

## The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 18, No 1 (2021)

Historical Review / La Revue Historique

The *H*istorical Review  
La Revue *H*istorique



VOLUME XVIII (2021)

Section de Recherches Néohelléniques  
Institut de Recherches Historiques / FNRS

Section of Neohellenic Research  
Institute of Historical Research / NHRF

**Jonathan I. Israel, The Enlightenment that Failed:  
Ideas, Revolution and Democratic Defeat, 1748–1830**

*Alexandra Sfoini*

Copyright © 2022



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

### To cite this article:

Sfoini, A. (2022). Jonathan I. Israel, The Enlightenment that Failed: Ideas, Revolution and Democratic Defeat, 1748–1830. *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, 18(1), 263–267. Retrieved from <https://ejournals.epublishing.ekt.gr/index.php/historicalReview/article/view/31379>

Jonathan I. Israel,  
*THE ENLIGHTENMENT THAT FAILED:*  
*IDEAS, REVOLUTION AND DEMOCRATIC DEFEAT, 1748–1830,*  
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, ix + 1070 pages.

The distinguished British historian Jonathan Israel, professor emeritus at the School of Historical Studies of the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, New Jersey, has devoted many works to the study of the Enlightenment, in particular his monumental trilogy *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (2001), *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670–1752* (2006) and *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution and Human Rights, 1750–1790* (2011), which sparked much debate. As he notes, this equally imposing volume ends the series.

Israel proposes a new reading of the Enlightenment through the prism of the ideas of radicalism and their paramount importance in the establishment of modernity. The main argument, which he develops in all these works, is that Western Enlightenment was, as a whole, an explosion of new ideas in philosophy, science and education related to freedom, tolerance and secularisation; these ideas spread to broader geographical contexts and brought about practical improvements in the second half of the eighteenth century. However, the Enlightenment experienced internal divisions, resulting in essentially two currents, one for, the

other against, the established social class of the ancien régime. One current, which emerged early in the mid-seventeenth century, first in the Dutch Republic and subsequently in other European countries, to create secret networks and organisations, constitutes what is called the “Radical Enlightenment”. From 1660 to the 1830s, it maintained its oppositional character, rejecting not only theology but also social hierarchy, which differentiated it from enlightened despotism. These radicals, known as Spinozists, because of their association with the philosophy of Spinoza, supported a democratic version of the revolution, based on the “general will” – conceived in universalist, non-Rousseauist terms – and the demands for equal rights, in rejection of the hereditary principle. Very influential in Europe, Spinozism contributed to the groundwork for revolutions, but censorship caused it to remain clandestine. The other current consisted of moderate enlighteners, such as Newton, Leibniz, Wolff, Hume and Voltaire who, distancing themselves from both radicals and counterrevolutionaries, compromised with the monarchy, the aristocracy and religion, while promoting the demand for reforms. All the radicals, from Spinoza to Bayle, d’Holbach, Condorcet, Volney, Destutt

and Bentham, rejected direct democracy, because the people, being ignorant and superstitious, needed education. Instead, in contrast to Rousseau, they promoted representative democracy through the election of the appropriate representatives who would advance the "common good". Although they rejected theology and the guidance of the church, they denied the charge of atheism, professing a naturalistic antitheological notion of "God". Spinoza was the first to combine criticism of the Bible with the elimination of all kinds of *supernaturalia*, envisioning the democratic polity as the best type of state, and theorising early the Radical Enlightenment, while in the mid-eighteenth century, the new Spinozists, which included Diderot, followed his principles. Nevertheless, the social, cultural and intellectual movement of the Radical Enlightenment also included groups or individuals who were not Spinozists; rather, they rejected religious authority and were oriented towards democratic state formations. This was because the ideas of a single intellectual thinker were not the source of the Radical Enlightenment. Instead, it was the response of a group of intellectuals to the historical realities of the Netherlands, initially, and subsequently, of the whole of Europe and the Americas.

According to Israel, who defines the contents and differences of the ideological currents in his introduction,

"Radical Enlightenment," in short, is the key to a great deal in historical studies, philosophy, political thought, Latin America studies, and the social sciences, an intellectual revolution profoundly affecting religion, morality, law, institutions, politics,

healthcare, and education, as well as sexual attitudes and general culture while entailing also a sweepingly reformist and innately revolutionary new democratic approach to society and politics (27).

On the other hand:

Counter-Enlightenment, meanwhile, did not deny the scale or grandiose hopes for improvement of the radical social projects of the post-1800 era; what it denied was that such radical schemes could in practice produce anything other than disorder, confusion, and setbacks ... Counter-Enlightenment preached submission to established authority, above all monarchy and ecclesiastics ... Enlightenment moderates, like Burke, Guizot, and many others, acknowledged counter-enlighteners, also like them flatly rejected universal and equal rights, black emancipation, women's emancipation, equality for Jews, eliminating religion's sway, and democratic republicanism, nearly as fervently sometimes as they did. But moderate enlighteners embraced *Tolerantismus*, schemes for constitutional and educational improvement, limiting monarchical power, depleting aristocracy, and spreading healthcare in ways corroding true Christian submission and the authentic mystique of aristocracy and monarchy (28).

He even finds analogies between the radicals and the socialists, since both movements sought "to create a much 'happier' and more equal society", although they differed as regards the way to achieve social change, since the radicals emphasised educating the *classe*

*populaire* and ridding it of superstition, while the socialists emphasised the abolition of the economic system exploiting it (29).

Israel does not claim credit for the concept of the “Radical Enlightenment”, which Leo Strauss introduced into the scientific debate in 1920,<sup>1</sup> long before Margaret Jacob’s thesis in 1981.<sup>2</sup> Instead, he is interested in the expansion of its meaning and scope, particularly in regard to the role of the Spinozist circle in the early creation of radical ideas and their diffusion by the Huguenots and other French intellectuals, in Dutch democratic republicanism, in the transition from the experimentations of the Radical Renaissance and the Radical Reformation’s theological overlay on the scientific, democratic and truly modern system of the Radical Enlightenment, in the mediating role of the English deists and the controversies of the mid-eighteenth century enlighteners, in the relations of the great “Moderates” (especially Montesquieu) with radicalism, the position of the *Encyclopédie*, Voltaire and Rousseau, as well as in the Nordic Model of the Enlightenment in the Scandinavian countries. Further developing the main points of his deliberation in the current volume, which is divided into four parts – The Origins of Democratic Modernity; Human Rights

and Revolution (1770–1830); Revolution and Competing Revolutionary Ideologies (1789–1830); The Enlightenment that Failed – he traces the early underground movements prior to 1650 and extends the field even further to new areas, such as the emancipation of women, racial theory, the emergence of the Spanish American republics, the parallelism between the French and American revolutions, and *Robespierreism* as a populist Counter-Enlightenment, which all true radical enlighteners opposed. Always pursuing the thread of the Radical Enlightenment, he reaches the Restoration and the revival of the Counter-Enlightenment, as well as the revolutions of 1820 and 1830; from which point on socialism increasingly replaced the radical tendency. Certainly, after 1848–49, the failure of the revolutions to transform Europe politically gave rise to disillusionment and pessimism in the non-socialist intellectuals and artists, to currents of religious mysticism, to new forms of racism, to imperial authority and conservative ideologies, while, as indicated by the title of the book, the ideals of the Enlightenment waned in the mid- and late-nineteenth century. Universal equal rights and female, Black and Jewish emancipation were blocked, secularisation was suspended, while freedom of thought and speech was violated.

At the close of the current volume, Israel responds to the critical reviews addressing his positions on the Radical Enlightenment.<sup>3</sup> The author notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Winfrid Schröder, ed., *Reading between the Lines: Leo Strauss and the History of Early Modern Philosophy* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981).

---

<sup>3</sup> See, primarily, the critiques by Antony La Vopa, “A New Intellectual History? Jonathan Israel’s Enlightenment,” *Historical Journal* 52 (2009): 717–38 and Antoine Litli, “Comment écrit-on l’histoire

that the controversy regarding the Radical Enlightenment has acquired considerable scope and become fashionable, given that it is regarded as the first source of modernity, the pillar of the political and social systems based on universal and equal rights. Some of the negative critiques he has received are rooted in socialist theories, the hostile postmodernist stance towards all grand narratives and the Enlightenment grand narrative in particular, as well as in the opposition to the central role of intellectual history, the negative role of religion, and the marginalisation of Britain, which traditionally had pride of place in early Enlightenment studies, and the replacement of Locke by Spinoza as the “father of liberal democracy”. Many reviews reject Israel’s position on the Radical Enlightenment as “reductive, reified, oversimplified, teleological, based on ‘shaky evidence’ and unacceptable ‘cherry-picking’ ... based on a ‘Manichaean logic’” (931).

To the criticism that he is first and foremost concerned with ideas and not so much with the social and institutional context, Israel replies that this is not an idealistic history, since ideas are not presented as causing the events or as determinants of group behaviours, but that intellectual history is always linked to social, political, religious and economic history and keeps track of not only the basic texts but also the public sphere through the press, court decisions,

parliamentary speeches, etc. Social factors sometimes determine events and developments; therefore the analysis is based on empirical examination and not idealism. To the criticism that “all roads lead to Spinoza”, he replies that it is simplistic, since, while the Spinozist circle might have been the source of Radical Enlightenment, radical ideas did not belong to Spinoza alone, as they are also found in other writings of the period, although the Dutch philosopher was the first apologist of the “atheist” tendency that overturned the existing moral and social order, something that Leibniz, Lessing and Kant admitted. Apart from that, the term Spinozism was widely used in the eighteenth-century polemics by Montesquieu, Diderot, Voltaire, Boulainvilliers and d’Holbach, and it had a specific content despite its various uses in the texts. As for the criticism that he overlooks Rousseau’s resonance with their contemporaries, which was far greater than that of Diderot or Raynal, since it became a sort of “handbook of the citizen”, he responds that it does not take into account that many democratic leaders, such as Condorcet, Volney, Paine, Jefferson and Bolivar, did not draw their inspiration from Rousseau, while the ideals of the Radical Enlightenment were cosmopolitanism, universalism and secularisation, curing the *multitudo*, as Spinoza called it, of its ignorance, credulity and fanaticism, and not *Rousseauism*, let alone *Robespierreism*, which attacked the atheist and materialist philosophes exalting the morally pure, ordinary man, the oppressive populism and dictatorship. Israel points out that although the Radical Enlightenment favoured revolution it did not favour

---

intellectuelle des Lumières? Spinosisme, radicalisme et philosophie,” *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 64, no. 1 (2009): 171–206.

a violent one, while mild methods did not only belong to the conceptual foundation and objectives of the Moderates, who, moreover, accepted the monarchy and the guidance of the church, limited voting rights, slavery, and the subjugation of women.

The author refutes the critiques, which he considers weak, but, as he notes, the positive as well as the negative reviews contributed to the development of his position on the Radical Enlightenment, which, despite waning since 1848, is now more relevant than ever, as: "It has

fully to revive, and despite the incipient resurgence of universal and equal human rights after 1945 now once again appears to be stalling if not in full retreat" (942).

In any case, despite the disagreements it may give rise to, Jonathan Israel's rich and dense work is a monumental achievement of erudition that offers food for thought and remains a point of reference for anyone dealing with the Enlightenment.

Alexandra Sfoini

*Institute for Historical Research / NHRF*