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# UNIT 3 CRITIQUES OF ENLIGHTENMENT

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## 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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The Enlightenment embodied the spirit of optimism. Its advocates believed that they lived in a world marked by greater wellbeing and happiness of all. There was visible progress in every walk of life and indeed the possibility that men could now shape their future. Reason and scientific rationality had emancipated men from the “empire of fate” so that they could advance firmly and surely towards the apprehension of truth and the creation of a world free from scarcity, hunger and disease. This vision of liberation and progress was accompanied by the understanding that men now had the “determination” and the “courage” to use their intelligence to challenge religious dogmas and discover for themselves the laws by which the natural and the social world are governed. The enlightened mind could therefore think of controlling nature, harnessing its energies for the advantage of humankind and shaping a better social world.

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## 3.2 THE ROMANTICS

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The Enlightenment understanding of man, society, history and knowledge did not however go unchallenged. By the end of the 18th century itself the Enlightenment faced a challenge from a group of intellectuals who were identified as Romantics. They questioned almost every aspect of the enlightenment thinking – from its conception of truth, science and reason to its belief in the idea of progress. The Enlightenment had represented the present as an advance upon the past, the Romantics, by contrast, saw in it the deterioration of the human condition. Jean Jacques Rousseau argued that the development of arts and sciences had resulted in the social and moral degeneration of man. Division of labour, differentiation of functions and applications of technology had, in his view, corrupted men and destroyed their idyllic existence. Indeed it had created a hiatus between nature and man. While man in his natural state was guided by the principle of pity – that is, “a natural aversion to seeing any other sentient being perish or suffer, especially if it is one of our kind” the progress of civilization had made him egoistic and self-centred. Above all, it had resulted in the loss of freedom for the self. Men led an alienated existence now, subordinated to the order of time and work that is imposed by industrializing capital.

Romanticists like Rousseau sought salvation in the “natural order”. For them, it was only in the natural order that man’s truest and deepest needs could be satisfied. Further, in contrast to that ideal world the present appeared as a disappointment, if

not a complete failure. It was an object of bitterness and resentment. Consequently, several romanticists idealized the past. Some even wanted to turn the clock back. These writings, attempting to glorify the past echoed the sentiments of the disinherited aristocratic class and they were congenial to their demand for returning to feudalism. However, this was not the defining attribute of Romanticism. The Romantics rejected the present society, harked back to the pre-modern world and created the image of a “natural” man primarily to challenge the mechanistic and instrumental rationality of the new capitalist order. Through its representations of the past and other civilizations it sought to reveal the limitations of the modern world-view and the scientific rationality that underpinned it.

The Romantic rebellion was, in many ways, the ‘other’, that is, the negation, of Enlightenment. It affirmed values that opposed everything that Enlightenment stood for. The Enlightenment had elevated reason to the position of sovereign authority. It believed that reason had the ability to discover the absolute truth, both about the meaning of history as well as the working of the universe. The *Philosophes* assumed, on the one hand, that reason rules over the universe and, on the other, that it was supremely important to man. Reason could enable us to understand the functioning of this intricately designed machine, called nature, discover its laws and apply that knowledge to control the physical and the social world. This idea that reason either “controls everything or could be made to do so” was fundamentally challenged by Romanticism. The challenge took many different forms. At the most immediate level, the Romantics pitted passions against reason. Against the carefully controlled and mathematically precise observations of the scientist, they placed the reason of the heart and extolled its virtues.

In Enlightenment thought reason was closely linked to scientific rationality. Its applications were expected to yield truth – i.e., knowledge of universals as well as knowledge that is universally applicable. By referring to reason of the heart, the Romanticists questioned this basic conception of universality and truth. Against the notion of objectivity of taste and permanence of the truly beautiful, Romanticism affirmed the value of the contingent. They stressed inward conviction and juxtaposed it to judgements oriented to externalized standards. Not only did they resist conformity to impersonal laws, they maintained that the “single narrow door to truth lay within us. By looking within ourselves, into our inner consciousness we come to understand and know the truth”.

The Scottish Enlightenment thinker, David Hume, had once suggested “If we take in our hand any volume, of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance, let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to flames; for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion”. Romanticism consciously sought to retrieve that which the Enlightenment had consigned to the flames. They focussed on the magical and the mystical and exalted the unknown over the known in a bid to reject the Enlightenment conception of truth and science. On the one hand, they challenged the need to adhere to laid down procedures and methods of observation and generalization, and, on the other, they focussed on the “exotic, deviant or the special case, counterposing these to the probable or average case”. Romanticism conferred a special status on the unique, and, along with it, defined individuality in terms of departure from social norms and conventions. Against the classical unities of time and place, they welcomed a “melange of times, tones, moods and places”.

The Enlightenment had viewed the world as a harmonious, integrated whole. Romanticism, on the other hand, perceived it as an “incongruous assemblage” and

tension filled conjunction of parts” that could not add up to a single, coherent, unified whole. The totality was at best a mosaic, characterized by plurality and dissonance. The use of standardized techniques and procedures by the Enlightenment was based on the assumption that the universe – both natural and social – had a patterned regularity. It functions in accordance with certain laws that can be discovered by the application of human reason and scientific method. By emphasizing dissonance of parts and uniqueness of events Romanticism rejected this assumption of Enlightenment thinking. In its view the world defied neat categorization and was not amenable to the kind of systematic, analytical study that was the hallmark of science. The writings of these theorists were filled with imagery of twilight, blurring boundaries and absence of clear-cut distinctions. Their works of art depicted pictures of the natural forces and elements that defied human control. While the Enlightenment art told a story of clear, calm skies in which man was in control of his destiny, Romanticism presented a turbulent world in which chaos and uncertainty prevailed, reminding human being of the limits of their knowledge and the finitude of their existence.

By concentrating on the singular and the unique, on the one hand, and the mystical and the unknown, on the other, Romanticism drew attention to the failure of human reason. If the Enlightenment expressed optimism that the world could be known fully by the human mind, Romanticism pointed to that which resisted explanation by human reason and scientific knowledge. Romanticism did not simply reverse the antinomies that defined the Enlightenment, they challenged the philosophy of Realism that informed the latter. Scientific rationality was anchored in the belief that truth can be arrived at through an accurate description of the external world. Romanticism challenged this notion of realism in three ways. First, it questioned the possibility of apprehending truth through the methods employed by science; second, it retrieved categories that had no place in a world that is experienced as fact; and third, it redefined the notion of truth emphasizing the capacity of the individual to create new meanings and values.

The idea that truth entails an accurate description of an external reality that is known through sensory perception and systematic observation was the constant object of doubt and criticism within Romanticism. In response to Newton’s *Opticks* Thomas Campbell wrote:

“Can all that optics teach, unfold

Thy form to please me so,

As when I dreamt of gems and gold

Hid in thy radiant bow?

When science from Creation’s face

Enchantment’s veil withdraws,

What lovely visions yield their place

To cold material laws!” (from *To the Rainbow*)

In a similar vein Keats also rebelled against the reduction of the rainbow to prismatic colours. Such representations, in his view, deprived it of its poetry and aesthetic quality, and in the process failed to fully experience or perceive this object.

While some Romanticists questioned the loss of truth through the analytic-synthetic method of the sciences, others, like Rousseau, gave a privileged place to emotions and feelings. The Enlightenment had dismissed these categories as subjective, and

unable to grasp objective truth, but Rousseau held them to be crucial to the understanding of the self and society. Further, he emphasized the role of the individual and maintained that the creative originality of the artist is better able to capture the truth of the external world. The Enlightenment *Philosophes* attempted to discover the world, i.e., to unveil the truth that was already there. In contrast to this, the Romantics stressed the capacity of the individual to create new meanings and values. The idea that truth is an object of construction and creation rather than discovery was subsequently developed by Nietzsche to provide a critique of the Enlightenment and even its Romantic critics.

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### 3.3 NIETZSCHE

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Romanticism had lamented the loss of meaning in the modern world. To fill this void they turned to nature, religion and tradition. Nietzsche, writing in the late nineteenth century, questioned just this. While accepting the spiritual wasteland in which the modern man walks alone, he maintained that neither proximity to nature nor religion could provide the *free* man with peace, joy or certainty. Speaking passionately against a return to the past, he wrote: “The barbarism of all ages possessed more happiness than we do – let us not deceive ourselves on this point! – but our impulse towards knowledge is too widely developed to allow us to value happiness without knowledge, or the happiness of a strong and fixed delusion: it is painful to us even to imagine such a state of things! Our restless pursuit of discoveries and divinations has become for us as attractive and as indispensable as hapless love of a lover.... Knowledge within us has developed into a passion, which does not shrink from any sacrifice and at bottoms fears nothing but its own extinction....It may be that mankind will perish eventually from this passion for knowledge! - but even that does not daunt me....”

For Nietzsche there was another reason why man could no longer rely on custom and tradition. Tradition oppresses: it appeals to a higher authority, an authority that is obeyed not because “it commands what is useful to us but merely because it commands” . The free man cannot therefore depend upon it. He is an individual, defying custom and norms of received morality. It is his will to depend on nothing but himself. Since the free man of the modern age cannot find solace either in religion or tradition, there are just two options before him; a) he may abandon the search for an ultimate meaning; and b) he may create meaning by his own will and action.

In exploring these alternatives Nietzsche did not merely reject the Enlightenment and its Romantic alternative, he questioned the entire tradition of western rationalist thought, beginning with Plato. For Nietzsche all schools of thought had one thing in common: they had firm belief in themselves and their knowledge. They believed that they had arrived at the truth. In the Athenian world of ancient Greek city-states Plato claimed that reason could give man access to the ultimate reality – the world of forms. In recent times, the Enlightenment claimed that the application of scientific method has yielded the truth about the world. Each in its own way thus claims that it has *discovered* the truth about the external world that exists independently of us. Further, that this truth has been arrived at impersonally and objectively; i.e., in terms of qualities that inhere in the objects themselves.

Men have, according to Nietzsche, lived in this state of “theoretical innocence” for centuries believing that they possess the right method for discovering the nature of ultimate reality, and for determining what is good and valuable. Working under the influence of these childish presuppositions they have failed to realize that the external world is in itself devoid of all meanings and values. Whatever has value in the present

world “has it not in itself by its nature”. Rather a value was “given to it, bestowed upon it, it was *we* who gave and bestowed! We only have created the world which is of any account to man”.

In making this argument and suggesting that man is a “creator, a continuous poet of life”, Nietzsche was not undermining the significance of cognition. For Nietzsche knowledge remains a supreme value, but if pure knowledge as revealed by reason or experiments is the only end then we would have to follow whatever direction these faculties take us in. We have to be prepared, for instance, to follow the path that experimental reason leads us towards, be that of nuclear energy or genetic engineering. However, this would be complete “madness”. Knowledge has to be mediated by values that we regard to be worth affirming, values by which we may wish to construct the world.

The role of the artist is therefore of the utmost importance. For it is the work of an artist that *creates* and unravels for us alternative worlds. While men of science aim to discover what is already there, the artist gives shape to a world, expressing human ideals. For this reason Nietzsche maintained that poetry and myths were a valuable source of knowledge for us. In Nietzsche’s works the artist was not just the ‘other’ of the modern rational scientist. He was, first and foremost, a creator; and as a creator he embodied the ability to transcend the boundaries of the social and what is designated as the rational. The artist as such stood alone, challenging the moralism implicit in western philosophical traditions.

Thus it was through Nietzsche and the Romanticists that some of the basic tenets of the Enlightenment came to be questioned in a fundamental way. In particular the view that the present was the most advanced and civilized era in the history of humankind became subject to scrutiny. Critiques of the idea of progress, reason and industrial rationality sought to displace the centrality accorded to science in the Enlightenment scheme of things. The critics, by and large, accepted that the new age of capitalism, scientific discovery and industrialization had provided a much “softened” world for the mortals. It had offered a benign ethic of health, vitalism and welfare but the problem was that these developments challenged the existing conceptions without offering any alternative vision of the meaning of life. Consequently, the critics searched for an alternative to the industrial society, especially to the instrumental and technical rationality that permeated the present. Romanticism of the late 19th century only marked the first step in this direction. Subsequent theorists carried this task forward by pointing to – a) limitations of the Enlightenment project of progress; b) the exploitative nature of the capitalism; and c) the violence implicit in modern science.

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### 3.4 KARL MARX

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The early writings of Karl Marx showed that capitalist mode of production generates four types of alienation: alienation of man in the workplace; alienation of man from his product; alienation of man from his species life; and, alienation of man from man. For human beings, work is a means of self-expression and development of one’s potential. However, in capitalism work ceases to fulfil this requirement. The industrial unit divides the work of production into small fragments; it compartmentalizes jobs such that each individual repeatedly performs the same differentiated and narrowly specialized task. Under these circumstances, work becomes a routine, if not a drudgery. At the same time, individual gets alienated from the end-product of their creation. They can no longer relate to the product that emerges from these factories. Even though the worker through his labour creates all the products, from the simplest to the most complex machines, yet, they appear to him as reified commodities in the

market. He can no longer own them as his creations. In fact he confronts these objects as a stranger and is dominated by them. Work thus becomes a mode of oppressing men. Instead of being a means of self-realization and fulfillment it is transformed into a repressive activity. The instrumental rationality that governs the workplace also extends to the social space. The urban industrial towns in which men live also function on the principle of utility and need. Men see each other as objects of use value and relate to each other on that basis primarily. Their alienation is thus complete: it extends from the economic domain to the social and the political.

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### 3.5 MARCUSE AND THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

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For Marx, freedom could not effectively exist in such a society. The world that Enlightenment had fantasized about could not possibly ensure liberation of men. Not even the most progressive expressions of that rationality – namely, science and industrialization - could provide for a society in which men could realize their potential. Towards the end of the 18th century, Romanticism had spoken of the moral ambiguity of the newly emerging order. It had also hinted at the loss of freedom in the age of industrialization. These themes were revived in the second half of the 20th century by the New Left, most notably in the writings of Herbert Marcuse. In his book, *One Dimensional Man*, Marcuse characterized the post-enlightenment industrial society as “irrational” and “repressive”. Despite the apparent progress and increase in productivity, this society, in his view, was “destructive of the free development of human needs and faculties”. To many it may appear that political freedom is protected in this society and there has been an expansion in the liberties enjoyed by men. Today there is more to choose from: many different newspapers, radio stations, TV channels and a whole gamut of commodities in the market – from different varieties of potato chips to motor cars and washing machines. Yet, men have no real capacity to make choices of their own.

Men’s needs are constantly shaped and manipulated by the media industry that furthers the interests of a few. It moulds and constructs images that determine the choices we make at home, in the market place and in social interactions. In a world where “false” needs are fashioned by the media there is no effective intellectual freedom or liberation of man. Men act and participate as “pre-conditioned receptacles of long standing”. Indeed through their actions they reinforce the instruments of socio-economic control and their oppression. According to Marcuse, the modern industrialized world constituted a “more progressive stage of alienation”. Its seeming progress, “the means of mass transportation and communication, the commodities of lodging, food and clothing, the irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers, and through the latter, to the whole. The products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood. And as these beneficial products become available to more individuals in more social classes, the indoctrination they carry ceases to be publicity; it becomes a way of life. It is a good way of life, it militates against qualitative change. Thus emerges a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behaviour”. More importantly, as men and women share in the same images and ideas there is less and less the possibility of challenging the present and seeking alternatives to it.

In a world where images, presentation and appearance count more than even the content, these theorists felt there could be no real freedom, or for that matter, the possibility of “communicative rationality” asserting itself in the “life-world”. For Marcuse as well as for other members of the Frankfurt School the Enlightenment

had transformed what was once liberating reason, engaged in the fight against religious dogma and superstition, into a repressive orthodoxy. It had done this by visualizing reason as an instrument of control; and, as a tool for gaining mastery over the world rather than critical reflection and reconstruction. Instrumental reason that was concerned primarily with efficiency, economy and utility could not be expected to liberate man or to construct a better world.

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### 3.6 CRITICS OF SCIENCE

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In the second half of the twentieth century, a similar doubt is raised about science. Can science create a better world: a world in which individuals can enjoy freedom and happiness? The Enlightenment had answered this question in the affirmative. Its optimism emanated, in part, from its view that science had revealed the truth. Its method had enabled men to know the external reality, the world around us, while technological application had facilitated control over that reality such that it could now serve the interest of man. Science had in this dual sense made man the master of the universe. Men may not have designed that magnificent machine but they were certainly in a position to control and manipulate it to suit their ends. Science symbolized this faith and it was for this reason that the Enlightenment had given it a special status in the order of things. This faith in science has been challenged in the late twentieth century. Among other things the critics maintain that modern science and technology promote violence, and cannot therefore be a means for improving the human condition or shaping a better, more peaceful, world.

In India this point of view is best represented in the writings of Ashis Nandy, Vandana Shiva and Claude Alvares. All of them see a link between science, technology, oppression and violence. For these analysts science is intrinsically violent. Both science and technology are violent ways of handling the world; hence, their “use for violent purposes is assured”. In collusion with colonialism and imperialism, science unleashed violence against traditional ways of life. Today, it has resulted in the vast accumulation of armaments and nuclear arsenal, all of which threaten the very existence of life on earth. In addition, it has resulted in concentration of power in the hands of few. Science does not simply downgrade tradition, it positions scientific knowledge against everyday experience and received knowledge. In the process it gives a special position to the technocrat, the specialists. In the scientific world-view, it is these men of knowledge rather than ordinary citizens who are empowered. Likewise, development and progress sanctioned by science has uprooted people from their natural surroundings and has resulted in the displacement of countless people from their land. Heavy industries and big dams have dislodged communities without any real possibility of rehabilitating them, taken over their land and resulted in the destruction of valuable agricultural land. At the same time, it has alienated communities from the resources that are crucial to their very existence.

According to Vandana Shiva, science is not merely responsible for the creation of sophisticated weapons of mass destruction, it is destructive even in its peaceful applications. In activities like agriculture and health, where the professed objective is human welfare, science remains largely violent. Scientific agriculture has resulted in aggressive and “reckless pillage” of nature. While traditional modes of farming left time for nature to regenerate itself, today the pattern of crop cultivation has generated problems at various levels. The use of new seeds, which promise higher yield, has destroyed bio-diversity and the richness of nature. Excessive exploitation of ground resources through cultivation of at least three crops each year, primarily for purposes of sale in the market, has left the farmer poorer. The condition of soil has deteriorated and it has created an environment that is “favourable for multiplication of disease”.

In the area of health similarly, there is an increase in iatrogenic illness. In fact “iatrogenic illness cause more deaths than road accidents”. In university hospitals in America, one out of five patients contract iatrogenic illness and one out of 30 die because of it. In other words, for these theorists, science has not yielded a safer and better world. While increasing productivity and cure for several diseases, it has created newer forms of illnesses, upset the balance of nature and worsened the condition of life for the ordinary man.

As we observed earlier, Romanticism had contrasted the world ushered in by industrializing capital and science with the ideal existence of man in nature. It had challenged the Enlightenment idea of progress by glorifying nature and seeking a return to it. If Enlightenment had credited science with advancing the happiness of man, Romanticism blamed it for increasing alienation, violence, loss of peace and security. It warned humankind of the disasters that come with science and its technological applications, and craved for the cosmic order that is supposed to be there, present in nature. It is this reliance upon tradition and the natural order that distinguishes Romanticism from the postmodern critiques of Enlightenment.

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### 3.7 POSTMODERNISM

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Postmodernism, taking its cue from Nietzsche, problematizes not just science but also philosophy and religion. Each of these intellectual engagements, in its view, seeks foundations; that is, they look for absolute and unconditional basis of reality and claim to arrive at the truth. The only difference being that while religion locates the absolute in the world beyond, science points to the laws of nature as constituting the foundations of the world and philosophy places its faith in the capacity of reason to unearth that absolute truth. What remains unaltered is that each of them looks for, and seeks to **discover** the truth that is already there. Against this worldview, postmodernism asks us to abandon the search for foundations and universal truth. Like Nietzsche, the postmodernist thinkers assert that knowledge does not involve discovering a meaning that is already there, pre-contained in the text. For the postmodernists, the task of every inquiry is, and must be, to deconstruct the text: to read it in a way that allows new meanings to emerge from it. Nietzsche had argued that the history of the west, from the time of Plato onwards, reveals a “tyranny of the mind”. Plato claimed that philosophers armed with the power of reason would penetrate the world of appearances and arrive at the truth. He therefore banished the poets from the Republic. In recent times, the Enlightenment bestows the same faith in systematic observation and experience. Both are convinced that they possess the absolute truth and the perfect method to arrive at it. Countless people have, over the years, sacrificed themselves to these convictions. Believing that they knew best they imposed their ways upon others.

The idea that we know the truth, that we and we alone have access to it, has been a source of fanaticism in the world. Postmodernists add to this Nietzschean sentiment to say that it has also been the source of totalitarianism. To protect freedom that the modern man so deeply cherishes we must therefore abandon this search for absolute truth. And realize instead that others also believe that they know the truth and are acting in accordance with it. Intellectual arrogance must therefore give way to a sense of deeper humility: that is, to a framework wherein meta-narratives give way to particular histories of people living in a specific time and place, and space is created for the co-presence of multiple projects and knowledge systems.

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## 3.8 SUMMARY

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To conclude, critiques of Enlightenment today have taken a new turn. Romanticism had only questioned the Enlightenment system of valuation, its assessment of the present modern era. Where Enlightenment had seen with progress and the march of reason, Romanticism only found moral degeneration and loss of freedom for the self. It challenged the Enlightenment by reversing its priorities and judgements. Postmodernism, by comparison, treads the path shown by Nietzsche and rejects the very search for some “good” values and morals. It therefore questions not merely the Enlightenment idea of knowledge and the process by which we can arrive at the truth. Rather it rejects the very idea of absolute truth and, with it, of a single method of inquiry that can yield knowledge. Postmodernism thus charts the path of anti-foundationalism where all signs of permanence, certainty and universality are wiped clean. It is not possible here to discuss the idea of the self and the world that anti-foundationalism itself ushers in, but we may with Nietzsche say that it is one in which “taste” and “*proportionateness* are strange to us”.

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## SOME EXERCISES FOR THIS BLOCK

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### Unit 1 : Renaissance and the Idea of the Individual

1. How did developments in trade and commerce create conditions for the Renaissance?
2. What was the process through which religion began to lose its dominate position in European Society?

### Unit 2 : The Enlightenment

1. What was the essence of the idea of progress as espoused by the Enlightenment thinkers?
2. How did Enlightenment thinkers understand the relationship between science and religion?

### Unit 3 : Critiques of Enlightenment

1. What are the main ways in which the Romantics differed from the Enlightenment thinkers?
2. How did Karl Marx and the Frankfurt School advance the ideas initiated by the Enlightenment thinkers?

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## SUGGESTED READINGS FOR THIS BLOCK

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(Block-2 of the Foundation Course in Humanities and Social Sciences, FHS-1, for B.A. students of IGNOU. (Specially recommended for those students who may not have studied Modern World earlier. They may read it before going through this Block).

Hale, J.R., *Renaissance Europe*, 1480 – 1520.

Hyland, Paul and others (ed.), *The Enlightenment: A Source book and Reader*, London, 2003.

Jacob, Margaret C., *The Enlightenment: A Brief History with Documents*, New York, 2001.

Johnson, Paul, *The Renaissance*, London, 2000.

Keke wick, Lucille (editor), *The Renaissance in Europe: A Cultural Enquiry (The Impact of Humanism)*, UK Open University, Oxford, 2000.

Kramer, Loyd and Maza, Sarah (editor), *A Companion to Western Historical Thought*, Oxford, 2002.

Munck, Thomas, *The Enlightenment: A Comparative Social History*, London, 2000.