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REVIEWS

Pathways to the Enlightenment: from Paul Hazard to Jonathan Israel

by Siep Stuurman

JONATHAN I. ISRAEL, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press; vii + 810 pp.; £30 hbk; 0-19-820608-9.

In 1935, when Paul Hazard published his now classic book on the origins of the Enlightenment, he posited as its hallmark a critical spirit (*‘esprit de critique’*) that was, in the end, intrinsic to the very identity of Europe. According to Hazard, there was a certain greatness in the obstinacy and perseverance of the men of the Enlightenment. They represented the European impulse to ‘ever recommence the quest for truth and happiness’, as they also demonstrated the superiority of intellectual and moral impulses over mere material forces.¹ Hazard’s *‘esprit de critique’* was not so far from Cassirer’s assertion, in the introductory chapter of his equally classic *Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (1932), that to the Enlightenment’s mind reason was a ‘concept of agency’, not of being.² As liberal intellectuals in an age of totalitarian ascendancy, both Hazard and Cassirer felt a profound sympathy for what they saw as the Enlightenment’s basic values.

In Hazard, however, far more than in the neo-Kantian vision of Cassirer, this empathy was anchored in a genuine historical account of the origins of the Enlightenment. The crucible of the Enlightenment, like Hazard’s own time, was a time of crisis, the decades spanning the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century (1680–1715). Hazard was not for a moment in doubt about the historical place of the crisis that ushered in the Enlightenment: it ‘proceeded directly’ from the Renaissance and it ‘prepared’ the French Revolution. Finally, Hazard announced that he wished to treat his subject in a European, not an exclusively-French, perspective. By Europe, however, he actually meant its Western rim. The coming of the Enlightenment marked a shift in the locus of intellectual life, from Italy to ‘the North’, to England and France, and to a lesser extent, the Dutch Republic. Hazard’s Enlightenment is organized around a French-British axis. Even so, his sources are for the greater part French, with English texts occupying a honourable second place. Other European vernaculars are intermittently consulted, but Latin is almost entirely absent which implies that intellectual life in the German lands and Eastern Europe remains for the most part outside his purview.

In his massive and brilliant book on the *Radical Enlightenment*, Jonathan Israel discusses roughly the same epoch as Hazard, although he draws its boundaries wider (1650–1750), and especially insists, rightly in my opinion, on the rapid growth of the ‘new philosophy’ in the 1650–1680 period. Like Hazard, Israel displays a profound, and contagious, sympathy for the intellectual movement he describes. His approach

is thus miles away from the postmodern 'hermeneutics of suspicion' which has informed, and sometimes marred, much discussion of the Enlightenment over the past decades.

And yet his approach differs profoundly from Hazard. Three aspects of Israel's story stand out. In the first place, he approaches the Enlightenment as a European phenomenon, but he does so in a more thoroughgoing manner than Hazard. Beginning his story three decades earlier, he accords a far greater importance to philosophical and theological debates in the Dutch Republic, with Spinoza as the key protagonist of the plot. Britain and France receive their share of attention, but there are also substantial treatments of Spain, Portugal, Italy, the Baltic, and, in particular, Germany. The truly European scope of Israel's story is enhanced by his abundant use of Latin, Dutch, and German sources, which were virtually absent in Hazard.

Israel's second departure from Hazard is the importance he attaches to the *radical* Enlightenment as a distinct current of thought. Writing in the early 1930s, before Ira Wade opened up the field of clandestine writings in the early eighteenth century, Hazard was not aware of the importance of the radicals, and was also inclined to view the entire Enlightenment, from Descartes and Cartesianism onwards, as 'radical' in a rather ecumenical sense. Israel, however, distinguishes from the outset between a radical and a moderate current. The radicals, he contends, are those who moved from Deism to some variety of materialism or pantheism, and they are usually influenced by Spinozism. Israel's objective is to demonstrate

that the Radical Enlightenment, far from being a peripheral development, is an integral and vital part of the wider picture and was seemingly even more internationally cohesive than the mainstream Enlightenment. Frequently, the moderate mainstream were consciously, even desperately, reacting to what was widely perceived as the massively dangerous threat posed by radical thought. (p. vi; all numbers in brackets refer to Israel's book)

In this connection, Israel further seeks to establish 'that Spinoza and Spinozism were in fact the intellectual backbone of the European Radical Enlightenment everywhere, not only in the Netherlands, Germany, France, Italy, and Scandinavia but also Britain and Ireland' (p. vi).

The intellectual controversies of the early Enlightenment, Israel posits, were played out in a triangular contest between a radical, materialistic and, more often than not, Spinozistic current, a conservative, orthodox-Christian reaction to the radicals, and finally a moderate current seeking a middle ground between materialism and orthodoxy. The chief moderates were the late seventeenth-century Cartesians, the adherents of the Lockean-Newtonian synthesis in the early eighteenth century, and finally the Leibnizian and Wolffian philosophers on the continent. The radicals basically argued for a monist philosophy which had no use for divine providence or spiritual agents, godly or otherwise. The moderates sought to reconcile the new natural science with religion, but they had great difficulty in defining and demarcating the religious: in practice their views varied from rational Christianity to providential Deism. The conservative, traditionalist reaction tried to stem the tide, frequently denouncing the moderates as crypto-Spinozists, but increasingly failed to hold the intellectual high ground as the eighteenth century progressed. Israel writes the history of the Enlightenment mainly in terms of the protracted polemics between

the radicals and the moderates. The conservatives provide the background, but are rarely discussed in their own right.

In the third place, Israel makes the claim, also found in Hazard, that the Enlightenment was the great gravedigger not only of the religious world-view, but of traditional hierarchy as well. By contrast with the Reformation and the Renaissance which had merely modified but not really subverted the old *Weltanschauung*, the Enlightenment, Hazard had argued, ushered in a new ordering of things ('*a nouvel ordre des choses*'), in which the idea of duty towards princes and God was replaced by the idea of rights, the 'rights of man and the citizen'.³ Israel makes basically the same claim, but by highlighting the Radical Enlightenment he radicalizes Hazard's account, making politics more central to the overall picture. The Radical Enlightenment, he contends,

not only attacked and severed the roots of traditional European culture . . . secularizing all institutions and ideas, but (intellectually and to a degree in practice) effectively demolished all legitimation of monarchy, aristocracy, woman's subordination to man, ecclesiastical authority, and slavery, replacing these with the principles of universality, equality, and democracy. (p. vi)

Israel thus makes two major claims. First, he asserts that the Radical Enlightenment was not a marginal phenomenon but a massive, tenacious, European current of thought which set the agenda for many of the great Enlightenment controversies. The moderates, Israel contends, can only be adequately understood against the background of the upsurge of radical thought that originated with Spinozism in the mid seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. Second, Israel further contends that the Radical Enlightenment destroyed the intellectual foundations of all forms of traditional hierarchy, including slavery and male supremacy, thus paving the way for an egalitarian and democratic world-view.

In what follows I will argue that Israel makes good on the first claim: his treatment of the Radical Enlightenment convincingly demonstrates its wide dissemination and its powerful and unsettling impact on the European philosophical and theological scene. Spinoza and Spinozism, as well as an endless array of anti-Spinozists, were indeed central to the origins and growth of the Enlightenment all over Europe. His portrayal of the moderates as reacting to the radicals is by and large also convincing, even though the line separating moderates and radicals is not always an easy one to draw.

However, I do not think that Israel entirely substantiates the second claim. There are two reasons for this: in the first place, he devotes most of his attention to the controversies that were played out on the interface between philosophy and theology. Discussion of the social and political ideas of the radicals, or of their involvement in radical groups and movements, is less extensive, and Israel actually observes that they cover a fairly wide political spectrum: from egalitarian utopianism to possessive individualism, and from enlightened monarchy to democratic republicanism (pp. 71–81). Second, the Radical Enlightenment is almost exclusively portrayed through its critique of the traditional justifications of the social hierarchy, but there is hardly any discussion of the new sciences of human nature, society and history that came to replace the traditional political wisdom, and that also contained modern discourses of inequality couched in the language of the Enlightenment itself.⁴

* * *

On the influence of Spinoza Israel is largely convincing. Spinoza was indeed the skeleton in the Enlightenment's cupboard. The countless exorcisms and refutations of his ideas bespeak his spellbinding hold on the Enlightenment's mind. In 1721, for example, a Genevan PhD-student, Louis Tronchin, industriously penned a defence of miracles against Spinoza, 'that atheist of the most recent age'.⁵ We cannot know if this Genevan student fully understood the finer points of Spinoza's metaphysics, but one thing is reasonably certain: he assumed as a matter of course that his audience knew what Spinozism was about.

Israel shows that the enormous influence of Spinozism can be largely explained by its thoroughness and systematicity: it offered a comprehensive and consistent alternative to Christian orthodoxy and it was not beset by the intractable contradictions of Cartesian dualism (pp. 230, 493). This made it attractive and dangerous. Israel relates several fascinating cases (such as Boulainvilliers: pp. 565–74) of men who set out to refute Spinoza but ultimately ended up as Spinozists themselves.

Israel is, of course, not the first to point to Spinoza's importance. The negative critical role of Spinozism was, in fact, already noted by Hazard. But Hazard believed that Spinoza had few real disciples outside Holland and the German lands, so that Spinozism remained marginal to the overall plot of his story.⁶ Only three years after Hazard, however, Ira Wade sought to demonstrate the importance of Spinoza's influence in the formation of the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment, in particular through the circulation and copying of clandestine manuscripts.⁷ In his 1960 study of French free-thought J. S. Spink likewise dwelt extensively on the numerous refutations of and borrowings from Spinoza. However, Spink stressed that almost no French author really understood Spinoza's thought, and asserted that Wade greatly exaggerated the influence of Spinoza.⁸ One of the issues at stake here seems to be what is meant by the 'influence' of Spinoza. Spink is probably right that only a tiny minority really understood Spinoza's metaphysics, but Wade is obviously making a quite different point. He sees Spinozism (which is not precisely the same thing as Spinoza's metaphysics) as a new ingredient in an ongoing stream of 'free-thought' that runs from Montaigne, on through Charron, Naudé, Sorbière, La Mothe Le Vayer, Gassendi and his followers, Hobbes and scores of minor figures, to the deists, atheists and skeptics of the early eighteenth century. According to Wade, Descartes tried to stem the tide but in the end his philosophy promoted skepticism and unbelief by its affirmation of the absolute autonomy of thought.⁹

What remained unclear in all of this was the significance of free-thought, including Spinozism, to the broader picture of the coming of the Enlightenment painted by Hazard. It was Margaret Jacob who, in 1981, coined the term 'Radical Enlightenment' for the ensemble of the heterodox currents of thought, therewith placing them on a par with the familiar, canonized Enlightenment discussed by Hazard. She also demonstrated that materialism, pantheism and Spinozism were closely tied to republican and anti-absolutist ideas which originated in the mid seventeenth-century English Revolution.¹⁰ According to Jacob, 'the Radical Enlightenment was not simply spawned, as it were, by liberal parents. It existed simultaneously and in harsh dialogue with the more dominant and moderate version of enlightened belief and practice, a dialectic that owes much to its English and revolutionary origins'.¹¹ The gist of Jacob's argument was that much of mainstream, 'respectable', Enlightenment thought can usefully be seen as an effort at containment of the radicals. Jacob

situated Newtonianism and its theological and political accretions at the centre of the moderate current.¹²

The radicals, Jacob further argued, formed a loose international network of journalists, printers, political propagandists and assorted figures, often with a refugee background. Many of them were republicans, pantheists or materialists, and a major organization channel through which they disseminated their ideas was the Masonic lodges. In the lodges and other locations of sociability, Jacob argued, we may trace the formation of an enlightened public sphere that frequently displays a more radical temper, both in politics and religion, than the 'respectable' company of the canonized Enlightenment thinkers.¹³ For Jacob the mainspring of the Radical Enlightenment was political. Hazard, she contends, neglected the political contexts in which the new radical thought originated. In her view, the mid seventeenth-century English Revolution spawned three currents of thought that would later be put to use by continental anti-absolutism: Hobbesian materialist contractualism, Harringtonian and other varieties of Republicanism, and, to a lesser extent, 'levelling' or 'democratic' ideas. Jacob argued that the politics of the continental Radical Enlightenment were fuelled by the opposition generated by Louis XIV's revocation of the Edict of Nantes and his subsequent bid for European hegemony. Finally, she goes beyond Hazard's treatment of the Dutch Republic. While Hazard focused on the crucial role of its French-language press, especially after 1685, Jacob points to the early flourishing of Dutch Cartesianism, Republicanism and Spinozism that preceded the 1685 turning point in European politics.¹⁴

* * *

Israel's argument is obviously heavily indebted to Jacob (and to the scholars who have followed her lead during the past two decades, notably Silvia Berti). Like Jacob, Israel highlights the spread of Spinozism, and, like her, he sees a linkage between materialism, republicanism and anti-absolutism. Again like Jacob, he underlines the pivotal significance of intellectual radicalism in the Dutch Republic for the ulterior development of the Radical Enlightenment. But Israel devotes most of his attention to the seventeenth-century Dutch intellectual scene, and less to Jacob's radicals who, through Freemasonry and other channels, disseminated Spinozist and related subversive ideas in Europe in the mid eighteenth century. He also differs from Jacob's account in that he assigns less importance to the English Revolution of the 1640s.

[T]here is little of a concrete nature to suggest that the continental Radical Enlightenment did in fact principally derive from English influence and example . . . After all, there were other quasi-revolutionary upheavals in mid-seventeenth century Europe, notably the Frondes and the Massaniello rising (and the brief establishment of a republic) in Naples in 1647–8, which made a scarcely less profound impression on the European consciousness in general and radical minds in particular. (p. 21)

Israel has a point here, but it remains true that an autonomous democratic movement such as the Levellers did not exist on the continent, with the exception of the minor episode of the Bordeaux *Ormée* during the Fronde. It also remains true that the continental, and French, influence of Locke's political ideas dates from the

1690s. Jacob, for her part, is carefully not to overstate the impact of English 'levelling' on the continent, but generally she accords a greater importance to pre-1688 British influences than Israel.

Israel may be right that the continental triumph of the Lockean-Newtonian philosophical synthesis began only in the 1730s, in the context of a broader 'Anglomania' which can be explained by the antecedent breakdown of Cartesianism and the urgent need of a moderate philosophy to stem the rising tide of radicalism. But Israel omits any discussion of Locke's political writings. Jacob, on the other hand, points out that the 1691 French translation of Locke's *Second Treatise*, by David Mazel, was an even more radical text than its English original. In 1755, Rousset de Missy (a radical, if ever there was one) brought out another edition, explaining that Locke was actually a republican.¹⁵ There thus appear to be two Lockes: the moderate philosopher and the radical political theorist who proclaimed a right to revolution if a monarch overstepped certain limits. (Needless to say, all three French Louis qualified.) By situating Locke unambiguously in the camp of the 'moderates' Israel somewhat simplifies a highly ambivalent theorist.¹⁶

Another important difference between the approaches of Israel and Jacob concerns sociability and organization. Jacob consistently demonstrates the importance of the Masonic lodges for the discussion and transmission of radical ideas. She also suggests that the organizational model of Freemasonry, with its formal hierarchy, meetings and electoral procedures, fostered an interest and training in politics, even though such politics were not necessarily radical. Apart from the content of their ideas, Jacob asserts, the quasi-republican political culture of the lodges was relevant to the mind-set of the Radical Enlightenment, and, beyond that, to the formation of European civil society and the disseminations of novel conceptions of citizenship.¹⁷ Israel discusses sociability in one of the early chapters of his book, especially stressing the 'levelling' effects of conversations in socially-mixed companies and the emergence of the new type of the 'polished gentleman' or 'man of the world' who is 'unclassifiable under the old social criteria' (p. 60), but clandestine and radical organizations, such as the Masonic lodges, get only the briefest mention (p. 59). In the light of these, and other, divergences between their interpretations of the Radical Enlightenment it is a pity that Israel offers no extensive discussion of Jacob's work in this massive volume.¹⁸

* * *

Israel has given us a vast panorama of the unfolding of Enlightenment thought during the crucial century between 1650 and 1750. In this review I can hardly do justice to the richness of his treatment of countless fascinating authors, both minor and well known. The book is a real *tour de force*.

The upshot is that European intellectual culture underwent a profound process of secularization that accelerated in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, culminating, on the radical side, in the materialistic philosophies of La Mettrie, Diderot, and their acolytes. Israel is sometimes inclined to overstate the importance of Spinozism. A puzzling omission in the early part of the story is of Gassendi and the Gassendists (Gassendism was an atomistic theory of matter, in which the world was regarded as consisting of nothing but atoms and the void, replacing the Epicurean notion of order produced by random collision of atoms with God's providential agency). In the historiography of free-thought and early Enlightenment,

Gassendism has always held a secure place. Gassendi's Latin works were widely read in Europe.¹⁹ François Bernier's more accessible *Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi* (1674, 1678, 1684) did for Gassendi what Fontenelle did for Descartes. Bernier's treatise, with its endless quotations from Lucretius, would perfectly fit into Israel's story. This may also be true of the 'orthodox sources of unbelief' charted by Alan Kors.²⁰

As I stated above, Israel's discussion of the Enlightenment mainly concentrates on its theologico-philosophical polemics. He pays far less attention to the 'positive' side of the evolution of Enlightenment thought. With Christian orthodoxy, Scholastic Aristotelianism, and finally also Cartesian dualism discredited, what came to fill the gap? What political and social theories came to replace the traditional discourses of human nature and society? This is a question Israel does not really address. It follows that his second major claim, that the Radical Enlightenment promoted 'the principles of universality, equality and democracy', cannot be fully substantiated by his analysis. In a negative sense, he is undoubtedly right. The radicals destroyed all the traditional justifications of hierarchy, rank, patriarchy, absolute monarchy, and unquestioning obedience to the powers that be. However, precisely because they did their work of subversion so thoroughly, they created the need for new theories of society. What is more, in many cases the radicals themselves made important contributions to new, Enlightenment discourses of inequality, such as political economy, conjectural history, racial classification and materialistic theories of sexual difference.

For example, Israel portrays Bernard Mandeville as an egalitarian, also noting that his political convictions were embedded in 'a larger philosophical vision of man as driven by egotistical impulses' (pp. 623–5). That larger vision is well known as part of the history of political economy. Mandeville expounds a typically modern justification of luxury, material inequality and a harsh regime of poor relief, not based on Christian duty but on its productive and pedagogical consequences. The French translator of Mandeville's *Essay on Charity and Charity Schools* enthusiastically reported (in the 1750 edition) the invention of a machine that enabled lame and blind people to work even if they had lost both arms and legs: it sufficed that they were able to move their torso forward and backward.²¹ Mandeville himself advocated a restricted education of the labouring classes, granting them no more knowledge than was needed for their own trade.²² This is a typically modern discourse of inequality. It is perhaps no coincidence that the middle decades of the eighteenth century, which Israel highlights as the decisive breakthrough of secularizing ideas, were also marked by a vast upsurge of the new human science of political economy.²³

Fontenelle, one of the founding fathers of the French Radical Enlightenment according to Israel, also ranks among the inventors of conjectural history (*histoire philosophique*).²⁴ In his writings on history, he vacillates between an egalitarian critique of climatological determinism and a view of the progress of civilization and science that limits it to the moderate, European zone:

At the most one might believe that the Torrid zone and the two Glacial zones are not very suitable for the development of Learning. Up to the present age, the sciences have not progressed beyond Egypt and Mauretania on one side, nor beyond Sweden at the other side; perhaps it is not by chance that they are confined between the Atlas Mountains and the Baltic Sea; we do not know

whether these are not boundaries established by Nature, and whether we may hope ever to see great Writers among the Lapps and the Negroes.²⁵

Like political economy, conjectural history became a major Enlightenment discourse in the mid eighteenth century. Egalitarian notions of a common human nature became embedded in a stadial theory of history which purported to explain the backwardness of extra-European peoples in terms of a universal science of human evolution.²⁶ Closely related to it, but theoretically distinct, was the equally modern discourse of racial classification, pioneered by the Gassendist François Bernier in the late seventeenth century, and steadily refined and widely disseminated during the eighteenth century.²⁷ We know that some authors, such as Lahontan (discussed by Israel, pp. 580–2), Diderot, Anquetil Duperron and the abbé Raynal advanced egalitarian critiques of European superiority, but they represent a minority view, while the ‘ignoble savage’, as Ronald Meek has shown long ago, was probably far more common in Enlightenment writings.²⁸

Finally, there is the case of gender. Israel devotes a chapter to ‘Women, Philosophy, and Sexuality’ (pp. 82–96), arguing that Spinozism led many to adopt a naturalistic view of sexual pleasure, in women as well as in men. Frequently, though not in Spinoza himself, this was part of a broader theory of the equality of the sexes. Israel’s examples are mainly taken from the eighteenth century, but he might have strengthened his case by the great upsurge of defences of the equality of the sexes in the 1650–80 decades, the period he rightly designates as the cradle of the Radical Enlightenment. Several of those, notably François Poulain de la Barre (briefly referred to by Israel in footnotes, pp. 93–4), also contributed to the Radical Enlightenment in other ways.²⁹

However, in the case of gender as in other areas, the Enlightenment also pioneered new, modern defences of inequality, such as bio-psychological and physico-anthropological theories of sexual difference. This current of thought has been highlighted by Thomas Laqueur.³⁰ On the other hand, Estelle Cohen has shown that Cartesian mechanistic, and by implication materialist, theories of the body were also used to make the case for gender equality.³¹ Claudia Honegger has demonstrated that the new, materialist discourse of male supremacy arose as a response to the radicals’ affirmations of equality.³² Materialism and secularization could thus result in both egalitarian and anti-egalitarian theories of sex and gender.

Israel’s case for the radical’s devastating critique of the *traditional* discourses of inequality is unexceptionable. Especially valuable is his demonstration of the depth, the vitality and the European reach of the Radical Enlightenment. The radicals were not just a marginalized minority: they set the intellectual agenda for many of the Enlightenment’s major debates. But Israel overstates his case by arguing that the radicals were egalitarians first and last. Instead, I would submit that there was a continuing dialectic between their critique of the traditional discourses of inequality and the invention of new, modern discourses of equality. The very notion of ‘reason’ was a double-edged sword. As a faculty common to all of humankind it was conducive to egalitarian ideas, but as the accomplishment of an enlightened minority it could also legitimate the rule of the enlightened few over the ignorant and superstitious many. This dialectic was played out across the entire range of Enlightenment thought, but also *within* the Radical Enlightenment. Its history largely remains to be written.

One thing, however, we may be sure of: nobody seeking to contribute to that future history will be able to ignore Jonathan Israel’s magisterial work.

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