

The Nation, Jonathan Israel and the Enlightenment

By Ann Talbot and David North
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On 12 May this year, the *Nation* magazine published an article entitled “Mind the Enlightenment.” It is an intellectually unprincipled and vindictive attack on Professor Jonathan Israel’s multi-volume history of the development of the Enlightenment and its relationship to social and political radicalism in the century leading up to the outbreak of the French Revolution.

Israel, a resident scholar at the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton, is an internationally respected expert on early modern European history. Now in his early sixties, his published work testifies to the exceptional range of his historical interests, not to mention his quite extraordinary proficiency in many languages, including Latin, German, Dutch, French, Spanish, Italian and Polish. His scholarly publications include *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism 1550-1750* (1985), *The Dutch Republic* (1998), *Radical Enlightenment* (2001), *Enlightenment Contested* (2006) and, most recently, *A Revolution of the Mind* (2010).

Professor Israel’s outstanding contribution has been his defense of the Enlightenment from its postmodern detractors, and also his emphasis on the central role of the seventeenth century materialist philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) in the development of democratic and radical thought in the eighteenth century. Israel’s books on the Enlightenment have had an impact far beyond the world of the professional historian. The scope and sweep of Israel’s scholarship is genuinely exciting. Despite the density and complexity of his demanding volumes, Israel draws his readers into an extraordinary story of a great century-long chapter in the intellectual development of humanity.

His books convey the author’s conviction that the revolution in scientific thought, which received a powerful impulse from the materialist philosophy of Spinoza, inspired a profound and deeply progressive advance in society and culture. The intellectual optimism that underlies Israel’s project, grounded in the conviction that reason, science and the pursuit of objective truth are intrinsically significant, found a response among those dissatisfied with the prevailing environment of intellectual relativism, extreme subjectivism and cynicism.

Israel has made no secret of his disdain for postmodernism, which he has identified as the progeny of reactionary Counter-Enlightenment thought that dates back to the eighteenth century. He has criticized the postmodernists’ “campaign to discredit and sap the moral foundations of what they disparage as the ‘Enlightenment project.’” (Israel 2006, 807)

In a blunt attack on postmodernist attempts to discredit the Enlightenment, Israel has written that its critique “is simply too inaccurate, and incoherent, both historically and philosophically, to be taken seriously in appraising ‘modernity’ whether defined philosophically or historically.” He sees in postmodernist relativism, which denies all claims to objective truth, “a major threat to democratic, egalitarian values and individual liberty and, as such, reveals itself to be just as devoid of moral and political as of intellectual cogency.” (869)

It was only a matter of time before the advocates of postmodernism

would strike back against Israel. Criticisms of Israel’s work have begun to appear in academic journals, where they exert considerable influence. With the publication of the essay in the *Nation*, the attack on Israel’s work has been taken into a far more public forum.

The author of the *Nation* article is Professor Samuel Moyn, who teaches modern history at Columbia. He specialises in European intellectual history and Jewish studies. His books include *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics* (2005). It discusses the work of the French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas who, influenced by Heidegger and Kierkegaard, developed his own highly mystical form of Existentialism, which in turn influenced the Deconstructionism of Jacques Derrida. Central to Levinas’s thought is the concept of the unknowable “other” which has contributed considerably to the development of postmodern thought. Samuel Moyn himself describes Levinas’s thought as “crypto-theological.”

It was perhaps inevitable that two scholars who approach modern European thought from such diametrically opposed positions would at some point clash. Academic criticism and conflict is inevitable, but Moyn’s article is of a different order because of its context and its tone. First of all, Moyn does not provide his readers with a frank acknowledgment of the antecedent intellectual conflict that has given rise to his own article. Moreover, he does not attempt to present honestly Israel’s views, let alone develop a well reasoned critique. His article attempts to give the impression that Israel’s work has been exposed and refuted. The vultures, Moyn declares, are “gnawing at the flesh of Israel’s creation.”

The vulture in chief, unfortunately, is Moyn. He creates an amalgam from explicitly postmodern accounts of the Enlightenment and from scholars who simply have a different view from that of Israel to create the impression that suddenly Israel’s work is not taken seriously in the scholarly community.

Israel’s work “has the dogmatic ring of a profession of faith,” Moyn complains, as if a historic narrative that traces the growing confidence in reason and science is not intellectually credible. The entire tone of Moyn’s article speaks of a cynical attitude towards both Israel’s scholarship and the principles that emerged from the Enlightenment. He portrays Israel’s account of Spinoza’s life, work and influence as an evangelical text, a gospel, rather than a work of serious historical inquiry and exposition. Israel “preaches the story of a renegade Jew—the philosopher Benedict Spinoza.”

Of Spinoza, Moyn remarks strangely, “Liberal secularists (notably Jews among them) have a long tradition of lionising him.” One does not know what to make of this reference to Jewish admirers of Spinoza. What point is Moyn trying to make? There are many non-Jewish admirers of Spinoza’s thought, among whom we might include Hegel.

He is no less dismissive of the Enlightenment itself. “Yes, it’s true, that several centuries on, the Enlightenment has not yet succeeded in either breaking the shackles of outworn creeds or lifting the yoke of scandalous

oppression across the globe.” Moyn writes sarcastically, “But this is no reason to surrender. More preaching of the gospel of Enlightenment is all that’s required.”

Professor Israel advances a distinctive thesis on the Enlightenment, with which one may agree or disagree. But there is no questioning the fact that Israel has underpinned it with a considerable weight of evidence. It cannot be refuted with a little literary phrase-mongering drawn from the postmodern lexicon.

The Enlightenment, Israel maintains, consisted of two rival wings. He identifies a moderate mainstream Enlightenment, which he associates with Newton and Locke, that aimed to compromise with existing social institutions and sought to preserve established religious beliefs, creating “a viable synthesis of old and new.” Its more conservative stance won the moderate Enlightenment support within both church and state.

“By contrast,” Israel writes: “the Radical Enlightenment, whether on an atheistic or deistic basis, rejected all compromise with the past and sought to sweep away existing structures entirely, rejecting the Creation as traditionally understood in Judaeo-Christian civilization, and the intervention of a providential God in human affairs, denying the possibility of miracles, and reward and punishment in an afterlife, scorning all forms of ecclesiastical authority, and refusing to accept that there is any God-ordained social hierarchy, concentration of privilege or land-ownership in noble hands, or religious sanction for monarchy. From its origins in the 1650s and 1660s the philosophical radicalism of the European Early Enlightenment characteristically combined immense reverence for science, and for mathematical logic, with some form of non-providential deism, if not outright materialism and atheism along with unmistakably republican, even democratic tendencies.” (Israel, 2001, 11-12)

It is this association between the Enlightenment and progressive political and intellectual trends with which Moyn takes issue, presenting Israel’s arguments in a form so simplified as to be a *reductio ad absurdum*.

Criticisms can be raised about Israel’s conception of the Enlightenment without either calling into question the depth and seriousness of his scholarship or the progressive character of the Enlightenment. The study and interpretation of the Enlightenment raise immensely difficult and complex questions. The historian is compelled to delve deeply into philosophy; while those who specialize in philosophy will make little headway without a firm grasp of the historical narrative. Professor Israel has attempted, through his examination of the conflict between radical and moderate Enlightenments, to provide a compelling and durable framework for an understanding of this great epoch.

There are problems in his argument. The dichotomy between a radical and moderate Enlightenment, however suggestive and stimulating, tends at times to overly simplify complex and contradictory processes in the development of philosophical thought. It is not always the case, as Professor Israel seems to suggest, that the most significant advances in philosophical thought were made by individuals who held the most politically radical views. John Locke, however conservative in his politics and religious views, played an immense role in laying down the philosophical foundations for French materialism, with all its far-reaching revolutionary implications. Neither John Locke nor, for that matter, Baruch Spinoza, necessarily foresaw all the political consequences of their own thought. This paradox is insufficiently appreciated by Israel.

The resulting adherence to an excessively rigid formula arises, in our view, from his almost complete unfamiliarity with the Marxist appraisal of materialist and Enlightenment thought. One is genuinely surprised, given the extraordinary range of his scholarship, that the bibliographies of *Radical Enlightenment* and *Enlightenment Contested* do not include a single reference to the work of any Russian-Soviet philosophers and scholars writing in the Marxist tradition.

He would have found a treasure of brilliant insights into the thought of the great French Enlightenment materialists D’Holbach and Helvetius in the writings of G. V. Plekhanov, the “father of Russian Marxism.” Professor Israel also appears to be unfamiliar with the Marxist tradition even when it concerns Spinoza. While Israel is correct that Spinoza was largely neglected (until recently) by writers on philosophy in Western Europe and the United States, this is certainly not true for those who worked in the Marxist tradition, especially in the Soviet Union. There is no indication that Professor Israel has examined the writings of Axelrod and Deborin, even though their writings were included in an important anthology on the Soviet reception of Spinoza prepared by an American scholar, George L. Kline.[1]

Israel’s lack of familiarity with the Marxist appraisal of the Enlightenment and, more generally, the dialectical relationship between socio-economic processes and their intellectual expression is a substantial weakness. His recent reference, in *A Revolution of the Mind*, to “the dogmas of Marxism, which insisted that only changes in basic social structure can produce major changes in ideas” (49) is a crude misjudgement that is unworthy of a man of Israel’s erudition. This inadequately considered dismissal of Marxism leads to errors that he might have avoided. One would hope that as Professor Israel confronts, in his projected third volume, the monumental complexities of the relationship between Enlightenment thought and the French revolution, he will delve more deeply into Marxist literature. Despite these criticisms, Israel’s study of the Enlightenment is a major contribution to an understanding of this seminal historical and intellectual process.

The real target of Moyn’s attack, at any rate, is not any actual weakness in Israel’s thesis, but his defence of the Enlightenment and its progressive implications. Moyn minimizes the association between the Enlightenment and materialist and Spinozist philosophy, since “philosophical books were only one of many kinds of texts published and read during the Enlightenment.” It is true that people read romances, fairy tales, classical literature, travel books, science books and practical manuals, banned books and legal books. Through them they absorbed the new ideas that had been taking shape for over a century. It was not necessary to read solely philosophy books to do so. Reading, and reading by masses of people, was itself part of the Enlightenment revolution of the mind. To read was, in Kant’s words, “To dare to know.”

No substantial connection can be made between the Enlightenment and the French revolution, Moyn insists. Israel’s insight that ideas can meet up with social forces to create a revolution (a conception that was developed most convincingly by Marx) is, to Moyn, a “dim notion that under the old order a populace with festering grievances was mobilized by Spinoza’s new ideas.” Moyn will have none of this: “[A]n explanation for historical events, appeals to festering grievances are not especially powerful,” he sneers, adding that “simmering discontent usually just keeps on simmering.”

Yet history shows that those grievances did not just keep on simmering during the eighteenth century. In America, France and Haiti “festering grievances” erupted into revolutions that articulated ideas formulated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment—above all the demand for social equality. Moyn denies the achievements of those revolutionary struggles.

“Secular history,” he writes with an air of world weary sophistication, “is very often a story of bad ideas winning and good ideas losing.” The American Revolution merely created “new hierarchies of race and wealth” and “who on the left could deny that the Enlightenment didn’t get very far in explaining how to create a free and equal society.” In other words, as the revolutions of the eighteenth century failed to match Moyn’s twenty-first century expectations, the Enlightenment should be viewed as a disappointing flop.

It is too much to expect intellectual consistency in Moyn’s arguments. Having claimed that there was no significant relationship between the

Enlightenment and revolution, he shifts his ground to warn that the ideas of the Enlightenment are associated with violence and repression. There is, he writes, a “profound ambiguity in radicalism.” He finds Israel’s “fervent commitment to the Enlightenment” concerning because the ideas of the Enlightenment, Moyn writes, “turned out to be a recipe for terrible wrongs.” The Jacobins “ended up orchestrating a reign of terror.”

Moyn has left out a fair amount of history. The claim that Enlightenment ideas led inexorably to the Terror and its tragic excesses is a variation of the basic postmodernist complaint (derived from Horkheimer and Adorno) that the Enlightenment, with its elevation of reason, science and technology, led to fascism and Auschwitz. Were there not other factors that contributed to the unleashing of the Terror, such as the threat of invasion by *ancien régime* powers financed by Britain; the danger of betrayal from within by leaders such as Mirabeau who took the king’s bribes; and the very real threat from a conspiracy of intransigent clerics and nobles? These political and historical problems are dismissed with a wave of the hand. It is not enough, Moyn declares, to “blame circumstances.” For Moyn, terror is the inevitable offspring of the Enlightenment.

He derives this argument from the work of Daniel Edelstein, assistant professor of French at Stanford, who maintains in *The Terror of Natural Right* (2009) that “natural right was not only a progressive, egalitarian legal discourse, but could be used to justify state violence on a vast scale.” The same conception was at work in the Soviet Union, Edelstein insists, because “history came to serve in Marxism the same authoritative function that nature had for the Jacobins.” He slides without pause from Lenin to the Stalinist purges and just as readily from the Soviet Union to Nazi Germany. In all cases he sees at work a concept of “totalitarian justice” that has found its most recent expression in the designation of Islamic terrorists as “enemies of humanity” by the Bush administration.

Moyn concurs and throws the “war on terror” into the mix. That too, we are asked to believe, is the legacy of Jacobinism. The idiotic pairing of George W. Bush and Maximilien Robespierre as brothers in arms testifies to the ahistorical and false character of the argument.

Israel’s work will withstand Moyn’s criticisms. Israel inevitably draws his readers’ attention to issues which are of vital importance for today. Social equality, philosophical materialism and determinism were at the heart of Spinoza’s thought. They were dangerous ideas to the elites of Spinoza’s day and they are no less dangerous to the financial aristocracy of the twenty-first century. Israel deserves credit for bringing them into public debate.

[1] The article by L.I. Axelrod is especially important, as she examines—on the basis of the work of Feuerbach and Plekhanov—the nature of Spinoza’s materialism. She stresses that Plekhanov, while recognizing materialism, from the standpoint of its historical development, as “a variety of Spinozism,” also maintained that Spinoza’s philosophy should not be regarded as “a consistent and sustained materialism, that is, a materialism free from all contradictions.” [“Spinoza and Materialism,” in *Spinoza in Soviet Philosophy*, edited and with an introduction by George L. Kline (London, 1952), p. 61] In another important essay by the Soviet philosopher D. Rakhman, dating from 1923, the influence on Spinoza of Jewish and Arab philosophers from between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries is examined. This influence is not adequately addressed by Israel. A more systematic contemporary examination of this issue is to be found in the recent works of Professor Steven Nadler. [back]

Also recommended:

Spinoza revisited: a review of *Radical Enlightenment*

[7 August 2001]

Spinoza Reconsidered

[26 August 2003]

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