

**Jonathan Israel. *The Expanding Blaze: How the American Revolution Ignited the World, 1775-1848*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-06-91-17660-4. Pp. x, 755. Hardcover, £30.00, \$39.95; Paperback (forthcoming, November 2019), £22.00, \$27.95.**

Much attention should be paid to the title chosen by Jonathan Israel for his recent *monstre* book, *The Expanding Blaze*. The line is taken from Philip Freneau's *On the Prospect of a Revolution*, published in France in 1790, and it suggests a genealogy along the trajectory of the historical frame which Alan Taylor has defined in plural as the 'American Revolutions' and, at the same time, indicates the American case as the possible beginning for such an era. As the subtitle clarifies, *How the American Revolution Ignited the World, 1775-1848*, this very point constitutes Israel's explicit argument throughout the entire book: the American Revolution influenced the political and cultural evolution in the rest of the world, imposing a model and an inspiration, providing a new beginning for human society at least until the Revolutions of 1848.

Israel establishes a thought-provoking dialogue between his book and one of the most resonant texts on the topic, Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution* (1963). In particular, Israel rejects Arendt's assumption according to which the American and the French Revolutions posit two very distant revolutionary environments and models, both in terms of theory and practice: he claims that Arendt's retrospective political reading well represents twentieth century socio-political hermeneutic categories, but adapts neither to the political rationale of the transatlantic revolutions, nor to the liberal innovation shaped by the American experience. What *The Expanding Blaze* wishes to demonstrate is rather how a substratum of Enlightenment concepts actualized for the first time in the American Revolution, was able to influence several liberal insurrections during the first half of the nineteenth century, such as the Irish Revolution (1775-1798), the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), the Latin-American uprisings (1810-1825), and the Greek Revolution (1770-1830).

Following this chronological framework, Israel criticizes Arendt's vision of the American Revolution as completely divergent from the French Revolution in two ways. On the one hand, he argues that both the American and the French revolutions are comparable for their common base resulted by a complementary integration of the principles of radical and moderate Enlightenment (two areas which Israel discusses thoroughly in his monumental trilogy: *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750*; *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670-1752*; and *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750-1790*). On the other hand,

Israel suggests that what Arendt identifies as the most significant difference between the American and the French Revolutions, namely the role of the people, is rather arguable. In fact, both in America and in France, 'popular discontent, insurrections and protests [...] served in order to generate social pressure and to produce emotional reactions.' In other terms, Israel questions the idea that, whereas the American Revolution became a mass uprising only on a later stage and was originally orchestrated and directed by intellectual revolutionary elites (as a matter of fact, Arendt agrees with J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, as he 'was radically opposed to the American Revolution, which he saw as a kind of conspiracy of 'great personages' against 'the common ranks of men)'), on the contrary, the French Revolution reflected the popular tensions from the very beginning of its development.

Although Israel acknowledges that the original context of the American Revolution implied a social struggle in addition to a political controversy, he also clarifies that the role of the people in the American Independence has been 'extensively diminished' and relegated to that of an emotional subject to be driven accordingly by the political leaders of the time. The point where the author's perspective becomes sharper is when he argues that such a prerogative of crowds, mobs and masses has been recurrent throughout the following centuries: rage and emotionality did not imply any intrinsic relationship to the political claims of the time but were, in fact, governed by the 'unstable avantgardes' and shaped in the image of their specific ideologies. According to Israel, this pattern would be replicated during the twentieth century in Bolshevism, Fascism, Nazism, Stalinism, and Maoism. This reading of the popular participation in the American Revolution reminds of Ronald P. Formisano's position in his *For the People. American Populist Movements from the Revolution to the 1850s* (2008), as he claims that 'The patriot cause entrenched a template for later movements that would attempt, in the name of 'the people,' to end social injustice or the corrupt sway of powerful elites.'

On the one hand, Formisano identifies the American Revolution as a sort of original practical model for the subsequent popular uprising. On the other hand, Israel seems to prioritize the theoretical application of the Enlightenment principles to the Revolution and to its exportation to the rest of the world. Both scholars agree on the original position of the American insurrection and its capacity to ignite and influence other socio-political contexts (both Israel and Formisano's span a period of time from 1776 to 1848). Yet, despite their common ground, Formisano categorizes the American Revolution as a proto-populist mass protest, while Israel nearly never recurs to such a label. He analyzes and discusses thoroughly the variety of constitutive traits of the Revolution which will re-emerge during the twentieth century, in particular, in the way revolutionary elites 'manufactured consensus' (as Noam Chomsky would say) through the use of language. Yet, he seems to reject a populist reading of the America

Revolution and maintains his reflection strictly consistent to the categories of moderate and radical Enlightenment in which he identifies the origin of American republicanism. At the same time, he observes how the first significant populist movements that emerged in the United States (such as the Know-Nothing Movement) had several elements in common with the popularization of the conflict with Great Britain, and at the same time constituted the first historical phase in which a popular movement distorted the principles of the *Declaration of Independence* thus paving the way for the radical xenophobia that characterized the 1850s in the United States.

The 'template' prerogative of the American Revolution recurred even in very recent times under the light of very distant ideologies (for example in NRA rallies, or in the Occupy Movement). For this reason, although it might be erroneous to apply a 'presentist' reading to Israel's rigorous historical and philosophical framework, ignoring the formalist similarities which can inevitably be identified in the American Revolution as well as in several of the latest popular movements might also induce to lose sight of the recurrent impact of the Revolution on the contemporary age, way beyond 1848.

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