

Following the sacred flame

The American Revolution as Radical Enlightenment by other means

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Jonathan Israel

THE EXPANDING BLAZE

How the American Revolution ignited the world,

1775–1848

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In the aftermath of the Second World War, the French historian Jacques Godechot depicted the American and French revolutions as the umbilical cord of “Atlantic Civilization”. His sometime collaborator, the American R. R. Palmer, later portrayed them as part of an “Age of Democratic Revolution”. Palmer paid scant attention in his two volumes to the Haitian, South American and Southern European revolutions, presumably because he perceived them as offshoots or belated emanations of what happened in the United States and France.

Palmer’s history was magisterial, but it attracted criticism. To some, his narrative was fatally tinged by ideology. He stood accused of being a sort of NATO staff historian, conjuring an origin myth of the Cold War liberal order. To later historians, his narrative was distasteful because it assumed that ideas spread from the dynamic, innovative centre to the passive, inert periphery. Were liberal democratic institutions everywhere merely a generous bequest of the American and French revolutions, which radiated outward and shattered benighted, obsolete and inferior political systems?

Beyond its intrinsic condescension, a further drawback of Palmer’s thesis was its inaccuracy. In recent years, historians have recovered “pre-modern” forms of representative government and traced alternative genealogies of political liberty. In doing so, they have decentred and diminished the American Revolution. In Spain and Spanish America, for example, historians found that, far from being wedded to American and French models, revolutionaries consciously opted to revive homegrown, long-standing traditions and institutions. They appealed to neo-scholastic doctrines and sought to regenerate the venerable representative body, the Cortes, undermined by centuries of encroaching royal absolutism.

Further inconvenient revelations dented Palmer’s thesis still more. By 1800, American and French models of revolutionary change were rejected by partisans of mixed government, chiefly constitutional monarchy. Not only was such a hybrid form politically expedient, they claimed, but it was superior on its own merits as well. Full-throated republicanism and inveterate monarchism were thus transcended by an amalgam of institutions salvaged from the Old Regime, refurbished with suitably updated political ideas.

When historians gazed beyond North America and Europe, moreover, and recast the Age of the Democratic Revolution as a global phenomenon, mixed government emerged as the undisputed victor of the tumultuous epoch spanning 1750–1850. Where the American Revolution was admired, as happened in parts of Spanish and Portuguese America, it was seen as a model of how elites could gain political independence while maintaining economic structures, especially slavery, and mores conducive to social control, intact. Distilling the American Revolution’s lessons to a single essence, then, was difficult in 1776 and impossible by 1800. If there ever had been a single monolithic American Revolution, it had

broken apart into fragments from which aspiring revolutionaries could pick and choose.

Jonathan Israel’s *The Expanding Blaze* should be read against this historical backdrop. Israel unapologetically declares that he will raise Palmer’s battered banner, but will extend it geographically to encompass the revolutions neglected by him. He also intends to push the chronological boundaries of Palmer’s study, stretching them towards the 1848 revolutions. This prospectus is staggering in ambition. Israel’s book is, after a fashion, a triumph of synthesis and sustained analysis. Though verg-

ing on encyclopedic density, Israel skilfully returns to his theme before the reader is lost in a labyrinth of absorbing detail. He uncovers considerable evidence to show the consanguinity of the American and French revolutions, demonstrating how French revolutionaries’ *Américanisme* informed their actions.

But this scholarly investigation is merely a sideshow. Israel resurrects Palmer’s framework of interconnected revolutions in order to repurpose it as a vehicle for his own “Radical

Enlightenment” thesis, developed in previous books, and to extend it into new terrain. The reader familiar with Israel’s scholarship soon feels a little like a passenger on a ship taken captive by pirates, who commandeer the vessel and plot a new course. They are bound inexorably for the pirate’s nest and are resigned to their fate. The most that can be hoped for is an entertaining voyage.

The American Revolution, Israel tells us, challenged three pillars of Old Regime Society: monarchy, aristocracy and religious authority. It toppled the first, weakened the second, and transformed the third. In its place, the revolutionaries proposed a social vision marked by shared liberties and equal civil rights. Israel acknowledges the incomplete realization of that vision, the imperfect instantiation of those ideals. But for him, it is the ideals, the political ideas, which matter, for they endured to animate and inspire revolutionaries during the subsequent seven decades. In this way, he claims, the American Revolution was “the crucible of Democratic Modernity”.

Israel traces the movement of the sacred flame of “Radical Enlightenment” across the Atlantic World. We encounter a cast of familiar and less-known characters navigating political life in a multitude of diverse societies only by virtue of its incandescence.

One can only admire the fearlessness of Israel’s undertaking, and his intention to break free of the confines of smaller-scale, parochial scholarship with its self-imposed blinkers obscuring connections. Yet for all his erudition, Israel’s dialectic of enlightenment is a blunt instrument for a type of intellectual history that demands more delicate surgical tools. The dichotomy of “Moderate” and “Radical” enlightenment might prove, in some cases, a useful interpretative device. It might serve to identify patterns in a morass of texts written in various languages and numerous national contexts. But when the device is made too solid and deployed indiscriminately, the result is flawed. Complex intellectual history is hurriedly disassembled, reduced, and then reshuffled into two crude piles.

In the end, less is learned in *The Expanding Blaze* about the Age of Revolutions than about the mind of its author. What is remarkable about Israel’s history of the first great age of decolonization is that it is itself a baldly colonizing venture. It seeks to unify an extremely diverse set of revolutions as manifestations of “Radical Enlightenment”. Geographical expansion is less troubling than temporal reach. To a degree, it is instructive to see Israel’s thesis extended to Latin America and Greece. It is not unlike examining an object through a kaleidoscope: it distorts the object but it also draws attention to patterns and details that might escape the inexpert or inattentive eye. Several lesser-known political writers of considerable merit, for example, are now incorporated into a grand narrative from which they were previously excluded.

Less illuminating, however, is Israel’s lunge into the nineteenth century. Most scholars tend to confine the chronological parameters of the Enlightenment to the eighteenth century. As with all periodizations in intellectual history, it is an arbitrary demarcation which shrouds notable continuities with later periods. Most historians explicitly or tacitly recognize such overlap. But Israel claims the first half of the nineteenth century for the Enlightenment alone. Rather than make his case, he demolishes the field and sweeps it away. He dismisses liberalism as a “general historiographical disaster” and an “absurdly vague and elastic term”. The aim, of course, is to show that “Radical Enlightenment” survived to shape political debates for longer than any scholar had imagined it did.

If such a revelation surprises or discomfits Israel reassures us, it is because scholars of the early nineteenth century have been duped. “It is almost as if some evil genius deliberately introduced these highly misleading and obfuscating labels to render the entire historiography of the period a fog of confusion”. Readers who revisit Jonathan Israel’s oeuvre should bear this warning in mind.



“Liberty’s Pulpit, 1775” by Jean Leon Gerome Ferris (1863–1930)

Conveniently enough, these ideas are almost indistinguishable from “Radical Enlightenment”, an admixture of metaphysical monism and political radicalism that Israel developed in previous books. The American Revolution is transmuted into a battleground pitting “Radical Enlightenment” against what he terms “Moderate Enlightenment”: democratic versus aristocratic republicanism, broad versus limited political participation, and universal rights versus narrow conceptions of rights.