

Enlightenment, romanticism and the american declaration of independence



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In our day, we instinctively associate Western Civilization with liberty, individualism and reason. However, liberal democracy is more recent phenomena. Many crucial aspects of the civilization of Western countries of today developed from the time of French and American revolutions. Before 1800 CE, the modern Western civilization was in many ways in formative stages. For example, the radical belief in human equality, under the premise that all men are born equal, was enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence only in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

The 17th and 18th centuries have been most crucial in determining the characteristic rational, scientific and liberal temperament of the Western mind. It is the Age of Enlightenment that forged its present-day character. The Enlightenment served as the model for political and economic liberalism and for humanitarianism reform throughout the 19th-century Western world. Although the intellectual movement referred to as the Enlightenment is often associated with eighteenth-century thought, its origins actually predate this.

The roots of what we now refer to as the Enlightenment can be traced back to the Renaissance as well as the work of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European scientists and philosophers, thinkers ranging from Galileo to Descartes. As the philosopher Kant put it, Enlightenment was mankind's final coming of age, the emancipation of the human consciousness from an immature state of ignorance and error. Kant rightly believed that the process of mental liberation was actively at work in his own lifetime.

The advancement of knowledge — understanding of Nature, as well as human self-knowledge — propelled this great leap forward. ' Sapere aude' ('

dare to know') was Kant's watchword (Losonsky 2001). The body of progressive and liberal ideas and opinions advanced by the leading intellectuals of the day amounted to a decisive stage in human improvement. The Enlightenment thinkers were confident in the powers of abstract reason. At the same time, in the light of the triumph of Newtonian science, the men of the Enlightenment also argued that experience and experiment, more than a priori reason, were the keys to true knowledge.

During the later Middle Ages and the early modern age down to around 1650, Western civilization was based on a largely shared core of faith, tradition, and authority. By contrast, after 1650, everything, no matter how fundamental or deeply rooted, was questioned in the light of philosophical reason... (Israel 2001) The Enlightenment thinkers advanced the cause of social progress by emphasizing the need for knowledge and an end to blind-faith. Enlightenment was characterized by fierce political and religious criticisms that arose largely out of resistance the established power.

The philosophers of Enlightenment not only challenged the centrality of religion, but also encouraged the use of science and reason to explore the control nature and to question what had previously been accepted as true. Many saw a need for a complete overhaul of traditional system of despotic authority. If the centuries-old medieval view of the physical world had been overthrown by the power of reason, then the antiquity of an idea, or indeed of a law, a privilege, or a form of government, could no longer be seen as a guarantee of its worth.

In most other major civilizations of the world, such as the Indian or the Chinese or the Egyptian or the Mayan, the more ancient something was, the more revered and worshipped it would have been. That is the reason these civilizations could not progress beyond a point. The concepts of rebellion and revolution were not active in any of the other great world cultures. However, by the time of Enlightenment, revolution and rebellion had already become prominent features of the Western Civilization: rebellion against orthodoxy, rebellion against the old in favor of the new, rebellion against ignorance and falsehood.

Two major revolutions in the name of progress and freedom, the French and the American, would get underway in the final decades of the Age of Enlightenment. Further, the spirit of discovery and exploration that had so prominently characterized Western civilization since 15th century was also rooted in a rebellious stance of mind. The very idea of human progress, that was so much propagated during Enlightenment, was an offshoot of rebellious thinking. The belief in progress became one of the distinctive features of the Western civilization.

However, the notion of continuous progress is of course always accompanied by a permanent dissatisfaction with existing social conditions. Such deep discontent has also been a unique characteristic trait of Western civilization ever since Enlightenment. Rebelliousness and revolutionary attitude of the Western world were nurtured by this sense of discontent. If the discovery of America had been a product of the great human spirit of exploration, the basis of American revolution was this sense of rebellion that did not brook misery, misfortune and oppression as given conditions of life.

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People of the 13 states of this vast continent united with a common purpose and revolted against the exploitative British rule. The result was the American government, and the fundamental philosophy of liberal democracy underpinning it. Enlightenment was a movement of unity, being the work of a group who largely were familiar with each other's works and admired each other. They hailed from the major nations of Europe and British North America.

There were the Frenchmen, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot, d'Alembert, Turgot, Condorcet; the Britons, Locke, Hume and Gibbon; the Germans d'Holbach, Kant and Herder; the American, Franklin. These constituted the hard core of the group called 'les philosophes' or the philosophers. Besides, there were many more people such as Bentham, Adam Smith, and the draughtsmen of American constitutional liberties, Jefferson, Adams, and Hamilton who have significantly influenced the ethos of an age and helping to create the character of the modern Western civilization.

The men of Enlightenment shared a general commitment to criticizing the injustices and exposing inefficiencies of the ruling powers. They endeavored to emancipate mankind through knowledge, education and science, from the chains of ignorance and error, superstition, theological dogma, and the clutches of the clergy. Many of these thinkers, such as Condorcet and Rousseau of France or Hume and Smith of Great Britain, put forth the idea that people had rights and that governments should work to secure and protect the right of individuals.

The vanguard of Enlightenment instilled a new mood of hope for a better future, issuing a call to practical action for creating greater prosperity, fairer laws, milder government, religious tolerance, intellectual freedom, expert administration, and importantly, heightened individual self-awareness. Along with the scientific method and a belief in progress emerged the notions of individual liberty and human dignity. Inherent in the ideal of progress is equity, seen as the convergence of standards of equality of opportunities — or social justice.

This idea of equality has nurtured all modern utopias — from the liberal, centered on political equality, to the socialist, concerned with socio-economic equality. Although the nineteenth century saw the heyday of political philosophers, the foundational basis for individual liberty and constitutional government was already present in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The assertion of individualism also resulted in the birth of Protestantism. Protestantism grew out of Renaissance, and as a rebellion against the authority of Church in Catholic religion.

It was a passionate expression of the belief that all human beings are equal before God, and there is no need of any intermediary authority of the Pope or the Church to mediate between an individual and God. The authority of the Catholic Church was on the one side undermined by the new scientific and liberal thinking that is spreading across the countries of Europe, and on the other hand was challenged by Protestant movement that sought to obviate the need of the Church's authority. Both these trends created greater awareness among people, instigated the spirit of individual initiative and enterprise.

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Such an emphasis on individuality is once again unprecedented phenomenon in the history of any other civilization of the world. The common people always existed as part of the herd, and never as individuals in their own right. This is the case even in the modern Western society today, to a significant extent. However, since the times of Renaissance and Reformation, there was more emphasis placed on the freedom and responsibility of an individual human being in shaping his or her own life and in contributing to the society.

This focus on the individual as a creator of his or her own destiny gave rise to Protestant ethic in the Puritan America. The Protestant ethic would eventually lead to the spread of capitalism in the age of Industrial Revolution (Furseth & Repstad 2006). The emphasis on the rights and duties of the individual would pave for popular democratic governments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Today, capitalism and democracy are seen as two most important characteristic features of Western society. However, both of them have the groundwork clearly laid out by and during the time of Enlightenment.

Once the industrialization got underway, however, there developed a counter-movement against the effusive faith of the Age of Enlightenment in reason and progress. Romanticism had been against the relentless onslaught of progress in many ways; it searched for a deeper meaning and context for life. As William Blake put it, "Improvement makes strait roads: but the crooked roads without Improvement are roads of Genius." Romanticism was this crooked road, not paved with asphalt, but merely a narrow clearing in the vast wilderness.

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Romantic poetry was a response to the growing schism between the self and the world. It attempted to heal the breach by reuniting humanity with its natural environment. The Romantics saw nature as an organic whole and man as an integral part thereof. They deeply objected to the mechanistic and reductionist view of the world that had become so widely prevalent by their time. Keats, for instance, expressed concern about the reductionist tendencies of scientific theory. He argued that knowing how the rainbow worked would destroy its beauty and our resulting sense of wonder.

This may or may not be true, our understanding of the mechanism of things need not necessarily affect our sense of wonder adversely; it may, on the contrary, enhance it. It is difficult to determine how right or wrong was Romanticism in not embracing science, but the fact is that the Romantic Movement was in many ways a reaction to the scientific abstractions of the eighteenth century and a drive towards concrete, immediate experience. The scientific attitude of Renaissance and Enlightenment, however, influenced the literary and artistic trends of Romanticism in a more positive manner.

The scientific revolution caused the decline of Christianity as a commonly accepted creed on whose principles human life and society could be patterned. In this context, nature was increasingly looked upon as the basis and orientation of human existence, as providing moral tenets and happiness. The artist was conceived of as the receiver of the divine light of nature, and nature as a storehouse of truth and inspiration that the artist could draw upon. In addition, nature was also regarded as a receptacle into which the artist could pour his feelings and ideas. Man drew light from nature but also supplied a new meaning to it.

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