

---

H-France Review Vol. 2 (February, 2002), No. 26

Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. xxii + 810 pp. Maps, tables, plates, notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 US (cl). ISBN 0-19-820608-9.

Review by J.B. Shank, University of Minnesota.

*Was ist Aufklärung?* Robert Darnton recently began a lecture on this topic by asking his audience to repeat the question, only this time with feeling. Jonathan Israel would not have been amused. He finds nothing tired or stale about this classic question of European intellectual history, nor does he see any problem with the classic "men and ideas" approach to it that Darnton has built a career critiquing. *Radical Enlightenment*, Israel's magisterial history of the emergence of Enlightenment thought in Europe, is nothing if not a throwback to a bygone era when, to borrow from Darnton again, intellectual historians were scholars who took dusty philosophical tomes off library shelves and taught readers how to link them together. Yet despite its frustrating traditionalism and maddening dismissal of an entire generation of newer Enlightenment scholarship, *Radical Enlightenment* is an important book. It especially offers an important chronological and geographical reconceptualization of the origins of the Enlightenment that scholars, whatever their historiographical stripe, will ignore only at their peril.

But will anyone actually read the book? And can the honest reviewer actually recommend that one do so? It is not that Israel is a bad writer. Quite the contrary, he proves to be a very engaging guide to the many topics he presents. It is rather that, weighing in at over eight hundred densely-worded pages, *Radical Enlightenment* is more accurately classified among the many fine encyclopedias which Oxford University Press has recently issued than among its histories. Israel's absolutely astonishing erudition partially explains the book's girth, since the author simply knows a great deal and is eager to share every last bit of his knowledge. In any case, the book concludes with a wonderfully thorough index, and so Israel's tendency to leave no idea unarticulated is not necessarily a failing, assuming, of course, that one treats the book as a reference work and does not try to read it from beginning to end. One might even imagine recommending the book as an erudite compendium, but this is made difficult by the fact that *Radical Enlightenment* does contain an important argument about the Enlightenment buried within its Baroque pageant of learning. Unfortunately, when trying to read the book for this central argument, one wishes that Israel (or his editor) had better understood the virtues of the cutting-room floor.

Indeed, while struggling with the "loose, baggy monsterism" of *Radical Enlightenment*, I was reminded of the Marquis de l'Hôpital's reaction to another dauntingly erudite compendium: Newton's *Principia*. "What a fount of knowledge there is in this book!" the marquis exclaimed, wanting to know further if the author was capable of socializing in the common way with ordinary men. Yet few followed l'Hôpital in actually reading Newton's work. Instead, the *Principia* became "the most influential unread book in history" because others--Pemberton, MacLaurin, Maupertuis, Voltaire--extracted its central argument and articulated its importance to a wider audience. I have the sense that reviewers will play Pemberton to Israel's Newton, which is fine since the ideas and central argument of *Radical Enlightenment*, like those of the *Principia*, deserve a wider circulation than the book itself is likely to produce.

From what has been said already, it should be clear that no thorough summary of the book's contents is even remotely possible. Yet the text can be described by outlining the architecture supporting its many particular discussions. After a brief preface, the book proceeds in five parts. Part I, called "The 'Radical Enlightenment,'" is really a set-up piece, offering survey chapters that explore such topics as government, society, politics, intellectual institutions, and gender in the period under study. This section functions like the general overview chapter which begins many history textbooks, and as such it offers a very effective introduction to the intellectual scene in Europe around 1700. Indeed, this section could even stand alone as a textbook were Oxford interested in issuing it separately as an inexpensive paperback. But since Israel is not generally inclined to treat texts and ideas in terms of their political, institutional, or gender context, little of this material appears again in any meaningful way later in the work. As a result, one wonders whether it needed to be in the book at all.

Part II, "The Rise of Philosophical Radicalism," constitutes the book's real beginning. Here Israel introduces us to the central protagonist of his story: Benedict Spinoza. He goes on to trace the roots of Spinoza's thought, its development into two principal texts—the *Tractus Theologico-Politicus* and the *Ethics*—and finally the publication and diffusion of Spinoza's ideas, first in Holland and then abroad. Part III, entitled "Europe and the 'New' Intellectual Controversies (1680-1720)," continues the story by charting the new culture of radical thought throughout Europe that Spinoza's work triggered. Israel is at his best in these two sections, which I find very important and will consider in detail in a moment. But Israel is not yet done; indeed, we have 300 pages and a couple thousand footnotes yet to digest. Part IV, "The Intellectual Counter-Offensive," explores the many responses to Spinozistic radicalism throughout Europe. Here Israel manifests another of his characteristic scholarly traits—an emphatically transnational approach to the history of thought—by surveying reactions to philosophical radicalism everywhere from London to Vienna and St. Petersburg and from Stockholm to Lisbon and Naples. Part V examines the European Enlightenment during its classical period (1680-1750), treating it in terms of the struggle between Spinozistic radicalism and what he terms interchangeably "the mainstream" or "moderate" Enlightenment. Virtually every canonical Enlightenment thinker gets his moment on stage in these sections, with Israel breathing fresh life into their roles by surrounding them with a generally unfamiliar cast of Spinozistic radicals. The book also becomes even more sweeping in these final chapters, literally hopping from European city to city in an effort to survey both the radical and the moderate Enlightenment. Although they are often very successful in generating fresh insights into the nature of Enlightenment thought, the book's final chapters suffer from their sweeping generality. In particular, they tend to absorb (and thus efface) historical specificity within the grand categories of the book's overall thesis. An Epilogue ends the text by making the necessary climactic gestures toward Rousseau and the French Revolution. With that, Israel's intellectual epic comes to an end.

Overall, *Radical Enlightenment* is best described as an encyclopedic history of European ideas between 1650 to 1750 conceived according to the "men and ideas" model practiced by Peter Gay or Paul Hazard.[1] So what is innovative and important about such a methodologically retrograde enterprise? Three things principally; first is the focus on Spinoza; second is the geographical shift toward the Dutch Republic effected by such a focus; third is the chronological re-orientation toward the final third of the seventeenth century, which necessarily follows from these other re-conceptualizations. Taken as a set, these re-orientations constitute an important challenge to existing Enlightenment scholarship. To understand their impact, let me consider each in turn.

One of the tremendous contributions of Israel's book is to take the specter of Spinozist radicalism at the center of European culture in this period and to give it flesh and bones. Israel overstates the case when he writes that "historians have rarely emphasized [Spinoza's status as] the supreme bogeyman of Early Enlightenment Europe" (p. 159), since any student of European thought in the years around 1700 quickly discerns that Spinozism is the great danger lurking behind virtually every argument. Furthermore, the classic works of Ira Wade and Paul Vernière and the more recent work of Margaret Jacob offer rich accounts of the nature and influence of the Spinozist threat in European thought.[2]

Israel, however, embeds his engagement with these works in his footnotes and bibliography, such that one might get the impression by reading only the text that no one before Israel has ever ventured into this scholarly territory.

Yet even if one finds this manner of *ex cathedra* scholarly address off-putting, it is clear that he makes an important and original contribution to our understanding by treating Spinozism not only as an ever-present intellectual danger but also as a real, embodied philosophical movement. Israel correctly contends that historians tend to "claim that Spinoza was rarely understood and had very little influence" (p.159), since the standard account treats Spinoza as the ultimate *outré* thinker, too radical to be fully absorbed into the existing currents of thought and too subversive to spawn an actual coterie of thinkers devoted to his ideas. Vernière's wonderfully rich *thèse d'état* on Spinoza in France before the Revolution illustrates well this tendency by arguing that Spinoza's ideas became widely influential in France largely through a misunderstanding of his actual philosophy. He further contends that there were no authentic Spinozists in France or anywhere else. Israel destroys this idea with devastating persuasiveness. Channeling his vast command of Dutch history into a meticulous reconstruction of the world that produced and received Spinoza's thought, he shows how Spinoza emerged out of the radical circles of the early Dutch Republic and how his ideas found a receptive audience within this same milieu. Margaret Jacob's work certainly points to the existence of a real, clandestine network of Spinozist radical thinkers in Europe and to the centrality of the Dutch republic in this movement. But *Radical Enlightenment* goes far beyond anything that Jacob or her predecessors have done in mapping this network with empirical precision.

In my estimation, the great achievement of *Radical Enlightenment* lies in documenting the inception and diffusion of the Spinozist movement in turn-of-the-eighteenth-century Europe. The irony, however, again from my point of view, is that this is not Israel's primary goal. Instead, he uses this empirical foundation to build a larger argument about the intellectual character of Enlightenment targeted against the notion of Enlightenment put forward by Peter Gay and Ernst Cassirer, who tend to ignore the influence of Spinoza entirely and to treat what Israel calls the "moderate Enlightenment" as the Enlightenment *tout court*. To the extent that this older "history of ideas" conception of Enlightenment remains a vital zone of historical debate, and to the extent that Gay's and Cassirer's work remains canonical in this sphere (two admittedly debatable assumptions), then Israel's work does offer an important challenge to this literature. Rather than a movement defined by its reasoned moderation, judicious empiricism, and sociable humanitarianism--Gay's Enlightenment--Israel argues instead for the centrality of aggressive, critical rationality, and anti-establishment agitation in defining the Enlightenment's modernity.

Furthermore, since Peter Gay's Enlightenment does at least remain a touchstone in eighteenth-century studies even if much of the scholarly literature has moved in other, less idealist directions, Israel's revisions of it are not without importance. When, for example, Dale Van Kley cites Gay (along with Keith Baker) in his *Religious Origins of the French Revolution* to support the claim that a "combination of Lockean empiricism and Cartesian rationalism...gave the French Enlightenment its peculiar punch," he is speaking from a consensus position among eighteenth-century French historians about the nature of the French Enlightenment. But when Van Kley in the same discussion finds it hard to imagine how "Locke's doctrine of the mind's dependency on sense perception for ideas could have led Diderot to materialism" and then resolves his dilemma by attaching Diderot to "the Cartesian legacy's radical separation of body from soul," the reader of *Radical Enlightenment* knows that a better answer is found in linking Diderot to the currents of Spinozistic radicalism so well documented by Israel.[3] In this respect, the revisions of *Radical Enlightenment* are important, especially within the framework of the traditional history of ideas approach to Enlightenment that Van Kley invokes here in generic fashion.

But does anyone, with the possible exception of Anthony Grafton, really think that Enlightenment studies needs to reconnect with its history of ideas roots?[4] *Radical Enlightenment* is without question a

---

magisterial history of ideas, and for some this description will offer a sufficient account of the book's significance. But for those, like me, who are uncomfortable with Israel's Grand Style of intellectual history, his argument needs a further *raison d'être*. Fortunately, the book provides one through its thorough reconstruction of the links tying Spinoza to his followers and his followers to radical thought throughout Europe. Accomplishing this task requires skills and stamina that few historians today possess (Israel appears to be comfortable working in at least eight European languages), and scholars for many years to come will be grateful to have at their disposal the work that Israel has produced.

Two further challenges to existing Enlightenment scholarship (including scholarship outside the history of ideas narrowly defined) also follow from Israel's work. One focuses on how to think about the origins of Enlightenment in geographic terms. Much Enlightenment scholarship today remains Paris-centric, tracing the birth and spread of Enlightenment in terms of the rise and diffusion of the philosophe movement.[5] Certainly there have been important challenges to this conception—the brilliant works of the late Roy Porter and J.G.A. Pocock offer cases in point.[6] Similarly the influence of non-French culture in forging the philosophe movement is unquestioned. A long historiography emphasizes the English origins of philosophe thought, while a newer historiography, now joined by Israel, broadens this picture by arguing for a combined Anglo-Dutch origin. Yet Israel's contributions to these discussions are nevertheless transformative, as he makes late-seventeenth-century Holland the mother of all of these movements. For example, he traces with his characteristic empirical precision the links that tied English radicals like Toland and Collins to the earlier Dutch Spinozist coterie. He also shows how both the English Newtonians who inspired Voltaire and the French Encyclopedists who inspired Europe were largely moderates when compared with the Spinozistic radicals circulating in the same cultural milieu. Once again, were Israel merely offering a conceptual map of Enlightenment thought, his book would not be as important. Instead, what makes his history so potent is his documentation of the actual Spinozistic underground of the eighteenth century, a Dutch-led movement that constituted a living, breathing foil to the more moderate Enlightenment of Paris, London and elsewhere.

Israel makes a similar argument for the seventeenth-century origins of the Enlightenment, and this constitutes the book's third and final challenge to our current understanding of Enlightenment. If, as Israel contends, Spinoza and his coterie do constitute the central vector of Enlightenment, and if, as he also claims, the development of Enlightenment is best understood in terms of the diffusion of Spinozist radicalism throughout Europe, then *Radical Enlightenment* also makes a strong case for shifting the standard chronology of Enlightenment backwards in time. I find this to be a salutary move, and I'd like to add further support to it—support not found in *Radical Enlightenment* but suggested by it.

Israel, as I have noted already, is not interested in the cultural history of ideas. Yet a reader, such as myself, attuned to this approach cannot help but see the resonance between his geographical and chronological redefinition of Enlightenment and the latest currents in Enlightenment cultural history. Over the last two decades, cultural historians have viewed Enlightenment in terms of the broader social changes of eighteenth-century Europe. Whether following the lead of Jürgen Habermas, Norbert Elias, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, or some other theorist of eighteenth-century society, a consensus has emerged that treats Enlightenment as a constituent part of a much broader transformation of European society.[7] Underlying this historiography—sometimes explicitly, at other times only implicitly—is the idea that the Enlightenment marks the cultural manifestation of such political and economic changes as the birth of civil society, the rise of market culture, the emergence of democratic sociability, and the beginning of modern media culture. What is exciting about Israel's work is the suggestion that this historiography needs to go back in time if it wants to trace the real roots of these foundational developments.

A personal anecdote can illustrate the point. Because of the presence of James Tracy at the University of Minnesota, our graduate program is blessed with a number of fine doctoral students of the Dutch

Republic. When I introduced these students to the literature linking the Enlightenment, conceived as an eighteenth-century phenomenon, with the emergence of market culture and civil society, their first question was: where is the Dutch Republic in this picture? Rightly, they pointed out, all of the constituent elements claimed by this literature to support the idea of an eighteenth-century Enlightenment were in existence in Holland in the middle of the seventeenth century. One student, Troy Osborne, took this idea and turned it into a fine final paper which argued that the Collegiant Movement, an institution of civic sociability created by Dutch Protestants, manifested many of the same practices and values that historians had associated with the civic sociability of the eighteenth century. The years that his paper studied were 1620-1680. I had Osborne's paper in mind while reading Israel's account of the rise of Spinozism. Not surprisingly, the Collegiants figure in Israel's story even if he does not explicitly analyze the role of such institutions in the cultural development of Spinozism. Yet the argument is there waiting to be made. If developed, it would connect institutions like the Collegiants to the wider emergence of civil society, market culture, and tolerant, egalitarian sociability in seventeenth-century Holland. It would then use this institutional framework to think about the rise of Spinozism and other intellectual movements of the period in the way that Thomas Crow, Daniel Gordon, Dena Goodman, Margaret Jacob and others have thought about eighteenth-century Enlightenment culture.[8] Israel deserves credit for providing a tremendous foundation for future work in this area even if he does not pursue the questions himself. For despite his very different scholarly orientation, Israel's argument about the influential diffusion of the Dutch *Radical Enlightenment* in Europe implicitly challenges scholars of eighteenth-century Enlightenment culture to consider seventeenth-century Holland as an important progenitor.

It must be remembered, however, that these are connections I am drawing out of Israel's book, not arguments he himself has made. *Radical Enlightenment* is simply not interested in social and cultural interpretations of the history of thought. It is content instead with a meticulous, thorough, and idealist reconstruction of the thought itself as manifested in philosophical books and debates. This can produce frustrating results, such as when Israel positions the French thinker Houtteville by saying that "like Le Clerc, Abbadie, Jaquelot, Denise, and Locke [he] sought a fully 'enlightened' Christianity which is factual and unchallengeable" (p. 500). Israel's primary approach to the history of thought centers on the labeling of intellectually unified thinker-authors in just this manner. Moreover, since his primary manner of arriving at these labels is through the contextualization of texts and authors within networks of author-text influence, lists of (often obscure) names like the one above become a common trope in his writing. Yet intellectual historians have been pointing out for decades the enormous problems inherent in any uncritical conflation of an individual's intellectual outlook with the texts he is known to have written and read. They also have exposed the problems inherent in using empirical lists of books-read and contacts-made as vehicles for determining the circulation and exchange of ideas.[9] Israel seems either blissfully unaware of these discussions or happily undisturbed by the challenges that they raise. He similarly does not worry about condensing the history of thought into philosophical reifications. For example, he describes Dortous de Mairan as having renounced both Cartesianism and Malebranchianism because of the inability of each to deal with Spinozism before adopting a moderate Newtonianism as his "mature" system of thought. In growing into this position, Mairan is said to have "benefited from the earlier efforts of such diverse philosophical authors as Fénelon, Huet, Tournemine, Bayle, Jaquelot, and Lamy" (p. 497). What is gained by returning to intellectual history of this sort? Is the next step for Enlightenment studies really the revival of idealist, philosophical narratives rooted in reified "isms" and contextualized through uncritical genealogies of authorial influence? I do not think so.

Yet *Radical Enlightenment* is nothing less than a scholarly tour de force, a work which cannot be dismissed on methodological grounds alone. It will certainly generate controversy, both because of its retrograde conception of intellectual history and because of the particular arguments that it advances. Israel already has generated a discernible buzz among scholars of eighteenth-century Italy, for example, as a result of his claim that the *Radical Enlightenment* should figure centrally in any understanding of

Vico's thought. No doubt other, similar controversies will follow, especially since Israel appears to enjoy issuing provocations of this sort. My personal favorite is Israel's otherwise undefended assertion that Leibniz is "the thinker to whom the early *Aufklärung* was most indebted" (p. 502). Dr. Pangloss be praised! Yet as odd as the idea of a Leibnizian origin of the Enlightenment may seem, Israel is surely right that our understanding of the subject has been clouded by a tendency to accept at face value the account of the movement's genesis offered by Voltaire and the philosophes. In this respect, Israel's provocative and still undefended assertion may constitute the undeveloped seed of a profoundly original historical reinterpretation.

In the double-business of this reaction rests my ultimate judgement about the book. With its devastating erudition and confident contentiousness, *Radical Enlightenment* is clearly an important book and a history worthy of one of America's "forty immortals" at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton.[10] Indeed, it is hard to challenge the decision of the American Historical Association's Leo Gershey Prize committee, which selected *Radical Enlightenment* as the best book on seventeenth and eighteenth-century European history published in 2001. At the same time, I hope this book remains a stunning anomaly—an important book that has its moment in the limelight before retiring comfortably to the research library shelf. Enlightenment scholarship was flowing in fascinating directions before the *tsunami* of learning that is *Radical Enlightenment* flooded the field. My hope is that the very important contributions of this work will be incorporated into the discussion as they should be, but that Enlightenment studies will nevertheless quickly resume its former (or should one say Pre-Israelite?) patterns of research without further delay.

#### NOTES

[1] Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, 2 Vols. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1966 and 1969); Paul Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne* (Paris: Boivin, 1935); idem, *La pensée européenne au XVIIIe siècle, de Montesquieu à Lessing* (Paris: Boivin, 1946). See also Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C.A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1951).

[2] Ira Wade, *The Clandestine Organization and Diffusion of Philosophic Ideas in France from 1700 to 1750* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1938); Paul Vernière, *Spinoza et la pensée française avant la Révolution*, 2 vols. (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1954); Margaret Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans* (London and Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1981).

[3] Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560-1791* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 236. Van Kley cites, in addition to Gay (see note 1 above), Keith Michael Baker, *Condorcet: From Natural Philosophy to Social Mathematics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

[4] I am referring here to Anthony Grafton's review of *Radical Enlightenment* in *The Times Literary Supplement* (November 9, 2001), which generally celebrates Israel's methodological orientation. To quote a representative sample, Grafton writes: "In an age of historical miniaturists, it is exhilarating to encounter a scholar who is willing to cover walls and ceilings with a magnificent sprawling historical fresco. Israel has put forward a Grand Historical Thesis of the sort that historians once revelled in, but that has largely gone out of style. He has done so, moreover, with panache and in detail, revealing a command of texts and archival documents, local milieux and international currents, that compels admiration. *Radical Enlightenment* swarms with fascinating material of every sort, so rich and varied that no review can do it justice."

[5] Recent restatements of this view include Robert Darnton, "George Washington's False Teeth," *New York Review of Books* (March 27, 1997); and Tore Frängsmyr, "The European Enlightenment," *European Review*, Vol. 3., No. 1 (1995): 25-34. The latter work generated a minor controversy in Sweden through its claim that Sweden did not have an Enlightenment if one defines Enlightenment in Paris-centric terms.

[6] Roy Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World: The Untold Story of the British Enlightenment* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000); Roy Porter and Miklaus Teich ed., *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[7] A useful and highly teachable synthesis of these recent approaches to Enlightenment is found in Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[8] Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985); Daniel Gordon, *Citizens Without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670-1789* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994); Margaret Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[9] The foundational arguments of this critique are laid out well in Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1969): 3-53.

[10] The actual number of Institute Professors is 23.

J.B. Shank  
University of Minnesota  
[jbshank@umn.edu](mailto:jbshank@umn.edu)

Copyright © 2002 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172