

H-France Forum

Volume 15 (2020), Issue 3, #1

Margaret C. Jacob, *The Secular Enlightenment*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. Xii + 360 pages. \$29.95 (cl). ISBN: 978-0691161327.

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As I carried around a book entitled *The Secular Enlightenment*, several times colleagues in other fields asked me, “Is there any other kind?” To respond, one would have to explain the multiple variants of different, and complementary, Enlightenments for which historians have argued over the past generation. These variants would include the “High Enlightenment,” “Enlightenments in national context,” the “Jewish Enlightenment,” the “Catholic Enlightenment,” the “Skeptical Enlightenment,” and of course, the variant probably most frequently discussed today, the “Radical Enlightenment.”[1] But to give such an answer would not do justice to the aim of Margaret Jacob’s new book, which is not to describe a secular variant of the Enlightenment but rather to make the case for a certain idea of the Enlightenment, generally.

The “Radical Enlightenment” was a term first put forth by Jacob herself, nearly 40 years ago, in a book which might be said to have brought the *Past & Present* school of social history to Enlightenment historiography.[2] *Radical Enlightenment* highlighted the importance of various dissident and freethinking groups outside of the “Establishment” (in the original sense of the term) in setting forth a radical and even revolutionary challenge to the intellectual, social and, eventually, political order. She also argued in that book for the importance of international networks, notably the Masonic orders, other associative bodies such as the Knights of Jubilation, and the francophone Huguenot diaspora, in the transmission of this challenge from the context of the English revolution to the Netherlands and thence to the “High Enlightenment” associated with France. Having seen her title and catchphrase repurposed to stand for a very different approach and argument, Jacob in the present volume reasserts her long standing interpretation, at once transnational and history-from-below. While it would overstate the case to call this book her masterpiece, *The Secular Enlightenment* is certainly a fitting summation of over forty years of immensely productive, relentlessly original and consistently readable works on the intellectual and political culture of the eighteenth century. Clearly intended to carry forward her intellectual legacy, this book about the past addresses “the future,” an audience referenced in both the opening dedication and the last line of the conclusion.

Jacob states her major propositions clearly and consistently, making this a very readable standalone book for someone new to the field; indeed, I assigned it successfully as the main text in an undergraduate seminar on the Enlightenment last fall. But for initiated readers, such as those of H-France, the book offers an important intervention in the past generation of social, political, and economic history about the eighteenth century. In the opening lines, Jacob defines “The Enlightenment” as “an eighteenth-century movement ...that made the secular world its point of departure,” defining “secular” as a “life lived without constant reference to God” (p. 1) By using the definite article, by specifying the time period, and by insisting on the secular nature of experience, Jacob takes clear positions in that historiography. She sets her argument against

what she has referred to as the “post-war polemics” against the Enlightenment; against insufficiently historicized interpretations of “Enlightenment” as a tendency across western history; and against attempts to disassemble the Enlightenment.[3]

At the same time, her presentation of “the Enlightenment” is by no means as chronologically static, uniform, or uninterested in identifying underlying causes or longer term consequences. Indeed, for Jacob, for the Enlightenment to be understood as “secular,” we must first understand the context in which “Religion” took on a new meaning, no longer a single doctrine of faith, but now as a category of “cultural practice [which] varied across time and space” (p. 5). Moreover, we must understand how the concept of “time” was revised from an externally created framework around the entirety of human existence into a discrete unit of measurement that provided structure to support individual agency. Finally, Jacob’s interpretation of “the Secular Enlightenment” requires us first to consider the dynamic mobility, both social and geographical, of the age. Thus, for Jacob, the Enlightenment is “secular” not only in the sense of *laïque* because it opened up conceptual categories of public life autonomous from religious belief, authority or, worship, but also in the *Annaliste* sense of a “secular” trend, meaning occurring slowly or repeatedly across a long period of time and across a wide expanse of space.

Indeed, the first three chapters make the case for that breadth as the underlying cause and essential characteristic of the Enlightenment, departing from an assertion that the movement emerged as an “inventive response” to changes in “spatial realities” and the “spatial order.” Here Jacob refers only in passing to the concept of “public space” but more specifically the new awareness of both cosmology and geography bequeathed by the preceding two centuries. It was then not a crisis of conscience within theological debates or a transformation in the manner of expressing personal belief and piety which brought about the appearance of a secular cultural tendency; rather it was the “unintended consequence of commercial expansion” and a European “imperial impulse” which made it possible, even necessary, to “make sense” of the world in ways “previously unimaginable” (pp. 6, 11). She makes this case in three, richly detailed yet tightly argued chapters, describing respectively how new ideas about space, time and mobility were expressed, interpreted, adapted and transmitted. In these chapters, Jacob introduces the reader to a rich cast of characters. Although in many cases known to readers of eighteenth-century historiography, these personages remain sufficiently outside the well-established canon that Jacob can plausibly present them as “small voices ...relatively unknown in our day” (p. 88). Her characters are chosen not for their renown or demonstrated influence on their time, but by how their writings—published as well as manuscript, treatises as well as memoirs or correspondence—illustrate the active process of transmission of new knowledge. Many are recognizable, by name or type, from Jacob’s earlier works, such as the Dutch francophone Huguenot diaspora, the Masons, the “Knights of the Jubilation” of the Hague and its infamously heretical, clandestine publishing program, English Dissenters, and Low Church natural theologians.

In this first part of the book, Jacob attributes the emergence of the Enlightenment to the failure of the English Puritans to sustain a Commonwealth that would be an expression of the sacred. Instead of a world governed by divine intervention, either explicit through miracles or implicit through predestination, the latter decades of the seventeenth century produced a new conception of temporality, in which the individual is responsible for actions “in the world and in time.” This

new awareness of time is evident in geological treatises that sought to date the formation of the world independently of Scripture, almanacs that sought to predict seasons and weather, and new timekeeping technologies (more precise clocks and watches) which made punctuality a meaningful concept.

This reconceived world, in turn, found insufficient the traditional moral and intellectual leadership of the clergy, an opening into which, Jacob tells us, stepped “the philosophers” whose “willingness to engage in intellectual exploration” and “spirit of curiosity” (pp. 75, 82) made possible, in chapter 3, the concept of living “secular lives.” To describe this development, she offers a wide range of set-piece case studies, notably Henry Wyndham and Johann Herder, as well as a lesser-known cast of “travelers,” and “provocative thinkers” notable for their polylingualism, cosmopolitanism, high degree of social and geographic mobility, and insatiable desire for new knowledge. At the same time, she concludes this first part of the book, their enthusiasm for the transformative potential of new knowledge attracted an antithetical response, obstacles to free thought and expression erected by absolutist states.

The next four chapters, occupying roughly half the book, offer an overview of national variations on this confrontation between secular, Enlightened thinking and the intellectual and political obstacles of established political and religious authority. In these chapters, we meet French materialists; Scottish academics; German-speaking seminarians, musicians and dramatists; and Italian reformers who lived the secular enlightenment. Here Jacob again develops, through a wide range of lively examples that make her argument with subtlety and a relative economy of words, another of her long-standing arguments: the importance of the spaces of urban sociability for the spread of Enlightened ideas. Paris, Edinburgh, Berlin, Vienna, Naples, and then Milan, successively provide the setting for a sequence of memorable figures, with her emphasis less on the production of original texts than on modes of transmission. Of these figures, the newest and perhaps most memorable is the Widow Stockdorff, a Strasbourg bookseller and heroic champion of materialism, whose brief account illustrates Jacob’s desire to demonstrate the social and geographic breadth of participation in the dissemination of challenging ideas. Drawing heavily on secondary sources, Jacob crafts a highly readable synthesis, punctuated by sufficiently engaging figures, and sufficiently broad in social and geographical coverage, yet manageable in length, to provide a suitable overview for undergraduates (for whose benefit a glossary of personal names is included as an appendix).

The final chapter, on the 1790s, as well as the Epilogue, brings to the fore another theme latent throughout all her work and present in this book: the relationship of the secular Enlightenment to democratic politics. After 1789, she argues, “time seemed to accelerate” and her subject is no longer “enlightened ideas” but “the new radical impulse,” “social radicalism,” “unconventional experimentation,” and the “advocates for democracy” (pp. 238, 240, 249). In a brief, concluding overview of radicalism in the contexts of Britain, the American Republic, the French Revolution, the Dutch Republic, and unrest in Naples and German lands, Jacob appears to be resuscitating the argument uniting the later eighteenth century as an age of both Enlightenment and democratic revolution.

However, such a conclusion raises several quandaries for advanced readers. Seeming to contradict the thrust of her argument for the democratizing tendencies of the Enlightenment, she

opens her conclusion stating that it is only in the “biased logic” of critics of the French Revolution that “Enlightenment deists” became “democrats” (p. 236). To resolve this seeming contradiction, one must turn to the Epilogue, where she explains that the democratic legacy of the secular Enlightenment is less evident in the short-term outbreak of political revolution in the eighteenth century than in the “personal transformations and political structures” which established an enduring culture of resistance to political repression. The Enlightenment, we learn, exerted its influence in the long term: “Where enlightened principles survived the repression of the 1790s, democracy had a better chance of emerging” (p. 261). She argues that in central and eastern Europe, where Enlightenment ideals were less well established before the end of the century, liberal democracy has been more vulnerable in the longer term, contrasting the German and Italian experience with Nazism and fascism with the Netherlands, and highlighting the current “resurgent xenophobia and resurgent nationalism” in some parts of eastern Europe. This somewhat surprising conclusion appears to imply a secular *Sonderweg*, based upon national cultural distinctions and which much of the foregoing book has seemed to argue against.

Throughout the book, Jacob makes a strong case for her interpretation while generally avoiding being drawn into the many potentially distracting controversies currently dividing the field. Although arguing for the Enlightenment’s significance beyond elites of the court and major academies, she rightly sidesteps reifications of “High” and “Low.” Although emphasizing the importance of instances of sociability and of print, she avoids almost entirely the issue of “the public” or “public sphere” and does not engage on the recent, and increasingly personalized, disputes over the “salons.” Above all, she is particularly deft in avoiding direct engagement with romanticized re-interpretations of the “radical” Enlightenment, which posit intellectually authentic materialists against moderating influences of elite patrons, political and ecclesiastical authorities and the reading public. A less tactical and potentially regrettable lacuna is discussion of the scholarly literature on book sales and personal libraries, which suggest an eighteenth-century European culture decidedly still very much invested in religious literature.[4]

Jacob is by no means a conflict averse scholar, so this light touch must be considered intentional and strategic. Indeed, it is best understood as a move consistent with her account of the Enlightenment as an intellectual culture rather than an ideology, characterized by a range of positions on a continuum, from Spinozist materialism to Kantian rationalism to moderate constitutionalism and political reformism, all of which she considers authentic expressions of a “secular Enlightenment.” By taking such a non-confrontational approach, Jacob has given us a book that presents an account of the Enlightenment at once readable and usable, a convincing case for the social breadth of the Enlightenment, for secular thought as its essential characteristic, and for its primary legacy being a democratic political culture. She has done so with historical sensitivity and restraint. With the erudition and sly wit of Jean Rousset de Missy, she provides a *recueil* rich with observations, anecdotes, and comments, but with the rigor and skepticism of her enduring hero, Isaac Newton, avoids allowing her account of the Enlightenment to be reduced to a small number of underlying or overarching theses. Feigning no grandiose or ahistorical case for Enlightenment reason, science, and humanism, Jacob is content to let the advocates of the secular Enlightenment speak to the future for themselves.

NOTES

[1] Roy Porter, ed., *Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Schmucl Feiner, *The Jewish Enlightenment* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Ulirch Lehner, *The Catholic Enlightenment: Forgotten History of a Global Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Jeffrey Burson and Anton Matytsin, *The Skeptical Enlightenment: Doubt and Uncertainty in the Age of Reason* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation/ Liverpool University Press: 2019); Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

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

[3] Although not referenced in the book, Jacob has in other writings, public talks, and seminars contrasted her version of the Enlightenment against the “post-war polemics” which she has associated with Jacob L Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* 2 vols. (London: Secker & Warburg, 1952); Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), first edition 1947.

[4] The most recent, and comprehensive, contributions to this literature, which emphasizes the enduring significance of religious literature, include Mark Curran, *The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe I: Selling Enlightenment* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018) and Simon Burrows, *The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe II: Enlightenment Best-sellers* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

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