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WHAT ARE ENLIGHTENMENTS?

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Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

"A public can only attain enlightenment slowly," Kant famously observed. His use of the term "public" (*Publikum*), of course, is notoriously slippery, and even now, after decades of academic discussion of *Öffenlichkeit* and *l'opinion publique*, it regularly trips up the unsuspecting undergraduate intent on answering Kant's central question: What is enlightenment? And yet it is clear that whatever else he meant, Kant envisioned a central role for the scholar (*Gelehrter*) in constituting the public, and furthering enlightenment. And so we might say, in a Kantian gloss, that scholars attain enlightenment, and knowledge of the Enlightenment, only slowly.[1]

Jonathan Israel does not mention the sage of Königsberg often in the first two books of his proposed three-volume study of the Enlightenment. And yet with this sentiment, at least, I think he would agree: whether through laziness, cowardice, or the uncritical acceptance of preconceptions and prejudices, too many scholars, even today, remain unenlightened when it comes to knowledge of the Enlightenment. As Israel writes in the preface to volume two of this essential work,

> There still remains great uncertainty, doubt, and lack of clarity about what exactly the Enlightenment was and what intellectually and socially it actually involved. For much of the time, in the current debate, both the friends and foes of the Enlightenment are arguing about a historical phenomenon which . . . . continues to be very inadequately understood and described. (2: v)

[1] For reasons further explained below, I have adopted the convention of capitalizing "Enlightenment" in English when I mean to refer to the historical phenomenon, and leaving the word lower case when I refer to "enlightenment" as a general process of maturation, growth, or modernity in keeping with Kant's original intent.

Part of the confusion, no doubt, stems from the ambiguity inherent in the very word "enlightenment," which is used widely to refer both to a general process of development—what Kant likened rather partially to personal and social maturation, man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage, the ascent from darkness into light—and to the historical phenomenon that English- and German-speakers since the nineteenth century have called *the* Enlightenment (*die Aufklärung*).[2] On the one hand, then, enlightenment connotes the rather vague, and still unfolding, process of "modernity," the intellectual, political, and economic development (some would say decline) that has characterized societies in Europe and the Americas since the eighteenth century, and that has gradually spread beyond them. On the other hand, however, *the* Enlightenment is used to refer to the historical movement that gripped Europe and the Americas in the late seventeenth century and the eighteenth—a cultural, intellectual, and perhaps social movement—that generated a number of key modern values (e.g. religious tolerance, individual rights, democracy, equality, the pursuit of earthly happiness), as well as the philosophical concepts that made it possible to articulate and justify those values. An issue of some debate, which cuts to the heart of central questions of causality in the historical process, is whether those values were *generated* by the philosophical languages and discourses in which they were imbedded, or rather were themselves *constitutive* of the philosophical concepts employed to justify and defend them.

While these two distinct meanings of Enlightenment/enlightenment are of course far from unrelated, the tendency to conflate them—and in the process to obscure complicated questions of context and causality—may well help account for the "lack of clarity" that Israel identifies as a feature of much of the scholarship of the Enlightenment. Still, his assertion that the historical phenomenon remains poorly understood is a strong claim when one considers that in the some forty years since the publication of the first volume of Peter Gay's monumental, if modestly entitled, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, scholars have debated the meaning and impact of that seminal movement with considerable energy, creativity, and verve. Though Gay's overwhelmingly positive reading of the "modern paganism" and "science of freedom" engendered by his "little flock of *philosophes*" is today more often read than shared, scholars have nonetheless honored him in pursuing a form of history whose name he sponsored, though

[2] On the historicization of the Enlightenment see James Schmidt, "Inventing the Enlightenment: British Hegelians, Anti-Jacobins, and the *Oxford English Dictionary*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64/3 (2004), 421–43.

never really practiced: the "social history of ideas."[3] Roger Chartier, Robert Darnton, and many others have mapped the contours of Grub Street and the publishing networks of the "low" Enlightenment, seeking to ascertain what men and women actually read in the eighteenth century, and how. Others have set out to investigate the institutions and places where, as Margaret Jacob describes it, the Enlightenment was "lived," looking at Masonic lodges, regional academies, salons, cafés, and other such *lieux de lumières* for evidence of how Enlightenment culture was shaped by environment and social context.[4] Still others, most prominently the indomitable J. G. A. Pocock, have highlighted the regional, national, and confessional peculiarities of Enlightenments plural, arguing the need to abandon the concept of a single, unitary Enlightenment altogether, a move that has prompted John Robertson to mount a spirited reaffirmation of "the case for the Enlightenment" as a transnational phenomenon of shared values.[5] Finally, though its critical energy is now largely dissipated, the postmodern impetus of Foucault, Lyotard, and others, combined with the dialectical musings of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, has produced a great deal of challenging reflection (if not always rigorous scholarship) on the Enlightenment's relationship to questions of race, gender, colonialism, the environment, and ultimately truth itself. When one couples this ample body of work with the exciting and provocative recent scholarship of people like Jonathan Sheehan, Carla Hesse, Jorge Cañizares-Esquerra, and Sankar Muthu expounding the Enlightenment's relationship with such subjects as religion, women, Ibero-America, and empire, it is easy not just to concur with one critic who observed recently that "the Enlightenment is back," but to question whether it ever really went away.[6]

That said, and all this scholarship notwithstanding, Israel is right to observe that since the publication of Gay's history "there have been hardly any serious

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3 See Peter Gay, "The Social History of Ideas: Ernst Cassirer and after," in Kurt H. Wolff and Barrington Moore, Jr., eds., *The Critical Spirit: Essays in Honor of Herbert Marcuse* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 106–20.

4 Margaret Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

5 J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001–2005), and John Robertson, *The Case for Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples, 1680–1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

6 Bernard Yack, "Naming and Reclaiming the Enlightenment," *European Journal of Political Theory* 5/3 (2006), 343–54, 343. See, for example, Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Jorge Cañizares-Esquerra, *How to Write the History of the New World: Histories, Epistemologies, and Identities in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

attempts, as Gay puts it, 'to offer a comprehensive interpretation of the Enlightenment'" (2: v). To be sure, no small number of philosophers, literary analysts, and other critics have worked during this time to dismiss what they often style "the Enlightenment project," a term, it seems, originally coined by Alisdair MacIntyre, though invariably deployed now to malign the Enlightenment's putative intolerance and will to hegemonic reason.[7] But though such dismissals have not lacked for comprehensiveness, their seriousness as *historical* depictions can certainly be questioned. Meanwhile, historians themselves have tended to eschew broad synthesis and interpretation, while at the same time downplaying the importance of what had so captivated the attention of earlier scholars of the Enlightenment from Paul Hazard and Ernst Cassirer to Isaiah Berlin and Gay himself: ideas. Israel only exaggerates slightly when he observes that "there is nowadays among general historians of the eighteenth century, as distinct from philosophers and specialists in political thought, rarely much discussion of the Enlightenment's intellectual content . . . " (2: v). Although we now know a great deal more than we ever have about the social and cultural dynamics of the Enlightenment era, ironically the Enlightenment's most distinctive legacy—its thought—remains underappreciated and imperfectly known.

For Israel, that is a serious matter. In the first place because, as the subtitles of both of these volumes indicate, he sees the Enlightenment, or more properly the Radical Enlightenment, as central to the "making of modernity," and so integrally bound up with the process of enlightenment and who we are today. But also because he understands that, in our present moment, enlightened *Gelehrten* cannot afford to stand by passively as our highest ideals—toleration, sexual equality, individual liberty, freedom of expression, democracy, and self-determination, to name only a few—are assaulted from without by a renewed religious fanaticism, and eroded from within by those preaching "difference" and the relativity of all values. As Israel has observed elsewhere, seconding a point made by other Enlightenment scholars,

> the terrible events of the last several years have provided thoughtful readers with more than just a glimpse of the nightmare world apt to result from enshrining as a new set of privileged and prevailing values "difference," a thoroughgoing relativism, and the doctrine that all sets of values, even the most questionable kinds of theology, are ultimately equivalent.[8]

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7 See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), esp. chaps. 5–6. Israel, rather curiously, refers to Macintyre, and Charles Taylor, as "Postmodernist philosophers" (2: 868). In Macintyre's case "neo-Thomist" would seem more appropriate.

8 Jonathan Israel, "Enlightenment! Which Enlightenment?," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67/3 (2006), 523–45, 524. For similar observations, albeit from a variety of perspectives, see Darrin M. McMahon, "Sweep of Reason," *Boston Globe*, 22 June 2003; Stephen Eric

In such a context, a full appreciation of the intellectual underpinnings of the Enlightenment is crucial—not only for those fortunate enough to live where its values have had significant impact, but perhaps above all for those who reside in places where its struggles are still nascent.[9]

Israel, then, sets out to provide a new history and interpretation of the Enlightenment. And as if that goal were not already ambitious enough, he further maintains that a new history demands a new method—in this case a "new, reformed intellectual history," combining "the advantages and shedding the disadvantages" of the discourse analysis of the Cambridge School of Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock; German *Begriffsgeschichte* as conceived by Reinhart Koselleck and Rolf Reichardt; and the "diffusionist" approach practiced by the likes of Robert Darnton and Roger Chartier, which seeks to take account of the role of book production, text diffusion, and marketing in the production of ideas, and of currents of popular culture, reading practices, and *mentalités* in their reception (2: 23). Israel shares with Skinner and the Cambridge School an emphasis on the importance of key authors and the discourses they inhabit. Yet he concurs with the practitioners of *Begriffsgeschicte* in regarding the Skinnerian understanding of intellectual "context," with its emphasis on convention, usages, and authorial intention, as too narrow. Like Koselleck and Reichardt, he would draw on elements of the diffusionist approach to broaden and deepen the historian's sense of the context and impact of ideas, but unlike them he would not confine himself to key "concepts" (*Begriffen*) and their historically determined shifts in meaning. Rather, by focusing on what Israel describes as intellectual "controversies"—both major and minor public disputes that "connect philosophers, books, and ideas directly to politics, approved attitudes, and the public sphere"—he hopes to get at the "real relationship" between ideas and society (2: 25).

Israel's new intellectual history, developed programmatically in the first chapter of volume two, is thus self-consciously eclectic. It is also unapologetically intellectual. Indeed, part of Israel's avowed aim in these volumes is to deny that "social, cultural, and material factors" are of greater interest to the historian than intellectual ones. Though he claims to strive for "genuine balance" between ideas

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Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Towards a Politics of Radical Engagement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 1; and Louis Dupré, *The Enlightenment & the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), ix.

9 For an indication of the direct relevance of an understanding of the Enlightenment in one such place—contemporary Iran—and of the treason of the postmodern clerks there see Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), and Danny Postel's *Reading Legitimation Crisis in Tehran: Iran and the Future of Liberalism* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2006) as well as the appreciative review in the Indian magazine *Frontline* 24/6 (24 March–6 April 2007).

and social-political context—between the intellectual and the physical—he is unabashed in approaching his subject from the former perspective, which he sees "as by far the less well-understood side of the equation," in order to restore a semblance of parity (2: vi). Entering a plea "for a shift of emphasis to a hegemonic role for ideas" (2: 4), he does not mince his words when it comes to what he sees as the pretensions and failings of the "'new' social history," taking aim, in particular, at the "cultural sociology" of Roger Chartier and others who would reduce ideas to the role of reflections of underlying social processes, and who trace the origins of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution to long-term transformations in sociability and to silent material shifts. "No one," Israel writes,

> has been able to specify what the allegedly profound social changes which lay behind the Enlightenment actually were or even how shifts in social structure, given their reality, could broadly and spontaneously translate into a popularly driven "universal revolution" designed to transform the core principles upon which society and politics rest. (2: x)

In this respect, Israel's "controversialist method" is doubly well named, for it is bound to be controversial.

But what does this new method and new history of the Enlightenment yield? As Israel himself writes, "the resulting picture turns out to be surprisingly unfamiliar" (2: 26), and for the most part that claim is true. Indeed, one of the many strengths of this work is the sheer quantity of new or neglected information it brings to the surface, culled from an astonishingly large number of regions and sources, both primary and secondary. Given Israel's genuine proficiency in at least, by my count, eight languages and the remarkable breadth of his reading, it may well be the case that few other English-speaking authors alive today could contemplate, let alone carry out, a project of this scope. From his core knowledge of the Netherlands, Israel ranges abroad to cover northern Europe, the Germanies, the Baltic, Italy, Austria-Hungary, eastern Europe, Great Britain, France, and Spain. A fascinating section in the second volume on the Greek cultural diaspora and Greek readings of Locke, Newton, and Leibniz is juxtaposed with a twenty-page excursus on Peter the Great and the Russian Enlightenment, which emphasizes the inordinate influence there of Dutch and German models as opposed to English and French. Throughout, Israel presents the writings and reflections of scores of thinkers, whose names will likely be unfamiliar even to those with considerable specialist knowledge of the Enlightenment era: Meyer, Vauvenargues, Saint-Hyacinthe, Poulain de la Barre, Meslier, Boureau-Deslandes, Bekker, Lévesque de Burigny, La Beaumelle, Boindin, Radicati, Fréret, Gundling, Lau, Brucker, Beverland, Rousset de Missy, Tyssot de Pato, Van Balen, Van Leenhof, and Le Clerc, among others. Similarly, Israel resuscitates and resituates a number of thinkers—Boulanvilliers, D'Argens, Boulanger, Du Marsais, Maupertuis, Mandeville, and Cloots, to name only a few—whose names

are generally known, but whose broader significance is less well understood. And even when he is on more familiar Enlightened ground, Israel frequently cultivates his sources with fresh insight and perspective. Thus in the context of discussions of the final overthrow of humanist criticism and the (re-)recovery of ancient Greek thought in the late seventeenth century and the early eighteenth, we learn a great deal about Pierre Bayle's interest in the pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes, or the Athenian Strato of Lampascus. It is eye-opening, if not exactly a revelation, to be reminded in the midst of an argument for the (comparative) conservatism of Voltaire's thought that his Lockean- and Newtonian-inspired writings, to say nothing of his poetry and plays, were well received by the Jesuits in Paris and liberal churchmen in Rome (including Pope Benedict XIV) in the 1740s and well into the 1750s. Finally, Israel's skillful handling of such apparently familiar Enlightened episodes as the furor surrounding Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des lois*, or the *guerre de l'Encyclopédie*, allows him to tease out hitherto overlooked tensions between radicals and moderates within the Enlightenment, while never losing light of their common, Counter-Enlightenment enemies.

The interplay of those three forces—the "triangular battle of ideas" (1: 11) between Radical Enlightenment, Moderate Enlightenment, and Counter-Enlightenment—is central to Israel's overall narrative. Unlike Gay, who famously asserted that "there were many *philosophes* in the eighteenth century, but only one Enlightenment," Israel insists that there were two from the outset, precipitated initially by the challenge of Cartesian mechanical philosophy and the general "crisis of the European mind" that undermined traditional scholastic and Aristotelian theological accounts of the world in the seventeenth century.[10] Though he borrows the notion of "crisis" from the Belgian historian Paul Hazard and his 1935 classic *La Crise de la conscience européene 1680–1715*, Israel moves the crisis back in time, identifying a period of initial upheaval between 1650 and 1680, which serves as a prelude to the Radical Enlightenment proper that came into its own thereafter. Drawing heavily on the thought of Baruch Spinoza and Pierre Bayle—the two founding fathers, as it were, of Israel's Radical Enlightenment—the movement was sustained by an underground, and pan-European, network of radical thinkers and writers who furthered atheist, materialist, and republican views. Spurning all compromise with the past, the Radical Enlightenment denied the Judeo-Christian account of creation; refused the possibility of miracles, revelation, and an afterlife; maintained a "one-substance" view of the universe; and held that all motion was inherent in matter, thus dispensing with the need for spirit, soul, a providential creator, or indeed any God who intervened in human affairs. At the same time, the Radical Enlightenment rejected all religiously

[10] Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 1: 3.

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ordained hierarchies, denied any divine sanction for monarchy or nobility, and collectively elaborated what Israel refers to as a "package of basic concepts and values" central to the development of modernity (2: 866). Those values and concepts include the adoption of mathematical and historical reason as the sole criterion of truth; the rejection of supernatural agency of any kind; a defense of the equality of all humanity, including racial and sexual equality; the belief in a secular universalism in ethics based on equity, justice, and charity; and the vindication of freedom of expression, democratic republicanism, and personal liberty of lifestyle in sexual and other matters. In Israel's view, the hard thinking and creative intellectual labor necessary to justify these beliefs was carried out in the late seventeenth century and the early eighteenth—not after 1750, as Enlightenment scholars often assert. In this respect "the real business was already over" by mid-century (1: 7). The Radical Enlightenment had been thought.

Yet it did not emerge in a vacuum. For over and against this Radical Enlightenment stood what Israel calls the "moderate, mainstream Enlightenment." This is the Enlightenment "that fills the older textbooks" (2: 865), the traditional High Enlightenment of Newton, Locke, and Voltaire, which Israel is also inclined to call the "conservative Enlightenment" (2: 11). That appellation is revealing, for Israel considers the distinguishing characteristic of the Moderate Enlightenment to be its attempt to salvage or conserve important aspects of the moral, religious, and political order challenged by the radicals. While the Moderate Enlightenment took different forms in different places, its principal architects—whether Newtonians, Lockeans, Leibnizians, Wolffians, or neo-Cartesians such as Malebranche—all sought to respond to the crisis of the European mind by forging new syntheses of reason and faith. Certainly, figures of the Moderate Enlightenment could—and did—work to eradicate ignorance and superstition, promote limited toleration, and foster social improvement. But while there was inevitably some overlap with the goals of the Radical Enlightenment, the moderate mainstream remained committed to preserving central elements of Christian morality and metaphysics, above all the notion of a Providential God. And given that its partisans frequently enjoyed the backing of governmental and ecclesiastical forces, they were generally reluctant to endorse equality and full religious toleration. "Intellectually moderate and socially conservative" (2: 743), they lent their support to monarchy and empire, while endeavoring to vanquish the atheistic and materialist views of their radical opponents.

Challenged from the "left," as it were, by the Radical Enlightenment, the Moderate Enlightenment was also threatened from the "right," forced to contend with an increasingly militant and powerful Counter-Enlightenment, little inclined to draw fine distinctions between moderates and those more extreme. Given Israel's primary interest in the Radical Enlightenment, he does

not focus in any detail on the Counter-Enlightenment, and yet he is very much aware of its presence, and it is to his credit that he takes its polemicists seriously. "The veritable Counter-Enlightenment mentality was not reacting to something it did not grasp or failed to engage in" (2: 38), Israel observes, and he understands, rightly, that in its militant rejection of "philosophy," self-conscious embrace of tradition, and increasingly fideistic rejection of reason, its polemicists contributed significantly to polarizing the European landscape, weakening the position of the moderates, and unwittingly doing the bidding of its most vehement opponents (a charge, incidentally, that could be leveled equally at the radicals).

With different theaters in different countries, this triangular battle of ideas was nonetheless a European-wide affair, with partisans and polemicists arguing across borders in the international republic of letters, borrowing and exchanging views liberally. For though Israel rejects the vision of a single, unitary Enlightenment, he is equally adamant in arguing against what he calls the "family of Enlightenments approach," with its tendency to compartmentalize discourses in national or confessional contexts, at the expense of the broader picture. Even more adamantly, Israel opposes the notion "that one particular 'national' or social tradition retains an overriding value or relevance" (2: 863), taking aim, variously, at scholars like the late Roy Porter or Gertrude Himmelfarb who have argued for the primacy of English or American models of Enlightenment. It is important, Israel writes, "not to identify [the Radical Enlightenment's] main thrust with any particular national or cultural tradition" (2: 27).

Nevertheless, Israel is intent on returning the locus of Enlightenment studies—and particularly those of the Radical Enlightenment—to the European continent, just as he is intent on moving its temporal fulcrum back in time. Though he does make some effort, in the second volume, to address what various critics identified as a shortcoming of the first—the downplaying of radical British ideas in the seventeenth century, specifically Hobbes, in favor of Spinoza and Spinozists—he nonetheless continues to see the Continent as the primary theater.[11] The Radical Enlightenment, he concedes, "happened to begin in the Dutch Republic *and* England" (2: 27, my italics). Yet he takes pains to stress that "its center of gravity was first located in the Netherlands and later shifted to France," emphasizing Britain's "remarkable failure, after the 1720s, to play a comparable role to France in the elaboration and propagation of radical ideas" (2: 27). Indeed, from 1720 on, "French language and culture eclipsed all the rest as the medium for diffusing radical ideas in Europe and the Atlantic world more generally" (2: 27).

[11] See, for example, Margaret Jacob's review of Israel's first volume, *Radical Enlightenment*, in the *Journal of Modern History* 75/2 (June 2003), 387–90.

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Although Israel's Gallic focus is hardly unprecedented—in fact, it marks in some respects a return to a more traditional evaluation of France as the capital of *les lumières*—it is nevertheless one of the more interesting aspects of the second volume. Whereas volume one seeds this theme, while building a case for the importance of Spinoza and radical thought emanating from the Netherlands (including that of the Huguenot diaspora), volume two develops it more fully, chronicling in detail the passing of the radical torch to the Hexagon. In Israel's grand narrative, the dominant story of the first half of the eighteenth century is precisely the defeat—or rather, the significant setback—of radical ideas, not only in England, but in the United Provinces, as well, and the triumph there, as throughout much of Europe, of various forms of Moderate Enlightenment with significant cultural capital and institutional support. But though on the defensive, the Radical Enlightenment had lost none of its philosophical coherence or power. On the contrary, fully articulated and battle-hardened, the Radical program was, on a purely intellectual level, stronger than ever. The Moderate Enlightenment, on the other hand, was, in Israel's reading, rent by fatal flaws and philosophical inconsistencies, hamstrung by its attempt to reconcile reason and faith, and ultimately compromised by its accommodation to power. This left the door open for the re-emergence of the Radical Enlightenment, and in France at mid-century it entered, led by Diderot, the heir to Spinoza and Bayle, and the third towering figure in Israel's Radical Enlightenment pantheon.

The circumstances for this re-emergence center around what Israel calls the "most decisive of all Enlightenment controversies" (2: 842), the *guerre de l'Encyclopédie*— Diderot's efforts, beginning in 1749, to defend the viability of his publishing venture in the face of a concerted opposition by Jansenists, *dévots*, and the Counter-Enlightenment. To reduce a complex story and reconstruction to its barest outlines, what Israel argues is that Diderot, deeply implicated by 1746–7 in the Spinozism and atheism of the Radical Enlightenment, was able to effect an alliance with the leading members of the French moderate mainstream—people like Voltaire, Montesquieu, Maupertuis, and Turgot. Anglophile, Lockean, and Newtonian, with important allies amongst the Jesuits and at court throughout the 1740s (and few overt enemies in the universities, Church, or *parlements*), the French Moderate Enlightenment was suspicious of the radicalism of Diderot and his circle and even of the *Encyclopédie*, which Israel describes as "a 'Spinosiste' conspiracy," under its many layers of camouflage (2: 843). Nonetheless, the moderates were alienated by the crackdown first on Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des lois*, then on the hapless abbé de Prades (a contributor to the *Encyclopédie* and an author of a Sorbonne dissertation accused of dubious orthodoxy), and finally on the *Encyclopédie* itself. That left them with no choice but to go over to Diderot and his Radical *confrères* before a common enemy. The consequences, Israel believes, were monumental:

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> The circumstances of the struggle locked together two opposed philosophical traditions which had long acknowledged, and continued to acknowledge, their own mutual antagonism and incompatibility but saw themselves as obliged to work together against a vastly more popular and powerful force, namely that of *anti-philosophie* and Jansenism. This was a unique situation in Europe, differentiating the French Enlightenment from Enlightenment in Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, and elsewhere, and one which had a crucial consequence: it enabled the radical wing to come out from the closet and become, in the French-speaking world, the dominant partner. (2: 862)

And so ends volume two at mid-century, but on a clearly ominous note. For Israel wants to suggest in both volumes—most explicitly in the first chapter of volume two—a direct relationship between the "revolution" carried out by the Radical Enlightenment and the "revolutions" of the Atlantic world, chiefly the French. He thus confronts head-on a relationship that Gay (whose own narrative ends with the kinder, gentler, American Revolution) famously skirted, and dispels—to my mind convincingly—the oft-repeated saw that "revolution," in its modern sense of fundamental, linear change, dates only to the French Revolution. In a handful of inspired pages that make effective use of the work of Koselleck and Jean-Marie Goulemot, Israel shows how widespread the idea of "revolution" as dramatic upheaval and deep-seated change had become in literate society already by the early Enlightenment when the "feasibility and fear of 'revolution' as a planned, deliberate attempt to replace the existing foundations of society had become a real possibility . . . ". "Modern revolution, accordingly," he adds shortly thereafter, "began as an idea and an essential philosophical and scientific concept but almost at once came to be rendered into the vocabulary of general politics and theological dispute" (2: 7). It follows from this, and from Israel's further contention that "socially and institutionally, *ancien régime* society did not change very dramatically between 1650 and 1789" (2: 5), that one must seek the origins of the "revolution" of 1789 in the prior "revolution" of the Radical Enlightenment. The Revolution, in a sense, *c'est le faute à Spinoza.*

Israel's reintroduction of the Enlightenment into the discussion of the fundamental causes of the Revolution is important. Philosophy, after all, as he points out, was how contemporaries themselves—both proponents and opponents—explained the origins of the upheaval initiated in 1789. For too long of late historians have danced around that important relationship, even if they have not avoided it as thoroughly or as consistently as Israel would have us believe. His polemical contention that "in recent decades, it has been deeply and more and more unfashionable among historians . . . to explain the French Revolution . . . as a consequence of ideas" (2: vii) fails to acknowledge the central role that ideas play in revisionist historiography, most prominently in the work of Keith Baker and François Furet, who famously described the Revolution as the

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"strange offspring of philosophy," even if he never fully developed the thought.[12] Nonetheless, Israel's reintroduction of the Enlightenment question directly into the debates over the ideological origins of the Revolution promises to be fruitful, and many will be watching closely to see how he develops that question in the final, concluding volume of his history.

For now, what can we say, by way of appraisal and assessment, of Israel's study so far? Although still a work in progress, it is already to my mind the most important interpretation of the Enlightenment to appear since Gay's own, and I am confident that that it will remain a central touchstone and indispensable resource for decades to come. Israel, quite simply, is a force to be reckoned with, and his study a remarkable achievement. It is true, as various reviewers have pointed out, that Israel's work lacks the mellifluous grace of Gay's. Indeed, as stimulating as these volumes are, they are often very hard going. Paragraph-length sentences; arcane references that are unexplained and not readily traceable in the index (Cocceian theology?); sections without introductions, conclusions, or other connective tissue to guide the reader along; and extended "plot" summaries of philosophical texts and arguments make for a difficult read at times. There is also a good deal of repetition of material or re-rehearsing of argument from the first volume to the next, which cover almost identical timespans. One wonders whether, with a bit of belt-tightening and a disciplined editor, Israel might have consolidated the nearly 1,800 pages of these first two volumes down to one. With another, presumably large, tome still to come, the resulting *oeuvre* will be mammoth, and probably too large for many to tackle, let alone teach. Given that Israel himself appreciates the need for a "usable outline survey" (2: v) and understands the importance of "usefulness as a teaching guide" (2: 863), he should be encouraged, when he has finished the third volume, to stand back and take a stab at producing a distillation of his research and the main themes of his argument along the lines of Roy Porter's slim little volume *The Enlightenment*, which is so serviceable in the classroom.[13] Such a text would be of immeasurable value in helping teachers to integrate Israel's views into their introductory courses, where, for the most part, the European Enlightenment continues to look decidedly different from the picture he paints here.

More substantively, a striking absence in the two volumes produced thus far is any discussion of commercial society and economic change. Clearly, given Israel's focus on ideas, it is hardly to be expected that he would attempt to theorize the relationship between the dynamic eighteenth-century economy and

[12] François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 28.

[13] Roy Porter, *The Enlightenment*, Studies in European History Series (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).

the Enlightenment (although it strikes me that that relationship is ready to be revisited). Still, the centrality of economic questions to the thought of people like Rousseau, Smith, Hume, Ferguson, Turgot, Mably, Condorcet, and numerous others begs the question of what the radicals had to say about the new culture of consumption and its relation to the happiness that Israel suggests was an important part of their package of modernizing ideals. Moreover, as Michael Sonenscher has recently reminded us, economic questions—particularly state finance and public debt—were of direct relevance to the "intellectual origins" of the French Revolution.[14] On such questions, Israel is curiously silent.

The silence is all the more perplexing given Israel's own strong background in economic history. Perhaps he is simply saving this material for the final volume, but perhaps, too, the reticence is revealing. At the very least it calls attention to the problematic relationship highlighted at the beginning of this essay between the Enlightenment as a historically grounded phenomenon involving the articulation, justification, and defense of core values and the enlightenment as a process of modernity. For Israel's reticence in the first two volumes regarding the advent of commercial society—surely by any reckoning a central feature of modernity and, as Istvan Hont has argued recently, a critical Enlightenment concern—suggests that he has yet to fully clarify the relationship between Enlightenment and enlightenment, between the values promoted by his Radical protagonists and their precise relation to history and historical context.[15] Notwithstanding the tremendous care and scope of these two volumes, a certain "lack of clarity" remains.

That impression is furthered by Israel's discussion of modernity itself. He is interested in modernity, he tells us, as conceived on two levels: on the one hand, as "an abstract package of basic values" (2: 11) or an "interlocking complex of abstract concepts" (2: 52). This is what Israel calls the *philosophical* making of modernity, and he is perfectly frank in acknowledging that it was a very different thing from the *historical* making of modernity, which he understands, on the other hand, as the "altogether untidier, less coherent outcome which actually constitutes the value-system and political orientation of the West today, an outcome shaped by a long process of continual clashes and collisions between the rival impulses of Radical, conservative, and Counter-Enlightenment." The difference between the two forms of modernity, Israel says, is one of "theory and practice" (2: 57), and he emphasizes that even today the two have yet to be fully reconciled. That is clear enough. But he then acknowledges further that on the messy ground of

[14] Michael Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[15] Istvan Hont, *The Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2005).

history, the Moderate Enlightenment of people like Locke and Hume "was of overwhelming importance," and its significance as great as "it has generally been taken to be." The shortcoming of the partisans of the Moderate Enlightenment, it turns out, was that people like Locke, Hume, Voltaire, and Benjamin Franklin were "politically, socially, morally, and in some respects, religiously . . . essentially conservative thinkers, who opposed many or most of the radical and democratic ideas of their age" (2: 57–8). Their deficiency, in short, was not to have shared the most radical values of the time, the same values that we in the contemporary world have inherited, and that we will someday presumably perfectly uphold when modernity is fully and completely "made."

I do not begrudge Israel his values or evident sympathy for the Radical Enlightenment—not in the slightest. But what we have here is a candid admission of the teleological imperative at play in his work, as well as an indication that Israel is perhaps slightly more interested in philosophical modernity (theory) than in historical modernity (practice). It seems to me that these predilections render the historical process—and the relationship between Enlightenment and enlightenment—rather too neat and clean. One has the sense in reading Israel that moderation and Moderate Enlightenment were somehow overwhelmingly the result of intellectual blindness, bad faith, or failure of nerve, rather than, as was also clearly the case, the consequence of a keen appraisal of viability and the prospects of success. Arguably, Moderate Enlightenment was the art of the politically possible, forged at the nexus where theory and practice met, whereas Radical Enlightenment was *la raison raisonnante*. I suspect that there is a lesson here for those parts of the world still struggling to emerge from the dark.

Moreover, other than as a means to preserve philosophical consistency, why must values be bundled together in tight "packages" in the first place? And other than as a heuristic device, can theory and practice be so neatly divided? Even Israel's most intrepid radicals never completed the package, were never doctrinally pure. Bayle was a monarchist, Boulanvilliers "very far from being a democrat" (1: 75), and Spinoza and Diderot's positions on women hardly *comme il faut*—less modern, arguably, than those of the moderate Montesquieu. Hume, similarly, was socially and politically conservative, yes. But surely his philosophical skepticism could lend itself easily enough to radical ends. And while as a philosopher John Locke undoubtedly tied himself into knots, it did not take too much imagination to untie his thought in more radical strands, as Paine would do politically, or Condillac epistemologically, as Israel himself shows. According to John Yolton, a fair number in England and on the Continent took Locke to be a materialist. They were wrong, but the confusion highlights the thin line that could separate moderate from radical, and practice from theory.[16]

[16] John W. Yolton, *Locke and French Materialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

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Nor should we so quickly assume that "modernity" necessarily meant radicalism, or what Israel calls at one point a "single intellectual, cultural, and political project" (2: 734; note again the absence of economics). In fact, one of the dangers of packaging ideas too tightly is to assume that they inevitably go together. Israel's reading of the Italians Doria and Vico is instructive in this regard. For although, drawing on a wealth of recent scholarship, he makes a convincing case that both authors were deeply influenced by Spinoza, and so in this sense redolent of what he calls "triumphant 'modernity'" (2: 526), he does not to my mind succeed in showing that their "new science" was any less conservative for that. "I combat all the modern authors, and against all the moderns I hurl myself," Israel quotes Doria as saying, adding that "one should not conclude from this that therefore he favoured pre-Lockeian ideas, medieval ideas, or indeed ancient ideas" (2: 524). Precisely. But neither should one conclude that he, or Vico, were comfortable with the evolving package of abstract values of the Radical Enlightenment. Their "modernity," rather, was employed to fight the "making of modernity." To my mind, Mark Lilla's view of Vico as a modern "anti-modern" is still the best way to understand his thought. As Lilla rightly observes, "An important part of Vico's legacy to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is his discovery that a modern social science can serve anti-modern political and religious ends."[17]

Of course the opposite may be true as well, with (by Israel's standards) "antimodern" religious beliefs furthering modern ends. A great deal of recent historiography of the American Revolution has focused on the (not insignificant) role of evangelical religion in precipitating that event, while Dale Van Kley has made a strong case that Jansenism, seen by Israel as a force for Counter-Enlightenment, was instrumental as a cause of the French Revolution.[18] By these reckonings, "retrograde" religion moved humanity forward—a contention, of course, that Tocqueville made central to his reading of the young American republic, where modernity and the spirit of religion apparently went hand in hand.

Or consider the issue of antislavery. As Israel partially acknowledges, some of the more "radical" and insistent voices in the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth were Christians—Quakers and evangelicals—not heirs of Spinoza, who was increasingly read after the French Revolution as less a prophet of radical

[17] Mark Lilla, *G. B. Vico: The Making of an Anti-Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 234.

[18] Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560–1791* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). On the role of religion in the American revolution see, for example, the pioneering study of Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966); and the more recent work of Mark Noll, Harry Stout, and Ruth Bloch, among others.

materialism than a forerunner of the Romantic's mystical pantheism of nature, Novalis's "god-intoxicated man." Or take resistance to empire. Must we really accept Israel's view that "anti-colonialism as a strand of modernity both actually derived from, and could only derive from, forms of radical thought based on materialist monism" (2: 594)? That is a claim that would have perplexed the slaves of Saint-Domingue, many of whom were motivated, as Laurent Dubois has shown, by religion, both African and Christian, to "lay the foundation for the revolt that ultimately brought [them] complete freedom," even if various strands of Enlightenment were admittedly important there as well.[19]

My point with these examples—and one could cite others—is merely to suggest that to trace the origins of modernity—whether in theory or in practice—to an exclusive package of radical concepts is to underestimate the contingency, the free play, the dialectical reversals and unexpected fortunes, the atavisms and transmutations of the crooked timber of thought. Israel has done much to render the genealogy of our modern notions straight. But like Kant's humanity, the roots and branches of Enlightenment are gnarled. No doubt we will continue to struggle to disentangle them for many years to come. In the meantime all those with an interest in this vital period will be watching with great anticipation to see how Israel brings his remarkable trilogy to an end. Scholars, alas, attain enlightenment—and knowledge of the Enlightenment—only slowly.

[19] Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard/Belknap, 2004), 43. On the complexities of the reception of the Enlightenment in Saint-Domingue see Dubois's "An Enslaved Enlightenment: Rethinking the Intellectual History of the French Atlantic," *Social History* 31/1 (February, 2006), 1–14.