



# Walking the Terrain of History with a Faulty Map<sup>1</sup>

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Benjamin Kaplan's superb new book, *Cunegonde's Kidnapping*, offers an opportunity to access the value of Jonathan Israel's rigid distinction between the so-called moderate and radical Enlightenments. Sometimes micro-histories expose the dangers of macro-histories founded not on historical reality but on the prejudices of the historian.

*Wandelen over het terrein van de geschiedenis met een verkeerde kaart*

Benjamin Kaplans indrukwekkende *Cunegonde's Kidnapping* biedt een mogelijkheid om Jonathan Israels strakke scheiding tussen zogenoemde gematigde en radicale Verlichting op waarde te schatten. Micro-geschiedenissen kunnen soms de gevaren blootleggen van macro-geschiedenissen die niet op de historische werkelijkheid zijn gebaseerd, maar op vooroordelen van de historicus.

We all enter the age of Enlightenment with preconceived notions and methodological habits. Studies of eighteenth-century life and thought range from the massive and general to the enticing micro-history, rich in local characters and color. Both approaches have validity; indeed the latter can cast doubt on the former and vice-versa. Do all the splendid generalizations offered by historians of the macro-view hold up when confronting the reality of life in eighteenth-century towns and villages? Perhaps the Enlightenment only mattered in the big cities where reading books – especially heretical ones – was commonplace. This is one of various questions raised by Benjamin Kaplan's minutely researched book.

His book on the young Catholic girl Cunegonde, living in the borderland between the Dutch Republic and the Holy Roman Empire, raises the issue of the tension between the macro vision and the lived reality of a particular small town. Its deeply religious tensions posed challenges to

enlightened values, both secular and tolerant. Yet well we might ask: does the provincial not always present problems to any synthesis derived from urban intellectual life and depending, as it does, upon an analysis of writings by the major thinkers of the eighteenth century?

It is now timely to assess any new book on the Enlightenment in relation to the arguments put forward by Jonathan Israel. In a set of lectures, *The Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton 2010, hereafter RM), Israel summarizes, solidifies, and sometimes alters the arguments of his two much larger and more careful books, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (New York 2001, hereafter RE) and *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (New York 2006, hereafter EC). To evaluate the lectures (RM), both books (RE and EC) need to be included for what all three tell us about the methods and macro-vision of their author. Its conclusions in turn need to be assessed in relation to the new evidence presented by Benjamin Kaplan.

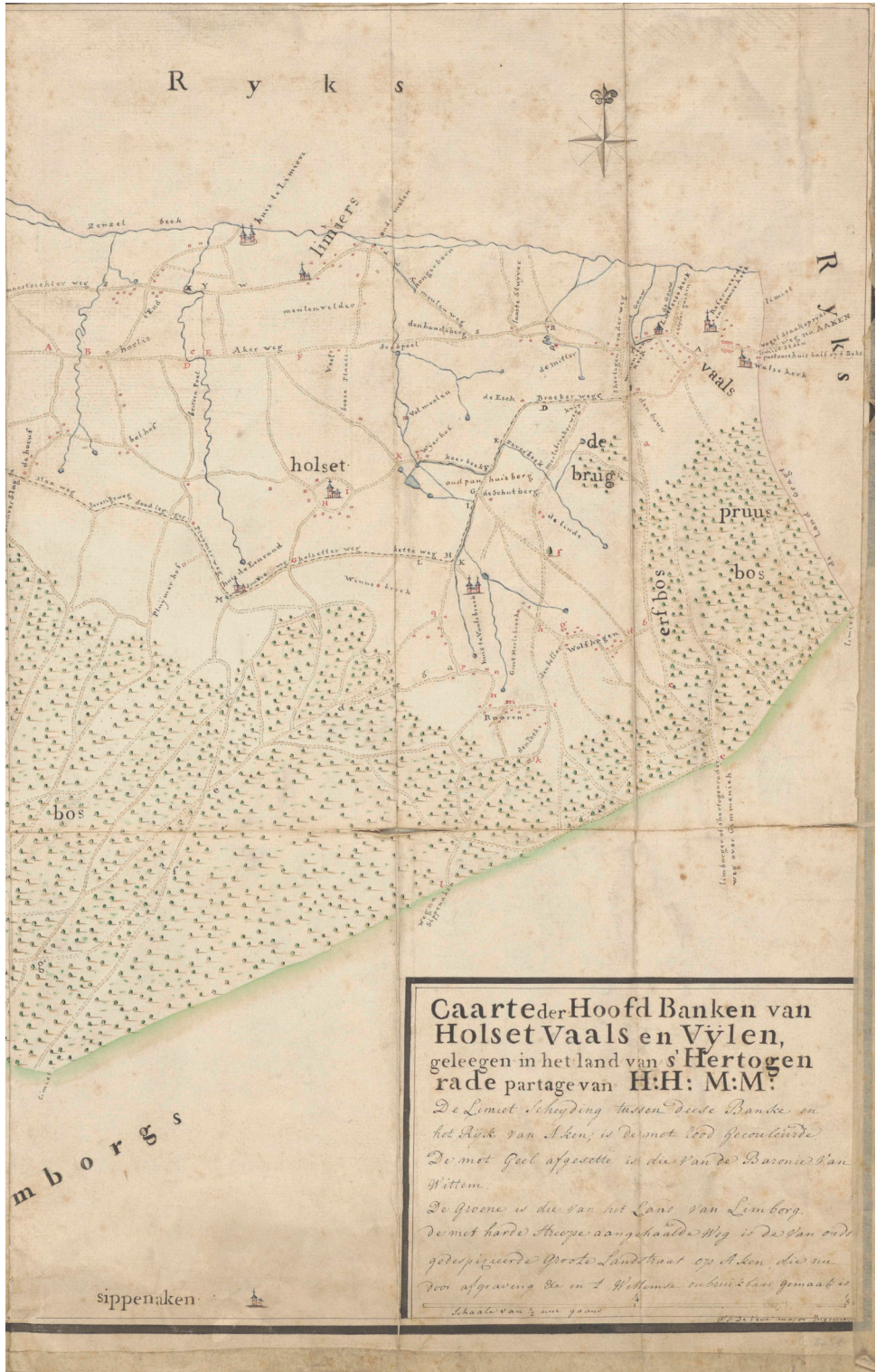
The borderland villages around Aachen, both Dutch and German, might be considered absolutely unique, without comparison in the eighteenth century and beyond. Let us think again. Using the very language that Benjamin Kaplan employs to describe that provincial borderland, we may now cast our gaze toward twentieth-century Ulster. Looking at Northern Ireland in most of the post World War II era the careful observer would have found it 'seething with religious strife'. Social and economic strains on both Catholics and Protestants meant 'new frictions exacerbated the enduring religious enmities inherited from previous centuries'. Both religious groups looked for signs of God's favor, in other words for the intervention of supernatural forces, regardless of what science and the Enlightenment teaches.

Visitors from abroad were commonplace in Ulster as were masonic lodges and various forms of voluntary association (as can be found in eighteenth-century Aachen, 139-140). Yet violence between Catholics and Protestants was endemic to both regions. Newly married, mixed couples could be burned out of their homes in the Irish countryside. The message was clear enough: go to Belfast or better still, leave Ulster. In the eighteenth century the city of Aachen offered a similar cover, hardly fool proof but safer than the surrounding villages. Yet, somehow, ever so gradually first Aachen, now Ulster, escaped the fixity of religious hatred. To this day in July of each year the 'marching season' reminds us that beneath a surface calm religious passions still simmer.

How remarkably late twentieth-century Ulster resembles the eighteenth-century territory around Aachen and Vaals (134-141), so vividly

1 Review of Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Cunegonde's Kidnapping: A Story of Religious Conflict in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven, London: Yale

University Press, 2014, xvii + 290 pp., ISBN 978 0 300 18736 6).



described by Benjamin J. Kaplan in *Cunegonde's Kidnapping*. The hapless Cunegonde Mommers of the title was a simple-minded German Catholic girl who in 1762 crossed the ever-porous border between the Protestant Dutch Republic and the Holy Roman Empire, burst into a Protestant baptismal ceremony, and attempted to snatch away the infant, her nephew. Before she could escape with child in hand, he was wrestled from her and the church doors sealed. Instead of fleeing back to the safety of the border and the Catholic Empire, she found herself under arrest. Then followed her rescue by her Catholic neighbors, only to have her re-kidnapped by Protestants intent upon bringing her to justice – along with the ‘rabble’ who supported her.

We can only imagine what Voltaire would have done with this story had he ever known about it. Superstition, priestcraft, and bigotry – the words would have rolled off his tongue as they did in so many cases of injustice about which Voltaire wrote and campaigned. The secular leaders of the Dutch Republic, William and Charles Bentinck – the sons of William III’s confidant – certainly knew Voltaire’s works and may even have met him on occasion. Their attitudes may justly be described as enlightened and they advocated leniency with regard to the main culprits in this rather extraordinary story. Their lofty sentiments appear to have had little impact on the locals, whether Protestant or Catholic. As Kaplan carefully points out, just about anything out of the ordinary could set both groups at logger-heads (245-246). He is equally careful to note that there were long periods of relative truces. From the perspective of a micro-history Kaplan raises important issues germane to current historiography, in particular to the interpretations of the Enlightenment offered by Israel.

Thus well we might ask, what does the recent and rigid distinction between the moderate and radical Enlightenment offered by Israel add to the story that Kaplan tells so well? All Israel’s books have aroused a barrage of criticism from scholars on both sides of the Atlantic, even from the Dutch – once his adoring public. Fitting his rigid schema of moderate vs radical into larger Enlightenment studies confounds most practicing historians of the eighteenth century and makes it harder, nor easier to understand the world of Cunegonde.



Map showing Vaals, 1766, with its five churches, the Catholic rectory, and the border with the road to Aachen. Selection after illustration on page 66 in book reviewed, from *Caarte der Hoofd Banken van Holset Vaals en Vijlen, gelegen in het land van 's Hertogenrade partage van H:H: M:M.*  
Colored pen drawing by F.J. De Veye. Nationaal Archief, The Hague (NA, VTHR Verzameling Binnenlandse Kaarten Rozemond, inv. no. 4455).

Israel is an historian with many subjective likes and dislikes, and he is a divider, a dialectician who sees two Enlightenments, one good and radical, the other moderate, of mixed value at best. Only the European, and not the American Enlightenment, Israel assures us, led to ‘full freedom of thought’ or with ‘identifying democracy as the best form of government’.<sup>2</sup> In assessing the contribution of the Bentincks and the freemasons (to which they belonged) Kaplan has made the unforgivable error of crediting the moderate Enlightenment with making a genuine improvement in lives wrecked by religious hatred. He has further compounded his error by seeing masonic lodges as possible foci of enlightened ideas and practices. Israel thinks they were backsliding oases of the mystical and reactionary and contributed nothing of value to the struggle for religious toleration and political reform.

The bountiful gifts of freedom and democracy come to us only from ‘Radical Enlightenment’ and it originated in the minds of Hobbes, Bayle, and especially Spinoza who were followed by various French writers of the early eighteenth century. To be truly radical anyone from Baruch Spinoza († 1677) to the French materialist, Baron Paul-Henri Thiry d’Holbach († 1789) had to combine ‘philosophical monism with democracy and a purely secular moral philosophy based on equality’. Everyone else, including Voltaire or the Bentincks, need not apply. How naïve of Kaplan to have thought otherwise; he must have been misled by his archival zeal as well as by his failure to embrace the message Israel has so voluminously and selectively documented.<sup>3</sup>

The discovery in The Hague of over fifteen hundred manuscript pages that describe the events around the kidnapping in detail – testimonies, court records, eye-witness accounts – provided Kaplan with a remarkable opportunity to show the depth of religious hostility alive and well in German and Dutch territories late in the century. Rightly he argues that if we want to understand the nature of religious toleration, or lack thereof, we need to look at on-the-ground practices, at how people lived their religion and treated others who deviated from it. In this case the deviation came down to an unbaptized infant – the fruit of a mixed marriage – plus a dispute between the parents as to which faith the child should belong. Egged on by a local priest

2 Where all this began see Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (London 1981; second edition revised 2006). Although cited most briefly, and also dismissively (696 note) in *Radical Enlightenment*, and without discussion, Israel got his thesis, however refigured, and title from *The Radical Enlightenment*. Cf. Dorinda Outram’s review of Israel’s book in *The British Journal for the History of Science* 34:4 (2001) 464-466. For

the phrases quoted see Jonathan Israel, *The Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton, NJ 2010) 21 and 40. A much shorter version of my argument appears as ‘Les Lumières Radicales’, 29-34, in: Catherine Secretan, Tristan Dagron and Laurent Bove (eds.), *Qu’est-ce que le Lumières ‘radicales?’* (Paris 2007).

to prevent a Protestant baptism, Cunegonde took matters into her own hands and created a dispute to be remembered for decades to come.

Wrongly, however, Kaplan concludes that the religious conflict upon which he focuses ‘raises obvious questions about the influence of Enlightenment ideas in eighteenth-century European society’ (14). Indeed, he argues, the burden of the evidence reveals how Protestant infant and Catholic kidnapper call into question the grand narrative of the progress of western civilization (15). Yet both Ulster and Aachen had an alternative vision available. What was needed was political leadership, like that of the Bentincks, willing to apply enlightened principles to seemingly intractable situations. A similar leadership coming from Dublin, London, and in the long run even Washington, ultimately produced the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

Historians have begun to restore historicity to the social and intellectual history of the eighteenth century. In an effort to reveal a sense of contingency, of human agents grappling with social and political events, Vincenzo Ferrone has written a balanced account of the Enlightenment that eschews the rigidity and idealism of Israel. He believes it is possible to come to generalizations about eighteenth-century thought that show its progressive and contingent elements without laying them in the Procrustean bed Israel attributes to Spinoza and his many followers.<sup>4</sup> In the spirit of contingency let us look again at the story Kaplan so artfully tells.

Does the story of Aachen prove the limitations of the Enlightenment any more than do events in twentieth-century Ulster undermine the reality of a legally tolerant and secular British state? What can be learned by examples such as these about the way new ideas work in any society where deep religious divisions exist for decades, if not centuries? Does any serious historical analysis of social behavior imagine that Spinoza, Locke, Voltaire, etc. actually changed the hatreds and prejudices held by their contemporaries? Enlightened ideas about religious toleration might best be seen as gold dust scattered in the wind, only occasionally altering the chemistry of an interaction, and then generally only in the generation that comes after. This is especially true where religious belief and the accompanying prejudice receives affirmation or rejection by agents of the state whether they were in twentieth-century Stormont or the eighteenth-century States General. Despite, indeed because of the characters so richly described in Kaplan’s history, the history of the age of Enlightenment must be written with Kant’s proviso firmly in mind: this was not an enlightened age.

4 Vincenzo Ferrone, *The Enlightenment: History of an Idea* (Rome 2010; English translation by Elisabetta Tarantino, Princeton 2015), Afterword. And a further corrective, Antoine Lilti, ‘Comment écrit-on l’histoire intellectuelle des Lumières?’

Spinozisme, radicalism et philosophie’, *Annales HSS* (janvier-février 2009) no. 1, 171-206. See also the exchange in *The New Republic*, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/118811/jonathan-israel-response-lynn-hunts-review>.

The immense value of Kaplan's book lies in the texture it supplies to the religious history of borderlands. Worshippers slipped back and forth across their borders sometimes risking a good thrashing from religious opponents along the way. By their nature borderland populations were fluid in matters religious; mixed marriages were more common and so too were religious tensions. When Kaplan leaves micro-history and tells us about leading political figures like William and Charles Bentinck, William V and his advisors, we are offered something like a plausible account of how enlightened values indebted to the *philosophes* might have worked to lessen religious hatreds, to excuse rather than harshly punish people like Cunegonde, her parish priest (both of whom served more than five years in jail as their predicaments awaited resolution), and the various religious ruffians who operated on both sides. A small progress may be credited to the Dutch governing elites, although Kaplan is grudging in his applause. He is especially critical of contemporary historians such as Jonathan Israel whom he accuses of fostering the teleology of an ever-expanding adherence to enlightened doctrines (234), when the on-the-ground reality was anything but tolerant.

Micro-histories such as this one serve as corrective to the glib generalizations beloved by those who would see progress without nuance or regress. An earthquake on December 26 1755, epidemics of cattle plague, violent weather sent Aachen's Catholic population in particular into spasms of fear and self-doubt. Divine wrath threatened a tenuous prosperity and the churches swelled with the repentant. Yet overall change moved in the direction of less fear and superstition, toward a greater reliance on the workings of an ordered universe. If the Enlightenment had nothing to do with that shift then we are hard-pressed to offer any meaningful explanation for the emergence of a mentality now so commonplace as to be unremarkable. Similarly if the architects of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement had not embraced enlightened principles and renounced the bloody-mindedness of centuries, Ulster would have remained as unreformed as Aachen before the 1770s. When eschewing teleology we cannot give up our ability to explain change – even if some (like this author), understandably, label it as progressive.

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