

*H-France Forum*

Volume 9, Issue 1 (Winter 2013), No. 4

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 Harvey Chisick, University of Haifa

In this third volume of his study of the Enlightenment, Jonathan Israel again shows himself to be immensely erudite and possessed of remarkable intellectual energy. His book examines intellectual developments in France, England, the German-speaking parts of Europe, Scandinavia, Spain, Italy, Russia, North and South America as well as the colonial endeavors of Spain, Britain and Holland in both the New World and Asia, including India. The scope is remarkable, and reminds one of the syntheses of R. R. Palmer and Franco Venturi on the history of the later eighteenth century, though Israel focuses more narrowly on intellectual history.

Jonathan Israel's understanding of the Enlightenment is significantly different from that of most historians in that he attributes to philosophy (usually and gratuitously designated "*la philosophie*") precedence as an agent of change, allowing it to eclipse economic, social, and cultural factors. He maintains that there was a radical Enlightenment distinct from, and in many ways inimical to, the moderate strain of the movement. Radical Enlightenment is taken to imply the equality of all mankind, liberty, human rights, democracy, republicanism, and revolution, or at least a "revolution of the mind" that was a necessary prerequisite to the Age of Revolution that swept the Atlantic world from the 1770s.[1] It was, Israel argues, the Radical Enlightenment, and not the Enlightenment generally, that should be seen as the main cause of the French Revolution, or at least its earlier phase which he calls a "Revolution of Reason," distinguishing it from the Jacobin "Revolution of Will" that began in 1792.

Whether Israel's reconceptualization of the Enlightenment and its relation to the French Revolution will prove convincing depends on the validity of the key hypotheses noted above as well as on a number of related issues. I will begin by considering the soundness of some of these premises.

### Radical Enlightenment

Jonathan Israel maintains that the philosophical core of the Radical Enlightenment rests on single-substance materialism established by Spinoza in his *Ethics* and popularized by Pierre Bayle and others. Spinoza's achievement, according to Israel, was to have demonstrated irrefutably that there was but one substance in the universe, thus negating the traditional view that there are two substances, one spiritual, the other material. Since most of us are influenced by modern science that deals in quantifiable materials and phenomena, we are inclined to agree with Israel that Spinoza's position was materialist. We should note, however, that Spinoza did not so regard himself and that he has been seen by many as an idealist and believer[2] and was called by Novalis "this God-intoxicated man."

While Spinoza's *Tractatus* is relatively straightforward and the sort of thing one might expect from a Cartesian, the *Ethics* is another matter. Voltaire said of one of the Church Fathers that he had been interpreted a thousand ways because he was unintelligible. One might say as much of the *Ethics*. I am not a professional philosopher and do not claim to understand the *Ethics*. But it seems to me an unlikely choice for a founding text of the Enlightenment in that it is written in Latin, much of its terminology is scholastic and its method deductive. Jonathan Israel points out that no one has been able to find logical

errors in the sometimes very long and complex chains of reasoning in the *Ethics*, and I have no reason to doubt this. However, the axioms and definitions Spinoza posits are, like all axioms, unproven because assumed to be true. If Spinoza's basic assumptions are unproven, then expertise in logical deduction doesn't mean that much. Beyond this, one may also ask whether the main features of single-substance materialism as posited by Israel—secularism, equality, liberty, toleration, human rights, democracy, republicanism and revolution—are to be found consistently in the thinkers whom Israel identifies as exponents of the Radical Enlightenment.

The claim for secularism, which includes rejection of the dogmas of revealed religions, anticlericalism, and a naturalistic account of the world, seems sound, though this is a position shared by the *philosophes* of the moderate Enlightenment. Secularization is perhaps the most general and distinctive feature of the Enlightenment, varying in complexion from visceral hatred of organized religion to advocacy of comprehensive toleration and more humane ethics. If, however, philosophy for Spinoza was seriously concerned with the divine,[3] then he does not properly belong to this trend.

In terms of its politics, Israel argues that the Radical Enlightenment was egalitarian, republican, democratic and revolutionary. This may overstate the case. Criticism of privilege may or may not be egalitarian. Most of the thinkers of the Enlightenment were critical of privileges deriving from birth, but regarded inequalities reflecting differences in intelligence, initiative and industry as justified, as were inequalities in wealth that followed from these qualities. Similarly, criticism of monarchy or aristocracy does not necessarily imply republicanism. Drawing attention to the shortcomings of political systems may be intended to modify and improve those systems, not to overthrow them. Approval of a republic in America may be an assertion that this form of government is appropriate there without implying that republicanism is universally desirable. Moreover, there are different varieties of republics, aristocracies and monarchies as well as of democracies, depending on the weighting of the different components of government and the powers allocated to each. Israel notes that, Rousseau aside, all Enlightenment thinkers rejected direct democracy (pp. 815-16) and that the radicals favored representative democracy, though he does not explore the implications of this. It is worth bearing in mind that Greco-Roman literature on which Enlightenment thinkers were raised, and which still exercised an enormous cultural influence in the eighteenth century, was in its entirety produced by aristocrats who were far from sympathetic to the "people" and had a dim view of their political abilities.[4]

How democratic were Israel's Enlightenment radicals? With respect to the founders, the case is not strong. Israel himself acknowledges that Bayle unambiguously supported absolutism.[5] Spinoza recognized the legitimacy of the government of the Netherlands and defined democracy as a regime "where men with one consent agree to live according to the dictates of reason." [6] The rule of reason is also the objective of Plato's *Republic*, which, without the element of consent, and whatever its virtues, is not democratic. The "dictates of reason" do not always coincide with the wishes of the people. Democracy, literally and practically, is the rule of the demos, or people. In antiquity, as today, the enfranchised people make their choices and conduct public business according to their perceived interests, limited understandings, and the promptings of those who manage, or are hired to manage, opinion. Spinoza, like Plato, preferred the rule of reason to that of the people.

The people, in fact, posed a serious challenge for the thinkers of the Enlightenment, something that Peter Gay recognized and Harry Payne and Benoît Garnot have examined in detail but that Jonathan Israel overlooks.[7] Today it is politically incorrect to link the franchise to income, occupation or level of education. This was not so in the eighteenth century, when franchise qualifications were regarded as necessary by virtually all political thinkers, including the radicals. The most common formulation of this concern was that a political voice was properly granted to those who had both a "stake in society," which is to say some minimal property or income assuring a reasonable presumption of independence, and an appropriate cultural level. Poverty, illiteracy and personal dependence were grounds for

excluding adult males from the franchise. This was the position of radicals such as Holbach and Sièyes in the latter's famous pamphlet *What is the Third Estate?*<sup>[8]</sup> It was generally held that women belonged to the domestic sphere rather than the public, so there were few demands to enfranchise them.

The Constitution of 1791 granted the right to vote to adult males over 25 years of age who paid the equivalent of three days wages in taxes. This disenfranchised about 40 per cent of the adult male population, but was much more inclusive than the irregular and corrupt franchise in eighteenth-century Britain, the only other elective system of government among the larger states of Europe. The Constitution also restricted the right to stand for election to those who paid a much higher level of taxes, the *marc d'argent*, restricting access to office to a wealthy elite. These measures were implemented by Israel's "Revolution of Reason" and were precisely the sort of restrictions that radicals such as Diderot, Holbach, and Helvétius, in their mistrust of the superstitious and volatile masses, would have found reasonable and necessary. There are similar restrictions in the constitutional arrangements of individual states in the newly formed American republic (pp. 463, 472 and 477), which also excluded blacks from the franchise, and in "the world's first modern, ideologically based, democratic movement" in Holland during the 1780s (pp. 889 and 892). Both the radicals of the Enlightenment and the politicians of the Constituent Assembly, to the degree that they favored democracy, favored a restricted form of representative democracy that mistrusted the common people, limited their role in elections and denied them office. These arrangements fit the views of Montesquieu, one of the leading figures of the moderate Enlightenment, who believed that the people were able to identify capable leaders but were themselves incapable of exercising political power.<sup>[9]</sup> Holbach was in complete agreement (pp. 816 and 950). The moderate Enlightenment and the radical agreed in rejecting direct democracy (pp. 812-15) and saw in representative democracy a way to reduce the political influence of the great majority of the people while retaining a symbolic element of popular participation in politics.<sup>[10]</sup> Representative democracy was a way of avoiding the Scylla of aristocracy and the Charybdis of undue influence of the ignorant and unstable masses. It is to this suspicion of the political competence of the people and an unwillingness to allow them to have the last word that we owe the electoral college in presidential elections in the United States.

A further question about the strain of the Enlightenment based on single-substance materialism relates to just who is designated as radical. Basil Willey long ago commented on the "passion for human improvement" of the eighteenth-century materialists.<sup>[11]</sup> He no doubt had in mind those who figure most prominently in Jonathan Israel's study: Diderot, Helvétius, and Holbach. More recently Margaret Atwood has observed, "The strictly materialist view—that we're an experiment animal protein has been doing on itself—is far too harsh and lonely for most, and leads to nihilism."<sup>[12]</sup> This brings to mind single-substance materialists such as La Mettrie, who is mentioned occasionally in *Democratic Enlightenment*, and the Marquis de Sade, who is not mentioned at all.

La Mettrie's form of materialism focused on the individual and on the maximization of her or his pleasure. He took the basic premises of Lockean psychology in a direction that is difficult to distinguish from vulgar Epicureanism, but he is no less a single-substance materialist for that. Sade, too, was a thoroughgoing naturalist and materialist, but a particularly nasty one. In his case radical egoism, amorism, and lust for power are superimposed on a materialist metaphysic. The values of humanitarianism, democracy, human rights, and social responsibility, which ennoble the thought of Diderot, Holbach, Helvétius, and many other materialists, are altogether lacking in Sade. The question this poses is, do the premises of single-substance materialism necessarily lead to the complex of socially responsible values found in the ethical materialists at the heart of Israel's study, or are the views of La Mettrie and Sade also logically sound conclusions drawn from the same premises?

Jonathan Israel maintains that single-substance materialism necessarily implies progressive politics and socially responsible values. In the introduction to *Democratic Enlightenment* he rejects the criticism of Siep Stuurman to the effect that "there is no 'necessary connection' between one-substance metaphysics

and Radical Enlightenment political and social reformism,” asserting that it is “most certainly mistaken,” (p. 2) though he does not explain how. This is an important point, and one on which Stuurman seems to be on firm ground. On the one hand, the social and political reformism of the moderate *philosophes*, while not based on a single-substance metaphysic, often overlapped with that of the radicals, while on the other hand, materialists such as La Mettrie and Sade lacked the social and political responsibility of many Enlightenment reformers, whether radical or moderate. It looks as if metaphysics had a less decisive role than Israel’s conception of the Enlightenment allows, and ethics a greater one. Siep Stuurman’s point is well taken.

### The Two Models of Enlightenment

Another key premise of Jonathan Israel’s interpretation of the Enlightenment is that there are two main groupings within the movement. The radicals, who found their inspiration in Spinoza and Bayle, adhered to a metaphysic of single-substance materialism, advocated equality and human rights, opposed aristocracy and monarchy, favored democracy, strove for comprehensive toleration, and so were revolutionary. Indeed, Israel goes so far as to claim that the specifically Radical Enlightenment was the “only important direct cause of the French Revolution” (p. 16). According to Israel, the French Revolution, or at least the period of the Constituent Assembly, was the realization of the radical program (pp. 16-17, 763 and 809). The moderates, by contrast, had as their founders Newton and Locke and like them accepted religion and providence in some form and worked within the framework of the Old Regime, which they sought to modify and rationalize, but not to overthrow.

One way of approaching the distinction between radicals and moderates is to conceive it as a distribution of opinion along a spectrum on which all thinkers of the Enlightenment could fit at some point. Jonathan Israel adopts the bolder proposition that properly conceived the Enlightenment is bipolar, with an uninhabitable middle ground between radicals and moderates (p. 6). He writes, “These [theological issues] and comparable metaphysical questions automatically generated an overarching duality polarizing all scientific and philosophical debate” (p. 33) so that there was “no feasible intermediate ground” (p. 34). The assumption that key issues presented themselves as either/or propositions may inhibit one’s ability to recognize and evaluate intermediary positions. It may be, too, that Israel’s emphasis on metaphysics is misplaced.

Israel states that it is “absurd” to posit a hermetic division between moderates and radicals (p. 33). He maintains that “All Enlightenment by definition is closely linked to revolution” (p. 7) and that anyone rejecting divine providence “was implicitly a forward-looking revolutionary” (p. 22). However, the revolution of the radicals “must entail the overthrow not just of kings but of the entire existing social order” (p. 29). It would be a “fundamental revolution,” a revolution that was “intellectual, social, political, and religious” (p. 31). The moderates are also revolutionary, “but in a limited, partial fashion” (p. 31). One may ask where, exactly, the line separating moderate revolutionaries from engaged reformers is drawn. By the end of his long book, however, Israel has apparently changed his mind and denies the moderates their revolutionary credentials, asserting that the version of Enlightenment “...anchored in Spinoza...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). It is not clear how the same group of thinkers can be said to be both revolutionary and anti-revolutionary. But if the moderates are regarded as revolutionary, then they were close to the radicals in this important respect, and the opposition between the two groups is compromised.[13] It may be, however, that Israel exaggerates the revolutionary credentials of the radicals and underestimates the degree of change advocated by the moderates and, as a result, overstates the differences between the two groups. If this is so, one of his basic working hypotheses is seriously weakened.

In recognizing that there were overlaps between radicals and moderates Jonathan Israel has the good grace to admit the obvious. Voltaire, in his view the leading figure of the moderate Enlightenment, is recognized as sharing some of the ideas and values of the radicals. He admired Chinese civilization and culture (pp. 559 and 570-72), supported the radicals in the controversy over Delisle de Sales' *De la Philosophie de la nature* (pp. 680-81), and like the radicals, denied the possibility of miracles (p. 33). Arguably, naturalism is characteristic of the Enlightenment as a whole and cannot be used to distinguish radicals from moderates. Israel might also have added that in his anticlericalism and criticism of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, Voltaire was as harsh as Helvétius, Holbach, or any of the radicals. In the Germanic world, Reimarus "exemplified the Enlightenment author, radical in some respects and moderate in others" (p. 202), while in Italy Filangieri's thought is said to be a mixture of radical and moderate elements (p. 372). As for Rousseau, Israel describes him as a "strange mix of radical, moderate, and Counter-Enlightenment tendencies" (p. 21), and he acknowledges that on the questions of equality and property his views are radical (p. 641). It is also worth noting that Rousseau's conceptualization of politics in the *Social Contract* puts him among the most radical social and political thinkers of his time. Indeed, in his advocacy of direct democracy and trust in the people, or perhaps mistrust of empowered elites, Rousseau was more radical than the radicals, who sought to assure the rule of the educated, leisured, and propertied classes by means of a system of representation. For Israel, Rousseau's advocacy of direct democracy, his notion of the general will<sup>[14]</sup> and the esteem in which Robespierre and Marat<sup>[15]</sup> held him make Rousseau the evil genius of the radical phase of the Revolution, or as he calls it, Revolution of Will.

Whatever his views on the "deep internal split between radical and moderate enlighteners" (p. 7), Jonathan Israel himself provides plentiful evidence that contemporaries often lumped thinkers of his two strains of Enlightenment together. The Spanish authorities prohibited books by the moderates Voltaire and Rousseau as well as the radicals Diderot, Helvétius, Holbach, and Raynal (p. 801); a translation into Spanish of the anti-*philosophe* Nonnotte designated the "heads" of the *philosophes* as Voltaire, Helvétius, and Rousseau (p. 804), and another critic of the Enlightenment, Bergier, included Bayle, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Helvétius, and Rousseau among the leading *philosophes* (p. 805). In Geneva the advocate of moderate Enlightenment, Jean-Robert Tronchin, counseled the condemnation of the *Emile* of the moderate Enlightenment author J.-J. Rousseau (p. 863). For contemporary conservative critics of the Enlightenment there seems to have been no significant difference between those Israel designates as moderates and those he calls radicals. Similarly, key thinkers of Israel's moderate Enlightenment, Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau, were among those hailed as precursors of the Revolution by radical journalists and politicians, such as Chénier (pp. 919-20), Roederer and Brissot (pp. 931-32), Mirabeau (p. 932), and Anacharsis Cloots (p. 944), as well as the conservative La Harpe (p. 931).

Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* was one of the most admired and widely cited books of the time. Because Montesquieu praises the English constitution and gives the nobility, the sovereign courts, or *parlements*, and the Church important roles as intermediate powers that safeguard the French political order and keep the monarchy within proper limits, Israel sees him as a defender of the Old Regime. But there is more to Montesquieu than that. In the political discourse of the second half of the eighteenth century, it was Montesquieu who gave the notion of despotism currency, and in the way he defined and presented it, despotism became a powerful element in the delegitimization of the monarchy.<sup>[16]</sup> Montesquieu's attempt in the *Spirit of the Laws* to establish social and political sciences using a comparative empirical method contributed significantly to reducing the legitimacy of arbitrary rule. In the *Persian Letters* he compared the dogmas of revealed religions to show their incompatibility, helping to make cultural relativism a powerful tool in the Enlightenment critique of religion. If sexual liberation is part of the Radical Enlightenment, then no one was more forceful in showing the evils of male domination of women, or more daring in imagining a woman with a harem of men, and in making an incestuous marriage the only happy relationship in the *Persian Letters*. So if there are moderate aspects to Montesquieu, there are radical ones too.<sup>[17]</sup> A further illustration of this is that while Israel regards the *Encyclopédie* as a flagship of radicalism, the important political articles on monarchy, republicanism,

despotism, and democracy were taken in part by Jaucourt from the *Spirit of the Laws*. Indeed, Montesquieu had been asked by the editors to write the articles on democracy and despotism for the *Encyclopédie* but declined the offer.

Further, Israel tends to exaggerate the “radicalism” of Spinoza and Bayle and to overstate the “moderation” of Locke and Newton. Locke and Newton, as well as Bayle, did believe that miracles, from the division of the Red Sea to the multiplication of loaves and fishes, had taken place. All three thinkers were closely engaged with Scripture. But each of them laid foundations for what became a naturalistic view of the world in which metaphysics and interventionist providence had little or no place. Bayle demonstrated the uncertainty of historical knowledge, an uncertainty that extended to ecclesiastical history; Locke provided the groundwork for a purely naturalistic understanding of the human mind; and Newton demonstrated that astronomy could be reduced to a few simple, mathematically verifiable laws. The dramatic breakthroughs of Locke and Newton rendered man and the world intelligible in an unprecedented way and laid the basis for Enlightenment optimism. Alexander Pope caught contemporary responses to Newton’s discoveries well in his phrase “All was light.” Of course Newton entertained extravagant religious views and was himself not what we would call normal. But that is not the point. The point is that his brilliant scientific work laid the foundation for the generalized Enlightenment belief in a balanced, harmonious and intelligible universe in which people could feel at home. Newton would not have disputed the validity of Laplace’s calculations, which were based on better data than he had available, and showed that the solar system had no need of periodic divine intervention to remain on course. He would probably have observed that the Divine Artificer did better work than his data allowed him to show and gone back unperturbed to establishing a world chronology based on Scripture, or presiding over the Royal Society, or to his responsibilities at the Mint.

Jonathan Israel presents the religious views of Locke and Newton as static but misses the dynamism and importance of their scientific paradigms. Rousseau, Condillac, and Helvétius were all Lockeanes in their psychology, and each adapted or developed Locke’s basic views in his own way. Over the eighteenth century Locke’s followers tended to drop reflection, one of his sources of knowledge, to concentrate on the other, sensation. Nevertheless, the broad framework and main assumptions of sensationalist psychology remained Locke’s.[18] Similarly, Holbach’s understanding of nature is basically Newtonian. It is balanced, harmonious, and generally beneficent, and so stands at a great distance from the view of nature as a constant and merciless struggle that predominated in the nineteenth century. Already in the early 1760s, in *Rameau’s Nephew*, Diderot portrayed the threats posed by such a view of nature when applied to ethics. In his *Encyclopédie* article “Natural Law,” he considered the political role of the amoral egoist and concluded that he ought to be drowned. Sade’s view of nature is also un-Newtonian. That Holbach ended his *Système de la nature* with what is in effect a prayer to Nature suggests that eighteenth-century materialism retained more optimism than did subsequent versions of the doctrine. In a very real sense, the ethical materialists of the eighteenth century remained within the Lockean and Newtonian paradigms that for Jonathan Israel distinguish the moderate Enlightenment.

There are, then, sufficient similarities in outlook between “radicals” and “moderates” to call into question the fundamental distinction that Israel seeks to establish between them. Another reason for questioning this separation is the shared elitism of almost all the *philosophes*, Rousseau excepted. This elitism followed in part from the comfortable economic standing of thinkers such as the tax farmer Helvétius and the wealthy landowner and beneficiary of the seigneurial system, Holbach, no less than the minor noble and jurist Montesquieu and the clever speculator and landowner Voltaire. It also followed from a mistrust of the common people on the part of the propertied and leisured. Reservations about the lower classes notwithstanding, moderates no less than radicals sought to improve the lot of the population as a whole by rationalizing administration and stimulating the economy. Harry Payne has aptly characterized this set set of attitudes as responsible elitism.[19] The people could not be trusted to administer the public sphere, so those who were able to do so should do this on their behalf and for the common good.

Israel writes, “The ultimate meaning of ‘moderation’ was that the most pressing social problems could not be solved...” (p. 30). Given an economics of underdevelopment, the social and economic problems of France were indeed intractable and would remain so until the development of effective systems of transport and widespread industrialization. These things had not happened by the end of the eighteenth century and would not happen on a scale sufficient to influence large sectors of the population until the Third Republic.[20] Recognizing the constraints of economic underdevelopment was less a “moderate” position than a realistic one and was shared by Israel’s “radicals.” Subordinating lived experience and economic realities to “*la philosophie*” is one of the more serious shortcomings of Israel’s project.

Jonathan Israel’s fundamental and sharp distinction between moderate and Radical Enlightenments seems to be less the discovery of two hitherto inadequately defined forms of Enlightenment than the consequence of a tendency on the part of the author to fit evidence to his working hypothesis. In philosophical terms, Israel adopts the principle of the excluded middle. In terms of historical analysis this leads him to overlook or dismiss the main institutions of the middle ground, namely the academies and salons as well as the mainstream press that publicized the open sessions, collections of memoirs, and essay contests by which the academies sought to influence and guide opinion, often, as in the essay contests, in the direction of solutions to mundane problems of agricultural production, storage of food products, transport, poor relief, and education. Arguing for a radically bi-polarized Enlightenment without a viable middle ground by overlooking or dismissing the main structures of that middle ground is a seriously flawed procedure.

### Enlightenment and Revolution

One of Jonathan Israel’s key theses is that the Enlightenment was revolutionary and that it led directly to the French Revolution. As we have seen, toward the beginning of his study Israel maintains that both strains of Enlightenment were revolutionary, but by the end he asserts that the radicals were “inherently revolutionary” while the moderates were “inherently anti-revolutionary” (p. 941). This second statement better reflects the general tenor of Israel’s argument than the earlier one.

It is the Radical Enlightenment that is taken as the driving force that results in the French Revolution, and from the outset this current of single-substance materialist metaphysics is presented as inherently or necessarily revolutionary, leading toward fundamental and comprehensive social and political change. This at least is the logical implication of this philosophy, and this, Israel argues, was the prime, though not the only, cause of the revolutions that shook the Atlantic world beginning in the 1770s. For the German radicals, and more generally, Spinozism was “the underpinning of both an outward and inward revolutionary consciousness” (p. 755). As noted above, Israel is not troubled by Spinoza’s recognition of the legitimacy of the government of the Netherlands, or by Bayle’s frank acceptance of absolutism. Both Spinoza and Bayle were worried by the superstitious and potentially dangerous lower classes and concern about the political competence of these classes did not change much over the eighteenth century.

So far as I have been able to determine, there is among writers associated with the Enlightenment no example of an explicit call for the masses in Europe to rise and overthrow the regimes oppressing them. Mercier and Raynal conjured the possibility of a great rising of black slaves (p. 520), but they did so, I would suggest, to warn contemporaries that if they did not ameliorate the condition of their slaves, the likely result would be a bloody—and justified—revolt. They were warning against the possibility of such an event, not calling for or encouraging it. In one of the late Enlightenment’s most forceful condemnations of slavery, Condorcet, identified by Israel as a radical both under the Old Regime and during the Revolution, advocated ending the slave trade, but not eliminating slavery until the slaves could be educated and raised to a level where they could make good use of their liberty. These were

radical proposals for the time, but not revolutionary ones.[21] There were no calls for popular revolution or encouragement of slave rebellions because the radical *philosophes*, no less than the moderates, saw themselves as socially and politically responsible and did not trust the “people” or slaves to exercise power competently. If the goal of the radicals, and of the Enlightenment generally, was to improve the lot of all, a descent into violence was not the way to do it.

To clarify the issue of revolution as it appears in Israel’s study, it may be useful to distinguish between revolutions of ends and revolutionary means. In the context of the Old Regime the idea of a disenchanted society—in which the clergy had much reduced influence, in which privilege was eliminated, and in which rulers were responsible to the people—was indeed revolutionary. But to effect these changes by education and persuasion was not. So while it may be fair to say that the ideology of the radicals was revolutionary by implication, this does not mean that the radicals advocated, or were even capable of conceiving, effective revolutionary action. Elitists—and the radicals were that—tend to favor orderly change from the top down. In their striving for improvement in all areas of life, the *philosophes* were aware of the potential costs of change and generally warned against extreme measures that might result in more harm than good. This did not make them conservatives, but it did make them pragmatic reformers. From the Renaissance on, Western literature is rich in projects and models for radically better social and political organization, but this literature belongs to the genre of utopia. Practical change usually meant gradual and limited improvement, and such changes often came from provincial academies, agricultural societies, philanthropic organizations, and individuals influenced by the rhetoric of sentiment to perform acts of kindness.

It is one of Jonathan Israel’s virtues that he reports findings that do not support his main theses. Though he argues emphatically that the Radical Enlightenment was revolutionary, he recognizes that many of his radicals and revolutionaries were socially conservative and wished to see the changes they advocated made by moderate means. Among those favoring sweeping change but rejecting violence are Pilati (pp. 351-55), Mirabeau (p. 780), and the key figures in Israel’s Radical Enlightenment, Holbach and Diderot (pp. 26-27 and 820). Raynal was “equivocal about revolution” (p. 438) and later denounced the Revolution that began in 1789 (p. 935). The German Illuminati advocated revolutionary change, but rejected violence as a means of achieving it (pp. 832-33), while Goethe, who is described as a Spinozist, is said to be “no democrat and no revolutionary” (p. 749), and Schiller is described in similar terms (p. 750). The British radicals Thomas Paine and William Godwin strongly favored democracy and revolution but conceived of revolution as a matter of changing the way people think.

Where supposedly democratic revolutions occurred, the leaders were often social and political elitists who mistrusted the “people” and sought to limit their role in politics or eliminate their influence entirely. Such were John Adams (p. 446) and Alexander Hamilton (pp. 458-59) in the United States, which waged a war of independence without a social revolution, and Schimmelpenninck in Holland (p. 892). The only figure said to call for popular insurrection was the Italian Gorani (pp. 363-64), but his case is so exceptional as to call for further examination.

Practical change usually meant gradual improvement. One strategy for achieving such improvement was to work within existing structures to rationalize and improve them, and it was adopted by Diderot as well as Voltaire. Jonathan Israel is perhaps unduly harsh in his discussion of enlightened despotism and may not have given pre-revolutionary reforms, such as the elimination of torture and granting of civil rights to Protestants, the weight they deserve. Doing so would not have enhanced his argument for a revolutionary Enlightenment, but it would have shown greater awareness of the difficulty progressive contemporaries faced in choosing between aristocracies intent on maintaining the status quo and monarchs trying to continue their work of centralization, rationalization, and state building.

Another test of Jonathan Israel's thesis that the Radical Enlightenment was a major cause of the French Revolution is the response of the *philosophes* themselves to the Revolution. Unfortunately, most of the leading Enlightenment figures died before the outbreak of the French Revolution: Montesquieu in 1755, Helvétius in 1771, Jean-Jacques and Voltaire in 1778, Diderot in 1784, Mably in 1785 and Holbach in 1789. Representatives of the moderate Enlightenment who were comfortably integrated into the Old Regime and who lived to see the Revolution, such as Morellet and Marmontel, were early disillusioned with the events of 1789. Their responses support the thesis that the moderate Enlightenment did not favor revolution, although Kant, whom Israel describes as a moderate and conservative, did welcome the early phase of the Revolution.

The *philosophes* whom Israel regards as radicals and who were active after the convening of the Estates General do not prove unequivocally that radical Enlightenment necessarily led to moderate revolution. Condorcet twice failed in bids for election to the Estates General but was elected to the Paris Commune in September 1789. He subsequently won a seat in the Legislative Assembly in the fall of 1791 and also sat in the Convention. As a publicist he supported the major reforms of the Constituent Assembly, but he remained above all a theoretician who wrote impressive memoirs and reports that were not implemented in conditions of large-scale internal revolt and a war waged against most of the major powers of Europe. He belonged to the Gironde and with the rest of that faction fell afoul of the Jacobins and their sans-culottes allies. When the Convention outlawed the Girondins he went into hiding and completed his great *Sketch of the Progress of the Human Mind*. When arrested, he took his own life.

The abbé Raynal, organizer, editor, and contributor to the *Histoire philosophique des deux Indes*, for Israel the key text of the late Radical Enlightenment, should have been, on Israel's interpretation, an enthusiastic supporter of the work of the Constituent Assembly. Raynal was elected to the Estates General but did not take his seat, and in May 1791 he denounced the Revolution (p. 935). Israel cites contemporaries who take this to mean that Raynal had never been a genuine radical, merely a moderate in radical's clothing, and seems to agree with them (pp. 934-36). An alternate interpretation is that Raynal was indeed a radical, but that radicalism did not necessarily imply revolution. He favored significant reform of the Old Regime but felt that too much was being done too quickly. Government should be for the people, but it was not feasible that it be by the people. Israel's most consistent radical, the Baron d'Holbach, rejected direct democracy, asserting that the people were competent only to choose those who were to govern them (p. 816) and that the best the people could hope for was to be governed by decent folk [*gens de bien*] (p. 950). As we have seen above, this was precisely the view of Montesquieu.

For Israel, "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" (p. 16). He further asserts that while social discontent was necessary to bringing the Revolution about, "...monist systems were in fact indispensable to the rise of a generalized outlook which was, in turn, the principal cause of the French Revolution and the other revolutionary movements of the late eighteenth century" (p.22). In contrast, Lester Crocker has written, "The makers of the Revolution were representatives of the moderate, deistic current, which had won the allegiance of the vast majority of liberals and thinking men, and not of the bolder, more original extremes of materialism, anarchism, or proto-totalitarianism." [22]

Crocker's views suggest a more subtle and complex interrelationship of ideas, policies, and events than Israel's emphasis on radical ideas allows. It is not often that philosophy has the sort of direct impact that Israel ascribes to it. If it did, we could reasonably expect that philosophy departments in contemporary universities would be flourishing, while faculties of business administration would not be spreading like nettles.

Jonathan Israel's treatment of the French Revolution is one of the less satisfactory aspects of his book. There are errors of fact, and there are omissions that result in serious misjudgments.[23] He writes, for example, that the Great Fear, as the peasant risings of July and August 1789 are known, included "extensive murder and pillage" (p. 898). Had he consulted Georges Lefebvre's classic *The Great Fear*, or Clay Ramsay's *The Ideology of the Great Fear: the Soissonnais in 1789*, or P.M. Jones' *The Peasantry in the French Revolution*, he would have found that the rural riots of the summer of 1789 were directed primarily against seigneurial rights and involved little or no violence against persons. When the seigneurs or their representatives surrendered the *terriers*, the ledgers that were the legal basis of seigneurial dues, the peasants destroyed these and left the chateau, together with its occupants and contents, otherwise undisturbed. Had Jonathan Israel familiarized himself with the work of Pierre de Saint-Jacob, Hilton Root, or Jeremy Hayhoe on the peasantry of Burgundy, he would have known that these peasants had been contesting seigneurial rights in the courts for decades, and that while they never won their cases in a legal system dominated by the nobility, their political awareness and sense of practical engagement grew as they hired lawyers, found the money to pay them, and followed their cases to their inevitable failures. It was through recognition of their immediate needs and from the lessons of lived experience that many peasants in the summer of 1789 applied carefully directed and limited violence to destroying the legal basis of onerous and one-sided seigneurial dues. The Great Fear was no *jacquerie*.

The way the urban environment worked to break down traditional hierarchies and to modify attitudes of town dwellers is one of the themes of Daniel Roche's magisterial *France in the Enlightenment*. Lived experience was a source of potentially revolutionary attitudes as widespread among urban artisans as it was for the peasantry. Guilds pitted journeymen against masters, provided a framework for a kind of participatory democracy, and served as the context for the development of contestatory ideologies. As David Garrioch has observed, "Even before the Enlightenment introduced the language of individual liberty and human rights, artisans spoke of their freedoms and rights and condemned 'tyranny.'" [24] Garrioch goes on to cite Michael Sonenscher to the effect that "...artisans did not need to read Rousseau or form popular societies to learn about slavery and freedom, dependence and independence, natural rights and legal obligation." [25] There is little doubt that the values and language of the Enlightenment served the legislators of the French Revolution in articulating their ideas. But there is rather more to the Revolution than the way members of its Assemblies used and manipulated the tools and ideas left them by the *philosophes*, whether moderate or radical.

The Night of August 4, 1789, was intended to put an end to the peasant risings by, at least in part, meeting the demands of the peasantry. To that end the legislators of the Constituent Assembly sought to eliminate certain seigneurial obligations, and not, as Israel claims "in principle to abolish all feudal dues and serfdom in France" (p. 903). The lawyers and landowners in the Assembly, ever sensitive to the rights of property, did eliminate serfdom and all personal service, but maintained all "real" (i.e. property-based) dues until redeemed at a rate of thirty times their annual value, something beyond the means of almost all peasants. Further, including "the abolition of feudal privilege" among reforms "wholly unconnected both with France's traditions and with popular sentiment" (p. 923) is a serious misjudgment. As common sense would suggest, and some acquaintance with the history of the countryside would show, there were no measures more popular among the land-owning peasantry than the elimination of the tithe and seigneurial dues. Moreover, the final legislative elimination of seigneurial obligations was not a boon conferred by a gracious Assembly on unexpecting peasants, but the result of peasant passive resistance and their refusal to pay their land-based seigneurial dues. The final abolition of seigneurialism, like the abolition of slavery, had to await the Jacobins, who acted in these cases less from ideological conviction than from the needs to assure the loyalty of the peasants to the Revolution at home and to meet the threat of British invasion of their colonies in the Caribbean.

Identifying Differences

Why is it that, given the immense erudition of the author and his seventy-five page bibliography, for this reader, *Democratic Enlightenment* fails to carry conviction? There are a number of reasons, the most basic of which is, perhaps, the way the author approaches his subject.

Jonathan Israel boldly sets out to write intellectual history in a way that places “*la philosophie*” at the center of his project and that minimizes, and sometimes eclipses, social, economic, and cultural factors. Israel thus accords to abstract thought a far greater and more potent role than do most historians, and he tends to view the logical implications of ideas as in fact drawn by the thinkers he treats. According to him the French Revolution is the working out of the ideas of the Radical Enlightenment, and these ideas are often treated as if it were sufficient to follow their logical implications to explain the Revolution. Israel cites copiously and approvingly from eighteenth-century authors, many social and intellectual conservatives, who state that the French Revolution was indeed the work of the Enlightenment (pp. 925-26). In accepting the judgments of reactionary critics of the Enlightenment and French Revolution at face value, Israel is in danger of setting intellectual history back two hundred years.

I find it difficult to accept the force attributed by Jonathan Israel to “*la philosophie*” because I continue to think that social, cultural, and economic forces and lived experience influence ideas and that it is necessary to see how all these factors interact adequately to appreciate what was going on. I suppose that this is a roundabout way of saying that I remain an old-fashioned social historian. In any case, I have been convinced by Daniel Mornet, Daniel Roche, Robert Darnton, Roger Chartier, Margaret Jacob, Dena Goodman, Elisabeth Badinter, Benedetta Craveri, and others that ideas do not move through society in a direct or unobfuscated manner. Social standing, institutional frameworks, and cultural orientation matter. Ideas are refracted, modified, bent (or twisted), ignored, amplified, moderated, appropriated or adapted depending on the cultural, institutional and social milieux in which they are articulated and on the functions they serve. We lose more than we gain by dismissing “cultural spaces” as Israel does (pp. 23-24 and 779-80). The same ideas will be differently inflected in the great Parisian academies, in salons, masonic lodges, Grub Street, cafés, and provincial academies where local elites gathered, often to work quietly and constructively for practical ends. But Jonathan Israel appears to hold that the deeper structures of history are to be found in philosophy, so that contingency, circumstance, and context hardly matter.

In considering what weakened the Old Regime and contributed to bringing about the Revolution it is probably not wise to ignore the gutter literature, or *libelles*, brought to the attention of historians by Robert Darnton. This literature lacks the cogency and moral earnestness of much *philosophe* writing, but these positive qualities were not necessarily more effective in political debate in the eighteenth century than they are in the twenty-first.

One of the less attractive features of Jonathan Israel’s book is his often dismissive attitude toward other scholars. He regards salons as unimportant (p. 5) and states that it is “completely wrong” to suppose that they set the “intellectual agenda” (p. 779). He dismisses the category of sociability as “just a giant red herring” (p. 5) and finds the notion of national Enlightenments “altogether invalid” (p.6). Israel’s views on the French Revolution and its interpretation are no less imperious. He asserts, “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 stress on alleged institutional and social factors not directly connected to the principles of the Revolution...” (p. 16). He further sees the failure to recognize the importance of philosophical controversies to the Revolution as “...an astonishingly universal and utterly unfortunate mistake” (p. 784). It is his view that “whole generations of scholars have been misled” by “modern theories and fashions...and so have failed to give proper weight to the explanations of contemporaries” (p. 925). One wonders if Israel would make a similar claim with respect to the witch hunts of the sixteenth century. He dismisses the social interpretation of the Revolution as “a gigantic historical delusion” (p. 926) that prevents our properly appreciating the

role of “*la philosophie*” in bringing about and shaping the Revolution. Similarly, “the current habit among many historians of distinguishing between ‘philosophical’ and ‘social’ interpretations of the Enlightenment is a giant delusion” (p. 937), and this despite the author’s penchant to dismiss the social and institutional dimensions of the Enlightenment.[26]

Why is Jonathan Israel certain that his assumptions and approach are so sound that he can simply dismiss the work of other scholars and specialists of the Enlightenment and Revolution? His certainty seems to come from his conviction that he has got it all right, so any approaches that differ from his are simply mistaken. They are dismissed or denounced. Unless one has been personally handed the Tables of the Law by a Higher Authority, this is not a recommended way of doing history. This is not just a question of tact. If one simply dismisses the research and conceptualization of other historians, one fails to engage with them. And whether or not one agrees with the findings of historians such as Roche, Darnton, Chartier, Furet, Jacob, or Keith Baker, there is much to be gained from seriously considering their arguments and methodologies. Most of these historians work on the contexts in which ideas were developed and disseminated, areas that appear unimportant to the author of the ambitious book under consideration.

On occasion Israel’s concern with radical ideas leads him to overlook relevant material, or to use it in a highly selective way. To make his case that Radical Enlightenment opinion became dominant during the 1770s and 1780s he asserts that the key books expressing radical views were the most widely diffused. He writes, for example, that 1770 was the year of the publication of “the century’s two most widely read radical works—the *Histoire philosophique* and the *Système de la nature*” (p. 648), and that “Along with the *Système* [*de la nature*], the most widely known everywhere in the Atlantic world, as well as the hardest-hitting, was the *Histoire philosophique* generally attributed to ‘Raynal’” (p. 785). We cannot know what was read and by whom two hundred fifty years ago unless we have specific evidence. Thus, what we are dealing with is the publication history of these books, and we assume that books would not have been printed and bought if there was not an interest in them.

The most comprehensive information we have on the clandestine book trade of the last decades of the Old Regime is the work of Robert Darnton. Darnton’s compilation of under-the-counter best-sellers does indeed show that Israel’s radicals did well in the publishing sweepstakes: Holbach’s *Système de la nature* ranks third, with 768 volumes, behind Mercier’s *L’An 2440* with 1,394 volumes and the *Anecdotes sur Mme la Comtesse du Barry* with 1,071. Raynal’s *Histoire philosophique* ranks fifth with 620 copies.[27] Israel cites these figures (p. 786) but does not modify his claims for the preeminence of the leading radical works, and while these figures rank the radical works in question high, they do not justify the superlative. Nor does Israel engage Darnton’s thesis that criticism of the immorality of the court and royalty, represented by the second best-seller on his list, contributed to undermining the monarchy and destabilizing the Old Regime. In any case, Israel’s claims for the preeminence of his favored radical works are not justified by the best figures available, as he himself is aware.[28] This points to an additional problem, namely exclusive emphasis on radical philosophy that precludes taking into account other relevant factors.

### Alternatives

It is clear from what precedes that I have serious reservations about the overall validity of Jonathan Israel’s view of the Enlightenment. Of course it is easier to criticize a work of such remarkable scope and outstanding erudition than to produce one, something of which very few historians, and certainly not the present writer, would be capable. I would, however, like to make some suggestions about how we might think about the Enlightenment in alternate, and hopefully more constructive, ways.

Jonathan Israel has made a metaphysic of single-substance materialism the core of his Radical Enlightenment, which for him is the “real” Enlightenment. It may be useful, however, to think of the

Enlightenment as a movement that is about not-knowing, or at least one that claims knowledge only in certain restricted areas, specifically those subject to observation and calculation. For Israel, emphasis on reason was characteristic of thinkers of the Radical Enlightenment. He is aware that Voltaire argued that the scope of reason was limited (p. 661) and that Locke, Hume, and Kant concurred (p. 733).<sup>[29]</sup> With respect to ultimate values and metaphysics, progressive eighteenth-century thinkers argued that these are areas in which certainty cannot be obtained. Today, lack of knowing tends to generate either anxiety or recourse to faith. In the eighteenth century it was liberation from the oppressive weights of theology, metaphysics, and absolutism. Not-knowing was arguably the main source of toleration, one of the Enlightenment's most important legacies, and one endangered today by those who think they know too much or who believe too zealously.

There is another sense in which Enlightenment thinkers can be said to incline toward negation. I would suggest that much of the naivety of Enlightenment social and political thought follows from the broadly held assumption that if it were possible to eliminate prejudices, privileges, and out-dated laws and institutions, all would be well. Possibly an overly optimistic view of human nature was at work here. Or perhaps the work of reform and renewal was more than enough for the thinkers of those generations, and the demands of outlining, explaining, and justifying a wide range of reforms and carrying on a running polemic with defenders of the old order exhausted their energies. In any case, the reforms of the French Revolution, significant as they were, left the great majority of the population in as much misery as ever, and as Eugen Weber has demonstrated, significant improvements in the lives of ordinary people had to await the Third Republic. Thinkers developing social, economic, and political sciences over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were aware, neo-liberals notwithstanding, that human well-being did not automatically emerge once abuses had been removed but had to be carefully planned in complex and ever-changing situations.

Another feature characterizing the Enlightenment is the emergence of individualism and the legitimization of self-interest. Neither classical republicanism nor traditional Catholicism gave precedence to the individual over the community. In the seventeenth century LaRochefoucauld pointed out the overwhelming power of self-interest as a motive in human affairs, but he did not think that this was a good thing. It was only during the eighteenth century that thinkers and economists began to assert not only the prominence, but also the social benefits, of self-interest. Once self-interest came to be seen as fundamental to uncorrupted human nature and as a basis for a science of man and society, it became possible to think about it constructively. Probably the most potent myth that we have inherited from the Enlightenment is the belief that vigorous pursuit of self-interest is the most effective way of maximizing general well-being. In the context of civil society this usually meant assuring the individual's rights to enterprise and property. It is worth recalling here that the only value ascribed sanctity in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen is property (article 17). An account of the Enlightenment that fails to incorporate the roles of individualism and self-interest is less than complete.

Jonathan Israel directs his work to both historians and philosophers (pp. 3, 4, 11, 784, 930 and elsewhere). As a historian I find it difficult, despite the author's impressive erudition, to accept his argument. The sharp distinction between radical and moderate Enlightenment seems artificial, and his narrative line—a radical strain of Enlightenment becoming dominant from the 1770s then leading to the French Revolution—is rather too simple to be convincing. His account of the Revolution as the work of a “tiny” group of thinkers and *philosophes-révolutionnaires* who succeeded by dint of their ideas and convictions in implementing the program of the Radical Enlightenment ignores the social, economic and political contingencies faced by the legislators of the early phase of the Revolution and the way events sometimes, as on the night of 4 August 1789, outran them. The French Revolution is rightly seen as a mass movement, and ascribing excessive influence to a small group of thinkers (pp.15-16, 31, 764, 902, 905, 913, 916 and 933) hardly makes for an adequate understanding of it.<sup>[30]</sup> It is of course appropriate to see the Enlightenment as providing the linguistic and ideological framework for the

legislation produced by the revolutionary assemblies and modified and codified by Napoleon. But this is not the same as arguing that the Enlightenment, or "*la philosophie*" was the main cause of the Revolution, which, I humbly submit, it was not.

The additional thesis that the Revolution moved from "reason" to "will" as the influence of Rousseau replaced that of the radical *philosophes* is unconvincing, first, because there is no good evidence for the dominant influence of Diderot, Helvétius, and Holbach in the early phase of the Revolution and, second, because an account of the shift from the moderate to the radical phase of the Revolution that ignores the flight to Varennes, the federalist risings, the alliance of Jacobins with sans-culottes, and a European war that pitted France against most of the rest of the continent is too far removed from the realities of the situation to explain what was happening. It places the author among those gentlemen for whom circumstances "pass for nothing." [31] It also puts Israel close to conservative and reactionary writers who saw the Revolution as the necessary outcome of the Enlightenment or, as some of them would have it, the outcome of a conspiracy of Jews, Protestants, Freemasons, and *philosophes*.

The abbé Barruel, Bonald, Maistre, and other conservatives wrote at a time when ideas and ideologies were often ascribed decisive force and when little attention was paid to social categories and to the way ideas and values were modified at different social levels. We know today, for example, that crowd actions toward the end of the Old Regime and during the Revolution reflect the behavior of small property owners who usually insisted on paying a "just price" for bread that market conditions had made too expensive for many. We know too that old regime guilds provided the background for the precocious political organization of artisans of the Paris districts and sections. We are aware that the persecution of Jansenists contributed to developing a mentality of opposition among a wide cross-section of the population, including simple working people. Historians such as Daniel Roche and Cissie Fairchilds have shown that secularization follows from things as ordinary as the beginning of a consumer culture and pragmatic reforms aimed at improving health, order, and security. Furthermore, despite a recent modification of ideological determinism toward linguistic determinism, many historians, the British prominent among them, have the good sense to recognize that circumstance and contingency do play a large role in human affairs. Jonathan Israel's frequent citations from eighteenth and nineteenth century commentators who saw the Enlightenment as the immediate and direct cause of the French Revolution appears regressive. [32] If Barruel, Maistre, Bonald, and even Taine could provide no more convincing an explanation of phenomena to which they were deeply hostile, we today can and should.

## Conclusion

Were it possible to ask a thinker of the Enlightenment what criticism he or she has of Jonathan Israel's treatment of his or her movement, I suspect that the response would be "*esprit de système*." This is the flaw that Voltaire found in the scientific work of Descartes and that led Enlightenment thinkers to reject the metaphysical modes of thought that preceded them. Broadly empirical, the Enlightenment used fact to limit theory and preferred to admit ignorance rather than pose unverifiable hypotheses. It seems that Israel has based his examination of the Enlightenment on a hypothesis, and having adopted it, has simply ignored facts that do not fit, or, in the case of the French Revolution, has not bothered to acquaint himself with what actually happened. Why bother, if one's conclusions have been drawn beforehand? It is *esprit de système* that is a main weakness of Israel's study of the Enlightenment, and vitiates his analysis.

Jonathan Israel concludes his book with the recognition that countervailing forces have blocked the advance of Enlightenment, but he does not abandon all hope. He writes, "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... 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). While I share Israel’s reservations about the intellectual currents and sets of interests that block realization of key Enlightenment values, I am not convinced that he portrays these values and their context adequately. The way we see an underdeveloped society is different from the way we see a developed one, and Europe in the eighteenth century was clearly underdeveloped economically. There was a significant level of trade, but industrialization was only just beginning and that on a modest scale. The *philosophes*, including such single-substance materialists as there were, lived in overwhelmingly traditional agricultural economies in which population was pressing hard on resources and life for most was short and harsh. The *philosophes*, including the radicals, were for the most part elitists who thought in terms of reducing abuses and improving the lives of ordinary people as far as the limited resources of a traditional economy and the main institutions of the Old Regime allowed. To ascribe to them aspirations that could be achieved only in industrial economies is misconceived. Social democracy is an ideal not of the eighteenth century but of the nineteenth and even more of the twentieth century and cannot well be separated from socialism, which was hardly present in the Enlightenment.

Israel’s tendency to overstate the novelty of Enlightenment thought is reflected in his use of the phrase “reevaluation of all values” (p. 949), a slight variation on a catch-phrase of the nineteenth century that has little application to the eighteenth. Carl Becker long ago brought attention to an element of intellectual continuity in Enlightenment thought in *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*. Becker argued that the great shift in modern Western thought occurred not with secularization but with the abandonment of a correspondence theory of knowledge and its replacement with voluntarism and relativism. During the nineteenth century thinkers such as Schopenhauer maintained that truth did not exist objectively but was a matter of will and perception. Unlike relativists and postmodernists, eighteenth-century thinkers believed, like Fox Mulder, that the truth is out there and that it was their task to discover it. They also believed that texts had determined meanings and that they could be, and all too often were, misinterpreted. They would not have agreed with voluntarists and many postmodernists that texts are infinitely indeterminate. Arguably, the distance between those who believe that truth is a matter of will and those who believe that it exists objectively is vastly greater than the distance between those who agree on the objective nature of truth but differ in apprehending it in sacred or profane terms.

Some Enlightenment thinkers saw and pondered the implications of a world working in terms of radical egoism rather than enlightened self-interest, of Darwinian struggle rather than Newtonian harmony, and of evolving organism rather than perfected mechanism. Sade saw certain of these developments and embraced them. In *Rameau’s Nephew* Diderot considered some of them, but refrained from publishing his concerns and reservations. Jonathan Israel’s thesis that single-substance materialism and its broader implications lay at the heart of the Enlightenment and of modernity is a bold attempt to reinterpret a subject that has received much attention from scholars. In the view of the present writer, it does not carry conviction.

#### Notes

I wish to thank Harvey Mitchell, Roger Emerson, Robert Forster, Norbert Ruebsaat, and Jonathan Vogt for having read and helpfully commented on an earlier version of this article.

[1] Jonathan Israel has summarized much of his argument in a single volume entitled *Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[2] Among eighteenth-century thinkers Hemsterhuis and Hennert (p. 696), Goethe (p. 698), Herder (p. 713), and Solomon Maimon (p. 719) rejected the view that Spinoza was an atheist.

[3] Part One of the *Ethics* is entitled “Concerning God.” Proposition XIV of that part states, “Besides God no substance can be granted or conceived.” Proposition XV states, “Whatsoever is, is in God, and without God nothing can be, or be conceived.” Proposition XVIII states, “God is the indwelling and not the transient cause of all things.” The translation used here is that of R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1955), pp. 54-55 and 62.

[4] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans. W.R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 131-33.

[5] Jonathan Israel, “Pierre Bayle’s Political Thought,” in A. McKenna and G. Paganani, eds., *Pierre Bayle dans la République des lettres: Philosophie, Religion, Critique* (Paris: Champion, 2004), pp. 368-69.

[6] Benedict Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, trans. R.H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1955), chap. xix, p. 247.

[7] Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, 2 vols (New York: Knopf, 1966-1969), vol. 2, pp. 517-28; Harry Payne, *The Philosophes and the People* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1976); and Benoît Garnot, *Le Peuple au siècle des lumières: échec d’un dressage culturel* (Paris: Imago, 1990).

[8] Sièyes says, for example, “It is unquestionable that tramps and beggars cannot be charged with the political confidence of nations. Would a servant, or any person under the domination of a master, or a non-naturalised foreigner, be permitted to appear among the representatives of the nation? Political liberty, therefore has its limits, just as civil liberty does.” He calls the members of the Third Estate who deserve a role in the political life of the country “the *available* classes” and continues “...and like everyone else I call ‘available’ those classes where some sort of affluence enables men to receive a liberal education, to train their minds and to take an interest in public affairs. Such classes have no interest other than that of the rest of the People.” *What is the Third Estate?* trans. M. Blondel (New York: Praeger, 1964), pp. 74-75, 78.

[9] Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, book 2, chap. ii.

[10] Jonathan Israel asserts that equality was one of the core values of the Radical Enlightenment but fails to note that not only in practical political terms, but also in theory, there were strong reservations about it among writers he designates as radical. The following citation is from Diderot and appeared in what Israel calls the leading radical publication of the 1780s, the *Histoire philosophique des deux Indes*: “The chimera of equality is the most dangerous of all beliefs in a civilised society. To preach this system to the people is not to recall its rights, it is to invite the people to murder and pillage; it is to unchain domestic animals and transform them into wild beasts. It is necessary to soften and enlighten either the masters who govern them or the laws which guide them. In nature there is only an equality of right, and never an equality of fact. Even primitive men become unequal as soon as they live together in groups.” Denis Diderot, *Political Writings*, trans. and ed. J.H. Mason and R. Wokler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 197-98. Voltaire’s article “Equality” in his *Philosophical Dictionary* is more playful and ironical in tone but shares Diderot’s reservations about any practical implementation of the ideal of equality.

[11] Basil Willey, *The Eighteenth-Century Background* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 167.

[12] Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2009), p. 241.

[13] Israel also asserts that both tendencies shared pessimism (p. 34), though it is unusual for pessimists to become either reformers or revolutionaries.

[14] Israel seems particularly aggressive, though not particularly well founded, in his criticisms of Rousseau. He states that Rousseau's general will "is more a question of what is willed, of volition" and is without objective criteria (p. 640). This goes against the sense of the *Social Contract*, book II, chap. 3, in which Rousseau argues that the general will cannot err. This follows not from the ability of the people always to make the right decision, but from the nature of the general will, which is conceived as something approaching a Platonic Idea. The majority may vote for a mistaken policy, but this does not negate the existence of an objectively correct policy that conduces to the general good. The great difficulty in arriving at decisions that favor the general good for Rousseau is overcoming particular and group interests. As is his wont, Israel finds in Spinoza the source for many key Enlightenment ideas. He alleges that Rousseau was influenced on a number of key issues by the author of the *Tractatus* (pp. 636-67). It is more likely that he derived his basic political ideas from reading the authors of the classical republican tradition. Israel also asserts that Rousseau "never joins in the attack on black slavery" (p. 640). Yet Rousseau delivers a scathing attack on slavery in general in the *Social Contract*, book I, chaps. 3-4, and unless he explicitly excludes blacks from his general criticism, he must be understood to include them. Among the philosophers of the Enlightenment, Rousseau is exceptional for his sympathy for the poor and downtrodden. Unless he can adduce a specific text to show that Rousseau accepted black slavery, Israel's accusation is unfounded. It is also curious that extensive as is his bibliography, Israel fails to cite many leading Rousseau scholars, such as Maurice Cranston, Robert Derathé, Judith Shklar, Jean Starobinski, Roger Masters, and Mark Hulliung.

[15] Jonathan Israel has a tendency to portray key figures of the Revolution in black and white. The revolutionaries painted in black are Marat, one of the leading spokesmen for extreme popular revolution, and Robespierre, who played a central role in the politics of the Terror. In addition to disregarding the pressure of circumstance, Israel fails to note that during the Constituent Assembly Robespierre was a leading advocate for democracy and a voice for moderation. He opposed the *marc d'argent*, spoke against the death penalty, and later, in the debates on war, opposed it. In one of his more syballine statements Israel asserts of Robespierre that "Deep down he hated *la philosophie...*" (p. 782). How deep one needs to go and how one verifies this point are unclear. Israel's presentation of his leading radicals is also lacking in balance. Sièyes and Mirabeau certainly had their good points; however, the latter actively cooperated with the court and was paid for his trouble, and the former, who played a key role in the pre-Revolution and transition to the National Assembly, was also a hauty backroom committee man who subsequently served on the councils of the repressive Directory and Consulate and then had a large part in establishing Napoleon's dictatorship. Interestingly, Jonathan Israel dates his "Revolution of Reason" from 1789 to 1792 and continues it from 1794 to 1802 (p. 948). He thus excludes the Terror from his praiseworthy and desirable Revolution but includes the earlier part of Napoleon's dictatorship.

[16] John M. Burney, "History, Despotism, Public Opinion and the Continuity of the Radical Attack on Monarchy in the French Revolution," *History of European Ideas*, 17 (1993): 245-63.

[17] For another view of the radicalism of Montesquieu see Catherine Volpillac-Augier, "Une Modération radicale? Montesquieu," in Cathérine Secrétan et al., *Qu'est-ce que les lumières "radicales"?* (Paris: Editions Amsterdam, 2007), pp. 389-97.

[18] Diderot wrote a critique of Helvétius' reductionist *De l'Homme*, asking, among other things, whether a purely passive sensation-based model of the mind was viable.

[19] Payne, *The Philosophes and The People*, pp. 128, 172, 187-91.

[20] Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976).

[21] Condorcet, *Réflexions sur l'esclavage des nègres* [1781], Jean-Paul Doguet, ed. (Paris: GF Flammarion, 2009; 1781), pp. 72-73.

[22] Lester G. Crocker, *An Age of Crisis: Man and the World in Eighteenth Century French Thought* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1959), p. 461.

[23] Israel speaks of attitudes of the Third Estate changing “suddenly” in the summer of 1788 (p. 765) but ignores the ruling of the Parlement of Paris of 25 September 1788 that directed that the Estates General be held according to its traditional format, thus giving the privileged orders, which together accounted for roughly three per cent of the population, an automatic majority. It was only at this point that the Third Estate distanced itself from the lead of the nobility. His assertion that “nothing carried over from before 1789” (913) goes against the grain of much recent scholarship, I think unwisely. He gives the date for the formal emergence of the National Constituent Assembly as 18 June 1789 instead of June 17 (p. 897), though he gets the date right elsewhere (p. 771). Eager to distance himself from the social interpretation of the French Revolution and to maximize the role of ideas, Israel denies the bourgeoisie a significant role in it and goes so far as to assert that there were no merchants or businessmen in the Constituent Assembly (pp. 764 and 902). Alfred Cobban’s analysis of the membership of a number of revolutionary assemblies showed that merchants and bankers accounted for 13 per cent of the members of the Constituent Assembly (“The Myth of the French Revolution” in *Aspects of the French Revolution*, New York: George Braziller, 1968, pp. 110-11). Colin Jones’ useful handbook gives a slightly higher figure: *The Longman Companion to the French Revolution* (Singapore: Longman, 1988), pp. 166-67. Israel similarly minimizes the role of the legal profession in the Enlightenment (p. 232) and the Revolution, where they are said to have had “no impact whatever” (p. 905). Since according to Cobban lawyers of various sorts made up 25 per cent of the deputies to the Constituent Assembly and even more to the Convention this seems unlikely. Furthermore, many of the *officiers*, who accounted for another 43 per cent of the deputies to the Constituent, would have had law degrees. These figures do not lend plausibility to Israel’s claims that the legal profession was without importance in Enlightenment reform or the Revolution. Had he consulted the important studies of Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) and David Bell, *Lawyers and Citizens: The Making of a Political Elite in Old-Regime France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) he might have thought it necessary to revise his views on the importance of lawyers in the intellectual and political culture of the eighteenth century. Another instance of Israel’s tendency to give priority to ideas in decisions of the Constituent Assembly concerns the nationalization of Church property. He ascribes this legislation to the ideology of the Radical Enlightenment (pp. 917-18) without taking into account the financial difficulties of the French state, the animus of certain Jansenists involved in drafting the legislation, or the care taken to avoid infringing on dogma. Similarly, Israel sees the Declaration of Rights as an expression of the views of the Radical Enlightenment (p. 905). Had he read chapter twelve of George Lefebvre’s classic *Coming of the French Revolution* he would have been able better to appreciate the complexity of that document which certainly had ideological content, but at the same time negated abuse after abuse of the Old Regime.

[24] David Garrioch, *The Making of Revolutionary Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 79.

[25] Garrioch, *The Making of Revolutionary Paris*, p. 79. The citation is from Michael Sonenscher, *Work and Wages: Natural Law, Politics and the Eighteenth-century French Trades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 332.

[26] From time to time Jonathan Israel makes statements to offset the philosophy-centered nature of his study. He says that “The Enlightenment is not a story of ideas but a story of the interaction of ideas

and social reality” (p. 5), and he rejects the criticism that he has made “ideas alone” the source of the success of the Radical Enlightenment (p. 14). With respect to the French Revolution, he writes that the people were “instrumentally crucial” (p. 765), and that “Plainly, it was *not* ideas on their own which did the work of carrying the Revolution forward. The Paris street crowds and clubs were decisive” (p. 936). These perfectly sensible views cannot be squared with many more of the author’s statements giving precedence to ideas and “*la philosophie*” and to the emphasis placed on them throughout the book. They are throwaways.

[27] Robert Darnton, *The Corpus of Clandestine Literature in France, 1769-1789* (New York: Norton, 1995), p. 194. The same tables are reproduced in Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: Norton, 1996), pp. 63-65).

[28] Israel also uses data selectively to give an impression he wants. For example, he uses Darnton’s local figures for the ranking of Holbach’s *Système de la nature* for Lyon (first place) and Lorraine (second) to show the success of Holbach’s most widely sold book (p. 786). Israel mistakenly gives his source here as Darnton’s *Forbidden Best-Sellers*, where the same author’s *Corpus* is required. He does not mention that the *Système de la nature* did not appear at all in the lists for Troyes and Marseille, or that it ranked twelfth in sales in Paris. (Darnton, *Corpus*, pp. 218-19, and 224). This sort of selective use of data is not helpful, and one would do better in generalizing to use the inclusive lists of best-selling books and authors Darnton has compiled. Similarly it may not be wrong to say that Helvétius’ *De l’Esprit* and *De l’homme* were “vigorously diffused” (p. 785), but it would be useful to add that *De l’Homme* ranked twenty-eighth of 74 works on Darnton’s list of best-sellers, Helvétius’ *Works* ranks sixty-seventh, while *De l’esprit* does not figure in that list at all (Darnton, *Corpus*, pp. 194-97). Helvétius does, however, figure in tenth place in Darnton’s list of best-selling authors, and Holbach in second. First place among authors of illicit literature was Voltaire, who, if he is regarded by Israel as a moderate, was apparently seen by the authorities of the time as unacceptably daring. (Darnton, *Corpus*, pp. 199-200).

[29] Israel further discusses the limits of reason in the Enlightenment on pp. 697-700.

[30] The excellent studies of Tim Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: the Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789-1790)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) and Vivian Gruder, *The Notables and the Nation: The Political Schooling of the French, 1787-1788* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), both of which are absent from Israel’s bibliography, would have helped to provide a richer and more nuanced account of the Pre-Revolution and the early phase of the Revolution.

[31] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* [1790], ed. L.G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2009), p. 8.

[32] Israel regrets that “modern historiography has somehow lost” the insight that “*la philosophie* was the primary cause of the French Revolution. It was indeed overwhelmingly the primary factor; but not quite in the way the *anti-philosophes* envisioned it, and to explain this is one of the central objectives of these volumes” (p. 17). This promised explanation does not seem to have been forthcoming.

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Volume 9, Issue 1 (Winter 2013), No. 4