

Book Reviews

Israel, Jonathan. A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy. Princeton University Press. Pp. 296. ISBN: 978-1-4008-3160-9

Jonathan Israel is not pleased with the state of research into the emergence of modern democratic values. He sets out to fill a “gigantic yawning gap” by tracing ideas such as equality and individual liberty to the Enlightenment and by defending the thesis that a Radical Enlightenment in the 1770s and 1780s created a “revolution in the mind”, which in turn led to the French revolution. This may sound familiar, but in fact the vast literature on the French revolution is “absurdly inadequate”: It is mired either in reductionist Marxist explanations or in postmodern distrust of reason and consequently fails to take into account the intellectual background and how ideas caused events.

Israel supports his thesis with the help of what he calls the “controversialist method”, giving a dramatic account of the Radical Enlightenment locked in a struggle with the “Moderate Enlightenment.” Almost the entire book is devoted to exploring the philosophical differences between these two ideologies, which resulted in the triumph of the radicals. Israel introduced the Radical Enlightenment already in the first volume of a projected trilogy on the Enlightenment, the well received *Radical Enlightenment* from 2002 where he argued that the foundation of the Enlightenment, and hence of modern democratic values, is to be found in Spinoza. The second volume, *Enlightenment Contested* came in 2009. *A Revolution of the Mind*, which originated as the Isaiah Berlin lectures in Oxford, is not part of the trilogy but anticipates themes that will be covered in the third volume.

Displaying an impressive breadth of knowledge, Israel argues that the Radical Enlightenment of Spinoza is carried on by the thinkers of the 1770s and 1780s, notably Diderot, d’Holbach, Paine, and Helvétius. Although the majority of the protagonists in the book are in France where the Radical Enlightenment was strongest, Israel also singles out a great number of radicals in Holland, America, Germany, England, and Scandinavia. On the basis of Spinoza’s monistic materialism, the radicals defend “the core values of modern secular egalitarianism”. These include democracy and equal civil rights, freedom of speech and the press, separation of church and state, sexual freedom, and the liberation of oppressed nations. Enlightenment is the method to shape reality according to these ideals; if people just know the truth, they will eventually do what is right.

Nonetheless, the radicals also support revolution where rights are systematically violated; indeed this is one of the chief differences to the Moderate Enlightenment of thinkers like Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Kant. Based on a support for rationalism and metaphysical dualism, they either reject or are weak in their defence of democracy and equality; they support aristocracy and monarchy, accept war as a necessary feature of international relations, and, Israel argues, suffer from a “Eurocentric superiority complex.” Although these thinkers too supported enlightenment and progress, they promoted gradual reforms and did not favour political revolution. These competing ideologies are explored over chapters on democracy, economics, international relations and moral philosophy as the radicals gradually won out in the period leading to the French revolution. There are occasional forays into social and political events but the bulk of

the text is an account of the many radical thinkers and their ideas, not their lives.

Israel is otherwise a supporter of Spinozistic monism but here he proceeds through a strict dichotomy, which causes difficulties. Voltaire and Locke, who are not unreasonably credited with contributing to the rise of civil rights and toleration, fit awkwardly within the Moderate Enlightenment and the same could be said for many others within either of the two teams. Thinkers are also not permitted to be somewhere in between. Take for example Kant whose *oeuvre* was an attempt at bridging the gulf between opposed philosophical traditions. He was alone, according to Israel, in attempting to bridge the Radical and the Moderate Enlightenment, but even he failed and came down on the moderate side. To make the case that Kant was a Moderate, Israel is forced to make him sound a lot less radical than he was, writing that he is “expressly rejecting democracy.” But by ‘democracy’ Kant, along with most of his contemporaries, had *direct* democracy in mind, something not even Israel’s Radical Enlightenment supported. Long discussions can be had about Kant’s commitment to popular sovereignty but he certainly did not expressly reject what today is called representative democracy. Likewise, Kant is on record defending the French revolution of 1789, whereas a Radical Enlightener like Herder, who supported a “revolution of the mind,” turned sharply away from the actual revolution.

The book’s main thesis is that the Radical Enlightenment was responsible for the French revolution. Occasionally Israel, who has bones to pick with Marxism and Post-modernism alike, formulates this in bold terms, claiming that “books cause revolution” (as indeed many thought in the 1790s). On closer look, however, he admits that “social grievances” played a part and that the role of ideas is to articulate grievances, providing “grounding” for the revolution. Whether ideas caused the French revolution is a venerable debate, and Keith Michael Baker has identified two main ways of pursuing the claim (1990. *Inventing the French Revolution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Some grandly assume a continuous history of doctrines, often based on the ideas of one particular thinker, moving society forward with inexorable logic (was, for example, Rousseau responsible for the revolution?). Others, more empirically, study the diffusion of books and ideas among revolutionaries and their followers (which books and pamphlets were on Robespierre’s bedside table?).

One might think that a careful historian like Israel, who often dwells on minor and overlooked characters, would favour the latter approach. But there is not much in this book about what books and pamphlets motivated the leaders of the revolution and their followers. Mirabeau and Condorcet are discussed, but the names Lafayette, Danton, Lally-Tollendal, Barnave and Sièyes (apart from one mention) do not appear, and there is little discussion of the great parties within the revolution. There are brief mentions of book history, but overall Israel does not dwell on how the ideas of the Radical Enlightenment achieved diffusion in the wider public.

One might think he instead supports the former approach to the problem, emphasizing a grand logic of ideas propelling history, because of his sustained emphasis on Spinoza standing behind the progress of the Western tradition. But this does not seem to match the sense of contingency conveyed by the “controversialist method”, which implies that either side could have won. Eventually, it is difficult to know exactly what Israel means by ideas causing the revolution because the crucial link between thinkers and agents, between the Radical Enlighteners and the revolutionaries is barely explored and there is no deeper discussion about how ideas move minds. This is unfortunate be-

cause it significantly lessens Israel's critique of the existing explanations. Marxists did not deny that radical literature flourished prior to the revolution; they just interpreted it as "superstructure" and held the subsequent events to be better explained by the increasing price of bread.

Israel is probably right that there is a gap in the literature on the emergence of modern democratic values, but filling it requires sensitivity to the complexity of political thinkers rather than a straitjacketing of them into a bi-party system reminiscent of an American election. It also requires a more sustained exploration of how these thinkers influenced political agents. Perhaps Israel himself will tell us more about that in the final volume of the trilogy on the Enlightenment.

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*Voorhoeve, Alex. 2009. Conversations on Ethics. New York: Oxford University Press.
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Alex Voorhoeve's book of interviews will prove an excellent document of the prevailing attitudes and standards that ruled moral philosophy at the beginning of the new Millennium. A number of eminent figures in Anglo-American philosophy, along with a few leading psychologists and economists with contributions that are particularly relevant to the field of ethics, are challenged to have "a frank discussion of some of the strengths and weaknesses of their ideas", in terms that are relatively "accessible to a non-specialist audience" (vii). Having in mind Socrates' warning from *Phaedrus* about the "orphan" nature of any written discourse, the author of these interviews is not only focusing on their main ideas and decisive arguments, but also tries to give us "a real sense of the human beings behind the writings", as Jonathan Wolff put it, addressing to the influential thinkers that are interviewed provocative questions about their intellectual development and the reasons that drove them into moral philosophy. Every discussion is preceded by a concise and accessible presentation of the central theoretical preoccupations of the approached thinker and it is followed by key bibliographical references regarding the conversation that took place. Explanatory footnotes about the more technical expressions used in the conversation, along with short explanations of some intricate thesis, are also inserted. We could say that Voorhoeve has a real gift for detecting the vulnerable parts in any thinker's argumentation and exposing them in a manner that forces the philosopher to produce a more comprehensive account of her or his views.

The conversations focus on three main puzzles that have troubled the philosophers' minds since ancient times. First, is the question regarding the reliability of "moral intuitions", our so-called "everyday moral sense" that prompts us in making moral judgments carrying strong feelings, despite the lack of sound rational justifications. Second, there is the old puzzle about the "objectivity" of our moral judgments: it appears that using the same "impersonal criteria", different rational agents seemingly well-intended may very well arrive at different ethical conclusions. In Voorhoeve's words, "we must decide how to respond to disagreements between good, though imperfect, enquirers" (4). Third, there is the difficult problem of moral motivation and the fact that moral reasons prevail in various concrete life-situations, without us being able to clearly indicate what these reasons are. The aim of this book is "to provide insight into contrasting answers