with the childhood of humankind.¹⁹ Another is local politics, where concerns regarding changes in the status of peasants and villagers are raised in a thoroughly historical framework of tradition and precedent.²⁰ The evolution of eighteenth-century historical consciousness, in other words, cannot simply be traced by way of a crude causal mechanism back to the urban experience. Nonetheless, the city plays a special role in this evolution, not least because of what can be termed its historical-theoretical complexity.

In discursive terms, this complexity derives from the fact that the eighteenth-century city is temporally overdetermined; it is unusual in the degree to which it gestures simultaneously to past, present, and future. On the one hand, it is linked to the distant past, whether through association with the infamous cities of the Bible, the great urban centers of antiquity, or even the self-governing middle-class cities of Germany's medieval urban renaissance. On the other hand, the city, especially the capital city, also figures prominently in the contemporary cameralist discourse on the organization of the state, according to which it functions as the administrative nucleus of a current unit of political organization. Finally, in its perceived role as cultural center and locus of surplus production, the city intersects with a discourse on sociability, cultural refinement, and luxury that registers the achievements of modernity but simultaneously points to an uncertain future. Each of these discursive axes entails certain assumptions about the larger temporal frameworks into which individual events are embedded—whether short-, medium-, or long-term, linear, cyclical, or static.²¹ Encounters with the rapid changes taking place in the cities themselves lead to a simultaneous actualization of multiple discursive axes and their corresponding temporal frameworks, and thus challenge both authors and readers to consider more carefully the precise relation between specific events or phenomena and the larger historical narratives into which they might be inserted.

It is the precise character of this process that I want to elucidate in the following pages, through an investigation of urban life and urban institutions as they appear in the works of four leading figures from the Berlin Enlightenment: Friedrich Gedike, Friedrich Nicolai, G. E. Lessing, and Moses Mendelssohn. Each of these individuals had a unique relationship to Berlin, and

each must be seen as a key contributor to eighteenth-century conceptualizations of metropolitan life. Gedike is best known as coeditor of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, public mouthpiece of the German Enlightenment and occasional forum for eighteenth-century urban advocacy. Nicolai was the overseer of a powerful, Berlin-based publishing empire and a tireless chronicler and defender of city life. Lessing had high hopes for success upon arriving in Prussia's expanding capital in the late 1740s but eventually left Berlin in frustration, in large part because of his failure to secure stable employment. Moses Mendelssohn, finally, came to Berlin from Dessau as a young man and spent the remainder of his life living, working, and writing in the city. He eventually achieved a kind of legendary status, referred to by contemporaries as the "Socrates of Berlin." Analyzing the diverse contributions of these authors reveals some of the individual and generic variation in eighteenth-century reflections on urban phenomena. At the same time, however, the consideration of multiple text genres — travel writing, cultural criticism, literature, and philosophy — enables the reconstruction of a shared framework for conceptualizing the city and its historical-theoretical significance. It is no coincidence that Berlin became a focal point for such efforts, and I turn shortly to the reasons for its privileged status. In order to map accurately the points of intersection between these representations and eighteenth-century thinking about history, however, it will be necessary to provide a more detailed topography of modern historical consciousness as it has come to be understood in recent scholarship.

Modern Historical Consciousness

Characterizing epochal shifts in mentality is risky business. In the case of the evolution of what has come to be termed modern historical understanding, the trajectory of development spans at least three hundred years (ca. 1500–1800) and is by no means linear. Furthermore, the very notion of a single, unified "historical consciousness" becomes problematic when one considers the complex interconnections among various areas of intellectual inquiry, including philology, theology, natural science, jurisprudence, and philosophy, each of which was deeply engaged in the eighteenth century with questions of temporal transformation. All of these areas, although they shared certain assumptions about the relationship between past, present,

and future, retained a certain degree of independence in their articulation of that relationship.

Such qualifications notwithstanding, one can discern a constellation of elements characteristic of a new mode of thinking about history that emerges in Germany in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Before turning to the substance of this paradigm shift in mentality, however, which I have schematized into three basic areas, one should note that it is contemporaneous with two related but distinct developments in the status of historical investigation in Germany. The first is the establishment of history as an independent university discipline, which entails a marked increase in the number of professional historians together with an effort to build a methodological foundation for history as a science. The university in Göttingen emerges in this period as the dominant center of historical research, home to such pioneering scholars as Johann Christoph Gatterer, August Ludwig Schlözer, and Ludwig Timotheus Spittler.²² The second development is an intensification of interest in history on the part of the educated middle class. Such a phenomenon is of course difficult to document. Nonetheless, one can chart both an increase in the number of historical treatises written by amateurs and in the number of essays on historical themes—from both amateurs and professionals—appearing in popular journals. Hans Erich Bödeker points out that the percentage of journal articles on historical and political issues in the late eighteenth century was higher than for any other thematic area except entertainment literature.²³ Indeed, one finds a greater emphasis on history in all of the main media for the dissemination of knowledge in the period, not just journals but also newspapers, travel reports, letters (fictitious and otherwise), and lexica.²⁴

The precise nature of the relationship between these two developments has been the subject of some scholarly discussion, though without any conclusive results. In a 1986 essay entitled “Historical Interest in the Eighteenth Century,” for example, Rudolf Vierhaus claims that the work of professional historians had only limited impact on the evolution of a modern historical understanding among the educated middle class. He writes: “It was less the reading of historical works than the interest in one’s own present, the rising demand for political enlightenment, and the growing criticism of existing conditions that directed their [the middle class’s] attention to history.”²⁵ At the same time, however, he notes a convergence in the latter half of the century between the aims of professional historians and the interests of the gen-

eral reading public. For both groups, history was seen as a source of useful knowledge in the service of enlightenment.²⁶ The picture is complicated further by the rise in the late eighteenth century of various philosophies of history (*Geschichtsphilosophie*), a phenomenon that is certainly indebted to the achievements of Enlightenment historiography, even if its main proponents were philosophers and literati (Herder, Kant, Lessing, Schiller, Hegel, and the early romantics). Although he recognizes the continuities between the guiding principles of eighteenth-century historians and those of the various *Geschichtsphilosophen*, Vierhaus here again emphasizes the “real-historical process,” the personal experience of rapid change, as the driving force behind the attempts to construct historical metanarratives.²⁷

Vierhaus’s claim that professional historians had only limited direct impact on popular historical interest in the eighteenth century is well taken, but it is important to recognize the wide circulation in the period of certain key assumptions regarding the nature and significance of historical change. Professional historians, after all, experienced the same “real-historical process” as the educated public, even if disciplinary exigencies molded the form and scope of the investigations in which this experience was articulated. Indeed, the very notion of two separate strands of historical discourse is problematic in a period in which history as an autonomous university discipline was still establishing itself. Although one can distinguish a growing number of university historians who are intensely occupied with questions of historical methodology in the late eighteenth century, one also finds a great deal of exchange with scholars and intellectuals from other backgrounds. As the twentieth-century historian Horst Walter Blanke points out, one must include among the important historians of the German Enlightenment not only the Göttingen professors Gatterer, Schlözer, and Spittler but also Friedrich Nicolai, the jurist Justus Möser, the theologian Johann Martin Chladenius, the philosopher Jacob Wegelin, and the Swiss philosopher and essayist Isaac Iselin, not to mention more renowned figures such as Winckelmann, Schiller, Kant, and Herder.²⁸ As a consequence of the dynamism and the relatively unified (that is, nonatomized) character of the literary public sphere, these individuals were all in dialogue with one another, a fact that becomes apparent when one peruses the titles and authors of journal articles from the period on topics like “Writing History” (*Geschichtsschreibung*) or “Historical Instruction” (*Geschichtsunterricht*). For Blanke, the public character of the disciplinary discussion was one of the most striking character-

istics of Enlightenment historiography, which he describes as achieving “an astonishing level of discursivity, one that is simply unimaginable from our current perspective.”²⁹

My intent in thematizing this problematic here is to provide a rough methodological framework for my own analysis. Vierhaus’s opposition between theoretical treatises written by eighteenth-century historians and the widespread personal experience of rapid change actually instantiates an ongoing controversy regarding the social content of intellectual and conceptual history. Since its emergence in the mid-1970s, conceptual history in particular, at least as practiced in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, has been criticized for its sometimes insufficient attention to the specific social-historical contexts in which concepts originate and are used.³⁰ With regard to the question of historical consciousness, the error lies in believing that methodological treatises or essays on *Geschichtsphilosophie* are an adequate source of information on historical consciousness in the period. Opposing the focus on elite culture—the *Gipfelwanderung*—that allegedly characterizes some examples of conceptual history, social historians have stressed the need to evaluate a wider range of sources as well as to engage in other kinds of analysis to get behind textual representations to the level of “social reality.”³¹

The very notion of an extratextual social reality might seem problematic to scholars in literary and cultural studies. Nonetheless, the basic objection to an overemphasis on canonical texts is certainly valid. In practice, however, historians interested in the social determinants of historical consciousness in eighteenth-century Germany often simply expand the source material to include lesser-known authors. The focus remains on explicitly historiographical texts, sometimes supplemented with statistical evidence on the increased historical interest among members of the middle class. There is no reason to denigrate this approach, which constitutes a necessary foundation for understanding historical consciousness in the period. Once the general outlines of the theoretical discussion have been established, however, it can be extremely productive to investigate how historical-theoretical paradigms are actualized in other kinds of texts, particularly those dealing with contemporary phenomena. If, as Vierhaus claims, it was the “interest in one’s own present” that engendered the middle-class fascination with historical topics, then certainly important insights into the complexity of eighteenth-century historical consciousness can be gleaned from texts that

attempt to come to terms with this dynamic present. Indeed, I would argue that in such texts, rather than those that are ostensibly historiographic or even historical, temporal structures become manifest in the most interesting fashion, as authors attempt to place current events into longer-term historical frameworks. In this context, a hermeneutic analysis that seeks to uncover the implicit temporalities that structure city texts can serve as a kind of cross-reference to more explicitly historical-theoretical writings. An evaluation of representations of the city and of urban phenomena can provide insights into the nature of historical consciousness that are both more substantive than those gleaned from statistical data and less reified than what one finds in historical-theoretical treatises.

Moreover, even though such an analysis remains at the level of textual representation, it can nonetheless shed light on the social determinants of historical consciousness by illuminating the way in which historical-theoretical paradigms are confirmed or called into question on the basis of the quotidian experience. Textual mediations of the eighteenth-century city serve as more than mere instances for the unreflected application of historical-theoretical models developed elsewhere; they also contribute to the development, refinement, or abandonment of these models. In their attempt to come to terms with an evolving present, city texts constitute an important medium for working out the meanings of those very concepts that become central to the eighteenth-century understanding of historical change, from “causality” to “progress” to “civilization.” These concepts are not fixed units of theoretical analysis in the period; they are in a process of articulation. The eighteenth-century is clearly characterized by a universal sense of historical transition, but the conceptual frameworks used to understand and theorize this transition must be constantly renegotiated in an ongoing confrontation with contemporary phenomena. As a site of rapid change, the city in general, and the unusually dynamic capital city of Berlin in particular, plays a critical role in this process. The full significance of this role, however, can only be appreciated once a baseline for the analysis has been established through a review of some of the more explicit theoretical reflections from the period.

I

The most significant and the most complex aspect of the new mode of historical understanding that emerges in the eighteenth century is a tran-

sition from what can be termed an atemporal conception of history to a notion of history as development.³² The former conception, which posits a fundamental equality between past and present, is characteristic of the essentially static temporal framework of traditional Christianity. Time as a variable plays no significant role in the evaluation of specific historical occurrences. Instead, these occurrences are seen as iterable examples of certain ideal types of behavior, to be measured against a divine and immutable ethical norm. Although certain events may be interpreted as marking the stages in an inevitable march toward the Last Judgment, the stages themselves are not characterized by any substantive differences in human mentality or forms of interaction. Coincident with the gradual process of secularization that characterizes early modern Europe, however, one can discern a growing sense of the importance of historical process and historical specificity for understanding the past. Koselleck describes the change as a “temporalization” (*Verzeitlichung*) of history. This temporalization entails a recognition of the qualitative uniqueness of different periods and thus lays the foundation for a belief in the possibility of substantive historical change.³³

Another way to think about this development is in terms of a shift from an exemplary to a genetic way of thinking about both the past itself and about the relationship between past, present, and future.³⁴ The philosopher Gottlob David Hartmann, in a Herder-inspired article entitled “On the Ideal of a History” (1774), offers the following characterization: “History comprises a series of events, whereby one event is always linked to another, as with the rings of a long chain, and each must partly determine those that follow. An event initially in the past, connected with one in the present, necessarily engenders the future event.”³⁵ If, prior to the eighteenth century, past events were considered primarily in terms of their value as timeless models for present behavior (stories from the Bible or from antiquity offer the most obvious examples), over the course of the century the focus shifts to their origins as well as to their originary function—their role in giving rise to a certain historical trajectory in which the present must be located. The relationship between past, present, and future, in other words, is conceived of in evolutionary and causal terms.

This transition finds concrete expression in the emergence of the German term *Geschichte* as a collective singular in the final third of the century. Whereas prior to this point, *Geschichte* was generally found in the plural

(*Geschichten*) and referred either to specific, iterable past events or their representation, the term eventually comes to denote the totality of past events and their perceived interrelatedness. History is viewed as a unified force, an agent that has the capacity to shape human will and identity. As Koselleck puts it, “this linguistic concentration into a single concept after about 1770 must not be underestimated. In the ensuing period, after the events of the French Revolution, history itself becomes a subject upon which is bestowed the divine epithet of omnipotence, absolute justice, or holiness.”³⁶ The goal of writing about history shifts accordingly from the establishment of accurate chronologies or the compilation of case studies demonstrating ideal types and situations to the construction of narratives that foster an understanding of how the past came into existence and how it relates to the present. Friedrich Schiller, in his 1789 inaugural lecture on universal history, distinguishes between an arbitrary “aggregate” of past events and a coherent historical “system.” The Berlin popular philosopher Johann Jakob Engel contrasts the “unpragmatic” historian, who merely presents us a series of snapshots from Cromwell’s biography, with the “pragmatic” historian, who is able to construct a causal narrative from these snapshots.³⁷ Although he was by no means at the cutting edge of the historiographical debate in the eighteenth century, even the king of Prussia reveals an awareness of this new understanding of the historian’s task. In his 1780 essay *On German Literature*, Friedrich II writes, “I permit myself the freedom to ask them [the historians], if the study of chronology is truly the most useful subject of history? . . . if it is such a grave error to forget . . . the time of day when the *Golden Bull* was published, whether it was at six o’clock in the morning or at four o’clock in the afternoon? . . . It is not that I want to excuse those historians who commit anachronisms; I would, however, judge small oversights of this kind with greater leniency than some far more serious mistakes, such as that of narrating events in a confusing fashion, or failing to establish cause and effect clearly, failing to follow any method whatsoever, lingering too long over insignificant details and hurrying past the important things.”³⁸

On a rhetorical level, one of the consequences of this new conception of historical writing is a convergence of history and literary narrative, as historians begin to pay greater attention to questions of narrative coherence as well as to the relationship between the general and the particular.³⁹ Engel, for example, addresses the historian’s task within the context of a more general

discussion of poetics. In terms of historical understanding, a more important consequence of the new evolutionary model is that the perceived alterity of the past gives rise to the conception of an open future, of the future as a realm of possibility. In the words of Peter Hanns Reill: "The more historical analysis could show that the present evolved from something that was qualitatively different, the more one could believe that a new set of social relations could be forged from those in existence."⁴⁰ The temporal differentiation of past, present, and future creates the conditions of possibility for a belief in progress, whether on the grand scale of the *Geschichtsphilosophie* formulated by Lessing, Kant, Schiller, and Hegel or in the more practical terms of the numerous German *Aufklärer* engaged in projects of social reform.

As I already intimated, this conception of history as an evolving totality also has important implications for the venerable topos of *historia magistra vitae*, the idea that "history teaches life." While a belief in the didactic value of history remains central in the eighteenth century, a transformation in the nature of this belief begins to take shape. History is no longer viewed solely as a reservoir of experiences from which one can select exempla appropriate to a given contemporary situation. Such a conception of the value of history can only exist when past, present, and future are perceived as essentially identical.⁴¹ The new conception of learning from history, as Jürgen Habermas explains, entails the recognition of and the attempt to understand one's own historical embeddedness.⁴² The ultimate lesson of history, in other words, is to think historically, to realize that a given historical moment has a unique horizon of possibility and thus requires a historically adequate standard of evaluation. Johann Gottfried Herder is the best-known representative of such historical sensitivity in the period, having once remarked, for example, on how foolish it would be to tear "a single Egyptian virtue out of the country, the age and the youth of the human spirit and measure it with the yardstick of another age!"⁴³ Although Herder is certainly unique in the degree of his appreciation of historical and cultural diversity, one can adduce numerous German intellectuals from the late eighteenth century who insist on the need for historically sensitive judgments. Nicolai, for example, asserts at one point in his monumental *Description of a Journey through Germany and Switzerland in the Year 1781* (1783–96) that the houses in Augsburg cannot be compared with "the temples of Greece or Rome's Capitol." On the contrary, "one must compare them with other burghers' houses from the century in which they were built."⁴⁴

II

Closely linked to the emergence of a genetic model of historical understanding in the late eighteenth century is a heightened awareness of the significance of perspective in historical representation. To the extent that history constitutes a singular totality, it necessarily transcends the scope of any given account of events. This space that opens up between history and its representation has a variety of philosophical implications, the most important of which is the recognition of a plurality of perspectives on past events, each of which may have a claim to partial validity. Koselleck has characterized the emergence of this notion as a shift away from a premodern ideal of suprapartisanship, a shift inspired by a recognition of the necessarily subjective nature of all historical representation.⁴⁵ Although eighteenth-century historians continue to strive for an unembellished presentation of the “naked truth,” an aim that had been part of their disciplinary identity since antiquity, one finds an increasing recognition of the difficulty of fulfilling this task.⁴⁶ Not only are the sources of historical information, whether texts or eyewitnesses, influenced by personal interests and social position, but historians themselves are vulnerable to subjective distortions of the truth.⁴⁷

Such developments are, of course, never linear or unidirectional; nonetheless, in this case a decisive break with earlier models can be traced to the work of Johann Martin Chladenius, a professor of theology and literature in Erlangen. In two main works, the *Introduction to the Correct Interpretation of Rational Lectures and Writings* (1742) and the *General Science of History* (1752), Chladenius develops a concept of historical perspectivism according to which any individual account of historical events is necessarily determined by position and thus has only relative validity. Whereas the past itself retains an objective existence, representations of the past are shaped by various subjective and extrasubjective factors. As Chladenius writes, “History is one; however, the conceptions of it are numerous and manifold.”⁴⁸

This positionality also applies to the historian himself, who is forced by the very act of representing the past to make selections, attribute relative significance, and develop appropriate metaphors and concepts, each of which entails an act of interpretation that in turn reflects personal interests.⁴⁹ As Koselleck points out, however, Chladenius’s new historical epistemology leads not to a sense of despair among historians but rather to a sense of liberation. No longer simply a medium for the conveyance of historical truth, the historian now takes on an active role in “creating” that

truth through analysis and interpretation.⁵⁰ Again one can discern a blurring of the boundaries between writing history and writing literature, as historians become more concerned with causal plausibility and the creation of coherent narratives.

Chladenius's idea of a historical *Sehepunkt* (point of view) was rapidly adopted by eighteenth-century historians, among whom one finds a marked increase in the frequency of synonymous terms such as *Standort* or *Standpunkt*.⁵¹ In 1768, for example, the historian Johann Christoph Gatterer published a programmatic essay entitled "A Treatise on the Position and the Point of View of the Historian, or, the German Livy." Here he demands a reflection on the epistemological conditions of historical truth, because "nation, epoch, religion, custom, and the other things that determine the position and the point of view of the historian have a noticeable influence on his selection of events."⁵² In the latter half of the eighteenth century, a further evolution in the understanding of historical perspectivism occurs. Chladenius operates in an essentially spatial framework. Although, in his opinion, individual accounts of the past vary and are thus imperfect, history itself, the historical truth behind the representation, remains static and noncontradictory. The best approximation to this truth is to be achieved through an examination of sources, preferably eyewitnesses to the event. Over the course of the century, however, the understanding of historical perspectivism, like the understanding of history itself, becomes increasingly temporalized.⁵³ Not only does one's point of view depend on social position and interests; it also depends on one's position within the historical totality. As a consequence of this recognition, the eyewitness loses his privileged status as a source of historical information, as the conception begins to take shape that those who experience a given historical moment are actually at a disadvantage in terms of understanding its significance.⁵⁴ A statement made in 1781 by the historian Gottlieb Jakob Planck summarizes the new mind-set: "Every great event is always shrouded in fog for those upon whom it has a direct impact, and this fog dissipates only gradually; often several generations make hardly any difference."⁵⁵ This new attitude is, of course, linked to the broader conception of history as an evolving totality in which past, present, and future are seen as qualitatively different. Previous events appear with greater clarity as time passes and their relative position within the general course of historical development becomes more easily discernible. Surprisingly, perhaps, Koselleck insists on the imbrication of a tem-

poralized historical perspectivism and eighteenth-century philosophies of progress. The recognition of others' as well as one's own historical situatedness does not necessarily lead to historical relativism; it can also foster belief in a continuous demolition of prejudice and an ever increasing knowledge of the course of human history.⁵⁶

III

If the first shift discussed concerns the perceived nature of temporal change and the second concerns its representation, the third reflects a new conception of the social function of this representation. Friedrich Nicolai provides a concise formulation of the new view in an 1806 treatise on the history of the Freemasons and the Rosicrucians. Here he writes: "History carries the torch that guides enlightenment."⁵⁷ In the eighteenth century, historical investigation becomes part and parcel of a wide-ranging program of middle-class emancipation.⁵⁸ This emancipatory intent has several implications for the kinds of historical writing that dominate in the period. First, the study of the past becomes a means to challenge the political and social status quo. Both courtly historiography and traditional Christian historiography had been (and often continued to be throughout the eighteenth century) affirmative in nature. Christian historians used past events as a means to validate the teachings of the Bible; court historians, to legitimate or valorize a particular regent or lineage. Over the course of the eighteenth century, however, historical writing, increasingly dominated by middle-class intellectuals, becomes a tool of social criticism.⁵⁹ Investigations into the Christian past reveal the historical variability of its dogma, just as political history challenges the supposedly unlimited authority of the territorial princes. In his *History of Osnabrück* (1768), for example, Justus Möser concludes that the princes had originally been the elected representatives of the landowners and thus could not claim an unassailable right to rule.⁶⁰

These critical investigations, whatever their theoretical consequences, were not intentionally relativistic, and they usually aimed at cautious reform rather than any radical transformation of society. In the religious sphere, progressive theologians conceived critical Bible scholarship and the historicization of contemporary dogma as a means to uncover the truth of Christianity that underlay its historically specific manifestations.⁶¹ Lessing's own reflections on religion can be viewed within this context. Political and social history, for its part, rarely called into question the paternalistic and monar-

chical foundations of German political organization. Nonetheless, the role of critical historical studies in justifying and inspiring attempts at social reform should not be underestimated.

A second consequence of the middle-class character of eighteenth-century historical writing was a thematic expansion and reorientation. The historical challenge to existing power structures entailed a simultaneous affirmation of the values of the upwardly mobile middle class. Historical investigations played an important role in the self-affirmation of an emerging group of nonnoble elites, often by deemphasizing the historical significance of war and diplomacy in favor of those spheres of activity in which the middle class loomed large. For the first time, for example, economic culture becomes an object of historical investigation, as in August Ludwig Schlözer's *Attempt at a General History of Trade and Navigation in Ancient Times* (1760) and in lecture courses like Leonhard Johann Karl Justi's "The History of Commerce, Public Policy and Finance" (1755–56) and Johann Friedrich Reitemeier's "The History of the European Trading Companies in East India" (1781–82).⁶² One also finds works on the history of technology and inventions, of various artisanal occupations, and of the cultural significance of tobacco, to name just a few areas of interest.⁶³

The shift away from high politics toward social and cultural investigations is closely linked to the period's belief in the didactic function of history, inasmuch as these were the areas with the most immediate utility for middle-class readers. The orientation of historical knowledge toward the practice of everyday life is central to the period, and various authors stress the need to make the past relevant to the contemporary reader. This relevance, however, is something that must be established through an explication of the link between past and present, rather than being derived from the timeless moral lesson that one can distill from a given historical occurrence as explicated through the topos of *historia magistra vitae*. While it is clear that the present drives the interest in the past in the eighteenth century, the two temporal dimensions are not only linked in the sense that the great figures from the past model appropriate behavior or that the lessons of certain historical situations can be memorized for their future application. Rather, inasmuch as the present evolves out of the past, the lessons to be learned concern the trajectory of development and the potential for improvements. Enlightenment historiography, in other words, is oriented toward the future. At least among the more progressive authors, the goal of historical education is not

to hammer home a selection of moral wisdom by way of historical example but rather to cultivate the critical faculties of the learner so that he can participate in the creation of that future.⁶⁴

The thematic reorientation in eighteenth-century history can also be linked to its critical agenda. In emphasizing those activities in which the middle class has the highest level of participation, it implicitly relativizes the role of the ruling nobility in the course of historical development.⁶⁵ The shift in focus, however, is by no means perceived in terms of group interests. What appears from a late twentieth-century perspective as a refocusing on the concerns of a different class was conceived and articulated in the late eighteenth century as a universalist project. This universalist agenda constitutes a third consequence of the middle-class basis of historiography in this period. As is the case with the Enlightenment intellectuals more generally, eighteenth-century historians are interested in transcending particularism and hence stress the historical role of humans as such rather than any particular estate.⁶⁶ The emphasis on a universal humankind as the subject of history, which can be seen as part of a more general anthropological turn in the period, finds its most pronounced expression in the increasingly popular genre of universal history (*Universalgeschichte*) as well as in the more explicitly teleological *Geschichtsphilosophie*. Friedrich Schiller describes the task of universal history in his inaugural lecture on the topic: "What states did man pass through before he rose from that extreme to this extreme, from the state of the isolated cave dweller — to that of the sharp-witted thinker, the cultivated man of the world — universal world history offers an answer to this question."⁶⁷ But more limited investigations also reflect this emphasis on the universally human, to the extent that an event's impact on humankind becomes the criterion for evaluating its historical significance. As the philosopher Thomas Abbt remarks in a 1760 article entitled "On the Different Uses of Ancient History": "Perhaps one may be so bold as to assert that only those events which concern the *entire human race*, or *each person* in particular, deserve the attention of an intelligent reader."⁶⁸

Histories of the whole of humanity have a long tradition in Christian Europe, but eighteenth-century universal history eventually detaches itself from the Christian model, eliminating once and for all the notion of four successive world empires followed by the Last Judgment. Intellectuals were by no means antireligious, as various analyses of the peaceful coexistence of the Enlightenment and religiosity in Germany have made clear.⁶⁹ None-

theless, world-historical narratives in the period become largely secularized. Divine intervention no longer constitutes a valid factor in historical explanation; the meaning of historical events must be derived from the events themselves. In this secularized context, the human being as such becomes the subject of history in another sense as well, namely, as the source of historical progress. As Hans Erich Bödeker remarks, "Increasingly, human beings learned to view themselves as the condition for and the motive force behind all change."⁷⁰ History comes to be viewed as something that is made by humans, ideally on the basis of the universal faculty of reason.

At the same time, however, writers of history also become more attuned to the complexity of causal relationships, recognizing both the role of the irrational and of supraindividual factors in shaping the course of human development. Significant in the latter case is not only the interest in natural factors (natural disasters, climate, geography) but also the struggle to understand the meaning of social phenomena that operate above the level of individual control. Despite a relatively high level of optimism regarding the potential of social engineering, one can discern in the period a degree of anxiety vis-à-vis social processes that seem to have acquired the status of a second nature. Long-term population fluctuations, patterns of economic crisis, and especially the seemingly ceaseless growth of luxury production all are phenomena that challenge attempts at simple causal explanation, operating according to a seemingly inscrutable, immanent logic. The historical-theoretical implications of this growing awareness of large-scale social processes have received little attention in the scholarship, despite the apparent affinity between the inexorable linearity of some of these processes and that of theories of human development. In this context in particular, the city, as the site where these processes appear in their most acute form, plays a crucial role.

IV

The three elements of historical understanding that I have introduced here in ideal-typical form are not intended as an exhaustive characterization of historical consciousness in eighteenth-century Germany. Not only do other shifts occur that have not been mentioned, but those which have been addressed are by no means universal. Because the period is one of transition, it is not surprising that older conceptual models continue to hold sway alongside newer ones. Thus, even as the foundation for its validity is

hollowed out, the topos of history teaching life remains widespread in the eighteenth century (as it does today), often coexisting in a single text with a sensitivity to historical difference. In *On German Literature*, for example, Friedrich II acknowledges on the one hand the existence of a “taste of the times,” but he also adopts a transhistorical standpoint in referring to the “one hundred examples” that history can provide to illustrate the causes for the rise and fall of states.⁷¹

Nonetheless, the evolutionary and causal model of historical understanding, the awareness of historical perspective, and the link between history and middle-class emancipation represent three key moments in the historical-theoretical force field of the period. Taken together they describe a plane of historical-theoretical discourse, offering a starting point for an attempt to graph the line of intersection between this plane and the one constituted by the discourse on the city. By investigating this line of intersection as it appears in the works of the Berlin *Aufklärer*, I hope to provide some insight into the role played by everyday experience in the evolution and articulation of the new understanding of history. Texts addressing urban life and urban phenomena certainly do not provide a transparent representation of Vierhaus’s “real-historical process” — the impact of social reality on eighteenth-century historical consciousness — but they can at least gesture to the role of material conditions. As I mentioned, the thrust of this impact would seem to be in the form of a challenge to overly simplistic theoretical models. If, for example, one can accept as representative Schiller’s claim that the discovery of “primitive” peoples convinced the Europeans of their advanced position on the timeline of human development, the domestic urban experience tended to complicate such naive linearity. The challenge was raised on an obvious and concrete level through the presence of various disenfranchised groups, from prostitutes to day laborers and indigents. Whereas the discussion of these individuals in texts often gives rise to reflections on imminent social disintegration, the marginalized and disadvantaged urban Jewish communities are often perceived as a case of arrested historical development and thereby linked to the distant past. The aggregation of such groups in the city creates a sense of nonsimultaneity both more palpable and more problematic than that perceived as existing between Europeans and the inhabitants of distant islands.

The urban context, at least for those who care to think seriously about it, also presents more abstract challenges to historical thought. As the site of a

confrontation between social and natural processes, where the borders between the two often blur, the city forces intellectuals to consider the historical significance of these processes, to attempt to situate them within emerging models of historical development. Of most immediate concern is the question of how to interpret the rapid growth of the cities themselves, a quasi-natural process that seems to indicate growing prosperity even as it demonstrates the limited ability of humankind to shape its own destiny. But other historically charged concerns arise as well. What, for example, is one to make of the seemingly endless succession of new fashions that appear in the city? How does one reconcile the project of individual self-cultivation, perceived as closely linked to urban forms of sociability, with conceptual models of the gradual development of the species as a whole? Can the detachment from traditional mechanisms of social control that characterizes big-city life open up possibilities for human progress or does it merely lead to degeneracy? These are the questions raised and reflected upon in the works of Gedike, Nicolai, Lessing, and Mendelssohn, as well as in other essays on the city written in the period. Admittedly, all of these representations of the urban environment are pretextualized to varying degrees by literary and rhetorical convention, but it is precisely in the interface between convention and narrative content that the subjective experience of urban life, together with its historical-theoretical implications, becomes apparent.

The Case of Berlin

Berlin's central role in these discussions is no coincidence. Eighteenth-century considerations of urban life, to the extent that they deal with Germany at all, find it impossible to ignore this city. The interest in Berlin is not surprising, because the city was, in several important respects, unusual in the German-speaking world. Part of its uniqueness has to do with sheer size. In the period after 1750, only Berlin, Hamburg, and Vienna could boast more than 100,000 residents.⁷² These three cities were thus at least twice the size of the next largest group of cities, most of which had between 30,000 and 50,000 residents.⁷³ The emergence of an entirely new category of *Großstadt* in central Europe was recognized by contemporaries as a historical novelty and led, particularly in the case of Berlin, to comparisons with London and Paris and to discussions of the dangers of urban sprawl. Friedrich Gedike,

for example, whose anonymous letters “On Berlin” are the focus of the next chapter, attempts to counter the charge that Berlin, like Paris and London, has become too populous in proportion to its geographic extension.⁷⁴

Even within the aforementioned triumvirate of large German cities, however, Berlin again stands out due to the rapidity of its growth. The comparison with Hamburg is particularly revealing. Hamburg’s population remained relatively constant between 1650 and 1800, hovering between 70,000 and 75,000 until the latter half of the eighteenth century, when it increased to 100,000. The population of Berlin, in contrast, jumped from 12,000 in 1650 to 55,000 in 1700, and then nearly tripled to 150,000 by 1800.⁷⁵ Much of this growth came from immigration, not only of economic refugees from the Brandenburg countryside but also of groups from other German states and other nations.⁷⁶ Berlin was thus a singularly cosmopolitan city for the period, home to Huguenots and Bohemians as well as an unusually wealthy and prominent Jewish community, and this diversity comes up repeatedly in the descriptions from the travel literature. Within German-speaking lands, only Vienna was comparable in this regard. Already in 1752 the city’s rapid expansion had led the Berlin theologian and demographer Johann Peter Süßmilch to investigate its causes in a work entitled *A Treatise on the Rapid Growth of the Royal Residence Berlin*.⁷⁷ As discussed in the following chapter, Süßmilch’s treatise does not merely register this growth but also attempts to place Berlin’s expansion within the context of a more general historical narrative, revealing a peculiar hybrid of Christian and secular historical models in the process.

While one cannot draw definite conclusions about the subjective experience of urban life from population statistics alone, the essays, travelogues, and fictional texts that address Berlin make it clear that these changes gave rise to an increased sense of the dynamism of the city. This pervasive sense of rapid transformation, more than anything else, underlies eighteenth-century Berlin’s uniqueness as an impetus for reflection on historical change. This is not to deny the importance of other major German or European cities as focal points for the articulation and mediation of historical consciousness. On the contrary, the discussion of Descartes, Rousseau, and their German disciples at the beginning of the chapter was intended to demonstrate the general historical-theoretical significance of the city in eighteenth-century Europe, a significance that often becomes most visible in comparisons among cities, either across different time periods, different territories,

or both. A more comprehensive understanding of the role of the city in the formation of eighteenth-century historical consciousness would require an analysis of several major European cities, paying special attention to the way in which temporal structures are actualized within the specific discursive traditions associated with each. With regard to the German-speaking world, eighteenth-century Vienna no doubt deserves special attention, because it shares some of the characteristics that made Berlin unique in the period: rapid growth, a diverse population, and an association, at least after 1780, with the forward-looking policies of “enlightened” absolutism.⁷⁸ And the various textual mediations of the major foreign metropolises, especially Paris, London, and Rome, could certainly be mined for their historical-theoretical content as well. Nonetheless, the unparalleled dynamism of Berlin does provide some justification for focusing on this city, especially within the context of the German Enlightenment. Commentators perceive eighteenth-century Berlin as an *arriviste* on the urban scene. Unlike Hamburg, it has no connection to the medieval traditions of the free imperial city.⁷⁹ Unlike Vienna, it is not the capital of an empire with links to antiquity, nor is it suffused with the faded glory of that antiquity like Rome. And unlike Paris or London, which were already vibrant cultural, economic, and political centers with more than 500,000 residents in the seventeenth-century, Berlin’s evolution into a major European capital only becomes apparent after 1750. Indeed, a number of late eighteenth-century writers on Berlin occupy themselves precisely with the question of whether the city has in fact “arrived” and what this arrival means for its future. Later, Berlin’s lack of tradition ossifies into something of a cliché.⁸⁰ In the eighteenth century, however, Berlin’s conspicuous modernity challenges commentators to find appropriate temporal models with which to interpret recent changes in the city and to delve into its murky past to determine exactly how it did evolve into its present state. Perhaps paradoxically, then, it is precisely the lack of preexisting historical narrative into which to insert Berlin that makes it a focal point with regard to historical consciousness.

Demographic movements provide only part of the story in this context. The rapid growth of Berlin in the eighteenth century, together with the tensions (and opportunities) that accompanied it, must be viewed within the context of profound, longer-term changes in the very nature of the city as a social and political entity that were occurring in Germany at the time. The early modern period was long considered by subsequent historians to be an

epoch of urban decline, in which the inexorable rise of the territorial princes gradually eroded the status of what were conceived of as the powerful, independent, and largely bourgeois trading cities of the Middle Ages. Already anticipated by late eighteenth-century critics of German absolutism like Justus Möser, this attitude became particularly prevalent among liberal historians of the nineteenth century, who viewed the emergence of the absolutist state as a fatal detour from the path toward a liberal-democratic constitutional state that had been anticipated in the self-governing medieval German city.⁸¹

An increased interest in the relationship between the city and larger political and economic structures in the past few decades, however, has resulted in a shift in perspective.⁸² Historians now recognize the period as one of radical reorientation rather than decline, in which the majority of cities lose their status as self-contained political entities and begin to function as nodes in the administrative, economic, and political networks of the emergent territorial states. Particularly in the case of the provincial capitals, one finds a gradual integration of the city into an expansive web of social, cultural, economic, and political relationships, in which it functions as a kind of nucleus. In other words, city and state become increasingly interconnected, a development that finds its concrete illustration in the demolition of the defensive city walls that occurs regularly in this period as well as in their replacement, especially in Brandenburg-Prussia, by customs control points.⁸³ Contemporaries were well aware of the connection between city and state, especially in the case of Berlin, where the rise of territorial power and the increasing status of the city went hand in hand. Friedrich Gedike makes this connection explicit in one of the first letters in his collection, where he remarks: "In short, Berlin is the emblem of the Prussian monarchy, where more or less everything useful and entertaining has been crowded together with the aim of satisfying only itself."⁸⁴

The simple precision of this particular statement is somewhat misleading, however, because other passages in the text suggest the indeterminate status of the city in this transitional period. Whereas in this remark Berlin is represented as the state in microcosm, in other passages it appears as an independent entity that can best be understood within the framework of the "big city." This oscillation corresponds to an inconsistency in the author's discussion of the residents themselves: the "Berliners" are sometimes treated as an urban population, sometimes as an independent people with its own "national" character, and sometimes as identical with the "Brandenburgers."

In these three categorizations of the city residents, which also appear in other descriptions of the city, one can discern three strands of urban discourse that converge in discussions of Berlin and indicate some of the conceptual challenges the city presented to commentators. The notion of the Berliners as a people unto itself harkens back to the traditional concept of the city as an autonomous, self-governing community of individuals bound together by a common culture and, more important, by a common set of legal rights. This general understanding of the city still predominates in Zedler's *Universallexicon*, where the author of the entry on "city" places a heavy emphasis on cultural and especially legal autonomy. He refers to the residents' "unity of temperament in their external way of life and comportment," as well as to the fact that they live "according to a single set of rights and laws."⁸⁵ In contrast, the conflation of Berlin and Brandenburg that one also finds in Gedike gestures to the centralization and consolidation taking place in his own day and suggests that the state, rather than the city per se, has become the new frame of reference. Finally, his comments on the Berliners as big-city dwellers points to a metropolitan future that has already arrived, where the big city constitutes an independent entity with characteristics that transcend state boundaries.⁸⁶

A tension between past, present, and future thus informs even the most basic elements in descriptions of Berlin, and this tension points back to the historical-philosophical complexity that was mentioned earlier. An awareness of this tension, however, should not distract us from the fact that writings on eighteenth-century Berlin generally emphasize the city's forward momentum. When one considers the changes taking place in the wake of Prussia's rise to power, this emphasis is hardly surprising. While the consolidation of the power of the territorial states can be linked to urban decline in the case of certain previously powerful trading centers—Augsburg and Nuremberg are two striking examples—it also laid the foundation for the meteoric rise of the capital or court cities (*Residenzstädte*). In the cases of Berlin and, to a certain extent, Vienna, this rise meant the appearance of an entirely new category of city, with a population, degree of social diversity, and level of political and economic complexity that had been hitherto unknown in central Europe.⁸⁷ The powerful presence of the state in these cities was in no way indicative of a lack in dynamism. On the contrary, in the words of the twentieth-century urban historian Etienne François, it is "remarkable to see how, after 1650, the capital cities take the place of the free

cities and the traditional trading centers as the privileged sites of economic, social, and cultural innovation.”⁸⁸

Berlin, a city whose sovereigns were actively engaged in raising it to the status of a first-tier European capital, was at the forefront of this development. Here, as elsewhere, the aforementioned reorientation had far-reaching social consequences. To address them in any detail would require a separate study. For the purposes of my analysis, it will suffice to point out that changes in administrative, political, and economic organization, like the demographic shifts with which they were inextricably intertwined, contributed to a sense of instability (if viewed negatively) and opportunity (if viewed positively) among city residents. That the latter was also the case can be seen in the pull exerted by the city on an emerging cultural elite, Lessing included, as well in the stream of artisans, shopkeepers, and domestic servants who came to the city in the hope of finding employment.⁸⁹ Old centers of urban decision making such as the magistracy and the guilds saw their power erode, either through a restriction of their sphere of influence, as in the case of the Prussian Trade Guild Law (*Handwerksordnung*) of 1733, or through their incorporation into a more comprehensive state apparatus, as in the case of Friedrich Wilhelm I’s various efforts to centralize and reform the state administration in the first part of the century.⁹⁰

What has to be remembered is that these attempts at consolidation, even if they ultimately resulted in an ossified, authoritarian bureaucracy, functioned at the outset as a dynamic element in urban life. Although a social order grounded in estate-based corporatism continued to predominate in Prussia until at least the early nineteenth century, these changes in administration helped to weaken its hold.⁹¹ As Christoph Dipper writes with regard to the rise of a professional bureaucracy, “after the middle of the eighteenth century, Prussia was the territory in which the specialized qualification of future state officials had become most detached from the methods of selection that were typical of an estate-based society.”⁹² And it was, of course, in the capital city, the center of Prussian administration, where the impact of this dissolution was most palpable. The concentration of state offices in Berlin created unprecedented opportunities for upward social mobility for a new, university-educated segment of the middle class.⁹³

Another crucial component of Berlin’s dynamism as it is conceived by eighteenth-century commentators is the city’s reputation for tolerance. Although scholars of the period have long since cast a critical eye toward the

Berlin Enlightenment under Friedrich II, mapping out its limits and revealing its often illusory character, there can be no doubt that contemporaries viewed the city as unique in terms of the intellectual latitude granted to its residents. This latitude was most obvious in the religious sphere, where the politically inspired immigration policies of the Hohenzollerns had led to a religious heterogeneity that undermined the church's ability to speak with a single, unified voice. General religious tolerance, together with public scandals, including Friedrich II's decision to grant asylum to the French materialist philosopher La Mettrie, led to a widespread stereotype of Berlin as a bastion of atheistic thought. As Goethe remarks to his sister in a letter from 1766, "I think there is now no other place in Europe as godless as the residence of the Prussian king."⁹⁴ Yet despite the powerful association of Berlin and religious freedom, critical discussion was by no means limited to the religious sphere. To be sure, certain subjects were taboo. The fundamental legitimacy of monarchical rule, for example, was rarely called into question; it was primarily addressed, as in the case of Kant's essay on enlightenment, in order to affirm its superiority to other forms of political organization.⁹⁵ However, it would be inaccurate to reduce the Berlin Enlightenment to the freedom to criticize religion. Encouraged by the relative lenience of Friedrich II toward the press and caught up in the general politicization of public discourse that took place in Germany in the 1780s, intellectuals debated numerous issues of city and state government, from school reform to agricultural policy.⁹⁶

Even in the economic sphere, with regard to which it has become clear that state intervention and the militarization of the economy in Prussia hindered the natural emergence of an entrepreneurial class, one must recognize the extent to which Berlin was perceived as a place where radical changes were taking place.⁹⁷ Friedrich Nicolai, who built a small family press into a highly profitable and influential publishing empire, can be taken as evidence of the opportunities available in the city. Also significant in this regard are the aforementioned Trade Guild Law of 1733; the establishment and expansion of wool, silk, and porcelain manufacturing facilities in the city, with which Moses Mendelssohn was involved for most of his life; and the financial crisis and profound redistribution of wealth that followed the end of the Seven Years' War.⁹⁸

My intent here is not to valorize absolutism in eighteenth-century Prussia but rather to counter the assumption that eighteenth-century Berlin,

because of its status as a court city with a strong state presence, was characterized by inertia. On the contrary, as Deborah Hertz has argued, it was precisely this presence that powered Berlin's rapid growth and fostered its heterogeneous social structure. Administrative expansion created a need for new bureaucrats, mercantilist policies generated new opportunities for Jewish and gentile merchants and financiers, and the powerful court drew in aspiring courtiers. These individuals attracted a supporting cast of artisans, clerks, tutors, and servants in turn.⁹⁹ Berlin's sizable intelligentsia was yet another definable group of residents, albeit one whose members sometimes served equal time in other occupations. As these various social groupings indicate, eighteenth-century Berlin was something of a hybrid: part court city, part state capital, and part bustling metropolis.¹⁰⁰ The tensions that arise between these various identities are reflected in the works under consideration here and contribute to the perception of Berlin's dynamism in this period. The city's hybrid personality, in other words, is a key aspect of its modernity. As the nucleus of an evolving political unit that anticipated the modern nation-state in many respects, Berlin functioned as a space where the social consequences of various incipient processes of modernization — bureaucratization, secularization, the erosion of tradition, and the spread of rationalized forms of production and distribution — made themselves felt with particular intensity. To be sure, these processes competed with powerful conservative tendencies in the policies of the Hohenzollerns, as can be seen, for example, in their resolute commitment to maintaining the social privileges of the nobility. Often, however, such tendencies ended up contributing to the vitality and heterogeneity of the city. If the Prussian monarchy had not been so concerned with the welfare of the landed nobility, for example, it would not have created the attractive positions in the military and civil service that brought them to Berlin and encouraged them to mix with the middle-class elites.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

This brief description demonstrates the plausibility of a link between urban experience and the evolution of historical consciousness in eighteenth-century Germany. The various debates and discussions about city life in general and Berlin in particular are not explicitly framed as histori-

cal investigations, but virtually all of them have significant implications for historical-theoretical reflection. Changes in the city induce commentators to situate them within a by now largely secularized conception of human history, either as examples of regression, progress, or some other temporal category. Berlin's rapid growth and rise to prominence elicit comparisons with its own earlier incarnations as well as with other European cities, comparisons that entail reflection on the current and future consequences of what are understood as "modern" developments. Even the notion of the big city itself, despite the persistent application of biblical and classical stereotypes in descriptions of urban space and urban life, comes to be articulated less and less in terms of an interchangeable constellation of timeless characteristics applicable to any empirical city. Instead, the focus shifts to a more inductive understanding of a given urban environment—here Berlin—as the product of a unique process of historical development.

The best examples of this shift in focus can be found in the works of Nicolai and Gedike, two enthusiastic Berlin residents. It is by no means universal, however, as becomes clear from an essay by one of the most resolutely negative commentators on big-city life in eighteenth-century Germany, the cameralist Johann Heinrich Gottlob von Justi. In 1764 Justi published a text entitled "The Big City Considered in Various Aspects, Especially with Regard to the Best Methods of Taxation and the Means to Ensure a Reasonable Price for Foodstuffs." Justi has nothing good to say about the big city. In language reminiscent of Rousseau but with a more pronounced economic emphasis, he describes it as "a glutton who drives up the price of food, a gourmet that wastes the country's money, a woman of leisure who flirts with manufacturing and industry only to steal them away from the diligent residents of the provinces, the corruptor of healthy commerce, and in general a weak, overly pampered creature who is thrown in to the most dangerous state of health and the most terrible convulsions by the smallest draft of fresh air."¹⁰²

Justi's essay is clearly concerned with contemporary urban growth, but his language suggests that this characterization applies to large cities throughout history. At least he makes no explicit, qualitative distinction between the big cities of the past and those of his own epoch. Even in this ahistorical approach, however, the big city becomes an occasion for addressing the specificity of the contemporary. The lack of sufficient employment in big cities gives rise to residents with time on their hands, and this leisure has

political implications. The modern state, according to Justi, has no need for idle citizens like those of Greek and Roman antiquity, who assemble in the marketplace, discuss the affairs of state, criticize the actions of their generals, and attempt to govern themselves. In a slightly more progressive moment, Justi also distinguishes between the “ancient times,” in which the glory of a ruler was paramount and derived to a large degree from the glory of his capital city, and the more enlightened present, in which the health of the state as a whole has become a central concern.¹⁰³

In addition to providing another illustration of the link between urban and historical discourse in the period, Justi’s treatise points to a secondary justification for this study. The prevalence of such negative representations of the big city, together with the valorization of nature and country life in much of the literature from the period, has led to a widespread perception of eighteenth-century German intellectuals as antiurban. With regard to eighteenth-century German literature, Erich Kleinschmidt has spoken of a “refusal” on the part of authors to pay serious attention to the city as a motif, something he attributes to their ambivalence regarding the often stifling living conditions in their own hometowns.¹⁰⁴ And Conrad Wiedemann, in the foreword to a volume of essays on the experience of German authors and artists in foreign metropolises, speaks of a displacement of the urban ideal, to the extent that it is made explicit, onto the foreign city. Rome, Paris, and London, though often viewed with suspicion and even contempt by German travelers, simultaneously function as the embodiment of a freedom seen as diametrically opposed to German provincialism. As a result, according to Wiedemann, the various journeys to these cities take on existential significance for the individual, generating conflicts between the desire for individual liberation and the need for a sense of national identity.¹⁰⁵

Wiedemann demonstrates the complexity of German attitudes toward the most famous foreign metropolises, but a similar complexity also characterizes representations of the urban experience in Germany, whether they occur in the form of general discussions of big-city life or in evaluations of specific German cities. It is true that the existential moment tends to be lacking in such representations. Nonetheless, the broader claim that eighteenth-century authors and intellectuals failed to take an interest in the emancipatory potential of domestic urban life becomes less convincing when one shifts attention away from canonical literary texts and stops basing evaluations on a concept of metropolitan literature derived from the postindustrial

period.¹⁰⁶ Even the valorizations of country life used as evidence of German antiurbanism appear in a different light when placed against the backdrop of eighteenth-century worries that big cities were growing too quickly and sucking the life out of the countryside. Already in the 1760s Justi writes that “a big city simply appeals too strongly to the human desire for opulence and excess to not have a constant stream of new residents.”¹⁰⁷ Thirty years later Christian Garve published an essay entitled, “Fragments on the Investigation of the Decline of the Small Cities, Its Causes, and the Means with Which to Remedy It” (1793). Here the author links the apparent deterioration of Germany’s smaller cities to the otherwise beneficial growth of the capital cities.¹⁰⁸ Even an urban advocate like Gedike warns that “the strange notion that people often have regarding the luster of the capital city is the reason that everything tends to be packed in so tightly there.”¹⁰⁹ In the context of such expressions of concern, valorizations like those found in Johann Georg Schlosser’s 1771 *Moral Catechism for Country Folk* (“I cannot even begin to tell you of the trials of life in the city”) or even Hölty’s 1775 poem “Country Life” (“Most blessed man who has fled from the city!”) begin to look like defensive posturing.¹¹⁰ Particularly in the case of Schlosser and a number of other nonfiction texts, the glorification of country life is clearly a reaction to an already existing and allegedly dangerous fascination with the city among certain segments of the population.¹¹¹ Moreover, as the general thrust of Gedike’s and Garve’s essays demonstrates, one does not have to look far to find explicitly positive testimony as well, even if class-based concerns sometimes temper the enthusiasm of these urban commentators.

In the case of the Berlin Enlightenment in particular, one can discern a high degree of civic pride and a cautious but conscious effort to cultivate an urban culture worthy of a European capital. In addition, despite the long shadow cast over the city by Friedrich II, this effort is often conceived as independent of, though rarely in opposition to, the court. Indeed, as I hope to demonstrate, the urban experience is viewed by Berlin intellectuals as a crucial, if problematic, aspect of their progressive agendas. One must recognize, in other words, that the Berlin Enlightenment was not merely headquartered in the capital city but was in important ways an urban phenomenon, which acquired its specific contours and self-understanding through a confrontation with the challenges of an urban modernity.

To these challenges, together with their historical-theoretical implica-

tions, we now turn. Before doing so, however, it should be noted that the analysis in the book has been structured to progress from the explicit to the implicit. Chapter 2 focuses on the reception of Berlin in the travel literature of the period, delineating the specific urban phenomena that interested commentators as well as the historical-theoretical implications of their responses to these phenomena. At one end of the spectrum are readings that associate Berlin's rapid change with the impermanent and ambivalent mutations of fashion. At the other end are the Berlin letters of Friedrich Gedike, which emphasize a more grounded, gradual form of change viewed as characteristic of progress. Gedike's letters demonstrate the historical-theoretical complexity at the root of eighteenth-century representations of the city, and this notion serves as a structuring principle for all of the remaining analyses in the book. Chapter 3 considers the manifestations of this complexity in the work of Friedrich Nicolai, especially as it relates to questions of historical causality. The focus remains on actual representations of the city, but the chapter progresses from an analysis of the author's historical-statistical volume on Berlin and Potsdam to an interpretation of the depiction of Berlin in his novel *Sebaldus Nothanker*. The aim is to identify conceptual analogies between the novel and the nonfiction texts in order to demonstrate key continuities and variations in the treatment of urban phenomena across Nicolai's oeuvre. The explicit reflections on city life discussed in the initial three chapters are intended to provide a foundation for the more interpretive readings in Chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4 takes the eighteenth-century conception of the big city as a site of liberation and autonomy as the starting point for an analysis of G. E. Lessing's Berlin comedy *Minna von Barnhelm*. Here the analysis emphasizes the way in which the urban setting informs the drama on a deeper level, motivating both its narrative trajectory and its perspectival structure. Finally, Chapter 5 attempts to demonstrate the extent to which Moses Mendelssohn's theory of sociability, though by no means consciously conceived as an "urban" philosophy, nonetheless resonates powerfully with both the urban writings of his contemporaries and with his own experience in eighteenth-century Berlin. In particular, the dialectic of sociability that becomes a central theme in Mendelssohn's late work and that serves as the foundation for an incipient theory of modernity, appears heavily indebted to the urban discourse of the period. It is hoped that the engagement with both explicit and implicit re-

flections on urban phenomena will not only make the central thesis of this study more compelling but that it will also give some sense of how significantly urban life impacted key facets of eighteenth-century German culture, even if this impact sometimes left its traces only beneath the surface of the text.