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**“The Radical Enlightenment and Freemasonry:  
Where We Are Now”**

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**Abstract**

Sometimes updating the observations and conclusions achieved long ago is necessary, especially when new scholarship on the topic appears. In this article, recent works about the relationship between radical enlightenment and Freemasonry are discussed.

**Resumen**

De vez en cuando es necesario reactualizar las observaciones y conclusiones efectuadas tiempo atrás a la luz de las producidas por nuevos autores o nuevas investigaciones. Así pues, en esta comunicación, se propuso presentar el estado actual sobre la relación entre Ilustración radical y la masonería.

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## “The Radical Enlightenment and Freemasonry: Where We Are Now”<sup>1</sup>

Margaret C. Jacob

### Introduction

In 1981 I first articulated the thesis about the Radical Enlightenment. I located it in the time that Paul Hazard, writing in the 1930s, saw as the crisis of the Western mind; that is, in the period of the 1680s to the 1720s. The radicalism I identified was both political and religious: hostility toward royal absolutism—with republics being seen as the true alternative—joined a virulent deism; materialism, if not atheism, largely articulated in the clandestine literature of the period. The loci of these subversive ideas lay in both England and the Dutch Republic. In the story as I told it then, the writings of the English freethinkers, Toland and Collins above all, and texts by both Hobbes and Spinoza figured prominently.

I argued that the period of the early Enlightenment produced within the republic of letters a set of ideas and attitudes, as well as texts, which were by any standard as radical as those we associate with the High Enlightenment. In my 1981 account three quite diverse national settings mixed to create, as it were, a perfect storm. After the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, thousands of exiled French Protestants fled to the Dutch Republic and England—to name only the largest concentrations—and they carried with them experiences of persecution vivid and shocking to the modern imagination. The French authorities’ detained children deemed ripe for conversion; the laity was actually forbidden to emigrate, thus forcing families to separate as escape routes were found for some and not others. Elderly Protestants were thrown in prison; the clergy was expelled sometimes with two days’ notice—or that was how long it took a leading and endangered Protestant clergyman, Jean Claude, to leave France. In his words, the French authorities

(...) strung up their victims, men and women, by their hair or by their feet, to the rafters in the roof, or the hooks in the chimney, and then set fire to bundles of moldy hay heaped up beneath them... They flung them into huge fires that they lit for the purpose, and left them there till they were half-roasted. They fastened ropes underneath their arms and lowered them into wells, pulling them up and down till they promised to change their religion<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> I want to thank Laura Normand for revising this paper.

<sup>2</sup> J. Claude, *An account of the Persecutions and Oppressions of the Protestants in France* (London, 1686), 19-21, as quoted in John Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press: 2006), 63-64. The 1981 argument appears in my *The Radical Enlightenment. Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981; second edition, Cornerstone Books, 2006). For recent work on Collins and his circle see Giovanni Tarantino, “The Books and Times of Anthony Collins (1676-1729), Free-thinker, Radical Reader and Independent Whig,” in: Ariel Hessayon and David Finnegan eds., *Varieties of Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth-Century English Radicalism in Context* (Burlington, VT.: Ashgate, 2011), 241-260.

True in every detail or not, accounts like Claude's were widely believed by Protestants on both sides of the Channel. When Claude (d.1687) arrived in the Dutch Republic he was awarded a pension by the stadholder, William of Orange.

The emotional logic of these events, combined with a newly found freedom, made for an experience that was inherently radicalizing. This could take the form of the extreme orthodoxy and millenarianism found among older exiles like Pierre Jurieu, or the radical skepticism of his enemy Pierre Bayle, or among the younger generation, a few highly literate seekers who took another look at religion in general and concluded that something was inherently wrong with the existing exemplars. Still others turned toward politics and embraced the Republic that gave them refuge, but not uncritically, as can be seen in the reformist role played by the Amsterdam Freemason, Jean Rousset de Missy in the Dutch revolution of 1747–48. In the imaginary Republic of Letters, if conditions were right, an intellectually radical posture toward both religion and politics was entirely possible. Combine French persecution with exile in the urban book capital of Europe, the Dutch Republic; add to the mix an armed international alliance between the republic and England against France; and refugees or Anglo-Dutch sympathizers could be expected to hold strong opinions. What is perhaps less obvious is that some would turn to freethinking and others to fraternizing.

In the 1970s when I was researching the material that became *The Radical Enlightenment* (1981), I believed—and I still believe—that the conditions created by the turn toward absolutism in the 1680s in both England and France set up unprecedented circumstances that would only be replicated, in a lesser way in the 1740s, and again more dramatically in the 1780s<sup>3</sup>. In other words, in early modern Europe, political instability caused by actions coming from the center, i.e. governments and elites, set up conditions where authority would be challenged, if only from the safety of anonymity. Persecution, war, rumors of invasion, financial crises in the state amounted to conditions of instability that led to public questioning or radical theorizing.

The reappearance of religious persecution in the 1680s created one such instability that in the context of English history harkened back to the civil wars of the 1640s and 50s. The notion of there being a dialectic between the magisterial and the radical came from my reading of George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962) where the conflict between Luther, Calvin, and the Church unleashed “lesser folk” who took the Reformation in unprecedented directions. The idea of applying this dialectical approach to the Enlightenment crystalized in conversations with J.G.A. Pocock. My reading of Christopher Hill also made clear that the civil wars had produced a revolution within the revolution, a radicalism that was both religious and political. Its heirs of the next generation replicated the dialectic, with the radicals believing that 1688–89 had not gone far enough. The Revolution had failed to establish a republic. In such an understanding, Locke would be the magistrate and Toland his radical nemesis.

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<sup>3</sup> Tabetha Ewing, “Invasion of Lorient: Rumor, Public Opinion, and Foreign Politics in 1740s Paris,” in Charles Walton, ed. *Into Print. Limits and Legacies of the Enlightenment. Essays in Honor of Robert Darnton* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 101-112.

It is important to remember that when I wrote originally, various philosophers of the seventeenth century were seen in a light different from that of today. Outside of French historiography, Spinoza had largely dropped out of the intellectual history of the Enlightenment; Locke was seen as infinitely more important than Hobbes, and the two dozen or so major *philosophes* occupied center stage in any history of the period. Very little had been written in the twentieth century on Toland or Collins, and no one had heard of the “Knights of Jubilation,” as our coterie called themselves. The history of Freemasonry had become the preserve of the devout or the conspiracy theorists. There had been pioneering work done on clandestine literature by Ira Wade in particular, but we were fifteen years away from the work of Miguel Benítez.<sup>4</sup> Not least, the concept of ideology was just beginning to be applied to terms like Newtonian, Cartesian, and Spinozean. Finally the foot soldiers of the movement toward the light—the publishers, booksellers, and journalists—were only just coming into their own. In less than thirty years we have performed radical surgery on the received understanding of the Enlightenment.

One ingredient in my 1981 intervention aroused considerable criticism: Freemasonry. I identified a manuscript in the possession of John Toland as bearing the tell-tale signs of a Masonic origin: the men called one another *frère*, their meeting was headed by *le Grand Maître*, and it met under statutes and rules—under *Constitutions*—which in 1710, when written in French, did not normally refer to statutes, but rather to the constitution of one’s health. The term had been imported from English. The signatories of this meeting record were either Huguenot refugees or Protestant booksellers at work in The Hague. To their circle I further traced the most outrageous clandestine manuscript of the eighteenth century, *Le Traité des trois imposteurs*, which labeled Jesus, Moses, and Mohammed as the impostors. To the same circle, and through the manuscripts of Prosper Marchand, Bayle’s 1720 editor, I found the letters of Rousset de Missy, who by the 1740s had become a leader in Amsterdam’s established Masonic lodges.

The 1710 Toland manuscript of a meeting of the “Knights of Jubilation” will probably never be proven to have a Masonic origin—such is the state of lodge records before 1717. No one, however, has come up with a convincing alternative explanation for the language in the document. Controversy still surrounds the Masonic element in the Radical Enlightenment, and most recently, Jonathan Israel has dismissed Freemasonry’s role in the Enlightenment entirely. The issue comes down to the value of social networks—as opposed simply to ideas in books—in fostering enlightened attitudes and beliefs.

Exported from Britain, Freemasonry could also take on meanings separate from its originally British identity. On the European continent a lodge could appeal to the uprooted, the mercantile, and the cosmopolitan: it was supposedly of ancient origin, democratic in its ethos, associated with the most advanced form of European government, and located across

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<sup>4</sup> Ira Wade, *The clandestine organization and diffusion of philosophic ideas in France from 1700 to 1750* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1938). Miguel Benítez, *La face cachée des Lumières: recherches sur les manuscrits philosophiques clandestins de l’âge classique* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1996). For recent work on Collins and his circle see Giovanni Tarantino, “The Books and Times of Anthony Collins (1676-1729), Free-thinker, Radical Reader and Independent Whig,” in: Hessayon and Finnegan, *Varieties of Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth-Century*, 241-260.

the Channel. Masonic membership was capable of being molded to one's tastes while offering charity and assistance to all brothers. In one of the first Paris lodges, we find one member who was a “Negro trumpeter” in the king’s guard. Lodges could also exist that included Catholics as well as Protestants; even French clergy found a home. In France, women’s lodges—although controversial—appear by the late 1740s. In the Dutch Republic women were present by 1751. Put simply, “Freemasonry was the first secular, voluntary association ever to have existed on a pan-European scale.”<sup>5</sup>

In deference to the deep religious divisions in Britain, as in much of Europe, Freemasonry endorsed a minimalist creed that could be anything from theism to pantheism and atheism. Not surprisingly, the lodges in England had a high representation of pro-1688–89 Whigs and natural philosophers, while in Paris by the 1740s the philosopher and Freemason, Claude Helvétius, was a materialist. The leader of Amsterdam Freemasonry, Rousset de Missy, was a pantheist. Montesquieu, also a Freemason, was probably some kind of deist. In both London and Amsterdam, Jewish names can be found in the lodge records. In France there were lodges for teachers and doctors, indeed even actors were admitted to certain lodges. Rarely do lodge ceremonies, even in Catholic countries, contain overtly Christian language. Many of the religious positions we associate with the Radical Enlightenment appeared conspicuously in some lodges where ceremonies invoked secular imagery of work, duty, and fraternity.

As Jonathan Israel has recently drawn to our attention, there was plenty with which to fault the lodges of the eighteenth century. Indeed later in the century Lessing’s *Ernst und Falk* (1778) laid out many of the complaints. In the lodges Falk finds objectionable the superstitions about the Knights Templars, the recourse to the magical arts, the play with words, gestures and symbols, and not least, the inability to promote true and absolute equality. Yet Falk clearly implies that there are Freemasons who support the American Revolution.<sup>6</sup> Far from Lessing “offer[ing] his century’s most scathing critique of Freemasonry,”—in Jonathan Israel’s curious reading of the text—*Ernst und Falk* directs the impulse for reform outward toward the state, and then back inward, toward the lodges of its day. Falk, speaking for Lessing, locates Freemasonry as a state of mind, a way of being in the world, and not as the imperfect behavior that he, along with the Comte de Mirabeau, so readily observed in everyday lodges.

Within Masonic circles after mid-century, why this turn toward enlightened reform, why the laser beam on the state—and then on the lodges? I am arguing that in the move Lessing makes—rhetorically establishing a complete worldly reality where religion (or the divine) is rendered incapable of explaining the human condition—he has, as it were, boxed himself into a new and dual reality. An earlier, clandestine literature associated with the Radical Enlightenment explains how that reality could take shape. An anonymous philosophe, writing around 1720, points us toward it. In the words of *Le Philosophe* (1743) “the existence

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<sup>5</sup> James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), .252.

<sup>6</sup> For the misreading of *Ernst und Falk* see Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind. Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 72-73.

of God is the most widespread and deeply engrained of all the prejudices,” and in its place *le philosophe* puts civil society as “the only divinity that he will recognize on earth.” Trapped by the doctrinal systems of the established churches, the tract continues, government languishes. The philosophe explains, “When one is a captive under the yoke of religion, one becomes incapable of the great visions that call on government, and that are so necessary for public situations<sup>7</sup>.”

Although writing a half-century later than *le philosophe*, Lessing would never have said in print, or perhaps even thought, such blatantly atheistical sentences. Nevertheless the words of *le philosophe* make crystal clear the implications of the radical version of Enlightenment, i.e., the attention to civil society and government permitted by the absence of the deity. If there is only this world—only civil society—then the other equally real entity must be the institutions of the state, and possibly also those of the church, however corrupted both might be. When meeting in orderly groups without a single compelling purpose such as science or literature, and when possessed of a set of ideals clearly articulated by Falk, would not the experience of the lodges—with their constitutions, votes, orations, fines for bad behavior, charitable works, and attention to decorum—lead to meditations upon religion and government? More than the scientific societies, or the salons and literary circles, the lodges embraced a specific social ideology that included the bonds of brotherhood, the need “to meet upon the level,” and the necessity for disciplined adherence to the rules for behavior put in place by every lodge.

The lodges could in effect function as schools for governing, and as such they provide an indispensable link between civil society and the Enlightenment, whether radical or moderate. In the earlier part of the century, when it is believed Du Marsais wrote *Le Philosophe*, radical texts dwelt more noticeably on religion and its perils. By the second half of the century, particularly but not exclusively in absolutist states, the philosophically enlightened gaze shifted toward the state and its institutions<sup>8</sup>. The scrutiny of the state can be observed in Masonic circles in both France and Germany.

In Paris in 1789 Mirabeau became one of the revolution’s most astute observers and participants. Late in the century other, German Freemasons responded to the tone Lessing set, and they too looked to the Prussian state and its discontents. In the wake of the French

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<sup>7</sup> [C. Chesneau Du Marsais], *Nouvelles liberté de Penser* (Amsterdam, 1743), “Le Philosophe,” one of five tracts, 165, 188 ; “La société civile est pour ainsi dire, la seule divinité qu’il reconnaisse sur la terre.” <http://www.pierre-marteau.com/c/jacob/ clandestine.html>. For a portion of the text see <http://www.vc.unipmn.it/~mori/e-texts/philos.htm> - “Il seroit [sic] inutile de remarquer ici combien le philosophe est jaloux de tout ce qui s’appelle honneur et probité: c’est là son unique religion. La société civile est, pour ainsi dire, la seule divinité qu’il reconnaisse sur la terre; il l’encense, il l’honore par la probité, par une attention exacte à ses devoirs et par un désir sincère de n’en être pas un membre inutile ou embarrassant.” “L’entendement, que l’on captive sous le joug de la foi, déviant incapable des grandes vues que demande le gouvernement, et qui sont si nécessaires pour les emplois [sic] publics.”

<sup>8</sup> “L’entendement que l’on captive sous le joug de la foi, devient incapable des grandes vues que demande le gouvernement, et qui sont si nécessaires pour les emplois publics. On fait croire au superstitieux que c’est un être suprême qui l’a élevé au-dessus des autres; c’est vers cet être, et non vers le public, que se tourne sa reconnaissance.” It is thought that du Marsais wrote the text in 1720. For a printed copy, see Alain Mothus and Gianluca Mori eds., *Philosophes sans Dieu. Textes Athées clandestins du XVIIIe Siècle* (Paris : Champion, 2010), 37 for this quote.

Revolution Herder offered his own meditation on Freemasonry and the state, in the form of a dialogue that is itself clearly in dialogue with *Ernst und Falk*. He begins by embracing “all the good that has been done...in the world.” Herder, himself a Freemason, reiterates “in the world.” He starts with Falk’s question: are men created for the state, or the state for men? He then, like Falk, notes all the divisions that states impose upon men, and he ends by invoking his cosmopolitan desire to have a society composed of all the thinking men in the entire world<sup>9</sup>. Herder’s embrace of such a utopian order is another example of Masonic language being employed to investigate the ideal of civil society. This search for a social utopia, too, is perfectly in keeping with the logic of the secular impulse, visible by 1700, and unlocked by the struggle against absolutism in church and state. The Radical Enlightenment did not invent Freemasonry, but the logic of the struggle made fraternizing and sociability, separate from church and state, all the more appealing.

Where does the story I told in 1981 fit into what we now think about the Enlightenment and Freemasonry? Since the 1960s two trends have dominated Enlightenment history. One was to situate the Enlightenment in specific national contexts, with little attention to the international circulation of enlightened texts and the predominance of French among all reasonably educated people. Just at the post-war moment when Europeans were forming their economic union, a common cultural legacy dropped out of the discussion. It became possible to question if some countries had even experienced the Enlightenment. Everyone agreed that there had been a Scottish Enlightenment, but historians, such as J.G.A. Pocock, asked if there had ever been an English one. Roy Porter wrote one of his many superb books to counteract the dismissal. People do still write about the Enlightenment in national settings, but now it is harder to ignore that ideas knew only linguistic borders, seldom territorial ones.

The other trend to which my work on the Radical Enlightenment belongs has been to situate the Enlightenment socially and politically, to find enlightened language within specific contexts, within coteries, circles, salons, Masonic lodges, and to locate the republican tendencies at work among the enlightened. Focus is placed on the 1680s and the threat posed by a newly invigorated absolutism in both France and England. French Protestants fleeing persecution by Louis XIV and his church are awarded pride of place in the new ferment of ideas about religious toleration, the new science, and the search for alternatives to absolutism. Robert Darnton (writing on the book trade in France from Switzerland), Wijnand Mijnhardt, and I have also sought to restore the international dimension and to bring the Dutch Republic into the center of the discussion.

In 1700 half the books in Europe, many of them in French, were published there. Spinoza also had Dutch followers, and in the past twenty years, thanks to the work of Wiep van Bunge and Jonathan Israel, we have learned a great deal about Lodowijk Meyer, the brothers Koerbagh, and Willem Deurhoff. My own recent work, coauthored by Lynn Hunt and Wijnand Mijnhardt, dwells upon learned artisans in the Dutch Republic. They were the

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<sup>9</sup> *Gespräch über eine-unsichtbar-sichtbare Gesellschaft* in Ion Contiades, ed. *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Ernst und Falk; met den Fortsetzungen Herders und Friedrich Schlegels*, 69.

foot soldiers in the dissemination and origination of enlightened ideas. They did the clandestine publishing, circulated forbidden texts in manuscript, and in the case of early participants in the Radical Enlightenment, such as Bernard Picart and Jean-Frederic Bernard, examined the religions of the world without the slightest interest in their veracity.<sup>10</sup> Similarly the radical Whigs, from the Commonwealth men of the 1690s to John Wilkes in the 1760s, tied the ideals of the English Revolution, of Milton, Harrington, and Sydney, to enlightened pleas for religious toleration, freedom of the press, and reform of corrupt institutions in church and state.

After 2001 another trend came to the fore in Enlightenment studies. Belonging to neither the national nor contextual trends, the intervention of Jonathan Israel vastly expanded upon the international scope of the Radical Enlightenment and laid renewed emphasis on the contributions of Bayle and Spinoza. In a set of recent lectures, *The Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (2010), and in his also recent 800-plus page *Democratic Enlightenment* (2011), Israel summarizes, solidifies, and sometimes alters the arguments of his two much larger and more careful books, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (New York, 2001, hereafter RE) and *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670–1752* (New York, 2006, hereafter EC).

The lectures (RM) and books (RE, EC and DE) need to be examined for what they tell us about the methods and implications of Israel's intervention. Basically he has turned the Radical Enlightenment into a century-long process that begins with Spinoza and ends with the French materialists of the 1780s. In this idealist account, only ideas matter—not social context, and certainly not Freemasonry. The social framework within which the Enlightenment flourished has been abandoned, and it has become all about ideas and mostly great thinkers.

Jonathan Israel is also a historian with strongly subjective likes and dislikes, and he is a Hegelian dialectician who sees two Enlightenments, one good and radical, the other moderate, of mixed value at best. Born and educated in Britain, Israel finds little of value in the British or American historical experience. The American Revolution failed to emancipate the slaves, and from the perspective of European and American radicals deliberately encouraged “the emergence of an informal aristocracy” (RM, p. 44). The American Founding Fathers, in Israel's typology, embody the Moderate Enlightenment, and possessed of no cosmopolitan impulses, they were content to do the work of revolution only at home. With the exception of Thomas Jefferson, they embraced the Moderate Enlightenment's “commitment to upholding privilege, rank, and monarchy.” Of course, as the arm-chaired French radical Comte de Mirabeau noted, the Americans embraced the prejudices of the British (RM, p. 46).

The first instance in the Western world where slavery was abolished, albeit slowly—Pennsylvania in 1780—leaves Israel unmoved. The Quakers who patrolled its borders to prevent owners from taking their slaves south do not merit a place in the radical pantheon.

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<sup>10</sup> Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob, and Wijnand Mijnhardt, *The Book that Changed Europe. Bernard and Picart's Religious Customs and Ceremonies of all the Peoples of the World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

They are just not secular enough. That they and the Founding Fathers—like Locke—actually *did radical things* becomes irrelevant, because for Israel only ideas, and moreover only a certain package of ideas, count. The Anglo-American traditions have made no contribution, Israel assures us, to “full freedom of thought” or with “identifying democracy as the best form of government” (RM, p. 21). Forget John Locke, or John Milton, or Algernon Sydney, or the Levellers and Diggers; also ditch “the Commonwealth tradition” and, for good measure, the Freemasons<sup>11</sup>.

The bountiful gifts of freedom and democracy come to us from “Radical Enlightenment” and originated in the minds of Hobbes, Bayle, and especially Spinoza, who in turn were followed by various French writers of the early eighteenth century (RM, p. 157). The late eighteenth-century Continental revolutions owe their intellectual roots to that particular radical tradition. Thus even the American Revolution, while “a crucial inspiration” for European democrats, “was also a disturbingly defective, truncated revolution” (RM, p. 40) and most of its leaders were hopelessly moderate. To be truly radical anyone from Baruch Spinoza (d. 1677) to the French materialist Baron Paul-Henri Thiry D’Holbach (d. 1789) had to combine “philosophical monism with democracy and a purely secular moral philosophy based on equality” (RM p. 21). Everyone else need not apply.

For Israel the Hegelian dialectic of thesis and antithesis manifests itself in the “unrelenting war” (RM, p. 217) between, on one hand, the “court-sponsored” Moderate Enlightenment with its “Eurocentric superiority complex”—embodied most tangibly in Voltaire and the Anglo-American followers of Locke and Newton—and, on the other, Radical Enlightenment, as Israel defines it, offering “an entirely new form of revolutionary consciousness” (RM, p. 221). Any theorist with heart-felt religious beliefs belongs in the camp of the moderates. Being devout, if heretical, Christians as they were, Newton and Locke fall into that less-than-courageous category. Guilt by association requires that anyone bearing the label Newtonian or Lockean “must be perfectly attuned to the Christian faith” (RM, pp. 171–72). Indeed, in some places allies of these good English Protestants include the Jesuits (EC, p. 847). Newtonian science only triumphed in the French colleges after 1760, as their foremost historian puts it, “over the dead body of the Jesuit order.” This is irrelevant to Israel.

Jonathan Israel offers other slights and dislikes. He really cannot stand Rousseau, who he describes as hostile to his radicals (RM, p. 53), as renouncing society as a whole (p. 59), as a nationalist (p. 61–62), a believer in censorship (p. 63), and an opponent of representative democracy (p. 64) —in short, as proto-totalitarian. The “darker side” of the French Revolution “was chiefly inspired by the Rousseauist tendency” (p. 231). In addition, Rousseau’s importance has been vastly overrated. Indeed “book-history demonstrates that these books [by Diderot and D’Holbach] achieved a far greater penetration in the 1770s and 1780s than did Rousseau’s political and social theoretical works, or indeed any other political and social ideology” (RM, p. 225). One can only marvel at the ignorance of the Dutch

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<sup>11</sup> Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*. Although cited most briefly, and also dismissively, 696 in *Radical Enlightenment*, and without discussion, Israel got his thesis, however refigured, and title from *The Radical Enlightenment*. Dorinda Outram’s review of Israel’s book in *The British Journal for the History of Science* 34, no. 4 (2001): 464-466.

authorities that, in the 1780s, banished not the writings of Diderot or D'Holbach, but Rousseau's *Social Contract*.

Israel's likes and dislikes are not, however, unchanging. In his earlier version of *Radical Enlightenment*, the Commonwealth-man John Toland (and the English freethinkers in general) are described as having made a "rather substantial" contribution to the movement (RE, p. 613), and Rousseau is treated as the intellectual equal of Spinoza and Diderot (epilogue). By 2010 even the Baron D'Holbach's immense debt to Toland has been downgraded, and while mentioned briefly (RM, p. 56), poor Toland has even been left out of the index.

Some obsessions never die. Now in 2010 D'Holbach looms larger than he did in the earlier version of the *Radical Enlightenment*, and is wrongly credited with informing the "virtual materialism" of Joseph Priestley (RM, p. 155, 162). There is a contradiction here, since Priestley is now included and he was religious. He is saved by D'Holbach, who, like everyone properly radical, derives most of his right thinking from Spinoza. Alas, Priestley's spiritual materialism was day-to-night from the thinking of D'Holbach, but never once can Israel bring himself to acknowledge that Priestley's Unitarianism expressed his deep devotion to a millenarian Christianity and his detestation of atheism.<sup>12</sup> Into this galaxy of materialists now a few Christian-Unitarians like Priestley or deist-Unitarians like Jefferson have finally been upgraded. Ignored in 2001, they merit mention. It has to be said, however, that Israel is right to point to long-forgotten importance of D'Holbach.<sup>13</sup>

Two intellectual habits reoccur throughout Israel's works. First, Spinoza has influenced everyone who is radical. To achieve the pantheon of spinozist saints, while discarding the reprobate, Israel approaches the historical evidence and texts selectively. For example, the newly elevated D'Holbach becomes not only *tout court* a follower of Spinoza, but now also "openly egalitarian, democratic and anti-colonial" (RM, p. 56).

The historical record is, however, otherwise. Through the good services of John Wilkes, whom he adored ardently when they were students at Leiden, D'Holbach learned a great deal about English thought, indeed whole passages from Toland's *Letters to Serena* (1704) appear translated in D'Holbach's *Système de la Nature* (1770). He even begins with an anachronistic attack on the Boyle lectures given in London decades earlier, during Toland's (d. 1722) lifetime. According to Israel, D'Holbach's imprimatur as materialist, democratic republican, and determinist derives from his debt to Spinoza. The only problem with this reading is that the baron was actually a liberal, almost utopian monarchist.

The past may be allowed to rest comfortably in a Procrustean bed only if its texts are quoted selectively, if at all, or whole books not to our liking are simply discarded or misread. Unacknowledged by Israel, D'Holbach's *Éthocratie ou le gouvernement fondé sur la morale* (Amsterdam, Marc-Michel Rey, 1776) expressed a *cri de coeur* for the virtuous sovereign, "the guide, the pastor and the father of his subjects...just and good himself, he would

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<sup>12</sup> For the corrective see the magisterial, Robert E. Schofield, *The Enlightened Joseph Priestley* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997-2004), 2 vols, see vol. 2, chapter 4, "Matter and Spirit."

<sup>13</sup> On d'Holbach see Mark Curran, *Atheism, Religion and Enlightenment in Pre-Revolutionary Europe* (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2012).

command men who resemble him, reasonable citizens, docile subjects who are truly attached [to him].” D’Holbach thought that Louis XVI might be his man. With the help of “the legislator, accommodating himself to the weakness of [men’s] minds” a people will receive “enlightenment, education and the sweetness of reason” from the French king (avertissement). This was hardly the thinking of someone whom Israel labels a “deliberate, conscious revolutionary” (RM, p. 53). Although deeply critical of the abuses perpetrated by monarchs and nobles, D’Holbach remained firmly on the side of law and order: “every citizen is made to serve the country; he must give to it his talents, his reflections, his councils... To stop the citizen from serving his country is to declare oneself the enemy of *la Patrie*.” Not least, in an unwitting deviation from Israelian orthodoxy, D’Holbach praises the English who offer an example of how government can be rescued from superstition and tyranny, in “less than two centuries [they successfully] threw off the yoke of Rome, and the yoke of tyranny<sup>14</sup>.” Finally, in Israel’s account of D’Holbach’s egalitarianism, we never learn that he systematically excluded women from his Paris salon.

According to Israel the Radical Enlightenment, unlike the Moderate Enlightenment, depended on materialist-determinist metaphysics. In the most recent iteration of the thesis, the dichotomy between the two Enlightenments has widened. The “warring and wholly incompatible” Moderate Enlightenment now becomes anti-egalitarian (RM, p. 111–12, 177). Then those cunning moderates, seeking to bolster and make scientific their disregard for poverty and inequality, and led by Adam Smith and Turgot, invented the dismal science of economics. Israel contrasts the failure of the moderates to deliver on religious toleration, curtail aristocratic privilege, or ameliorate poverty, with the fiery, liberating rhetoric of Thomas Paine, D’Holbach, Diderot, and Helvétius, the true heirs of Spinoza.

Not only did Spinoza lay the foundation of both atheism and modern democracy, “indeed, without referring to Radical Enlightenment nothing about the French Revolution makes the slightest sense, or can even begin to be provisionally explained” (RM, p. 224). Israel tells us that, led by the late François Furet, “historians of the revolutionary era...have failed almost entirely” (p. 226) to understand the crucial intellectual developments Israel now proclaims. The French clergy of the late 1780s had it “assuredly right” (RM, p. 229); *la nouvelle philosophe* of the eighteenth century, along with Spinoza, had undermined all authority in church and state.

In this dark vision, allied forces, represented on one side by the clergy and on the other by the Jacobins, undid the Enlightenment and subverted the promise found in the early phase of the French Revolution. In this one respect Israel follows Furet in identifying Freemasonry as part of the dark underside of the eighteenth-century that led to the Jacobins and the Terror<sup>15</sup>. Israel has decided that he, too, really does not like the Freemasons, and he ventures forth to find enlightened thinkers, indebted to Spinoza, who can be used to support his case.

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<sup>14</sup> [Par 1 ‘auteur *du Système de la Nature*] *Système social. ou principes naturels de la morale et de la politique* (London [actually Amsterdam], 1774, 155, 162.

<sup>15</sup> For an antidote see Kenneth Loiselle, “Living the Enlightenment in an Age of Revolution: Freemasonry in Bordeaux (1788-1794),” in: *French History* 24 (2009): 60-81.

Israel thinks that Lessing (d. 1781) “steered clear of the secret societies” and indeed saw through their mystique.

The Radical Enlightenment, shorn of its English and Masonic elements, spawned the early phase of the French Revolution. The “proof lies in the controversies” (RM, p. 240). The clerical anti-Enlightenment understood clearly that Spinoza and Bayle were the originators of the “contagion” that was undermining throne and altar. The logic of this argument, read into contemporary politics, would work as follows: If American Tea Party activists announce, repeatedly, that our health care reform amounts to socialism, then we should now examine the reading habits of Democrats to see if they were influenced by Marx or Lenin. Time and again, Israel offers proof that someone followed Spinoza by quoting from a contemporary clerical or royalist opponent who said he did (RM, pp. 26, 74).

It is easy to fall prey to the claims and charges of pious polemicists, especially if read selectively. They were obsessed with Spinoza and spinozism (in ways reminiscent of anti-Communists in the 1950s). Seventeenth-century sale catalogues of books thought nothing of advertising Spinoza’s *Tractatus* (1670) by saying it was written by “an apostate Jew in league with the Devil.”<sup>16</sup> The fact of Spinoza’s being a Jew, even if apostate, was often the first item mentioned by so many polemic assaults on his character and his philosophy.

Blinded by love for Spinoza, it is possible to miss the nuances and transformations that occurred within the materialist reading of nature. In his *Encyclopédie* (1751+), Diderot distinguished the old from the new spinozism<sup>17</sup>, and noted that the signal characteristic of the new spinozism lay in the modern ability to infuse matter with sensibility or life. Where we can find eighteenth-century authors actually describing themselves as pantheists, as did John Toland and the Amsterdam journalist and Freemason, Jean Rousset de Missy, we profit from paying close attention to what they meant and intended. Toland tells us of his debt to a calculated reading of Newton<sup>18</sup>, and Rousset’s debt to English ideas and notions of government, and not least, Freemasonry, has never been disputed since it was established back in 1981. What happened to materialism when it gradually became pantheism, or a vitalistic materialism, transformed the course of Western metaphysics. It became possible to postulate law-like force within history and nature, motion inherent in matter, and every materialist from Toland through to Diderot, D’Holbach, and Marx saw the remarkable possibilities that such an intellectual move permitted. Newtonian science made that move

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<sup>16</sup> *Catalogus van boecken inde bybliotheque (sic) van Mr. Jan de Wit...* [1672], The Hague, 1672, no. 33 in appendix and the text most easily seen in *The Abraham Wolf Spinoza Collection at UCLA. A Facsimile of the Monno Hertzberger Catalogue* (UCLA, Special Collections, 1990), 65.

<sup>17</sup> I owe mention of this text to John Zammito who brought it to my attention: *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une Société de Gens de lettres*, Paris, vol. 15, 474: SPINOSISTE, s. m. (Gram.) sectateur de la philosophie de Spinoza. Il ne faut pas confondre les *Spinosistes* anciens avec les *Spinosistes* modernes. Le principe général de ceux - ci, c’est que la matiere est sensible, ce qu’ils démontrent par le développement de l’œuf, corps inerte, qui par le seul instrument de la chaleur graduée passe à l’état d’être sentant & vivant, & par l’accroissement de tout animal qui dans son principe n’est qu’un point, & qui par l’assimilation nutritive des plantes, en un mot, de toutes les substances qui servent à la nutrition, devient un grand corps sentant & vivant dans un grand espace. De - là ils concluent qu’il n’y a que de la matiere, & qu’elle suffit pour tout expliquer; du reste ils suivent l’ancien spinosisme dans toutes ses conséquences.

<sup>18</sup> John Toland, *Letters to Serena* (London, 1704), fifth letter.

possible as they knew and acknowledged.

Spinoza could not make the move to a vitalistic materialism because—to put it simply—he had been dead ten years when Newton’s *Principia* appeared in 1687. Newton supplied a mathematically grounded law of nature, based upon immaterial force operating from the center of bodies, and thus unwittingly offered freethinkers like Toland and Diderot the possibility of making an essential modification on the materialist tradition. If universal gravitation works on all bodies from their centers, it was trivially easy to assert that motion is inherent in matter and that Newton’s science has so proven it. The force of eighteenth century vitalistic materialism lay precisely in the ability of those who promoted it to champion Newtonian science while walking away from Newton’s own metaphysics, which always located the source of motion in immaterial forces of divine origin.

## Conclusion

The effect of the recent rewriting of the meaning of the Radical Enlightenment has been to obscure the unity amid complexity of the Enlightenment and its roots. With each passing year, Israel has offered dichotomies, distinctions, and differences that tunnel the reader’s vision into ever narrower, fleeting glimpses of an eighteenth-century past that becomes—at least to this historian—increasingly unrecognizable.

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