

Laudatio Prof. dr. Jonathan Israel

Your Royal Highness,
Your Excellencies,
Members of the Board of the Heineken Foundation and the Alfred Heineken Fondsen
Foundation, in particular their Chair, Mrs. De Carvalho,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear Professor Israel,

A society that pays only scant attention to history and the humanities in general is a society intent on cultural suicide. This is the razor-sharp observation of an historian who has no qualms about viewing contemporary social issues from a broad historical perspective and analysing what forces are at work in the Netherlands of the early twenty-first century – and not only there.

It is greatly to the credit of Jonathan Israel, the winner of this year's Heineken Prize for History, that he has combined historical vision and contemporary analysis in a single, masterful stroke. Israel has trained the illuminating spotlight of the past on today's social problems in a way that leaves no room for doubt. What he reveals in doing this is how much contemporary debate is coloured by fashion, if not fad. Nor does Israel eschew confronting political and social taboos, for example, the notable silence with which politicians and the media have greeted the resurgence of anti-Semitism in Europe in recent years. At the same time, Israel makes us painfully aware that a lack of historical consciousness has a much greater impact on our views than we generally realise. This is what he refers to as "cultural suicide".

It is this fairly unique combination of historical sensibility and contemporary awareness that persuaded the jury that Jonathan Israel, more than any other scholar, deserves the Heineken Prize for History. But there were other reasons, for example, the astonishing breadth of his knowledge. Referring to him merely as an historian does not do justice to the remarkably multifaceted nature of his work. With evident ease, Israel has acquired in-depth knowledge in a broad range of different fields, including economic history, intellectual history, the history of politics, religion, society and science – and I am not even mentioning his examinations of art history.

The comprehensiveness of his learning is expressed most eloquently in the book that made him popular among a broad readership in the Netherlands: *The Dutch Republic. Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477-1806* (Oxford 1995), a masterpiece that immediately became a classic work of history. Israel is usually not interested in producing works of fewer than a thousand pages, but even in his shorter publications, he shares his remarkable erudition with us, as in his splendid monograph *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism 1550-1750*. A powerful synthesis characterises his entire oeuvre, based on exhaustive archival research and a profound knowledge of the literature. His interest in Dutch history was stimulated by his appointment, in 1985, to the position of Professor of Dutch History and Institutions at University College London – the first scholar to be appointed to this chair who was not Dutch. He left the university in 2001 to become Professor of Modern European History with the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton.

That same year, Israel caused an uproar among historians of the Enlightenment by arguing that the European Enlightenment was a single, international philosophical movement, and not a collection of national movements as had generally been thought since the nineteen seventies. That was his first controversial proposition. His second was related: he argued that it was one particular scholar who gave the Enlightenment its ultimate shape, a name that will

not have escaped the notice of anyone who has even glanced at a newspaper or television: Spinoza. And finally, Israel's third proposition was that the Enlightenment began as far back as the seventeenth century (and was therefore not a typically eighteenth-century phenomenon) and had its roots in the Netherlands.

Anyone who proposes new ideas in the world of scholarship can reckon on debate and controversy. There has been no lack of either since the publication of Israel's *Radical Enlightenment* in 2006, followed by *Enlightenment Contested*. The debate continues even today. I would like to mention one of the personal traits of the laureate in this connection: the fact that he has always shown himself to be an extremely charming debating partner, without being any less acerbic. Israel is admired by both young researchers and established scholars for his stunning erudition and his immense drive, but they also value him for his accessibility and sympathetic personality.

The Enlightenment, whether radical or moderate, will continue to colour our debate. Freedom of speech, freedom of the press, equal rights for men and women, the separation of church and state – they are all values over which debates have erupted and battles have been fought. One of the great achievements of the historian Jonathan Israel is that he has repeatedly pointed out, first of all, that the battle for these values must be fought over and over again, and secondly, that we cannot engage in that battle without historical awareness.

Prof. dr. Ernestine van der Wall,
Chair of the jury of the Dr. A.H. Heineken Prize for History 2008