Some comments on Jonathan Israel

By Andreas Kinneging

1. “The Enlightenment,” Jonathan Israel contends, “was the most important and profound intellectual, social and cultural transformation of the Western world since the Middle Ages and the most formative in shaping modernity.”

I beg to differ. I do agree the Enlightenment is important. But what came after it, to some extent as a reaction to it, Romanticism, is at least as important as the Enlightenment in shaping the modern worldview and the modern world. Think of the cult of the emotions, the exaltation of the imagination over reason, the believe in the importance of subconscious nonrational urges, cultural relativism, the emphasis on uniqueness, moral nihilism, the cult of the ego, nature mysticism, the importance of creativity, etc. Each and everyone of these is an important trait of modern culture, and none of them is present in Enlightenment thought, but concocted at a somewhat later date by the Romantics.

2. The Enlightenment is not only the most important and profound transformation, but also―Israel believes―a godsend. A turning point in the history of mankind, that has always been a valley of tears, Israel thinks, at least for the great majority of the people, suffering under the burden of oppression by the monarchy, the aristocracy, the priesthood, all of them scheming to keep them poor and dumb. To paraphrase a famous line by Pope: “Everything lay hid in night, then the Enlightenment came and all was light”. Democracy, liberty, and equality, modernity’s holy trinity, were born. At first, it is true, only in the mind. The Enlightenment was “a revolution of the mind”. But that is where everything new begins. Eventually, these new ideas were implemented in law and began to shape the culture. Hence, modernity, modern society, modern states came about. And we have to be thankful for that, Israel insists, because modernity is much, much beter than “the world we left behind”, that is the pre-modern “society of orders.” That is not to say that we can now sit back and relax. The modern agenda of democracy, liberty, and equality has not yet been realized completely, Israel argues, not even in the most advanced countries of the West. That is why these ideas are still important as rallying cries for all good people, together forming the party of progress.

I beg to differ. In my view one cannot say, without qualification, that the present is better than the past. If only because the present is a big place, and the past a long time. There is much to be deplored in the world of today, and much to be admired in the world of the past. Moreover, it seems to me that at least some of the things that are to be deplored in the world of today are intimately linked to the ideas the originated in the Enlightenment. And some of the things that are to be admired of the past are due to a lack of Enlightenment.

A few examples.

a. Reason, as championed by the Enlightenment is mostly conceived as instrumental reason, enabeling us to better control things and hence make ourselves master over them. This type of reason certainly has boomed in the past centuries, due to the Enlightenment. It has brought about industrialization, and modern technology. And these have been very helpful to mankind in many ways. But we should not overlook the fact that they have also brought major new problems in their wake, some of which might prove to become our doom eventually. Think of modern ABC-weaponry, think of the environmental problems, think of overconsumption etc. There really is something like a dialectic of Enlightenment. The traditional stories of dr.Faustus and the sorcerer’s apprentice do have to tell us something important.

b. Democracy, liberty, and equality, the Enlightenment’s core values, are great things. But as Aristotle said: “Of nothing too much”. A democratic family or a democratic school, where one person, one vote is the rule, is not a very good idea, simply because they cannot function properly, that is to say in a way that will benefit all concerned, the parents and the children, the professors and the students. Liberty is great, but excessive liberty, that is to say a complete lack of discipline, is nothing but anarchy and chaos. Equality is fine, but wherever humans live and work together there is a need of hierarchy as well, whether we like it or not. Try to picture a family of a university without any discipline or hierarchy. Impossible isn’t it? And what goes for them goes for many other institutions as well. Now, one of the basic problems of modern society is that we have become so enamoured with democracy, liberty, and equality, that we are less and less capable of accepting and imposing any type of discipline and hierarchy. And hence the decline of many institutions that depend on these values, such as the family and the school. The traditional saying that all good things, taken to extremes, turn into bad things, does tell us something important.

c. The Enlightenment mindset is a mindset that sees the world as something that needs to be improved. And it certainly did and does succeed in improving the world in many ways. Nevertheless, as a worldview it is too limited, too banausic. It overlooks and neglects two very importants ways of being in the world, of which our pre-Enlightenment ancestors, it seems to me, had a clearer grasp.

First of all, there is what might be called the ascetic way, the aim of which is not the improvement of the world, but the improvement of oneself as a person. Becoming a better person. More virtuous and less sinful. This seems to me to be the quintessence of morality. It virtually is expelled by the Enlightenment. “Der Aufklärer will alles verbessern, nur sich Selbst nicht”.

Secondly, the Enlightenment mindset is so fixed upon improving the world in multifarious ways that it has little or no interest in and time to contemplate the “permanent questions”, the traditional subject of both philosophy, theology and literature. Neither does it take much interest in beauty, and hence in the arts. It is a thoroughly practical, engineering mindset, focussed on functionality. “Let’s make things better.” As a consequence, it tends to set aside philosophy, theology and the arts as something unimportant, a side issue, a personal hobby. Hence, it brings about a world that functions well, but is both mindlessly superficial and ugly.

3. Israel thinks that the Enlightenment is a concept that should neither be used in the singular, nor in the plural, but in the dual. It is erroneous to speak of “the” Enlightenment, but is is equally wrong to speak of a plurality of Enlightenments. In reality, he argues―and he thinks that he comes up with something new here―there were two: the moderate Enlightenment and the radical enlightenment. The first includes such luminaries as Voltaire, Montesquieu, Hume, Smith, Ferguson, Hume, Kant and Burke, the most important representatives of the second are Spinoza―its founder―, Diderot, and Holbach. Israel’s is sympathies are on the side of the latter. They are clearly and openly materialist, utilitarian, democratic, libertarian, and egalitarian. And that is what was needed and still is needed in the world. The moderates on the other hand were in favor of a monarchy, of an aristocratic i.e. hierarchical social order, of limits to liberty, of some kind of church and religion. Hence, not what was needed then, and not what is needed now.

There is much to be said for this distinction, I think. Although in his effort to prove how influential it was Israel overdoes it by enlisting men such as Herder and Boulainvilliers on the side of the enlightenment radicals. Herder was an anti-enlightenment romantic, and Boulainvilliers was an aristocratic racist. However that may be, the distinction it is not new. It is quite famous in certain circles, since it was introduced by the illustrious Friedrich Hayek in several of his works in intellectual history, starting with his the essay “Individualism true and false” from 1948, and then picked up by many others. Hayek too distinguishes between a moderate and a radical wing of the enlightenment, the first encompassing the several Scots mentioned and Burke, the second consisting mainly of the French *Encyclopédistes*, just as Israel argues. Where they differ is in their sympathies. Israel sides with the radicals, Hayek with the moderates. And I, of course, do too. It seems to me that the philosophy of the enlightenment radicals was and is a recipe for disaster. Two quick points of criticism.

a. Reason is very weak in most individuals. Hence, instead of overthrowing their habits and customs, as the radicals want to, we should be tend to them carefully, because they often are stocks of built-up experience, and thus a form of collective reason.

b. Mankind cannot be made happy just by the right education and the right political and legal system, as the radicals think, because man is not a tabula rasa, but a very problematic being, inclined toward several kinds of evil. These are all things the moderate enlightenment thinkers were well aware of and draw our attention to. If we fail to take notice we will unwittingly head for tyranny. It is no coincidence that the radical enlightenment thinkers were highly regarded in the DDR.

4. Israel argues that the radical enlightenment was instrumental in bringing about or even the main cause of the French Revolution. Most laypersons will regard this as almost a truism, but within the historical profession this is indeed something of a shocker, although not as big a shocker as Israel says it is, since Francois Furet and his school have preceded him by several decades. However, it is true that after Tocqueville, ever since Marx, ideas have been relegated to the loft, as nothing more than Überbau, and historians have concentrated on either classes or persons. The idea that ideas can have enormous political and social consequences was no longer taken seriously by most historians.

I wholeheartedly agree with Israel that this is a grave mistake. The world is ruled by ideas and scarcely anything else. Of course, the Revolution was caused by ideas. And of course, the ideas of the radical enlightenment had an enormous influence. But I do not agree that there is a simple one to one relationship here, the radical intellectuals coming up with the ideas and the revolutionary politicians implementing them.

First of all, the revolution was a highly complex phenomenon, with many different parties and persons expressing many different and often contradictory views. There were as many Montesquieu-followers, and Rousseau-followers in the Revolution, as there were Holbach-followers, for instance.

Secondly, as I know from my own experience, politicians always simplify and combine the ideas of intellectuals, changing them almost beyond recognition: they are born eclectics and opportunists. Hence, it is only to some extent that ideas explain the revolution. We also need the other approaches.

Having said al this, I want to close by saying that, although I am somewhat critical of your work, I do have a great respect for what you have achieved with your trilogy on the enlightenment. It is a magnificent work. Vey few people indeed have the intellectual scope, the determination and the stamina to write such a *magnum opus*.

Thank you