PART I

Intellectual Herritage

The European Enlightenment, what the French called *le siècle des lumières* (the century of lights), represents a fundamental divide in human history: a period of intellectual ferment, scientific research, and increasingly rapid economic progress. If we were suddenly teleported back in time to the years before the Enlightenment, typically dated between the late 1600s and the French Revolution of 1789, we would find a world utterly alien to our own; a world dominated intellectually by religious faith and politically by a semi-educated aristocracy that readily abused its authority for personal aggrandisement. Economically, most particularly in continental Europe, everything hinged on the annual grain harvest. When it failed, famine and social disorder would ensue. By contrast, the years subsequent to the Enlightenment saw the embodiment of an intellectual and economic world that is clearly modern; a world characterised by revolutionary new forms of technology and transport, most particularly steam-powered railways. Throughout Western Europe and North America, hereditary privilege retreated before the advancing forces of political democracy. Intellectually, what was particularly revolutionary was not just the advance of science and inventive ideas, but a willingness to question all aspects of human existence, sparing neither church nor kings. As the French economist Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot wrote in a letter to the Scottish political philosopher David Hume, *les lumières* (the illumination) involved, above all, a capacity to see the “true causes” of things through experiment and deduction.1

From the Enlightenment there emerged rival traditions of thought that are pertinent to our story. Clearly dominant was a tradition that believed that the world could be positively transformed through science and reason; a belief that underpinned both the Industrial Revolution and an associated process of economic and political liberalisation and transformation. In political philosophy, beginning with the publication of Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan, or, the Matter, Form and Power of Common-Wealth, Ecclesiastic and Civil* in 1651, a long series of studies—undertaken by John Locke, David Hume, Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, among others—argued that the authority of rulers rested on what Hobbes called a “covenant” and Rousseau a “social contract”.² No longer could monarchs and oligarchs claim power on the basis of either “divine right” or custom and practice. Rather, they were expected to provide, in return for popular acceptance, not only security, but also protection from arbitrary action—including that undertaken by their own officials. In the field of economics, the Enlightenment announced the effective birth of the discipline, first in France (Turgot, Richard Cantillon, Francois Quesnay, Etienne Bonnet de Condillac), and subsequently in Scotland with the publication in 1776 of Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*. In the discipline’s ensuing nineteenth-century “golden age”, David Ricardo, John Stuart Mill, William Stanley Jevons, and Alfred Marshall laid the basis for modern economic understandings. Despite his opposition to capitalism, Karl Marx must also be counted among the members of this intellectual mainstream. Not only did he believe as much as Smith and Mill in the powers of science and reason, but he also engaged in the same debates—about the nature of value, economic costs, the organisation of work—as his free market opponents. The circumstances involved in operating the new steam-powered factories and railways also gave birth to management as a distinct occupational practice and theoretical discipline; a discipline that was to find its most influential exponents (Frederick Winslow Taylor, Chester Barnard, Elton Mayo) in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century.

If the intellectual strength of what this study thinks of as “modernity”—societies based on market economies, political democracy, legal

protections for private property and individual rights, and free labour forces—can be traced back to the main wellsprings of the European Enlightenment, and through it to the philosophies of the ancient Greeks, postmodernism also draws on traditions of thought that hark back to the Enlightenment. Among postmodernists, Michel Foucault is unusual in openly acknowledging this debt. In an analysis entitled *What Is Enlightenment*, Foucault declared, “We must try to proceed with the analysis of ourselves as beings who are historically determined, to a certain extent, by the Enlightenment.”3 In particular, Foucault continued, critical analysis such as his own drew on an Enlightenment “philosophic ethos” that allowed “a permanent critique of our historical era”.4 Certainly, postmodernist thought draws on two critical traditions that emerged during the Enlightenment. The first of these, which found in Jean-Jacques Rousseau its greatest exponent, was—as we noted in our Introduction—opposed in principle to the idea that increased economic wealth and industrial mechanisation were in any ways socially beneficial. The second Enlightenment tradition to which postmodernism is heir is that of philosophical idealism, the view that knowledge of objective reality is always conditional and subjective, that is, open to a myriad of alternatives. By combining these two dissident traditions, each of which once appeared to have been marginalised by modernity’s advance, postmodernism recontests understandings woven into modernity’s very fabric.

Before proceeding, the author should announce his own philosophical biases. One of the effects of researching this project has been to convince myself that simple empiricism—that is, the belief that we can accurately perceive the objective world directly through our senses—is, as postmodernists correctly adjudicate, inadequate as a platform for research and understanding. Not only do the senses often deceive, but it is also true that there is frequently considerable difference between the perceptions of various individuals. This is particularly the case when accounts are committed to that most fallible of storage facilities: memory. In contradiction to postmodernists, however, I am not led by the unreliability of sensory perception to believe that the objective world cannot be accurately comprehended. This is because we have—as Plato and Immanuel Kant argued—a great weapon at our disposal: reason. It is through this that we


4 Ibid., 42.
distinguish truth from falsehood. Accordingly, given the centrality of Plato to debates about the role of reason in human understanding, the ensuing chapters—most particularly Chap. 2—pay much more attention to Plato than to Aristotle. Even if one does not share the author’s neo-Platonian or, to be more exact, Kantian epistemological orientation, an understanding of concepts that stem from Plato (“form”, “representation”) is nevertheless vital to understanding postmodernist critiques.