



A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy

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Democracy, free thought and expression, religious tolerance, individual liberty, political self-determination of peoples, sexual and racial equality--these values have firmly entered the mainstream in the decades since they were enshrined in the 1948 U.N. Declaration of Human Rights. But if these ideals no longer seem radical today, their origin was very radical indeed--far more so than most historians have been willing to recognize. In *A Revolution of the Mind*, Jonathan Israel, one of the world's leading historians of the Enlightenment, traces the philosophical roots of these ideas to what were the least respectable strata of Enlightenment thought--what he calls the Radical Enlightenment.

Originating as a clandestine movement of ideas that was almost entirely hidden from public view during its earliest phase, the Radical Enlightenment matured in opposition to the moderate mainstream Enlightenment dominant in Europe and America in the eighteenth century. During the revolutionary decades of the 1770s, 1780s, and 1790s, the Radical Enlightenment burst into the open, only to provoke a long and bitter backlash. *A Revolution of the Mind* shows that this vigorous opposition was mainly due to the powerful impulses in society to defend the principles of monarchy, aristocracy, empire, and racial hierarchy--principles linked to the upholding of censorship, church authority, social inequality, racial segregation, religious discrimination, and far-reaching privilege for ruling groups.

In telling this fascinating history, *A Revolution of the Mind* reveals the surprising origin of our most cherished values--and helps explain why in certain circles they are frequently disapproved of and attacked even today.

A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy Details

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Grace says

This book summarises some of Jonathan Israel's recent work on the enlightenment - there are two 1000 page volumes (both under £25 - what a bargain OUP!) and I think another one is on the way. This short volume necessarily skips a lot of detail and mainly focuses on the differences between the moderate and radical enlightenments in the later, immediately pre-French revolution period of about 1750-1790. Israel argues that new 'radical enlightenment' ideas combined with longstanding social and political inequalities to produce revolutionary ferment - a controversial position in that philosophy is often thought not to cause very much. The other major argument outlined here is that there were two fundamentally opposed enlightenment threads (radical and moderate) and that our current ideals of equality, democracy and justice stem very clearly from the radical side (Spinoza, Diderot, d'Holbach, Paine etc) not the moderate (represented by Voltaire, Locke, Hume, sometimes Rousseau) as we often tend to think.

I would have liked more discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the radical enlightenment position but this is primarily a history book and I suppose I can now go away and think about that stuff myself. It was very interesting though and relevant to the contemporary world in that there are still conflicts between the ideal of equality and commitment to authority and the status quo.

Heather Stein says

This book is so polemical i am had trouble even managing to get through it. The basic premise of a radical and moderate Enlightenment seems forced. The end of Diderot's life is much less radical than Israel would have us believe AND i am having problems with any definition of "moderate" Enlightenment figure that lumps Voltaire in with Sir Edmund Burke... Sir Edmund Burke the famed conservative whose *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

Avoid reading. It will just get under your skin. Antoine Lilte has published a stunning review in one of the French journals that is worth reading instead.

Billy McCoy says

Excellent book.

Peter A. van Tilburg says

Book gives a good overview about the Enlightenment and more specific 2 parties the more moderate ones who wanted to fit the ideas in the existing order and the revolutionary party who realises that fitting in contradicts

with the basic ideas of the Enlightenment.

Interesting to see that some ideas such as 'the reason' are not defined and more or less accepted as general truths.

Charlie Huenemann says

This is a nice, short overview of Israel's larger volumes. Israel's work is thoroughly researched and the claims he makes are both daring (at least among academic historians) and interesting. Reading this volume is a great way of getting some sense of major and minor players, the important philosophical differences among them, and the relation of ideas to the revolutions in America and France. In the end, I think his principal distinction, between the Radical and Moderate movements of Enlightenment, disintegrate into a wide array of views; I think he exaggerates Spinoza's influence; and, overall, I think he pays too much attention to ideas and not enough to other determining causes. He's also not the most elegant of writers. Still, none of this means it isn't a book well worth reading and thinking through.

Luke says

In *Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy*, Jonathan Israel argues that the Enlightenment must be viewed as a competition between two separate strains of philosophical thought. The first strain, moderate Enlightenment, is that most commonly recognized, advocating for Enlightened despotism, a deistic worldview, a small group of enlightened individuals, and incremental reform. The radical Enlightenment, on the other hand, aimed for democratic solutions, rational atheism, and sweeping change in Atlantic societies as a way to liberate all people of tyranny. In Israel's conception, radical Enlightenment became the dominant force in intellectual circles during the 1770s and led to the outbreaks of the Atlantic Revolutions, above all the French Revolution.

However, Israel overstates the differences between radical and moderate Enlightenments, arguing that they were two irreconcilable strands of thought that brought the Western world on two different trajectories. To him, the moderate Enlightenment was epitomized by the regimes of Catherine I of Russia and Frederick the Great of Prussia, while the radical Enlightenment is much more recognizable to us living in the liberal and social democratic world. This does not seem to be a quite fair explanation, as there was a great deal of correspondence between thinkers of both the moderate and radical Enlightenments and the two spheres did converge a great deal.

Strangely, Israel argues that the radical Enlightenment must be viewed as the core of the French Revolution and that debates about Old Regime crises is overstated. Studies of the intellectual origins of the French Revolution were quite common until the 1970s and 1980s before they were eclipsed by broader cultural, political, and economic studies of the origins of the French Revolution. Frankly, the Enlightenment was certainly a cause of the French Revolution, but material realities were surely more important to those who constituted the Third Estate and felt the brunt of the Old Regime's policies. Without doubt, they were influenced by the Enlightenment, but the reality of the French Revolution is that it was not an ideological struggle, but a simple attempt for better conditions, at least before 1792 when the Republic was formed.

Israel argues that the Reign of Terror represented a disavowal of the radical Enlightenment, leaving a space of less than a year for the radical Enlightenment to have been the dominant force in the French Revolution.

Yet, Republican leaders looked more to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (who Israel characterizes as moderate) than Thomas Paine or Denis Diderot (who he characterizes as radical), suggesting that the Revolution did not rely on as radical thought as Israel thinks.

Nevertheless, this is a study worth reading for its insights, but I do not think that Israel's argument is as useful as it could be.

Hadrian says

Jonathan Israel has written some Very Big Books about the Enlightenment that I hope to read someday. Unfortunately, time pressures and work have forced me to make do with this 300 page summary/manifesto of his 2400 page argument.

As far as I can tell, his argument is based upon three main points: the history of the Enlightenment has its roots in the 17th century and the arguments of Spinoza; the Enlightenment as we know it is an international, not just national phenomenon that can be further defined as part of a 'radical' or 'moderate' tradition; and that the ideas of the Radical Enlightenment were a major contributor to the political revolutions of the early 19th century.

The first two points are well done here. Israel doesn't always go for the 'big names' of Locke, Kant, and Hume, but he insists on placing them within their historical context and their competitors and colleagues, such as d'Holbach, Diderot, Helvetius, and Schimmelpennick.

The third point doesn't seem as well established. It's more of a 'the ideas showed first, the revolution happened second, therefore the ideas caused the revolution'. But this might seem unfair. This is only a summary of a summary, after all, and Israel could very likely describe these histories in his other books.

Still a fair primer. I still think I should read the trilogy, however.

Donald says

I'd love to read Israel's enormous books on the subject, but I'll try his short version first. The type is really big, so this book is even shorter than its page length implies.

Israel makes three big arguments:

- 1) The Enlightenment ought to be understood/studied as two competing Enlightenments - the Radical (Diderot, D'Holbach, et al) vs. the Moderate (Voltaire, Hume, et al) - rather than a set of distinct national phenomena.
- 2) The Radical Enlightenment is rooted in Spinoza and Bayle... essentially, the philosophers of the Radical Enlightenment are (atheistic or Unitarian, materialist) "Spinozists".
- 3) Contra Marx or the Annales school or whomever, the intellectual fervor provoked by Radical Enlightenment is the chief cause of the French Revolution. (And that Robespierre & the Jacobins were Rousseauists and thus enemies of the Radical Enlightenment.)

The first two arguments are stronger than the third. After reading this, I accept his first argument, at least in a general way. I don't know enough about either the 18th century philosophers he cites or Spinoza to accept or reject the second. The third seems overstated.

But this is a fun book that everyone should read. It mentions a lot of names I'd never heard of - but could now research if I wanted to. The best part is watching Israel attack Rousseau and Voltaire, who are so often held up as heroes of reason. Mostly, this book makes me want to read Spinoza.

Stuart Macalpine says

And interesting account of the philosophical ideas leading up to the French Revolution. Spinoza emerges as a founding father of the ideas of the radical Enlightenment. The interesting thing is the extent to which our modern values are a product of this time. Specifically the kind of values we often hear talked about including democracy, equality, and freedom of conscience and speech. To a surprising extent these are only located within the radical Enlightenment and are not a mainstream part of political thought in the Enlightenment to the extent one might have expected.

Robiok says

Read for an exam.

This fucked me up, changed my entire brain (I literally felt it move and re-adjust in my skull ask my friend she was there) and I guess my reply to the question: who's your role model? Is now: DIDEROT MAN!!

How did I end up like this, and also WHY ARE THE SEQUELS TO THIS BOOK SO EXPENSIVE. Because yea, Prof. Israel wrote 2 more books, this is a trilogy and I want it even if it's not required for any exams that I break my brain on this intense philosophical ride which makes me MAD but that is something I could live for IF I HAD THE BOOKS. You know what I'm saying.

Look, I'm not gonna write a smart review of this, this book is smart enough, read it to be a decent human.

Devin Creed says

Israel splits the Enlightenment into two camps, Radical and Moderate. The Radicals, led by Diderot and D'Holbach, employed the monistic thought of Spinoza to lay the foundations for secular modernity. Meh.

Steve says

This book in many ways amounts to an abstract or summary of his brilliant (and quite lengthy) trilogy on the Enlightenment (Radical Enlightenment, Enlightenment Contested, and Democratic Enlightenment), all of which I've read and enjoyed over the past few years as I've studied the Enlightenment.

As with all of his books they are informative and quite readable if you're into 2-inch-thick non-fiction titles

covering a fairly obscure but incredibly important process in Western civilization. :

Esteban del Mal says

1/27/10: Spinoza sighting! Can't wait to get to this one.

Awww. Look at little, sweet, innocent Esteban, circa early 2010 up there, back before he read this. The abbreviated anticipation is almost palpable.

What a chump.

Shitty books are shitty for different shitty reasons. This one is shitty because it deals foremost with philosophy. Meditate upon the word for a minute. Do you break out in a cold sweat at the thought of a bunch of white, twenty-something males that look like they just rolled out of bed lounging around coffee houses, reeking of stale cigarettes and bicycle grease and trying to impress each other in some indecipherable code? Who don't realize that they've peaked? That they have nothing to offer a society that has moved past them? Waaaaay past them? That's what the word philosophy conjures for me.

Because I think philosophy, as it's currently practiced, is nothing but word games and parlor tricks. A way for nerds to have ready-made pick-up lines because they can't think spontaneously. Sure, it meant something at one time. It pierced the veil of religio-monarchist oppression to a large degree and gave form and expression to both secular democracy and science, at least in the West, back in the 1700s during what we celebrate as the Enlightenment. But that's about the last time it had anything worthwhile to say, at least as far as I'm concerned.

But that's enough for me because I'm interested in history and curious about how we got where we are. Philosophy ushered in modernity. That's a pretty big deal. But, to be frank, the author is an awful writer. Aside from his penchant for quoting bygone philosophers in the original French and German without providing translations (fuck you, Jonathan I. Israel! The conclusion of modernity is 'Merica and we speak English in 'Merica! Why should I have to bother with Google translate, you conceited bastard? See what I mean about philosophers contentedly lounging about and talking only to themselves? Faugh!), he just tries to do too much in too few pages. This thing reads like bullet points interlaced with adjectives.

We, the inheritors and benefactors of the Enlightenment, deserve better from our philosophy.

SB says

I'm now convinced of the book's thesis: the radical enlightenment was importantly distinct from the moderate enlightenment.

But boy this was a slog.

Adna says

Measuring close to 3.000 pages, Jonathan Israel's trilogy on the Enlightenment (*Radical Enlightenment* (2001), *Enlightenment Contested* (2006), and *Democratic Enlightenment* (2011)) has been a great source on related topics - but I so far have not had the time, or indeed the courage, to read them cover to cover. I figured this much more manageable book would be a good way to familiarize myself with the major themes in the trilogy, and I think that, seen in that light, the book has served its purpose.

Throughout the book, it's quite clear that Jonathan Israel has an axe to grind. In his view, the Enlightenment's most novel thinkers, which he groups together in what he calls the Radical Enlightenment, have been unjustly ignored or marginalized. This lack of focus on the Radical Enlightenment creates a '*highly perplexing problem of historiography*' for students of the period, and Israel has little patience for this '*astounding failure dragging on over the decades*'. His fellow historians, Israel asserts, have been '*famously loathe to concede that ideas played a formatively crucial part*' in shaping, and creating the conditions for, the revolutions of the late 18th century, specifically in France - though he mentions the American colonies and the Dutch United Provinces as well. However, Israel explains, '*there is no place for such an attitude*' and the '*prevailing view about the French Revolution not being caused by books and ideas in the first place ... [is] totally indefensible*'.

I am not completely convinced that this is true, primarily because I find Israel's grouping together of various writers into his categories forced and perhaps suggestive of more uniformity and influence than actually existed. If indeed these 'Radical Enlightenment' books and ideas had such a strong and mobilizing influence on the public at large, why then did the French Revolution spiral out of control so quickly and disastrously? No doubt Israel explores this in greater depth in his recent book *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from the Rights of Man to Robespierre* (2014). More importantly, I think Israel's claim would have been stronger if he had spent more time connecting the debates among philosophers and intellectuals to society at large, and explored the reason behind the successful spread of certain ideas as opposed to the failure of others. His comments on the fragmented historiography did ring true, as the complex and international Enlightenment has, I think, suffered from being written about by (seemingly) monolingual historians, mostly from the English speaking parts of the world, but from France as well. As an aside; Israel has a tendency to quote in the original French or German, and he refuses to provide translations in the footnotes. Given that this book is aimed at a somewhat general public, I am slightly puzzled why the publisher went along with this quirk of his.

A minor quibble: considering the numerous books and articles Israel has written on the Dutch United Provinces, I was disappointed that they featured only on the sidelines in this book, and all the more so when Israel does spend dozens of pages detailing philosophical debates on ontology and epistemology. Nevertheless, the outlines Israel presents are interesting and competently explained. I'm not sure I'd recommend the book to people starting out with this subject or period, but as an introduction to his own trilogy I think it works as well as can be expected.
