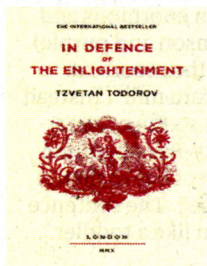


In Defence of the Enlightenment, by Tzvetan Todorov, translated by Gila Walker (Atlantic, £9.99)



The philosopher and historian Tzvetan Todorov does not want to return to a previous age: he admits the Enlightenment “belongs to the past”. Rather, he argues that enlightenment is a process that each new generation needs to engage in and learn from. As Kant said, “the maxim of thinking for oneself at all times is enlightenment”. The 18th-century rationalist intellectuals who created the Enlightenment believed that utopia was within reach. Instead, thanks to traditional adversaries - “obscurantism, arbitrary authority and fanaticism” - it slips through our fingers like sand: “humanity is condemned to seek truth rather than possess it.” Todorov makes a compelling case for the continued importance of enlightenment. Chapters dealing with key themes - autonomy, secularism, humanity - move deftly from history to current issues. A discussion of truth begins with Hume and Condorcet and concludes neatly with the manipulation of truth to justify the invasion of Iraq. It was, he says, an “attack on the foundation of democracy”. A brief but wonderfully intelligent and insightful book. **PDS**