

Fear and Loathing at the *H-France Review* Publications Desk:
Nausée and the Hostile Review

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This essay began in fall 2014 when the *H-France Review* editors sent to me the pre-published review by Margaret Carlyle of my book, *The Idea of the Sciences in the French Enlightenment, a Reinterpretation* (2014), and asked if I would like to respond to it. I saw here a chance to articulate the fear and loathing brought on by the uneasiness of reading hostile book reviews. Since what I wrote went beyond a direct reply to Carlyle's decidedly non-hostile review, David Kammerling Smith proposed that instead it become part of this issue of *H-France Salon* focused on "The Scholarly Critique." My goal here is not to offer prescriptions about how to write scholarly reviews, but rather to reflect on my own experiences as publication editor for *H-France Review*, book reviewer, and reviewed author in order to describe and explain the queasiness I feel when reading hostile (and not simply critical) book reviews. I write "*nausée*" in the title above to evoke the Sartrean notion of existential nausea, not the more mundane feeling when I awake after drinking too much alcohol the night before. I deploy Hunter S. Thompson's catchphrase "Fear and Loathing" because it seems almost a moral complement to Sartre's existential idea. If ultimately nothing makes us act as we do except personal choice, then we are free to choose how to respond to a book and free to approach it generously and humbly—or not. Hostile (and not simply critical) reviews seem to me like a failure of artistry—destructive rather than constitutive of scholarly community.

As I hope the rest of the essay will clarify, I differentiate the hostile review from the merely critical one in several ways—e.g., rhetorical style or apparent authorial intent—but ultimately suggest that a hostile review is destructive rather than constructive, tends to focus more on the contribution of the reviewer than on the scholarship under review, promotes boundaries and gate-keeping rather than understanding or the improvement of knowledge, and works to transform a scholarly discipline into a opposing camps of practitioners rather than into a "republic of letters."

I seem to recall that as a graduate student I unreflectively adopted a style of book reviewing based on the practices that appeared to predominate in the scholarly journals I read in the 1990s when I learned the craft of academic history. Professionalization in any field most likely involves this sort of thing: looking around to see what senior colleagues are doing, and then doing one's own work in a similar way in order to fit into the community—a generally good idea. But nothing compels us to continue actions and practices without reflection. As I read more books, wrote more reviews, and read more book reviews, I came to realize that I enjoy writing book reviews, especially in a style more or less of my own that does not unreflectively follow the standard professional modes, but which I think is well suited to generate scholarly dialogue with

colleagues and, dare I admit it, learning on my own part (I learn a lot about a book while writing a review of it).

Although most book reviews are professional and respectful, some of them contain an underlying aggressiveness brought on perhaps by the need or desire both by scholars and reviewers to position and situate themselves intellectually in any particular scholarly debate. Maybe reviews become hostile when this intellectual/professional positioning or self-fashioning takes place at the expense of the work being reviewed, but even when hostile intent does not exist there sometimes remains a combativeness that is probably a side-effect of otherwise healthy scholarly debate. At some point this style of hostile reviewing began to cause me a queasiness that I first sought to understand and then to avoid. Would it not, I thought, be possible to eliminate what in essence serves as a sort of selfishness in my own reviews in order to open myself better to whatever contribution the author of the reviewed work might make? This approach is not to foreclose the possibility of intellectual debate and even dispute, but to ensure that my critique remains focused on the scholarship under review and not on me and my own professional self-fashioning. Ultimately, I suppose I'm just not very interested in trying to look smart or in guarding any professional gates. Let me emphasize, however, that I am not here offering prescriptions or rebukes. Colleagues can obviously critique and review the scholarship of their fellows in any way they wish. Undoubtedly my nausea will persist.

Fear and loathing does not apply to Carlyle's review of my book, my initial response to which was the genesis of the present essay. When the *H-France Review* editors (of whom I am one) asked for my response to her review, I read it with trepidation, but ultimately I found the review to be professionally critical, perceptive, and even generous. My disagreements with the review are, for the most part, little more than quibbles. At worst, I think that Carlyle was simply unconvinced by a key aspect of my thesis. Overall, I would even concede that most of her criticisms are correct and spot on. The book I have published is hardly perfect. I am, unfortunately for me, not a "perfect" kind of person.

In contrast with Carlyle's review is a review published on another listserv network, H-Albion, by Jeremy Caradonna. I do not subscribe to H-Albion, the British history network, and so was unaware of this review until I stumbled upon it by accident. I do not even know why a British history network had a copy of my book on French history for review. None of the editors at H-Albion apprised me of its appearance, which is probably just as well considering the tone of the review. It is a sobering experience to read such a profoundly hostile review of one's work. I am generally always willing to consider the worst about myself, but Caradonna's review certainly filled me with fear and loathing.

The appearance of two reviews of my own scholarship that are both critical, but which are practically opposite in rhetoric and tone, gave me the analytical distance, hopefully, to articulate the fear and loathing brought on by the *nausée* of reading hostile reviews. And I read a lot of reviews. As I have already noted, I have served as publications editor at *H-France Review* for the past several years, so a large number of reviews of works in French history cross my desk. The majority of reviews are clear, moderate, respectful both of the author and of the profession in general, and as objective as possible—or perhaps a better word would be "fair." Most typically a reviewer offers some criticism where he or she may believe it is due but is careful to exercise

collegial restraint. I have seen, however, a number of hostile reviews. I am not sure if the number is increasing or whether I just notice them more since I became a publications editor (looking back at *H-France Review* I do not see any evidence of increase, but such reviews do appear regularly). At any rate, Carlyle's review falls into the first category and Caradonna's falls into the second. In both solicited and unsolicited responses to hostile reviews, authors often (but not always) complain that the reviewer has mischaracterized the arguments and conclusions of the book, intending to portray the work as deficient or just plain bad, but that in reality the reason for the hostility toward a book, and by implication its author and the author's agenda, is due to a selective misreading brought about either by the intellectual denseness of the reviewer or by some difference over methodology, philosophy, or ideology. The response then usually sets out to rebut the review point by point, often at length. I have even received dismayed e-mail messages from reviewers who are, presumably, mortified by authors' furious responses to their negative reviews, "Why," they ask me, "was my review granted a response by the author?" I always refer them to my superiors at *H-France Review* who determine the criteria for response requests, but I want to tell them (and never do), "If you attack, it's reasonable to expect a counter-attack."

In general, I think that academic book reviewers have hitherto traditionally enjoyed a fair amount of unaccountability in their reviews: the scholar writes a book, and the reviewer can then say what he or she wants to say about it so long as it is couched in the proper sort of academic rhetoric. Social media and the internet are changing that dynamic, however, as author responses on *H-France Review* and elsewhere demonstrate. As publication editor, I have now witnessed examples of reviewers checking themselves out of fear of a published authorial response. In one case, which I will not mention by name here, a reviewer requested that a review not be published upon being notified that an eminent author had prepared a response. This may seem to be a check on free speech and on the right of the reviewer to review without fear of retribution, but I do not think it is in reality. In fact, the fear of a response simply imposes on the reviewer what he or she could have self-imposed: that is, an ethic of collegial restraint, and maybe some generosity and humility.

One case in point (among the many I could have chosen) is a review on *H-France Review* of Jean-Jacques Courtine's *Déchriffrer le corps. Penser avec Foucault* by Michael Behrent, an associate professor at Appalachian State University. Behrent, an excellent intellectual historian, took it upon himself to go beyond strong criticism of Courtine's book. Apparently not content with judicious analytical criticism, he (in my judgment, which admittedly may be wrong) questioned Courtine's ability to comprehend Foucault's ideas and even challenged Courtine's scholarly competence with sarcastic lines such as: "One of the puzzles of this book is exactly what Courtine means by 'thinking with' Foucault. Does it mean seriously engaging with Foucault's ideas or simply citing Foucault when one finds it convenient?" Now, I want to clarify that I do not know Behrent personally and have nothing against him or his scholarship, which I generally admire. But I do wonder what Behrent hoped to achieve with this attack. If he were truly baffled by Courtine's methodology, might he not have written something more like, "I do not really understand what Courtine means by 'thinking with Foucault,'" which could have opened the possibility of genuine dialogue? Courtine, by the way, has been publishing scholarship since I was about eleven years old, and seeing that that is more than thirty years ago

now, I would have been extremely hesitant to make such a hostile critique of a scholar who has so many years of scholarly experience.

Overall, I find hostile reviews and the authors' distressed, defensive responses embarrassing, inducing in me the queasiness that I discussed above. Crossing the boundary from collegial, analytical, and constructive criticism to outright hostility, some such reviews display petty invective in defense of a preferred methodology to which the reviewer believes the author has not sufficiently conformed. These hostile reviews often resort to criticism of the authors' scholarly competence or, perhaps worse, the authors' intellectual or ideological agenda. Why should an author then have to defend his or her work in detail? Courtine's response to Behrent, for example, runs to seven single-spaced pages with twenty-five footnotes, and Behrent later asked if he could respond to the response, thus prompting in me fear (and loathing) of an infinite regress of responses. And the more hostile the reviewer, the more embarrassing the review and subsequent response, since it implies that authors routinely perceive their scholarly contributions aggressively, as a sort of combat, kind of like a medieval disputation (maybe some do). Such reviews also indict the competence and agendas of an array of scholars who might have read a book in manuscript form for an academic press and approved it for publication. A truly dismissive review, then, suggests the superiority of the reviewer and the intellectual inferiority not only of the author, but of colleagues who read and approved the book, typically in a blind review. Such immodesty is distasteful. Writing and scholarship are, after all, so very hard, and demolishing an author's work is by comparison so very easy.

Another example, chosen practically at random from *H-France Review*, is Douglas Porch's review of Jonathan Krause's *Early Trench Tactics in the French Army. The Second Battle of Artois, May-June 1915*. Obviously unconvinced by what he considers a revisionist approach, Porch's take-down of Krause drips with sarcasm. For example:

The fact that these "improvements" were "ultimately unsustainable" (p. 140) because they were acquired at the staggering costs of dead 350,000 *poilus* in 1915, the highest yearly tally of the war for the French, strikes Krause as a regrettable but necessary price of "learning." "Such experience," after all, "could not be gained by tactical inactivity." The alternative in Krause's view is that denied a chance of carrying out suicidal offensives, "[the soldiers] will quickly despair and conclude, as modern interpretation seems to have done, that the many attacks he is being asked to carry out, and perhaps the entire war itself, are ultimately pointless." By sending French soldiers to their deaths in the tens of thousands, with half-baked tactical and operational schemes anchored in vague aspirations of breakthrough, "French officers, almost universally," showed that they "cared very deeply about the lives and well-being of their men" (pp. 164-165).

So Porch here suggests, somewhat contemptuously in my reading, that Krause does not take seriously the human tragedy of World War I and, thus, in his review calls into question Krause's very morality. I do not know Krause, but I cannot imagine that the text truly gives one warrant for this allegation. But having at least intimated Krause's wickedness, Porch then in the rest of his review brings up the more usual assertions of a hostile review: that the evidence contradicts

the book's argument, the argument is not even clear, and (perhaps worst and most common of all) "there is nothing new here..." Krause's mortified response follows the typical embarrassing path:

Given our differences in interpretation, I had expected a pretty rough review. What I did not expect was that the review would contain so many gross mischaracterizations of my research. My actual arguments are further obscured by the reviewer's frequent use of sensational language (notice how often words like "slaughter," "tragic," and "suicidal" appear). What follows then is a selected analysis of certain comments made by the reviewer which I would like to rectify.

I do not intend to suggest that scholarly work, including my own, is in any way above criticism. Not too long ago, for example, I defended on social media a critical review of a methodologically speculative and experimental volume of essays edited by the eminent medievalist Jeffrey J. Cohen entitled *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects* (Oliphant Books, 2012). Although I both enjoyed and admired many of the essays in the volume for their methodological heterodoxy, and I completely understood Cohen's dismay at what he considered a hostile review that could negatively impact the careers of young scholars who chose bravely to attempt experimental forms of scholarship, I suggested that there was no obvious evidence in the review of hostile intent, which was professional and restrained. Instead the reviewer questioned the abandonment of traditional scholarly methodologies and wondered about the efficacy of more speculative approaches—a valid question. I sometimes wonder about them, too, even as I find them fascinating, worthwhile, and important.

In hostile reviews, antagonistic reviewers seem to bolster (consciously or not) their own sense of self by their aggressive critiques and then apparently think that the authors being reviewed will not and should not take the tactic personally. But this is impossible because we pour ourselves into our writing and scholarship. A book or an article is not something separate from our selves; it is an extension of both our professional and personal identities—and we all know it. So it would follow that the sort of respect we would routinely offer to a colleague *in person* ought to be paid also to that person's work. Alternately, we could just abandon the pretense of civility and give in to a sort of academic Hobbesian war of all against all.

Certainly, a code of enforced civility carries its own dangers—a peril made all too plain by the scandal at the University of Illinois surrounding the Steven Salaita case. However, I am not talking about some notion of civility enforced top-down and retroactively by university big-wigs eager to kowtow to major donors who are angry about a controversial hiring decision. Rather, I am referring to mutually recognized codes of professional behavior. If you go after a colleague with sarcastic insults and hostile rhetoric in order to augment your own sense of scholarly expertise, you look like a jerk. If that is your gig, then by all means go for it. But I do not want to engage in it myself since it is, in my opinion, not a productive means to advance scholarship, dialogue, and professional friendship—and absent these I am not sure I see the point of it all (hence my *nausée*). Obviously we are not here for the big bucks.

As an example of significant, but not hostile, criticism, I return to Carlyle's review of my book. Carlyle, for instance, praises my book as an "ambitiously conceived" work whose "main

achievement is its claim that Neostoic philosophy was at the root of a new and politically important moral idea or way of thinking that was forged and explored by early Enlightenment savants.” She also makes the strikingly perceptive comment, “There is more for this book to explore, but this is also an exploratory book. Its episodic and uneven treatment of the figures, subjects, and historiographies discussed here mean that it might better serve as a collection of essays tackling conceptions of the eighteenth-century natural philosopher as part of a moral elite.” In fact, I attempted to peddle the manuscript just so: as a collection of essays on the development of the moral idea of the sciences. But I found no takers in the academic publishing world. Rather than abandon the work, I revised it as a sustained monograph since it already had a strong chronological, if episodic, narrative, whereupon I finally garnered interest at the University of Delaware Press where I had a very positive publishing experience. The work undoubtedly contains significant artifacts of its earlier form.

I do have some quibbles with Carlyle’s review, but I would not want to belabor them. She, for instance, suggests that my book “promises a reinterpretation of the sciences in eighteenth-century France,” which, technically, it does not. The book promises a reinterpretation of the moral *idea* of the sciences, paraphrasing its title from a work by Leonard Marsak in 1959 and engaging with historiography that has tended, I believe, to interpret moral or social ideas about the sciences more proleptically than historically, or not historically enough. I conceived the book primarily as an intellectual history. I should also note that Martin Staum’s review of my book in the *American Historical Review* made more or less the same complaint: Staum nicely notes that the book “provides a fresh intellectual history of the idea of the cultivation of the sciences (really of natural philosophy) as it relates to individual virtue and political rationality.” But, he continues, “It is hardly, however, a reinterpretation of the significance of the sciences in the French Enlightenment.” Of course I never attempted anything so grand in this short volume as a complete reinterpretation of the significance of the sciences in the Enlightenment, nor did I knowingly state that I was attempting to do that. I wonder if I could have headed off some of these confusions by more precisely entitling the book “The *Moral* Idea of the Sciences Among a Relatively Small Group of Philosophes in the French Enlightenment.”

Carlyle also makes another statement that, to me, stands out, about Chapter Two: “The chapter trails off into interpretations of Fontenelle’s philosophical oeuvre—arguing, for instance, that his conception of man as a passionate creature presaged Nietzschean philosophy (p. 40)—and in so doing loses grip of a narrative that subsequent chapters fail to reclaim. From here on, the link between statist scientific programmes and Neostoic philosophy is rarely invoked and the reader is left to wonder if their link is more tenuous than the introduction suggests.” My analysis of Fontenelle’s moral philosophy and his attempt to deal with the problem of human passions, however, was essential to my entire book, so it is curious in my view to suggest that the chapter on it “trails off” anywhere. Furthermore, to suggest that I lose the grip on the narrative at that point and rarely invoke Neostoicism is confusing to me since I bring it up continuously throughout the book (as the index reveals). In a similar vein, Carlyle remarks regarding chapter three, “The author’s eagerness to describe the Physiocratic moment unfortunately obscures the more salient point that his ministry marked the culmination of Sorbière’s project to bring together reason and state.” But in fact, I barely mention Physiocracy in that chapter and am at pains to argue specifically the very point that Carlyle says I fail to argue. I can only conclude that

my continuous linking of Neostoic thought to the evolving moral idea of the sciences in the later eighteenth century was simply unconvincing to Carlyle.

Carlyle's more pointed criticisms are more difficult to answer, and they hinge on what she thinks I should have done in the book or what I failed to do. In large part this failure was in clarifying in what way the moral idea of the sciences that motivated Samuel Sorbière in the seventeenth century was the direct antecedent of the idea that motivated the marquis de Condorcet in the eighteenth. Whereas I had thought the book made this clear, Carlyle was not convinced and offers in her review multiple methodological suggestions about how one might possibly articulate or even better problematize historiographically the evolution of the idea that the sciences promote virtue. Her points are valid and constructive, and I took them to have been offered in a spirit of collegiality.

As my concessions to and minor disagreements with Carlyle's keen criticisms demonstrate, I am not at all opposed to spirited discussion and even dispute of historical, historiographical, methodological, or philosophical issues—they are not nausea inducing; they are in fact essential to arriving at understanding through effective dialogue. Historians should, therefore, absolutely hold their colleagues accountable for scholarly claims and arguments, as well as for problematic assertions. In his recent review for *H-France Review* of David Andress's edited volume *Experiencing the French Revolution*, for example, Ronald Schechter takes Andress to task for arguing that applying a "paradigm" (or some sort of contemporary theory or explanatory science) to explain how people experienced the French Revolution is not only epistemologically suspect but an "ethical error" since it prioritizes, or gives greater ontological weight, to our perspective than to those historical actors we are actually studying. Personally, I am not entirely sure such a practice is unethical, but it does apply an ironic trope to history-writing by suggesting that historians stand outside of history and are able to see true historical forces better than the poor Revolutionaries who are trapped inside of their history. I tend to think that hindsight is not even close to 20/20. At any rate, my high regard for Schechter as a historian and colleague only climbed higher upon reading his review, even though I agree with Andress that we should take the utterances of people in the past seriously as indicators of their feelings and experiences, rather than, or perhaps at least prior to, applying a trans-historical theory or paradigm to explain them. What Schechter found necessary to question in Andress's argument was Andress's defensive tone that led at least to the appearance of a lapse in collegiality by challenging the ethics of those with whom he disagrees. It may well be that Andress legitimately feels the possibility of "ideological coercion" slipping into academic history writing, but using phrases like "paradigm-mongering authors" might not be the best way to confront what one should presume in the absence of contrary evidence to be the honest, professional, and serious scholarship of one's colleagues. For his part, Andress responded courteously to Schechter's criticism to provide assurances that he did not mean to engage in any personal attack: "there seems to me to be a very great difference between arguing for the persuasive value of one's own interpretations, whatever they may happen to be, and arguing that coming to agreement on what should stand as a 'paradigm' is a good thing in itself. I do think that the latter is a rather odd thing to want to do, especially as it is something that historians have self-evidently never been good at sticking to. I don't think I have ever argued that such a view makes those holding it bad people, or bad historians—not least because some of them are definitely fine historians, and friends."

Like Address (and Schechter, for that matter), I am generally opposed to the hegemony of any particular methodology or philosophy, and especially the use of personal invective and uncollegial nastiness to defend it. As I stated above, I decided earlier in my career to attempt to eliminate in my scholarly criticism that aspect of professionalization that leads to the need/desire to situate oneself aggressively in a scholarly debate. In one's own scholarship, perhaps one must take a position; in reviews I am very hesitant to take a position if it means I cannot be open to the author's contribution but instead insist upon my own. Perhaps as a result, I have not written openly hostile book reviews or attacked the ideas, methods, or subjects of historians in any sort of personal or vituperative way. I prefer criticism to be constructive rather than destructive. I hope in my reviews to reveal as well as possible the strengths of a book, not to pick a fight or to mortify another scholar (I provide a link to reviews I have written at the end of this essay). I have too much sympathy for the difficulty of writing and doing scholarship, and I do not presume to infer the incompetence or inferiority of a work just because I might disagree with it or not understand it fully—although, honestly, I cannot really think of any book I have reviewed about which I had a truly negative feeling. If I did, I would possibly return the book and say I could not review it fairly. In the first review I ever wrote for publication, a double book review essay, I very dubiously criticized one of the books by a scholar far senior to me for its use of sources, mostly because I thought that was what a reviewer was supposed to do in book reviews. I have since regretted that act and feel *nausée* when I think about it—it feels to me like a lack of artistry and a failure to take my responsibility seriously. Nor have I repeated it. In more recent reviews I have found that by trying very hard to lay out a book's contribution I usually discover that I appreciate the book a lot more than my initial reaction would have suggested.

By contrast, in Jeremy Caradonna's review of my book on H-Albion my work is described thus: "unfocused," "under-stimulating," "less a monograph than a loosely related collection of essays" with a "blurry" argument, "fuzzy" in narrative and argumentation, using "dubious" sources. Only in the opening chapter, Caradonna opines, do I "come the closest to staking out a clearly defined thesis." Often, in his view, I "purport" to do one thing, but in reality only accomplish something much more mundane. And the overall effect is "underwhelming" by treading over "familiar" terrain. My favorite zinger of all is, "The author seems to have cherry-picked particular episodes from the Enlightenment in the hopes of reinterpreting the whole period, but the lasting feeling is having done math on a broken calculator: the correct buttons might be getting pushed, but it is impossible to know what it all adds up to." Bravo! I will admit to feeling a wave of fear and loathing upon reading that.

The usual response to such a hostile review would be an attempt to rebut its charges point by point citing evidence from the text so reviewed. But since there is no possibility of genuine dialogue here, I wonder instead what such an attack, somewhat similar to Behrent's mentioned above, is intended to achieve. Caradonna and I do not know each other, so there should not be any personal animosity. Were I to read a review like this of a book not my own I might be astonished that a reputable university press would publish a book that displayed such utter incompetence or that it would have received approval from scholars decades senior both to me and to Caradonna who read the book in manuscript and recommended it for publication. In fact, Caradonna's claims also impugn the judgment of other eminent scholars who read both the

revised and unrevised versions of the manuscript before it was submitted it to the University of Delaware Press.

But since this is my own book, I will instead grant some of Caradonna's criticisms, inasmuch as some of them are over-the-top expressions of criticisms made by Carlyle and Staum to which I have acceded: The book is far too short (I cut out a lot), does tread over some familiar territory (if that is a sin), and only makes a "modest" contribution to scholarship (how could I hope to do more?). Furthermore, Carlyle concurs with Caradonna's judgment that my argument is not sufficiently "sustained" and that my treatment of the historiography is not "even." As a result, I must consider the possibility that in various ways I failed to express my ideas clearly enough and did not engage sufficiently with some of the relevant scholarship, although Staum makes no such criticisms (maybe he just did not get around to it). But I maintain that the book is not unfocused; its narrative is strong; and it is grounded in the formal and informal writings of the primary historical actors with whom I was concerned. I confess I am not sure what to make of Caradonna's claim that I avoided some sources because I am "not much interested in critiques and conflict," since it presupposes an awareness of my inner thought processes. I chose a subject and wrote about it, not about something else. Caradonna's suggestion, then, that I look into prize contests is amusing since that is the subject of his own first book. I have noticed this sort of thing in hostile book reviews. As I write this, an example comes to mind of an author response that I am currently preparing for publication on *H-France Review*: Alicia Montoya, dismayed at a hostile review of her book *Medievalist Enlightenment: From Charles Perrault to Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (2013) wrote, "This seems to me to be the classic situation of a monograph on Topic A being reviewed by a specialist on Topic B, who objects that there is too little of Topic B in the book." A book review probably should not be viewed as an opportunity to promote one's own scholarly predilections. And anyway why offer revision "suggestions" for a book that is already published?

The heart of Caradonna's review is the most interesting to me, however, because it takes his hostility beyond me and into a wider arena where we academic spectators have been watching academic star-gladiators attempting to dismember a more significant and pugnacious academic opponent. The approach I take in my book, Caradonna notes, contrasts with the predominant "practice- or culture- or institution-based approach of recent historians" of the Enlightenment (presumably he means cultural history as it has often been practiced since the linguistic turn) and is too close methodologically for Caradonna's tastes to the approach taken by Jonathan Israel with his, as Caradonna puts it, "shameless focus on ideas and philosophers." And, although we might "marvel" at the erudition of Israel's "three-volume attack," (now, of course, four-volume), Caradonna opines, Israel's work has received "heavy scrutiny."

It is a dubious honor these days to be compared to Jonathan Israel, and although I suppose I should thank Caradonna for lumping me in with him, I doubt that he meant it as a compliment. I do appreciate Israel's passionate interest in intellectual history and the role of important ideas and the philosophers who articulate them in historical change. The dust-up or brouhaha (or whatever you want to call it) resulting from the publication of his gigantic four volumes on the history of the Enlightenment and Revolutionary Ideas, the various unreceptive reviews of them by well-respected historians, and his almost belligerent responses has been one of the more

exciting academic exchanges of the past fifteen years. As it has gone on, however, the exchange has come to seem to me more and more of a nausea-inducing, long-term crucifixion.

Here is not the space to go into an exhaustive analysis of the reviews of Israel's recent books, even if I was up to the task, but I do wonder not only about the combativeness of the exchange, but also about the very strangeness of it. On the one hand we have senior historians of unimpeachable reputation and achievement—Keith Baker, J.B. Shank, J. Kent Wright, David Bell, Lynn Hunt, and Jeremy Popkin, just to name a few—who insist in their remarkably detailed and powerfully negative (although not always overtly hostile) critiques that Israel has not only terribly misinterpreted the Enlightenment and its relationship to the French Revolution, but also has resurrected a disproven and obsolete idealist methodology. Baker bemoans, “How could a book this massive not get it right?” If we accept the building evidence of the reviews, Israel didn't get it right in *all four books*—nearing 4,000 pages of densely argued text representing more than twenty years of writing and research on his part. And why should we not accept this evidence, presented so convincingly by eminent and respected scholars of the history of the Enlightenment and the Revolutionary era who are more than capable of reading and evaluating scholarship in their fields? It is highly reasonable to trust their judgment.

On the other hand, however, I am troubled by their critiques. Leaving aside a number of sarcastic comments in some of these reviews (fortunately not most), from the earliest to the latest reviews, one of the central critiques these scholars make is that Israel ignores almost everything we understand about historical change, sweeping aside decades of historiography in order to argue that ideas are the great motors of history. In his 2002 review of Israel's first book on the subject (*Radical Enlightenment*, 2001), Shank wonders, “What is gained by returning to intellectual history of this sort? Is the next step for Enlightenment studies really the revival of idealist, philosophical narratives rooted in reified “isms” and contextualized through uncritical genealogies of authorial influence?” Shank quickly answers himself, “I do not think so.” In his recent review of Israel's latest volume (*Revolutionary Ideas* [2014]), Popkin adds, “Those who read Israel's reply to his critics will also know how intransigently he is committed to the proposition that ideas are the only real moving force in history.” And with regard to the Revolution itself, Popkin continues, “No one familiar with Israel's earlier work will be surprised to learn that he concludes that ‘Radical Enlightenment’ was incontrovertibly the one ‘big’ cause of the French Revolution.” Along the way from Shank to Popkin, the weight of criticism barrels down on Israel's apparently old-fashioned idealism like a steamroller: “He [Israel] attributes to philosophy... precedence as an agent of change, allowing it to eclipse economic, social, and cultural factors” (Harvey Chisick); “In the eyes of his critics, Israel's interpretation of the Enlightenment is a kind of academic juggernaut, careening destructively through the discipline, in the service of a false idol—Spinoza, supposed demiurge of modernity—and an unsustainable principle—the idea of an umbilical connection between metaphysical monism and political radicalism” (Wright); “Jonathan Israel insists that a ‘revolution of ideas’ was ‘the motor and shaping force’ of the French Revolution” (Hunt). The criticisms of Israel's idealism go on and on.

It seems impossible to me, however, that an intelligent person could hold such a simplistic view of historical change and historical agency. Israel is an accomplished scholar with a distinguished career, many well-regarded publications, and a prestigious position at the Institute for Advanced

Studies at Princeton. He cannot, therefore, hold simplistic views of historical change and historical agency. QED? In fact, in one of his latest responses to his critics (specifically Popkin), Israel responds directly to the charge of idealism, remarking: “I am very far from being committed to the ridiculous proposition that ‘ideas are the only real moving force in history’ and find this grotesque distortion typical of the review as a whole. There are many moving forces in history and innumerable causes of the French Revolution. I do think, however, that ideas and ideology are considerably more important when dealing with social grievances and great institutional transformations than many historians appear to think. I also believe intellectual history has often been conducted too much in self-imposed isolation and evince a keen interest in the processes involved around the intersection of ideas and ideology with political events and social developments.”

So I do not really know what to make of this whole kerfuffle. Is it that in thousands and thousands of pages of scholarship by eminent historians of the Enlightenment and the Revolution that Israel and his critics are just not actually communicating with each other? How is this possible? When I read the scholarship of Baker, or Wright, or Popkin, et al., I have never found them to be dismissive of the importance of ideas or ideology in history. And when I read Israel, I take him at his word that his interest in the writings of philosophers and philosophes like Spinoza or Condorcet is not to dismiss the role of social, cultural, and economic agency in historical change. This is not to suggest that there are not other subjects of contention in Israel’s oeuvre, but certainly the issues of methodology and historical agency are central to all critiques of Israel’s recent books. Since, therefore, there is obviously no intellectual denseness on one side or the other, I am left with the conclusion that communication between the two parties has failed. Despite intelligence and sincerity on both sides, there is some sort of cultural-professional incommensurability that thwarts clear dialogue and has resulted what we might call the “Jonathan Israel Affair.”

Is this what scholarship is all about? Is this the ultimate conclusion of treating scholarship as combative, as a series of attacks and counter-attacks, of treating contributions as opportunities for disputation, to be victorious or vanquished, instead of dialogue and collaboration? If so, then I do indeed feel existential nausea about it. My own response has been to adopt a somewhat flat ontology with regard to the objects of historical scholarship, in which a lot of things are equally important to human history—including ideas, which in my experience exercise a considerable amount of agency in the world. I chose to write a short book about an idea, not about academic prize contests or the culture of the Enlightenment, but I did not assert that academic prize contests or cultural practices were not important, too. This ontological position may separate me from Jonathan Israel, if I am to accept the verdict of many historians I both know and respect and whose work I have been reading since even before I went to graduate school—but I have assurances from Israel that it does not. To me, at any rate, an idea is just one interesting actant among many, and I see no reason why anyone should be ashamed (as Caradonna would suggest) to write about an idea or about the people who articulated it. As Andress writes in his response to Schechter, “There is an infinite variety of historical gardens” that we can cultivate. Israel is, therefore, free to adopt any methodology he wants; and his colleagues are free to accept or not accept it. And in that case, perhaps it would be helpful to think of the goal of scholarship not as victory or defeat, but as common understanding. One of my favorite philosophers, Epicurus, is said to have once said, “In a philosophical dispute, he gains most who is defeated, since he learns

most.” Perhaps we could apply that to historiographical disputes, too. Critique is vitally important to scholarship, for in that rational analysis of each other’s work, constructive critique helps to create the intellectual community of academic life wherein we debate our ideas and thus increase our understanding. Since hostile critique, in my experience, probably inhibits understanding and disrupts community, it appears to go against the reason and purpose of scholarship, at least as I see it. In Sartre’s *La Nausée*, the Autodidact at one point remarks, “I do not believe in God; his existence is denied by Science. But in the concentration camp I learned to believe in men.” Why? A little later in the dialogue, the Autodidact explains that when he and his fellows were all crushed together into a community of sufferers—as we all always are—“I felt that I loved these men as brothers, I would have embraced them all.”

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My own book reviews appear in various locations, but I have collected most of them here: <https://csc.academia.edu/MatthewAdkins>.

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