

# **TWO MODELS OF EUROPEAN THOUGHT: ENLIGHTENMENT RATIONALISM AND ROMANTIC SUBJECTIVISM<sup>1</sup>**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

My purpose in this introductory seminar is to simplify the many and sometimes divergent strains of European social theory into two, broad and general orientations; two models of thought. One of these I term “Enlightenment Modernism”; the alternative, “Romantic Subjectivism”. The strength of this approach is that it is based upon many of the traditional dualities of social theory: materialism and idealism; objectivity and subjectivity; free will and determinism. The chief weakness is that theory is always produced by a theorist and classifying a theorist's work into an either/or typology does great damage to the integrity of the writing. For example, Marx attempted to integrate materialism and idealism into a “dialectical” theory; Heidegger claimed to have overcome the false duality between objectivity and subjectivity. In fact, almost no theorist stands unashamedly on one of the poles of these dualism.

Despite these difficulties, however, I think that most bodies of social theory can be classified as tending towards one or the other of these opposite poles; that Sartre's existentialism is profoundly subjective in its foundation; that Marxism is basically materialistic. Second, I think that broad generalizations about social theories still tell us something useful about Western society.

In what follows, then, I describe the main features of what I term “Enlightenment Modernism”, which is the dominant form of thought in the west and the most practically important since it provides the foundation for most western social, economic and political institutions. The alternative view is largely an intellectual expression of opposition to the dominant view. It has few practical consequences for the power structure of society and exists primarily among some intellectuals at the margins of economic and political power.

## **2. THE ENLIGHTENMENT MODE OF THOUGHT**

The Enlightenment represented a crucial reorientation of European thought which began in the 18th century. Pre-Enlightenment thought consisted primarily of religious dogmatism. The culture consisted primarily of tradition and custom, within a hierarchy of status positions. Humans were regarded as “fallen”, humble creatures without the capacity for independent thought. Truth was given by authorities and not the province of the individual human mind. The economy was agrarian and static. Politics was dominated by traditional authority.

During the 16th to the 18th centuries, Europe underwent an economic, ideological, and social transformation. In religion, the Reformation caused a major split in Christianity with the growth of Protestantism. In culture, the Renaissance belief in “humanism” elevated humanity from weak, fallen beings to the paragons of creation, infinitely perfectible. Scientific discoveries challenged religious dogma and demonstrated the abilities of the human mind.

Society was regarded as automatically progressive, getting better and better over time. This economic transformation was led by merchant capitalists. Based on global pillage, vast

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amounts of wealth was accumulated as the basis for the industrial revolution led by the rising class of capitalists. In politics, doctrines of liberalism emerged in England along with varieties of radicalism in France.

These were diverse movements with two elements in common. The first of these was individualism – the elevation of the individual above society. In Protestantism, the individual was alone before the deity, without benefit of the hierarchy of clergy as intermediaries. In culture, individuals were the creators of culture and the source of scientific discoveries. Individual entrepreneurs were regarded as the source of economic wealth through the individual pursuit of economic advantage. In political liberalism, the individual was the creator of the state (for example, in the concept of the social contract).

The second element these diverse movements had in common was the importance of human reason, of rationality. The Renaissance elevation of human “potential” meant above all that humans were superior because of human reason, their ability for rational thought and action. All natural and social problems could be solved by the scientific method, the application of human reason and the experimental method. In economics, reason prevailed. The capitalist is a rational economic actor, making investment decisions, dealing with the labour market and understanding consumption demand. The individual Citizen was also a political actor. Bourgeois democracy gave each voter a choice among alternative forms of government. In the realm of ideas, bourgeois freedoms promised a free marketplace of ideas through a free press and freedom of expression.

In the Enlightenment view, humans, then, must be understood as rational creatures who are essentially individualistic, but can cooperate because of their ability to calculate rationally their self-interest. They must be given the widest freedom possible to express their interests (within the limits of not harming other individuals).

This rationalist orientation was strongest in Natural Science. The scientific method led to great practical success in the transformation of the material world. Secular humanism became widespread as the new ideology, replacing religious dogmas, whether Catholic or Protestant. The application of science led to a great growth of technology and an enormously expanded scale of business operations and bureaucracies. Government was similarly “rationalized” by the creation of a civil service and bureaucratic agencies. Capitalists were also “rational” economic actors in the pursuit of efficiency and the “bottom-line” of profit.

Western thinkers assumed that this scientific, rational orientation was the highest development of humanity. Other cultures, whether religious (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism) or merely traditional (Confucian China) were regarded as inferior, as the same as European feudalism. They were backward and must be altered by western, progressive ideas; these societies must be “modernized” along the lines of western economics, government, and secularism. Europeans were “civilizing” the natives, dragging them into the modern world which was in all ways superior to their traditional societies. Some of this orientation was shared by Marxism. For example, Marx's evaluation of traditional societies in Asia declared them to be stagnant and backward. Consequently, to the extent that colonialism helped to break down “feudalism” in Asia, it was historically progressive. Marxism should be seen as the modern development of the Enlightenment mode of thought, at least with respect to rationality. Marx retained the emphasis on the rational construction of society, and on secularism and science while discarding bourgeois individualism.

I think Marxism was and is the most important ideology which originated in 19th century Europe, based on Enlightenment principles. However, Marxism gained only a minor foothold in the west.

### **3. THE CHALLENGE TO THE ENLIGHTENMENT MODE**

By the late 19th century, the dominant “modern” ideology which was inherited from the Enlightenment was being challenged, not by Marxism, but by a different version of bourgeois ideology.

The roots of this alternative ideology can be found in criticism of the negative consequences for society which were caused by rationalism and science. In the economy, free enterprise was quickly lost and replaced by huge conglomerates and global corporations which were organized along bureaucratic lines, demanding loyalty to the bosses, subservience to the rules and conformity of behaviour. Little men in gray suits and conservative ties had replaced the individualistic entrepreneur. By the 20th century, governments had found it necessary to regulate the economy, creating huge bureaucracies which dominated people and limited their freedoms. Politics was dominated by big business and ordinary people had no real say. Bourgeois democracy was a fig leaf covering increasingly authoritarian government. Science and technology had changed from an instrument which had the potential to liberate humanity into a technological nightmare, dominating humanity. From the assembly line to the H-Bomb and the surveillance camera, people were servants of machines, objects of control.

More than any other single event, the First World War brought European beliefs in automatic progress (that things were destined to always improve), in the benefits of technology, and in modern government, crashing down. Then the Great Depression undermined the faith in the social outcome of individualistic business rationality. Later in the 20th century, there was even more room for pessimism. With the hydrogen bomb, science had reached the point where all life could be extinguished. Global capitalism threatened to bring ecological disaster. Modernism was a juggernaut, a huge machine, careening out of control.

In this context, most western intellectuals did not turn to Marxism for relief. 20th century Marxism in Russia and China was regarded as worse than capitalism, as more bureaucratic and more authoritarian, as just a more extreme version of the same. Instead, a second strain of western thought, which had some pre-enlightenment origins that had merely been overshadowed, rose again in new forms.

### **4. ROMANTIC SUBJECTIVISM**

The dominant western ideology continued to be rationalism, science, technology and bureaucracy. But an alternative view arose, rejecting this tradition. It was composed of many different strands, without a single centre. What they had in common was a rejection of the dominant ideology, of authority and the state, scientism, and bureaucracy.

One strand was anarchism because it stood for opposition to all authority. Anarchism is extreme bourgeois liberalism, the furthest extension of the demand to give humans the maximum freedom. Again, this was only a minor movement in the west. In one respect, it did not fit the criticism of “Modernist”, Enlightenment ideology: anarchism assumed that all humans were

rational enough to live in a society without authority. So anarchism did not become the basis of the alternative ideology.

A second strand reached back to English liberalism, particularly the emphasis on individualism and freedom, while denying the importance of rationality. This was Romanticism. Individuals were not rational, but were motivated by emotions and feelings; they understood things intuitively. What was really important: beauty, music, self-expression – above all, freedom – could never be understood by rational science. Late 19th century painting, for example, abandoned the realism which was connected to bourgeois thought – rationalism and science – in favour of expressionism. Not depictions of nature, or real social conditions, but paintings which expressed emotion, irrationality, even rebellion. Writers tried to express that which could not be expressed in words. Stream of consciousness emerged in literature along with nonsense poetry.

A third strand arose from a branch of science itself: psychoanalysis. The revolution in thinking started by Freud suggested that the rational part of the brain was secondary to the unconscious, which included the most basic and primitive impulses, particularly sexuality. Human rationality became little more than rationalisms, explanations for things which merely excuse or justify our actions which, in reality, spring from deep, unconscious processes. The Enlightenment belief in rational thought, then, was wholly mistaken. People were motivated to act by non-rational factors. This explained the hold that religion had on so many people; the irrational nationalism of the First World War; the rise of fascism in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. Racism, prejudice, national chauvinism were the fundamental facts of humanity.

European philosophy provided yet another element in this alternative ideology. There have always been two main currents in European philosophy. One stressed the importance of the material world: matter actually existed and humans could come to understand matter through reason and science. This view, that existence was first objective, was adopted wholeheartedly by the Enlightenment, by the materialists and by Marxism.

There, was however, an alternative philosophy based on subjectivity. Ultimately, nothing could be known to exist except your own mind (I think therefore I am -- or at least I know my mind exists and therefore I do). Philosophers such as Hume and Kant were modern exponents of subjectivism in philosophy.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

If the “Modernist”, dominant ideology had practical consequences in the economy, in politics and technology – in all of social life – the alternative, romantic, individualist, subjectivism was primarily an intellectual phenomenon: it was expressed by writers, artists, professors, philosophers, students. It was a “middle class” phenomenon. It was a style, an attitude, a feeling of permanent rebellion against the bureaucratic, authoritarian rationalism of the status quo. It did not demand political change, only life-style change. You lived and displayed your rebellion. This attitude surfaced along the West Bank of Paris, the original Boheme; in the growth of Bohemian subcultures in London (Soho) and New York (Greenwich Village); among the 1960s hippies who “turned on” (took drugs) “tuned out” (abandoned traditional morality) and “dropped out”; in the alternative music “scene” of rock and roll and then hard rock.

In the end, although Bohemia claims to be the “opposite” of dominant bourgeois ideology, both modes share the fundamental individualism which is the main feature of

bourgeois ideology. For the romantics, however, modernism is not individual enough or, rather, it has sacrificed individualism on the altar of materialism, technology and bureaucracy.

The significance of this alternative, rebellious individualism is not economic. Most youthful bohemians, middle class in origin, end up in secure, middle class office jobs somewhere in the bureaucracies they had formerly rejected. Nor is it political. Such “rebels” pose no real threat to the status quo. At most, it is cultural. Yet, even here, capitalism has the ability to embrace rebellious impulses, converting them into commodities, selling them, and thereby rendering them harmless, whether it is mass produced music albums by “alternative artists” who become millionaires, abstract art which is eventually sold to the wealthy bourgeoisie, or styles of dance or clothing. They all become the new status quo. Romantic subjectivism is ever renewed in different epochs, and it is ever absorbed into mainstream culture. The contemporary manifestation of romantic subjectivism is postmodernism. In the sense that I am using it, it is not “post” anything but is, rather, one version of “modern”, bourgeois ideology.

The question is whether, when a more viable and effective rebellious project unfolds, romantic subjectivism will form a part of this social movement for transformation or, rather, continue to act as a social safety-valve, directing rebellion into safe, easily subverted or co-opted channels. Given the global hegemony of capital in the late 20th century, an even bigger question is what form a viable project of profound social transformation would take in the advanced west. At the moment, I see no alternative other than a social movement arising from the mode of thought which is based on Enlightenment rationalism and Marxism.