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Rousseau, the “Traditionalist”

Helena Rosenblatt

Professor Israel is without a doubt one of the world’s foremost authorities on the Enlightenment, admired even by his critics for the extraordinary range, depth, and sheer quantity of his scholarship. Carolina Armenteros calls his 2011 *Democratic Enlightenment* “a truly monumental work”; Harvey Chisick describes it as “immensely erudite”; Johnson Kent Wright refers to “the breadth of Israel’s reading and display of sheer scholarly stamina”; while Keith Baker recognizes the extent to which Israel’s work has “energized the field and prompted vigorous debate.”¹ In a review for the *New Republic*, David Bell calls it “the most monumentally comprehensive history of the Enlightenment ever written.”²

Democratic Enlightenment is an important and exciting book for several reasons. First of all, it restores intellectual history to the center of the Enlightenment and puts radical ideas on center stage again. Since Peter Gay, historians of the Enlightenment have tended to turn away from the history of ideas, embracing instead various forms of social or cultural analysis. There has also been a trend to “pluralize” the Enlightenment; that is, to locate different varieties of it, and this variety has arguably served to diminish the Enlightenment’s stature by rendering its very meaning vague and amorphous. We have lost a sense of what the Enlightenment *was*, just as

¹ Review essays by Armenteros, Chisick, Wright, and Baker, as well as a response by Israel, appear in the *H-France Forum* 9, no. 1 (2014), <http://www.h-france.net/forum/h-franceforumvol9.html>.

² David A. Bell, “Where Do We Come From?,” *New Republic*, March 1, 2012, <https://newrepublic.com/article/100556/spinoza-kant-enlightenment-ideas>.

we have lost a sense of what the French Revolution *was*. What were they and why does it matter?

But Jonathan Israel knows what the Enlightenment was. The Enlightenment, he declares, was a “revolution of the mind,” “unquestionably among the greatest, most decisive shifts in humanity’s history.”³ It was “a giant leap forward,” “the most important and profound intellectual, social and cultural transformation of the Western world since the Middle Ages, and the most formative in shaping modernity.”⁴ It was a vastly ambitious program that, in its radical vein, promoted toleration, personal freedom, democracy, racial and sexual equality, emancipation, and freedom of expression and of the press. It is easy to sympathize with the Enlightenment project—and with “modernity”—when they are described this way.

Intellectual historians will be gladdened by the fact that Jonathan Israel takes ideas seriously both as subjects of study in their own right and as motive forces in history. To Israel, ideas matter and good ideas are heroic and powerful things. They are clear and they are right and they are what modernity is all about. Ideas transform the world. In today’s academic climate, when we seem not to know what we are talking about anymore and the people we study seem not to know what they are talking about either, the intellectual optimism that permeates Israel’s book is refreshing and even attractive. Today everyone wants to discover and discuss complexity, ambivalence, ambiguity, tension—and Israel’s book is a welcome antidote to all that. He is not shy about his disdain for postmodernism. He does not even apologize for focusing on a small and unrepresentative group of dead white men who dreamed big and radical ideas. He tells an exciting story of the intellectual battles these men fought, these “deliberate, conscious revolutionaries.”⁵ The story Israel tells is thrilling and uplifting.

Jonathan Israel also knows what the French Revolution was—and that it was caused by the radical ideas of this handful of brave men. Without a hint of embarrassment, he writes that “the agenda of 1788–9 obviously had nothing to do with the habits and experiences of the people except insofar as they responded to the summons to rise and establish a new order. Where the agenda sprang from was the thinking of the twenty or thirty *philosophes-révolutionnaires* leading the Revolution in Paris.”⁶ Israel believes that there is only one major formative factor and only one cogent

³ Jonathan Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750–1790* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 940.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5, 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 809.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 645.

answer to the question “what caused the Revolution?”: the radical Enlightenment. “Everything else,” he says “is entirely secondary.”⁷

This bold revisionism and intellectual self-confidence make for excellent—even entertaining—reading. Israel knows that in speaking this way, he is challenging nearly everything written on the subject in many years. “A correct understanding of the Radical Enlightenment is impossible,” he declares, “without overturning almost the whole current historiography of the French Revolution.”⁸ Historians, he insists, have been laboring under “a gigantic historical delusion, an unshakeable assumption that unspecified social changes caused the Revolution when patently social, cultural, economic and political changes did nothing of the sort.”⁹ Elsewhere, he contends that “no adequate framework for interpreting the French Revolution is possible without going diametrically against the main trends in the recent historiography.”¹⁰ About the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d’Alembert, he writes that other historians’ interpretations are “obviously untrue,” “could scarcely be more mistaken,” are “fundamentally incorrect,” “seriously misleading,” and “completely untenable.”¹¹ He contends that salons contributed “practically zero” to the Enlightenment except as “passive amplifiers.”¹² He dismisses the philosophy of Michel Foucault as “false” and calls François Furet “doubly confused.”¹³ This takeschutzpah.

But is Jonathan Israel right? Most, if not all, of his critics find his book deeply flawed and problematic. Israel himself, in a response essay in the 2014 issue of *H-France Forum* dedicated to his *Democratic Enlightenment*, refers to the “juggernaut” of criticism his view of the Enlightenment has generated.

Israel maintains—and this is a unifying theme of all three of his volumes, *Radical Enlightenment* (2001), *Enlightenment Contested* (2006), and *Democratic Enlightenment*—that there were in fact two Enlightenments, or two rival wings: a moderate, mainstream Enlightenment and a radical Enlightenment. Good things, in Israel’s view, stem from the radical Enlightenment—propagated by the likes of Spinoza, Bayle, and Diderot. The radical Enlightenment, writes Israel, “rejected all compromise with the past and sought to sweep away existing structures entirely.”¹⁴ It was this

⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 926.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 924.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7, 780.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 913.

¹⁴ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), xxxi.

Enlightenment that caused the Revolution. It was also this Enlightenment that generated the ideas of freedom we cherish today. The moderate Enlightenment, on the other hand, propagated by people such as Locke, Newton, and Montesquieu, aimed to compromise with existing institutions and beliefs, creating a kind of “synthesis of old and new.”¹⁵ This was, according to Israel, an essentially incoherent attempt to reconcile reason with faith, science with theology, and emancipatory ideals with traditional forms of authority. In effect, however, this effort tended to uphold the principles of monarchy, aristocracy, and empire, as well as sexual and racial hierarchy and oppression. Its conservatism won it support from church and state, which made it a powerful and often obstructionist force.

At the risk of oversimplification, the criticism Israel has received might be summarized as follows. Many have disagreed with the dichotomy he posits between the “radical” and the “moderate” Enlightenments and his suggestion that all good things stem from the former. They have questioned Israel’s portrayal of how ideas function in history, and in particular his suggestion that good philosophical ideas (“philosophical monism”) lead to good political ideas, which then lead to good democratic results. History, his critics say, is messier than that, more unpredictable, contradictory, and complicated. One has to agree with Harvey Chisick when he writes that ideas do not move through society in a direct or unobstructed manner: “Ideas are refracted, modified, bent (or twisted), ignored, amplified, moderated, appropriated or adapted depending on the cultural, institutional and social milieux in which they are articulated and depending upon the functions they serve.”¹⁶

Critics also have problems with Israel’s interpretation of some of the key thinkers he discusses—and why some thinkers are regarded as “radical” and others not. Carolina Armenteros argues that Israel is wrong about William Jones and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, neither of whom fit into Israel’s categories of radical versus moderate Enlightenments. Harvey Chisick agrees with Armenteros that Rousseau was in fact “radical” and notes that many *philosophes* regarded as “radical” by Israel might very well have advocated sweeping change, but would nevertheless have been quite worried about causing a revolution. Keith Baker takes Israel to task for his portrayals of both Turgot and Condorcet, as well as his unhistorical use of

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Chisick, “Review Essay,” *H-France Forum* 9, no. 1 (2014): 57–76, at 67, <http://www.h-france.net/forum/forumvol9/Israel4.pdf>.

the word “revolution.”¹⁷ “All Enlightenment by definition is closely linked to revolution,” writes Israel.¹⁸

This essay will focus on Israel’s treatment of Rousseau. One of Professor Israel’s more surprising assertions is that Rousseau was a “traditionalist” thinker. “Rousseau’s moral philosophy,” he writes, “relying on the ordinary person’s feelings, remained broadly traditional.”¹⁹ In other words, Rousseau’s supposed denigration of reason and valorization of feeling made him an adversary and not a friend of the radical Enlightenment. Thus—and this is another surprising twist in Israel’s story—Rousseau ended up inspiring not the “good guys” of the French Revolution—in other words, the radical democrats who led the Revolution in its early stages—but rather the “bad guys,” the authoritarian Robespierre and Saint-Just at the height of the Terror. Another reason Israel regards Rousseau as a traditionalist and not a radical is that Rousseau believed in God and divine providence. He is not a “monist.”

There are several problems with this argument. One is the assertion that in the eighteenth century it was a traditionalist stance to subscribe to a moral philosophy that “relies on the ordinary person’s feelings.” Many scholars of the Enlightenment have rightly argued that sentimentalism could be a powerful vehicle for new egalitarian and humanitarian notions. Much of this literature, although certainly not all of it, is about novels and concerns women as both authors and readers. One might also recall that when Condorcet, a radical democrat according to Israel himself, argued for political rights for women, he did so on the grounds that they were “sentient” beings. But Jonathan Israel does not seem to like feelings—and appears to be saying that if you give weight to sentiments, you cannot be part of his radical Enlightenment. You become a “traditionalist.”

Where Rousseau’s traditionalism is most “obvious,” according to Israel, is “on questions of gender and sexuality.”²⁰ Rousseau, according to Israel, declared himself the “standard-bearer of a wholly traditional view of woman’s place, urging women’s exclusion from all debate and public life.”²¹ Rousseau “roundly rejected” the bold revolution in gender relations that radical thinkers such as Diderot proposed. And Diderot and his circle

¹⁷ Baker, “Review Essay,” *H-France Forum* 9, no. 1 (2014): 41–56, <http://www.h-france.net/forum/forumvol9/Israel3.pdf>.

¹⁸ Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, 742.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

apparently “dismissed as incoherent nonsense” Rousseau’s views.²² Here Professor Israel is surely wrong again.

While Rousseau’s views on gender were far from traditional—and could even be called, in at least one sense, radical—Diderot’s are hard to call egalitarian. Consider the articles on women and marriage in Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*. They propagated a sexualized view of female existence, one that was in complete agreement with the latest “science,” and according to which women’s organs made them less rational, less capable of attention, and thus in need of male governance. In contrast to men, women were consistently regarded and described not from the standpoint of their reason or intellect, but chiefly from the standpoint of their weaker and sexual natures. Diderot’s essay “On Women,” which also disseminated the most advanced “scientific” ideas of the times, perpetuated the myth that there are hidden powers at work in the female body, powers that restrict a woman’s capacity for rational thought and make her prone to a number of illnesses. He described the delirium and “extraordinary ideas” produced in women by the uterus, an organ susceptible to “terrible spasms.”²³ He also recounted a number of cases of hysteria that had to be cured by the expert intervention of male doctors or magistrates. Is this radical or conservative? The categories simply do not fit. One must be careful not to assume that support for a variety of sexual emancipation, such as one seems to find in Diderot, translates into advocacy of social or political emancipation. At the time, and throughout the Revolution and thereafter, it was precisely the distinct sexuality of women’s natures that was used to deny them educational and political opportunities. A myriad of examples of texts could be cited that endlessly repeat that women are incapable of self-government because of the power of their uteruses. What Professor Israel speaks of admiringly as the emancipation of the libido does not translate into political emancipation or equality for women. Like most doctors and scientists at the time, Diderot subscribed to the notion that women were biologically determined by their uterus, an organ that produced a variety of disorders and made their intellectual development deeply problematical. Women remained for Diderot “very extraordinary children.”²⁴ One would have to agree with Mary Trouille, who finds in Diderot’s essay “On Women” a striking example of a “pseudo-feminist rhetoric,” that is, “a subtle paternalism and a tacit complicity with the

²² *Ibid.*, 97.

²³ Denis Diderot, “Sur les femmes,” in *Oeuvres complètes de Diderot*, ed. J. Assézat and M. Tourneaux (Paris: Garnier, 1875), 2:251–62, at 255.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

status quo.”²⁵ Despite his seemingly feminist rhetoric, she explains, Diderot offered no concrete proposals nor did he evidence a genuine desire for change.

And that is precisely why what Rousseau does is so bold and radical. Rousseau is no longer seen as the simple-minded and unrepentant misogynist portrayed in early feminist scholarship. Recent scholarship is bringing to light the extent to which he challenged normative gender identities by repeatedly suggesting that they were culturally constructed. Rosanne Kennedy’s recent book *Rousseau in Drag* shows how Rousseau used a number of devices, for example, *ménages à trois* and references to cross-dressing and the ingesting of milk products, in order to question both male authority in society and within the family—and even the very notion of sexually determined gender. Men in Rousseau’s writings, Kennedy shows, are not necessarily masculine nor are women necessarily feminine. The categories are fluid and contradictory, the message radically egalitarian.²⁶ Kennedy’s work reminds us also that to read the famous section on Sophie in the *Émile* unironically—as if it represents Rousseau’s own views and his last word on gender relations—is a serious error. Rousseau is not a traditionalist thinker—certainly not when it comes to politics, as Carolina Armenteros points out, and certainly not when it comes to gender.²⁷

It would be interesting to consider what women at the time preferred. Objecting to the notion that woman’s intellectual capacities were biologically determined, Fortunée Briquet included on the title page of her *Dictionnaire historique, littéraire et bibliographique des françaises* (1804) an epigram that she, not insignificantly, attributed to Jean-Jacques Rousseau: “The soul has no sex”—an idea that has inspired feminists over the course of centuries.²⁸

One more thing might be added. Rousseau’s Julie is a far more interesting and complex character than any of Diderot’s women, whether we are speaking of his Tahitians or his nuns. While Diderot sexualized his women, Rousseau sentimentalized and spiritualized them. How this relates to social and political equality for women remains to be discussed—and cannot be assumed. But certainly one must question Israel’s assertion that “only

²⁵ Mary Trouille, *Sexual Politics in the Enlightenment: Women Writers Read Rousseau* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 192–93.

²⁶ Rosanne Kennedy, *Rousseau in Drag: Deconstructing Gender* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

²⁷ Armenteros, “Review Essay,” *H-France Forum* 9, no. 1 (2014): 26–40, <http://www.h-france.net/forum/forumvol9/Israel2.pdf>.

²⁸ Briquet, *Dictionnaire historique, littéraire et bibliographique des françaises, et des étrangères naturalisées en France* (Paris: L’Imprimerie de Gillé, 1804), iii.

monist systems [can] supply criteria capable of consistently underpinning a comprehensive doctrine of female equality.”

Indeed, it is hard to understand why monism—that is, the belief in one-substance philosophy, materialism, or atheism—should necessarily be more democratic or feminist than deism. Throughout history, many believers in God and divine providence have had radical political ideas. And to be a deist in the manner of Rousseau was certainly not to be a traditionalist. When Rousseau declares, as he does over and over again, that God does not sanction the existing sociopolitical order, he is saying something very powerful and radical. When Rousseau’s Savoyard vicar exclaims “so many men between God and me,” he is saying something very subversive—in some ways more threatening in the eighteenth century than the outrageous suggestion that God does not exist. As Israel himself says, in volume one of his trilogy, the profession of faith of the Savoyard vicar offered “a sweeping rejection of tradition, Revelation and all institutionalized authority.”²⁹

Disagreement and debate is invigorating and good for scholarship. What is most disappointing about all of this is not that we disagree with Professor Israel. He is to be commended for participating enthusiastically in symposia on his work and for listening to criticism. What is more disconcerting is his apparent unwillingness to take his critics seriously enough to engage with their reservations and concerns and then to adjust his thinking accordingly or explain why he is not doing so with *proofs*. As Keith Baker writes in his essay for *H-France*, Professor Israel asserts more than he proves. There is now an overwhelming consensus among his colleagues that he has gotten a few fairly fundamental things wrong. His tone, when writing about scholars with whom he disagrees, is often condescending and dismissive, as several of his reviewers have pointed out. His response to his critics in *H-France* is really a non-response. Israel seems to dismiss the “*misleadingly* critical literature . . . [which] frequently repeats fundamentally *misconstrued* objections” (emphasis added). He calls his own “the only viable and convincing argument available.” At the 2013 Graduate Center symposium on his *Democratic Enlightenment*, he very politely thanked us for our criticism and then “responded” by giving us a summary of his next volume, *Revolutionary Ideas*. According to recent reviews by Lynn Hunt and David Bell, it suffers from many of the usual problems.³⁰ We were grateful for the collegial manner in which Jonathan Israel listened

²⁹ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 1.

³⁰ Lynn Hunt, “Revolutionary Causes,” *New Republic*, June 30, 2014; and Bell, “A Very Different French Revolution,” *New York Review of Books*, July 10, 2014, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2014/07/10/very-different-french-revolution/>.

to our presentations, but we were also surprised and disappointed when he did not actually answer our questions or respond to our critique. Restating one's position is not a response. We can only hope that Professor Israel takes this opportunity to respond to our criticism and that of our colleagues. What he writes is always thought-provoking.

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