

RUSS LEO  
Duke University

## CAUTE: JONATHAN ISRAEL'S SECULAR MODERNITY

Review of Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750*. Oxford University Press, 2002. 832 pp. ISBN 978-0199254569. Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752*. Oxford University Press, 2006. 983 pp. ISBN 978-0199279227.

In her recent study *\$urplus: Spinoza, Lacan* (2007), A. Kiarina Kordela reads Jonathan Israel alongside Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Antonio Negri, and Michael Hardt as proponents of "Neo-Spinozism" in contemporary philosophy and political theory. While offering scant praise for this "Neo-Spinozist" camp Kordela recognizes Israel's intervention *beyond* the field of intellectual history. Of Israel in particular she writes, "To praise Spinoza as the most philosophical force of secular modernity on the ground of arguments such as [in *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (2001)] only makes one wonder whether it would have been better to have left him in quasi-anonymity."<sup>1</sup> In other words, she recognizes the importance of *Radical Enlightenment* (and subsequently *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (2006)), the extent to which both works argue for a certain modernity as well as a revised history of modernity. Kordela's treatment of Israel exemplifies the degree to which the concept "Radical Enlightenment" currently enjoys cross-disciplinary vogue. It provides a useful point of entry into Israel's attempt to retrace the Enlightenment, an attempt that is as much a critique of reigning forms and fantasies of modernity as it is an historical corrective. For Israel, Benedictus de Spinoza is the intellectual progenitor of "the only kind of philosophy which could (and can) coherently integrate and hold together such a far-reaching value condominium in the social, moral, and political spheres, as well as in 'philosophy'" (EC 867). It is Spinoza and Spinozism which promotes the adoption of secular reason and government, universal toleration and shared equity among all men, personal liberty, freedom of expression, and democratic republicanism. Israel's vision of modernity, grounded in his reconfigured Enlightenment history, is a polemical statement buttressed by an historical archive – one which critics and philosophers across disciplines, including Kordela, seem interested in recruiting or dispelling.

Given the scope of his archive as well as his argument, the appeal of Radical Enlightenment is perhaps unsurprising. In both *Radical Enlightenment* and its companion text *Enlightenment Contested* Israel challenges existing approaches to

---

<sup>1</sup> A. Kiarina Kordela. *\$urplus: Spinoza, Lacan*. Albany, NY: SUNY P, 2007. 25.

and histories of the Enlightenment based on his identification of a single, coherent and continuous “radical” stream of thought. This radicalism emanates from Spinoza and his Dutch circle during the mid-seventeenth century. Israel takes issue with national histories of the Enlightenment and claims to multiple Enlightenments as well as with unsophisticated and insular histories glorifying later eighteenth-century French and/or English innovations. In their stead he introduces a single history of Enlightenment marked by three competing trends or forces – those of Radical Enlightenment, Moderate Enlightenment, and Anti-Enlightenment, all of which are set to work as early as 1650. Radical Enlightenment ideas cut across national, regional and confessional lines as their Spinozism takes shape (much earlier than has been accorded by historians of the Enlightenment) throughout Europe as the most thorough, systematic, and rigorous critique of the “shared core of faith, tradition, and authority” of the Middle Ages and Early Modernity (until around 1650) (RE 3). Illustrating Moderate and Anti-Enlightenment trends, Israel identifies numerous reactionary movements working to stop the torrent of Spinozistic claims and illegal texts. These reactionary movements understand Spinozist claims as anarchic and atheistic innovations that quickly breach the limit of what is necessary to maintain order and morality in a civil (and religious) society. Israel’s is a history where radical philosophers stand at odds not only with absolutism, tyranny, superstition, and intolerance but with an emergent Moderate Enlightenment as well. Here we encounter an apologetic and ultimately conservative philosophical cohort working to reconcile philosophy and reason with faith, including such hallowed figures as Rene Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, Isaac Newton, John Locke, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Christian Wolff, and Francois-Marie Arouet Voltaire. For Catholics, Protestants, monarchs, limited-republicans, humanists, scholastic philosophers, and philosophers of the Moderate Enlightenment alike it is the spread of Spinozism that marks the greatest threat to a well-ordered, pious, and increasingly-rational European world.

Israel’s determination of Spinoza and Spinozism first takes shape in *Radical Enlightenment*. Indeed, detailed investigations of related figures and controversies surround the exegesis of Spinoza’s *oeuvre*, particularly the 1670 *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, the posthumously-published 1677 *Ethics*, and the 1660-1 *Korte Verhandeling*. Israel’s reading of the *Korte Verhandeling* in particular supports his crucial claim that Spinoza’s system was essentially determined by 1660 which, in turn, buttresses the underlying claim for Spinoza’s primacy. He introduces such key philosophers as Franciscus Van den Enden, Johan de la Court, Peter Cornelius Plockhoy, Johannes and Adriaen Koerbagh, and Lodewijk Meyer, as well as debates and events concerning early modern science, political theory, and the (unsuccessful) efforts on behalf of Anti- and Moderate Enlightenment forces alike to curb the publication and distribution of radical texts and ideas. Israel’s treatment of Johannes Bredenburg and the so-called “Bredenburg Debates,” of Balthasar Bekker, Bernard Le Bovier de Fontanelle, and the heated disputations over superstition, oracles, and the existence of the devil reveal the degree to which Spinozism and the very name “Spinoza” became watchwords for disruptive or impious challenges to existing beliefs and institutions. This is even the case in controversies where the so-called

"Spinozists" act in the name of religion and deny the influence of such a notorious atheist and innovator. This is perhaps nowhere as evident as in the case of Pierre Bayle, a figure who in his conflicting allegiances to the Reformed Church, to Catholicism, and to Spinozism throughout his life comes to exemplify the complex protean tenor of Radical Enlightenment debate and exegesis. Despite his avowed hatred for Spinoza and his declared piety, Bayle's careful (and lengthy) treatment of Spinozism across his works led contemporary and future readers to suspect the motivation of his philosophical and theological projects. Controversial issues such as tolerance and the stated virtue of atheists led Bayle's readers to Spinoza in spite of (or, as Israel suggests, in accord with) his declared intentions.

Much of the work of *Radical Enlightenment* – indeed, what makes it an invaluable intervention in the history of Enlightenment thought as well as in the history of religion – lies in Israel's attention to lesser-known figures and, ultimately, to the lesser-known Dutch context of early modernity. This is not to accuse Israel of merely producing a rival national history to counter existing English or French varieties; on the contrary, the Netherlands of *Radical Enlightenment* takes shape as a porous polity populated by a number of political and religious refugees and communities in exile. Publishing in the Netherlands retains an international character and the range of figures that spent significant time in the region, including Locke and John Toland, is striking. Nevertheless, it is attention to the Dutch context that enables Israel's most scouring critique of existing histories of Enlightenment (namely those of Peter Gay and Margaret C. Jacob), where the celebrated innovations of Locke, Newton, and Voltaire are rendered conservative in comparison to their lesser-known contemporaries, the victims of national histories.

*Enlightenment Contested* extends the earlier argument to account for the emergence of France as a crucial theater in the contest between rival versions of Enlightenment. Here he locates the work of such figures as Bayle, Voltaire, Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, and Denis Diderot in relation to Spinoza and Spinozism and in opposition to trans-national Jesuitical, Jansenist, and Reformed movements working to limit (albeit in opposition to one another as well) Radical Enlightenment. The narrative is not one of philosophy versus religion, however; neither is it an easy contest between political forms, between oppressive despotic regimes and their republican discontents. *Enlightenment Contested* advances a more intricate competition over ideas (as in the preceding volume), identifying divergent philosophies and theologies according to the tripartite scheme: Radical, Moderate, or Anti-Enlightenment. While much of the work retraces the spread of Spinozism beginning with Bayle, Israel eschews another investigation of Spinoza's Spinozism and that of his immediate circle. He proceeds, rather, through a series of controversies and topics; Israel's treatments of Socinianism (a key theological movement which *Radical Enlightenment* referenced without explanation), tolerance, deism and physico-theology, Hobbesian thought and forms of republicanism, monarchy and representation, humanism, and the new discipline of the History of Philosophy all foreground rival versions of Enlightenment. Particularly salient is his

exploration of various approaches to Islam, Confucianism and Chinese political formations, race, gender, sexuality, and debate over what is now known as evolution.

Here Israel continues to extend his thesis beyond Europe, offering key, albeit brief, Enlightenment scenes from Russia and China as well as the New World, where Jonathan Edwards comes to stand in as a sort of representative Moderate or Anti-Enlightenment colonial informant. His exemplary attention to Germany and the Baltic region works to expose additional contexts for the transmission of radical ideas and their subsequent effects in various political and religious landscapes, giving the reader a more capacious understanding of the scope of Enlightenment. In order to make a case for the spread of radical ideas, particularly Spinozism, Israel attends not only to philosophical ideas but explicitly to the materials and emergent institutions of Radical Enlightenment across both volumes, investigating censorship laws and the contents of "universal" libraries as well as the strategic publication of illegal books and the circulation of clandestine philosophical manuscripts. This is one of the stronger points in Israel's narrative, lending credence to an otherwise unfamiliar and estranging notion of Enlightenment and historical philosophy as well as to many heretofore-unknown clandestine documents.

But while Israel is clearly capable of tracing the spread of ideas among philosophical circles and within certain religious institutions and organs of state, neither *Radical Enlightenment* nor *Enlightenment Contested* seem able to make a case for the dissemination of Spinozistic ideas among the general European population. His thesis is particularly difficult to accept outside of literate aristocratic circles and specialized reading groups. Israel traces the ubiquity of the name "Spinoza" as well as the often-derogatory use of the term "Spinozism" (or some variation) to refer to any number of radical philosophical claims yet this does little more than establish familiarity with the name alone. The thesis wants evidence of the supposedly wide spread of Spinozistic ideas themselves. A brief tour through mid-seventeenth-century heresiographies (particularly in English, during the turbulent 1640s and 1650s) might have shed new light on the circulation of Spinozism as a term without content, or at least without the radical content Israel is looking for. Heresiographies are notorious for misrepresenting ideas for popular audiences and comparative work might distinguish Israel's claims for a more substantial dissemination based on the recognition of "Spinozism" from more dubious terms. While the histories of radical materials are often compelling one is nevertheless left with the feeling that some aspect of this very material history has been omitted, that the print histories Israel offers are somewhat incomplete: what audiences did such texts expect? How were the texts read? Who was able to obtain radical texts, besides *philosophes*? Did they circulate with similar philosophical materials or with clandestine or illicit books of a more general sort? My reservation is that when "Spinozism" is understood as a general period term for atheism, for secularism, for reason and Enlightenment, it might also come to stand for a type of literature common to a more general trade in pornography and satire, recalling a more familiar

terminology proper to libertinism. Whether or not this is the case is unclear in Israel's work.

In support of his basic argument – that Enlightenment is transnational and continuous, marked by varying degrees of acceptance but ultimately stemming from an initial systematic critique in Spinozism – Israel often writes defensively. In some of the most unfortunate moments across the two books we encounter Israel championing his own methods and determinations of liberation against parodic summations of his intellectual opponents' arguments – those of social historians, "postmodernist and postcolonialist philosophers," and critics of Enlightenment projects (notably, Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre). Despite the reaction to his work across disciplines, such moments lead one to wonder which debates Israel imagines his work intervening in. In short, Israel's most polemical moments, which often act as bookends for his more substantial investigations, stand conspicuously against his treatment of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century materials.

This is particularly evident in Israel's determination of secularism, a term which he locates at the center of radical thought and which becomes *the* measure against which philosophers are classified as "Radical" or "Moderate." Israel is correct in identifying numerous critical approaches to religion (and to Christianity in particular), especially in the aftermath of the Reformation and its attendant violent conflicts, just as he is correct in locating in Spinozism a particularly thorough and systematic statement against a particular sort of religion. But in what ways is Spinoza's philosophy "secular"? This is a question that Israel answers too quickly, eschewing the investigations of Christian, Islamic, and Jewish influences that have figured prominently in competing studies of Spinozism. This is not to chastise Israel (or his Spinoza) for their trenchant critiques of religion nor is it an attempt to apologize for religion in any general sense. What Israel misses is the extent to which various religious movements or interventions make possible the very "secular" achievements in thought he seems to champion. Israel's thesis – that the true Enlightenment began with Spinoza and with Spinozism, the only strains of thought which truly deserve to be called "Radical" – carries with it a dismissive determination of secularism.

Not every critique of religion is necessarily secular, even when the critique is as systematic as Spinoza's ontology. Secularism is an argument or set of practices working toward a particular vision of modernity. It is not merely the opposite of religion nor is it necessarily a form of atheism. Numerous interventions across a number of fields teach us otherwise, from the work of Hans Blumenberg, Michael J. Buckley, and Marcel Gauchet to that of John Milbank, William E. Connolly, Charles Taylor and Talal Asad (and this is, of course, only scratching the surface).<sup>2</sup> But in Israel's work secularism is taken for granted and conflated

---

<sup>2</sup> See Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1966; translation, 1983); Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (1987); Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion* (1985; translation, 1997); John

with Spinoza's project and with his apparent atheism. In this way Israel seems not to contend with certain important trends in Spinoza scholarship either, ignoring the possibility of Spinozism as an alternative to confessional forms of religion and to secularism, as a philosophical movement that offers something else entirely. I refer to the work of Antonio Negri and Yirmiyahu Yovel in particular, both of whom make compelling cases for a certain continuity between religious or mystical languages and concepts and Spinoza's own innovative philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Spinoza's supposedly secular and atheistic philosophical monism is further conflated with a kind of universalism, a claim that enables Israel to locate in Spinozism the only conceivable way to posit the inherent equality of all men. Despite his early attention to Spinoza's ontology in *Radical Enlightenment*, by the end of *Enlightenment Contested* Spinoza's complicated and intricate ontological intervention (particularly in his *Ethics*) risks devolving into a blanket universalism which Israel is able to locate across a wide spectrum of writers. Israel's picture, in turn, becomes more a clash of universalisms – religion versus secularism – rather than a more nuanced vision of the many conflicting approaches to secularism and to religious life.

Israel's determination of secularism is more than a theoretical problem. It is reflected in his treatment of historical resources. This is evident in his treatment of Socinianism across *Radical Enlightenment* and *Enlightenment Contested*, an important heretical movement impacting sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European confessions in its threatening approaches to Scripture and reason. While Israel is correct in affirming the importance of Socinianism he is markedly incorrect in his summary of Socinian beliefs and practices; what he understands as "a denial of Christology" and "a thoroughgoing scepticism about miracles" is in fact a more subtle understanding of doctrine emphasizing adiaphora and anti-Trinitarian thought (EC 123). He concedes Radical Enlightenment status to Socinianism (despite disputations between Socinian Frans Kuyper and Bredenburg, with the former championing Moderate Enlightenment principles against quasi-Spinozism (RE 347-358)) on the grounds that it comes close to a supposedly-Spinozan "freedom of thought and a comprehensive toleration" (EC 123) rather than its (more accurate) alternative comportment to orthodoxy and belief itself. Ultimately Socinianism is only important or radical based on its apparent similarity to Spinozism, a similarity that we are told is merely tactical on Spinoza's part.

But while Socinianism is misunderstood it is Israel's treatment of English Revolution philosophers, theologians, and social theorists that is most puzzling. Figures as diverse as Gerard Winstanley, John Milton, Roger Williams, John Lilburne, Anna Trapnel, Edward Sexby, and Abiezer Coppe (to say nothing of

Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (1991); William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (1999); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (2007); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (2003).

<sup>3</sup> See Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics* (1981; translation, 1991); Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason* (1989)

Lucy Hutchinson, translator of Lucretius, or Margaret Cavendish) are elided based on Israel's deployment of secularism which in turn shapes his understanding of radicalism. This is particularly frustrating given his disproportionate attention across the two books to the bourgeois sources and contexts of continental radicalism; given the opportunity to read the English vein of radicalism with or against continental trends, Israel discounts such sources based on their religious character and what he reads as their relative simplicity. In his own words, "the pantheism of a Winstanley had a theological, strongly poetic, even magical quality, and altogether lacked the pretensions to philosophical rigour characteristic of Spinoza, the Dutch Spinozists, and the British Deists of the Early Enlightenment" (RE 601). Thus we are left with an English scene characterized by Thomas Hobbes and Oliver Cromwell, neither of which Spinoza liked, based on limited secular criteria.

Israel's treatment of English Revolution texts – and, subsequently, scholarship of mid-century radical writing in English – points to his dismissal of Dutch capitalism in its capacity to shape the Enlightenment and to the economic situation informing Spinoza's philosophical project. His Spinoza and Spinozism work to enable a personal liberty as well as a notion of individualism itself that is not necessarily apparent in other historical versions of Spinozism or of modernity itself. The degree to which this determination of Spinozism – and, indeed, radicalism – is in fact shaped by commitments to political and economic forms of liberalism departs from other recent Spinozisms (in particular, Negri's).

Both *Radical Enlightenment* and *Enlightenment Contested* will undoubtedly remain standard references for future histories of Enlightenment as well as of Spinozism, Cartesianism, and a host of other philosophical figures and movements, and for good reason. It is an erudite and convincing project insofar as Israel presents Enlightenment as an inclusive pan-European trade in competing claims and methods, supported by detailed investigations of its materials and institutions. Nevertheless, Israel's secular vision of Enlightenment carries with it a number of risks. Despite the thrilling recuperations of various figures and texts; despite his romance with Spinozism which reveals other histories of the Enlightenment and their champions as reactionary and subordinate; even despite the ambition and scope of such a project and the invigorating energy it brings to scholarly debate, Israel's treatment of secular modernity leads to a series of challenges in understanding the stakes of Spinozism as well as of religious dissent, even within orthodox traditions. It leads one to wonder what the term "radical" is capable of doing in recasting the history of modernity under secularism, and certainly to question what form of emancipatory modernity Israel presents. Even in praise of the book I offer, after Spinoza, a word: *caute*.

RUSS LEO is a PhD Candidate in the Program in Literature at Duke University. He is the editor of the forthcoming issue of *Polygraph: An International Journal of Culture & Politics*, titled "Cities of Men, Cities of God: Augustinian Critical Languages and Late Secularism."

© Russ Leo. All rights reserved.

Leo, Russ. "Caute: Jonathan Israel's Secular Modernity," in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 9. no. 2 (Summer 2008): 76-83.