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Book Review: The Expanding Blaze: How the American Revolution Ignited the World, 1775-1848 by Jonathan Israel

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Israel, Jonathan. *The Expanding Blaze: How the American Revolution Ignited the World, 1775-1848*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. xii + 755 pages. Hardcover, \$39.95.

In his latest book on the Enlightenment, Jonathan Israel, Professor emeritus at the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study, investigates the intellectual history of the American Revolution and its profound impact across the world until the mid-nineteenth century. By successfully and lastingly challenging the pillars of the old regime, the American Revolution, as Israel argues, created the modern democratic world. Israel writes, “From 1775, America became the first [...] model of a new kind of society, laying the path by which the modern world stumbled more generally toward republicanism, human rights, equality, and democracy” (p.24). While, after establishing their own democratic republic, Americans could not do much to directly intervene in the revolutionary upheavals subsequently unfolding in Europe and Latin America. Their example, however, provided an invaluable inspiration for freedom-fighters elsewhere. Revolutionaries in Ireland, France, Germany, Italy, Haiti, and Columbia—to name but a few of Israel’s examples—took their cue from the Americans, frequently pointing to the model character of the U.S. to justify their demands for democratic change.

The major assumption that shapes Israel’s analysis of the many revolutions of the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century is the claim that the ideological turmoil that ensued the American Revolution both within the U.S. and elsewhere was a global struggle between democratic republicans, or representatives of the radical Enlightenment like Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson on the one hand, and aristocratic republicans and moderate Enlightenment thinkers like John Adams and Alexander Hamilton on the other. The former championed democracy, equality, and the separation of church and state and drew their inspiration *inter alia* from Diderot, Condorcet, and Spinoza; the latter defended more limited forms of popular participation, the maintenance of some traditional privileges, and the

ecclesiastical establishments and followed among others the theories of Locke, Hume, and Montesquieu.

Israel demonstrates convincingly that, while few of the revolutionaries had initially intended it, the American Revolution marked the break between the old order and the modern period: it “commenced the demolition of the early modern hierarchical world of kings, aristocracy, serfdom, slavery, and mercantilist colonial empires” (p.2). He is also justified in stressing that the ideological battles that Americans and Europeans waged between the 1770s and the Revolutions of 1848/49 were similar, debunking the exceptionalist myth, according to which the American Revolution was unique. He aptly shows that the political issues that were being fought over in the multiple revolutions throughout the Atlantic world were fundamentally the same despite the fact that the social dynamics might have differed from case to case. As Israel puts it, “both the American and French revolutions, and all the other supposedly ‘national’ revolutions, were essentially tussles between rival ‘democratic’ and ‘aristocratic’ variants of a single Atlantic Revolution” (p.4). By thus situating the American Revolution in a global context, *The Expanding Blaze* is a welcome addition to the literature that has remained mostly nation-centered to date. It is a timely update to Robert R. Palmer’s two-volume *The Age of Democratic Revolution* (1959/1964) whose influence has been limited.

However, the one-sided way in which Israel interprets the ideological conflict leaves his account open to criticism. He makes no secret out of his strong sympathy with the radical Enlightenment and, by unabashedly taking the side of the radicals, he at times seems to be re-waging the ideological wars of the time. His dichotomy is black and white: On the one side of the divide stood the heroes—those fighting for democracy, tolerance, reason, secularization, and human rights. On the other side were the villains—those defending monarchy, aristocracy, mixed government, religious bigotry, colonialism, and slavery. In

Israel's narrative, there is little if nothing inherently problematic or contradictory in the thought of the radical Enlightenment. He simply attributes all the negative effects of the Atlantic Revolutions—such as the deepening of racial hierarchies and the acceleration of violent extermination policies in the U.S. or the mass murder of political opponents in France—to the moderate Enlightenment or counter Enlightenment, thereby leaving the radical Enlightenment he embraces untarnished.

Israel may be right when he insists that “the American Revolution’s core [democratic] values, given their content and scope, were to some extent bound to encourage, reinforce, and broaden the movement to weaken and abolish slavery in the Americas and the rest of the European colonial world” (p.141) and that the maintenance of slavery was hence a betrayal of the revolution’s principles. However, one might equally well point out that slavery became more entrenched and Native Americans more ruthlessly driven off their lands after the revolution, not although, but *because* the U.S. was thoroughly democratized and white Americans were no longer curbed by British authorities, as they exploited black labor and disposed the indigenous populations. At least, one needs to deal with the fact that it was many of those who were most outspoken in their calls for egalitarian democracy such as Jefferson that also fought hard to ensure that race-based slavery would not be tampered with.

Similarly, Israel does not regard populist movements such as the Know-Nothings as outgrowths of the democratizing spirit of the age, neatly setting them apart from the “authentic democratic Radical Enlightenment”(p.599). He also denies that the “Reign of Terror” was at least partially the result of the democratic dynamics ignited by the French Revolution, but simply considers it a reversal of the radical Enlightenment. Instead, Israel contends that “the French populist authoritarianism generated by Marat and Robespierre was not in any way an offshoot of the democratic republican Revolution of 1789-93 but an entirely separate and fiercely antagonistic social, cultural, and political trend” (p.281). The

problem with such a normatively charged intellectual history is that it does not fully take into account the actions that the ideas under investigation inspired and the conclusions that historical actors drew from them.

This criticism notwithstanding, Israel's intellectual history of the American Revolution and its worldwide impact is a staggering achievement. The breadth of Israel's knowledge and the scope of his research are breathtaking and he deserves unequivocal praise for making clearer than anybody before him that the American Revolution was a truly global event.

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