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Jonathan Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. xvi + 1066 pp. Notes, bibliography, illustrations, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-19-954820-0.

Review essay by Johnson Kent Wright, Arizona State University

A decade ago, at the end of what is still the finest brief survey of the field, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob took stock of the current state of “Enlightenment studies.” The age of the magisterial survey by a solitary Olympian, in the fashion of Cassirer or Gay, they concluded, was long since over. Given the industrial-scale size of the scholarly literature now devoted to the Enlightenment, the future plainly belonged to vast collective projects of the kind to which their own essay was a contribution.[1] At the time, Hunt and Jacob’s prediction seemed safe enough. But a spectacular disconfirmation was already in the works. In the same year, Jonathan Israel, leading historian of the Dutch Republic of his generation, published *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750*, a sweeping reinterpretation of the origins of the Enlightenment, which Israel traced to what tradition called the “Scientific Revolution” and in which he assigned the pivotal role to Spinoza. Four years later there followed the second volume of what was already planned as a trilogy. *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670-1752*, took the story down to the launching of the *Encyclopédie*, when, Israel argued, the “radical” current of Spinoza-Bayle, driven underground for a half-century by a tamer “mainstream” Enlightenment, now began to resurface. The 2008 Isaiah Berlin lectures at Oxford, published as *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* in 2010, gave readers ample warning where Israel was headed with the next volume in the series—moving boldly into territory where neither Cassirer nor Gay dared to tread, onto the terrain of the French Revolution itself.

With *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750-1792*, the completed trilogy is now before us—though even Israel’s warmest admirers may be dismayed to find that the logic of the argument as a whole clearly points to at least one more volume, no doubt of equal heft to that of its predecessors. If Israel’s interpretation of the Enlightenment greatly exceeds those of Cassirer and Gay in both scale and scope—the trilogy has reached 2,967 pages, more than two times longer than their three volumes put together—its reception has formed a sharp contrast with theirs as well. *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* and *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* were never without critics. But both works quickly acquired a canonical status as the major syntheses and unavoidable touchstones of their generation, each enjoying a healthy respect that persists to this day. Nothing like that is in sight for Israel. His account of the origins of the Enlightenment met with skepticism, polite or intense, from the start for exaggerating the role of Spinoza out of all proportion.[2] The appearance of *Enlightenment Contested* and the Berlin lectures, which brought the shape of the argument as a whole into view for the first time, then provoked an extraordinary response—a series of in-depth critiques, from leading practitioners of every stripe, including Theo Verbeek, Harvey Chisick, Anthony La Vopa, Antoine Lilti, Samuel Moyn, and Dan Edelstein.[3] Though all expressed admiration for the breadth of Israel’s reading and display of sheer scholarly stamina, they also reached a strikingly unanimous verdict. In the eyes of his critics, Israel’s interpretation of the Enlightenment is a kind of academic juggernaut, careening destructively through the discipline, in the service of a false idol—Spinoza, supposed demiurge of modernity—and an unsustainable principle—the idea of an umbilical connection between metaphysical monism and political radicalism. The completion of the trilogy will do nothing to temper the complaints—on the contrary, it is certain to take the battle to a higher plane. With *Democratic Enlightenment*, Israel has moved beyond the ambitions of even Cassirer or Gay to an undertaking not

attempted since R. R. Palmer's *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*—a causal account of the relations between the Enlightenment and the cycle of political revolutions that shook the “Atlantic” world at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries.

For his part, Israel, far from being daunted by criticism, obviously relishes a fight. Indeed, the long, three-part introduction that opens *Democratic Enlightenment* exceeds everything that has come before it in assertive pugnacity. Israel begins by declaring that the fact that the Enlightenment has “increasingly come to the fore as the single most important topic, internationally, in modern historical studies,” while simultaneously serving as whipping boy for “Postmodernist theorists” such as Foucault, places a special burden on its historian: “Given the overriding importance and vast scope of this global cultural-philosophical clash today any scholar discussing Enlightenment in broad terms has a clear responsibility to render as accurate, carefully delineated and complete a picture of the phenomenon as possible” (pp. 1-2). In addressing himself to the task, Israel starts with a very bold statement: “The Enlightenment, I maintain, was the most important and profound intellectual, social, and cultural transformation of the Western world since the Middle Ages and the most formative in shaping modernity. It must be understood both as an intellectual movement and mainstream socio-economic and political history” (p. 3). But what, exactly, was able to effect a “transformation” as overarching as that? None of the current candidates for a more precise definition of the Enlightenment are “altogether satisfactory,” in Israel’s view. Peter Gay was not wrong to depict it as a movement for general emancipation, but he greatly exaggerated its unity, failing to grasp the unbridgeable gulf that separated the “mainstream” Enlightenment from its radical vanguard. However, it does not follow that the pluralist approach recently championed by John Pocock is any improvement: “the concept of distinct ‘national’ enlightenments seems to me altogether invalid” (p. 6). What about the abundant recent literature studying the various institutional supports for the diffusion of Enlightened thought and “sociability”—book trade, journals, academies, salons, coffee shops? Israel brushes it all away with an impatient *fin de non recevoir*: “[I]t is neither necessary nor advisable to find room for the cultural history of sociability and social practices in defining the Enlightenment . . . Sociability, in short, is a gigantic red herring” (pp. 4-5).

Only John Robertson, rightly stressing the Enlightenment commitment to “betterment” in his study of the Scottish and Italian variants in *The Case for the Enlightenment*, gets a passing grade for avoiding the extremes of monism and pluralism and the snares of “sociability.” But Robertson still suffers from “four considerable limitations”: he begins the Enlightenment in 1740—“simply too late a starting point”; he fails to see that the desire for “human amelioration” owed more to “a general transformation in human thinking” than to “economic processes, social practices, inherent national characteristics real or alleged, imperial expansion, religious revelations, rediscovering ancient texts or ancient constitutions”; he underestimates the extent to which Enlightenment thinkers demanded “a giant leap forward, a vast revolutionary change”—leading directly to the American and French Revolutions; and he forgets the universalism that is “one of the quintessential characteristics of the Enlightenment” (p. 5). Making the necessary corrections to Robertson, Israel thus arrives at his own definition, according to which the Enlightenment actually extended “from around 1680 to around 1800”:

Enlightenment, then, is defined here as a partly unitary phenomenon operative on both sides of the Atlantic, and eventually everywhere, consciously committed to the notion of bettering humanity in this world through a fundamental, revolutionary transformation discarding the ideas, habits and traditions of the past either wholly or partially, this last point being bitterly contested among enlighteners; Enlightenment operated usually by revolutionizing ideas and constitutional principles, first, and society afterwards, but sometimes by proceeding in reverse order, uncovering and making better known the principles of a great ‘revolution’ that had already happened. All Enlightenment is by definition closely linked to revolution. Here I think is an accurate, historically grounded, complete definition (p. 7).

The Enlightenment thus defined, Israel turns next to its causes. “There were two main categories of causes that can be usefully classified as intellectual-scientific, on the one hand, and social-cultural on the other.” The “factors of destabilization” that comprised the first were many: the “Scientific Revolution,” the physics of Copernicus and Galileo at the fore; but also “the Renaissance’s rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy,” especially skepticism; the “advance of Western Averroism in the later Middle Ages and the inability of Aquinas’ powerful synthesis of reason and faith to effect a fully satisfactory reconciliation”; and “the rise of a literary movement known as *libertinage érudit*, a tendency hinting at religiously and morally subversive ideas that operated in a veiled, hidden manner” (p. 8). As for “social-cultural” causes of the Enlightenment, Israel specifies only two:

[T]he stalemate that ended the Wars of Religion and untidy compromises embodied in the Peace of Westphalia” and “the unprecedented expansion of the urban context especially in a few great capitals such as London, Paris, Vienna, Berlin, and Petersburg but also in the closely bunched Dutch towns, creating a new sphere of cultural cosmopolitanism fed by imported products and sometimes people from Asia, Africa, and the Americas and social and cultural fluidity and vagueness blurring traditional class distinctions (pp. 8-9).

No further inquiry into economics is necessary, however: “It is not vital to suppose, meanwhile, that anything like a socio-economic class shift of the sort Marxist historians tended to predicate was under way . . . Leading representatives of Enlightenment thought came from aristocratic, bourgeois, and artisan backgrounds and the Enlightenment movement itself always remained socially heterogeneous and non-class specific, in terms of its spokesmen, objectives, and socio-economic consequences” (p. 9). As for those “spokesmen,” they were a magnificent seven, at the outset: Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, Bayle, and Leibniz. Five of these heroes, alas, aimed low, settling for various kinds of reconciliation or compromise with “authority and faith.” Bayle and Spinoza alone followed a truly revolutionary path, though only one reached the destination: “However, Spinoza’s contribution was arguably the most crucial in crystallizing what is here termed the Radical Enlightenment, primarily because his thought goes further than that of the other six in undermining belief in revelation, divine providence, and miracles, and hence ecclesiastical authority, and also because he was the first major advocate of freedom of thought and the press as distinct from freedom of conscience and the first great democratic philosopher” (p. 10).

Having arrived at the main bone of contention, Israel makes it clear that he will not be yielding an inch to his critics: “Spinoza’s seemingly incomparable cogency (which greatly troubled Voltaire in his last years) cannot be dismissed, as many try to, as some sort of philosophical judgement on my part. Rather it is a historical fact that in the late eighteenth century, many people believed or feared (often to their own consternation) that one-substance monism, at least to all appearances, was much the most formidably coherent philosophy obtainable” (p. 15). The problem, however, is to explain how that “historical fact” came about. For the triumph of Radical Enlightenment was a long time coming, catching even many of its sympathizers by surprise when it arrived. For most of the century, Israel explains, the radical tradition remained far offstage, confined to “tiny underground networks,” the legacy of Spinoza “intellectually central to European civilization but socially and politically wholly marginal” (p. 13). Down virtually to the eve of the French Revolution, center stage was occupied by the “moderate” Enlightenment, which itself came in two distinct varieties: “on the one hand, the Lockean-Newtonian construct dominant in Britain, America, Spain, France, and Holland; and, on the other, the Leibnizian-Wolffian tradition dominant in Germany, central Europe, Scandinavia, and Russia” (p. 12). The tide only began to shift after 1750, and it was well after this that “the radical tendency surged up from the underground to become briefly hegemonic in the 1780s and 1790s.” For all the giddy expectations this aroused in a figure such as Paine, the triumph of Radical Enlightenment was fleeting indeed: “Its successes in the years 1788-92, however, were very partial and its philosophical principles rapidly rejected and perverted by Robespierre and the Jacobins . . . And although the ‘revolution of reason’ was briefly reconstituted in the years 1795-1800, Napoleon (while incorporating some parts of

it) shortly after 1800 definitively replaced its freedoms and democratic contours with a new kind of authoritarianism. Nevertheless, the Radical Enlightenment survived through the nineteenth century, especially in the minds of great artists and poets, like Heine and George Eliot, as the hope for a free, just, equitable, democratic, and secular society in the future” (pp. 13-14). A full treatment of the Jacobin “perversion” of Radical Enlightenment, its brief resuscitation during the Directory, and its final burial by Napoleon—not to mention its afterlife in Heine and George Eliot—await a further volume or volumes in the series. The task Israel sets himself in *Democratic Enlightenment* is daunting enough—to explain how the hitherto marginal Radical Enlightenment suddenly overtook and engulfed the “moderate mainstream” at the end of the 1780s, so as to shake the entire world.

Turning, then, to a preview of his explanation, Israel wants to make one point clear: “Some critics mistakenly suppose that I claim the Radical Enlightenment achieved its partial success in the late eighteenth century through the power of ideas alone. This criticism has been made time and again but it is completely misplaced” (p. 14). What is his explanation, then? It is two-fold. “The principal reason for the partial successes of radical thought in the 1780s and 1790s was the almost total failure of the moderate Enlightenment to deliver reforms that much of enlightened society had for decades been pressing for” (p. 14). What were these reforms? Realization of religious toleration and freedom of speech and of the press; abolition of serfdom in Central and Eastern Europe and the “black slavery” that “marred the Americas”; modernization of archaic legal systems and establishment of equality before the law; establishment of political democracy and overthrow of patriarchy. But why did these reforms not succeed?

The official Enlightenment of the courts and churches broadly failed in their Enlightenment reform programmes extending from Chile to Russia and from Scandinavia to Naples, because moderate Enlightenment, dependent as it was on the backing of kings, aristocrats, and the ecclesiastical arm, was incapable of delivering the emancipatory reforms many others besides radical *philosophes* wanted (albeit even more people opposed them). It was because social grievance was widespread that radical ideas proved able to mobilize support and gain an important field of action, an opportunity widened by the fact that one-substance monism yielded a metaphysics and moral philosophy apparently more consistent and free of logical difficulties than any philosophical alternative—at least prior to the rise of Kantianism as a major cultural force in the late 1780s (p. 14).

The rise of Kantianism notwithstanding, a further step was needed for “one-substance monism” to prevail, what Israel calls “the evidence of the familiar mechanism of modern revolutions.” For the period 1775-1810 saw “a truly astounding number of revolutions successful or unsuccessful in America, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, Ireland, Peru, New Granada (Columbia), Haiti, Italy, Spain, and the Rhineland” (p. 15). What “mechanism” does Israel have in mind?

Except for the American revolution which followed a different pattern, all these revolutions were orchestrated by tiny batches of mostly strikingly unrepresentative editors, orators, pamphleteers, and professional agitators or renegade nobles, like Mirabeau and Volney—and practically never businessmen, lawyers, or office-holders. These entirely unrepresentative intellectuals captured a mass following by seizing on and amplifying popular protest arising from widespread discontent into a formidable political force . . . This cultural phenomenon—revolutionary leaderships ranging from Germany to Peru that are totally heterogeneous and unrepresentative socially but highly cohesive ideologically—is in many ways the key to understanding both the French Revolution and the saga of the Radical Enlightenment itself (p. 16).

But is this not simply a reversion to the oldest and hoariest reactionary explanation for the Revolution, *la faute à Voltaire*? Israel does not shrink from the reply:

[W]hat I am arguing is that the Radical Enlightenment—and not the Enlightenment as such—is the only important direct cause of the French Revolution understood as a total transformation of the political, legal, cultural, and educational framework of French life, administration, and society. Everything else, the financial difficulties that brought the French ancien regime monarchy crashing down, discontent of the peasantry, pre-1789 legal politics, and the French nobility’s tenacious promotion of its power and privileges, however crucial to the mechanics of the historical process that made the Revolution possible, was entirely secondary, in fact tertiary, in shaping the revolutionary outcome” (p. 16).

In other words, Burke, Barruel, and Maistre were “partly right” in blaming the Revolution on “*la philosophie moderne*”—they just accused the wrong *philosophes*.

Israel is not quite through, however. He starts his introduction’s third section by emphasizing the “fundamental and irresolvable duality” between “mainstream” and Radical Enlightenment—“the chief factor shaping the Enlightenment’s course” and “the key to any proper grasp of the Enlightenment”: “Between these two consciously opposed and rival enlightenments, one wanting to tear the old house of ancien regime society down and put another in its place, the other seeking to modify and effect repairs on the old structure, given us by divine providence, and hence basically good, obviously, no compromise or half-way house was really possible” (pp. 19, 20, 18). The emphasis is necessary, “because questioning the link between Spinozism and political radicality has recently become one plank of the growing literature devoted to attacking the concept of Radical Enlightenment underpinning this series of volumes. However necessary the fuel of social discontent in making revolutions, monist systems were in fact indispensable to the rise of a generalized radical outlook which was, in turn, the principal cause of the French Revolution and the other revolutionary movements of the late eighteenth century” (p. 22). This was the approach that Lilti, La Vopa, Moyn, Stuurman, Chisick, et al., called “reductive”—but they “could not be more mistaken.” It is true that the representatives of the “moderate mainstream” always commanded a much wider audience than the radical few: “But this embedded preference could not help the oppressed peasantries of Europe, religious minorities, serfs, slaves, tradesmen resenting monopolies and privileged businesses, imprisoned debtors, and other victims of an archaic legal system and penal code, and underprivileged colonists, including the Spanish American Creole; only radical ideas could” (p. 23). This panorama of “social grievance” is the “real, the important social context” to which historians must attend, and not the “cultural spaces and trends identified by Chartier, Darnton and their disciples, or the ambiguities and contradictions so beloved by the Postmodernists” (p. 23). But what about Harvey Chisick’s complaint, in particular, that Israel has so far failed to provide much evidence for so wide a diffusion of “Spinozism” itself? Israel responds, “This is an absurd objection and one that betrays a complete failure to grasp not just the basic argument for *la philosophie* but the processes of diffusion and cultural reorientation we are dealing with. No sensible historian proposes a decisive spread of philosophical ideas among the general population. Philosophical ideas have never spread broadly among any population. But they do sometimes penetrate where it counts” (p. 26). No prizes for guessing where and when such “penetration” occurred:

The real question, if we are to construct a meaningful social history of ideas, is to ask from where the revolutionary leaders most effectively voicing popular grievance and frustration before the Jacobin takeover—Mirabeau, Sieyès, Brissot, Volney, Condorcet, Bailly, Cloots, Foster, Roederer, Gorani, and others, whether directing the Assemblée Nationale, the Paris municipality, the Mainz revolution, or the main revolutionary journals—derive their egalitarian and democratic concepts? What is the complexion of the ideas, proposals, and slogans enabling them to lead *l’opinion publique*? Not many coherent suggestions have been advanced; and there is only one convincing answer: the Radical Enlightenment (p. 26).

So ends the introduction to *Democratic Enlightenment*. As the extended citations should make clear, it is a potboiler, which risks distracting attention from the considerable attractions, even the grandeur of much of what follows. There is a noticeable shift in the register of Israel's writing once he turns to his primary work, presenting and analyzing the chain of interconnected "controversies" that form the backbone of his story. A good deal of the introduction's bombast recedes amid the painstaking reconstruction of intellectual debates, interweaving extended contextual set-up, and close textual analysis. Admirers of *Radical Enlightenment* and *Enlightenment Contested* will find the same virtues of these books projected on to an even wider canvas. First, there is the genuinely awe-inspiring scale of Israel's reading, in both the primary sources and in the secondary literature around them, drawn from around the globe in at least seven languages. Where one is able to make any judgment at all—a tiny fraction of the whole, for most of us mortals—his prep-work looks exhaustive and immaculate. Israel's reading lists will form the starting-point for the work of generations of students, it is safe to predict. At the same time, no reader can fail to be struck by Israel's narrative skill at piecing together so many different episodes of intellectual combat in set-pieces that are typically informative and entertaining in equal parts. Israel has a knack for storytelling that is rare among historians of ideas. However, this does not mean that the introduction and its concerns are in any way detachable from the rest of the book. On the contrary, the truly astonishing feature of *Democratic Enlightenment* is the extent to which this gargantuan display of erudition is indeed put to the service of the agenda set forth in the introduction, down to the smallest detail. For those who find that agenda compelling, the completion of Israel's trilogy will seem a magnificent achievement—the realization of the dream of bringing together Gay's "Enlightenment" and Palmer's "Age of the Democratic Revolution" at long last in a single totalizing vision of the advent of philosophical and political "modernity." For anyone who harbors doubts about the schema, *Democratic Enlightenment* risks looking like something very different—a vast and imposing edifice, resting on dangerously unstable foundations.

There is only space here to indicate the basic shape of the structure and to note one or two of its weak spots. The thirty-four chapters that follow the introduction to *Democratic Enlightenment* are grouped into five parts. The first—"The Radical Challenge"—presents a string of interconnected episodes, illustrating the consequences of the public debut of "radical" thought after mid-century. Moving geographically from western to central Europe, Israel starts with a deft analysis of the philosophical debates over "nature" and "providence" inspired by the Lisbon earthquake; then describes the epic struggle over the *Encyclopédie* during the 1750s, followed by an account of Rousseau's split with Diderot and defection from the philosophic camp; turns next to Voltaire and his regrouping, after the Versailles and Prussian debacles—evidence of "a faltering mainstream"; canvasses the various *anti-philosophes* who had correctly grasped the challenge of *De l'esprit*; and concludes with a look at the German zone, where the residual legacy of Leibniz and Wolff faced an emergent radicalism, with both the aging Reimarus and the young Kant searching for a middle ground between them. Israel already conceded, in the introduction, that Rousseau would be the exception that proved the rule for his conceptual schema: "Only Rousseau persistently combined a strong commitment to deism and divine providence with the complaint that all men are in chains and all societies and existing institutions fundamentally corrupt. But Rousseau, as we shall see, was a strange mixture of radical, moderate, and Counter-Enlightenment tendencies and on all sides continually accused of contradicting himself" (p. 21). Here, in the first of two chapters on Rousseau, the same warning light comes on: "Rousseau, as has often been noted, belongs to the Enlightenment in some respects, but, at the same time, was (or rather, became), its critic and foe." A full explanation of the anomaly lies some nineteen chapters ahead. No need to worry, however, since an *ad hominem* resolution of the problem is already conveniently at hand: "It must give pause for thought that an impressive list of honourable men denounced Rousseau's hypocrisy, contrariness, paradoxes, and bad nature, headed by d'Alembert, Hume, Voltaire, Helvétius, and Diderot, whilst no one of comparable stature ever championed Rousseau's integrity" (p. 109-110).

The second part of *Democratic Enlightenment*—"Rationalizing the *Ancien Régime*"—completes the geographical tour of Europe, focusing now on zones in which attempts at "enlightened" reform revealed

the limits of the “moderate mainstream” in one fashion or another: Scotland, with Hume demonstrating the connection between philosophical caution and political moderation, followed by cameos devoted to Smith and Ferguson, Kames, and Reid; then a surprisingly—perhaps symptomatically—cursory look at “enlightened despotism,” confined to the German and Austrian zones, with a coda devoted to the fine arts; a glance northward to Protestant Germany, focusing on the *Fragmentenstreit* that swirled around Lessing; then a turn to the south, to Italy, featuring Beccaria and Verri, then a more radical fringe to the north and south, in Milan and Naples; and finally, a very welcome chapter on the Bourbon reforms in Spain, with Olavide playing a starring role. Part three—“Europe and the Remaking of the World”—takes the tour overseas, beginning with a winning portrait of Raynal and the *Histoire philosophique des deux Indes*, “the book that made a world ‘revolution.’” From there, Israel moves in a vast circle, from successful rebellion in British North America to its failure in the Ibero-American south; then across the Pacific to the Dutch East Indies, Japan, and China, and finally arriving at Catherine’s Russia, which, Diderot himself stymied, produced its first genuine “radical” in Radischev. Here, the sore thumb, to match that of Rousseau, is plainly the American Revolution. On the one hand, it is “One of the greatest, most formative events of modern history . . . of immense intrinsic significance” (p. 443). On the other, its achievements were unfortunately the work of “moderate” Enlightenment alone. Israel does what he can to ferret out any traces of radical admixture, in Paine (who had read Dragonetti and Raynal, after all), Jefferson (capable of using the “broadly Spinozistic” phrase “laws of nature and nature’s God,” and who was suspicious of the Constitution of 1787), and Rush; on the campuses of Princeton, Harvard, Yale, and Columbia; and in the state constitution of Pennsylvania. However, the “great political debate about liberty, constitution, and order that took place between 1763 and 1789 in America”—the object, let us recall, of the epilogue to Peter Gay’s *The Enlightenment*, treating the Constitution of 1787 as the supreme realization of its principles in action—here merits no more than two cursory pages (pp. 457-9). “The slavery issue, Amerindian exclusion, and a defective toleration”—such was the unhappy fruit of the victory of “moderate” over “radical” Enlightenment in North America.

Meanwhile, back in the Old World, the same period saw the true “breakthrough” of Radical Enlightenment at last. This was to be seen initially in a string of “Spinozistic controversies,” the object of Part Four of *Democratic Enlightenment*. In France, there were the “bombs” thrown by Holbach, whose clear and present danger was grasped by Voltaire, even in his dotage; and in Germany, the *Pantheismusstreit*—“or more correctly *Spinozismusstreit*”—with Goethe and Schiller contributing vivid representation of radical ideas in art. These initial public appearances by Radical Enlightenment all ended in “inconclusive deadlock,” however—not least because of the presence of potent rivals. First, there was Rousseau, to whose political thought proper Israel now returns in a brief but crucial chapter. There is no denying that Rousseau took some steps toward “the modern conception of democratic sovereignty”—indeed, “It has long been realized by some historians of political thought that the main derivations and affinities in Rousseau’s conception of democracy derive from Spinoza rather than the contractual conceptions of Hobbes and Locke.” But the same historians—two, anyway: Israel cites articles by “an alert Spanish scholar,” María José Villaverde, and his own *Radical Enlightenment*—have also pointed out “that the divergences from common ground between Spinoza and Rousseau, and especially in their rival visions of democracy, are even more crucial than the affinities” (p. 637). Above all, there was all the difference in the world between Diderot’s and d’Holbach’s conception of the “general will” and that of Rousseau: where the former descended directly from Spinoza, identifying “will” with rationality and universality, Rousseau’s “general will” severed the links with both. This retreat to “particularism” not only explains Rousseau’s own racism and misogyny, but it opened the door for exit from Enlightenment altogether—for the full embrace of “Counter-Enlightenment” by his Jacobin acolytes. Off to the east, a similar dynamic could be traced in the Kantian ascendancy that issued from the *Pantheismusstreit*—a victory for “moderate” rather than “Counter-Enlightenment,” to be sure, but one that yielded the same baleful racism in its author, decried by his compatriot Forster, “a future revolutionary leader and egalitarian publicist who was primarily an ethnographer but housed a good deal of ‘philosophy’ in his library” (pp. 737-8).

The fifth and last part of *Democratic Enlightenment* is entitled simply “Revolution.” Beginning with France, an initial chapter races through the entire period from the start of the Pre-Revolution to the fall of the Bastille in a mere ten pages; two succeeding chapters devote four times as many pages to the “The Diffusion”—of the literature of Radical Enlightenment in the same period, that is—with Holbach playing the starring role. From there, Israel turns to the circulation, necessarily more clandestine, of the same kind of writing in Germanic Europe over a much longer period, going back to 1776. Clipped accounts of the failed “Small-State Revolutions” (in Geneva, Aachen, Liège, the Austrian Netherlands) and “the Dutch Democratic Revolution” of the 1780s—each of them the expression of Radical Enlightenment in action, naturally—follow. The penultimate chapter of *Democratic Enlightenment* returns just as cursorily to the political history of the first year of the revolution in France. Israel sprints past the Night of 4 August, the Declaration of Rights, the rejection of bicameralism and compromise over the royal veto, but the political narrative trails off without explanation in the middle of 1790, having only gestured at the nationalization of church property and the launching of the *assignats*, the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, and the abolition of nobility. The important thing, the second half of the chapter makes clear, is not so much the “what” of the Revolution as the “who.” Israel insists over and over that whatever was done was the work of a “tiny batch” of “anti-Rousseauist” adepts of the Radical Enlightenment: “Mirabeau, Sieyès, Brissot, Cloots, Volney, Condorcet, and so forth” (p. 933).

If any explanation were needed for the asymmetries of attention and temporal zigzags of part five of *Democratic Enlightenment*, and the abrupt hitting of the pause-button at its end, Israel furnishes it in his final chapter, “Epilogue: 1789 as Intellectual Revolution.” The bumptious register of the introduction returns. Israel asserts, “The argument of this third part of our general history of the Enlightenment has focused on the ‘revolution in the mind’, a dramatic shift in the balance between moderate and radical Enlightened thought which was, in turn, the chief cause of the ‘General Revolution’ of the late eighteenth century.” Any attempt to distinguish between “philosophical” and “social” dimensions of the Enlightenment is “a giant delusion”: “There is no such thing as a non-philosophical account of the Enlightenment and could not possibly be” (p. 937). As for the Revolution itself, the fact that it “was caused by ‘philosophy’” was obvious not just to Lichtenberg, but to all discerning observers at the time—but not just any “philosophy”: “One kind of Enlightenment, anchored in Spinoza originally and in the view of Voltaire, and many others, still so anchored in the late eighteenth century (despite the efforts of a growing number of scholars today to deny this) was inherently revolutionary; its counterpart, on the moderate side, inherently anti-revolutionary and inclined to ally with religious authority and tradition as well as monarchy and aristocracy” (p. 941). Little wonder then, that the advent of the “General Revolution” spelt the end of the “moderate mainstream,” which now split in two, “handing the initiative to outright reaction and Counter-Enlightenment, on the one hand, and the revolutionary underground on the other” (p. 941). Once above ground, however, Radical Enlightenment’s moment in the sun proved very brief indeed. *Democratic Enlightenment* concludes—strangely or appropriately?—with the early history of the Panthéon, the royal church converted to revolutionary mausoleum, with Mirabeau, “the epitome of a new kind of hero to replace the corrupt, outmoded heroes of tradition,” its first honoree. Mirabeau was followed, alas, by that supreme representative of the “moderate mainstream,” Voltaire; nor did Diderot or d’Holbach or even Helvétius stand the slightest chance of *panthéonisation*. Things got much worse, in fact. By the time that Marat took Mirabeau’s place in the crypt, the Jacobin hi-jacking of the Revolution was well underway. The Terror it soon unleashed had nothing to do with the conduct of foreign war or suppression of civil conflict, much less the principles of 1789: “It was a full-blooded Counter-Enlightenment,” whose key victims were indeed that “tiny batch” of Radical *philosophes*—Condorcet, de Gouges, Cloots—with Paine barely escaping.

The brief come-back of Radical Enlightenment after Thermidor meant that Marat lost his perch, at least. But Napoleon restored the Panthéon to the Catholic Church in 1804, closing the circle. The “general revolution” had failed, at least in the short term—despite the fact, noted by Lichtenberg as early as 1790, “that it had become obvious to any intelligent, honorable, and erudite person that

Spinozism was the most cogent among the philosophies” (p. 949) and the fact, insisted upon by Holbach, that “*La philosophie* is beyond most people’s grasp but even so it can transform everyone’s life for the better bringing great benefits” (p. 95). At the very end, Israel feels “obliged to muse somewhat on the nature of causality.” He bristles once more at the suggestion that he has fallen prey to “the seductive simplicity of monocausality”: “These two closely linked ‘revolutions’, the Enlightenment and the political revolutions that followed, obviously had an enormous number of causes and these of many kinds.” An “and yet” is not long in coming, however: “And yet in the case of the French Revolution, however numerous the causes that shaped its general context, it seems clear that there loomed in fact one particular ‘big’ cause which had no rivals whatsoever when it came to carving out the specific legislation, constitutional principles, new institutions, and the transformed rhetoric of politics—and that is the Radical Enlightenment” (pp. 950-51). True, the “democratic enlightenment” it launched in the late eighteenth century, which drove “a powerful wedge between the conservatism of ignorance and the conservatism of landownership and money,” was almost immediately halted and driven back by “Robespierre’s Counter-Enlightenment.” But it “resumed after a fashion in the post-Second World War era,” and perhaps still has legs even now: “But in response to today’s fundamentalism, anti-secularism, Neo-Burkeanism, Postmodernism, and blatant unwillingness to clamp down on powerful vested interests, it is at least conceivable that the universalism and social democracy of radical thought might advance again and this time drive the wedge home harder. There are few grounds for optimism. Yet, it is intriguing to think that the programme of the radical *philosophes* could perhaps be completed yet” (p. 951)

The sheer scale of *Democratic Enlightenment*—third volume in a three-thousand-page trilogy—is such as to suggest caution, at the least, to any critic. Moreover, appraisal of the project as a whole can only be provisional at this point. The logic of Israel’s argument, and the sudden termination of its narrative less than a year into the French Revolution, plainly point to a further volume in the series, taking the revolutionary saga of “Radical Enlightenment” at least as far as 1800 or 1804. Until we have a much fuller account of the Jacobin “Counter-Enlightenment” and what Israel regards as a fainter radical comeback after Thermidor, ended by Bonaparte, critical commentary must remain tentative, liable to later qualification or correction. Having said that, it may be worth starting with some consideration of the formal characteristics of *Democratic Enlightenment*. Israel’s writing itself has attracted surprisingly little comment from critics. But the citations above are sufficient to demonstrate how singular is his prose, unlikely to be confused with that of any other historian. Two traits deserve special attention. One, which is virtually Israel’s signature, is to combine emphatic, sweeping assertion with equally forceful qualification or outright reversal, immediately afterward—with the emphasis typically supplied by a cascade of high-pressure adjectives and adverbs. “Overriding,” “vast,” “giant,” “gigantic,” “immense,” “thoroughly,” “completely,” “wholly,” “totally”—Israel rarely lets an important noun or verb go without some such adornment. We have just seen a particularly striking example of an unembarrassed about-face—the impatient dismissal of the charge of “monocausality” (“We would appear here to be as remote from what one historian has called ‘the seductive simplicity of monocausality’ as one could possibly find oneself”), followed eight lines later by the claim that over the French Revolution “there loomed in fact one particular ‘big’ cause that had no rivals whatsoever.” But examples could be cited ad nauseam, from any number of head-snapping oscillations (the Spinozan tradition “intellectually central to European civilization but socially and politically wholly marginal”; “the main derivations and affinities in Rousseau’s conception of democracy derive from Spinoza rather than the contractual conceptions of Hobbes and Locke”—and yet “the divergences from common ground between Spinoza and Rousseau, and especially in their rival visions of democracy, are even more crucial than their affinities”) down to the hapless oxymoron of the Enlightenment as “partly unitary.” Elsewhere, adverbs serve repeatedly to muddy the water: “One-substance monism yielded a metaphysics and moral philosophy apparently more consistent and free of logical difficulties than any philosophical alternative”; “Spinoza’s contribution was arguably the most crucial in crystallizing what is here termed the Radical Enlightenment”; “Spinoza’s seemingly incomparable cogency”—but “apparently,” “arguably,” and “seemingly” to or by whom, exactly? Do these intensify or qualify the verbs to which they are attached? On occasion, one adverb

can even neutralize another: e.g., those “mostly strikingly unrepresentative” revolutionaries—although these do, a line or two later, return as “wholly unrepresentative.” The effect of Israel’s prose on the reader is a constant sensation of whiplash, as if a passenger in a vehicle not quite under its driver’s control.

A second formal feature of *Democratic Enlightenment* then over-corrects for this—its author’s use and abuse of capitalization. Early in his Introduction, Israel issues a sage warning against the anachronism of the basic terminology at work in the text: “[I]t is necessary to remember that the very term ‘Enlightenment’ we use today and its French equivalent *Lumières*, or Spanish *Ilustración*, are to a large extent later nineteenth- and twentieth-century constructions—though the German *Aufklärung* was more widely used in the late eighteenth century.”[4] Among the reasons for keeping this in mind, Israel goes on to say, is to forestall the interference of certain misleading contemporary associations with the term: “Especially alien to the eighteenth-century concept—and sometimes pernicious in our contemporary usage—is the today widespread assumption in some quarters that we in the Western world are ‘enlightened’ and need to defend and preserve a supposedly shared body of values” (p. 4). Having given the advice, however, Israel ignores it entirely. The thousand pages that follow contain not a single reflection on the nineteenth- and twentieth-century construction of the idea of “the Enlightenment,” nor scarcely even any scrutiny of its actual eighteenth-century prodromes—“*lumières*,” “enlightenment,” “*illuminismo*,” “*ilustración*,” “*Aufklärung*.” Instead, not only does Israel proceed to prolific use of “the Enlightenment,” undeterred by any scruples about its anachronism, as often as not he drops the definite article altogether, yielding a usage embarrassingly close to contemporary religious understandings of the term: “All Enlightenment by definition is closely linked to revolution.” The special pleading by means of capitalization is even more telling, however, when it comes to the modifiers. Israel has no choice in regard to the “French,” “British,” or “American” Enlightenments, to which he refers abundantly, while also disputing their very existence. But only two adjectives really count, and here his procedure is one of inconsistent consistency, to adapt the Kantian phrase—comically so. As the above citations suggest, “Radical Enlightenment” is almost invariably capitalized throughout the text and “moderate Enlightenment” and its synonym “mainstream Enlightenment” virtually never. Indeed, so evidently allergic is Israel to the very idea of “moderate Enlightenment” that he typically replaces “Enlightenment” with the sub-substantive “mainstream,” leaving the disgraced pairing in lower-case—“the moderate mainstream.” Consistency would have at least bestowed the dignity of capital letters on the poor thing, though Israel, mercifully, has at least left the particularly unhappy synonym he adopts for “*philosophe*”—“enlightener”—in lower case too.

Hypertensive vocabulary, spastic syntax, manipulative capitalization—these might be seen as nothing more than authorial tics, arousing the reader’s irritation or amusement as the case may be, but otherwise scarcely affecting the substance of *Democratic Enlightenment*. But that something more is at stake, at least in regard to this last trait, can be seen by turning to the first of three major substantive issues posed by the book. Israel makes it abundantly clear that his understanding of “Radical Enlightenment”—the distinction between it and a “moderate mainstream”—is the pivot on which not just *Democratic Enlightenment*, but the entire trilogy turns. As we have seen, the “fundamental and irresolvable duality” between the two is “the key to any proper grasp of the Enlightenment” and “the chief factor in shaping the Enlightenment’s course” (pp. 20, 19). Now, it is worth noting, to start with, that the concept of “Radical Enlightenment” obviously runs its own risks of anachronism. Like the noun, the adjective has roots in the eighteenth century but is essentially on loan from the nineteenth. In this case, descending from Whig circles in the epoch of the American and French Revolutions, “radicalism” eventually came to designate one of the three main currents of nineteenth-century party politics, in Britain and France in particular: to the “right” of “radicals” sat “liberals” and then “conservatives,” with the whole trio, at the respectable center of the political bandwidth, flanked by extremes at either side. Not all of that baggage has accompanied the adjective “radical” in its migrations, but it is important to keep the wider spectrum in mind. In any case, as is well known, Israel was not the coiner of “Radical Enlightenment.” Credit for that belongs, of course, to Margaret Jacob,

whose path-breaking *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* was published in 1981. Adapting the periodization set forth by Paul Hazard in *La crise de la conscience européenne*, Jacob aimed at providing a sharper and more accurate account of the *origins* of the Enlightenment. These were to be traced, in her view, to a loose coterie of chiefly British and French thinkers—Toland, Collins, Bayle, Rousset de Missy, etc.—whose paths crossed creatively in Dutch exile, in the wake of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes and the Glorious Revolution. Inheritors of both the intransigent republicanism of the English Revolution and the vanguard thought of the Scientific Revolution, the “radicals” placed themselves at the center of an international network for the diffusion of these currents of thought in the first decades of the eighteenth century, which proved, in turn, to be the launching pad for the High Enlightenment that followed. Jacob’s *Radical Enlightenment* belongs to that happy class of books that manage to launch whole research programs. Over the next two decades a large number of scholars followed in her path, tracing the circulation of manuscripts and publications across Europe, in the process both enriching and, naturally, altering Jacob’s original conception of the “radical Enlightenment.”

Eventually, these scholars were joined by Jonathan Israel, whose previous specialization had not been intellectual, but economic and imperial history—essentially focusing on the relations between the Dutch Republic and the Spanish cocoon from which it had emerged. Israel’s initial foray into intellectual history followed Jacob very closely. Toward the end of the book that remains his true *chef-d’oeuvre*, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall, 1477-1806*, Israel devoted a brief chapter to “The Enlightenment,” describing the Dutch contribution to the wider movement. A tiny section within it – two pages – took up “The ‘Radical’ Enlightenment,” presenting it as a minor current, running from Spinoza’s critique of revealed religion down to Boulainvilliers and Rousset de Missy, from whom it then flowed into the vast ocean of the mature Enlightenment.[5] There was no hint here of the drastic reconceptualization of the field that was to come with the trilogy, nor of whatever alchemy produced the change, for with *Radical Enlightenment* in 2001, Israel adopted an understanding of the central concept not only at odds with that of Jacob, but with it, an interpretation of the Enlightenment as a whole that was absolutely *sui generis*. Two features were virtually without precedent in scholarly writing on the subject. First, there was a dramatic backdating of the Enlightenment, such that it now encompassed, in Israel’s eyes, much of what had long been conventionally known as the “Scientific Revolution.” Hazard had been right, Israel argued, to see a “crisis of the European mind” as the antechamber to the Enlightenment. But the “crisis” had to be moved back some thirty years, to 1650-1680, when the philosophical turmoil marked by the “advent of Cartesianism” was resolved by the “rise of philosophical radicalism,” whose greatest achievement was Spinoza’s fusion of ontology, epistemology, ethics, and politics in a single, irresistible “system” of thought.[6] That is, of course, the second great novelty of Israel’s account, by contrast with Jacob, or anyone else—divesting Spinoza of less exalted epithets (icon of the “Scientific Revolution,” “rationalist” philosopher), in order to re-brand him as something far grander, the incarnation of “Radical Enlightenment.” The latter concept did not designate, as it did for Jacob and most of the scholars following in her wake, a set of transitional figures and ideas, mediating between political and intellectual radicalisms of the seventeenth century and the Enlightenment of the eighteenth. For Israel, “Radical Enlightenment,” as crystallized in Spinoza’s *oeuvre*, was the pristine form of “Enlightenment” *tout court*. What began around 1680—three years after the death of Spinoza—was not the transition *to* the Enlightenment, but the *retreat from* its original shape. The “intellectual counter-offensive” at work here was launched, not by conventional defenders of throne and altar, but by the founding fathers of “moderate Enlightenment”—Newton, Locke, Leibniz, Wolff. But for all of their apparent success in driving Radical Enlightenment underground, the latter remained the star of the show. The first installment of Israel’s trilogy ended with a long concluding section describing the “Clandestine Progress of the Radical Enlightenment (1680-1750).” Jacob’s cast of characters at last stepped on stage, but chiefly as carriers of one kind of “Spinozism” or another, the core of whose message was eventually passed on from La Mettrie to Diderot. A brief epilogue vouchsafed a glimpse of the French Revolution itself on the far horizon, through the eyes of Rousseau, whose thought, here at

any rate, revealed a “Janus-faced mixing of elements from both the radical and mainstream Enlightenment.”[7]

Five years later, *Enlightenment Contested* covered virtually the same ground as its predecessor—1670-1752, rather than 1650-1750—but in greater detail and from a slightly different angle, Israel now making more central use of the idea of “modernity” as an organizing principle. But here, too, the “contest” in question was not one between the Enlightenment and an enemy external to it, but rather a struggle *within* it. For “modernity,” Israel explained, “designates two chronologically and factually inseparable and partly overlapping, but yet conceptually distinct phenomena, one philosophical, the other historical, which the reader needs to keep notionally apart.” *Philosophically*, there is no doubt of the overriding importance of Radical Enlightenment, the tradition of thought descending from Spinoza, in the “making of modernity”—this last understood as “an interlocking complex of abstract concepts of which individual liberty, democracy, freedom of expression, comprehensive toleration, equality racial and sexual, freedom of lifestyle, full secularization of all legal institutions and most publicly maintained educational establishments, together with a wholly secular morality based on equity, are the most important . . .”[8] *Historically*, however, it is true that for a time, certain promoters of “moderate Enlightenment”—Locke, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Hume—managed to steal a march on their radical *confrères*, persuading many of their contemporaries, and not a few of our own, that “the making of modernity” was their work instead. One of the goals of *Enlightenment Contested* was precisely to right this wrong, restoring “Radical Enlightenment” to its rightful place of honor in the Pantheon of modern thought. In any case, the bulk of the book was devoted to describing a series of “controversies”—in regard to religion, politics, philosophy and science, civil society and empire—in the last quarter of the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth, in which the Radical Enlightenment appeared to have been bested by the “moderate mainstream.” But the tale had a happy ending, all the same. *Enlightenment Contested* concluded on French soil—Israel insisting that the centerpiece of any account of the Enlightenment is the descent of ideas from the Netherlands to France—where Diderot’s radicalism at last overtook Voltaire’s moderation, with the launching of the *Encyclopédie*. As for the *rest* of the story—we now have that in *Democratic Enlightenment*. As we have seen, the *Encyclopédie* was at the leading edge of a wider “radical challenge” that swept out of France in the 1750s and 1760s, extending into German territory for the first time. Rousseau’s defection cost something, Israel concedes. But it was more than compensated by the abundant evidence of a “faltering mainstream” in the same period, as one effort of “moderate” reform after another foundered. The 1770s saw another radical surge, this time extending outside of metropolitan Europe itself, with the radical promise of the *Histoire philosophique des deux Indes* actually counting for more than the tepid achievements of “moderation” in North America. Far more crucial than the American Revolution was the “radical breakthrough” in Europe that followed in the 1780s, where a string of “Spinozistic controversies” finally brought Radical Enlightenment to the center of the European stage. Fortunately, the “inconclusive deadlock” that resulted—thanks to the appeal, residual or emergent, of Rousseau and Kant—was only temporary. The intellectual “bombs” flung by Holbach in his last years were more than enough to light the fuse: the “revolution in the mind” already accomplished by Radical Enlightenment now exploded in the “‘General Revolution’ of the late eighteenth century.”

How should we judge this construction, now that we have something close to the full story before us? The first thing to note is how fragile is the explanatory apparatus that accompanies this grand narrative. As we have seen, the introduction to *Democratic Enlightenment* features an analysis of the “causes” of the Enlightenment as a whole, dividing these into two categories, “intellectual-scientific” and “social-cultural.” The first is simply a laundry list of earlier intellectual movements or currents of thought, described as “factors of destabilization” – “Scientific Revolution,” “Renaissance,” and “the advance of Western Averroism in the later Middle Ages and the inability of Aquinas’ powerful synthesis of reason and faith to effect a fully satisfactory reconciliation,” with “*libertinage érudit*” apparently thrown in as an afterthought (and the Reformation sent down the *oubliette*). That is the last we hear of any of these. No effort to place the Enlightenment within this larger sequence, tracing the recomposition of

older ideas into new forms of thought, follows, much less any attempt to relate these to the “socio-cultural” causes of the Enlightenment. Those were only two: “the stalemate that ended the Wars of Religion and untidy compromises embodied in the Peace of Westphalia” and “the unprecedented expansion of the urban context especially in a few great capitals such as London, Paris, Vienna, Berlin, and Petersburg but also in the closely bunched Dutch towns, creating a new sphere of cultural cosmopolitanism fed by imported products and sometimes people from Asia, Africa, and the Americas and social and cultural fluidity and vagueness blurring traditional class distinctions” (pp. 8-9). The door is slammed even more firmly on these. Despite Israel’s repeated insistence that the Enlightenment must be approached not just as “an intellectual movement” but as “mainstream socio-economic and political history,” neither international relations nor economics—the conduct of the “Second Hundred Years’ War,” let us say, or the progress of the “Industrious Revolution,” or even the emergence of political economy itself—are assigned any significant role in explaining the “course” of the Enlightenment. In this respect, Israel’s entire trilogy is “tunnel history” with a vengeance, focusing relentlessly on a single drama, the long contest between “Radical Enlightenment” and its “moderate” shadow. Only two moments in this tale really require explanation. First, how did the “moderate mainstream” manage to get the upper hand over Radical Enlightenment for much of the eighteenth century, despite the far greater “cogency” of the latter? Israel’s answer here tends to be two-fold: on the one hand, “moderation” obviously prevailed because of its willingness to compromise and collaborate with the Old Regime; on the other, it never really prevailed. The victory of the “moderate mainstream” was provisional at best, often merely apparent and always much exaggerated by a fawning posterity. Second, how, then, did Radical Enlightenment manage to turn the tables on its rival and launch the “General Revolution” of the last quarter of the century? As we have seen, Israel supplies two answers. We will return to the second—“the familiar mechanism of modern revolutions”—in a moment. Here, it is enough to register the complete circularity of the first: “The principal reason for the partial successes of radical thought in the 1780s and 1790s was the almost total failure of the moderate Enlightenment to deliver reforms that much of enlightened society had for decades been pressing for” (p. 14). The list of “reforms” that follows is astounding: full religious toleration and complete freedom of speech, abolition of serfdom *and* slavery, establishment of democracy, overthrow of patriarchy. For not only were these never aimed at by a “moderate mainstream,” they actually go well beyond anything dreamed of by most eighteenth-century “radicals.” Never mind. Moderate Enlightenment failed because it was not radical; Radical Enlightenment succeeded because it was.

What these weightless vagaries suggest, of course, is that Israel is not actually interested in *explaining* the Enlightenment at all, at least in terms of any conventional understanding of historical context. Instead, *Democratic Enlightenment* reveals his conception of “Radical Enlightenment” for what it is—a classic case of *hypostasization*, if ever there were one. If anything, it is an even better illustration of the fallacy than the example Pierce analyzed in naming it, the “subjectal abstraction” that transformed the proposition “honey is sweet” into “honey possesses sweetness.”[9] Whether he or she actually uses the adjective “radical” or not, no scholar surveying the Enlightenment as a whole has ever done without the idea of a *spectrum* of opinion, typically running from “progressive” to “conservative,” for classifying its thinkers and their ideas—more often than not, a number of distinct spectra, for different zones of thought, with specialized vocabulary for each. The rule applies to Cassirer, Hazard, Venturi, Gay, Hampson, Darnton, Outram. There are virtually no exceptions. Israel alone, however, invoking a principle of “coherence” that is never defined, has selected a series of beliefs he regards as logically linked—monist metaphysics, egalitarian ethics, democratic politics—and extrapolated them into a stylized entity dubbed “Radical Enlightenment,” which then is made to stand for the whole, accident having been thereby transformed into essence. Much of the controversy over the trilogy has turned on the question of whether Spinoza is an appropriate emblem for this “package”—but the real scandal is the hypostasization of “Radical Enlightenment” itself. Israel, of course, presents his Enlightenment as “partly unitary”—supposedly riven by a “fundamental and irresolvable duality” between “radical” and “moderate” camps: “Between these two consciously opposed and rival enlightenments, one wanting to tear the old house of ancien regime society down and put another in its place, the other seeking to

modify and effect repairs on the old structure, given us by divine providence, and hence basically good, obviously, no compromise or half-way house was really possible.” But the logical incoherence of this picture speaks for itself. If “radical” and “moderate” Enlightenments really represented, not positions along a single spectrum, but antithetical and mutually exclusive poles, binaries with no possibility of “compromise” between them, then any rationale for joining them under the single rubric “Enlightenment” vanishes. In reality, as in most purportedly dualist outlooks, the abyss separating “radical” and “moderate” Enlightenment in Israel’s system is illusory. Secretly at one from the start, the parting of the Enlightenment into two streams, Bacon, Descartes, Locke, and Leibniz splitting off from Spinoza and Bayle, was simply a matter of the lesser “coherence” and “cogency” of the former; the latter were vindicated in due course, when the two currents rejoined in the “General Revolution.” The temporary rift between the two Enlightenments is, in effect, a narrative device, permitting Israel to stage a Manichean contest whose conclusion is given in advance. Railing against Peter Gay’s excessively “unitary” conception of the Enlightenment, Israel’s “Radical Enlightenment” far exceeds it in distilling a manifold surface variety into a single underlying essence. Appropriately enough, we may call it the “monist” interpretation of the Enlightenment: *ordo et connexio idearum idem est ac ordo et connexio rerum*.^[10]

But recounting the victory of “Radical” over “moderate” Enlightenment is only one of Israel’s aims in *Democratic Enlightenment*. Beyond it lies his claim that this victory is the key to understanding the relations between the Enlightenment and the string of political upheavals that swept across the entire Atlantic world at the end of the eighteenth century, with the French Revolution at its center. To offer a solution to this problem, a great crux of modern historiography, is a truly awe-inspiring ambition, one of the largest promises made by any contemporary historian. *Democratic Enlightenment* presents only the beginnings of such an enterprise, but enough, perhaps, to permit some provisional appraisal of Israel’s success. Here, as elsewhere, Israel goes it alone, declaring his independence from all other historians: “A correct understanding of the Radical Enlightenment is impossible without overturning almost the whole current historiography of the French Revolution which puts far too much emphasis on institutional and social factors not directly connected to the principles of the Revolution, thereby nurturing a quite incorrect notion of the three-way relationship between ideas, Revolution, and social grievance “ (p. 16). This, it must be said, is a very peculiar characterization of “the current historiography of the French Revolution.” In general, Israel proceeds as if the great debate over the origins of the Revolution, pitting a Jacobin-Leninist “Orthodoxy” against an insurgent Revisionism—surely one of the most famous episodes in the annals of modern historiography—never occurred. His insouciance is all the stranger, in that, by all accounts, the contest ended in a decisive Revisionist victory, burying the “social interpretation” of the French Revolution once and for all and replacing it with a powerful counter-interpretation, portraying the Revolution as essentially *political*, driven above all by an egalitarian—“democratic,” in fact—social ideology. Despite an abundance of evident parallels and echoes with the Revisionist case, Israel makes no real effort to engage with the accounts of the origins of the Revolution of either François Furet or Keith Baker, which, by any reckoning, have dominated the scene for a generation now. They are excused from *Democratic Enlightenment* with a handful of dismissive gestures.^[11] Instead, Israel indulges in a lengthy scolding of Roger Chartier, a much lesser target, for his “cultural” interpretation of revolutionary origins (pp. 24-25). No doubt one of the reasons for holding Furet and Baker at arm’s length is that that “the Enlightenment” as such—at least in the “Radical” sense of the term—does not figure nearly so centrally in their accounts of the origins of the Revolution. In any case, the real precedents for Israel’s enterprise in *Democratic Enlightenment* belong to an older literature from the epoch before the fight-to-the death between Orthodoxy and Revision.

They are, of course, the great two-volume works by R. R. Palmer and Peter Gay: respectively, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* (1959, 1964) and *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (1966, 1969). Indeed, at first glance, one is tempted to say that with *Democratic Enlightenment*, Israel has managed to combine the aspirations of Palmer and Gay in a way that far exceeds either. The latter concluded his interpretation

of the Enlightenment with a brief “Finale,” showing “the program in action”—the American Revolution, with the Constitution of 1787 as its finest fruit.[12] Palmer, meanwhile, offered a sweeping interpretation of both the American and French Revolutions—and dozens of lesser upheavals—as driven by the same “democratic” social ideology while supplying only the sketchiest sense of the origins of the ideas themselves. Building on an interpretation of the Enlightenment at least as comprehensive as that of Gay, what *Democratic Enlightenment*—together with whatever sequels follow—appears to promise is an account of the “Atlantic” revolutions of even greater scope than that of Palmer. But the appearance is deceptive. Israel’s opening move is to exclude the American Revolution from his purview, on the grounds that it is an exception to the “familiar mechanism of modern revolutions”—a preliminary amputation that would have flummoxed Palmer or Gay. As we have seen, beyond citing “the slavery issue, Amerindian exclusion, and a defective toleration”—setting a rather high bar for any early modern revolution, it might be said, including the French—Israel provides no analysis of the “different pattern” represented by the War of Independence and its aftermath, no explanation why it should have proved the exception to so “familiar” a rule, nor any discussion of its consequences for the “General Revolution” as a whole. After chapter sixteen, the American Revolution for all intents and purposes disappears from *Democratic Enlightenment*. Its role in contributing to the bankruptcy of the Bourbon monarchy scarcely figures at all; whatever ideological impact it may have had in Europe is confined to a few remarks about the Netherlands. David Armitage’s *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (2007), a book that one might have expected to be fundamental for any effort to relate the Enlightenment to the age of revolutions, is missing, from an otherwise bulging bibliography.

What then is the “familiar mechanism of modern revolutions,” which was lacking in North America alone? The explanatory model that Israel adopts at least has the virtue of simplicity. It has just two moving parts, “social grievance,” on the one hand, and “ideas,” on the other, whose conjugation produces “Revolution.” “Social grievance” is a capacious category, and Israel casts his net very widely, citing, as we have seen, “the oppressed peasantries of Europe, religious minorities, serfs, slaves, tradesmen resenting monopolies and privileged businesses, imprisoned debtors, and other victims of an archaic legal system and penal code, and underprivileged colonists, including the Spanish Creole” (p. 23)—not to mention the victims of patriarchy. The “[p]olitical and social developments” responsible for these “grievances,” then “are the real, the important social context that intellectual historians, no less than general historians, need to be relating ideas to and not the cultural spaces and trends identified by Chartier, Darnton, and their disciples, or the ambiguities and contradictions so beloved by the Postmodernists” (p. 23). But “social grievance,” although a necessary component to “the familiar mechanism of modern revolutions,” in Israel’s view, is not a sufficient one. What was also required were the “ideas” supplied by those “tiny batches of mostly strikingly unrepresentative editors, orators, pamphleteers, and professional agitators or renegade nobles,” who “captured a mass following by seizing on and amplifying popular protest from widespread discontent into a formidable political force.” But not just any ideas. These “entirely unrepresentative intellectuals” were only able to pull off this trick thanks to a specific metaphysical commitment:

However necessary the fuel of social discontent in making revolutions, monist systems were in fact indispensable to the rise of a generalized radical outlook which was, in turn, the principal cause of the French Revolution and the other revolutionary movements of the late eighteenth century . . . there was always an inherent tendency during the Enlightenment for democratic and egalitarian revolutionary movements urging drastic change to justify their programmes via monist, materialist systems defining the moral order as something purely natural and properly constructed exclusively on the principles of equity and reciprocity in social relations (pp. 22-23).

Such is Israel’s basic model, then: “social grievance” establishes the conditions of possibility for Revolution, and the ideas of Radical Enlightenment act as “cause” of its “outcomes.” As for the French Revolution in particular, once again, we get this:

[W]hat I am arguing is that that the Radical Enlightenment—and not the Enlightenment as such—is the only important direct cause of the French Revolution understood as a total transformation of the political, legal, cultural, and educational framework of French life, administration, and society. Everything else, the financial difficulties that brought the French *ancien régime* monarchy crashing down, discontent of the peasantry, pre-1789 legal politics, and the French nobility's tenacious promotion of its power and privileges, however crucial to the mechanics of the historical process that made the Revolution possible, was entirely secondary, in fact tertiary, in shaping the revolutionary outcome (p. 16).

How persuasive is this picture? A final judgment will have to await a much fuller account, not just of the subsequent course of the French Revolution, but of the dynamic of the “General Revolution” itself, as it spread through both the Old and the New Worlds. Still, it is not hard to resist the explanation of the origins of the French Revolution on offer in *Democratic Enlightenment*. Nothing arouses Israel's ire more than accusations of “reductionism.” But how else should we describe an explanatory scheme that confines “the mechanics of the historical process that made the Revolution possible” to “social grievance,” on the one hand, while, on the other, describing the “monist systems” of the Radical Enlightenment as “the only important direct cause of the French Revolution”? Starting with the “possibility” side of the ledger, no one will miss the tone of Dickensian bathos in Israel's appeals to “social grievance,” whose effect is to confirm his own progressive sympathies, while also depriving popular energies of any real explanatory value. For one thing, if Israel genuinely believed that *ressentiment* “from below” played a significant role in the origins of the Revolution, then he would surely owe us some account of its sources and amplitude, grounded in the wider economic and social history the Old Regime—which he makes not the slightest effort to do. Discontent was “widespread,” he assures us repeatedly, without citing a shred of evidence for it, much less any explanation. For another, why confine “social grievance” to “conditions of possibility” alone? Did popular unrest really play no role in “shaping the revolutionary outcome”? The Great Fear and the municipal insurrections of July 1789, which did rather more to seal the doom of the Old Regime than the simultaneous goings-on at Versailles, would suggest otherwise. Predictably, Israel shoves both episodes to the margins of an account that devotes nearly ten pages to tracing the contributions of “*la philosophie*” to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. At the same time, whatever role we assign to “social grievance,” it obviously cannot be regarded as the sole factor at work in “the mechanics of the historical process that made the Revolution possible.” Like his earlier reference to “untidy compromises embodied in the Peace of Westphalia,” Israel's deceptively casual gesture at “the financial difficulties that brought the French *ancien régime* monarchy crashing down” points, in fact, to the largest single lacuna in *Democratic Enlightenment*, which alone invalidates any claim it has to treating the Enlightenment “both as an intellectual movement and as mainstream socio-economic and political history.” This is its almost total occultation of the history of international relations in the eighteenth century—the inter-imperial rivalries between the “Atlantic” powers that surely are essential to grasping the interrelation between the Enlightenment and great political upheavals that followed in its wake. Given the place of economic and imperial history in Israel's earlier work, his neglect of this particular dimension of historical reality seems incomprehensible. But the astonishing fact remains. To take but one example, in *Democratic Enlightenment's* thousand-page account of the years 1750-1792, the Seven Years' War—the great turning point in the long secular struggle between the Bourbon Monarchy and the United Kingdom, obviously a crucial event for the “course” of the Enlightenment, and perhaps *the* pivotal one for the entire cycle of “Atlantic” revolutions—is nearly invisible. It is noticed for its effects, not on France or Great Britain, but on Spain and India.[13]

The warrant for donning these blinders, of course, is the fact that however important were popular discontent and interstate rivalry in making the French Revolution *possible*, they were “entirely secondary, in fact tertiary, in shaping the revolutionary outcome.”[14] That privilege belonged to Radical Enlightenment alone—to the “tiny batches of mostly strikingly unrepresentative” intellectuals who “captured a mass following by seizing on and amplifying popular protest from widespread

discontent into a formidable political force.” The difficulty in assessing this side of the balance sheet is that *Democratic Enlightenment* actually gives us very little in the way of “revolutionary outcomes” by which to judge. Israel’s discussion of the Declaration of Rights is effectively the last extended effort to demonstrate the “mechanism” by which the adepts of Radical Enlightenment achieved their goals. By comparison, the rejection of bicameralism and adoption of the royal veto in September, then the nationalization of Church property, launching of the *assignats*, Civil Constitution of the Clergy, and the abolition of nobility, all get increasingly shorter shrift, before Israel suspends his narrative, in order to shift his gaze to the Panthéon. Presumably the contribution of “monist” metaphysics to the later achievements of the Constitutional Monarchy will receive extensive demonstration at the start of the sequel to *Democratic Enlightenment*. In the meantime, the way in which the latter actually concludes, with its forlorn tale of Mirabeau’s installation in the sacred crypt—“the first public hero to repose there under the resounding inscription, *Aux grands hommes, la Patrie reconnaissante*”—only to be expelled, most ungratefully, a short time later, already points to the great paradox of Israel’s account of the saga of Radical Enlightenment. The basic form of the narrative, from 1650 down to 1789, is one of a happy story of triumph over adversity. Having leaped into the world whole, rather like Athena, from the head of a single deity, Radical Enlightenment then endured a long march through the desert, driven there by a lame, collusive version of itself. [15] But the ordeal only made it stronger, as its inheritance passed, in the shadows, from the Dutch periphery to the French heart of the Old Regime. With the *Encyclopédie*, Radical Enlightenment enjoyed a gloriously public rebirth and then went from strength to strength, resolutely crossing the Rhine and making landfall in North America, while the *Histoire dex deux Indes* broadcast its message of emancipation around the globe. The “Spinozistic controversies” that erupted across Europe in the 1780s were harbingers of the blessed event that closed the decade, the launching of the “General Revolution” itself in 1788–89.

But having thus stormed the gates of heaven, what did Radical Enlightenment actually accomplish? We have to await the sequel to *Democratic Enlightenment* to get a full accounting. But so far Radical Enlightenment looks to have petered out ignominiously, very much with a whimper rather than a bang. Where Peter Gay invited us to consider the Constitution of 1787 as the supreme expression of the Enlightenment “in action,” Israel appears to regard the Constitutional Monarchy of 1789–92 as the greatest achievement of its “Radical” cutting edge—and Mirabeau and Sieyès its “heroic” individual icons. Sieyès, famously, could at least claim to have survived. But the Declaration of Rights and Panthéon aside, the most durable accomplishment of the Constitutional Monarchy, before its assisted suicide, was to return France to Europe’s dynastic battlefield—though it, of course, took the First Republic to bring real success to the effort. We have already been warned how Israel intends to treat Jacobinism. Far from revealing the slightest tincture of “radicalism,” it will evidently be seen as nothing less (or more, apparently) than “a full-blooded Counter-Enlightenment.” Like his benching of the American Revolution, all this suggests is the extent to which Israel’s *idée fixe*—“Spinozism” alone was truly “revolutionary”—prevents him from offering anything other than a highly distorted picture of the “General Revolution” of the late eighteenth-century. No doubt philosophical radicalism, “monist” and otherwise, played its role in the American, French, Caribbean, and Latin American Revolutions of the period. Israel is not wrong to detect its workings, especially in so many of the declarations, manifestoes, commemorations, monuments, and mausoleums that littered the scene. But to portray ideological ornamentation and amplification of that kind as the sole effective *lever* of these upheavals is to miss their richness and complexity entirely. The larger truth is that origins of the “Atlantic” revolutions has to be sought not just in “social grievance,” but also in the structural logic of inter-state and inter-imperial competition; and that the agents of their “outcomes” included not just metaphysically-correct “monists,” or even advocates of every brand of “moderate” Enlightenment, but the whole range of elite and popular classes, in town and countryside alike, propertied and propertyless, free and enslaved. They pursued their own ends, many of which owed little or nothing to “philosophical” inspiration. Most of that is missing from *Democratic Enlightenment*, as it is likely to be from its sequel. There we can apparently expect, after Israel’s extended analysis of the Jacobin “Counter-Enlightenment,” the story of Radical Enlightenment’s faint comeback under the Directory, then its final entombment by Napoleon, leaving

only its embers, still glowing in the minds of Heine and George Eliot. Perhaps Israel will be able to save some appearances by rummaging elsewhere in the record of the “General Revolution”—not in North America, apparently, but no doubt the *caballeros racionales* of the Lautaro Lodge are in for some searching scrutiny in volumes to come.

The most one can say is that the historian of Radical Enlightenment still has his work cut out for him if he wants to avoid concluding his grand narrative on a farcical note. Meanwhile, the Herculean scale of these labors brings us to a third and final issue. It is not surprising that, from the publication of *Radical Enlightenment* onward, critics have been tempted to see in Israel’s enterprise parallels with the great synoptic surveys of the Enlightenment of the past, above all Cassirer’s *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* and Gay’s *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*. In a characteristically acute review of *Democratic Enlightenment*, David Bell has pointed to a specific reason for grouping these three together. It is a striking fact, he suggests, that the most forceful scholarly defenders of the legacy of Enlightenment should be “secular-minded European-born Jews who perhaps feel gratitude toward the Enlightenment for their social and intellectual freedom.”[16] The suggestion is indeed intriguing, but an adequate sense of the place of Israel’s trilogy in “Enlightenment Studies” as a whole requires a more panoramic view. As it happens, we lack a comprehensive survey of the vicissitudes of the Enlightenment in the twentieth century, not just as object of scholarly enquiry, but of passionate philosophical and political polemics as well—plainly, a key arc of modern intellectual culture. Schematically, however, we might conceive of the study of the Enlightenment over the last century as developing through three broad phases. The first, dating in fact to the last decades of the nineteenth century and proceeding very unevenly in the major west European countries, saw the gradual transition from the post-Revolutionary polemics that had dominated references to *les lumières*, *i lumi*, and *der Aufklärung*, to the more settled routines of scholarship, historical and literary. The vocabulary used to describe the object of study itself continued to evolve through this period, with the English “the Enlightenment” being a fairly late arrival; the shadow of the great national rivalries of the nineteenth century continued to hang over the proceedings, which the Great War naturally did little to alter.[17]

The interwar years, and the rise of Fascism, in particular, then proved to be a watershed, ushering in a second phase of “Enlightenment Studies.” In effect, the field was now gripped by a novel polarization, distinct from the ideological clashes of the nineteenth century. On the one hand, as Hunt and Jacob point out forcefully in their article in Kors’ *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, an “anti-Fascist” scholarly tradition emerged at the liberal center of the political spectrum, identifying with and defending the Enlightenment (the vocabulary was now fixed, in all the European languages).[18] The founding text here, of course, was Cassirer’s *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, published in 1932, on the eve of his flight from Nazi Germany, with the extremely influential English translation following in 1951. But Cassirer was joined in this rescue operation by Paul Hazard and Franco Venturi, making the chief French and Italian contributions to the cause, with Gay’s grand synthesis of the late 1960s concluding the campaign, at precisely the moment that the common liberal and “Atlantic” civilization it celebrated reached the peak of its postwar unity and prosperity—while still locked in battle with its Cold War enemy. On the other hand, the same period also saw the emergence of a quite new kind of critique of the Enlightenment, from an unwonted direction. Vilification of the *philosophes* from the Right had a long history, of course, and the names of Talmon, Hayek, and Himmelfarb suggest that the tradition has never expired altogether. What was unprecedented, from the interwar period onward, was a series of assaults on the Enlightenment from the Left. These came in two great waves, the first emerging from specific currents within Western Marxism. Lukács was the interwar pioneer, equating Enlightenment scientism with capitalist reification itself, but he was then trumped by Horkheimer and Adorno, whose post-war *Dialectic of Enlightenment* conjured up an astonishing history of reason as an instrument of domination, stretching from Homer to Bacon, Kant, and Sade, then down to Hitler and Walt Disney. With the turn of the 1960s, many of these Frankfurt-School themes then reappeared in quite new packaging, from the other side of the Rhine. The dominant figure, of course, was Michel Foucault, much of whose imposing *oeuvre*, evolving across the structuralist/post-structuralist divide, zeroed in on

the eighteenth-century hinge of modern thought, whose emancipatory surface rhetoric was held to conceal a profound authoritarianism. But Foucault was far from alone, and in the 1970s, there was added a “postmodern” attack, from the likes of Lyotard, denouncing the Enlightenment’s “grand narratives” of progress and liberation. At the same time, the 1970s also saw the consolidation of a feminist critique of the Enlightenment, mingling both Frankfurt and French themes, which formed something like a *third* critical wave from the progressive end of the political spectrum.

The entire current of “critical” thought—more like a vast river-system, in fact—could not help but have an enormous impact on “Enlightenment Studies” proper, as provocation and inspiration. Still, what is perhaps most striking of all is that no frontal collision—no great debate, no battle-royal—ever occurred *between* it and the alternate “anti-Fascist” tradition. Instead, by the turn of the 1980s, the more passionate forms of what might be called “Enlightenment-phobia” began to recede, just as attitudes of passionate “Enlightenment-philia” had already started to do some time before. The result was the transition to a *third* phase of “Enlightenment Studies,” in which the polarities of the second gave way to something like fruitful intermingling and collaboration of the two traditions, amid many surprising cross-currents. This was a period in which the principal heir of the Frankfurt School, Jürgen Habermas, could become the leading critic of Foucault and defender of the “unfinished project” of the Enlightenment. In the Anglosphere, no one did more to broadcast the virtues of both Habermas and Foucault than Keith Baker, originally a student of Cobban and later a close associate of François Furet. The work of Habermas and Baker took place in the context of a many-sided debate over the “modernity” of the Enlightenment, in which the “heroic” and “anti-heroic” traditions lived on, but in appropriately toned-down or ironic versions. The feminist critique of the Enlightenment issued into what might well be the single richest scholarly sub-literature on the subject. The most distinguished representative of the “anti-Fascist” lineage today is doubtless Robert Darnton, who escorted us down from the Olympian heights scaled by Cassirer to something closer to street-level, but who continues to identify warmly with his object of study, if in a suitably gentler mode.[19] These star-turns, meanwhile, have owed much to the development of an extensive infrastructure of scholarly support, anchored in publishing programs such as the Voltaire Foundation, calling on the resources of ever-increasing numbers of complete works and collected correspondences. Specialized journals proliferated; scholarly societies and international conferences enjoyed boom-times; by the end of the century, digitalization was generating huge amounts of new kinds of data and evidence for the study of the Enlightenment.

Such was the state of “Enlightenment Studies” as described by Hunt and Jacob at the end of their survey—a world of large-scale and coolly-orchestrated collective enterprises, which looked to have left the individual heroics and anti-heroics of earlier generations, with their impassioned defenses of or attacks on the Enlightenment, well behind it. But today, another decade on, with the completion of Israel’s trilogy and the promise of more to come, have we not arrived at an entirely new phase in the study of the Enlightenment—a *fourth* epoch, the Age of Israel? How should we explain the apparent anomaly—the appearance of a jumbotron interpretation of the Enlightenment from a single hand, dwarfing those of Cassirer, Hazard, Venturi, and Gay in size and far exceeding theirs in its impassioned self-identification with the object of study? One possibility immediately suggests itself. A prominent feature of all three parts of the trilogy is reference to the menace posed to a grasp of the Enlightenment by “Postmodernist philosophers.” This actually reaches a minor crescendo in *Democratic Enlightenment*, where Foucault is singled out in its first pages for having “maintained, often very convincingly, that Enlightenment was not just about liberation but even more about new forms of constraint . . . In this way, a new ‘project’ arose, replacing the intellectual foundations forged by the Enlightenment with a fresh set of criteria framing a postmodern world built on multiculturalism, moral relativism, and the indeterminacy of truth” (p. 2). Perhaps, then, Israel’s trilogy has brought us to the long-deferred confrontation with the Enlightenment’s late-twentieth-century foes, a scholar having at last summoned the courage to take up “cudgels”—Israel actually uses the term, a few pages later—in its defense?[20] In fact, this is unlikely to be the case. Israel makes no attempt, anywhere in his three volumes, seriously to engage with the issues posed by philosophical relativism or pragmatism—or realism, for that matter.

His interest in epistemology and ethics begins and ends with a few gestures in the direction of “universal truth” and “moral universalism,” without supplying either with so much as a definition, much less extended analysis. More importantly, that idea that the doctrines of Foucault and the “Postmodernists” enjoy a hegemonic position in the field that poses a threat to such verities is entirely unconvincing. The high crest of post-structuralist and postmodernist influence in “Enlightenment Studies,” however these are defined, was reached somewhere between thirty and forty years ago and has since receded with each passing decade.

Still, no scholarly project on the scale of Israel’s can have been undertaken without the motivation of some deep political or intellectual passion. If the defense of the Enlightenment against the dangers supposedly posed by “postmodernism” is unlikely to have inspired the trilogy, then what has? The original context that prompted the succession of great vindications of the Enlightenment, from Cassirer to Gay, disappeared an even longer time ago. There is not the slightest need today to defend the Enlightenment against fascism—or against any other enemies, for that matter, since the Cold War, at its peak when Gay concluded his “finale,” of course ended, at the close of the century, with the complete victory of the liberal civilization he celebrated. By any sober reckoning, the values of the Enlightenment enjoy a greater degree of uncontested supremacy around the globe today than they have at any moment in the past. But—and it is with this question that we approach an explanation of the ideological charge behind Israel’s project—*which* Enlightenment? Despite its elephantine size, the trilogy is actually a lesser enterprise than those of Cassirer or Gay. Where they set out to defend what they regarded as the Enlightenment as a whole, the far more strenuous advocacy of Israel is confined to one kind only: Radical Enlightenment. His recourse to capitalization merely confirms what any reader can tell, from the first page of *Radical Enlightenment* to the last of *Democratic Enlightenment*—that it is not the noun, but rather the adjective “radical” that functions as a kind of talisman in the three books. What is the source of its magic? A full analysis of its semantic field would not be an idle exercise, as is confirmed by a glance at Aurelian Craiutu’s superb study of “moderation” in French political thought, the antithesis on which Israel himself concentrates.^[21] More pertinent still would be to trace the fortunes of the term “radical” later in the nineteenth century, as it moved steadily rightward, especially with the rise of the socialist movement, until it was virtually indistinguishable, for practical political purposes, from the dominant liberalism of the Belle Epoque. That is one clue to the way the term functions in Israel’s trilogy. He could not be more candid about his own political cards, which are those of a humane and progressive liberalism. As we have seen, in *Enlightenment Contested*, Israel defines the “philosophical” essence of “modernity,” approvingly, as “an interlocking complex of abstract concepts of which individual liberty, democracy, freedom of expression, comprehensive toleration, equality racial and sexual, freedom of lifestyle, full secularization of all legal institutions and most publicly maintained educational establishments, together with a wholly secular morality based on equity, are the most important . . . ” (p. 52). There is scarcely a page of *Democratic Enlightenment* that fails to pay tribute to the Enlightenment, its “radical manifestation” in particular, for “laying the foundations for modern basic human rights and freedoms and representative democracy.” Its last lines express the hope that “the universalism and social democracy of radical thought might advance again.”

As political principles go, “individual liberty,” “basic human rights,” “representative democracy,” even a Euro-tinged “social democracy” are perfectly respectable—indeed, *honorable*, to use one of Israel’s favorite terms. What they are not, however, is “radical” in the slightest. They were the ruling rhetoric of the “international community” at the moment when Israel launched his trilogy, every other word in the mouths of the architects of the “Third Way” or the promoter of “compassionate conservatism,” as they still are today in those of their various G8 successors. What is the point of describing this set of conventional and anodyne ideologemes as “radical” and constructing a genealogy for them that returns us to a “Radical Enlightenment” in the eighteenth century? What might be suggested, by way of conclusion, is that Israel’s trilogy should be seen as a specific kind of response to the end of the Cold War and the new political and intellectual context it ushered in—one with no small appeal, in fact. *Mutatis mutandis*, there are even parallels with the episode that launched the “heroic” tradition of

“Enlightenment Studies” in the interwar period. Then, a series of liberal scholars responded to the emergency caused by the collapse of liberal civilization with what Fredric Jameson once described, in a famous essay on Benjamin, as a “lucid nostalgia”: “a nostalgia conscious of itself, a lucid and remorseless dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of some remembered plenitude.”^[22] The “plenitude” patiently recovered and reconstructed by Cassirer, Hazard, Venturi, and Gay was “the Enlightenment,” the first and best incarnation of liberal modernity, before its descent into one form of modern barbarism after another—social revolution, nationalist warfare, Fascism, Stalinism. Six decades later, however, liberal civilization had not only endured, but, with the destruction of last of those barbarisms, it had prevailed. In these circumstances, there was no need to defend the Enlightenment as a whole, in the fashion of Cassirer or Gay. What *was* needed, however, was to give consolation and hope to those who, for one reason or another, were disappointed in the way that history had “ended” in 1989. Nowhere was this need more acutely felt than among those with mildly “progressive” or “social democratic” sympathies, especially since the new lease on life that many expected with the demise of Stalinism never materialized. The past two decades have seen many different kinds of reaction to these circumstances from this band of the political spectrum, but surely it is not far-fetched to see Israel’s appeal to “Radical Enlightenment” as one of these? For here we have an attempt to persuade us that the Enlightenment was never one, or many, but *two*—a “radical” core or inner essence, whose “coherent” and “cogent” principles were established by an intransigent and courageous minority; and a “moderate” majority, perpetually willing to compromise those principles and betray its better self. There is no reason to regret the way the Cold War ended, we are thus given to understand, nor any need to blame the Enlightenment as a whole for the injustice and irrationality that continue to blight the globe. Responsibility for those can be laid squarely at the feet of the “moderate mainstream”—for *that* is the form of Enlightenment that prevailed at the end of the twentieth century, just as it did on the eve of the French Revolution. *Radical* Enlightenment, however, still has its best days ahead of it, and until its return, we may console and edify ourselves with the story of its first triumph, as it worked its way from the Netherlands to France, where it unleashed a “General Revolution” that shook the entire world.

Nostalgic, Israel’s Enlightenment trilogy certainly is. Whether it is “lucid” or not each reader will have to decide. The bizarre telescoping of history required for this message to make any sense, on vivid display in the peroration that concludes *Democratic Enlightenment*, is not reassuring. There, we are told

[a] process was set in train in the late eighteenth century, a democratic enlightenment based on liberty, equality, and the ‘general good’, which was then arrested by kings, aristocracy, and Robespierre’s Counter-Enlightenment and driven back, but which resumed after a fashion in the post-Second World War era. Many scholars argue that at the end of the eighteenth century the hopes of the enlighteners were blighted by the contradictions within the Enlightenment. Another way of looking at the Radical Enlightenment’s defeat is to see it as a temporary and partial setback. In 1789, it seemed to be possible to drive a powerful wedge between the conservatism of ignorance and the conservatism of landownership and money so that the two no longer mutually reinforced each other. It did not happen. But in response to today’s fundamentalism, anti-secularism, Neo-Burkeanism, Postmodernism, and blatant unwillingness to clamp down on powerful vested interests, it is at least conceivable that the universalism and social democracy of radical thought might advance again and this time drive the wedge home harder (p. 951).

Here, virtually the entire course of modern history after the French Revolution—industrialization, imperialism, World Wars, Communism, decolonization—is wiped away, as if time had stopped in 1789 and only began to resume again, “after a fashion,” in the “post-Second World War era.” But as this drastic repression of historical reality suggests, whatever consolation or comfort the Enlightenment trilogy offers, it is not based on a sober grasp of modern historical development. Its satisfactions are essentially symbolic, laying claim to the word “radical” while emptying it of any determinate political meaning. Or perhaps we can call its comforts “philosophical”—though more in the popular than in the

technical sense of the term. What the reader is furnished with, as surety that “the universalism and social democracy of radical thought” will sooner or later resume its course, is Israel’s insistence that ontological “monism” and political “radicalism” are one—that metaphysical correctness goes hand in hand with the political variety and vice-versa. As we have seen, the “facts” confirm this over and over, but they cannot do otherwise. “All Enlightenment is by definition closely linked to revolution”—though, as velleities go this is surely no more persuasive than would be its opposite: “All revolution is by definition closely linked to Enlightenment.”[23]

Many critics have remarked on the apparent discrepancy between Israel’s own sensibilities as a writer and thinker and what are commonly taken to be those of his eighteenth-century subjects—their famous skepticism, irony, and wit seemingly lost on their historian. Not surprisingly, some have suggested that Israel’s real temperamental affinity lies with the “*esprit de système*” of the previous century, its obsession with getting ontological foundations right. Others have detected a later sensibility at work in the Enlightenment trilogy, the all-too-dogmatic positivism and scientism that dominated the later nineteenth-century—the high point of political “Radicalism” as well. But there may be another way of capturing the distance between conventional understandings of the eighteenth century and Israel’s “Radical Enlightenment.” Strange as it sounds, and Israel’s difficulties with Rousseau notwithstanding, might we not see a touch of Romanticism at work, not so much in his portrait of Radical Enlightenment itself, but in the high seriousness and deep passion that he has brought to its recovery and vindication? That would certainly be one way of describing a project that was born in a context of disappointment and defeat and whose basic reflex is the return to a moment of plenitude in the past—above all, in light of Israel’s extravagant libidinal investment in the lost object itself, “Radical Enlightenment” portrayed as the veritable demiurge of “modernity.” If it ever made sense to speak of a “Romantic” interpretation of the Enlightenment, then Israel’s trilogy would probably be it. That returns us, in fact, to the architectural analogy introduced earlier. Whatever our final judgment about either the foundations or the superstructure of *Radical Enlightenment*, *Enlightenment Contested*, and *Democratic Enlightenment*, they certainly comprise no ordinary building. If there really is a touch of Romanticism in Israel’s temperament and outlook, then perhaps one parallel for the trilogy might be seen in those soaring nineteenth-century edifices, which sought to recapture the lost glories of medieval architecture, in stylized fashion, such as they never quite were in reality—Neo-Gothic, Romanesque Revival. That would imply that Israel’s conception of “Radical Enlightenment” stands in about the same relationship to the real world of eighteenth-century thought, as the Houses of Parliament and the *Schloss Neuschwanstein* do to the Middle Ages. That may sound unkind—still, no one has ever denied that the Palace of Westminster and that castle in Bavaria are certainly something to see.

Notes

[1] Lynn Hunt, with Margaret Jacob, “Enlightenment Studies,” in Alan Charles Kors, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), vol. 1, pp. 418-430. I would like to thank David Garrioch for the invitation to contribute to this forum, for his editorial expertise, and, above all, for his exceptional patience and generosity.

[2] For acute reviews of *Radical Enlightenment*, see Jonathan Rée, “The Brothers Koerbagh,” *London Review of Books*, 14 January 2002, 21-24; Margaret Jacob, “Review of *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750*,” *Journal of Modern History* 75 (2003): 387-389; ; J. B. Shank, Review of *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750*, *H-France Review* Vol. 2 (February, 2002), No. 26 <http://www.h-france.net/vol2reviews/vol2no26shank.pdf> (accessed 29 December 2013); and Anthony La Volpa, “Review of *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750*,” *Journal of Modern History* 75 (2003): 389-393.

[3] For Israel's acknowledgement and then brusque dismissal of the entire lot ("... debunking efforts which raise important and relevant questions, but also include much that amounts to little more than failure to grasp the argument and inaccuracy in reporting what is actually being argued"), see *Democratic Enlightenment*, pp. 2-3.

[4] Although Israel does not cite it, he seems likely to have in mind a now-famous article by James Schmidt, "Inventing the Enlightenment: Anti-Jacobins, British Hegelians, and the *Oxford English Dictionary*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64 (2003): 421-443.

[5] Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall, 1477-1806* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 1047-1049.

[6] Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 14-23. "Part I: The Radical Enlightenment" (chapters 1-7, pp. 1-155) sets the scene; "Part II: the Rise of Philosophical Radicalism" (chapters 8-17, pp. 157-327) describes the emergence of "Spinozism."

[7] Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 720.

[8] Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 52.

[9] "The Simplest Mathematics" (1902), in C. S. Pierce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Pierce*, Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, eds., 6 vols (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931-1935), vol. 4, pp. 227-323.

[10] *Ethics*, Part II, Proposition 7: "The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things"—the so-called (but not by Spinoza) "Parallelism Doctrine."

[11] E.g., *Democratic Enlightenment*, p. 913. For a sense of how rich the discussion of revolutionary origins remains, in ways scarcely hinted at by Israel's account, it is enough to turn to not one but two recent collections of essays: Peter R. Campbell, ed., *The Origins of the French Revolution* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), and Thomas E. Kaiser and Dale K. Van Kley, eds., *From Deficit to Deluge: the Origins of the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

[12] See Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, vol. 2, *The Science of Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), pp. 553-568.

[13] See *Democratic Enlightenment*, pp. 383-4, 583-7. It is telling that a secondary bibliography containing at least 1500 items omits Paul Schroeder's *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763-1848* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), a book that almost single-handedly revived international and diplomatic history, altering all conventional understandings of the period.

[14] As it happens, the demotion of popular discontent to "tertiary" status is partially rescinded a few pages later—but only partially: "The common people's role, hence, was not just unstable and sporadic but also basically secondary, if not in providing the muscle that actually toppled the *ancien régime* then certainly in formulating the laws and forging the institutions that replaced it" (*Democratic Enlightenment*, p. 26). Hard cheese on the "common people," of course.

[15] The simile for the birth of Radical Enlightenment is borrowed from Darrin McMahon's elegant review of *Democratic Enlightenment*, "The Enlightenment's True Radicals," *New York Times*, 23 November 2011.

[16] David A. Bell, “Where Do We Come From?” *The New Republic*, 1 March 2012.

[17] See Schmidt, “Inventing the Enlightenment,” cited above; but also Vincenzo Ferrone and Daniel Roche, *L’illuminismo nella cultura contemporanea* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2002); and the first chapter of John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples, 1680-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 1-51.

[18] Hunt, with Jacob, “Enlightenment Studies,” pp. 428-429.

[19] See, for an attractive sample, Robert Darnton, “The Case for the Enlightenment: George Washington’s False Teeth,” in Darnton, *George Washington’s False Teeth: An Unconventional Guide to the Eighteenth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), pp. 3-24.

[20] “Foucault’s influence certainly spread far and wide and broadly infused discussion of the fundamental relationship between truth and power. But while such a philosophy is a splendid basis for multiculturalism, the coexistence of different sets of values, plainly anyone strongly committed to moral universalism and basic human rights predicated on the principle of equality must reject Foucault’s philosophy as false. Anyone believing truth is universal, and that human rights imply a common code that it is the duty of everyone to defend, cannot avoid taking up cudgels not just against Foucault and Postmodernist philosophy but also against the exponents of historiographical theories and approaches focusing attention on sociality, ambiguities, and ‘spaces’ rather than basic ideas intersecting with real social context, by which I mean socio-economic tensions and political clashes, the main lines, that is, of general history” (*Democratic Enlightenment*, pp. 21-22). Except for one derisive gesture at *Discipline and Punish* later in the text (“Foucault could not be more mistaken here”—p. 232), this is the last appearance of Foucault and the “Postmodernists” in the text—but they have all been warned!

[21] Aurelian Craiutu, *A Virtue for Courageous Minds: Moderation in French Political Thought, 1748-1830* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

[22] Frederic Jameson, “Walter Benjamin; Or, Nostalgia,” in *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 82.

[23] Alas, there are signs that Israel’s attempt to register “radical” as a kind of domain name has worked. For a particularly dismaying example, see the reference to Israel’s “great trilogy on the Enlightenment” in the conclusion to Neil Davidson’s recent *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2012), p. 654. It would be difficult to imagine a book more distant in spirit from Davidson’s, a magnificent rehabilitation of the concept of “bourgeois revolution,” than *Democratic Enlightenment*—hostile not only to any kind of Marxism but to any serious consideration of social class or even “mainstream” economics.

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