

Spinozismo, or how to raise higher political consciousness

Entrevista com Jonathan Israel

Desde a publicação do seu livro *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford University Press, 2001), Jonathan Israel está contribuindo a uma nova escrita da época moderna, colocando o “spinozismo” no centro do jogo. Senior researcher no Institute of Advanced Studies (Princeton, USA), ele viaja o mundo defendendo a relevância da filosofia de Spinoza para pensar o conceito de democracia. Seu novo livro, *The Expanding Blaze: How the American Revolution Ignited the World, 1775-1848* (2017), marca uma nova etapa no trabalho dele.

How did Spinoza change in the last fifteen years ? In what sense is this author not any more the one the commentators used to read ?

Spinoza has recently become an object not only of philosophical studies, but also of intellectual history. To understand this, one must acknowledge the peculiar gap, in some academic cultures, existing between « philosophy » and « history of philosophy » on the one hand, and « historical studies » and « intellectual history » on the other. In these countries (France and Brazil seem to be some of them), the organisation of academic life didn't allow to “intellectual history” the place it had in Germany, where it appeared in the XIXth century, or later in Italy, Great Britain or in the United States. Now, what is the difference? Whereas history of philosophy looks at philosophical ideas, philosophers and others things that might have influenced them, focusing on the philosophical debate itself, intellectual history is about how philosophers and economists, legal reformers, scientists, etc., influence the intelligentsia as a group in order to reform and refine institutions. It is about society, but

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specifically about how intellectual influence impacts politics. It means that what matters is not necessarily what society thinks as a whole; there can be small groups leading the political debate. It aims at describing a political and legal process. As I understand it, this is not part of history of philosophy, which has a different focus. This is why intellectual history discusses Spinoza's philosophy on very different terms.

In this approach, Spinoza appears as one actor among the Spinozist movement. And this is not only helpful to explain how Spinoza's philosophy emerged, but also how it contributed to political changes.

This is the reason why I find the book by Jean-Baptiste Stoupe, *La Religion des Hollandais* (1673), but also Cornelis Bontekoe's notebook and later Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697) extremely important, because they all describe how Spinoza established a movement. This has never been totally accepted by intellectual historians. Antoine Lilti, for example, maintains that Spinoza's circle was isolated, that their publications in Dutch had little influence in Europe, and that the reference to Spinoza in the XVIIIth century is "déracinée", far from its original Dutch context. But Stoupe suggests that Spinozism is not just a philosophical movement; it has some features of an almost religious sect. Others documents from the period of Bayle say that. I want to show that in the wider European scene, early texts of English deism for example – think of John Toland (1670 – 1722) – are in direct connection with Spinozism. A less known example is Matthew Tindal's book, *The Rights of the Church Demonstrated* (1706). It gave birth to one of the main controversies of the XVIIIth century; thirty books were published in reply. Why was it seen as so highly offensive? Because it claimed that the Christian church had no political rights regarding society. This certainly doesn't sound like Hobbes, but it recalls an anonymous book, *De jure ecclesiasticorum*, published in Holland in 1665 and certainly written by someone close to Spinoza. Tindal took his argument from this text, written in Latin. This shows that a huge controversy on the rights of the church came out of a specifically Dutch context. But the problem is, European intellectual historians have made a gentlemen's agreement that each of them would claim its own country to have played the most important role. This is why the Cambridge school – J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner – didn't pay enough attention to the Dutch Republic.

But then, it sounds as if everything came from a single origin. Isn't it strange to drawn back this movement to the very person or figure of Spinoza ? Shouldn't we avoid diffusionism?

I never made Spinoza the cause of everything! The spinozistic diffusionism is a misinterpretation of my argument. I agree very much with you. In many cases, Spinoza doesn't even stand up for radical ideas as clearly as Adriaan Koerbagh (1633 – 1669) and Franciscus Van den Enden (1602 – 1674) do. Democratic republicanism starts with Pieter De La Court (1618 – 1685) and his brother Johan De La Court (1622 – 1660), then Koerbagh and Van den Enden. Spinoza was only able to sum up and express with greater philosophical depth something that was urgently in the forefront of the intelligentsia of the society in which he lived; he also had a great ability to widen the scope, extend this spirit to additional areas. One reason of his achievement is that... he comes slightly after the other figures. So again, I agree very much with you: it's not Spinoza's genius as a philosopher (which is beyond question) that explains his influence, but a routine inside the particular Dutch context. Spinozism should be seen as coming out from a group, and the Dutch scholars have been working on these authors since twenty years. But apart from your "Clan Spinoza", international spinozism still doesn't pay enough attention to these people. It's not possible to understand the crucial step in the history of modernity that lays in a clash between aristocratic and democratic republicanism, unless you look at the peculiarities of the Dutch Republic. The oligarchs of the Republic we coming from families who, two generations before, were nobodies. The brothers De La Court were exiled from Flanders, they were new comers to the Dutch Republic and had no access to political life. No doubt that is why they adopted their radical political attitude. More generally, money is the only way to define the Dutch oligarchs – but that is a very instable feature. In fact, the Republic itself is very instable. The question then is: how to broaden its support? In this context, democratic republicanism is a very good option, especially if you value religious toleration and other forms of freedom. And toleration itself had been imposed by the fight against Philip the Second and the Duke of Alba: during the revolt, people from Nederlands had to put aside their religious differences. If they had let the divisions split them, they would have had no way to win the struggle. All these conditions created a debate where aristocratic and democratic republicanism were in collision, and that was on different grounds from any other country.

The specificities you are pointing seem to cause a spectacular break. How does this match with long scale evolutions ? Are there no continuities with previous movements ?

Long term perspective is something I will be trying to address in the fourth volume of my research¹, where I want to distinguish the Radical Enlightenment clearly from an underground Radical Renaissance based on Averroism and Epicureanism. I'll consider what was the significance of clandestine movements in the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, and the Reformation. And you could say that before the Radical Enlightenment, there is an underground intellectual movement, a form of new Epicureanism, that stands as a precursor. But I'll show that, like Averroism, once these thinkers created an intellectual counter-culture that rejected all the premises of the political power, they didn't actually try to reject the regime; they concealed themselves like Epicure did in the Garden, far from the prejudices of the clergy, the anger of the common people, etc. They had everything of a clandestine movement, they were forbidden, they wanted to propagate certain ways of thinking, based on rational philosophy, against religious authority. But they accepted the political *status quo*. Whereas Spinoza and the Radical Enlightenment were trying to undermine the structures of oppression. They tried to replace them not with a revolutionary new program, but with the original principles of the political constitutions.

How do you conceive of these historical categories – Moderate and Radical Enlightenment, for instance – you contributed to refine?

Well, the difference between Moderate and Radical Enlightenment, for example, was meant to particularize our understanding of political ideas. Or course, there are other categories that could be dropped: liberalism for instance is so vague (especially in the XIXth century) that it is misleading; there are too many different directions. When a term generates more misuse than help, then it should be abandoned. On the contrary, there is a general agreement

1 J.I. has published so far : *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650 – 1750* (2001) ; *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from The Rights of Man to Robespierre* (2014) ; *The Expanding Blaze: How the American Revolution Ignited the World, 1775-1848* (2017).

on certain points about Enlightenment: the ideas that many institutions and laws are obsolete, that they should be changed or improved, and that philosophy and science will give us the bases and guidelines for these improvements. One who would not subscribe to these points, even if he goes frequently to coffee-houses in Paris, would not be part of the Enlightenment. And one who would, would then find himself in opposition to the spirit of the time, because Enlightenment is not a “*mentalité*”. Now, the difference between Moderate and Radical Enlightenment actually comes from Leo Strauss. In Leo Strauss’ views, the main feature of the Radical Enlightenment is that it is persecuted, its partisans must hide, and therefore they should be read between the lines. This category is useful for very complicated cases. Moses Mendelssohn (1729 – 1786), for instance, is one of them. He is moderate *and* radical at the same time, because he is not so much concerned with intellectual consistency as achieving certain goals. Nonetheless, we can’t just point out all the nuances, contradictions and different strategies. If you just say that there is a vast range of possibilities and leave it there, it won’t be very helpful to the general reader or even to the scholars. We need broad categories to have a discussion, to compare the XVIIIth with the XIXth century, to describe general phenomenon. After all, why do we think that our institutions are archaic and need to be changed, some say intensively, some say only on many aspects? Nor the Chinese thinkers, nor the authors before the XVIIIth century, looked at society that way. We wouldn’t see this without the Radical Enlightenment. We wouldn’t see the novelty of Spinozism without it.

You describe Spinozism as a long term current that seems to run throughout history. How do you conceive of the continuity of an intellectual movement? What conception of time is conveyed by this type of storytelling?

The continuity lies in the fact that the spinozist concepts have been constantly reintroduced in intellectual history. Think of G. E. Lessing (1729 – 1781) and Heinrich Heine (1797 – 1856). They are obsessed with Spinoza. Why? Because Heine basically thinks: “we have a revolutionary consciousness and eventually this conscience might achieve real things”. Of course, the revolutionary consciousness doesn’t need Spinoza, but with Spinoza, you can elevate it to a higher level. Spinoza’s readers can draw from him an ethical inspiration which will help underpin the better society they long for. And there are so many of these people who keep on reintroducing Spinoza – even

today, there is a whole lot of rhetoric about “conatus” and these words... –, that I would argue there is a continuous process in a sense. It is not always refined, not always rigorous, many writers do strange things with Spinoza (see for example Moses Mendelssohn), but his philosophy is still playing an inspirational role. It is a powerful force. Another eloquent example: a fellow named Ignác Einhorn (1825 – 1875), son of a rabbi, joined the revolutionary movement in Budapest and became a prominent journalist and activist in 1847-1849; during these years, he became very disillusioned when he discovered that the Magyars leaders were not so keen on securing ethnic minorities’ rights in any sense. When the Hungarian revolution became defeated in 1849, Einhorn fled to Leipzig and wrote a book called *Spinozas Staatslehre*, were his argument reads as follows. Hegel, Fichte, Schelling all say Spinoza is important for philosophy, but they ignore his political thought. This, according to Einhorn, is absurd because Spinoza’s political thought is just as important as his metaphysics, and is going to change Europe and the world through revolutionary action. This is a good illustration of the significant role Spinozism did play. Einhorn is not a great thinker, but his book was very influential.

You seems to be very confident in the force of ideas.

In the discussion about what democracy is, universal and equal rights again have become central for Europeans and Americans since 1848, and the place of the individual in society, and how to stabilize and guarantee all the freedoms of expression, individual liberty of conviction, etc., are today vital in our societies. What can we do to understand and promote that ? The Marxists historians who studied XVIIth century were often looking at mass movement and great shifts, and were not really looking at the position of the individuals within the society. Although it has appeared here and there, one of the most important things about Spinoza is the articulation between individual and society. Anarchist traditions preserved this aspect better than Marxist traditions. On a small scale, anarchists are good at promoting the individual freedoms, but they are not interested in their constitutional forms, nor how to build a democratic state. Spinoza was very interested by both aspects. So the way Radical Enlightenment conceived of oppression and human misery in the world differs from the way socialists did. That seems to me very important. Both movement agree that we could live much better, because we are under an oppression that makes the majority of humans live an unnecessary

miserable life. And fairly, that could be changed. But these movements disagree on the causes of oppression. Radical Enlightenment considers it happens because our ideas are all wrong. And if we could change the way people think, then we would have a better society. Now, according to socialism, ideas are not the issue; the problem is that the economic system is all wrong, and if you could take hold of the economic system and change it, then we would have a happier life. As you see, both the perspective and the emphasis is very different about how to remedy to a problem they basically agree on. That is why spinozism today would need to be more comprehensively a « post-marxist spinozism ». There are changes and transformations in society that can be explained in terms of philosophical ideas, changes of understanding, new writings, science, etc. That is the function of Enlightenment. Nicolas de Condorcet (1743 – 1794), just before he died, maintained that the democratic republic is the best form of government, provided you can enlighten the society sufficiently and raise the educational level to the point where it works. If you can't do that, it's better not to try, because if you try to build a democratic republic with a ignorant and superstitious society, you will end up with more turmoil than before. Again, the educational issue might be why the Radical Enlightenment is regaining force today. Doesn't the "spinozismo" play a role in Brasil and latin America in general since the 1970s ? This would illustrate how, in a post-marxist context, Spinozism might be a way to help the intelligentsias see how to stabilize democratic forms and systems. In any case, they are enthusiasts who think politics in these terms, and that, in itself, is interesting.