

## Response Page

The following responses were posted on the H-France discussion list in response to Jeremy Popkin's review of Jonathan Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from The Rights of Man to Robespierre* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014).

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The original review may be found on the H-France Review web site at:  
<http://www.h-france.net/vol15reviews/vol15no66popkin.pdf>

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14 June 2015

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A few basic facts:

1. Condorcet remained still a supporter of the Bourbon monarchy as late as the summer of 1788. No republican then.
2. How many "republicans" were there in France in 1788/1789? One? Two? Three? That does not a movement make.
3. "République" in the eighteenth century did not necessarily mean "republican"—i.e., a non-monarchical government. In its broadest sense it could mean a well-ordered government, one based on laws made with citizen participation.
4. There was one unequivocal democrat in 1789—that was Robespierre in the National Assembly, not just Brissot at his writing desk. And his role was more effective in extending the suffrage in the Constitution of 1791. One could be a democrat without being a republican then. Robespierre did not favor a republic until the monarchy's collapse in 1792. Does that make him a moderate? A radical? He certainly can be characterized as committed "to democracy and universal and equal human rights" which Israel otherwise attributes exclusively to Brissot et al, and certainly he cannot be accused of "lack of commitment to republican and democratic values," which is Israel's biased judgment.
5. It is shocking to underplay or overlook Brissot's strong support for France to initiate war in 1792; nothing more worked to undermine the original premises of the Revolution which Israel otherwise embraces. The Brissotins sowed and then shunned responsibility for their actions; the remaining Jacobins then had to confront the consequences of the disasters the war unleashed.
6. Israel's attribution of support for "radical Enlightenment thought" is very elastic. It can be stretched far to include every good principle known in the eighteenth century:

"What I am discussing is how far radical ideas shaped revolutionary democratic republicanism, rejection of the mystique of monarchy, press freedom, full liberty of expression, the Declaration of the Rights of Man, elimination of aristocracy, primogeniture and feudalism, universal male suffrage (1792), confiscation of the Church's property and eventually separation of Church and state, dissolution of most monasteries, black emancipation, emancipation of the Jews and Protestants, promoting women's rights, and the marriage reform and divorce law (1792)."

Then he restricts support of these ideas to a small groups of people. Can there be others, apart from those belonging to Brissot's faction, who supported these ideas? Was it not the strength of the Enlightenment that its ideas gained broad support across society? Otherwise how would these aims ever have been realized? And this line of argument still omits the impact of unfolding events on the choices legislators, publicists, popular groups made in the years of Revolution.

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14 June 2015

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There will always be enjoyable debates like this as long as historians insist on debating how many causes can dance on the head of a pin.

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15 June 2015

Paul Werner  
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Dear Jonathan Israel:

I am writing to you directly since any opinion diverging from that of a small, self-appointed coterie is systematically banned from H-France. I am confident that my opinion is far more widely shared than you might at first be led to believe.

I have been slowly working my way through your series on the Enlightenment, ever cautious to form a definitive opinion because my experience is mostly of the French Enlightenment and Revolution. All the same, I find your erudition rarely less than encyclopedic and — fare more important — your grasp of the theoretical issues at stake irreplaceable. Contrary to appearances it's not the small error or the inaccurate detail that bothers our own little censors, it's the development of an overall narrative, and worst of all, a narrative that has deep implications for the politics of the present. (Politics. There, I've said the dirty word. Enough to get myself banned.)

If anything, I would suggest to you that you may, at times, be unaware how deeply your narrative cuts into the long-cherished ideas of certain well-established, self-referential groups: hence, perhaps, your surprise at their hostility. For myself, and speaking for any number of silent readers, I welcome you as a fellow-traveller or, as some might prefer, a useful (not-so-idiot) idiot.

Looking forward to further critical reading,

Paul Werner

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16 June 2015

Tami Sarfatti  
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Dear H-France editors

I would like to thank the editors for posting Jonathan Israel's response to Popkin's review. Reading Popkin made me doubt my abilities to understand what I read and even doubt whether his review referred to the same book I had just finished. Jonathan Israel's response has restored my confidence.