Postscript on Jonathan Israel's Failed Enlightenment: Where Did It Go Wrong?

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As a student of early modern German literature, I argued a case in defense of Jonathan Israel's multi-volume *Radical Enlightenment* project.[1] It had convinced me of the radicalism and epochal impact of Spinoza's work. It seemed to me that Israel had located the birthplace of a pluralistic, liberal-minded enlightenment for which religious dissent and scientific rigor were in almost equal measure a midwife or parent. Early criticism of Israel's initial volume faulted its narrow focus on Spinoza as a kind of founding figure who introduces the light of the Enlightenment into our world. In response, I directed attention to his previous *The Dutch Republic* which had offered a detailed exposition of the antecedent currents of humanism and religious dissent that shaped the environment in which Spinoza was able to flourish and disseminate his influence. In what was intended as a friendly amendment, I argued the continuity of George H. Williams's "Radical Reformation" with the "Radical Enlightenment." Israel acknowledged those antecedents in his most recent work.

Israel's latest volume extends the Radical Enlightenment to early nineteenth-century Germany. It is forebodingly entitled *The Enlightenment that Failed: Ideas, Revolution, and Democratic Defeat, 1748-1830*,[2] reminiscent of the exposé of Communism by its erstwhile disillusioned advocates: *The God that Failed.* Israel posits 1830 as a terminal point of the extended Radical Enlightenment. Until then, the primacy of philosophy over theology which began with Spinoza and continued with the *philosophes* who set the stage for the French Revolution holds. An added chapter continues then to "Marx and the Left's Turn

[1] Andrew Weeks, "From Radical Reformation to Mystical Pre-Enlightenment." In *The Radical Enlightenment in Germany: A Cultural Perspective*, ed. Carl Niekerk. Leiden, Boston: Brill-Rodopi, 2018.
[2] Jonathan Israel, *The Enlightenment that Failed: Ideas, Revolution, and Democratic Defeat, 1748-1830* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2019).

from Radical Enlightenment to Socialism (1838-1848)." In the ten years prior to the 1848 revolution, the Radical Enlightenment impulse somehow loses itself in the radicalization of the young Marx.

How did this happen? Israel writes that, "Earlier, Marx passed through successive intellectual stages, but his entire development from 1838 to 1844 was that of a late Enlightenment radical with what later emerged as 'Marxism' being then so remote on the horizon as to be totally invisible" (902). "Only from 1844, when he first began studying economic theory, did he defect from and abandon classic Radical Enlightenment, defined as democratic republicanism joined to rejecting religious authority, forming a (mostly non-violent) revolutionary thrust principally geared to changing how men think" (902). Israel chides scholars of "Marxology" for ignoring the early impact of Spinoza on Marx; but he concedes that they are right insofar as the young radical indeed showed no interest in Spinoza's *Ethics* (903). Israel wants to absolve the pre-1844 Radical Enlightenment of "any hint of [Marx's] subsequent plunge into economics, the ideology of class-warfare and the world of communism" (906). So, what was it that lured Marx away from a path that was enlightened in Israel's sense onto the false path of communist perdition? Did the former raise questions the latter answered?

In the larger context, it makes no sense to point to the study of economics or the embrace of socialism as the fatal misstep. Israel knows that socialism came in many varieties, many of them non-communist and non-violent. The reader who extrapolated from his concluding passages a Neoliberal rejection of all controls on rampant capitalism would mistake the thrust of the *Radical Enlightenment* project. It initially won me over with its intimation of a continuity between the dissenters of the radical reformation, the nonconformists supporting Spinoza, the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and the progressive spirits in our time. Israel's project has implications for a society split between religious and secular camps. Identifying the misstep of the "failed Enlightenment" interests me not only for a better understanding of the implications of Israel's argument but with regard to the current political situation.

Israel's critics (some of whom, I believe, have been motivated by academic special interests) have challenged many of his premises. For the sake of discussion, I prefer to grant his main hypothesis and question the pivotal turning point at which his Radical Enlightenment goes off the tracks in Marx. Prior to this misstep, Marx believed that education must prepare the ground for revolution. According to Israel, "he was convinced too that the coming upheaval would be wholly useless if not based on a new general consciousness, a fundamentally new way of thinking arising from oppressed humanity's having long and carefully taken stock of its situation and become enlightened" (910). Can education really be the term of separation? The entire socialist movement, indeed, even the theory and practice of Communism, emphasized education in a sense that conforms to Israel's Radical Enlightenment. It cannot be denied that Communism propagated a worldview which was rigorously atheistic, monistic, and dedicated to the proposition (which Israel ascribes to Spinoza) that, "the course of history [is] the only divine providence there is and history itself, like Spinoza, Hegel, Bauer, Heine, and Hess, [is] the only meaningful definition of God's will" (904). If education, secularization, and monism were crucial, Communism was in full accord with the impetus attributed to Spinoza. Israel's allusion to a pernicious "ideology of class-warfare and the world of communism" is too vague to be helpful. It leaves us with an implicit tautology: Marx departed from the "classic Radical Enlightenment, defined as democratic republicanism joined to rejecting religious authority, forming a (mostly non-violent) revolutionary thrust principally geared to changing how men think" (902)—because he departed from it. But why?

The fatal misstep, I would submit, was rather that Marx did not entirely secularize history but instead rendered absolute what German thinkers of his day called the "Young Hegelian apocalypse." As historian of ideas William Brazill wrote: "Bakunin's faith in a rapid and immediate transformation of human society and Marx's and Engels's assurance in the *Communist Manifesto* that a great revolution was at hand indicated the extent to which they accepted the apocalyptic thinking of the Young

Hegelians"[3] Advancing toward the imminent resolution of contradictions, the absolute progress of the Hegelians would vanquish every power that resisted the telos of history. For Marx, the dialectic would reveal that telos as the classless utopia. In an apocalypse, no holds are barred, no weapons banned, no prisoners taken. The German text of the *Internationale* evokes a cosmic final struggle. "Völker, hört die Signale! Auf zum letzten Gefecht!" Let the peoples of the world rise up in a conflict to end all conflicts! The parties of this final struggle are as inexorably fixed as the Elect and the Damned. The latter are on the wrong side, not because of ill intentions or overt actions. The structure of history has drawn the line in terms of social class. I would submit that Marxism secularized and incorporated the viciousness of the biblical Book of Revelation, not as a theological precept, but as the base line of a tradition of radical end-time conflict prefigured in medieval Christianity and early modern religious war, reinforced by the French Revolution and its Terror, and echoed in the Young Hegelian apocalypse and what the Left Hegelian Bruno Bauer called the "terrorism of pure theory."[4]

The German language has coined the word *Konfliktkultur* to designate our ways of enacting conflicts. I believe that the term could be extended to the traditional modalities in which conflicts are conceived and carried out. The term *apocalypse* highlights end-time conflict as a recurrent constellation in Western religion and politics. Though the term *Konfliktkultur* was not in use in his time, Karl Löwith captured its point in citing the "political radicalism beyond all measure which has characterized all the great movements of Western history since Charlemagne." They contrast with conflicts in the ancient world in having "ultimate roots in the radicality of the Christian message"—a radicalism embodied in the Apocalypse and transferred first from religion to philosophy and then to communism and fascism.[5]

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[3] See William J. Brazill, *The Young Hegelians* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1970), p. 269, see also p. 102 ("Strauss, like all the Young Hegelians, assumed as his sole responsibility the duty of ushering in the Young Hegelian apocalypse, of smoothing the passage from the age of religion to the age of philosophy").

[4] Bruno Bauer, "The terrorism of pure theory must clear the field," cited in Brazill, 175

[5] See "Appendix I, Modern Transfigurations of Joachim," in *The Meaning of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 209.

The disaster of communism is an overdetermined phenomenon with too many explanations. It makes little sense to assign a date to the parting of ways between Spinoza's influence and Marx's. Intellectual history isn't a single file march for which we can declare Rubicons crossed and flags fallen. Instead of looking for the point of separation, it may help to consider in broad outline the character of German and European thought two centuries after Spinoza and to regard for the sake of contrast the parallel of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Education of Humankind* (1777-1780). This treatise combines religious speculation with Spinozist philosophy and includes a rather different approach to apocalyptic thinking and its associated *Konfliktkultur*. It exemplifies the Enlightenment dialectic as dialogue which was on the verge of being lost to the Hegelian-Marxist dialectic as font of utopian end-time prophesy.

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In the aftermath of the French Revolution, the nineteenth century was seeking its bearings. This meant theorizing history as never before. It also entailed reflecting on the rationalist universalism of the French Enlightenment and contrasting it with the German response of an organic heterogeneity with the temporal aspect of dialectical transformation. Spinoza's *Ethics* could not satisfy such interests to the extent or in the manner of Herder or Hegel. Spinoza envisaged enlightenment as an unmediated issue of right thinking. He saw eternal unity where the nineteenth century saw complexity and change. Herder, Hegel, and their contemporaries understood that the "light" of enlightenment is dispersed among eras and peoples and gradually matures like stages of organic growth. The lower stages contain the seeds of the higher. For Hegel, Christianity bears the seeds of idealist philosophy and humanism, just as for Marx and Engels Hegelianism bears the seed of historical materialism.

This implied a distinction between what people think or say and what their beliefs *really mean,* a rift between consciousness and being. This rift found various articulations. For Hegel, the notion of the "cunning of reason" suggested that the passions of conquest and glory of the Napoleonic era were

in reality about establishing the bourgeois civil order. Christians believed in a transcendent realm which was *in reality* only an apotheosis of human possibility. Ideologues of the state spoke of principles when *in reality* class interests were their meaning. According to Kierkegaard, the dialectic of despair is such that not to be in despair may signal precisely the opposite, that one is in despair.[6] Eventually, Freud would argue that what is conscious expresses subconscious sexual drives and instincts. Earlier thinkers had known about delusion, equivocation, class conflict, and sexual symbolism. People had long known that desire could obsess and deceive. The poor had always rebelled against their lot. Yet the theoretical revolutions of the nineteenth century were foundational in that henceforth one could hardly conceive of the conflict of the poor with their exploiters without invoking Marx or discuss the power of sexual desire in human personality without bringing Freud to bear. Marx and Freud had recognized the gaps between consciousness and its determinants and bridged those gaps by means of theory.

Theory therefore acquired a new force in culture and consciousness. Never mind that certain Marxist predictions no more came true than psychoanalysis healed mental illness. Hegel, Marx, and later Freud projected a theoretical universe, worlds apart from the transparently ordered system of Spinoza's *Ethics* where true thinking institutes justice and harmony. The discontinuity of consciousness and being—theorized by means of the seductive concepts of *dialectic* and *sublimation*—distinguished a complex modern world from the more linear universe of Newton, Descartes, or Spinoza.

There is another difference separating Spinoza from the rank and file of the Enlightenment. He wrote in Latin in a style which was surely incomprehensible to many even among the literate. Of course, Latin, as opposed to Dutch or any other vernacular, made his *Ethics* accessible to a broader readership across Europe, just as his geometrical style made it possible to avoid biblical argumentation.

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[6] *Kierkegaard's Writings* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978-2000), vol. XI, p.138.

But learned Latin and demonstration *more geometrico* also separated him from a common folk for whom his revolutionary propositions were never intended.[7]

Israel's focus on Spinoza neglects the humbler currents that fed into and flowed out of his Radical Enlightenment. He cites the Parable of the Three Rings from Lessing's *Nathan the Wise* as "a blatantly Spinozist theme" (236); but the ring parable preceded Spinoza by at least two centuries. It was adapted from the *Decameron.* Like Chaucer or the Old French *Fabliaux,* Boccaccio lent voice to a late medieval anticlericalism which helped challenge and undermine the authority of the church to impose its doctrines and exclude non-believers. It is true that those earlier anticlerical voices lacked Spinoza's ability to formulate a philosophical alternative to Christian belief. But wasn't the crux of the matter challenging the authority of the church to impose religious teachings, not convincing everyone to embrace an alternative philosophical system? Israel is an urbane scholar of the Dutch Republic who has nothing against the persistence of diverse religious communities. What he (and we) object to is the clerical domination of government. Against ecclesiastic hegemony, those early plebeian dissenters, devout or indifferent, contributed as did elite Spinozists. Typically, Israel pays considerable attention to the polymath dissenter Comenius, but none to plebeian rebels against clerical oppression. The tacit view that the uneducated are religious bigots who cannot think for themselves was probably false then and certainly is now. The most famous medieval rebels against church-backed dominion professed apocalyptic articles of faith. Hussites challenged the Church by establishing a rival religious movement. But they were motivated by the manifest hypocrisy of those in authority and by the contradictions of doctrine and practice. We know this from reliable sources and because the undogmatic anticlericalism in medieval and early modern literature drew on and appealed to popular sentiments.

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[7] Benedict de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise,* ed. Jonathan Israel, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), p. 12 ("I know that it is as impossible to rid the common people of superstition as it is to rid them of fear. . . . I do not therefore invite the common people and those who are afflicted with the same feelings as they are, to read these things).

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One often reiterates without question the view that Marx and Engels rejected religion, thereby breaking decisively with Hegel and Christian utopian socialists. This overlooks the logical implication of their claim of having turned Hegel's philosophy upside down or right-side up. If taken seriously, this also meant inverting the central role of Christianity in Hegel's philosophy by secularizing rather than rejecting its precursor status. Engels' later work on the *Peasant War in Germany* still takes it as a given that class interests during the Reformation were defended beneath theological banners.

Intellectual biographers find in Marx's early *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* a pivotal moment in his identification of the proletariat as the ultimate revolutionary class and capstone to what becomes historical materialism.[8] Writing in 1843, Marx completes and supersedes the Young Hegelians' turn from religion to philosophy by turning from critical theory to revolutionary practice. To the student of literature, the thematic context and use of antitheses *mutatis mutandis* are noteworthy in this text. Literary style embodies here Marx's movement of thought, just as Spinoza's *faux* Euclidian demonstrations or Kant's architecture of colorless concepts embody theirs. Marx's mutating antitheses of religion into theory and practice signal his dialectical method. His discussion assigns the proletariat the key role in the coming revolution, not based on economics which he had yet to study,[9] but on a dialectical progression implicit in the meaning of the Reformation in relation to German philosophy:

> Even from the historical point of view, theoretical emancipation has a specific practical importance for Germany. Germany's *revolutionary* past is precisely theoretical:

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[8] See Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2016), pp. 152-54; Jonathan Sperber, *Karl Marx: A 19th-Century Life* (New York: Liveright, 2013), pp. 125-26. (Relevant to the primacy of theory versus empirical observation, Sperber writes, "Marx's personal acquaintance with the actual working class, with its own suffering, actions, aspirations, and ideas, was barely beginning when he placed his revolutionary hopes in it"—126).

[9] See Joseph O'Malley, "Editor's Introduction," Karl Marx, *Early Political Writings,* ed. and trans. Joseph O'Malley with Richard A. Davis, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, series Eds. Raymond Geuss, Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), pp. xvi. Marx's first studies of political economy began well after the February 1844 publication.

it is the *Reformation.* As at that time it was a monk, so now it is the *philosopher* in whose brain the revolution begins.

Luther, to be sure, overcame servitude based on *devotion,* but by replacing it with servitude based on *conviction.* He shattered faith in authority by restoring the authority of faith. He transformed the priests into laymen by changing the laymen into priests. He liberated man from external religiosity by making religiosity that which is innermost to man. He freed the body from chains by putting the heart in chains.

But if Protestantism was not the real solution, it at least posed the problem correctly.[10] (All typographical emphases in Marx's cited texts are in the original.)

Marx makes no reference here to exploitation based on surplus value or to cyclical economic crises, but only to his historical antitheses and reversions. The previous revolution of the Reformation and Peasant War aimed to free the laity from the priests and princes by secularizing church property. The coming revolution would free the Germans from the feudal and bourgeois classes by confiscating private property. The exposition has as much in common with the biblical foreshadowing of type and antitype as with the causal reasoning of social science: "At that time, the Peasant War, the most radical event in German history, foundered because of theology. Today, when theology itself has foundered, the most unfree thing in German history, our status quo, will be shattered by philosophy" (65). Luther, however, at least "posed the problem correctly." The new dispensation will fulfill, not abolish, the old.

As of 1844, then, Marx has arrived at the key conclusion which he would only later substantiate with the aid of political economy. Our consideration of the genesis of his conclusion should help us understand why the victory of the proletariat comes to appear as: 1. the "apocalyptic" end of history;

[10] Marx, 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction' (1844), cited from Marx, *Early Political Writings,* pp. 64-65. Citations to Marx in parentheses are to this edition.

and 2. its utopian fulfillment. Neither postulate, neither the end of history nor its radiant significance, is self-evident on economic grounds. Otherwise, the economic theorists on whom Marx drew should have anticipated his conclusions. Instead of economics, it is the *mutatis mutandis* relations of France to Germany, religion to philosophy, and theory to practice that usher in the final outcome: "In Germany, . . . [as opposed to France], where practical life is as little intellectual as intellectual life is practical, no class of civil society has the need and the capacity for universal emancipation until it is forced to it by its *immediate* situation, its *material* necessity, and its very *chains"* (68). "Just as philosophy finds its *material* weapons in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its *spiritual* weapons in philosophy; and once the lightning of thought has struck deeply into the native soil of the people the emancipation of the *Germans into men* will be accomplished" (69). The "lightning of thought" evokes dialectical revelation.

The style of these passages, propelled by antithesis and analogy, should not be underestimated. One can imagine the Young Hegelian "Free Men" *(die Freien)* in their Berlin taverns and coffeehouses nodding assent. For two generations, a Holy Grail of German intellectual life had been the derivation of the future from the patterns of the past. Marx was writing in France and cut off from Berlin circles. If his old associates had been able to hear or read his arguments, they might well have recognized in his dialectical reasoning the secularized apocalyptic reversal whereby the last should become the first. I don't mean that the religious precedent was the necessary and sufficient cause of Communist utopia. The radicals of the early nineteenth century, among them Marx, Engels, and Bakunin, were disposed to anticipate apocalyptic reversions because their *Konfliktkultur* drew authority from past revolutions, reformations, and plebeian revolts. These prototypes engaged their theoretical imagination and guided their quest for a future prefigured in the past. Marx wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte:* "The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living." It does so, because the concepts that express our thoughts also shape and inform them.

Marx's *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* lives in those rhetorical antitheses: "The weapon of criticism certainly cannot replace the criticism of weapons" (64). Luther, as head of the early theological-theoretical German revolution, "transformed the priests into laymen by changing the laymen into priests" (64). Consistent with Spinoza, Marx still maintains that the "status quo" will be "shattered by philosophy" (65). The French Revolution and German Reformation are exemplary in shifting and transferring authority. Luther "shattered faith in authority by restoring the authority of faith" (64). When Marx goes on to contrast the prerevolutionary situations in France and Germany, his dialectical reversions and antitheses dominate more than any information based on observation or description. In Germany, the role of emancipating the whole of society will fall to the proletariat, "a sphere of society having a universal character because of its universal suffering" "so that the *complete loss* of humanity . . . can only redeem itself through the *total redemption of humanity"* (69). Aided by the Hegelian dialectic, the interplay of the universal and the particular leads to conclusions which lack any empirical sociological basis and embody the eschatological tenet that the last shall be made first. Not only the nationalisms of that age appropriated the role of the suffering Savior of Humanity. Wilhelm Weitling, the plebeian founder of German communism, drew openly on Reformation-era radicalism. To his credit, he neither hailed himself as Savior nor preached an absolute version of the Apocalypse.[11]

[11] Keith Taylor's chapter on "Wilhelm Weitling" in *The Political Ideas of the Utopian Socialists* (London: Frank Cass, 1982), p. 188, seems to ascribe a personal sense of messianic persecution to the imprisoned and exiled worker communist in 1844: "Increasingly Weitling seemed to see himself in the role of a persecuted communist Messiah"; however, Waltraud Seidel-Höppner's "Wilhelm Weitling – Leben und Werk – eine optimistische Tragödie," in *Wilhelm Weitling: Ein Deutscher Arbeiterkommunist,* Lothar Knatz and Hans-Arthur Mariske (Eds.) (Hamburg: Ergebnisse Verlag, 1989), pp. 51-52, insists on the anticlerical and secular intentions of his *Evangelium der armen Sünder,* 1843, which was written at the same time Marx was formulating the relationship of religion and the Lutheran Reformation to philosophy and revolutionary theory, and for which Weitling was imprisoned in Switzerland: "[Weitling's *Evangelium*] will zeigen, daß ein humanistisch verstandenes Christentum mit dem emanzipatorischen Bestreben des Kommunismus verreinbar sei. Es verfehlt den Kern, dieses Werk schlechthin als Rückfall ins Sektierertum zu bewerten. Es handelt sich um eine durch und durch säkulare Interpretation des Urchristentums als geschichtliche Lehre und Bewegung für Demokratie und Freiheit. Sie erklärt die Bibel als Menschenwerk und Jesus als historischen Vorgänger der modernen kommunistischen Bewegung, dessen Kampfziel kein Himmelreich in den Lüften, sondern Gütergemeinschaft auf Erden sei. Das Buch hat nichts von irgendeiner Art 'mystischem Messianismus.'" Cf. Martin Hüttner, *Wilhelm Weitling als Frühsozialist: Essay* (Frankfurt am Main: Haag + Herchen, 1985, pp. 35-45. This more nuanced presentation agrees that Weitling was not a mystical messianist, though he had good reason to feel ignored and persecuted. Unlike Marx or Engels who soon eclipsed his role, he did time in jail.

Marx here still emphasizes the priority of the inner liberation: the Germans must emancipate themselves from their "inner priest" (65). But just as the Reformation confiscated church property, the coming revolution will confiscate private property (65). The revolution will be no less apocalyptical than the religious movement that decried the pope as Antichrist. Calling for "war upon the conditions in Germany" (59), Marx vows to synthesize criticism with passion: "In its struggle against [German conditions] criticism is no passion of the brain, but is rather the brain of passion" (59). The objective is not to "refute" an opponent but to "destroy" an enemy (59). Frustrated and impatient to implement their theories and realize their philosophical-political apocalypses, radicals and intellectuals in the wake of Marx, Engels, and Bakunin would make good on Bruno Bauer's hyperbolic slogan of the "terrorism of pure theory" by racking and amputating humanity to fit the procrustean bed of theory.

We have become familiar with a "terrorism of pure theory" practiced by the Right no less than the Left. No one should underestimate the chasm that separates theory from common sense. Recently, conservative voices have assigned a deeply subversive role to critical theory and the Frankfurt School. In fact, unlike such earlier critical venues as the Monthly Review circle of Marxist intellectuals, critical theory has rendered the chasm between academic criticism and lay reception all but impassable. The chasm blinds those who can't discuss exploitation without invoking Marx or sex without referencing Freud, as well as those who eschew all theory and claim common knowledge as their only guide. If a sea captain runs aground and loses his crew, no one doubts that he should be relieved of his command; but if the captains of industry and finance wreak disaster, punditry and politicians instead denounce the evils of socialism and call for measures that rescue and reward failure, all based on what "everyone knows." We live in a world where reason and responsibility are drowning in a deluge of abstraction, rationalization, falsehood, and recrimination. A population capable of behaving sensibly and decently on an individual level longs for the strong hand to simplify things, resolve confusions, and restore normality. But is Spinoza really a viable guide out of our maze of conflicting ideologies and beliefs?

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Spinoza's method in the *Ethics* is a relic of the age of Descartes without any application in our educational culture. Marx and his radical contemporaries would have consulted him in vain for their dialectic of historical change or their belief that the common people could be a force for progressive development. To fault Marx, or us, for not modeling our political opposition on Spinoza's *Ethics* is to blame the nineteenth or twenty-first century for not being the seventeenth. Spinoza did contribute to the intellectual ferment of Marx's time. For Lessing or Goethe, his influence was significant. However, we need to look further afield to survey the broken continuity of Spinoza's humane impact. Spinoza's influence reaches a crossroads with the "Enlightenment that Failed" in Lessing's treatise *The Education of Humankind* (1777-1780).[12] This treatise claims nothing with certainty; but it indicates that a religious culture subsumed by Communism and nationalism could have been approached pedagogically rather than dogmatically-dialectically. The apocalyptic strain in the Hegelian-Marxist tradition could have lent itself to another historical sensibility, a different *Konfliktkultur*.

Here is a work written under the influence of Spinoza which encompasses elements that later appear incompatible. It mixes scriptural piety with agnostic critique and treats the triadic configuration of apocalyptic faith as a heuristic hypothesis. In this regard, it is true to the mixed culture of Christian dissenters and Cartesian rationalists in which Spinoza flourished. Popular millenarianism yields to a provocative *jeu d'esprit*. Lessing doesn't so much propound enlightenment in theory as actuate it in practice as the self-liberation of Kant's "daring to know." His treatise is positioned at the crossroads where education as inner enlightenment crosses paths with a religious or secular apocalyptic passion to end history by vanquishing evil. Lessing reinterprets the secularizing millenarian tradition which

[12] There is an older translation of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *The Education of the Human Race,* trans. Rev. Fred. W. Robertson, M.A., third edition (London: Henry S. King & Co., 1875), and a recent one included in Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings,* trans. and ed. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005). Citations, including the title, are my own translation.

extends on to Hegel, Marx, and the twentieth century history-concluding utopias of Communism and Fascism. We need a more accessible English version with a more extensive commentary to elucidate its many passages informed by biblical, theological, mystical, and philosophical allusions.

In one hundred numbered paragraphs, the author constructs a kind of monolog with himself or dialog with the reader, or inner monolog that encourages the reader to participate and follow suit. The first, fiftieth, and fifty-eighth are shortest (fifteen, sixteen, and thirteen words respectively), the seventy-third, comprising reflections on the Trinity, longest (thirty-three lines constituting a full page). *The Education of Humankind* proposes to consider by means of analogy the triadic revelation comprised by the Old and New Testaments and the Joachite Age of the Spirit as a kind of successive educational process, one might almost say the primary, secondary, and advanced schooling of the human spirit. In the first stage, Jehovah uses punishments to keep his unruly people on the right path. In the second, Christ is the "practical teacher" of the immortality of the soul who encourages an "inner purity of the heart in regard to that other life" ("Eine innere Reinigkeit des Herzens in Hinsicht auf ein anderes Leben"—§ 61). This "practical" teaching is still bound to the threat of damnation and the promise of eternal life. It has yet to mature into the "complete enlightenment" and "purity of heart" that renders us "capable of loving virtue for its own sake" (§ 80). The education of humankind progresses from the fear of external punishment to the inner purity of the soul to a love of the good as an end in itself.

The author speculates that the medieval millenarians may have had an inkling of this with their notion of an age of the "new, eternal Evangel" (§ 86). "Perhaps their threefold age of the world was more than an empty fancy" (§ 86). "The religious enthusiast or fanatic *[i.e. Schwärmer]* often has a true insight into the future; but he cannot wait for this future" (§ 90). Near the end of life, the hard-pressed, long-suffering Lessing concludes with a burst of undogmatic hope, an intimation of metempsychosis or eternal recurrence, and a tentative yet fervent faith in a gradual progress toward enlightenment. His

tentative hedging of hope leaves unconfirmed what might otherwise harden to dogma. The reader is authorized to take it or leave it or to rethink the whole thing. Above all, Lessing dares readers to think for themselves, eschewing all the dogmas of orthodoxy, heresy, atheism, or fideism.

Lessing embodies the heroic optimism of the Radical Enlightenment, while also anticipating Hegel's evolving Spirit and philosophical interpretation of Christianity, as well as the mutating dialectic of the Young Hegelians. He recapitulates scriptural and theological antecedents from Augustine and Joachim of Fiore to Spinoza and Reimarus. The provocative play of analogy and allusion evokes the forms of spiritualist dissent and the inner certainty of mystical illumination. In the spiritualist tradition, Lessing recapitulates the transfer of authority from external sources to the inner word of conscience. Mystical illumination is adumbrated when his opening paragraph sets the thought process in motion: "What education is for the individual, revelation is for the entire human race." Not only does this lend a rational interpretation to biblical revelation; it celebrates the flash and wonder in our epiphanies of learning. Paragraph 73 recalls the rich patristic tradition of trinitarian speculation which was applied already by Augustine to the dynamics of the mind and here anticipates the new dialectic of subject and object. In the best Socratic tradition, dialectic truly is method rather than doctrine or prophesy.

The Education of Humankind is a precursor of the Hegelian reinterpretation of Christianity; but it also voices a warning which could have been meant for Marx and the Young Hegelians: The fanatic enthusiasts *(Schwärmer)* had an "inkling of the future," Lessing writes, but they were too impatient to wait peacefully for it. His Lutheran readers would have inferred here the violence ascribed to Taborites and Müntzerian Anabaptists. The Joachite dogma of the three unfolding ages was an attempt to anchor a presentiment of the future in the authority of heaven and enforce it on earth. This conforms to Yuri

Slezkine's recent thesis in his documentary *House of Government* that the Soviet dictatorship stood in the tradition of apocalyptic attempts to create heaven on earth.[13]

Karl Löwith understood that the same Joachite texts and themes lay at the root of the medieval Franciscan Spirituals, the movements of chiliastic dissent, the heuristic of Lessing, the inspirations of German Idealist philosophy, and the brutal utopias of Fascism and Communism:

> The revolution which had been proclaimed within the framework of an eschatological faith and with reference to a perfect monastic life was taken over, five centuries later, by a philosophical priesthood, which interpreted the process of secularization in terms of a "spiritual" realization of the Kingdom of God on earth. As an attempt at realization, the spiritual pattern of Lessing, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel could be transposed into the positivistic and materialistic schemes of Comte and Marx. The third dispensation of the Joachites appeared as a third International and a third *Reich,* inaugurated by a *dux* or *Führer* who was acclaimed as a savior and greeted by millions with *Heil!* The source of all these formidable attempts to fulfill history by and within itself is the passionate, but fearful and humble, expectation of the Franciscan Spirituals that a last conflict will bring history to its climax and end.[14]

Löwith in effect confirms that the Joachite historical triad is one of the recurring figures of authority, comparable to the fall from grace, the two cities of St. Augustine, the Byzantine celestial-ecclesiastic hierarchy, or the *translatio imperii* of legitimacy from ancient Troy in the *Aeneid* with all its echoes. These

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[13] Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2017).

[14] Löwith, *The Meaning of History,* p. 159. Elsewhere, Löwith states that, "Lessing's influence [with *Education]* was extraordinarily deep and far reaching. It affected the Saint-Simonian socialists in France; and even Comte's law of three stages was probably influenced by it . . . . Lessing's theory was then adopted by the German idealist philosophers . . ." (p. 208); cf. Walter Kaufmann on the influence of Lessing's *Education* on Hegel, in *Hegel: A Reinterpretation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1965), pp. 41-44.

themes are reflected both in literature and in historical culture and should be studied conjointly. In general, too little attention is given to the symbols, styles, and structures of philosophical literature.

The value of literary analysis extends to different writings by the same author. Students of literature might recognize contrasting adaptations of the hermeneutic tradition in Lessing and Marx. Like Ernst Bloch, Lessing recognizes in eschatology and apocalyptic thinking the "principle of hope." His exposition is informed by critique and sharpened by wit. Marx's preface to *The German Ideology* satirizes in a manner worthy of Brecht the Young Hegelian determination to resolve human alienation by alleviating its representation in the mind. To evoke the unworldly logic of their philosophical reformism, Marx formulates this ironic fairy tale.

> Once upon a time there was a brave man who imagined that the only reason men drowned was because they were possessed by the *thought of gravity*. If they could rid their minds of this idea, for example by branding it superstitious, religious, they would be safe from the danger of drowning. Throughout his life he fought against the illusion of gravity, whose pernicious effects were amply demonstrated to him by every statistic. That brave man was the very type of the revolutionary German philosopher. (120)

Self-fulfilling theory ignores the weight of reality and disables the theorist's capacity for praxis. The satire could as appropriately be aimed at our self-help literature which claims to alleviate alienation and depression by obviating them as mental conditions. The disassociation of theory from practice is enunciated here more effectively than in Marx's famous dictum (which he was wise not to publish): "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in different ways; the point is to *change* it." Nothing would seem to convict the world-improving illusions of academics more forcefully or demand more resolutely that we turn from theory to practice. But there is a flaw in this appeal. It, too, is theory, and a poorly conceived one. Many philosophies have changed the world. None could have done so without

interpreting it. The overdrawn antithesis of *interpret* and *change* is characteristic of an evolving Hegelian dialectic[15] which promised world transformation by the proletariat.[16] The dialectic with its antithetical incantations was Marx's magical thinking. Marxists religiously cite his eleventh "thesis on Feuerbach" like Holy Writ, yet avoid even the most cursory familiarity with a Bible that would reveal to the secular-minded certain pre-conditions of Marxist thought, as well as the culture of the Left's religious allies.

Lessing's *Education of Humankind* expresses hope and faith in the coming enlightenment. What he longs for isn't a world-apocalypse at the end of time effected by a dualistic final struggle, but a self-enlightening of individuals, each in their time, always susceptible to setbacks and detours, yet vouched for by our ability to think things through. This is not the eradication of religion envisaged by Feuerbach or Marx but an open-minded colloquy with faith which advances beyond dogma and superstition by taking religion seriously. Lessing isn't recommending a new gnostic elite knowledge but appealing for respect for the less advanced and for confidence in the subtler ways of progress: "take care not to let your slower fellow pupils notice what you divine or are already beginning to see" (§ 68). They must discover it for themselves. "Until they have caught up with you, these slower fellow pupils—better that you go back again to that primer to investigate whether those formulations of method which you regard as didactic placeholders are not indeed something more" (§ 69). Lessing resists the canonization of his educated conclusions as the final word which others are simply too dull to grasp. Better that we return to the "primer" with them. No one is too advanced for a deeper knowledge and no one too backward for advancement. We are all on the same path. All players in the same very long game.

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[15] According to Robert Nola, "The Young Hegelians, Feuerbach, and Marx," in *The Age of German Idealism,* Routledge History of Philosophy VI, Robert E. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins (Eds.) (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), "The future evolution of the proletariat is also described in the "Introduction" in terms of Hegel's dialectic—the one prominent feature of Hegelian thought that Marx never abandoned" (297).

[16] Even the more practical minded but hardly less brilliant Engels maintained his faith in the dialectic to the end, as he reiterated in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (1888), (New York: International Publishers, 1941), p. 44 ("this materialist dialectic which for years had been our best working tool and our sharpest weapon was, remarkably enough, discovered not only by us, but also independently of us and even of Hegel by a German worker, Joseph Dietzgen" *[Das Wesen der menschlichen Kopfarbeit, dargestellt von einem Handarbeiter]).*