

**LASTING LIGHT: Re-positioning the Legacy of the Enlightenment within
Cultural Studies**

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Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Communication and Cultural Studies

This Thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Murdoch University

2013

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Signed.....

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation concerns a re-evaluation of the ‘Enlightenment’ and its historiography within cultural theory in relation to contemporary debates concerning the limits and possibilities of active and inclusive citizenship, participatory democracy and a pluralistic public sphere. I interrogate what the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment encompasses and how this period and its legacy have been understood in relevant areas of philosophy and social theory. My contention is that an overly reductionist and negative understanding of the Enlightenment has come to dominate cultural theory over the past thirty years owing partly to a simplified reading of theorists including Foucault and Derrida. Using the work of, among others, Jürgen Habermas, I hope to demonstrate that a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of the Enlightenment and its legacy will aid contemporary social theory in formulating conceptions for a more just and equitable society. To this end, I show how contemporary figures within the Enlightenment, including Moses Mendelssohn, Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe de Gouges, are relevant to current theoretical concerns. I identify with Habermas’s argument in favour of an ‘enlightened critique of the Enlightenment’ and his assertion that modernity represents an ‘unfinished project’ rather than a static model of social superiority. At a time when religious fundamentalism and ideological extremism are dominant forces in global relations, and nationalism and cultural essentialism inform much of the public discourse on citizenship and democracy, a considered affirmation of the precepts of the Enlightenment is necessary to the realisation of socially progressive theory.

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Acknowledgements

I extend my sincere thanks to both my supervisors, Professor Alec McHoul and Dr Ian Cook. Both were highly supportive of this project and offered important advice and many useful insights. I acknowledge Murdoch University's Equity Department for the support they extend to many students. I also extend sincere thanks to my group of friends for supporting me during the otherwise isolating experience of post-graduate candidature. I thank Macska Chinna for his moral support. Last, but never least, I acknowledge from the heart the ongoing love and support of my parents.