Dutch Golden Age Politics and the Rise of the Radical Enlightenment
An Overview

Jonathan Israel

If it is accepted that the group that we refer to as ‘Spinoza’s circle’ did indeed play an intellectually crucial pioneering role, during the 1650s and 1660s, in a way that no other milieu in the Netherlands, or Europe, did in laying Radical Enlightenment’s foundations, it becomes necessary to study this phenomenon historically as well as philosophically as the outcome, in considerable part, of a specific and highly distinctive local context. Wiep Van Bunge’s remarks in his March 2010 inaugural lecture at the Brussels Vrije Universiteit designating the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic ‘de kraamkamer van Spinoza’s filosofie en de radicale Verlichting’ [the delivery-room of Spinoza’s philosophy and the Radical Enlightenment] are undoubtedly justified.¹

The circle that gathered around Van den Enden, the Koerbaghs, Lodewijk Meyer and Spinoza for the first time forged the basic philosophical format and typology that was from then on to characterize the entire Radical Enlightenment tendency in Western trans-Atlantic society and politics down to the 1848 revolutions.² Certainly, there were appreciable differences in ideas between these various individuals which should not be underestimated; but there is little doubt today that the group were all enthusiastic disciples of a radical version of the ‘new philosophy’ aiming not just to thoroughly revolutionize philosophy and our view of the world, in the manner of the Cartesians, but our conception of society, morality, education and politics.³ Especially formative was the philosophical step that arguably proved the most characteristic and fundamental feature of the Radical Enlightenment stream down to the mid-nineteenth century: these writers tied their systematic assault on all

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¹ Van Bunge, De Nederlandse Republiek, Spinoza en de Radicale Verlichting, 31.
² Den Boer finds it an objectionable “anachronism” to employ the term “radical” in the social, political and moral sense that Bentham and Ledru-Rollin employed it during the first half of the nineteenth century. Disagreeing, I argue that the radicalism of Bentham and Ledru-Rollin was the last phase of precisely the same radical tradition commencing in Holland in the 1650s. Anachronism may by the ‘sin of sins’ of historians, but it is an equally gross error not to recognize genuine continuities and derivations, see Den Boer, “Le Dictionnaire libertin d’Adriaen Koerbagh”, 105.
³ Krop, Spinoza. Een paradoxale icoon van Nederland, 73–76.
religious authority, and priesthoods with the first comprehensive theories of modern democratic republicanism, doing so purposely and systematically—thereby initiating a revived and broadened “True Freedom” to use Johan de Witt’s telling phrase, a modern philosophy that went beyond Cartesianism, Hobbesianism or Lockean empiricism in being socially reformist as well as more comprehensively politically engaged.

Linking the broadest possible attack on religious authority to democratic republican political theory remained the Radical Enlightenment’s most essential defining feature. It was a linkage stressed very often and heavily by Condorcet, Cérutti, Desmoulins, Brissot and all the theorists and publicists of the democratic republican wing of the French Revolution, and by the Paineite tradition—represented by Paine, Young, Barlow, Freneau, Palmer, and Jefferson himself infusing the radical (democratic) wing of the American Revolution. While the centrality of this linkage has indeed been denied by several notable critics of the Radical Enlightenment thesis such as Siep Stuurman and Helena Rosenblatt who see no particular connection between the push for equality and denial of religious authority, such denial hardly seems a tenable or logical position. Rather, it has become more or less obvious in recent years that only through denying divine governance of human affairs, and ruling out Revelation and miracles, could the moral and legal order, and hence the social system, be conceived as being not God-given or legitimately sanctioned and ordained by ecclesiastical authority.

Equally, only by ruling out a conscious divine providence could one block philosophies embracing Locke’s ‘supra rationem’. Far from being a connection hard to fathom as numerous critics maintain, there is actually no other way to construct a full equality of interest and opinions in society. Only by rejecting revelation and theological doctrines in toto leaving reason and social utility as the sole criteria of legitimacy can a divinely sanctioned world order buttressing value systems according priority of interest and opinions to the royal, aristocratic, ecclesiastical and select, based on priestly intervention, be repudiated. Awareness of just how momentous and great a break this represented infused the Radical Enlightenment itself from its first stirrings in the 1650s down to its final defeat during and after the 1848 revolutions. Eliminating the ‘supra rationem’ and every conceivable ground for reconciliation between theology and philosophy and doing so uncompromisingly, a step later taken by John Toland in the wake of Spinoza, specifically to counter Locke,⁴ was the sole and exclusive strategy capable of establishing full equality of interests, participation, expression, and representation in society and politics.