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Jonathan Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from The Rights of Man to Robespierre*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014. viii + 870 pp. \$39.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-691-15172-4.

Review by Jeremy D. Popkin, University of Kentucky.

In early 2014, H-France devoted one of its “forums” to Jonathan Israel’s previous book, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (Oxford University Press, 2011). The four critiques, by Harvey Chisick, Keith Baker, Carolina Armenteros, and J. K. Wright, and Israel’s equally lengthy response, were reportedly the longest essays ever posted on the listserv.^[1] Those who read the forum, or who have made their way through any of the three massive volumes Israel has dedicated to the Enlightenment, will be familiar with his insistence that that movement was sharply divided into two rival camps, a “radical Enlightenment” supposedly characterized by an unswerving commitment to a rationalist materialism first articulated by Spinoza, and a “moderate Enlightenment” fatally contaminated by a lingering belief in a higher power.^[2] In Israel’s view, the radical Enlightenment, as he defines it, is the only significant source of modern notions of freedom. The moderate Enlightenment, which in his definition encompasses almost all of the major figures conventionally associated with the movement, including Locke, Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Rousseau, not only failed to make any major contribution to the campaign against superstition and ignorance, but essentially defended them. Those who read Israel’s reply to his critics will also know how intransigently he is committed to the proposition that ideas are the only real moving force in history.

In his newest publication, *Revolutionary Ideas*, Israel applies his approach to the French Revolution. His claims are ambitious. “Key general assumptions about the French Revolution, everywhere frequently repeated and long accepted by both philosophers and historians, turn out to be fundamentally incorrect, leaving us with an uncommonly urgent need for some very sweeping and drastic revision,” he asserts (p. 29). The subject of the Revolution’s political thought could be a fruitful one. In recent years, only Patrice Higonnet has tried to take on the full range of revolutionary ideas.^[3] Discussions of revolutionary ideas can easily be swamped by accounts of the period’s dramatic events, however, and Israel’s volume proves to be a prime example of this phenomenon. The book’s barrage of footnotes to primary sources is deceptive. The vast majority of them refer to contemporary accounts of political events or to personal polemics from the period, rather than to texts one might consider as examples of political reasoning. No one familiar with Israel’s earlier work will be surprised to learn that he concludes that “Radical Enlightenment was incontrovertibly the one ‘big’ cause of the French Revolution. It was the sole fundamental cause because politically, philosophically, and logically it inspired and equipped the leadership of the authentic Revolution” (p. 708).

Revolutionary Ideas is intimately connected to Israel’s overall project on the Enlightenment, and indeed one might say that the plausibility of his entire project on the Radical Enlightenment hinges on his ability to convince readers that the Revolution was the translation of that movement’s ideas into reality. The story Israel tells in his new book, however, raises a fundamental difficulty for the entire radical-Enlightenment thesis, because Israel makes no attempt to claim that the Revolution was a success. Indeed, as he describes it, the handful of the faithful whom he defines as the only true revolutionaries

were overwhelmed by an unholy coalition of religious and monarchist counterrevolutionaries, proto-fascist advocates of pseudo-populist dictatorship led, in his view, by Robespierre, and a naive and ignorant population incapable of recognizing its real friends. In the end, the surviving proponents of “la philosophie” wound up putting the Revolution’s fate in the hands of a military strongman who abandoned their principles altogether (p. 694). We are left to wonder why, if the emancipatory potential of the ideas of the Radical Enlightenment was so unmistakable, a movement to put them into practice turned into such a failure. One might also ask, although Israel certainly doesn’t, whether the effort to impose the Radical Enlightenment’s ideas on a population which he concedes was overwhelmingly opposed to them was not doomed from the start, and whether the moderates and conservatives he treats so dismissively did not have a point when they warned of the dangers of trying to sweep away all existing institutions.

Just as he divides eighteenth-century thinkers into two fundamentally opposed camps, Israel divides the revolutionaries into sheep and goats. His heroes are a small band whose composition is never precisely defined. His central figures are certainly Brissot and Condorcet, although Mirabeau frequently appears alongside them in early chapters, and there are a number of others, including Camille Desmoulins, Anacharsis Cloots, Thomas Paine, and several deputies usually identified as members of the Girondins, who are occasionally elevated to full partnership. The villains are everyone else: monarchists, Catholics, the common people, “unworthy of the courageous men braving a thousand perils to enlighten them” (p. 207) and, above all, “populist authoritarians” (p. 89), led by Robespierre and Marat. The latter and their followers, sometimes also identified as proponents of “unbending Rousseauist populism” (p. 66) in order to stress their connections to the man Israel considers the most dangerous of the moderate Enlighteners, might appear to be revolutionaries but were in fact, in Israel’s reading of things, the movement’s most dangerous enemies.

The terminology Israel uses will certainly bewilder anyone familiar with the existing literature on revolutionary politics. On the one hand, Israel frequently describes his heroes as “Left republicans,” a term never used at the time that places them at the radical end of the Revolution’s political spectrum, beyond the Montagne, the Hébertistes, and any other factions of the period. On the other hand, he routinely describes the same figures as “Brissotins,” apparently oblivious to the fact that this was a polemical slur invented by Brissot’s personal enemies—one of them also coined the verb “brissoter,” defined as “to steal”—with the overt purpose of exaggerating his influence over his political allies. In discussing the Directory years, long after Brissot’s death, Israel comes up with the term “neo-Brissotins” for those he sees as the heirs to the “Left republicans” of earlier years. One of the stranger consequences of Israel’s vocabulary is that anyone consulting the index under the heading of “Girondins,” the generally accepted, if often contested, term for Brissot and his political allies (and the one I will use here), will find that there is no entry for them, even though mentions of members of that group appear on almost every page.

In any event, Israel’s list of heroes is a relatively limited one, a fact he not only concedes but stresses. After the storming of the Bastille, he writes, “leadership of the Revolution had fallen into the hands of a small, unrepresentative clique.... That a small steering group of the Assembly could prod the rest into accepting that neither parlements nor any past or existing body, institution, charter, law, or precedent possessed any validity was something unparalleled in history” (pp. 70, 72). Although the new constitution hammered out by the National Assembly created a constitutional monarchy, Israel has no doubt that “the ‘radical’ wing of the revolutionary leadership was already uncompromisingly republican by 1788” (p. 24), a proposition for which he provides no evidence. The fact that he never defines what he means by “republicanism” does not help matters. So obvious does the wisdom of the revolutionaries’ principles appear to Israel that he does not even bother to explain them. His chapter on the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen does not identify what were defined as man’s four natural rights, explain how liberty and equality were defined, or mention many of the document’s other basic

provisions. Among those passed over in silence are articles demanding a separation of powers and affirming the right of property, the former a concession to Montesquieu that raises questions about the Radical Enlightenment's exclusive role in shaping the document, and the latter whose potential conflict with the promise of equality was obvious to everyone.

Given Israel's conviction that there are no valid arguments against the ideal of natural rights, he is of course faced with the problem of explaining why these principles encountered so much resistance. Dismissing the possibility that peasants and the urban lower classes might have had any reason to see the liberal principles of 1789 as an attempt to reconstitute social inequality on a new basis, and announcing, in disregard of generations of scholarship from Georges Lefebvre to John Markoff, that "little evidence survives as to how the uneducated common people really thought" (p. 38), he can only conclude by endorsing a claim made at the time by Camille Desmoulins, to the effect that freedom of the press had the unfortunate consequence of enabling "a new species of political deceiver, *le calomniateur* despot, who systematically defamed rivals, forging a new kind of tyranny—*le despotisme populacier*—built on organized ignorance" (p. 52). The two despotic populist arch-villains of Israel's narrative are Marat and Robespierre, indissolubly linked together and denounced with monotonous regularity on page after page, despite one passing concession that "even Robespierre" scorned the "odious and despicable" *Ami du peuple* (p. 417). Although serious historical scholarship has dispelled the myth that Robespierre completely dominated the revolutionary government, Israel uncritically repeats the accusations made at the time by Robespierre's bitterest enemies, such as the Girondin deputy Louvet and the Thermidorians, about his dictatorial authority. An émigré pamphlet from 1794, for example, is the source for the claim that the other members of the Committee of Public Safety were "more often... like Robespierre's 'secretaries' than colleagues" (p. 503). The only one of Robespierre's utterances given any serious analysis is his speech on the moral foundations of republican government, delivered in May 1794, which Israel quotes at length because it justifies his claim that Robespierre was an enemy of the *philosophes* (pp. 561-66).

In a narrow sense, there is some truth to Israel's claim that a relatively small group of "patriot" politicians did exercise an outsized influence on the early stages of the Revolution. Sieyès, Mirabeau, Lafayette, and yes, Brissot and Condorcet, did play crucial roles in the transformation of the Estates-General into the Constituent Assembly and in the drafting of the Declaration of Rights. Whether these men were all inspired by "metaphysical monism and one-substance philosophy" (p. 621) is another question, and whether they succeeded because of the unique quality of their ideas or because they gave clear expression to sentiments about the need for constitutional government and the protection of individual rights that were more widely shared is another and even more important issue. The idea that France needed a declaration of rights was repeated in hundreds of pamphlets and *cahiers* in early 1789. Fewer authors were prepared to try translating the general idea into a specific list of provisions, and Israel's protagonists, along with other figures such as the moderate Mounier, were among those who did. The final result included contributions from many deputies. Part of the document's success was undoubtedly due precisely to the fact that it did not appear to express the ideas of a small coterie of philosophical radicals but instead was worded in such a way that people of many different views could accept it.[4]

Israel's emphasis on the importance of what he repeatedly calls the "core" group of revolutionaries works much less well once he gets past the movement's opening stages. It is hard not to conclude that, for Israel, everything that happened in France between 1789 and 1799 was basically a continuation of the quarrel between Rousseau and the Diderot-d'Holbach circle, but this Manichean model hardly applies to the much more complicated course of the Revolution. For one thing, his "core" group was much more diverse than he acknowledges. Whereas Israel wants to claim that they were all principled republicans from the start, Mirabeau, whom Israel considers the hero of the fight for the Declaration (p. 84), was already in secret contact with the court by October 1789 (not March 1790 as Israel says) (p. 136).

Israel sees a sharp distinction between “democratic republicans” such as Brissot and “authoritarian populists” like Robespierre, but in fact Brissot was one of the first to call for authoritarian emergency measures. In an early number of his newspaper, the *Patriote français*, for example, Brissot challenged Sieyès’s argument that the deputies of the National Assembly, in their capacity as the people’s representatives, had the authority to draft a constitution. “Jamais une Nation ne peut être constituée par des Représentans même extraordinaires, sans son approbation expresse de la constitution,” he insisted, echoing the criticism of representation that Israel identifies as one of Rousseau’s congenital “populist” errors. (*Patriote français*, 1 Aug. 1789). Brissot was one of the first, if not the first, revolutionary to propose a special court to try enemies of the Revolution, the germ of the idea of the future Revolutionary Tribunal. Indeed, he was already advocating the idea, justified in terms of the need to satisfy the people’s demand for vengeance, in the first week of August 1789. (*Patriote français*, 4, 7 Aug. 1789). Whereas Israel wants to make support for freedom of the press one of the touchstones of genuine revolutionism, Brissot approved the arrest of troublemaking writers: “Quoi! l’on pourroit arrêter l’Auteur d’une machine infernale qui, par une explosion subite, pourroit faire sauter une Ville, & l’on ne pourroit arrêter un homme dont les calomnies & les déclamations peuvent en un instant armer le Peuple contre ses Chefs, & les Provinces contre les Provinces? Demander qu’on respecte alors la liberté de la presse, c’est nous prier de nous laisser paisiblement égorger.” (*Patriote français*, 8 Nov. 1789)

Brissot and Condorcet are Israel’s two paradigmatic rationalist revolutionaries, but their conceptions of reason were certainly very different. Both were hostile to existing institutions, particularly the Church, and both undoubtedly believed in the power of reason to guide human affairs. Condorcet’s abstract and mathematical notion of reason, however, was not the same as Brissot’s, which was more like a version of common sense. For Brissot, the dictates of reason in politics were always “simple” and obvious, and he did not consider it necessary to explain them in detail. Condorcet, on the other hand, strove to bring a geometrician’s rigor to political reform, as the convoluted procedures for elections and referenda incorporated in the draft constitution he presented to the Convention in February 1793 demonstrate. Israel, who calls this proposal “a great landmark in world history” (p. 347), concedes that it would have required “complex electoral procedures” (p. 354). Most critics at the time and since have concluded that its requirements for two separate multi-week national elections every year (one for legislators and another for the choice of ministers) and its provision for potentially unlimited numbers of referenda, including re-votes on propositions just passed, would have been completely unworkable, an example of reasoning pursued to a point where all sense of practicality had disappeared. Condorcet advocated political rights for women, on the grounds that both sexes shared the power of reason. Brissot, like Rousseau, firmly believed that a woman’s place was in the home, as he told the female journalist Louise de Kéralio when she asked for his support for her enterprise.[5]

On one crucial issue, however, Brissot and Condorcet did arrive at the same conclusion, although it was one that was hard to justify in terms of abstract reason. They both supported a tactical alliance with the king in 1792 in order to push France into war with Austria. If Israel had reflected more carefully on what he himself writes about the two men’s role in the war campaign, he might have recognized why much of the population came to distrust them so thoroughly. As Israel puts it, Condorcet’s “and Brissot’s republican campaign of June-July 1791 had failed dismally; an aggressive strategy toward the émigrés and a European war promised to be a more successful way of promoting the republican bloc’s fortunes and swinging most of the Jacobin Club behind them” (p. 238). In other words, these two pure rationalists (as Israel sees them) were prepared to plunge their country into a conflict of incalculable consequences out of purely partisan motives. Robespierre, of course, famously warned against this adventure. One does not have to believe in Robespierre’s malevolent cunning or the inherent stupidity of the common people to understand why the Girondins’ reputation never recovered from the dubious maneuvers they undertook to promote their war policy.

In comparison with the Montagnards, who did indeed resort to the dictatorial methods Israel denounces at length in *Revolutionary Ideas*, the Girondins have the advantage of not having had to actually govern the country during the crisis of 1793-94. We can never know whether they would have resorted to similar policies to put down the Vendée rebellion, counter foreign invasion, and keep the economy from collapsing. As we have seen, Brissot certainly justified authoritarian measures from the beginning of the Revolution, and he and Condorcet were among those who pushed hardest for punitive measures against refractory priests and émigré nobles in the fall of 1791. After the Convention established the Revolutionary Tribunal in April 1793, Brissot and his allies succeeded in getting Marat indicted and tried, setting a precedent that would come back to haunt them. They presumably would have been happy to see him executed. When supporters of the Girondins succeeded in gaining power in major provincial cities in the weeks prior to what Israel describes as “Robespierre’s putsch” of 31 May-2 June 1793, they treated their Montagnard enemies as harshly as the Montagnards would treat them a few months later. In short, both Israel’s attempt to portray the Girondins as consistent advocates of human rights, opposed to sinister “proto-fascist” Montagnards, and his broader argument that the difference in behavior on the part of the two groups comes down to differences in their philosophical ideas, are fundamentally unconvincing.

Israel’s treatment of Robespierre is the inverse of his unsustainable glorification of Brissot. The stands that made Robespierre a hero to the Left in the Constituent Assembly—his insistence that all citizens, regardless of wealth, should have the right to vote, his opposition to martial law and the death penalty, his opposition to the Feuillant scission after the king’s flight—are either barely acknowledged or passed over in silence. If he was, as Israel insinuates, aiming at dictatorship from the start, it is certainly curious that he introduced the famous “self-denying ordinance” that prohibited all deputies in the original assembly, including himself, from running for seats in its successor. Among other things, this opened the doors of the Legislative Assembly to Brissot and Condorcet, who had both failed to win election to its predecessor. Robespierre certainly makes a most peculiar “populist.” He never mixed with the common people, and he had no talent as a rabble-rouser. At the height of the Terror, he was frequently sidelined by ailments that Israel confidently diagnoses as nervous breakdowns, which means that he was not involved in several decisions of the Committee of Public Safety.

It is in dealing with Robespierre that the shortcomings of Israel’s research methodology and handling of evidence become glaringly evident. One can certainly find innumerable references to Robespierre as a “dictator” in sources from the period, ranging from J. B. Louvet’s vehement denunciation of him in November 1792 to the flood of thermidorian literature unleashed after his execution. Israel cites repeatedly from this literature, without ever questioning the motives of its authors. Whereas he dismisses all attacks made on the Girondins as calumnies, he takes Louvet’s invective at face value, and he never notes that many of those who heaped abuse on Robespierre after his death were trying to exculpate themselves from any responsibility for the Terror. If one really wants to try to understand Robespierre’s admittedly often enigmatic actions, one cannot rely only on the period’s polemical literature. It is essential, as historians such as R. R. Palmer and Robespierre’s biographers have shown, to seek out the archival sources that show how the revolutionary government actually functioned. Israel includes some of the relevant secondary literature in his bibliography, but its insights are entirely missing from his text.[6]

While Israel sees Robespierre as having nearly single-handedly wrenched the Revolution off its rightful course, he regards the Directory years as having given the movement a second chance. The surviving republicans tried to rid themselves of “the miscreants who had perverted the Republic” and restore “the Revolution of democracy, equality, and human rights” (p. 593). He happily notes the number of disciples of the Enlightenment, normally referred to as the Idéologues, who got themselves appointed to the regime’s new intellectual institutions after 1795, and claims that the regime’s success is shown by the fact that “France’s now huge and steadily expanding army operated efficiently under its control while remaining steadfastly subordinate to this newly reconstituted republican authority until 1799” (p. 613).

The members of the Directory, who learned to their surprise in 1797 that General Bonaparte had negotiated the peace of Campo-Formio with the Austrians without bothering to consult them, knew better. In the coup d'état of 18 fructidor V, which Israel regards as an unqualifiedly good thing, three of them openly conspired with Bonaparte to use the army against their two colleagues. His positive assessment of the Directory and the Idéologues does of course oblige Israel to explain why so many of the latter participated in the overthrow of the regime in 1799. The blame falls on Sieyès, who made the “decisive error” of inviting Bonaparte to join the coup plot (p. 694). One might have thought that these republicans’ real error was in deciding to overthrow the institutions many of them had helped set up just four years earlier in order to guarantee their hold on power.

There are many other instances of tortured arguments and misleading assertions throughout *Revolutionary Ideas*, but the fundamental weakness of the book is Israel’s determination to force the entire complicated series of events that made up the Revolution into the simple mold of a struggle between a heroic Radical Enlightenment and the evil forces of darkness surrounding it.[7] Israel is certainly entitled to his personal conviction, emphatically stated in his conclusion, that “the Radical Enlightenment alone offered a package of values sufficiently universal, secular, and egalitarian to set in motion the forces of a broad, general emancipation based on reason, freedom of thought, and democracy” (p. 708), and that it remains the only hope of the world today. Others may think that figures like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, neither of whom could be considered a believer in “one-substance philosophy,” have also made major contributions to the cause of human freedom. Only a naive or uncritical reader of Israel’s book could conclude, however, that he has shown that the ideas of the Radical Enlightenment, as he defines them, were the guiding force of the French Revolution, or that the history of the Revolution proves the superior wisdom and intelligence of those who he identifies as the acolytes of that movement from 1789 to 1799.

NOTES

[1] H-France Forum 9, issue 1 (Jan. 2014).

[2] In addition to *Democratic Enlightenment*, Israel’s trilogy on the Enlightenment includes *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) and *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[3] Patrice Higonnet, *Goodness beyond Virtue: Jacobins during the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

[4] On the drafting of the Declaration, see Marcel Gauchet, *La Révolution des Droits de l’Homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989); Stéphane Rials, *La Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen* (Paris: Hachette, 1988); J. S. Samwer, *Die französische Erklärung der Menschen- und Bürgerrechte von 1789-1791* (Hamburg: Hansischer Gildenverlag, 1970); and J. Sandweg, *Rationales Naturrecht als Revolutionäre Praxis* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot GmbH, 1973). On the emergence of the idea of natural human rights more generally, see Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights* (New York: Norton, 2007).

[5] Louise de Kéralio, letter of 10 Oct. [1789], assuring Brissot that she agrees with his remarks that women should show modesty and not be distracted from their domestic occupations, in AN, 446 AP 9 (Brissot papers).

[6] One could make a good reading list for a seminar on the French Revolution out of the major works of scholarship on the subject that do not appear in Israel’s bibliography. They would include John Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords and Legislators in the French Revolution* (University

Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), which refutes his claim that we know nothing about peasant thinking in 1789; Timothy Tackett, *When the King Took Flight* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), which deals at length with the question of whether republicanism was a plausible possibility after the flight to Varennes; Pierre Caron, *Les Massacres de septembre* (Paris: La maison du livre français, 1935), still the standard account of the September massacres; Isser Woloch, *The New Regime: Transformations of the French Civic Order, 1789-1820s* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1994), on the social reforms introduced by the Montagnards; Howard Brown, *Ending the French Revolution: Violence, Justice, and Repression from the Terror to Napoleon* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), which throws Israel's generally positive assessment of the Directory into question; Charles Gillispie, *Science and Polity in France: The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Years* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), essential for understanding the relationship between the Revolution and intellectual elites; Suzanne Desan, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), the most comprehensive analysis of revolutionary legislation affecting women; Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), which would have corrected many of Israel's misstatements about events in the Caribbean; and Juan Cole, *Napoleon's Egypt: Invading the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), on Arab reactions to the French expedition. Given the importance of Brissot in his narrative, it is surprising that the two main biographies of him, by Eloise Ellery and Suzanne d'Huart, are not mentioned. For the record, let me state that two of my own books, *The Right-Wing Press in France, 1792-1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980) and *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) are included in Israel's bibliography.

[7] There are a dismaying number of factual errors in the book: Avignon was not part of France prior to 1790 (p. 44); the royal veto incorporated into the Constitution of 1791 was valid for three two-year legislative sessions, not just one (p. 103); Madame Roland was not a native of Lyon (p. 150); the "populists" Hébert, Chaumette, Ronsin and Vincent were never deputies in the Convention (p. 275); "the reactionary Prussian king... [who] could only fulminate and vow unrelenting war of the Revolution until absolute monarchy and aristocracy were restored" after the French victory at Valmy in fact essentially withdrew from the war against France to concentrate on grabbing territory in Poland and then became the first European ruler to make peace with the Republic in 1795 (p. 316); the French revolutionary commissioner to Saint-Domingue, Sonthonax, was never "captured by white colonists," and when he returned to France in 1797, he was not put on trial but rather seated as one of Saint-Domingue's deputies to the Council of 500 (pp. 416-7); Marat's body did not lie in state "for weeks"; in fact, it putrefied so rapidly in the summer heat that the stench drove the crowd away from the elaborate ceremonies held in his honor (p. 471); the editor of the *Journal de Perlet*, whom Israel credits with "expounding radical philosophique views" after the Fructidor coup in 1797, was in fact one of the few counter-revolutionary journalists unlucky enough to be deported to Cayenne (p. 689).

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