

Jonathan Israel: *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from "The Rights of Man" to Robespierre*. (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014. Pp. 870.)

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After reading this gargantuan, infuriating, and illuminating book, I came away impressed and intrigued. I was impressed by the sheerchutzpa of the scholar who devotes more than 800 pages to pursue a rather quixotic aim, and by the sheer heft of its erudition. The book comprises twenty-five chapters covering the years 1788 to 1799, and twenty-one black and white images drawn from period engravings and portraits. The sweep is breathtaking, and the argument—that there were essentially three revolutions vying for supremacy—tantalizing. The parties involved include: constitutional monarchists such as Lafayette who advocated moderate Enlightenment ideas; democratic republicans allied to Tom Paine, who fought for “Radical Enlightenment” ideas; and authoritarian populists such as Robespierre, who violently rejected key Enlightenment ideas and should ultimately be seen as counter-Enlightenment figures. Like Marisa Linton’s *Choosing Terror*, Israel shows how the fierce rivalry between these groups shaped the course of the Revolution, to the Terror, and the post-Thermidor reaction.

I remain intrigued by the writer who would devote a significant part of his life to trying to help us, as members of “democratic civilization avowedly based on equality,” to “know its origins correctly” (*Enlightenment Contested* [Oxford University Press, 2006], 60). Indeed, like Ursula Goldenbaum and other reviewers of Israel’s trilogy on “Radical Enlightenment,” I began *Revolutionary Ideas* with enthusiasm, and I too applaud Israel’s “rejection of the widespread belittling of the Enlightenment as scientific, as fostering repressive reason, as producing prisons, mad houses, and the guillotine,” and agree that “the philosophical and political views of enlightenment authors were closely connected even if not always visible.” And yet, like many other reviewers, I found this book overall to be a frustrating read. This has to do in part with the author’s Olympian style, but mainly it concerns the breakdown between Israel’s stated goals and the methods used to attain them. Sometimes it seems as if the author is willing to look beyond the evidence in order to make his point. Perhaps that is why this is such a long book.

As stated in the introduction and restated frequently throughout, Israel’s goal is to prove that no one has yet understood the French Revolution’s origins: a situation that leaves us “with an uncommonly urgent need for some very sweeping and drastic revision” (29). The Revolution was not caused by social, economic, political, or cultural forces but rather by intellectual trends: dangerous ideas foisted on the French by the most radical and antiestablishmentarian of the eighteenth-century philosophes. “The true underpinning was the confident secularism pronouncing philosophical reason the engine of universal human emancipation deriving from the

encyclopédistes and, earlier still from the radical thinkers of the late seventeenth-century Enlightenment" (707).

To prove this point, Israel enlists a massive array of evidence but it all winds down to a list of ten books, "the major textual sources that shaped this democratic republican political culture after 1750" (707). The Top Ten are: Diderot's political articles and exposition of the *volonté générale* in the *Encyclopédie*; Rousseau's *Discourses* and *Social Contract*; the *Histoire philosophique*; d'Holbach's *La Politique naturelle*; his *Système social*; Helvétius's *De L'homme*; Paine's *Rights of Man*; his *Age of Reason*; Condorcet's political writings; and Volney's *Les Ruines* (707). This bold claim upends more than a century's work on reading practices in eighteenth-century France. Received knowledge—based on the pioneering work of Daniel Morner and Robert Darnton—holds that the libraries of literate Frenchmen were more likely to contain works of natural history, dictionaries, and novels; not the *Social Contract*, but rather *Julie, or The New Heloise*. According to Morner's inventory, for every one copy of the *Social Contract* there were 165 copies of *Julie* (460). The jury is still out on the impact (or even legibility) of the *Social Contract* for average readers in prerevolutionary France. But such details do not trouble Israel, who blithely sails through the choppy waters of scholarly debate in pursuit of evidence for his thesis. Arguing that "most people did not read their books and would scarcely have understood if they tried," he turns to the press, cheap tracts and pamphlet literature, which he claims propagated an adulterated form of *philosophie* to the masses (48). Note how the methods muddy the claims: how can ten major books shape a political culture, if other media are also enlisted to explain how that culture was shaped?

His analysis of newspapers and pamphlets is good, and certainly owes a great debt to the work of Jeremy Popkin, Roger Chartier, and other scholars of the press, yet they are barely mentioned. At any rate, Israel's concern is not with his intellectual peers today any more with the average person of the past. Perhaps it is the privilege of the intellectual historian to study the happy few who dictate public opinion, largely from beyond the grave. Turning social history on its head, he argues that the Revolution was a "transformation [that] occurred without popular support" (11). In what is the most cogent articulation of method, Israel argues for "a way to build on the emerging socio-cultural approach, and especially, more effectively integrate social history with intellectual history" (12). This inherent tension is a problem, however. Israel wants to combine the intellectual historian's task of investigating ideas in isolation from the social and political contexts in which they developed with the social historian's concern for those contexts. He dismisses popular movements for their obtuseness, yet "nearly everyone agreed that *la philosophie* was the principal factor undermining the foundations of French society" (16). How could everyone agree, if "most of the population" did not understand what was going on? The answer lies in the sources Israel relies on, conservative Christian writers of the 1790s–1850s such as Edmund

Burke, Joseph de Maistre, Thomas Carlyle, and the lawyer Portalis. This prompts some odd-sounding asides, as for example when he claims that the philosophes' chief weapon was their appeal to "women, *especially young pretty women*" and the statement that Brissot was "*rightly* identified as a particularly dangerous and incendiary writer." He describes the armed conflict launched against France by European monarchies in 1792 as being "generally perceived by the sharpest, best informed (*surely rightly*) as not just inescapable, but fundamentally a conflict between monarchy, aristocracy, and religion versus republicanism, democracy, and philosophy" (17, 42, 232; emphases added).

Israel's book succeeds most when the author explores paradoxes in revolutionary history, such as its leaders' inability to sustain pan-European revolt, and the internal incongruities that undermined its judiciary. He is very strong on comparative analysis, as in chap. 4, where Israel explains how the French viewed the American Declaration of 1776: it set a crucial example, but was not strong enough to sweep away the ignorance and errors which kept the French in chains. In order to set the stage for a truly radical revolution, the French needed "a universal justification of human right, something abstract and philosophical," and so they turned to the future. "Where the American Declaration declares natural rights inherent in British constitutional liberties, the French Declaration invokes rights enshrined in laws yet to be made" (84). This useful point helps readers understand the way that constitutional reform gradually snowballed into more radical demands for change in France, and then the Terror and military overthrow, whereas American society evolved with apparent ease into a capitalist, property-loving powerhouse.

One weakness lies in Israel's treatment of women's involvement in politics. Although he provides an even-handed if slim overview of some eminent women of republican repute such as Marie-Jeanne Roland and Olympe de Gouges, his analysis of the most important action of revolutionary women—the March on Versailles of October 1789—relies on an interpretation that was debunked over two centuries ago! Echoing a conspiracy theory that was duly investigated and thrown out of court in 1790, Israel claims that "this mass of hungry women chiefly demanded bread, but some also backed the aspirations of Louis-Philippe, the flamboyant Duc d'Orléans" (91). Another intriguing lead on women's involvement emerges in his description of Voltaire's Pantheonization. Quoting the outrage of the anti-philosophe François-Xavier de Feller, Israel writes: "All Catholic Europe heard the news with stunned outrage. The mighty church of Sainte-Genève in Paris had become the shrine of the 'carcasses' of Mirabeau and Voltaire, the new 'divinities' of the Parisian rabble daily manipulated by fanatical 'débauchées,' that is, 'dévôts de la philosophie'" (172). If the rabble were truly being exploited by racy, free-thinking women—*débauchées*—surely this is a lead to investigate.

Israel's treatment of revolutionary turmoil in the provinces and abroad provides moments of breathtaking clarity. In chaps. 12 and 23, Israel moves

effortlessly between tumult in Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the Italian states, thereby revealing a whole network of sympathetic partisans who entertained similar notions of democratic rule and battled monarchical interests each in his own way. But a passage in chap. 9 reveals one of the problematic traits of Israel's prose: its focus is uneven. He suggests, with fascinating understatement, that a "virtual miniature civil war" ran through Avignon in August 1790, but frustrates readers' expectations by retreating immediately from narration of events into the empyrean realm of intellectual history to bring the argument back to interpretation of Rousseau's concept of the "social contract." Unlike earlier theorists who held that Rousseau's notion designated the contract between the ruler and the ruled, Pétion's repression of Avignon relied on the claim that the contract should be between all men to create a social state (232). The explanation of the run-up to war in 1792 is nonetheless a useful and illuminating chapter, as are the other explications of pan-European sentiment and ferment.

Unlike those revisionist historians who focus on "discourse" to the detriment of human agency, Israel sometimes reveals telling discrepancies between peoples' words and their acts. This comes out well in his analysis of the Revolutionary tribunal in chap. 19. He shows how a double standard incited the tribunal to issue lenient sentences for people guilty of food crimes versus harsh punishment for speech crimes. Despite a publicity campaign denouncing such "bandits," the government turned a more or less blind eye to speculators and food hoarders during those dark months of winter 1793–94 when hundreds perished of illness and hunger. On the other hand, the tribunal zealously pursued and punished perpetrators of seditious speech. This insight helps us understand why so many obscure and low-born people were executed: although food-related crimes ravaged the French people more directly, seditious speech was the most flagrant offense against the State. And protection of the State was the primary end of the State, during the 1793–94 regime of La Montagne (543).

Despite its idiosyncrasies, one cannot but help but admire *Revolutionary Ideas* for the sheer effusive energy and the extraordinary erudition manifested by Israel in his desire to persuade us to follow him as he explains how the "Radical Enlightenment" led to Revolution and then dwindled into the Directory, before fizzing out entirely under Napoléon's Empire. I advise readers to read and learn from *Revolutionary Ideas*, which will surely become a new classic in our field. But do so in small doses, and keep your wits about you.

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