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As Justin E.H. Smith explains in the preamble to *Irrationality: A History of the Dark Side of Reason*, philosopher Hippasus is said to have been murdered at the hands of his fellow Pythagoreans for discovering a form of mathematical irrationality. By calculating the relationship between a square's diagonal and its side, Hippasus had found an irrational number; for the Pythagoreans, who believed in an entirely rational universe, this was too dangerous a finding to be allowed to stand. Millenia later, the novelist Isaac Babel was executed in the Soviet Union. His writing was too messy, too corporeal, to fit into the rationalistic worldview of Soviet art and ideology. As Smith argues, the two murders, though separated in space and time, one 'legend' and the other real, represent the same inescapable dialectical relationship between rationality and irrationality.

According to Smith, our capacity to behave reasonably and rationally is inherently constrained by our innate human irrationality: our imperfect evolutionary inheritance leaves us prone to prejudice and phobias; dreams and hallucinations seem to defy all rational order; the inconceivability of death causes us to think irrationally about our own lives. As a result, movements to eliminate irrationality tend to lead "from commitment to an ideal, to the discovery within the movement of an ineradicable strain of something antithetical to that ideal, to, finally, descent into that opposite thing" (4). Rationality, in other words, begets irrationality as its mirror opposite. Thus, the history of rationality shows: "exaltation of reason, and a desire to eradicate its opposite; the inevitable endurance of irrationality in human life, even, and perhaps especially – or at least especially troublingly – in the movements that set themselves up to eliminate irrationality; and, finally, the descent into irrational self-immolation of the very currents of thought and of social organization that had set themselves up as bulwarks against irrationality" (4). As Smith acknowledges, this is an argument deeply indebted to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.[1]

Irrationality, which is geared towards a general audience, is not a conventional work of history. It dispenses with "rigorous chronology and any purported causal sequence of events," instead attempting to "paint a broad picture of how the current world came to be as it is," in a style that Smith attributes to Michel Foucault (288). Smith organizes the book thematically, with each chapter exploring a different potential limitation of rationality: logic, reason in nature and non-human animals, dreams, art and imagination, pseudoscience, the Enlightenment, the internet, jokes and lies, and death. The format makes sense for Smith; he has chosen to tackle an extraordinarily broad topic, and he has had success with a similarly casuistic approach in a previous work.[2] Consequently, though, *Irrationality* occasionally reads more like a series of essays than a

[1] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1997 [1944]).

[2] He described his approach in *Nature, Human Nature*, and Human Difference as proceeding "not by a single, cumulative argument, but by following these theses like leitmotifs through a wide variety of texts and authors" (23). Justin E. H. Smith, *Nature, Human Nature, & Human Difference : Race in Early Modern Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

monograph. And, if the array of chapter topics were not dizzying enough, Smith cycles within each chapter through history, philosophy, and present-day cultural and political analysis. The rapid transitions between subjects can be difficult to follow. Chapter one, for example, addresses Petrus Ramus, Plato, Cicero, G.W. Leibniz, Pierre Gassendi, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, Kasper Hauser, rational choice theory, the role of religion in the public sphere, the NXIVM cult, Zeno, and logical paradoxes. It also includes multi-page criticisms of "Paris irrationality" (exemplified by Jacques Derrida) and Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek. The chapter is 24 pages long.

While *Irrationality* covers an extraordinarily wide range of topics, it is grounded in a series of thinkers to whom Smith returns repeatedly. René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, Leibniz, Immanuel Kant, and Herman Melville, for instance, are touchstones in multiple chapters. It also contains a number of fascinating insights and reflections, though one occasionally wishes they had been explored more fully. His discussion of different approaches to dreaming, and its public or private status in different societies, stands out as particularly interesting. Contrasting Descartes, Kant, Sigmund Freud, and seventeenth-century Jesuit reports of Iroquois dreams, he argues that we have failed to create a "community of publicly accepted and shared dream meanings" (96). Such a communal approach, he claims, might be "better at managing a human experience that is, in any case, irrepressible and ineradicable" (96). His chapter on pseudoscience is equally stimulating. Drawing on the long history of outsider critiques of popularly accepted scientific ideas (those of Francis Bacon and Descartes, for example), as well as relevant philosophy of science and pseudoscience (Adorno, Paul Feyerabend, Larry Laudan), he proposes a typology of modern pseudoscientific movements. Some, he claims, are conspiratorial and uninterested in facts. Others attempt to appropriate the methods and epistemological techniques of the sciences. The separation of sentiment from science, he argues convincingly, is partly responsible for the proliferation of unreasonable pseudoscience (140). In another of Smith's provocative and interesting moves, this separation becomes a theme throughout the book, and Smith argues powerfully that it allows the sciences to monopolize violence (121-2).

But Smith does not engage much with the historical literature on the topics discussed in *Irrationality*. For instance, while the chapter on pseudoscience is provocative, it draws on very few histories of the pseudosciences or outsider sciences. Smith has set himself the enormous task of analyzing philosophies of rationality and irrationality throughout human history, and so it is understandable that he has not included an extensive historiographical review. But the breadth of *Irrationality* leaves him little space to address disciplinary questions that have been important to the history of science.[3] Greater attention to the scholarly literature on the topic might have evoked interesting questions. How has pseudoscience been used as a critical term, rather than a descriptive one? How have the pseudosciences moved into and out of scientific establishments? How have they informed scientific techniques? Smith touches on these questions, but further engagement with the historical literature would have been even more illuminating.[4]

Irrationality presents two historical interventions. First, Smith is interested in offering a corrective to histories of the Enlightenment that fail to treat "counter-Enlightenment less as Enlightenment's opposite than as its twin" (9), positioning

[3] For example, see Seymour Mauskopf and Michael McVaugh, *The Elusive Science: Origins of Experimental Psychical Research* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); Ian Hacking, "Telepathy: Origins of Randomization in Experimental Design," *Isis* 79 (1988): 427-451; Roger Cooter, *The Cultural Meaning of Popular Sciences: Phrenology and the Organization of Consent in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Michael D Gordin, *The Pseudoscience Wars: Immanuel Velikovsky and the Birth of the Modern Fringe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[4] This is true in other areas as well. For instance, in his chapter on death, Smith might have addressed the work of Philippe Ariès, who remains a towering figure in the history of death. He might also have discussed the more recent work of Thomas Laqueur on the subject. See Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981); Thomas Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). Similarly, literature on the irrational in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century thought is hardly addressed. For example, in a classic work of intellectual history, H. Stuart Hughes portrayed Freud, Max Weber, and others of their generation as engaged in a common project of grappling with the irrational. See H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Thought, 1890-1930*, rev. ed. (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2002).

his work instead alongside those of Zeev Sternhell, Isaiah Berlin, and Pankaj Mishra.[5] (The objects of his critique include popular histories of the Enlightenment, like Steven Pinker's recent *Enlightenment Now*, as well as academic histories.[6]) Such works fail to address Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment ideas dialectically, instead treating rationality as the sole true legacy of the Enlightenment, with irrationality represented as an unfortunate stumbling block to be overcome. Smith's dialectical approach shows that irrationality is ineradicable, and that attempts to eliminate it can lead to violence – the Khmer Rouge and the Bolsheviks, for example, are indebted to the Enlightenment tradition of rationality (12). But Smith also hopes to add to approaches that are already dialectical. These, he argues, have paid significant attention to reason and unreason in social organization, but have not sufficiently addressed "reason as it is conceptualized in modern philosophy, as a particular faculty of the human mind, and, in turn, to the respects in which the political philosophy of the Enlightenment… is in the end a philosophy of the human soul writ large" (13). Instead, they have focused more on "theories as to what constitutes the best ideal and values around which to organize a society" (13). To these historians' focus on ideals and the social order, Smith adds a dialectical history of reason and unreason as faculties of the *mind*.

Though Smith's focus on irrationality is frequently enlightening, there are times when it forces him to portray very different issues as similar irruptions of unreason. For instance, Smith describes "mysticism" and "mass demonstrations" as examples of irrationality at the level of society (4). But are all mass demonstrations necessarily irrational, even as Smith uses the term? He lists both Woodstock and the Nuremberg rallies as examples of irrationality, which he describes as "neither good nor bad" (195). It seems reasonable to ask if any category that includes Woodstock and the Nuremberg rallies as fundamentally similar events is too capacious. Elsewhere, Smith classifies both racism and fear of flying as irrational inheritances of our imperfectly evolved capacity for reason. He wonders why racism is defended vigorously by argument and "protective pseudofacts," while fear of flying is recognized as a phobia, concluding that it may be because racists find community and solidarity through their racism (69). But to treat racism and fear of flying as two different manifestations of the same form of irrationality is to ignore the historical construction and reinforcement of racism through institutions and systems. Racism has justified not only "solidarity" among racists, but also real material benefits at the expense of others. One might wonder if irrationality, then, is the most illuminating framework for understanding it. Very few undertakings rely on fear of flying, but racism has sustained empires.

Smith's focus is as firmly on the present as the past, and his goal seems to be to explain the current moment. Smith offers a reminder that "it is irrational to seek to eliminate irrationality, both in society and in our own exercise of our mental faculties" (6), one that is particularly important because "we are living through a moment of extreme irrationality" (18). To that end, Smith returns frequently to present-day figures and phenomena, including Trump, internet trolls, Twitter, *Charlie Hebdo*, the alt-right and 'the illiberal left,' and many, many others. According to Smith, many of these are manifestations of the same form of irrationality that he has found throughout history. Moreover, as with the other phenomena he discusses, they emerged dialectically from rational and idealistic systems. For example, he argues that the utopian promises of the internet, not long ago thought to be able to serve as a Habermasian public sphere, have been seized by "the forces of aggression and chaos" (19).

Smith does make interesting and nuanced claims about the present moment, but as he approaches more directly political issues, it is not clear that he always maintains that nuance. He describes Twitter critics as Maoists-in-waiting, engaged in "what are effectively purges [that] are taking place at the substate level," and writes that "those who thrive online are the

[5] Zeev Sternhell, The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition, trans. David Maisel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas, ed. Henry Hardy* (New York: The Viking Press, 1980); Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2017).

[6] Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018). While Smith does not write exclusively about the Enlightenment, he does highlight it as a key historical moment worthy of analysis. Nevertheless, Smith focuses on only a few works of Enlightenment history. For a more sustained analysis of Enlightenment historiography, see Annelien de Dijn, "The Politics of Enlightenment: From Peter Gay to Jonathan Israel," *The Historical Journal* 55:3 (September 2012): 785-805.

most cutthroat and unflinching personalities… the Robespierres and the Berias" (211). He attributes great importance to "meme warfare" in the 2016 election (16), and ascribes "tremendous power" to makers of memes and others like them, the "technologically literate but argumentatively subliterate" (18). "No-platformers" are akin to Robespierre, and are ready to ruin lives "for a poorly worded tweet about, say, the innateness of gender inequality" (227). Those in the "new scholarly protection racket surrounding the discussion of what it is to be trans" refuse to reckon with criticisms, instead resorting to "internet mobbing" (223). Smith treats these figures as representatives of irrationality in society, and as having little of worth to say. But one wonders what conclusions he might have reached had he given their arguments the attention that he pays to those of the figures he discusses more positively.

The subjects of Smith's critiques are rarely given the chance to defend themselves in *Irrationality*. Judith Butler, for instance, is put forth as an example of someone whose views cannot be questioned without social consequences.[7] Smith argues that Butler and those who study her are unwilling to engage with empirical science, particularly the reality of sexual dimorphism in non-human animals. However, he does not address Butler's writings, instead citing only a brief summary of her work on an online syllabus (216). It seems reasonable to wonder if this is a fair representation of Butler's arguments, or even of the online syllabus he cites, which does include a number of books by scientists, including books on neurosexism, "the flaws in the science of sex differences," and evolution and developmental plasticity.[8] Smith also occasionally makes observations that might be better supported with more evidence. He notes, for instance, that "there is a significant presence on social media of people agitating for a general moratorium on all references to female reproductive anatomy, maintaining that there is simply no such thing as 'female biology'" (220). Without offering examples, though, Smith does not show that any such "significant presence" exists, instead leaving readers to their own devices.

Though it sometimes feels disjointed in its breadth of topics, *Irrationality* contains a number of provocative and fruitful claims. Smith's initial insight – that humans have an ineliminable capacity for irrationality, and that we must all think more deeply about how to live with that – seems both plausible and important. But *Irrationality* might have been better served had Smith used the space dedicated to critiques of present-day politics and culture to further explore his wide-ranging, rich work on the history of philosophy throughout the rest of the book.

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[7] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

[8] Merriam Lewis-Leary, "Syllabus on Sex and Gender Differences: How to Disprove Sexist Science," *Library Card*, 14 August 2017, http://librarycard.org/2017/08/14/syllabus-sex-gender-differences-disprove-sexist-science/.