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Steffen Ducheyne, ed. *Reassessing the Radical Enlightenment*. London and New York: Routledge, 2017. xii + 318 pp. Bibliography and index. \$49.95 (pb). ISBN 978-1-138-28004-5.

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For generations of academics and students alike, the Enlightenment has been one of the staples of the university curriculum, standing alongside the Renaissance, the reformations, and the other great cultural and intellectual movements of the early modern world. Scholarly approaches to the Enlightenment were once dominated by an emphasis on a handful of great thinkers, predominantly British and French, foregrounding Hume, Montesquieu, d'Holbach and Voltaire, to name just a few, and focusing upon a period roughly spanning the years 1720-70. Over the last fifty years, that model has been challenged on every level. Following the call to study the Enlightenment in its national context, scholars from Poland to Portugal have unearthed their own distinct versions of a wider movement. That national focus has, in turn, been challenged by efforts to think transnationally or globally. As the geographical breadth of Enlightenment study has widened, so too has its depth. Successive waves of social and cultural historians have looked down from the lofty heights of the great *philosophes* to a forgotten world of savants and hacks, many of whom, though now forgotten, were celebrated in their day, and formed part of a wider movement blossoming amidst the booming world of print and new forms of sociability made possible by the economic and commercial expansion of the eighteenth century. If in the popular mind, it is still Voltaire and his anti-clerical war cry "Écrasez l'infâme!" that are synonymous with the Enlightenment, even that relationship has been challenged. Our attention has been drawn to the existence of what has been termed a Christian Enlightenment as well as that of a more predictable counter-Enlightenment. These are only some of the rich mines that scholars have been digging, but it is probably fair to say that few have been more productive, or a greater cause of dispute, than the concept of a Radical Enlightenment.

Despite the emphasis on the writings of the eighteenth-century *philosophes*, it has long been known that new and potentially revolutionary religious and political ideas were circulating long before the supposed heyday of the High Enlightenment. When, for example, Paul Hazard wrote of what he termed *La crise de la conscience européenne* in 1935, he situated it in the generation or so before 1720.[1] However, if scholars have often appreciated the significance of the earlier period of intellectual ferment, it was initially thanks to the work of Margaret C. Jacob that the concept of Radical Enlightenment came to prominence. In 1981, she published a seminal work that argued that it was during the seventeenth century that an intellectual movement hostile to monarchical absolutism and religious orthodoxy first emerged.[2] Jacob looked to English sources in particular, stressing the importance of the Commonwealth tradition and of factors such as a relatively free press in an unusually, for the period, urban milieu. Her vision was of a world of freethinkers nourished by the scientific discoveries of Newton. They pointed in a radical republican and materialist direction that contrasted with the comparatively moderate stance of later *philosophes* like Voltaire who, while critical of revealed religion, were prepared to put their faith in a reforming monarchy. If Jacob's book helped to put the concept of

the Radical Enlightenment on the map, the subsequent publications of Jonathan I. Israel have ensured that it has become one of the most contested areas of contemporary historiographical debate.^[3] Put simply, he too is convinced that there was a Radical Enlightenment, distinct from a more moderate strand that was wedded to the political status quo, which had distinctly revolutionary implications for the future. Unlike Jacob, he does not look to the English commonwealth tradition or to the influence of pantheists and freethinkers, but rather to what he believes was the decisive role of Dutch radicals, principally, Baruch Spinoza, and his exposition of one substance monism. Far from being a distant ancestor of the Enlightenment, Israel presents Spinoza and those who shared his position as central to its development and ultimately to that of revolutionary republicanism in France and America. In a few words, it is impossible to do justice to the sophistication or depth of Israel's scholarship, which is presented in four weighty tomes, attracting both admiration and fierce criticism from his many reviewers.

The appearance of this volume is therefore to be welcomed because it brings together a group of experts in order to offer an overview of the current state of the debate and to look in detail at areas of contention. Collections of essays are notoriously something of a curate's egg, but Steffen Ducheyne is to be congratulated for assembling a distinguished and interdisciplinary team of historians and philosophers and, more importantly, for persuading them to keep to their brief. The book is divided into three parts. The first contains four essays seeking to provide an overview of the "big picture" or the definition and nature of the Radical Enlightenment. The second contains five chapters discussing its origins and development circa 1660-1720, and the final section containing six essays looks at the later period and the impact of the movement in Europe and North America. Ducheyne introduces the book with a useful short overview of the Radical Enlightenment debate, which is followed by chapters written by Jacob and Israel. The two authors set out their personal visions of the Radical Enlightenment, while considering how their ideas have developed since they were first published. Their contributions provide the leitmotif running through the volume with the other authors taking up a critical stance relative to their respective works. The first part of the book concludes with chapters by Harvey Chiswick and Frederick Stjernfelt. The latter investigates the contemporary origins and subsequent trajectory of the concept of Radical Enlightenment, while Chiswick probes the alleged dichotomy between radical and moderate enlightenments, via the emblematic figure of baron d'Holbach, who, as a materialist and an atheist, is usually placed firmly in the radical camp. By looking closely at d'Holbach's attitudes towards concepts such as democracy, equality, slavery, and revolution, Chiswick challenges a simple binary approach towards the Enlightenment. He proposes instead a more fluid, and for this reviewer convincing, model in which d'Holbach, Condorcet, Diderot, Voltaire and others were not wedded to a "moderate" or a "radical" stance. Chiswick also seems on firm ground when he challenges Israel's argument that those whom he identifies as radical were seeking to overthrow the existing order and were ultimately the principal cause of the French Revolution. Whatever one's view of the Radical Enlightenment thesis, there is no doubt that the attempt to highlight the significance of ideas in the gestation of the French, and other, revolutionary movements is to be welcomed. To be convincing, however, these ideas have to be situated within context. The moment that the ideas and actions of individuals, or the course of events, are examined in detail, the waters are liable to become muddied. To be fair to Israel, in his contribution to this volume, he acknowledges that any study of the Radical Enlightenment "must involve interweaving the history of ideas with detailed investigation of specific social, cultural, and political contexts" (p. 40), and Chiswick's essay gives a useful indication of where such studies are likely to lead.

In part two of the book, the contributors explore the origins of the Radical Enlightenment in greater depth, concentrating upon Spinoza and his influence as well as the ideas of other key figures such as John Toland and Jean Meslier. As one might expect, the authors write with an eye on the work of Israel in particular, and, while some are critical of aspects of his interpretation, there is nevertheless a broad consensus that recognizes the significance of Spinoza for the development of the Radical Enlightenment. In his chapter, Ian Leake, for example, stresses the influence of Spinoza on the writings of John Toland and specifically his *Origines Judaicae* of 1709, suggesting that, if anything, the "extent of Spinozistic

influence may have been underestimated” (p. 154). Nancy Levene and Beth Lord take a closer look at Spinoza’s materialism and its relationship to his ideas on religion, authority, and inequality, and, while noting that he should not be seen in isolation, remind us that many of his positions remain radical today. Lord, however, uses Spinoza’s views on the state of nature to challenge Israel’s model of egalitarianism following from substance monism. She argues instead that for Spinoza, there is “no continuity of ‘natural equality’ between the state of Nature and the civil state; instead there is a continuity of ‘natural right’, which is fundamentally unequal” (p. 138). Charles Devellenes switches the attention away from Spinoza in a lively chapter examining the ideas of the atheist priest Jean Meslier, while reflecting on the connection between irreligion and political radicalism present in both the works of Israel and Jacob. Devellenes effectively demolishes the anachronistic arguments of those who would style Meslier as a communist, arguing persuasively that he should be seen as a radical republican. While stopping short of proposing an automatic progression from radical religious stance to a radical political one, Devellenes shows that in the case of Meslier, at least, there were strong resonances between the two positions.

In the final section of the book, the focus shifts to the later eighteenth century and contains several notable contributions. Eric Palmer is another to question the sharp dichotomy between radical and moderate enlightenments, both by indicating the porous boundaries between them and emphasizing the importance of a significant Christian contribution to the cultural and intellectual world of the early eighteenth century that has tended to be obscured by later revolutionary anti-clericalism. Falk Wunderlich comes to similar conclusions in his examination of materialist thought at the University of Göttingen, and these essays raise the related question of whether the whole Radical versus Moderate Enlightenment debate is ultimately an artificial one, deriving in large measure from the perspective of the French Revolution rather than reflecting the reality of the previous century. Unburdened by hindsight, eighteenth-century European intellectuals were not confined by the boundaries of later academic scholarship. Given that they were by nature curious, and frequently gregarious, the circulation, exchange, formulation, and reformulation of ideas was an on-going process. Thus, quite when, or if, distinct and rigid radical or moderate positions developed is open to debate. Indeed, even those who might seem to be most unquestionably “Radical” could not be said to adhere to a single “Radical programme,” and, in addition to the case of d’Holbach already cited, Devin J. Vartija and Jennifer J. Davis make similar claims for luminaries such as Buffon, Condorcet, and Diderot, whose attitudes to gender, racial, or political equality cannot be neatly pigeon-holed into a moderate or a radical camp. Given the passions stirred by these debates, these and other arguments will run and run, but this volume will, at least, give both professional scholars and students a valuable introduction to a complex and contentious field.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Steffen Ducheyne, “Introduction”

Jonathan I. Israel, “Radical Enlightenment’ – A Game-Changing Concept”

Margaret C. Jacob, “The Radical Enlightenment: A Heavenly City with Many Mansions”

Harvey Chisick, “Of Radical and Moderate Enlightenment”

Frederik Stjernfelt, “The Emergence of the ‘Radical Enlightenment’ in Humanist Scholarship”

Nancy Levene, “Spinoza the Radical”

Beth Lord, “Spinoza on Natural Inequality and the Fiction of Moral Equality”

Ian Leask, “John Toland’s *Origines Judaicae*: Speaking for Spinoza?”

Charles Devellennes, “Radical Atheism: Jean Meslier in Context”

Wiep van Bunge, “The Waning of the Radical Enlightenment in the Dutch Republic”

Eric Palmer, “Less Radical Enlightenment: A Christian Wing of the French Enlightenment”

Falk Wunderlich, “Materialism at the University of Göttingen: Between Moderate and Radical Enlightenment”

Ultán Gillen, “Radical Enlightenment and Revolution in Late Eighteenth-Century Ireland”

Winfried Schröder, “De Sade – An Heir to the Radical Enlightenment?”

Devin Vartija, “Empathy, Equality, and the Radical Enlightenment”

Jennifer J. Davis, “The Radical Enlightenment and Movements for Women’s Equality in Europe and the Americas (1715–1825)”

NOTES

[1] Paul Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne, 1680-1715* (Paris: Gallimard, 1935), available in English as *The Crisis of the European Mind, 1680-1715*, trans. J. Lewis May (New York: New York Review of Books, 2013).

[2] Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981).

[3] Among several works, see especially Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

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