

Review of Jonathan I. Israel's *Radical Enlightenment : Philosophy
and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750*, New York: Oxford, 2001ⁱ

by Jeremy L. Caradonna

Jonathan Israel's 2001 *Radical Enlightenment* is, in a certain sense, a meticulous attempt at reformulating the famous question posed by the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in 1784, 'was ist Aufklärung?' The real question should have been 'wer ist die Aufklärung?' And the correct answer, we learn, is apparently Baruch de Spinoza.

The 'renegade Jew,' and a large cohort of Dutchⁱⁱ radicals, take center stage in this sprawling, erudite, and painstakingly researched *Vogelperspektive* of the early European Enlightenment. Israel has rejected two centuries of popular historiographical convention by concentrating on the dynamic and innovative intellectual community that existed in the early modern Dutch Republic. Most rival studies, Israel points out, tend to foreground French, English, and, to a lesser extent, German scholars, while relegating Dutch thinkers (and the *Pays bas*) to the status of an unpaid extra in the great drama of the Century of Light. Israel has remedied the situation by producing a brilliant and long-overdue synthesis of the *Aufklärung* that takes proper stock of the role played by Netherlands-based intellectuals, and especially the massively influential works of Benedictus de Spinoza.ⁱⁱⁱ This approach will seem unfamiliar to scholars in the Anglophone and Francophone world who cling dogmatically to the belief that the Enlightenment was headquartered in either Paris or London, and that it did not reach its fullest expression until the latter half of the eighteenth century.

Israel weaves into a single narrative an extraordinarily complex set of thinkers, ideas, and theses with the precision and dexterity of a master craftsman. Drawing on his extensive knowledge of the Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century,^{iv} Israel describes—with a thickness that would surely please his colleague at the Institute for Advanced Study, Clifford Geertz—a semi-clandestine web of radical intellectuals strewn throughout the low countries, but concentrated most heavily in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and the Hague. Besides Spinoza, we learn a tremendous amount about the radical philosophical positions of such thinkers as Meyer, Ploekhoy, Van Enden, the Koerbagh brothers, Johan and Pieter de la Court, Beverland, Bekker, Lucas, Leenhof, Tschirnhaus, Tyssot de Patot, Pierre Bayle, and many others beside. What unfolds is an intricate game of philosophical connect-the-dots, in which Israel systematically traces the spread of radical ideas beyond Dutch borders and into the far reaches of the European republic of letters. One practically needs to draft a spreadsheet to keep track of the enormous cast of characters that Israel introduces, and the web of 'influence' that connects virtually every major European luminary back to some aspect of radical Dutch philosophy. Though he focuses on the period from 1660-1690, Israel is in constant dialogue with the philosophical trends of the latter half of the eighteenth century. One of the main goals of the book—and a radical move in its own right—is to historicize and thus dethrone the

once-almighty High Enlightenment. By and large, Israel tends to view post-1740 developments in philosophical radicalism as little more than clever reworkings of late seventeenth-century Dutch thought. Thus Rousseau, Voltaire, d'Holbach, Hume, La Mettrie, and Diderot, for example, are all shown to have borrowed quite heavily from the Dutch archetypes listed above, and especially Spinoza's four principal works: the *Korte Verhandelng*, the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, the *Tractatus Politicus*, and the *Ethics*. Indeed one could say with only a smidgen of exaggeration that Israel's ultimate historiographical objective is to remove the Enlightenment from the eighteenth century; *chez* Israel, the *siècle des Lumières* means century seventeen.

But there is more. Israel opens up a second front by attacking the recent attempt by scholars to Balkanize the Enlightenment into a cluster of contextually-unique mini-Enlightenments. "It used often to be held that 'the Enlightenment,'" Israel notes, "was essentially French and centered in Paris. Nowadays, it is not infrequently claimed that 'continental Europe looked to England as the source of the Enlightenment,' a view sometimes expressed not only by Anglophone but also German and Italian—if rarely by French—scholars. Another notion which has recently become influential is that there was not one Enlightenment but many different Enlightenments, that the Enlightenment 'occurred in too many forms to be comprised within a single definition and history, and that we do better to think of a family of Enlightenments, displaying both family resemblances and family quarrels.'¹ But all considered," he continues, "it seems best to discard all these perceptions and return to the idea of a single European Enlightenment, except now it should be seen as a European Enlightenment that most emphatically was not inspired by any single nation, be it France, England, or the Netherlands, but rather had its centre of gravity in north-western Europe and particularly in the inner circuit linking Amsterdam, the other main Dutch cities, Paris, London, [Edinburgh?], Hamburg, and Berlin, albeit with a subsidiary southern base in Naples, Venice, and Florence. Consequently, what chiefly needs to be stressed is that Britain and France were far from being the only major sources of 'enlightened' ideas and that it is indispensable, if one is to avoid serious distortion, to analyse the ebb and flow of ideas within a much broader European context than has been usual in the past.(140-141)"

Israel thus offers a near complete reconceptualization of the European Enlightenment that spins concurrently on four axes: first, he pulls the intellectual vitality of the Enlightenment back into the seventeenth century, and thus blurs the lines between the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment;² second, he recuperates the idea that the Enlightenment was a unified and cosmopolitan intellectual movement that transcended the particularities of local contexts; third, he argues that the 'radical' Enlightenment was integral to the Enlightenment as a whole, and that radicalism itself hatched and developed in the Low Countries; and fourth, he contends that the Enlightenment should be understood as a series of prolonged battles fought between a host of political and religious authorities, on the one hand, and four competing philosophical systems—Cartesianism, Newtonianism, Leibnizian-Wolffism, and Spinozistic-radicalism—on the other.³ This final strand of Israel's thesis adds a fourth beat to the Newton-Descartes-Leibnitz triad long familiar to students of seventeenth and eighteenth-century natural

philosophy, and favors what we might call a ‘confrontationalist’ view of intellectual discourse in general and the Enlightenment in particular.

Israel goes to great lengths to convince us that Spinoza was the cornerstone of the radical Enlightenment. It is true that while Spinoza is often studied in philosophy courses, he is rarely integrated into the wider intellectual history of the Enlightenment. Israel overcompensates for this historiographical *oubli* by mentioning Spinoza on virtually every page. According to Israel, the controversies triggered by Spinoza and Spinozism were of absolute centrality to the late seventeenth century republic of letters, and established the framework for the ensuing socio-politico-religious conflicts of the High Enlightenment. The picture that Israel so vividly paints turns upside down the long-standing image of Spinoza as an isolated fringe character, whose works were either ignored, misunderstood, or totally marginalized by authorities and intellectuals alike. Israel has scrupulously uncovered a dense network of Spinozists and Spinozistic debates criss-crossing Europe from Amsterdam to Naples, Paris to Berlin, and Portugal to St. Petersburg. One gets the impression that Israel may very well have tracked down every existing reference to Spinoza—positive or negative—in early modern Europe. To achieve this Herculean task, he not only consults manuscripts and published works from all four corners of Europe, but he also employs a highly critical method of literary analysis when investigating works allegedly hostile to Spinozistic radicalism. Israel never takes dismissive statements about Spinoza at face value. He is fully aware that scholars had to discuss Spinoza with nothing less than fervent indignation, lest they sought to invite dangerous accusations of covert Spinozism. Radicals had to use great tact and shrewdness if they wanted to endorse some aspect of his heterodox philosophy. Israel is at his best when reading between the lines of such texts. One example comes on page 712, when Israel scrutinizes Diderot’s article dedicated to Spinoza in the *Encyclopédie*. Here, as always, Israel digs deep and exposes Spinozism hidden behind faux refutations and thinly veiled variations of Cartesianism. By the end of the book, one has the sense that Spinoza was indeed “the supreme philosophical boogeyman of Early Enlightenment Europe.(159)”

Israel has clearly digested the intricacies of Spinoza’s thought. The book includes an admirable synopsis of Spinoza’s philosophical system that elucidates and simplifies the often imperceptible distinctions that separated Spinozism from its three philosophical competitors. In the process, we learn why Spinoza incurred such fear and hatred from the political and religious establishment, who saw the radical philosopher as the very incarnation of atheism, immorality, and political subversion.^{vi} His central belief was that the universe was made up of a single substance, and that this substance was co-terminous with either God or Nature. He rejected all aspects of revealed religion, Providence, the divinity of Jesus, the existence of miracles, and the so-called absolute nature of morality. He was also a committed determinist, yet, paradoxically, a firm believer in the liberty of mankind, and adhered to the starkly anti-Providential idea that motion existed intrinsically within matter. Methodologically, he believed that all knowledge derived from a combination of sense-data and mathematical reasoning, not religious faith, and that philosophy, not religion, lit the only navigable path to natural truth. If that was not enough, he was also a staunch republican and a life-long enemy of rigid social hierarchies and divine-right monarchy. All of these social, political, and philosophical positions—

Israel never tires of pointing out—became mainstays of the radical European Enlightenment from the late seventeenth century to the French Revolution.

From a more critical standpoint, *Radical Enlightenment* suffers from a wide range of structural, historiographical, and methodological caveats. The first problem is the size of the book. With 720 pages of densely-printed text (810 counting the bibliography and index), 38 chapters, 4,222 encyclopedic footnotes, and dozens upon dozens of intellectual profiles, the mere act of reading such a mammoth tome constitutes a veritable triumph of the human will. The book appears to have been marketed to a general academic public, but it is hard to imagine that anyone other than the most zealous student of the Enlightenment would have the stamina to read *Radical Enlightenment* cover-to-cover. Its massive girth has led one reviewer to quip that the book would be better off shelved alongside dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other works of reference dedicated to the period.^{xiii} A heavy-handed editor at Oxford University Press could have slimmed this pudgy paperback down to size by cutting out some of the excessive fat that clogs the first and fifth sections of the book, most notably. This could have helped Israel to streamline the argument and move the book up a few notches on the scale of readability.

Second, the actual structure of the book raises some important questions about Israel's methodological approach to the Enlightenment. The book is divided into five sections of roughly similar length: The 'Radical Enlightenment,' The Rise of Philosophical Radicalism, Europe and the 'New' Intellectual Controversies (1680-1720), The Intellectual Counter-Offensive, and The Clandestine Progress of the Radical Enlightenment (1680-1750). The first section of the book is the only place where Israel discusses at any length the history of the public sphere, the role of women in philosophical discourse, the evolution of intellectual sociability, and other cultural aspects of the early European Enlightenment. What is disconcerting is the fact that these elements seldom if ever reappear in the remainder of the text, leading one to wonder why Israel chose to include them in the first place. Cultural history, in general, flies well below Israel's historical radar. The bulk of the book is dedicated to highly intellectualized discussions of the rise of Spinozistic radicalism, the subsequent 'intellectual counter-offensive' that sprouted up around Europe around 1700, and the ultimate triumph of the radical Enlightenment in the first half of the eighteenth century. More precisely, *Radical Enlightenment* is an intellectual history concerned chiefly with philosophical systems, personal biographies, publishing histories, and tracing the contours of that slippery slope known as scholarly "influence." In this sense the book is, unfortunately, a giant step backwards. Israel has brazenly shoved aside three decades of innovative historiographical approaches to the Enlightenment in favor of a 'traditional'—read: outdated—approach to the "movement," cut from the same cloth as those much-maligned (yet oft-quoted) studies by Ernst Cassirer, Peter Gay, and Norman Hampson^{xv}. While Israel clearly succeeds in illustrating the upsurge of philosophical radicalism in the century from 1650 to 1750, he has failed to indicate how cultural practices might have changed concurrently over the course of the same period; was 'radicalism' merely a set of beliefs, or could it have been a kind of activity that one practiced as well? Israel is silent on this point—as he is on virtually all aspects of cultural history—and does not seem particularly interested in broaching the subject.

The third problem, on a related note, is the absence of historiographical dialogue in *Radical Enlightenment*. Indeed, the book should not be considered historiographical at all (leading one to ask, once again, who the target audience was supposed to be). While Israel often cites the (massive) secondary literature on Spinoza, for example, he rarely if ever meets his peers head on to challenge or endorse such or such competing interpretation of Spinoza's thought. Ignoring the footnotes and the bibliography, one could very well walk away from this book with the impression that Jonathan Israel is the first person to have written about Spinoza since the middle of the eighteenth century. In addition, we are left to wonder what Israel makes of the works of Robert Darnton, Roger Chartier, Daniel Roche, Jürgen Habermas, Dena Goodman, Quentin Skinner, Roy Porter, Steven Shapin and Simon Shaffer, and a variety of other leading scholars who explicitly repudiate a narrowly intellectual approach to the Enlightenment. Israel seems wholly uninterested in engaging with these scholars or weighing the significance of their methods—that is, the social history of ideas, the history of cultural practices, the rise of the public sphere, the transformation of intellectual sociability, the commercial and material revolution, the development of institutions that supported intellectual discourse, the role played by gender, class, and national heritage, and the sociology of ideas.

Fourth, Israel uncritically adopts a set of categories to describe the radical Enlightenment, and thus ends up perpetuating some arbitrary distinctions long since thrust upon the period. He employs the term 'radical,' for example, in a maddeningly vague and overly generalized manner. The 'radical' Enlightenment, for Israel, apparently indicates any thinker who scandalized religious or civic authorities. The 'mainstream' Enlightenment, by contrast, signifies those philosophers and intellectual systems who tended to get along with the secular and religious establishment. But this is surely a false dichotomy and one that relies too heavily upon negative definitions. Israel, in this regard, is his own worst enemy. After designating Newtonians, (most) Cartesians, and Leibnizian-Wolffians as the 'mainstream' Enlightenment, he then goes on to discuss the bitter controversies that swirled around such non-Spinozists as Wolff, Voltaire, and John Locke. If the non-radicals—that is, the non-Spinozists—were also treated like radicals in certain contexts, then the so-called division between the 'mainstream' and the 'radical' Enlightenment simply falls to pieces. Indeed one could think of numerous instances from the Enlightenment in which the 'mainstream' earned the ire of both Church and State. Israel could have avoided this problem by spending more time scrutinizing and reformulating these arbitrary distinctions and categories—rather than reproducing them—and jettisoning his predilection for reified language. He runs into the same problem when discussing the alleged division between the Enlightenment and the Counter-Enlightenment that is so uncritically adopted by the modern historical profession. Only from the perspective of intellectual history could one substantiate the idea that intellectuals can be so easily slotted into one of two competing philosophical camps. When addressed on the level of cultural history, for example, the partisans of the so-called Counter-Enlightenment appear to have shared much in common with their intellectual rivals.²

Fifth, Israel often grossly exaggerates the extent of Spinoza's philosophical reach. By designating Spinoza as the taproot and puppet-master of the radical European

Enlightenment, Israel deliberately (or inadvertently) diminishes the significance of other, non-Netherlands-based radicals such as Thomas Hobbes. It seems perfectly feasible that one could have written a similar study of the Enlightenment that considers Hobbes, and not Spinoza, to be the great-grandfather of European radical thought. Israel's near obsession with Spinoza leads him to scent the effluvia of Spinozism in the least likely of places. Thus he spends considerable time arguing that Wolff, Vico, Robespierre, and Mirabeau, for example, took their cues from Spinoza. Moreover, Israel tends to focus on debates about the New Philosophy, religion, naturalism, deism, freethinking, atheism, religious and philosophical toleration, Providence, free will, miracles, the relationship between philosophy and theology, mechanism, the nature of God, republicanism, debates on the existence of revealed religion and the historical validity of the Bible, and above all the challenges that radicalism posed to intellectual, social, political, and religious authorities. The fact that he ignores the history of astronomy, biology, physiology, epistemology—in addition to the aforementioned cultural lacunae—means that *Radical Enlightenment* falls well short of being a true overview of the early European Enlightenment.

Sixth, there are notable ellipses even in a book of 810 pages. Spinoza's republicanism, for instance, is very thoroughly analyzed, but James Harrington and Algernon Sidney, the two most important English republicans of the period, receive only one mention apiece, and the abbé Mably, the most important French Republican, is referenced but twice in passing. More egregious is the fact that the radicalism of the English Civil War hardly ever surfaces in *Radical Enlightenment*. Israel never discusses the radical religious sects that sprouted up around England in the 1640s and 1650s. Surely the Diggers, for example, deserve a place in the history of European radicalism? Montesquieu, that pillar of the early Enlightenment, was apparently not radical enough, since Israel only makes fleeting allusions to the great thinker of Bordeaux. Ditto for Leonard Euler and David Hume, whose contributions to radical thought are greatly diminished. A final example concerns the absence of Robert Hooke. Israel sustains a long discussion of the "argument from design" without ever once mentioning the pivotal role played by Hooke's *Micrographia* in this debate.

Finally, I should reference one noteworthy blurb that adorns the rear jacket of *Radical Enlightenment*. A laudatory reviewer from the 'New Statesman' predicted that Israel's book would revolutionize the field: "The scholarship is breathtaking. Israel has read everything, absorbed every nuance, followed up every byway...five years from now, our views of the Enlightenment will have been enormously influenced by Israel." This was written in 2001—exactly five years ago. Has this prophesy come true? Has *Radical Enlightenment* generated a buzz commensurate with its author's ambitious recalibration of the European Enlightenment? The recent appearance of a French translation has occasioned a second opportunity to reflect upon the impact of this book. In the end, it seems safe to conclude that *Radical Enlightenment* has made some valuable contributions to the study of the Enlightenment. But the historical profession and the public at large still await a definitive synthesis of the Enlightenment that weaves together a more diverse range of methodological approaches.

On balance, *Radical Enlightenment* has much to offer students of seventeenth and eighteenth-century intellectual history. Many of my initial discrepancies ended up mercilessly crushed under the weight of Israel's profound erudition. One cannot but marvel at the breadth and depth of his research, his solid grasp of every important European language, and his uncanny ability to sustain an argument for 720 pages in highly engaging prose. A movement as cosmopolitan and dynamic as the European Enlightenment certainly deserves a scholar as learned and sophisticated as Jonathan Israel. Ultimately, the great contribution of the *Radical Enlightenment*, I believe, is threefold. First, Israel has breathed life into the comatosed notion that the European Enlightenment borrowed heavily from the intellectual milieu of the Netherlands. From this point forward, it is no longer acceptable to ignore the extensive intellectual contributions that issued from the Low Countries in the late seventeenth century. Second, Israel has laid to rest the long-standing interpretation of the Enlightenment that privileges the influence of France and England, and the concomitant belief that the High Enlightenment represents the period of the greatest philosophical innovation before the modern era. Israel has succeeded in showing that “there was no fundamental break separating the High Enlightenment of the mid-eighteenth century from the general European philosophical ferment of the late seventeenth.(518)” Voltaire, Rousseau, La Mettrie, Condillac, d’Holbach, Diderot, Helvétius, and many other high priests of the High Enlightenment, are rightly cut down to size by Israel’s axe. “The essential ideas making up their radicalism,” he proves admirably, “were those of a late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century tradition which culminated in their work. (704)” Third, Israel has recuperated the idea that the Enlightenment transcended national contexts and that there existed a single, homogeneous, and pan-European republic of letters.^{xi} His sweeping coverage of European intellectual life lends credibility to this contention.

The final contribution, I should note, seems to me correct in spirit but methodologically flawed. One must ask whether it was merely books, philosophers, and ideas who fastened the Enlightenment into a single pan-European edifice. When studied from the perspective of cultural rather than intellectual history—something that Israel only does sporadically—that thing that we have come to call ‘the Enlightenment’ does indeed display a rather impressive measure of commonality. But what exactly was the content of that commonality? One could argue, in opposition to Israel, that it was rooted in a large number of shared institutions and uniform cultural practices, and not just common philosophical sources. Thus while the ideas, in fact, often varied drastically from think-to-thinker and from place-to-place, the common practices and forums of intellectual exchange do more, I believe, to demonstrate the overwhelming congruity of the culture of the Enlightenment. One hopes that Jonathan Israel and other intellectual historians will learn in the future to pluralize their approach to the history of the European Enlightenment. If the history of ideas wants to survive as a credible sub-discipline, it needs to spend less time in the ivory tower of elite intellectual exchange, and more time mingling amongst the common people down in the lowlands of cultural practice.

ⁱ Translation: *Les Lumières Radicales : La Philosophie, Spinoza et la naissance de la modernité, 1650-1750*. Translators: Pauline Hugues, Charlotte Nordmann, Jérôme

Rosanvallon. Éditions Amsterdam, 2005. Note that the French translation actually mentions Spinoza by name, unlike the original. Note also that a French version of this review will appear shortly in the *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*.

ii By 'Dutch' I mean to signify, as Israel does, not only Dutch nationals, but exilic and immigrant communities who settled in the Low Countries. Thus Spinoza and Bayle, for example, count as Dutch.

iii "While Italian, Jewish, British, and what might be termed French indigenous sources played a substantial part around the edges, the central thrust, the main bloc of radical ideas, stems predominantly from the Dutch radical milieu, the world of Spinoza and Spinozism." *Radical Enlightenment*, 694.

iv Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic, Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall, 1477-1806* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995)

i Here Israel cites Peter Harrison, Ernst Cassirer, and John Pocock.

v This is an idea that he clearly owes to Paul Hazard, *The European Mind 1680-1715*, transl. J. May (1935; Harmondsworth, 1965).

vi One should add that all of these philosophical systems were in dialogue with Aristotelian Scholasticism as well.

vii In this regard, the book complements nicely A.C. Kors' *Atheism in France, 1650-1750* (Princeton, 1990).

viii See the review by J.B. Shank, H-France (2003).

ix Norman Hampson, *The Enlightenment*; Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*; Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, 2 vol.

x See my forthcoming dissertation: "The Enlightenment in Question : Prize Contests and the Francophone Republic of Letters, 1670-1795."

xi This is an idea often associated with Peter Gay. Note that Israel greatly expands Gay's "little flock of philosophes," however. I should also mention that Israel never cashes out the title of his book; he scarcely touches upon 'modernity,' or how the philosophy of this period informed the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries.