

likely the burden for a creative solution will soon fall on Muehlenberg and his supporters.

Rather than being an insightful assessment of the arguments for and against 'gay marriage,' the *Why vs Why* essays demonstrate how little is being fought over in the debate to extend marriage to same-sex couples. But it is often the smallest and most irrelevant prizes that attract the fiercest fights and the most absurd hyperbole.

### Reviewed by Tim Wilson

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

by Jonathan Israel

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It is too early, of course, for a thoroughgoing history of the modern era. Even a decade into the new century, things are still too unsettled. Plus, we are all compromised. Even when we try for a measure of objectivity, we are still hopelessly modern. Modernity is the frame, the ethos, through which and in which we operate. Even when we attempt to be anti-modern, or post-modern—we look to modernity for our cues. We have not yet found the solvent that will free us from its influence, and modernity has proven sticky indeed.

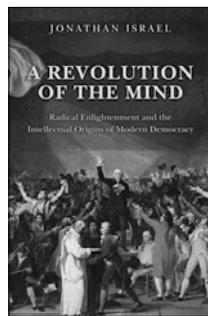
In the meantime, two thinkers are laying the groundwork for

emancipation, writing at least towards an *intellectual* history of the modern age. The first and most eminent is Charles Taylor. His *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1992) and *A Secular Age* (2007) are magisterial treatments, uncanny in the way new things are, and likely flawed in the same manner. They are breathtaking but unavoidably provisional first steps. The second thinker, whose leap forward is no less impressive for being more emphatic, is Jonathan Israel. His genius is not yet as widely understood, but his virtuosity is on display in this relatively short book.

Israel's bread and butter work is 'concerned with European and European colonial history from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century, with particular emphasis on the history of ideas.' He is an authority on 'the Dutch Golden Age (1590–1713), including the Dutch global trade system, seventeenth-century Dutch Jewry and Spinoza' and his writing has taken in 'the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688–91 in Britain, and Spanish imperial strategy especially in Mexico, the Caribbean and the Low Countries.'

It is, however, his most recent writing—a three-volume monograph on radical Enlightenment thought—that will determine his legacy. *A*

*Revolution of the Mind* presents only a limited set of conclusions from that wider project; it is an accessible (but not entirely general) primer published between volumes two and three of the intellectual history.



Israel's contention is simple. Most historians of the post-Enlightenment West have it wrong. Swayed by Marxism and a 'modish multiculturalism infused with postmodernism,' they overstate the importance of economic conditions when accounting for social and political upheaval. They also miss (or too hastily reject) what Israel offers as the key fact about the 'General Revolution' that swept Europe and the American colonies in the mid- to late eighteenth century: it was a 'revolution of the mind,' instigated and fed by Radical Enlightenment thinkers who 'aspired one day to carry through a successful revolution of fact, leading to an entirely new kind of society.'

To prove his thesis, Israel needs to show that:

- a) certain ideas were in play—religious toleration if not outright atheism, a robust democratic framework, and a revolutionary notion of equality,
- b) there was indeed a revolution of the mind (i.e. the minds swayed were influential), and
- c) radical thought came to the fore during moments of consequence in France, in the American colonies, and elsewhere.

This he does with ease. He shows, indeed, how American independence and the French Revolution sprang from radical thinking, filling in the details with detours into Dutch, English, and

seventeenth and eighteenth century European history. He goes further, drawing a bold if crooked line from those early upheavals to the social, political, and secular principles of the modern age. Israel contends that:

Radical Enlightenment is the system of ideas that, historically, has principally shaped the Western World's most basic social and cultural values ... democracy; racial and sexual equality; individual liberty of lifestyle; full freedom of thought, expression, and the press; eradication of religious authority from the legislative process and education; and full separation of church and state.

He paints the Enlightenment and the subsequent history of the modern world as a grand, intellectual struggle with practical consequences, setting out his insights in chapters dealing with contested notions of progress (Chapter 1), egalitarianism (Chapter 2), economics and material inequality (Chapter 3), war and peace (Chapter 4), moral philosophy (Chapter 5), and the more basic issue of body/soul dualism versus philosophical materialism/monism (Chapter 6). While previously, historians dismissed the idea that 'books cause revolutions,' Israel shows how radical philosophers' views on the nature of the universe and the place of man in the world (*vis-à-vis* God and humanity) prejudiced, to a startling extent, subsequent upheavals in national and international politics, transforming

prevailing attitudes on social issues, religion, and economics.

In the vigorous, if clandestine, *salons* of the Radical Enlightenment, and via censored pamphlets, proscribed books, and scandalous *Encyclopédie* entries, Israel shows secular modernity *in utero*—a most compelling and remarkable achievement. It is also fruitful and intellectually satisfying to use Israel's framework to parse contemporary politics—a critical test for any scholarly endeavour hoping to garner a wider audience.

The treatment is even-handed, remarkably so given the contemporary resonances. While it is obvious, for instance, that Israel's sympathies are American 'bi-coastal'—the main problem is that, unlike Taylor, he never really questions secular modernity, so he cannot reach forward in the same breathtaking way. He also seems to have little time for the Catholic priesthood, in particular, repeating unchallenged the radicals' worst calumnies about 'priestcraft' and 'superstition.' His treatment of Spinoza's materialism (which led to Spinoza being sanctioned with a rare, rabbinical form of ex-communication) betrays a lazily secular, modern, metaphysics — at odds with the residual Deism of most Western cultures, and strikingly at odds with the refulgent Christianity and political Islam roiling parts of Europe, Asia, Africa and the American heartland.

Something is certainly lost in Israel's treatment of all thinkers to the right of Diderot as 'moderates' in the Enlightenment 'mainstream.' The distinction between classical liberals, free-marketeers, and conservatives, for instance, is not clear—and he does not extend his

usual grace to the shopping list of non-radical thinkers 'Hume, Ferguson, Adam Smith, Frederick the Great, Benjamin Franklin, Montesquieu, Turgot, [and] ... Voltaire,' described as exponents of a 'Moderate Enlightenment, culminating in the ideas of Edmund Burke.' Conservatism here, as in so much American liberal scholarship, is what people do when they 'react' against the progressive arc of history. 'Ancient Stoicism,' which has so much to offer moderns seeking an escape from barbarism and self-regard, is despatched in a sentence. Of course, Israel must focus on his central interest, but it is challenging to encounter the history of the post-Enlightenment West as a Whiggish story of inexorable progress, broken up by temporary reactionary movements—some purely economic—rather than as a story of stability and prosperity occasionally threatened by revolutionary upheaval.

Still, Israel's book is as balanced and objective as a discerning reader needs. He does not push a point of view, and it is not a criticism to simply identify the standpoint that any writer occupies. His deft and generous treatment of relatively obscure thinkers—Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment tradition, in particular, not to mention his focus on the otherwise overlooked d'Holbach—more than makes up for any tics.

A rich text, with the potential to become a classic, Israel's primer on the Radical Enlightenment is worthwhile reading on its own, and a fine introduction to his wider project.

**Reviewed by John Heard**