

Jonathan I. Israel. *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670-1752*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. xi + 983 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-927922-7.

Reviewed by Robert Leventhal (German Studies (Department of Modern Languages and Literatures), College of William and Mary)
Published on H-German (June, 2007)



Enlightenment Uncontested

With this book, Jonathan Israel continues the exploration of the philosophical origins of modernity he began with *Radical Enlightenment* (2001). In that work, he argued that despite recent efforts to pluralize and variegate the European Enlightenment, or to view it solely in sociological or social-historical terms and categories, we should instead view the European Enlightenment “as a single highly integrated intellectual and cultural movement” (p. vi). Moreover, the intellectual core or backbone of what is for Israel the “true” Enlightenment, the Radical Enlightenment, was Baruch Spinoza and Spinozism. While the classical literature in the field—one thinks of Paul Hazard, Ernst Cassirer, and Peter Gay—had acknowledged Spinoza’s strong eighteenth-century presence, Israel made a convincing case that it was actually Spinoza and the academics, writers, and critics who followed him who were the real challengers of ecclesiastical authority, pre-ordained social hierarchies, religious intolerance, and the restriction of expression. Spinoza and Spinozists were the unabashed proponents of the core values of Enlightenment, such as democracy, human freedom, equality, and justice. Spinoza, in other words, not Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Voltaire, Isaac Newton, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Moses Mendelssohn, or Immanuel Kant, is for Israel the true source of our “modernity.”

In the preface, Israel asks: “Was the Enlightenment in essence a social or an intellectual phenomenon?” He answers that “it was both, and ... physical reality and the

life of the mind must be seen to be genuinely interacting in a kind of dialectic” (p. v). Precious little of this dialectic is included in the book, however, and the argument suggests the Enlightenment was primarily a philosophical phenomenon: “it was philosophers who were chiefly responsible for propagating the concepts of toleration, equality, democratic republicanism, individual freedom, and liberty of expression and the press, the batch of ideas identified as the principal cause of the near overthrow of authority, tradition, monarchy, faith, and privilege. Hence, philosophers specifically had caused the revolution” (p. vii).

In order to give the argument adequate profile, I must jump to the end of the book, to the postscript where Israel enumerates what he views as the enduring, core values of the Enlightenment: 1) philosophical reason as the criterion of what is true; 2) rejection of supernatural agency (divine providence); 3) equality of all mankind (racial and sexual equality); 4) secular universalism in ethics anchored in equality and stressing equity, justice, and charity; 5) comprehensive toleration and freedom of thought; 6) personal liberty of lifestyle between consenting adults, safeguarding the dignity and freedom of the unmarried and homosexuals; 7) freedom of expression, political criticism, and the press in the public sphere; and 8) democratic republicanism. In Israel’s account roughly seventy French, Dutch, German, Italian, and British academics, writers, philosophers, scholars, and critics active between 1660 and 1750 espoused

these views and constituted what he calls the Radical Enlightenment. The vast diversity of these figures and their sources notwithstanding, Israel urges that “the only kind of philosophy that could coherently integrate and hold together such a far-reaching value-condominium in the social, moral and political spheres, as well as in ‘philosophy,’ was the monist, hylozoic systems of the Radical Enlightenment labelled ‘Spinozist’ in the ‘long’ eighteenth century” (p. 867). Much of the book is concerned with showing how Spinoza and Spinozism informed these thinkers of the Radical Enlightenment, and, in turn, how these core values both sprang from and reflected Spinoza’s basic philosophy. The most important figures in Israel’s story, besides Spinoza himself, of course, are Pierre Bayle, Jean Baptiste de Boyer, Marquis d’Argens, Henri Boulainvilliers (although his aristocratic republicanism place him slightly outside of the Radical Enlightenment), Denis Diderot, Paolo Doria, Johann Christian Edelmann, Jean Meslier, César Chesneau du Marsais, Franciscus van den Enden, Adriaen Koerbagh, Johann Georg Wachter, Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d’Holbach, Julien Offray de la Mettrie, Johann Lorenz Schmidt, Bernard de Mandeville, Friedrich Wilhelm Stosch, Simon Tyssot de Patot, John Toland, Giambattista Vico, Jean le Rond d’Alembert, and Radicati di Passerano.

Instead of proceeding through each phase of the argument, interrogating individual interpretations, and examining Israel’s demanding and minute documentation at each turn, which would explode the boundaries of a review in terms of sheer volume, I would rather like to ask some questions regarding the overall trajectory of the book, what I see to be the underlying research interest and point of the book, and finally what I believe to be truly at stake, methodologically and theoretically, in the writing of this book. In addition to the incredible erudition and skill of presenting a coherent thesis over eight hundred pages, Israel does not conceal his hermeneutical concerns. I believe there are three distinct, yet related, claims that Israel is making with this book beyond the fundamental argument stated above.

First, as already mentioned with reference to *Radical Enlightenment*, *Enlightenment Contested* is an attempt to shore up the idea that there are essentially *two* Enlightenments, a “moderate mainstream” Enlightenment, which was morally, socially, and politically conservative, and apologetic if not outright supportive of absolutistic monarchy, and, on the other hand, the Radical Enlightenment. The Radical Enlightenment was responsible for, first and foremost, the emergence of liberal modernity

in the eighteenth century and its rejection of ecclesiastical authority, its strict differentiation between truth and belief, philosophy and religion, its insistence on human equality regardless of race, gender, and class, and its demand for the absolute freedom of expression in the public sphere. Secondly, *Enlightenment Contested* is a not-so-implicit critique of modern trends in cultural history, cultural studies, “new social history,” and sociology of knowledge. Focused not on the institutions, settings, milieux, written media, cultural contexts, or socioeconomic and political structures of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Israel is unapologetic about doing “high” intellectual history, a history of ideas, or *Ideengeschichte*. His argumentation seeks at every turn to show how Spinozism and spinozistic ideas, diffused and disseminated, repeatedly surface in the texts of Radical Enlightenment thinkers and threaten the existing sociopolitical and sociocultural order and how Spinoza and Spinozism represent *the* single most significant rupture with tradition and pave the way for the revolutions of the second half of the eighteenth century, not to mention our own democratic values, ideals, and aspirations even today.

Around 1969, historical thinkers such as Quentin Skinner, J.G.A. Pocock, and John Dunn took the linguistic turn, asking how political languages worked in an effort to understand not the ideas themselves but how discourse functioned, making the discussion of ideas richer and more grounded in the political and social transformations of the time.[1] With the work of the 1970s and 1980s, the importance of the textual and linguistic context of ideas had been firmly established. In Germany, Reinhard Koselleck had insisted on and developed a highly useful history of the semantics of terms and concepts, historical-critical *Begriffsgeschichte* as opposed to traditional *Geistesgeschichte*. [2] The central idea was that key ideas were crafted and propagated amid the “cut and thrust” of political, social, and economic history. The Cambridge School and the work in historical semantics taking place in Germany had a great deal in common. Increasingly, however, a new sociocultural history emerged that questioned even these more progressive and newly established forms of intellectual history, the history of political “languages,” and *Begriffsgeschichte*. Israel cites in particular the work of Roger Chartier, who argued that the most profound changes in the ways of being “were not the result of clear and distinct thoughts” (p. 21), but instead a basic, determining set of “real” social structures lay at the root of these new, bold ideas.[3] Robert Darnton’s “new social history” is equally criti-

cized as a “diffusionist” method that unwittingly ends up supporting “the Postmodern campaign to discredit traditional methods of historical criticism and marginalize, and cast a negative light on, the Enlightenment itself” (p. 22).[4] Contrary to this tendency, Israel argues that “to integrate intellectual history effectively with social, cultural, and political history ... it seems likely that what is really needed is nothing like a ‘cultural sociology,’ but rather a new reformed intellectual history presiding over a two-way traffic, or dialectic of ideas and social reality” (p. 23). Israel proposes that we look carefully at “contemporary controversies” to see, on the ground, what mattered to whom and why. “Contemporary controversies” are the pivot, the means to grasp the real relationship between the social sphere and ideas (p. 25).

For Israel, therefore, public intellectual controversies are the key. Israel’s “controversialist technique” is focused on the broad mass of Enlightenment controversies to see “how structures of belief and sensibility in society interact dialectically with the evolution of philosophical ideas” (p. 26). I am taking aim at a crucial distinction between “new reformed intellectual history presiding over a two-way traffic, or dialectic of ideas and social reality,” and the “controversialist technique,” which examines the intricacies of intellectual debate and exchange and never truly examines how such controversies are situated, informed by, and responding to social, economic, and political structures. Indeed, for Israel, intellectual history does “preside” over a “two-way traffic, or dialectic of ideas and social reality.” The problem is either that Israel assumes we already *have* the other piece of this traffic or dialectic (which would obviously be fully *undialectical*), or he fails, in many instances, to mediate effectively between the diffusion and dissemination of Spinoza and Radical Enlightenment, on the one hand, and the social and cultural institutions as well as the political forces at work in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, on the other. To be fair, Israel’s account of the eclipse of the reign of Louis XIV and the liberalization aperture that occurred in the period of 1715-40 (pp. 699-709) does provide some of this mediation, but this is the only instance where I genuinely felt he succeeded in bridging the two parts of his proposed “dialectic” between ideas and social reality. The radical writings that circulated clandestinely in the period before 1715 at that point became diffused widely in French society.

The most interesting and intellectually satisfying chapters are those in part 4 of the book, “The Party of Humanity” (pp. 545-692). In five chapters, Israel adroitly traces the concept of equality from Book 3 of

Spinoza’s *Ethics* (1677) to the eighteenth-century transformation of conceptions of gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, colonialism and empire, Islam, and Orientalism. These sections are in my view exemplary for their nuanced and balanced approach, their sensitivity to the context of the texts, and their engagement with issues relevant to us today. The Radical Enlightenment is shown to have rejected the entire system of social pressures and theological pretexts and became truly emancipatory in the sphere of gender and relations between the sexes. The “erotic revolution, entailing a whole new culture of desire, voluptuousness, and pleasure” (p. 585) becomes manifest in such writers as Adriaen Beverland, Jean-Frederic Bernard, André-François Boureau-Deslandes, d’Argens, La Mettrie, Diderot, and Étienne Gabriel Morelly. Without original sin, sexual relations are simply part of nature and integral to it. Although Israel acknowledges that sexual life must then be “ordered,” and “classified” in an entirely new fashion, and that research into sexuality then becomes “a new kind of investigation” (p. 587), the investigations of Michel Foucault, Lynn Hunt, and others who have explored the regimens of sexual knowledge and relations in this arena are strangely absent.

Next, empire became integral to national identity in the period 1680-1720. The Radical Enlightenment launched a powerful critique not merely of empire and its colonial aspirations. Bayle and other “spinozists” consistently professed and deployed the principle of universal moral respect for different cultures and different civilizations. Different human societies might stand at strikingly different levels of civilization and technology, but this variety does not entail, for the radical writers, a moral or legal hierarchy of races, cultures, or civilizations (p. 603). Many of these writers in fact condemned slavery in all of its guises and advanced a nascent form of powerful anti-imperial and anti-colonialist thinking.

Finally, chapters 24 and 25 look at the ways the Radical Enlightenment rethought Islam and the Orient. While it clearly did not condone the fanatical side of Islam, the Radical Enlightenment praised the intellectual coherence, consistency, and conformity to justice in Muhammad’s teachings. Finally, with respect to the Orient, Chinese culture, and civilization in particular, Israel successfully documents the Radical Enlightenment’s enthusiasm for classical Chinese philosophy in the writings of Isaac Vossius (1618-89), who extolled the virtues of Chinese civilization, science, and technology, Charles de Marguetel de Saint-Denis de Saint-Evremond (1613-1703), and Sir William Temple (1628-99), both of whom were

acquainted with Spinoza. They represent an instance of “Spinozism before Spinoza.” But it was again Bayle who made the most specific connection between Chinese thinking and philosophy and the work of Spinoza. According to Bayle, Spinozism pervades the thought of Cabalists, Sufis, and the Chinese.

Also interesting to many readers will be Israel’s critique of the postmodernist attack on the Enlightenment, and his critical remarks against Alasdair McIntyre and Charles Taylor in particular.[5] This attack states that the Enlightenment was unsuccessful in being able to construct or to establish “a viable secular morality independent of theology and traditional metaphysics” (p. 808). According to Israel, however, this result stems from a failure to distinguish moderate mainstream and Radical Enlightenment (p. 808). Thinkers and writers such as Spinoza, Bayle, Du Marsais, Diderot, d’Argens, Claude Adrien Helvetius, d’Holbach, and Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas Caritat de Condorcet, who followed Spinoza and Bayle “in adopting a fully secular and universalist ethic based exclusively on the ‘common good,’ equity, and equality” (p. 808) essentially make the postmodernist critique beside the point. In Israel’s view, postmodernism and postcolonialism have targeted an obsolete and truncated view of Enlightenment and have not responded adequately to the claims and arguments of Radical Enlightenment. There might be many sources of such a universalist secular ethic and such sources might not have originated in the West, but the Radical Enlightenment of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was *the* “instance,” according to Israel, in western civilization where this radical model of full equality and absolute freedom of expression, in which the unrelenting critique of existing church and political authority, sexual roles, gender differences, empire, and colonialism was first fully articulated. As such, it represents the cornerstone of modernity. But it is not simply that postmodernism and postcolonialism attack a fundamentally outmoded and truncated Enlightenment. Israel claims that they actually *share* in the responsibility for the failure of Enlightenment; that through their confusion and negligence in understanding the true origins of the Radical Enlightenment they actually contribute to its demise. He sees this as a failure of philosophy and the humanities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to teach about the specific origins and nature of modern ideas concerning democracy, equality, individual freedom, full toleration, liberty of expression, and anti-colonialism.

Israel’s book makes its case with an astonishing degree of learnedness and meticulous documentation. He

writes with precision and clarity. Still, I have my doubts about the basic argument of the book, stated on page 867, that the “only kind of philosoph[ies] which could (and can) coherently integrate and hold together such a far-reaching value-condominium in the social, moral, and political world” are “the monist, hylozoic systems of the radical Enlightenment generally labelled ‘Spinozist’ in the ‘long’ eighteenth century” (p. 867). One can reasonably advocate all of the values and moral precepts Israel attributes to the Radical Enlightenment on pragmatic grounds and not be a metaphysical monist. In other words, we do not need to believe in Spinoza’s metaphysics to believe in democracy, freedom of expression, social justice, equality, fairness, and tolerance. We can, but do not need to, align historical truth with progressive values. We can, but are not required to, adopt a naturalist vision of science and philosophy to be thoughtful and moral citizens. And in fact, that is what “postmodernism,” broadly conceived, is all about. Drop the meta-narrative, the epistemological and metaphysical demands, the high-minded requirements of philosophical truth and “rightness” and get on with the important concrete tasks of making the world a better place to live. In a word, as Spinoza himself argued, we don’t need to believe the same things or hold the same metaphysical views to do what is urgently needed on the ground to transform society to become more just, more tolerant, more empathetic, and more peaceful. As Israel says, the philosophical sources, not to mention the social, moral, and political motivations and intentions of the thinkers who constitute the Radical Enlightenment, were extremely disparate: an amazingly diverse body of intellectual influences and inspirations, social, cultural, and institutional transformations. Perhaps no grand unifying scheme exists. La Mettrie, for instance, might have called himself a *Spinoziste*, but in terms of morality and the theory of society, his reduction of *everything* to purely anatomical and physiological processes could not have been more contrary to Spinoza and Spinozism. In his staunch materialism, he was certainly part of Radical Enlightenment, but a very different Radical Enlightenment than that of Diderot.

So why do we need the overarching meta-narrative Israel has provided? Perhaps the diversity and plurality of Enlightenments, even Radical Enlightenments, is not such a bad thing after all. It does not preclude us from exploring and articulating transnational and transcultural connections, unifying motives and themes, strong and enduring influences. It does not preclude us from recognizing Spinoza and Spinozism as incredibly important

components of Radical Enlightenment, and identifying the multifarious ways in which Spinoza both overtly and covertly impacted the strong figures who exemplify the radical democratic stance. Many of the figures of the Radical Enlightenment Israel seems to favor wanted a diverse and pluralistic society free of the tyranny of any one set of ideas and free of all attempts to present and represent things in terms of one single, overarching “system.” They did not want to shut down or foreclose continuous, ongoing investigations into the illusionary “stability” of a single, fundamental proposition or even a set of such propositions. Lessing was one of them. Lessing eschewed such “fundamental propositions” (*Grundsätze*) and rigid systems, remarking that they make one complacent, inactive, lethargic, and proud. If Lessing was a Spinozist, he nevertheless insisted on a lively pluralism in the realm of interpretation and criticism, and I do not think we would want it any other way.

Notes

[1]. Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8 (1969): 3-53; J.G.A. Pocock, *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (New York: Atheneum, 1971); John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1969, repr. 1995).

[2]. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984).

[3]. Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

[4]. Israel’s critique is primarily focused on Robert Darnton’s *The Business of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), and *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: Norton, 1995).

[5]. Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1981); and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Robert Leventhal. Review of Israel, Jonathan I., *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670-1752*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. June, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13250>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.