

H-France Forum

Volume 15 (2020), Issue 3, #3

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

Review Essay by Alicia C. Montoya, Radboud University, The Netherlands

This is an immensely satisfying book, which I read with enjoyment and immediately recommended to several of my students working on eighteenth-century intellectual history. Not only is *The Secular Enlightenment* a highly readable work of scholarship, one also dares hope it might appeal to a crossover, non-academic audience. With its sweeping scope and geographically ambitious framework, it provides a welcome synthesis in a scholarly landscape where the splintering of the Enlightenment into so many distinct sub-Enlightenments—Radical, moderate, religious, Catholic—threatens the coherence of the narratives we use to make sense of the past. From a pedagogical perspective, then, Jacob’s book performs a much-needed service. But it does more than that: it unites clarity of vision with the necessary modernization of a concept that has become so worn that there have been some calls to discard it altogether. There is much to like in the author’s expansive, inclusive approach. I particularly enjoyed the opening chapter’s lively cast of characters, with its references to hitherto overlooked, bit players in eighteenth-century social history that are bound to resonate with new audiences. These include “cabarets and clubs where men made marriages together,” imaginary kingdoms “inhabited by buggers, tribades (lesbians), ‘batdaches’ (male prostitutes), and knights of the Manchette, a common term used for male homosexual gatherings,” as well as the Negro in the King’s Guard identified as one of the earliest French members of a Paris Freemasons lodge, and the hundreds of free blacks who congregated in the streets of eighteenth-century Amsterdam (pp. 19, 28). Such details provide a fine-grained, evocative background to what is essentially an intellectual history of the Enlightenment.

The book’s great strength is that it succeeds in negotiating a crucial tension inherent in many histories of the Enlightenment: the tension between conceiving the Enlightenment as a specific content or set of ideas, as in Peter Gay and Jonathan Israel-style intellectual history, or rather, as a historical, socio-cultural process, as in the work of Robert Darnton, Antoine Lilti and others. Jacob, as a seasoned practitioner of both schools, manages to walk a fine line between the two, uniting rich historical contextualizations, including a host of lesser-known players, publishers and journalists, to a grander history-of-ideas narrative. This she does by defining her Enlightenment from the outset as an and/and affair: “an eighteenth-century movement of *ideas and practices* that made the secular world its point of departure” (p. 1; my emphasis). While we do not know whether the men who performed marriage ceremonies in cabarets were political progressives themselves (as one might expect, as potential objects of religious and political persecution), this does not finally matter in Jacob’s account, since their practices contributed to chipping away at traditional norms. And even if the Africans living in Amsterdam were not active participants in contemporary debates about slavery and human rights, their presence contributed to creating a context for such discussions, she suggests, as part of a typically urban setting characterized by “unprecedented displays of the outrageous, daring, and free” (p. 20). Jacob thus convincingly gives agency to historical actors who have hitherto remained silent because they left behind no textual productions of their own, yet may have contributed significantly through their actions to broader processes of cultural change.

But despite these precautions, *The Secular Enlightenment* does not altogether avoid the lure of creating coherence where a view from the ground might see primarily a jumbled collection of disparate players and ideas. In order to impose narrative unity onto her account, Jacob takes as a federating notion the concept of materialism, with its associated theories of atomism and vitalism, and links this to eighteenth-century processes of secularization and ideas about political reform. With admirable nuance, she understands secularism in a Taylorian sense not as the retreat of religion from everyday experience, but as the cordoning-off of religion to its own distinct sphere of influence. Hence, acknowledging recent scholarship on the religious Enlightenment, she pays due credit to the ideas of both Catholic and Protestant thinkers, and to the influence of physico-theology particularly in Protestant Europe. But this is, perhaps, not quite enough. For this grand narrative necessarily privileges players who fit best into this secular, somewhat radical-leaning Enlightenment mold and ignores others. Similarly, it privileges materialist and politically progressive ideas while neglecting others, even though these ideas may sometimes co-exist in the writings of the same author. Such selectivity inevitably runs the risk of smoothing over differences, and presenting a picture of intellectual unity where, in fact, internal incoherence might better describe the tenor of much Enlightenment intellectual debate. Thinkers who were religiously progressive were not necessarily also politically so, while classic republicanism could very well go together with a traditional religious worldview. The issue of selectivity in turn raises the notoriously delicate issue of representativeness, and how the different parts Jacob describes fit into the whole. For example, when she notes that the 1730 raids on bookstores of Namur (in the then Austrian Netherlands) turned up “French translations of works by John Locke and Machiavelli, along with the anonymous and risqué” (pp. 20-21), Voltaire and fashionable encyclopedias, one wonders what else was found in these bookstores, and how “the anonymous and risqué” related to the possibly thousands of copies of Catholic catechisms and devotional works the same stores most likely also carried.[1] What, in other words, was the actual significance and impact of the secular Enlightenment for the larger cultural context in which it developed?

The Secular Enlightenment is on its shakiest ground when, adopting a history of the book perspective, it addresses questions about the range and impact of books conveying radical ideas. Comments about the “Dutch-centered international commerce in forbidden books” (p. 25) elide the fact that most books were forbidden not because of their radical content but for commercially protectionist, intellectual property reasons.[2] Odder still are statements such as one about a volume attributed to Robert Dodsley, *The Oeconomy of Human Life: Translated from an Indian Manuscript* (1750), that “no text we can associate with the Enlightenment went through more editions and translations, printed and manuscript, with copies in German, Hungarian, Welsh, and so on” (p. 71). No other text: really? And the final argument about the Enlightenment “seepage of ideas” in chapter 3, “Secular lives,” purportedly addressing “ordinary voices,” comes as a bit of a surprise, given that this chapter focused on the writings of dramatist-translator Luise Gottsched, gentleman tourist Henry Penruddocke Wyndham, author Robert Dodsley, chaplain diarist Samuel Dickenson, the Anglo-Irish Edgeworth family (of which novelist Maria became the most famous member), Glasgow university professor John Anderson, Dutch freethinking memorialist Isabella de Moerloose, Romantic theorist Johann Herder, *salonnière* Suzanne Necker, and Caribbean-born poet Evariste Parry—hardly the “relatively unknown” or “small voices” (Jacob’s terms) one would expect. The conclusion that the Enlightenment was basically a high-brow affair seems an inescapable one, but actually does not detract from Jacob’s overall intellectual-history argument. It is a pity, then, that wishful thinking about the penetration of Enlightenment ideas should occasionally cloud

such an otherwise fascinating, wide-ranging chapter on the flow of ideas in eighteenth-century Europe.

The second, much broader issue raised by Jacob's synthesizing account, and one that I think is generic to any account of a movement as vast as "the Enlightenment" and its influence on "the Western world" (as the book's dust-jacket ambitiously proclaims), concerns the present state of play in global scholarship. Jacob does not make any claim to doing global history—despite a few brief excursions to the Americas—but I would contend that doing European history, as she does attempt, proves difficult enough. Fairly predictably, her account focuses primarily on France, whose *philosophes* have traditionally been viewed as a prime locus of the Enlightenment movement, and the English-speaking world, and further homes in specifically on the urban settings where intellectual debates mostly took place. Thus after three framing, broadly conceived chapters, she devotes one chapter to Paris (chapter 4), one to Edinburgh (chapter 5), one to Berlin and Vienna (chapter 6) and one to Naples and Milan (chapter 7). The final chapter, on the 1790s, returns to France and various revolutionary movements as they spread across Europe and the Americas. The resulting map is a bit uneven. Eastern and central Europe are missing, Jacob explains, because of their low literacy rates. The absence of south-eastern Europe appears justified by its allegiance to the Ottoman empire (even if Enlightenment ideas did penetrate there, too). The absence of the Iberian peninsula, and the vast American empire that lay beyond, is more surprising. This absence is surely due, in part at least, to existing geopolitical power imbalances in present-day academia, that overwhelmingly privilege English-language scholarship and perspectives over others.[3] The relative difficulty that U.S.-based scholars have in accessing non-Anglo material, also due to language barriers, means that a wealth of scholarship remains untapped that has increasingly questioned inherited narratives about southern European backwardness and the exclusion of Iberian and Hispanic material from accounts of the Enlightenment.[4]

But beyond these omissions, and also related to inequalities in global scholarly production and its availability to English-speaking students of the eighteenth century, is the persistence in some English-language historiography of an implicit northern-European bias and an accompanying Protestant master narrative of modernity that can lead to accounts unhelpfully framed in terms of a Protestant-Catholic binary. This master narrative is expressed here in subtle ways, ranging from the assertion in the prologue that present-day scholarship now "even" recognizes a Catholic Enlightenment (implying that Catholicism and Enlightenment are somehow incompatible) to suggestive wording, for example referencing "reformed Catholicism"—which sounds to my perhaps overly sensitive ears a bit too much like the similarly equivocal "moderate Islam." Similarly, the many references to the Inquisition, whether consciously or not, appeal to worn-out clichés and knee-jerk reactions associated with the long-lived *leyenda negra*. Yet recent scholarship has demonstrated the striking discrepancies between eighteenth-century Inquisitorial censorship theory and practice, and has increasingly also addressed Protestant regimes of censorship, in which punishments for blasphemy might include such typically "Catholic" measures as tearing out the culprit's tongue and decapitation.[5] Book-burning, after all, was a supra-confessional practice. As a final example of this subtly Protestant bias, Jacob's discussion of the Huguenot effort to relativize religions in Jean-Frédéric Bernard and Bernard Picart's *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* (1723-43) describes it as "the exact opposite of what the Christian missionaries at work on every continent had intended" (p. 13). While not roughly speaking an inaccurate statement, this does seem at odds with the rich historiography on the writings of the Jesuit missions in China or recent work on how early-modern Catholic

scholarly engagements with Islam preceded and lay the groundwork for later, Enlightenment revisions.[6]

In short, while Margaret Jacob's *Secular Enlightenment* grapples with a number of issues that are generic to any synthetic account of a cultural movement as wide-ranging as the Enlightenment, it remains a fascinating book, that brings together much new material in a highly readable, accessible form. The author should be lauded for taking on the challenge of breathing new life into one of the crucial historiographic categories we use to organize the past—and, perhaps as importantly, the present and future. That the categories themselves, as scholars have pointed out, can sometimes function more problematically as exclusionary, reductionist instruments, is a matter that is and should be the object of scholarly debate. The fact is that, as Jacob realizes well in occasionally referencing modern-day, political uses of the concept of “the” Enlightenment, this remains a widely-deployed, and enduringly usable, heuristic construct or model to think with. Whatever the shortcomings or historical validity of the concept of the Enlightenment, Jacob has done a valuable service by updating it for the twenty-first century.

NOTES

[1] For the ubiquity of devotional literature, see Simon Burrows on the publishing history of Jacques Coret's devotional best-seller *L'Ange conducteur*, as well as his revisionist assessment of the relative importance of Enlightenment works in the business of the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel. Simon Burrows, *The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe II* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

[2] The repetition of the cliché that “by 1700 about half the books published in Continental Europe came from the Dutch Republic” (p. 94) will similarly also raise some book historian eyebrows. For a more accurate overview of the Dutch book trade in this period, see Andrew Pettegree and Arthur der Weduwen, *The Bookshop of the World: Making and Trading Books in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

[3] Let me in passing note my own distress, as a scholar of French literature, at the inability of modern American copy editors to produce error-free renderings of French titles in an academic book: *Encyclopédie, Terre austral...*

[4] See, however, for an important English-language contribution the work of Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, in his *How to Write the History of the New World: Histories, Epistemologies, and Identities in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

[5] This in Lutheran Norway-Denmark. See Gina Dahl, *Books in Early Modern Norway* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 21.

[6] See, for example, Alexander Bevilacqua, *The Republic of Arabic Letters: Islam and the European Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

Alicia C. Montoya
Professor of French Literature and Culture
Radboud University, The Netherlands
a.montoya@let.ru.nl

Copyright © 2020 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. H-France reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Forum nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.