CHAPTER SEVEN

THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND ROUSSEAU

THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Feudalism was a decentralized political structure from which it was more logical to derive the separation of state power than the centralization of power in the hands of an absolute monarch. Medieval guilds and incorporated towns exercised limited self-management of common affairs. In a number of countries, including England and France, representative bodies or parliaments emerged from within feudalism. However limited they were in conception or function, they embodied a potential for popular power that was greatly in advance of their original, advisory role. Even in Christianity, despite its history of hierarchy and ideological control, notions of equality (if only in death), of the simple yet ethical life, and of peace made liberal doctrines appear palatable. More than one potential future coexisted within the institutional structure of medieval Europe, and the historical path taken by each nation reflected the changing balance of forces over time.

The gradual assumption of power in England by a commercial class of landowners and merchants took several centuries. In Continental Europe, similar battles erupted within the old regime. While England was undergoing the social and political violence that reflected the birth pangs of the modern social order, France was consolidating central power in the hands of an absolute monarchy and a powerful Church. France developed as a single nation through its Hundred Years War with England, inspired by the heroism and sacrifice of a common-born woman, Jeanne d'Arc. By the time of the Restoration in England (1660), France was under the autocratic rule of Louis XIV. Underneath the splendour of the French court at Versailles, the rapid growth of the French economy under the doctrine of mercantilism (the target of Adam Smith’s laissez-faire attack), and the flowering of French culture, numerous social conflicts festered and erupted periodically in violence. The landed aristocracy contended with the Crown for political power, peasants groaned under heavy taxation and sometimes rose in rebellion, and clashes between French Protestants and the Roman Catholic majority were particularly violent and vicious.

Economic prosperity in the eighteenth century stimulated an economic revolution on the French side of the Channel, precipitating the types of social changes that had engulfed England. As new sources of conflict jostled with the old ones, the intellectual atmosphere became volatile and critical of the social order. The conflict between the autocratic powers and the upstart social classes was reflected in ideas of freedom, equality, and natural law. This ideological revolt against the old regime is known as the ‘Enlightenment’.

According to traditional thinking, doubt crept into the human mind through the influence of the Devil. To doubt, as Salman Rushdie suggests, is the opposite of having faith. Whispers of doubt were spread in sixteenth-century Europe by the scientific revolution and, within religion itself, by the Protestant Reformation. The dominance of the Roman Catholic interpretation of faith in Europe was undermined by the rise of Protestantism to an equal status as Christian truth. Committed Protestants had no less faith than their Catholic counterparts. Warfare between Catholics and Protestants demonstrated that Christians committed to one faith would commit
brutalities against Christians of another faith when goaded by religious fervour. The French wars of religion, which dovetailed with a struggle for political power, reached its infamous zenith in August, 1571 when thousands of Protestant men, women, and children were slaughtered in the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre.

In this highly charged atmosphere, fundamental differences between equally committed and incompatible faiths demonstrated and the frightful consequences of dogmatism and raised questions about the basis of faith itself. The horrendous consequences of religious dogmatism sharply contrasted with the new Humanism, which was spreading in Europe through the Renaissance. Scholars of the period were influenced by skeptical Greek philosophy and notions about the perfectibility of human nature.¹

The spirit of doubt took root in the atmosphere of irrational violence that convulsed sixteenth century France infuses the writings of Michel de Montaigne (1533-59), the French essayist and landowner. Living from the wealth he had inherited from his father, Montaigne retired to his Chateaux in 1571 to devote his life to writing. Although he was a Catholic who sought a reasonable foundation for his faith and his belief in Christian ethics, Montaigne’s essays continually develop relativist arguments that challenge any absolute beliefs. ‘Some say,’ he wrote, ‘that to philosoph[ize] is to doubt.’² Tackling a great variety of subjects, from idleness and drunkenness to cruelties and profit, Montaigne’s method was to demonstrate contradictory examples for any proposition, from which it could be shown that no argument is necessarily true in all cases. Montaigne was widely influential and helped establish a sceptical frame of mind in France that was consequential in philosophy.

French philosophers such as René Descartes (1596-1650) adopted a rationalist point of view that defined humanity essentially by the singular ability to reason.³ Shakespeare’s tragic character, Hamlet had expressed the same view, although Descartes added the radical assertion that minds were more or less equal: ‘For myself’, he wrote, ‘I have never ventured to presume that my mind was in any way more perfect than that of the ordinary man.’⁴ In The Discourse on Method, Descartes rejected empiricism as a route to knowledge because the senses could reflect erroneous information about the world. As the poet Tennyson put it:

Law is God, say some;
No God at all, says the fool,
For all we have power to see
Is a straight staff bent in a pool.⁵

¹ Sarah Kay, Terence Cave and Malcolm Bowie, A Short History of French Literature. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 121. This reflected a rebirth of interest in the philosophy of Plato. The rise of empirical science in Europe had given pride of place to the philosophy of Aristotle, which had displaced the earlier acceptance of Plato, whose ideas were more consistent with Christian theology.
³ René Descartes, ‘Discourse on the method’, in Enrique Chávez-Arvizo, Descartes: Key Philosophical Writings (Ware, UK: Wordsworth Classics, 1997), 72.
⁴ Ibid., 71–2.
The only knowledge Descartes felt certain about was that his own mind existed, because he was aware that he was doing the thinking. He expressed this in his famous maxim, ‘I think, therefore I am.’

Descartes helped focus attention on the mind as the source of knowledge rather than the apparently objective world. He was certain, however, that the mind of the deity—hence also God—existed as the origin of material things. Doubt did not lead Descartes into atheism. By the middle of the seventeenth century, however, the Church was confronted by a growing number of freethinkers.

The great thinkers of the eighteenth century were known collectively as the philosophes. Perhaps the most famous and sceptical of these writers was François-Marie Arouet (1694–1778), who used the pseudonym ‘Voltaire’. In his satirical story, Candide or Optimism, Voltaire skewered the conventions of French society. In his story, the protagonist, Candide was brought up by a noble family and was tutored by Dr Pangloss, the world’s greatest philosopher, in metaphysico-theologo-cosmolonigology, which taught that ‘things cannot be otherwise’ and ‘everything is necessarily for the best’. Kicked and thrust out of his original earthly paradise, Candide embarks on a tumultuous voyage of discovery seeking to understand the cause of evil in the world, ‘to reason about effects and causes’, and debate the Hobbesian view of humanity as inherently evil:

‘Do you think,’ said Candide, ‘that men have always massacred each other, as they do today? Have they always been liars, cheats, traitors, weak, flighty, cowardly, envious, glutinous, drunken, grasping, and vicious, bloody, backbiting, debauched, fanatical, hypocritical, and silly?’

‘Do you think,’ said Martin, ‘that sparrow hawks have always eaten the pigeons they came across?’

‘Yes, of course,’ said Candide.

‘Well,’ said Martin, ‘if sparrow hawks have always possessed the same nature, why should you expect men to change theirs?’

‘Oh!’ said Candide, ‘there is a great difference; free will.’

Shanghaied into the army, Candide witnesses the brutality of warfare—the disembowelled girls, murdered wives, and scattered brains—all done, however, ‘in accordance with international law’. In Lisbon after the earthquake, the wisest men condemn three people to be executed, having decided ‘that the sight of several persons being slowly burned in great ceremony is an infallible secret for preventing earthquakes.’ In Paraguay, where the rulers ‘have everything and the people have nothing’, government claims to be a ‘masterpiece of reason and justice’. In Surinam, Candide encounters a slave who lost a hand in the sugar mill and a leg.

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6 Ibid., 92. In Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans, Augustine of Hippo similarly argued in favour of the certainty that he existed and had knowledge of it. But even if he were mistaken, then he still has proof of his existence since, ‘A non-existent being cannot be mistaken; therefore I must exist, if I am mistaken.’ (Bk XI, Ch. 26) Translated by Henry Bettenson, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, 459-60.


8 Voltaire, Candide or Optimism (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1946) (1759), 7, 72.
which was amputated for escaping. He tells Candide: ‘This is the price paid for the sugar you eat in Europe.’  

After surviving innumerable hardships and witnessing dreadful barbarities, Candide renounces his optimism, which he calls ‘the mania of maintaining that everything is well when we are wretched’. Eventually, he learns that the secret to a life of contentment is simple farm labour, which ‘keeps at bay three great evils: boredom, vice and need.’ Candide and his few companions settle down co-operatively to cultivate their own garden and eat candied citrons and pistachios, working ‘without theorizing’, because ‘tis the only way to make life endurable.’ Voltaire generally agreed that, as Balzac put it later, ‘[i]n the matter of civilization, everything is relative. Ideas that suit one country admirably are fatal in another—men's minds are as various as the soils of the globe.’ More characteristic of the Enlightenment philosophes, however, was the search for natural truths that were as absolute as the former theological truths had claimed to be.

At the beginning of the Enlightenment, there was a considerable distinction between ‘high’ (aristocratic) and ‘low’ (common) culture. The arts, such as music, painting, and architecture, catered to the expensive tastes of the upper class. Only the aristocrats had the time to cultivate what Voltaire regarded as genuine, refined taste and the inclination to spend large sums of money on luxury consumption. This arrangement was fine for most of the master artists who sought sponsorship from individually rich patrons. The intellectuals of the age believed that the arts and literature could be reconstructed on the ideal basis of reason. The English poet, Alexander Pope, expressed several of the main tenets of the Enlightenment in his Essay on Man, endorsing modern humanism in the following couplet:

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
The proper study of Mankind is Man.

As painters and writers revived classical styles, many endowed their art with the weightier moral purposes of instruction and education. In contrast to aristocratic art, which was designed primarily for pleasure and aesthetic enjoyment, Enlightenment artists added a social purpose: to expose the vices and frivolous nature of the life of the upper class. Alexander Pope’s lengthy satirical poem, The Rape of the Lock, ridiculed pompous, affected, and shallow aristocratic values. Art should represent social values and inspire people to virtue and effort.

Neo-classical architecture was characterized by the use of Greek columns and symmetrical, proportional designs in such public buildings as museums and churches, and in private homes, exemplified by the Georgian-style row houses of the Circus in the city of Bath. These elegant row houses were designed for the new gentry. The movement to improve nature that developed in the Renaissance was also reflected in the further evolution of formal ‘gardens’—carefully planned collections of plants symmetrically arranged outside the houses on the estates of the upper class, and imitated by the middle class. Nature itself was to be reshaped and reorganized according to rational principles of beauty.

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9 Ibid., 7, 17, 42, 63.  
10 Ibid., 2, 63.  
11 Ibid., 113–14.  
The defining concepts of neo-classicism in France were order, balance, and proportion producing, in Kennedy’s view, an art of ideals, principles, and fixed rules. Reason applied to painting declared that the purpose was to portray ideas, such as ideal beauty or truth, through the use of symbols or idealized portraits. The aristocratic culture of eighteenth-century France was condemned for its ‘artifice, sensation, and pleasure’ and derided as particularly ‘feminine’, as distinct from the masculine values of action, virtue, and progress. In the Enlightenment, the courtly culture was criticized for producing ‘effeminized’ men.\footnote{Whitney Chadwick, \textit{Women, Art, and Society} (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 128–9.}

The most famous painter identified with the neo-classical style in France was Jacques Louis David (1748–1825). With David, the critical side of the Enlightenment is apparent in such works as \textit{The Oath of the Horatii} (1785) and \textit{Brutus} (1789). The first illustrated the classical Roman story of three sons vowing an oath to defend the Roman republic with their lives; the second recounted the return of Brutus’s sons who were about to be executed on their father’s orders for betraying the republic. Neo-classical art was inspired by republican sentiments when the monarchy of Louis XVI and the Old Regime were still intact.\footnote{Emmet Kennedy, \textit{A Cultural History of the French Revolution} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 84–6.}

For David, as Kennedy shows, the purpose of art was to penetrate the soul and make ‘a profound impression on the mind’. By depicting heroism and civil virtues for the public gaze, the artist stimulates ‘the passions of glory, of devotion for the welfare’ of the nation.\footnote{Ibid., 84.} In his \textit{Death of Socrates} (1787), David portrays the moment when the great Greek educator, seen as the founder of reason, is about to drink poison. From the point of view of Enlightenment thinkers, Socrates had been convicted of impiety—disbelief in the gods—and of corrupting youth. He died a martyr for the cause of reason in opposition to superstition and arbitrary, corrupt authority. No more fitting subject could have been found for a pre-revolutionary, Enlightenment painting.

To illustrate the tendency of the eighteenth century to account ‘all conduct logical and every non-logical action a “prejudice”’, in a lengthy footnote, the Italian theorist Vilfredo Pareto cites a dialogue between Cidalise and Clitander from the romantic play, \textit{La Nuit et le moment}, written by Claude Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon (1707-77). The protagonist, Clitander draws a distinction between loving a women and having ‘had her’. Modern, Enlightenment philosophy, Clitander asserts, hasn’t changed ‘the things we do’; it has merely given ‘a clearer understanding of why we do them.’ Before we learned to reason so well, we used to do the very things we do today’ but under temptation and ‘with all the qualms of conscience that prejudice inspired in us.’ Wanting to seem virtuous, ‘a ridiculous prejudice spoiled many a good time.’ Now the truth had been revealed

‘and what a relief it is! Women have never been so care-free in society. There has never been so little affectation of virtue. You like her? Well, you take her—and she you! You are bored? You separate with as little ado as you began. You are right in saying that love figures very little in all that. But what was love but a desire that people chose to exaggerate in importance in their own minds—a sensuous impulse that they had been silly enough to represent as a virtue? … Now we have come to see that pleasure is the only thing . . . and I take it that on the whole it has proved the height of wisdom to substitute so many pleasures for a few outworn prejudices that net very little esteem and a great deal of annoyance
[for] those who take them as their rule of life.' [second ellipsis, square brackets in Pareto]

Pareto comments: ‘For a good understanding of the French Revolution such a passage is worth more than no end of direct description.’ He takes Claude de Crétillon’s play more as historical fact than satire, however.\textsuperscript{17}

**JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU**

[T]he principles of liberty are so engraved in the heart of man that, if the history of all governments presents a picture of efforts of power to trespass [people’s rights], it also presents a picture of popular struggle against these efforts.\textsuperscript{18}

-- Germaine de Staël, ‘Considerations on the principal events of the French Revolution’ (1816)

Voltaire may have been the most famous philosophe, but his ideas did not always coincide with the group of intellectuals who debated the old regime in the new salons of Paris and contributed to the great Encyclopaedia project, the compilation of accumulated knowledge. More influential for modern social thought, however, was another idiosyncratic philosophe, Jean Jacques Rousseau.

Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* (1754) traversed some of the territory of the English liberals, but with opposite consequences and implications. For Rousseau, the first step in analysis is to imagine humans in a state of nature—what they were naturally. In his *Discourse on Inequality*, he had condemned the development of civilization because it had created more evil than good. He began by deducing a state of nature in which humans already possessed some capacity for reason. Primitive humans would not have lived in nature simply as beasts. While animals follow their instincts when they feel the demands of nature, humans knew they were free to go along or to resist these natural impulses.\textsuperscript{19} Nor was their peaceful nature clouded by the strongest passions of sexual desire. In Rousseau’s view, humans in a natural state would be satisfied solely by the physical acts of reproduction. For Rousseau, the closer humanity was to its natural origins, the more they lived simply and in harmony with nature, the more they were able to express the simple virtues of essential human nature. As French Novelist Balzac expressed this idea in 1833, ‘evil propensities are weakened and good qualities are developed by’ country life. ‘In fact, the fewer the numbers of the human beings collected together in a place, the less crime, evil thinking, and general bad behavior will be found in it. A pure atmosphere counts for a good deal in purity of morals.’\textsuperscript{20}

Ideally, they would have lived in a world where their simple needs would be satisfied by the resources of nature. The mythology of the Garden of Eden represented this hypothetical state.


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 44–5, 46, 48.

Unlike Eden, for Rousseau, the state of nature was permanent unless something changed. When humans lived largely by their individual efforts, in a simple society, ‘they lived as free, healthy, good and happy as they could.’ The ideal of the simple life represented, in the eighteenth century, a potentially practical return to an Eden-like existence in the face of creeping social change. Just such sentiments animated the narrator in Laurence Sterne’s novel, *Tristram Shandy*, who boasted that:\textsuperscript{21}

‘for the six months I’m in the country, I’m upon so small a scale that with all the good temper in the world, I out-do Rousseau, a bar length—for I keep neither man or boy, or horse, or cow, or dog, or cat, or any thing that can eat or drink, except a thin poor piece of a Vestal [a chaste woman] (to keep my fire in) and who has generally as bad an appetite as myself—\textsuperscript{4}.

Spanish novelist, Cervantes had expressed similar ideas in *Don Quixote* [1605]. In the golden days of the past, he wrote,

... to gain his daily sustenance no labor was required of any man save to reach forth his hand and take it from the sturdy oaks that stood liberally inviting him with their sweet and seasoned fruit. The clear running fountains and rivers in magnificent abundance offered him palatable and transparent water for his thirst; while in the clefts of the rocks and the hollows of the trees the wise and busy honey-makers set up their republic so that any hand whatever might avail itself, fully and freely, of the fertile harvest which their fragrant toil had produced. The vigorous cork trees of their own free will and grace, without the asking, shed their broad, light bark with which men began to cover their dwellings, erected upon rude stakes merely as a protection against the inclemency of the heavens....

...[S]elf-interest dared not trespass [on Justice], dared not impair her rights, becloud, and persecute her as they do now. There was no such thing then as arbitrary judgments, for the reason that there was no one to judge or be judged.\textsuperscript{22}

For Rousseau, social peace and tranquility could not exist without the interconnected conditions of equality and liberty, which could and must dovetail (Box 7.1). But these conditions did not persist. Rather, the first step towards civilization was taken when the first person staked a claim to a portion of the common world as his private property. From there, Rousseau deduced growing inequality of families, increasing violence and strife, and threats to the unequal possession of those that had much more than others. In this context of disorder an danger, the well-off devised the institution of government as a device to protect their interests and maintain order in society. As a character in Joseph Conrad’s novel, *The Secret Agent* put it somewhat

\textsuperscript{21} Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1761-7). New York: Penguin, 1997, Vol. IX, ch. xvii, p. 520. This passage, though, is ironic; it neither represents the worldliness of Sterne’s novel nor his opinion of Rousseau’s *Confessions*, which, he suggested, was not so much a confession of sins as wallowing in them.

later, ‘Don’t you know what the police are for, Stevie? They are there so that them as have nothing shouldn’t take anything away from them who have.’ Conrad also imagined the same social situation from the point of view of Adolf Verloc, the double agent in Conrad’s 1907 novel, Verloc,

surveyed through the park railings the evidences of the town’s opulence and luxury with an approving eye. All these people had to be protected. Protection is the first necessity of opulence and luxury. They had to be protected; and their horses, carriages, houses, servants had to be protected; and the source of their wealth had to be protected in the heart of the city and the heart of the country; the whole social order favourable to their hygienic idleness had to be protected against the shallow / enviousness of unhygienic labour. It had to—

Box 7.1

I know that enslaved peoples do nothing but boast of the peace and tranquility they enjoy in their chains and that they give the name ‘peace’ to the most miserable slavery. But when I see free peoples sacrificing pleasures, tranquillity, wealth, power, and life itself for the preservation of this sole good [liberty] which is regarded so disdainfully by those who have lost it; when I see animals born free and abhorring captivity break their heads against the bars of their prison; when I see multitudes of utterly naked savages scorn European pleasures and brave hunger, fire, sword and death, simply to preserve their independence, I sense that it is inappropriate for slaves to reason without liberty.

—Rousseau, Discourse on Inequality (1754)

Rousseau did not conclude that it was necessary to recreate a system of communal, rather than private, ownership of productive property. He believes that many people could own a small piece of property and make a living at it—property ownership was relatively equal and not, in itself, the source of great inequality and injustice it would become under the factory system. For Rousseau, the owners should be permitted to do as they please with their property.

Rousseau’s naturalism inspired the visual arts in France. Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1803) painted scenes derived from the every-day life of ordinary, rural people. If civilisation corrupted people, as Rousseau had written, then those people most closely tied to nature would be the most virtuous. Greuze painted lower-class peasant life in an idealistic way, depicting them as exhibiting natural virtues. Like Neo-classical painting generally, Greuze’s works were heavily moralistic; they were designed to instruct not merely to decorate. But the message was revolutionary in its implications.

Emile and Sophy

In the nineteenth century, Rousseau was well-known as a proponent of what would later be called experiential education. In Emile, Rousseau presented his conclusions about the most

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advantageous way to educate boys and girls. His ideas about educating the former were radical for the time and influential well beyond his own time. His depiction of the proper education for women was controversial and was soon challenged by women because Rousseau accepted the most common prejudices about the distinct, essential different nature of women. Women were more imaginative and spiritual than men, and less scientific. Novelist, Margaret Atwood articulated, in the words of a male Commander, a similar perspective on the individualistic and imaginative nature of the female mind in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986) (see Box 7.2).

**Box 7.2**

Women can’t add, he once said, jokingly. When I asked him what he meant, he said, For them, one and one and one and one don’t make four.

What do they make? I said, expecting three or five.

Just one and one and one and one, he said. …

What the Commander said is true. One and one and one and one doesn’t equal four. Each one remains unique, there is no way of joining them together. They cannot be exchanged, one for the other. They cannot replace each other.

-- Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986)

Sophie was to be raised by her mother in the womanly arts, but her mind was also to be harnessed to the everyday details of household management—mundane matters that the expansive male mind need not consider. For Rousseau, women were not inferior to men, just as an apple is not inferior to an orange; they are merely different. Women have an ability to reason, however limited their abilities to understand the more abstract subjects.

By the age of 15, Sophie knows all the details about running a household, including the keeping of accounts. Rousseau had opposed swaddling children. Yet, Rousseau’s argument about the appropriate education for women suggests that they should, in fact, be swaddled because this would provide appropriate training in docility. Chadwick argues that Rousseau’s injunction against swaddling was inappropriate for working women, who needed to immobilize their infants in order to have hands free for labour.

In another nod to more modern conventions about Women, contrary to the custom of the time, according to which a girl’s parents chose a husband, consulting their daughter only as a matter of form, Sophie is to exercise her right to choose freely, leaving only to the parents the final approval. Her husband, however, becomes her mentor. Although Émile teaches Sophie about mathematics, science, philosophy, and history, there are natural limits to how much she is able to learn. She has only a vague understanding of logic, the general laws of physics and the universe, and of metaphysics.

**CONCLUSION**

Both critics and champions of the French Revolution viewed the Enlightenment as having prepared the world mentally for great changes. The Italian socialist, Antonio Gramsci,
complained that the critics of the Enlightenment tended to misrepresent the period as reflecting merely ‘pedantic and arid intellectualism’. For Gramsci, ‘The Enlightenment was a magnificent revolution in itself and … it gave all Europe a bourgeois spiritual International in the form of a unified consciousness, one which was sensitive to all the woes and misfortunes of the common people and which was the best possible preparation for the bloody revolt that followed in France.’ The Enlightenment prepared a unified consciousness that incited similar rebellions in many European cities and created ‘the cultural factors that helped to create a state of mental preparedness for these explosions’. Above all, the new radical consciousness was critical and rational.28

Voltaire is at once one of the principle spokesmen of the Enlightenment and, at the same time, expresses pessimism about the prospects of rationalism. We should abandon social theory, he concludes, and merely cultivate our gardens, perhaps doing what we can to improve our immediate environment and elevate humanity one person at a time. A more general disillusionment with the Enlightenment would alight half a century later, when the revolutionary implications of the rationalist perspective were clear. The new Age of Reason, however, promised a great deal, as Thomas Mann described these claims: ‘the powers of reason and enlightenment will in the end set humanity wholly free and lead it in the path of progress and civilization toward an ever brighter, milder, and purer light.’29

Pareto considered Enlightenment doctrines to be metaphysical or theological. Not only did the philosophes worship the ‘cult’ of Reason, Truth, and Progress, this new religion ‘was born, it has flourished, and it continues to prosper, for the purpose of combating other cults’. The philosophes treat dissenters from their religion ‘the way the orthodox have always treated heretics’.30 Science may have dethroned theology, pareto observed, but ‘not experimental science’; rather, ‘a certain metaphysical entity on which the name of science has been foisted.’31

Already in the eighteenth century, with the industrial revolution barely underway, social critics were decrying the social consequences and attacking the new economic doctrines of liberalism. Much of this opposition looked to the past, to the customs of the traditional society that was being radically altered. Among these anti-liberal ‘Tories’ were satirists such as Jonathan Swift. Oliver Goldsmith decried the loss of rural life, with its simple life, emphasis on family, and paternal authority. In the Tory view, the new, industrial cities were cesspools of vice and corruption, irreligion and depravity. As conservatism arose as a social theory following the French Revolution, it would have much in common with Tory nostalgia.

When early modern liberalism was applied to politics, a severely truncated version resulted. At best, in England, though better in the United States, liberals succeeded in establishing a limited democracy of the propertied. This was much less than the seventeenth century Levellers had demanded, making their demands for universal suffrage a form of radical liberalism. By the middle of the nineteenth century, as we will see below, the demand would grow to widen the franchise and make government more formally representative.

As the eighteenth century passed into the nineteenth, the The star of laissez-faire was

29 Mann, The Magic Mountain, 98.
31 Ibid., 452:271.
rising, though more slowly than some would have wished. It was obvious to the business class in emerging nations such as the United States that they would be better off with an interventionist government that was motivated to assist national industry as much as possible. While free trade may have remained a blueprint for a future economy, the most fundamental lesson of Smith’s economics was written on the banner of free enterprise. Adam Smith was the guru of the rising capitalist class and his Wealth of Nations, frequently reprinted, was both fashionable and powerfully influential in shaping the ideology and class awareness of the capitalists.

The laws of economics developed by economists such as Smith were premised on an individualistic view of the world. People were assumed to act on the basis of rational choice to maximize their interests or utilities. As individuals made choices and acted on them, the patterns of economic life emerged, such as the price structure and the growth or decline of investment in certain industries. The social world was the sum of the independent actions of a multitude of freely acting individuals. This highly individualized and rationalistic model of human action would later be applied to social phenomena more generally.

Smith’s model of laissez-faire capitalism dominated economic policy in capitalist nations until the Great Depression of the twentieth century demonstrated the self-destructive tendencies of free-enterprise capitalism. In place of laissez-faire a new model of economic policy known as ‘welfare state capitalism’ became the dominant form. With increased state intervention and regulation, some redistribution of income through taxation, and government-operated services such as socialized medicine, the new policy was an economic reversal of the principles advocated by Smith.

Since about 1980 and into the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, there has been a revival of laissez-faire economic policy, marked by the collapse of government welfare polices, deregulation of businesses, increasing free trade, and an emphasis on individualism and entrepreneurship. The modern prophets of laissez-faire, such as Milton Friedman and Michael Walker, champion the return of the dog-eat-dog world of competitive capitalism, now extended into globalization, where the gap between the rich and the poor grows locally and globally, and national governments find it more and more difficult to protect their communities and citizens from the domination of powerful, global oligopolies.