

05.16.2017

Dialectical Enlightenment

HARRISON FLUSS / LANDON FRIM

The socialist project isn't to rebel against the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity, but to show how capitalism is incapable of fulfilling them.

A

revolt against the Enlightenment's legacy has marked the academic culture of a generation. Leftists today often criticize the Radical Enlightenment thesis, arguing that those who advance it privilege the force of ideas in history over material forces. They accuse its proponents of elevating philosophy written by elite European men over the sacrifices made by ordinary people in the course of mass struggle.

For example, a recent *Viewpoint* article alleges that Jonathan Israel's *Radical Enlightenment* series paradoxically rejects theory because he holds ideas in such high regard. Like most criticism of Israel's scholarship, Asad Haider's intervention is the result of an echo chamber: he recites prominent book reviews rather than the texts themselves.

Indeed, even a cursory reading of Israel gives lie to these truisms. As an intellectual historian, he focuses on the role ideas play in history, but he also devotes page after page to topics like "women, philosophy, and sexuality," "sexual freedom," "censorship and culture," "revolutionary conspiracy," "criminal trials," "Dutch colonialism in Asia," "the Enlightenment in Japan," "*Anti-Philosophie* and the diffusion of radical literature," "secret societies," "liberation movements in exile," and the "General Revolution" as a global process.

Israel highlights both the effects of material forces and the power of struggles from below. It is a strawman argument to characterize his position as crediting philosophers like Baruch Spinoza, or even Spinoza's readers, as the proximate authors of revolution. Rather, Israel claims that Spinoza's philosophy most articulately expressed the democratic and radically egalitarian energies of that time.

Unfortunately, praise for the Radical Enlightenment thesis often misses the point, as well. It celebrates Israel's work for "problematizing" the Enlightenment, "destabilizing" the concept, or revealing the plurality of tendencies within the intellectual movement. But the Radical Enlightenment thesis does not just problematize or complicate this period: it *analyzes* its essential features. It sees the Enlightenment as a project that strives for egalitarianism, secularism, and political emancipation.

When these essential features are delineated, we can distinguish between the moderate and radical Enlightenment tendencies, recognizing that the latter more consistently manifests those ideals.

Nonetheless, our reception of this thesis entails an even more radical politics than Israel himself would allow. Our approach has been anticipated in works such as Nick Nesbitt's *Universal Emancipation: The*

Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment, in which the author broadens the horizons of Israel's thesis to incorporate European and non-European Jacobinism.

We also trace the Radical Enlightenment to nascent socialist movements in late eighteenth-century Europe. Gracchus Babeuf's trial, final testament, and execution, one of the last episodes of the French Revolution, is particularly telling in this regard. In his defense, Babeuf invokes not only Rousseau, but also Mably, Helvetius, and Diderot. He tells the jurors that these authors inspired his revolutionary socialism and the imperative to overthrow a society based on private property. As Babeuf put it, "it is because of these philosophical poisons that I am lost."

Real Materialism

O ur emphasis on ideas does not mean we abandon materialism. After all, materialism itself is a philosophical idea. Far from "common sense" empiricism or pragmatism, materialism implies an intelligible universe. It requires uniform natural laws and predictable cause-and-effect relations; it precludes divine intervention, the spontaneity of wills, or radical evil. Spinoza's long-fought metaphysical achievements allow us to be materialists. Some may wish to "throw away the philosophical ladder," but this attitude is not intellectually sophisticated — it's superficial.

The great conflicts of history, the drivers of class conflict, are all material. The tension between the ways we produce and the relations of production underlie historical change, including revolutionary change. But empirical descriptions of the economy cannot tell us on which side of the barricades to stand.

In revolutionary moments, the ideas in one's head matter. Like the pessimist philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, you may lend your opera glasses to Prussian soldiers so that they can shoot down rioting workers in the 1848 Revolution. Or, like Friedrich Engels, you can join the ranks of those same democratic uprisings and resupply them with rifle cartridges.

Some self-identified materialists may argue that economic forces solely determine class allegiance, but this position does not represent genuine materialism, let alone accurately describe history.

Capitalism consolidates ever-greater sections of humanity into two great and opposed camps, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The self-emancipation of the working class remains the central element of overturning capitalism. But if social station alone determines which side you take in the class war, then no member of the middle or upper classes could ever authentically support workers' struggle. That would include Marx, Luxemburg, and Lenin, among others.

The oppression of workers is not mysterious or inscrutable. Neither is their ultimate victory a purely private one. The triumph of the working class will be the emancipation from class society itself. A crass economism, that imagines worker identity to be permanent, misreads this struggle as tragic, never-ending, and Sisyphean. Hence the tendency to eschew the input of those without working-class pedigree, as though Engels's ideas were automatically poisoned by the size of his bank account.

Ideas should be judged by their revolutionary merit and not their origin. To deny this is mere tribalism.

The Universal and the Particular

E ven if we grant that economic conditions decide a person's place in the struggle, it does not follow that revolutionary consciousness emerges from class position alone.

Declining wages, poverty, and unemployment have alienated millions from the establishment and its neoliberal orthodoxies, but disaffection does not produce a singular political response.

For this, we still need the right ideas. Disaffection alone could produce either a socialist protest or a racist pogrom. It certainly matters whether one joins an internationalist workers' party or self-identifies only with the "white working class."

The alt-right's self-appointed leaders have exploited real economic pressures in service of their ideology. They hype dubious crime statistics, Islamophobia, and general racist and sexist nonsense to channel the real suffering that neoliberal policies have created over the past thirty years.

People seduced by the far right experience this economic warfare, but they understand the struggle in racial or civilizational terms. Thus, they cannot perceive their common interest with the oppressed of other races and nationalities. Simply responding to economic pressure obviously does not suffice; we need to comprehend these pressures themselves.

Against the alt-right, how do we assert that class struggle is more fundamental than membership in a particular racial or ethnic community? How do we argue that everyone should care about the exploitation and suffering of those from different cultural backgrounds? It is by advancing the one premise that racist and xenophobic ideologues most vehemently reject: a common human nature.

Of course, positing a shared human nature will not guarantee political struggle either. Cheerily shouting "we're all in this together" will not establish peace and harmony among all peoples. Handing a police officer a soft drink will not abolish racism. At best, this manner of thinking belongs to the utopian socialism of the nineteenth century; at worst, it bolsters today's consumerist liberalism.

The Left must both recognize our common humanity and perform a clear-headed analysis of oppressive societies' historical contradictions. By acknowledging the invariant drives shared by all human beings — drives for physical well-being, education, and community — we can measure society's relative progress in meeting those demands. At the same time, by understanding existing contradictions and current historical movements, we can chart the course toward greater human flourishing.

We need to carefully determine the relationship between human nature — what Marx called "species being" — and its development in time and place. Human nature is not elevated to some heavenly ideal that can never be achieved in the fallen, material world. Instead, by human nature, we mean all the real and still latent capacities of the human species. We must create the social conditions where these latent capacities can be realized.

With these criteria, we can distinguish those movements that incarnate progress and universal interests from those that do not. We then have a fixed and universal basis for supporting some anti-imperialist movements' nationalism while condemning the nationalism of anti-immigrant platforms. We can stand in solidarity with Black Lives Matter protests while standing against white supremacist marches.

A succession of particular struggles will advance the interests of humanity, and we should support them for their own sake. We must fight to eradicate racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. The Left cannot view these sites of conflict cynically — as mere instruments for class struggle — but recognize the role they play in building class consciousness. By demonstrating how diverse forms of oppression have a common root in capitalism, these struggles reinforce the fact that abolishing capitalism is the necessary condition for overcoming these forms of injustice.

Toward Dialectical Enlightenment

In denying the dualism between thought and matter, and in affirming a human identity grounded in an intelligible universe, we should return to Spinoza. His system most clearly draws the connections between thinking and action, theory and practice. This philosopher's Radical Enlightenment ideas were no European miracle; to the contrary, Spinoza's rationalism argues that the most important ideas are universal and therefore innate to human beings the world over.

Precisely because of what we affirm in Spinoza, we view his French reception in the twentieth century skeptically. Thinkers such as Deleuze and Althusser largely reject Spinoza's rationalism, monism, and determinism, reducing his substance to a swirl of anarchic forces, whether in Deleuze's nomads or in Althusser's aleatory materialism. These readings perform a kind of "substance abuse," replacing Spinoza's objective metaphysics with a Nietzschean play of forces.

But a different tradition of Marxist Spinozism doesn't fall into this trap. Starting with Joseph Dietzgen and Georgi Plekhanov and proceeding with the Soviet Spinozists, A. M. Deborin and Evald Ilyenkov, these writers treat Spinoza as a dialectical thinker *avant la lettre*. They participate in the tradition of the left-Hegelians Heine, Feuerbach, and Hess, who hailed Spinoza as the real godfather of German Idealism. As such, they did not reject Spinoza's humanism for a Heideggerian inspired antihumanism. Instead, they sought to affirm human power and dignity through an understanding of the material world.

Accepting or rejecting the Radical Enlightenment thesis is not, as Michel Foucault put it, a matter of intellectual "blackmail." Because the project has specific philosophical content, agreeing with it is not a matter of taste but of worldview. It is not like choosing between different ice cream flavors, when one may innocently answer "strawberry" or "mint." Instead, these represent genuine options. Making a decision about them is not optional.

Insisting that people decide — and that there is indeed a right answer — is not blackmail. Either we accept an intelligible universe or reject it; either we affirm a common humanity or deny it; either we see social revolution as necessary or remain blind to this fact.

Today's left tends to avoid giving such definite philosophical answers, satisfied with "problematizing" and never coming to a conclusion. Generally, thinkers do this under the guise of false humility. They substitute theoretical pluralism for theoretical commitment, presenting the latter as sheer hubris.

And yet, they seem to have no such aversion to insisting on a definite political program, as if coherent politics could be immaculately conceived through the struggle itself without the mediation of ideas. This position is clearly self-defeating and limits theoretical knowledge to make room for political faith, ultimately denigrating both.

We do not have all the answers, but we assert the imperative to find them. Our project must overcome skepticism of the Enlightenment with a dialectical Enlightenment. It will not merely critique the values of "secularism, republicanism, rights, freedoms, and equality" but will rather show how capitalism is incapable of fulfilling them.

To materialize the ideals of the most radical sections of the bourgeoisie, including those of Spinoza himself, bourgeois society must be overcome. This is the essence of dialectical Enlightenment.