
UNIT 1 RENAISSANCE AND THE IDEA OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Structure

- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 The Invention of the Idea
- 1.3 Developments in Italy
- 1.4 New Groups: Lawyers and Notaries
- 1.5 Humanism
- 1.6 New Education
- 1.7 Print
- 1.8 Secular Openings
- 1.9 Realism vs. Moralism
- 1.10 Summary
- 1.11 Glossary

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This is the first Unit of the course and is being treated as the entry point to an understanding of modern world. ‘Renaissance’ is an Italian word meaning re-birth. But over the last two centuries the word has come to acquire a new meaning. Renaissance as we understand it today is associated with major social and cultural developments in Europe between the 13th and the 15th centuries. The contribution of the Renaissance to the emergence of modernity in early modern Europe has been for many years an appropriate entry point to the history of the modern world. However much intellectuals of the third world dislike such an euro-centric vision, there is no escape from the fact that it was in renaissance Italy and subsequently in certain parts of the sixteenth century Europe that a new view of man as a creative individual possessing the power to shape his destiny without depending on god became a major inspiration for social thinking and political action. In a loose sense this is what is conveyed by what we know as renaissance humanism. Michelangelo’s painting of the creation of Adam in the Sistine Chapel, in an artistic sense was a celebration of the newly discovered greatness of man. The idea of a free and creative man was not however a consequence of renaissance social thought alone. Reformation, which came quickly on the heels of the Renaissance also, made its distinct contribution to a spirit of self-consciousness by privatizing religious practice and Protestantism fundamentally fostered an individualistic psyche.



MICHELANGELO, *The Creation of Adam* (About 1511)

1.2 THE INVENTION OF THE IDEA

It is interesting to know that, prior to the 19th century, the major socio-cultural developments in Europe during the 13th- 15th centuries were not understood and codified as renaissance. In this section you will become familiar with the process in which renaissance became a part of our knowledge.

In 1860, Jakob Burckhardt formulated the influential concepts of ‘Renaissance’ and ‘humanism’, in his pioneering masterpiece of cultural history, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. Burckhardt’s book was a “subtle synthesis of opinions about the Renaissance that had grown powerful during the Age of the Enlightenment”. He seemed to be confirming a story told by secular, liberal intellectuals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who were searching for the origins of their own beliefs and values, that after the collapse of classical civilization a period of darkness and barbarism had set in, dominated by the church and the humdrum of rural life. Eventually, however, a revival of commerce and urban life laid the foundations for a secular and even anti-religious vision of life. The new vision, which glorified the individual and the attractions of earthly life were strongly reinforced by the rediscovery of the pagan literature of the Antiquity. The new secular and individualistic values, which were somewhat incompatible with Christian beliefs, constituted a new worldly philosophy of life known as ‘humanism’, drawing its main ideas and inspiration from ancient times. Humanism subsequently became the inspiration for questioning the moral basis of the feudal and Christian inheritances in Europe.

Burckhardt’s work, which dominated the 19th century perception about the Renaissance, came to be subjected to criticisms later. For a time in the late 1940s and the 1950s, the very idea of a Renaissance came under attack, when the rich growth of scholarship on medieval history made the inherited view of a dark and uncivilized Middle Ages look untenable, “as medievalists discovered squarely in the Middle Ages all the essential traits supposedly typical of the later period, and also discovered within the Renaissance many traditional elements which seemed to prove that the Middle Ages lived on into the Renaissance”. Medievalists found renaissances in the sense of periods of classical revival in Carolingian France, Anglo-Saxon England and Ottonian Germany. One of these medieval revivals, the ‘twelfth-century Renaissance’, became a subject of major historical enquiries, since the coining of the term by Charles Homer Haskins in his *The renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (1927). Haskins maintained that the term ‘renaissance’, in the sense of an enthusiasm for classical literature, was an important feature of the twelfth century and that this cultural renewal was the ancestor of subsequent civilizational progress in early modern Europe.

Yet historians have not discarded fully the concept and the term ‘Renaissance’ in the sense Burckhardt had used it. For historical realities, which Burckhardt had described, cannot be dismissed with quibbles about terminology. Burckhardt rightly saw the emergence of a new culture and also located one of its main sources in Italian humanism by linking it to a unique set of social, political, and economic conditions. This new culture might seem to be the product of the growth of commerce and cities in northern Italy from the late eleventh century. But urban growth and commercial expansion since the 11th century, does not explain why the new culture flowered almost at the end of the 14th century even as it is true that Italy during the 12th and 13th centuries had become the most highly developed, the wealthiest and the most urbanized region of Europe. The urban and commercial growth of Italy stands in contrast to other parts of Europe in the north of the Alps, where the scholastic philosophy, Gothic art, and vernacular literature of these centuries were clearly associated with the clergy and the feudal aristocracy of the medieval age.

1.3 DEVELOPMENTS IN ITALY

Italy too was not totally free of this older aristocratic and clerical culture. Yet the dynamic part of Italy, the north, was dominated not by clerics and feudal nobles but by wealthy urban merchants, 'and during the 12th and 13th centuries, the cities of northern Italy in alliance with the popes broke the military and political power of the German kings, who called themselves Roman emperors and attempted to assert control over northern Italy'. Strong, centralizing monarchy of the kinds that developed in France and England did not emerge in Italy. Northern Italy was dotted with virtually independent urban republics. Although the people of these urban communities were deeply religious people, the position of the clergy in Italian city life was marginal. The cities were governed by wealthy merchants and the dependent petty traders and artisans, though from the 13th century, more and more of them came under the control of military despots who offered protection from internal disorder and external invasion.

Most of these Italian towns existed as markets for local communities, as links between the surrounding country and the distant markets, generally purchasing its cereals from the vicinity. A few large urban formations, like Genoa or Florence, were centres of international trade, which had expanded so enormously during the 12th and 13th centuries that the urban communities in such sprawling towns became larger than the usual small communities in the city republics. The administration of these towns came to depend increasingly on a professional civil service with legal training. As the activity of the towns became more complex, they came to gradually acquire permanent civic institutions including a class of magistrates. This was the time when the communities came to display features of a city-state.

The city-states in practice were republican oligarchies where crucial decisions were taken by a small minority of office-holding wealthy merchants, even though a considerable part of the male population was recruited in the citizen's militia. Over time however, the existence of the city republic in many instances became precarious. The townsmen were fighting each other, a feature that Machiavelli, the great Florentine thinker of renaissance Italy explained as a result of enmity between the wealthy and the poor. The situation was further complicated by factional rivalries within the ruling groups. The city councils became so divided along factional lines that in most cities before the end of the 14th century the regime of a single individual began to be increasingly preferred. To escape the problem of civic strife, most cities turned from republicanism to *signoria* (the rule of one man), who could either be a member of the urban aristocracy or a military captain who had been hired by the city councils for organising the city's defence from external enemies. Republican survivals were exceptions, the rule of the signor became universal. With the exception of Venice, most Italian cities experienced this transformation. The signori in most cases chose to rule through existing republican institutions combining the hitherto antagonistic principles of municipalism and feudalism.

The advent of signori resulted from the fragility of republican institutions, yet the triumph of the signori did not eliminate the need for scholar administrators. The city-states with enlarged functions including diplomacy, warfare, taxation and governance in an expanding and complex urban environment was an ideal breeding ground for a certain consciousness of citizenship. Whether it fostered individualism, as claimed by Burckhardt, still remains a problem. The kind of control that the municipal authorities imposed on traders and artisans fell far short of free private enterprise, yet it is possible to argue that the development of private wealth against the backdrop of an expanding commerce and a measure of involvement of the cities' elites in the

actual governance of the city were capable of reinforcing the individualist self consciousness in some of the city's leading men.

1.4 NEW GROUPS: LAWYERS AND NOTARIES

In a society where commerce dominated the scene the most important educated groups were the lawyers and the notaries (a combination of solicitor and record keeper) who drew up and interpreted the rules and written agreements without which trade on a large scale was not possible. With the growing scale of commerce there was an acute need for men skilled in drafting, recording, and authenticating contracts and letters. These were the notaries, specialists who did not need the long and costly education provided by law schools but who did receive training in Latin grammar and rhetoric. Such training in letter-writing and drafting legal documents was often given by apprenticeship, but at major centres of legal study such as Padua and Bologna, there were full-time professional teachers who taught not only the conventional legal forms of drafting various kinds of business documents and the correct type of handwriting for documents of public record but also provided some instruction in Roman law. Unlike in the middle ages when virtually all intellectual activities were carried on by churchmen, in the Italian cities this was pursued by members of the new professions. In more than one sense they were the real precursors to renaissance humanism.

Padua, a university town especially noted for the study of law and medicine, produced enthusiasts for the language and literature of ancient Rome. An important figure in this movement was Lovato Lovati (c. 1240-1309) a judge who showed many characteristics of humanism. His younger contemporary Albertino Mussato (1261-1325), who was a notary by profession, became widely known throughout Italy. During this early phase of the growth of humanism, Florence, the city associated with the later flowering of humanistic culture, played a marginal role. The great Florentine literary and intellectual figure of this age, Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), is linked more with medieval rather than Renaissance culture whose generation in Florence, despite the persistence of old cultural beliefs, still thought about a certain conception of cultural renewal through reinterpretation of classical literature and a conscious repudiation of the values of medieval civilization. The arrival of Petrarch, a century later, brought about this change in Florentine culture, more decisively. Petrarch realised that antiquity was a distinctive civilization which could be understood better through the words and the languages of the ancients. Petrarch's stress, therefore, was on grammar, which included the close reading of ancient authors from a linguistic point of view. With language, eloquence and the study of rhetoric, the ultimate purpose of this educational programme was to project a certain idea of good life that was suffused with secular meanings.

1.5 HUMANISM

Since the nineteenth century, historians have labeled this new culture as 'humanism', though it appears nowhere in the writings of the Renaissance period itself. The term that did exist was 'humanistic studies' (*studia humanitatis*), implying academic subjects favoured by humanists. By the first half of the fifteenth century, the term 'humanist' designated masters who taught academic subjects like grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. They were members of a particular professional group who taught humanities and liberal arts – humanitas, a classical word earlier used by Cicero as a substitute for the Greek Paideia, or culture. Cicero was trying to make the point that it was only human beings who were capable of this knowledge about their own selves.

Renaissance humanism, conceived as 'a new philosophy of life' or a glorification of human nature in secular terms, eludes precise definition. Indeed there is no definable set of common beliefs. More than a heightened sense of individualism, the primary characteristic, was the new pattern of historical consciousness that emerged first in the thought of leading 14th century poet, Petrarch. The sense of being deeply engaged in the restoration of true civilization after many centuries of barbarian darkness – an unfair position at that - finds its first clear statement in the works of Petrarch, and some such claim is common to virtually all of those writers - like Salutati, Poggio, Valla and Ficino to name a few - whom historians identify as the leading personalities in the history of Italian humanism. The humanist self-image as free agents of civilization was sharpened by such historical consciousness which enabled them to distinguish their time as an age of light from the preceding one of darkness. They believed that a dark age had set in after the decline of the Roman Empire as a result of the invasion of the barbarians. The humanists belonging to different generations returned to this theme of belonging to a new time, inventing the concept of the middle ages between the collapse of Rome and the cultural renewal in the age of renaissance. Leonardo Bruni, for sometime the chancellor of Florence, in his history of Florence or Flavio Biondo in a work covering the period from the sack of Rome by Alaric in 410 A.D. to the writer's own time betrayed this new sense of modernity.

The sense of the novelty of their age was entwined with a conscious imitation of the works of the ancient Greek and Roman writers. A certain consciousness of the newness of their time turned the great figures of renaissance into believers in progress. Without doubt, the poet Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca, 1304-74) was its first great figure, the real founder of the new culture, who tried to bring back to life the inner spirit of ancient Roman civilization. His love for ancient Latin literature was dovetailed with a repudiation of the inherited medieval culture. He transformed classicism into a weapon in a struggle to regenerate the world and to create a distinctive new culture built on the solid foundation of a lost but retrievable antiquity.

1.6 NEW EDUCATION

Petrarch's dream of a cultural and moral regeneration of Christian society, based on the union of eloquence and philosophy, had important implications for education. In late medieval and renaissance Italy, there were three types of schools other than the universities and schools conducted by religious orders exclusively for their own members. Most of the teaching at all three levels was done by self-employed schoolmasters who took tuition-paying pupils and, working either alone or with one assistant, taught them whatever subjects their parents paid for. But many towns in northern Italy also organized community schools, in which the local government selected and hired a schoolmaster, who was bound by a very specific contract to teach certain subjects up to a certain level. Communal schools began to appear in the 13th century. Communal schools in small towns ensured that competent preparation for university study would be available for the sons of the ruling elites.

Despite the growth of humanism, in the 14th century the curriculum of these schools did not change much. The textbooks used were predominantly medieval and Christian in origin, and many of them had been deliberately compiled for classroom use in teaching correct Latin and sound moral principles. This medieval curriculum aroused the contempt of Petrarch and virtually all later humanists, who attacked this curriculum on the ground that most of its intellectual content, was inadequate and that its moral indoctrination had no relevance in the lives of the citizens of Italian cities. Leonardo Bruni acknowledged that it was Petrarch who had outlined a programme of study

by which the classical ideas would be achieved. It included grammar, rhetoric, poetry, moral philosophy and history. The humanists also insisted upon the mastery of classical Latin and Greek, so that the ancient authors could be studied directly to the exclusion of medieval commentaries.

The humanists taught in a variety of ways. Some founded their own schools where students could study the new curriculum at both elementary and advance levels; some humanists managed to find their way into universities where teaching continued to be dominated by law, medicine and theology and the humanist curriculum had a peripheral presence. The majority achieved their mission by teaching in numerous grammar schools. But formal education was not the only way through which they shaped the minds of their age; literature, art and drama were the other vehicles of transmission of humanist ideas.

1.7 PRINT

The growing influence of humanist schoolmasters in the Latin grammar schools in the Italian towns did much to establish humanism as the major force in Italian culture. Yet another source of humanism's growing dominance was the new art of printing. By 1500, many classical texts had been printed in Italy, mostly in Latin. Printing, apart from standardizing the new editions of the classics also helped in their dissemination. Before printing, most books existed only in a few copies; printing increased their numbers. As a result, the cost of books also fell exposing the students to a new kind of learning instead of depending solely on lectures. A printed book promoting new ideas, could quickly reach hundreds of readers. Ideas, opinions, and information moved more widely and more rapidly than ever before. Surely one reason why the humanistic culture of Italy spread more rapidly across the Alps toward the end of the 15th century is that books were circulating in print.

1.8 SECULAR OPENINGS

One of the most important features of the renaissance is a beginning of a loosening control of religion over human life. In this sense it may be said that renaissance created conditions for the emergence of a secular ideology. A new focus on humanism also fed into this secular opening. But it is important to understand exactly how, and to what extent, this secular opening was created. Although humanism may have challenged the conventional authorities of the academic world, including scholastic theologians, it was not necessarily meant to be a challenge to Christian faith or to Catholic orthodoxy. Petrarch, for example, expressed doubts about his own spiritual beliefs, but he never doubted the truth of Christianity. He also objected to the Italian scholasticism of his time not on the ground that it was too religious but that it was materialistic and at times subversive of the teachings of the church. Salutati did endorse the active secular life for most people and followed that course in his own life, but he still respected the monastic ideals. In the 1390s he and his family were attached to a revivalist movement that was based on traditional forms of devotion. The inherent and general irreligiosity of Renaissance humanism is to a large extent a creation of 19th century historiography.

This is not to imply that men were not interested in worldly things, even when the educated classes as well as plain folk were deeply moved by religious revivalism and devotionism. Certainly renaissance Italians were strongly attracted to material wealth, to power, and to glory. Yet those who preferred to live a happy and successful life were not necessarily irreligious, even though humanism as a culture of the talented urban people in the wealthy Italian town was giving rise to a secular morality.

Fransceco Barbaro, a Venetian humanist of the first generation, wrote a tract concerning marriage which repudiated the traditional ideas of poverty and defended acquisition of wealth as a virtue. Bracciolini Poggio (1380-1459), who was the most celebrated excavator of lost manuscript in Florence, in a tract *On Avarice* defended acquisition of wealth, going to the extent of justifying usury which had always been condemned by orthodox Christianity as an unchristian act, as a legitimate form of business. In addition numerous humanist treatises like for example *On Civil Life* written by Matteo Palmiry upheld the superiority of an active life over one of contemplation. Such opinions did express values of the prosperous classes. This set of values was secular; it regarded marriage, wealth and politics as natural and worthy of pursuit. Yet they were not fundamentally anti-Christian. Their authors were practical moralists who presented a moral code appropriate for the ambitious people, rather than monks, while accepting that there could be a spiritual life beyond one's worldly existence.

The glorification of secular life, however, was more a literary reflection of changing social attitudes than an aspect of classical studies. The classical studies nonetheless contributed to the glorification of human nature, even though humanists were also conscious of its frailties. Lorenzo Valla (1406-1457), who believed that study of history led man to live a life of perfection, in his work, *On Pleasure*, condemned within a profoundly Christian mentality the conventional Christian injunction against pleasure. In some other writings, there was a rejection of the view that wise men should suppress passion, on the ground that such suppression was thoroughly unnatural. The theme of human dignity occupies a central place in such works to the degree that in a number of places, as the one written by Marsilio Ficino, a neo-Platonist thinker of Florence, human nature was endowed with super natural power. Human beings occupying a crucial middle position in the great chain of being was the point of contact between the material world and the world of god. Such sentiments had already informed the writing of the 13th century humanists like Leonardo Da Vinci. Ficino's glorification of human nature takes the pursuit of the human glory beyond the everyday life of the middle class Florentines. Ficino, despite his knowledge in platonic philosophy on which he regularly lectured before students in his platonic academy, was a believer in magic and astrology. Ficino belonged to a circle of some prominent intellectual figures, which included a young prince of Medici family whose name was Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola. Mirandola's most famous work, '*Oration on the dignity of man*', published in 1496 deals with the theme of human dignity by suggesting that of all God's creation man received complete freedom to choose his own place in the Great chain of being. By his own free choice man creates himself either in a spiritual fashion or in the manner of a beast. His view of human nature did not look towards divine grace but celebrated worldly achievement.

The secular morality of the humanists, therefore was grounded in a belief in man's intellectual and moral capacity, a new sense of history, and a highly sophisticated mode of learning. Faith in human capacity came form the realisation that the educated could attain wisdom without the help of priests or intellectuals. The conception was strengthened by a renewed acceptance of the ancient proposition that virtue was knowledge. Behind this lay a belief that knowledge could elevate human beings. These attitudes constituted an idea not just of individualism but also a different ideal of public man, setting out not just a few new assumptions about humanity but also a normative procedure for assessing human actions.

In the 15th and 16th centuries, the scholars, the artists, the architects, the musicians and the writers, all those who shaped the culture of Humanism, began to experience a more general sense that their society had entered upon a new age, an age which

has removed the 'darkness' of the preceding centuries: the 'Renaissance'. While this interpretation of history was an exaggeration of what they were professing, it was yet undeniable that a new vision of man was being created. The 'new man' was considered sovereign in the world and, with his reason and creative powers, was able to refashion the world in accordance with his will.

Increasingly, the *studium humanitatis* and the general cultural climate of the Renaissance produced texts which showed this deepening interest in the essence of what made man more civilized, humane being and which were therefore called *humanist literature*. Texts written on a variety of subjects sought to expose what man was and could do both as an individual and as a member of society. The autobiography, in which a person tells his own, unique story of his life was born in humanist circles. A fine example of this kind of writing was the one written by the famous goldsmith and sculptor, Benvenuto Cellini (1500-71), it was a secular and realistic work which told the story of his life. His readers were persuaded to see the world around him through his eyes, not according to all sorts of idealizations which the Church had earlier imposed on Christian communities.

Thus, Cellini writes of the necessity to record one's deeds, and in the process informs the posterity about his experience and engagement with reality. He writes about the ancient monuments that inspired him, giving an idea of the sense of life and movement in Michelangelo's work, often graphically describing Michelangelo's quarrels with his competitors. Another instance of this genre of writings is Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, in which the author, who was himself an artist, reflected on the achievements of some of his contemporaries in relation to their personalities, in short describing the place of the creative individual in society. His work, as those of other great names of the renaissance like Niccolo Machiavelli was informed by the sentiments that all men were capable of achieving wisdom and glory – a feeling which merged into the new humanist ideas in the intellectual circles. This enabled them to understand afresh the history of texts, in the process laying out the groundwork for classical scholarship of modern times. A consequence of such intellectual interest enabled the humanists to develop a new understanding of man in society.

The moral basis of this ideal was derived from the belief in man's capacity to understand truth on the strength of his reason and worldly sense – an idea that the intellectuals of the renaissance had inherited from classical learning. At one level this human capacity was looked upon as a divine gift; at another level human achievement depended on free choice which implicitly acknowledged a certain self definition of goals and responsibilities by an individual, who was as much capable of sound decisions as of faulty strategies. The description of man incorporated both virtue and vice. The historian Buckhardt wrote about the development of the individual as an aspect of this new consciousness, attributing this to the material life and political culture of the Italian city states. This new consciousness created the ideal of the universal man in the sense of a certain recognition of the individual personality and private achievements. To men like Machiavelli pursuit of glory was a perfectly human virtue.

1.9 REALISM VS. MORALISM

Apart from the pursuit of glory, the self-development of an individual personality through cultivation of 'arts and sciences' emerged as another social ideal allowing a great flowering of creative activity. The cult of artistic personality was the other side of the same coin – an ideal which figures prominently in Vasari's *Lives* who linked artistic excellence to a psychology of achievement. To some extent Vasari had followed

the procedure which had been adopted by the celebrated Roman biographer Plutarch. Plutarch had presented before the humanists a vision of man in society whose achievements were results of their pursuit of glory and entwined with a certain conception of virtue.

The idea was attractive and powerful because of its intense realism. Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527), a Florentine scholar, who, in his famous 1513 tract *The Prince*, describes the role of man in that segment of society which is called politics. Machiavelli, too, was secular and a realist; he showed that the will to power was a dominant motive in human action though often coated with nice words of religious and ethical nature. Upon a closer look it revealed itself as pure self-interest; and more importantly there was nothing wrong about it. Machiavelli's political thought is often interpreted as "the activation, in one sense or another, of a pagan morality, without being contaminated by Christian asceticism". It is also argued that being a realist he suggested a dual morality. What was moral in the public sphere might have been immoral in one's private life. Machiavelli's condonation of cunning on the part of a ruler in the larger interest of the realm, is the well-known example of the dual morality. Machiavelli apparently was interested more in what men did in the public sphere than what they preached. Scholars like Quentin Skinner have painstakingly argued that this was essentially a pre-Christian pagan morality where success was worshiped as virtue. Even though Machiavelli had a gloomy opinion about the way life was governed by fortune, he placed a large premium on the appropriate initiatives by men to overpower fortune. In a sense this was a celebration of man as a self-determining being.

Such a dynamic concept of man which appears with the renaissance, like humanism, cannot be precisely defined. It certainly implied an individualistic outlook and has often been described as 'renaissance individualism'. In a way it fell far short of the individualism of a mature bourgeois society, yet it was bourgeois individualism in its embryo. Probably the ideal of the self-made man which renaissance humanism proclaimed was suggestive of the way the individuals were capable of shaping their own lives rather than the more mundane pursuit of power and money. This ideal was closely tied with certain versatility or many-sidedness of human nature going against the ordered existence that was imposed on man by Christianity and feudalism. The Christian concept of man was founded on the idea that man necessarily had a depraved existence and could be delivered only by the grace of god. At another level he was a member of a feudal order or an estate. The status of an individual either as a member of a feudal order or as a member of the Christian community allowed him an extremely narrow range of freedom. One could of course rebel against the church and could be condemned as a heretic. But even that rebellion was staged in the name of the Christ, always weighed down by the belief in man's essential sinfulness derived from the Biblical notion of the original sin. The renaissance view of man replaced this with the dynamic view in which "the two extreme poles were the greatness of man and also his littleness".

Whether great or small, man began to be looked upon as a relatively autonomous being, 'creating his own destiny, struggling with fate, making himself'. This was no more than an idealised image of actual man, backed up adequately by a pluralism of moral values reversing a value system based on the seven cardinal sins and seven cardinal virtues of medieval Christianity. The pluralism of moral values appears boldly in the way the renaissance intellectuals began to respond very differently to different human propensities. If the striving for power was perfectly acceptable to Machiavelli, to some others, like Thomas More, it was a source of much mischief. To put it simply the renaissance experienced the development of what may be labeled

as realistic ethics, suggesting a situation where values became relative and contradictory calling upon man to look for the appropriate measure to distinguish between good and bad against the background of a significant transformation of social life.

The new ideal of man presumes a larger amount of freedom of action which the medieval Christian community did not allow. The city state was one sphere in which it became increasingly evident that man is the maker of his own world together with others instead of being determined by either Christian or feudal rules of conduct. One of the consequences was the gradual fading away of the old notion of sin. The man of the age began to measure his action by their success or the lack of it. The emergence of such practical atheism was an important aspect of renaissance thinking about man. It also existed as the basis of the rational Christianity or a tolerant religion of reason taking its position against dogmatism and allowing a certain freedom of individuality and choice. Ficino, for example, made a significant attempt to reconcile some of his platonic philosophical ideas with Christian thoughts imbued with the awareness of the creative power of man. The great renaissance figures discovered that the attributes of god in fact were the attributes of man as well. One can perhaps think of an attempt towards the deification of man as one of the wonders of the world. There are many illustrations from renaissance sculptures where human heroes appear as divine figures. Michelangelo's David looks like a Greek god. A man like Ficino not only argued that god created man, but also stressed that once created, man created himself over and over again. Ficino also spoke of the eternal restlessness and dissatisfaction of human mind returning to the same dynamic concept of man which refused to acknowledge any limits like an early modern merchant motivated by boundless opportunities for profits.

This vision of the greatness of man dovetailed with man's essential frailties. Machiavelli himself believed that 'all men are bad and ever ready to display their vicious nature partly because of the fact that human desires are insatiable'. The most powerful motive Machiavelli sees as the incentive for every human action is self-interest. The vileness of human nature therefore had nothing to do with any deliberate design for evil and what Machiavelli described as human nature is synonymous with the general ethical belief of the emerging bourgeois society in which reliance was placed mainly on the unbiased observation of facts and behaviour. This precisely was the ethic of experience which occupies a central place in Machiavelli's definition of human nature when he writes that 'the desire to acquire possession is a very natural and ordinary thing, and when those men do it who can do it successfully they are always praised and not blamed'.

Artists presented this new vision of man as well. For the material remains of classical culture were now sought as assiduously as the surviving ancient texts: the 15th and 16th centuries saw the birth of archaeology. Numerous works of art were discovered in the ruins of ancient Rome, and the finds reinforced the new view of man that had been developing in the previous century. A multitude of paintings and sculptures of 'perfectly' proportioned men and women was the result. A new, ideal-type human being was created, which has captured our imagination through the ages. Early in the 14th century life like frescos of Giotto di Baondone, had brought about significant changes in the artistic visualization of human figure breaking away from the mechanical style of the middle ages. In 1416, the Italian sculptor Donatelo broke new ground with figures like his nude David, anticipating the more well known work on the same subject by Michelangelo in 1503. Leonardo da Vinci painted Monalisa, which has remained as one of the symbols of female beauty in modern times.



“ST. GEORGE,” BRONZE COPY OF A MARBLE STATUE BY DONATELLO, 1415

Besides incorporating the secularist and individualist aspects of humanism, the reborn age or Renaissance should be called realistic as well. In painting, attempts were made to represent everything as it appeared. Though not totally absent in the previous ages, one can certainly maintain that for many centuries realism had been relatively unimportant. Already in the 14th and 15th centuries, during the first phases of humanist culture, painters increasingly attempted to reproduce reality, casting off preconceived ideas about what was morally or religiously acceptable. Increasingly, what the eye could measure or observe was painted incorporating distance, depth and colour in order to make the painting more realistic. In sculpture too people were individualized, with recognizable faces, whereas the art of the preceding centuries had been a component of an architectural background - reliefs more than free-standing figures; in the changed context sculpted images presented man according to his newly-won vision of himself as an independent and free personality, displaying a certain pride in the beauty of the body, both the male and, in view of the conventions of the preceding age, the female too.



“MONA LISA,” OIL PAINTING BY LEONARDO DA VINCI, 1503-06

Whereas woman for a long time had been ‘stereotyped due to the limits imposed upon her role by the society, she now seemed to regain some stature as an individual person, in whose body the perfection of God’s creation was made as visible as in the male’. This was the case even when paintings and sculptures served religious purposes, and were composed in such a way that they aroused an appropriate devotional reaction in the viewers, like the Madonna and her child by the Italian painter Raphael or the huge frescos, mosaics and statues that adorned walls and ceilings and cupolas in the Church.



“THE GRAND-DUKE’S MADONNA,” OIL PAINTING BY RAPHAEL, 1505

Inevitably, trade and travel, military conquest and diplomatic contacts linked the new culture of the Italian towns and courts with the world beyond. The new culture was admired and imitated all over Europe although, of course, by the better educated and the wealthy, only. For both south and north of the Alps, Humanism and the Renaissance were elite phenomena. Only very few of the new ideas and thoughts filtered down to the ordinary man who, after all, could not read or write the polite language, lacking, as the cultivated mind of the age saw it, the ability to acquire virtue and wisdom.

Yet in the 15th and early 16th centuries, the educational institutions in northern Europe produced many humanists. Like their Italian colleagues, they too, began to focus on the classical Greek and Roman texts along with the holy books of the Christians. Desiderius Erasmus, one of the most famous of these north European humanists, in a series of treatises, tried to lay down the rules for an educational system that despite its Christian foundation, came to be animated by the critical spirit of Humanism. Indeed, one should not forget that, contrary to what often has been suggested, most people living the culture of Renaissance and humanism did not display a ‘heathenish’, pagan spirit but remained firmly tied to a view of man and the world as, essentially, redeemable only by a Christian God.

By the beginning of the 16th century humanist values had begun to refashion the intellectual life of northern Europe. John Colet and Sir Thomas More popularised them in England, Jacques’s Lefevre’d Etaples and Guillaume Bude in France, Conrad Celtis and Hohann Reuchulin in Germany and Erasmus in Holland were the leading humanists in early 16th century Europe. But unlike Italy, where professionals dominated the humanist movement and gave it a secular character –even atheist in some cases – in European humanism the leading protagonists were mostly members

of the clerical order. Their reassessment of Christian theology set the stage for the Reformation by calling upon Christians to practice religion in the way it had been stated in the ancient texts of the Christian religion, by discarding unnecessary and unpalatable rituals, condemned as later accretions to a simple religion. With the advent of the Reformation, the humanist 'Self Congratulation on living in a golden age' was eclipsed by theological battles of the time. 'The waning of the Renaissance' had begun. Yet the new view of man as a free rational agent was a principle to which the post-Renaissance philosophy returned over and over again, inspired by the belief in a distant god who created man but allowed him complete freedom to live his life freely, in pursuit of happiness 'here and now'.

1.10 SUMMARY

This unit has tried to explain to you the different ways in which the Renaissance created the condition for the making of a new world. It starts by explaining that significant commercial, socio-cultural and literary developments in Europe during the 13th-15th centuries came to be viewed and conceptualized *as* Renaissance only in the 19th century. The Renaissance was marked by the emergence of a new culture with roots in Italian humanism. This culture was the product of a set of unique social, political and economic conditions prevalent in parts of Europe from the late 11th century onwards. These conditions were most conspicuous in the northern part of present-day Italy with the growth of commerce and cities. These developments brought about an important shift in the centres of political power from the clerics (men associated with the Christian Church) and feudal nobles to wealthy urban merchants. At the same time there was also a tendency towards a consolidation of political power. These crucial developments along with the emergence of new social groups (lawyers and notaries), new ideologies (humanism and tendencies towards secularism) and new technologies (print) cumulatively transformed the socio-cultural and political landscape of Europe. These developments also created new forces which, in the centuries to follow, worked towards a greater cohesion and integration of the world.

1.11 GLOSSARY

- Euro-centric Vision** : a way of looking at history and the world that places Europe and its history at the centre.
- Oligarchies** : a small group of people in control of state power in the society. This term was generally used for the rulers of the city-states in medieval Europe.
- Pagan** : used here to refer to small religious tradition that existed outside, and prior to, the dominant world religious traditions.
- Antiquity** : used here in the sense of a distant past prior to the middle ages in the history of Europe.
- Usury** : the practice of money lending at a high rate of interest.
- Theology** : used here in the sense of the study of god and religious subjects.

UNIT 2 THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Structure

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 The Idea of Progress
- 2.3 Science and Knowledge
- 2.4 Science Versus Religion
- 2.5 Of Man and Society
- 2.6 Summary

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Eighteenth century Europe witnessed very wide sweeping changes in all spheres of life. Although these changes did not occur at the same time or at the same pace in all countries, they structured a distinct historical era – one that laid the foundations of the modern age. The Enlightenment or the Age of Reason, as it came to be known subsequently, marked a sharp break from the past. Even though its anti-clericalism echoed the sentiments of the Renaissance and the Reformation it neither endorsed the paganism of the former nor did it share the faith of the latter. It clearly identified two enemies: religion and hierarchy, and attempted to displace the centrality accorded to both in social and political life. The Enlightenment men were not irreligious or atheists but they were bitterly opposed to and intolerant of the institutions of Christianity and they sought to challenge them by articulating a conception of man, history and nature that relied heavily upon the world-view expressed by the new discoveries in the natural sciences. At the most general level, the Enlightenment used the scientific method of enquiry to launch a systematic attack on tradition *per se*. They questioned blind obedience to authority, whether that of the priest or the ruler. Nothing was any longer sacred and beyond critical scrutiny. The new social and political order that the Enlightenment thinkers aspired for expressed the optimism that came with the advancement of material and scientific knowledge. They strongly believed that human beings were in a position to create a world in which freedom, liberty and happiness will prevail over all else. Even though this vision was very widely shared it was most clearly evident in the writings of Voltaire, Diderot, d’Alembert and Condorcet in France, Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith and David Hume in Scotland, Christian Wolff and Immanuel Kant in Germany and marchese di Baccaria in Italy. The writings of these theorists best express the spirit of the Enlightenment and its influence upon the modern age. In this Unit we are going to discuss some of the essential features of the enlightenment.

2.2 THE IDEA OF PROGRESS

The idea that is constitutive of the Enlightenment and central to this historical epoch is the idea of progress. Through it the Enlightenment expressed the twin belief that – a) the present was better and more advanced than the past, and b) this advancement has resulted in the happiness of man. Both these claims about progress in history were based on the assessment of the changes that were taking place around them. The scientific discoveries of Copernicus, Kepler and Newton and their applications by Galileo led them to believe that human beings could fully understand the functioning of the universe and gain an unprecedented degree of control over their natural and

physical environment. This sentiment was further reinforced by the changes that were taking place in the traditional organization of life. The incorporation of new technologies in the field of agriculture and in the manufacturing of goods had meant significant increase in the sphere of production. Coupled with improved communications, development of roads, canals, and the growth in internal and foreign trade, they believed they were standing on the threshold of a new era: an era that would be marked by abundance, perfectibility of man and the institutions of society. At the most general level there was a feeling that we are now moving towards a condition in which, to quote Gibbons, 'all inhabitants of the planet would enjoy a perfectly happy existence'.

Theorists of the Enlightenment were convinced of the achievements and superiority of their age. They saw in history a movement from the dark ages to the civilized present. This did not mean that human history was slowly but steadily moving in one direction or that every stage marked an improvement over the previous one. While pointing to progress in history they were primarily saying that there was a marked improvement in the quality of life in the present era. More specifically, the *Philosophes* (philosophers who espoused this vision in France) were claiming that there has been a tangible and undeniable advancement in every sphere of life since the Reformation. For Chastellux, flourishing agriculture, trade and industry, the rise in population and the growth in knowledge were all indicators of the increase in felicity. The latter meant that their age was a much happier one. It was marked by peace, liberty and abundance. It was, to use Kant's words, the best of all possible worlds.

Unlike many of his contemporaries Kant was however of the view that happiness was not the main issue. It was not simply a question of increase or decrease in the levels of happiness because civilization, even in its most perfect form, could not bring about the happiness of men. Hence it was not to be judged in those terms. Civilization, according to Kant, provided a setting in which men can test and prove their freedom. The present merited a special place in so far as it had created conditions in which men can encounter the most important category of reason, namely, freedom.

The belief that man had advanced from the 'barbarous rusticity' to the 'politeness of our age' was characteristic of the Enlightenment. Indeed, this reading of the past and the present marked a sharp break from the earlier conceptions of history. The Greeks, for instance, saw history as a cyclical process comprising of periods of glory followed by periods of decline and degeneration. The Middle Ages, under the influence of Christianity, had little place for mundane history. Nothing in real history mattered because hope and happiness lay in the other-world. Man's fall from grace had meant the loss of idyllic existence. Consequently, for them, it was only through redemption that men could hope to improve their present condition. The Renaissance broke away from this Christian reading of history but it had a pessimistic view of human nature. The Renaissance men believed that the achievements of antiquity, in particular, of Greek and Roman civilization, were unreachable. They embodied the highest achievements of humankind that could not be surpassed. The Enlightenment, in sharp contrast to all this, focused on the 'here' and 'now' and saw in it unprecedented growth, accompanied by moral and intellectual liberation of man. Johnson is reported to have said, "I am always angry when I hear ancient times being praised at the expense of modern times. There is now a great deal more learning in the world than there was formerly; for it is universally diffused". The Scottish philosopher Dugald Stewart was even more unequivocal in affirming the progress in the present world. He argued that the increase in commerce had "led to the diffusion of wealth and 'a more equal diffusion of freedom and happiness', than had ever existed before". Technological innovations that accompanied capitalism

meant that men were “released from the bondage of mechanical labour and...free to cultivate the mind”. The present was thus seen as the age of progress where there was unprecedented advance in every sphere of life.

While the present was seen as ‘spreading the light’ of reason, the Enlightenment designated the past as ‘primitive’ and ‘barbaric’. It was, in its view, riddled with superstition and dogma, and guided by religion and blind obedience to authority. Above all, it was marked by the absence of individual freedom. The present, by comparison, was designated as ‘civilized’ and ‘enlightened’: an era in which reason was expected to prevail. The theorists of Enlightenment believed that there were primarily two obstacles to progress – wars and religion. Both these could be, indeed they needed to be, destroyed by reason. Once that was done then the world would be a better place. It would, in the words of Condorcet, move from bondage to ultimate perfection of freedom and reason.

Reason was, in a sense, the key to the earthly utopia. It was an instrument that individuals could use not only to interrogate all received forms of knowledge but also to lead a virtuous, rational and happy life. For the *Philosophes*, reason was an ally of experience. It embodied a non-authoritarian source of knowledge that can be tested and proved. In the Preface to *The System of Nature*, Holbach wrote: “[R]eason with its faithful guide experience must attack in their entrenchments those prejudices of which the human race has been too long the victim.... Let us try to inspire man with courage, with respect for his reason, with an indistinguishable love for truth, to the end that he may learn to consult his experience, and no longer be the dupe of an imagination led astray by authority...”. Theorists, such as Holbach, believed that reason could liberate men from the oppressive power exercised by religion and, at the same time, provide them knowledge of the truth. Men had therefore to be taught to use reason and to act in accordance with its potentialities. This was the main Enlightenment project.

2.3 SCIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE

The growth in scientific knowledge had given the Enlightenment grounds for being optimistic about the present and the future. Its spokesmen asserted with conviction that civilization was moving in the right direction and that it must continue to move in that direction. The apparent progress in material and social life also gave them a sense of grandeur. They felt that there were no limits on what human beings could know and accomplish. The development of human faculties and the advance that had been made by the sciences and by civilization as a whole, gave them enough reason to assert that nature had placed no limits on our hopes. The belief that human beings could achieve whatever they set out to do was closely linked to the Enlightenment idea of progress. Progress indicated the increasing ability of individuals to control their natural and social environment. According to the Enlightenment thinkers, the visible improvement in human life was the result of active and effective application of reason for controlling physical and social environment. *Vice-versa*, the success that their generation had in controlling their environment and harnessing the forces of nature for the betterment of humankind affirmed the belief that scientific application of reason would lead to the liberation of man. It could create an ideal world in which individuals could strive to combine the virtues of knowledge with liberty.

Three points need to be emphasized here. First, the Enlightenment thinkers linked knowledge with the natural sciences. The method of systematic observation, experimentation and critical inquiry used in the physical sciences was, in their view,

the only viable basis of arriving at the truth. Knowledge must be demonstrable. It must be backed by proof that is accessible through reason and the faculties of the human mind. Based on this conception of knowledge, the Enlightenment posited a dichotomy between metaphysical speculation and knowledge. The Middle ages, under the influence of Christianity, had assumed that the world created by God could not be known by human beings. It was, by definition, inaccessible to human reason. The truth about man and the universe could only be 'revealed', and hence, known through the holy scriptures. "Where the light of reason does not shine, the lamp of faith supplies illumination". This was the avowed belief of the Middle Ages. The Enlightenment rejected this view and maintained that things that could not be known by the application of reason and systematic observation were chimerical. What could not be known must not even be sought for it constitutes the realm of the metaphysical, if not the non-sensical.

Second, the Enlightenment began with the view shared by the leading scientists of their times: namely, that the secrets of the universe could be apprehended completely by man. These theorists were convinced both of the intelligibility of the universe and of the ability of individuals to understand it completely. They believed that while discussing nature we ought to begin not with the authority of the scriptures but with sensible experiments and demonstrations. In *Les Bijoux Indiscrets*, Diderot compared the method of experimentation to a giant who could in one blow destroy the grand systems created by metaphysics and idle speculation. The latter were simply buildings without foundations so they could easily be knocked down by the power of scientific reason.

Third, science had provided a new and fairly different picture of man and the universe. Instead of positing a world of things that are ordered by their ideal nature or by some prior purpose, it presented nature as a self-regulating system of laws. The Enlightenment theorists embraced this world-view and like their counterparts in the natural sciences they aimed to discover laws that govern society and human nature. Identifying laws and establishing patterns entailed the study of cause and effect relationships. It required the search for an antecedent event that is necessary and sufficient for explaining an occurrence. The *Philosophes* abandoned the search for final causes and focussed instead on the examination of an efficient cause; that is, they tried to specify an antecedent event whose presence is necessary for the occurrence of a given phenomenon and whose absence would imply the non-occurrence of that phenomenon.

The study of cause-and-effect relationships was central to the Enlightenment conception of science. According to Francesco Algarotti "things are concealed from us as though by a heavy fog especially those things that are most often before our eyes. Nature has hidden from us the primary and elementary effects almost as thoroughly, I should say, as she has hidden the causes themselves. Thus, if we cannot find the order of mutual dependence of all parts of the universe, nor discover first causes, perhaps...you will think it no small achievement to show the relationship among effects that appear to be very different, reducing them to a common principle, and to extract by observation from particular phenomenon the general laws which nature follows by which she governs the universe". This conception of scientific enquiry marked a sharp departure from the Aristotelian world-view that had dominated the study of nature before this. In place of using observation as a tool for categorizing and classifying things, it now urged the discovery of causes in an attempt to explain 'why' certain things happen and also to predict the occurrence of such events in the future. Discovery of causes, in other words, was a means of increasing man's control over his environment – both natural and social.

While endorsing this conception of science the *Philosophes* were nonetheless aware that knowledge would have to be built from small foundations. Yet, they were firm in their belief that the little that we had learnt by method of observation and causal analysis had vastly extended our knowledge; and, that it alone could reveal to us the truth about the world. “[T]hanks to observations with the microscope our vision has penetrated into the deepest recesses of bodies, and that by observations with the telescope it has scanned the breadth of the heavens to enrich natural history and astronomy with a thousand wonderful discoveries. Only through the study of observations has Chemistry been perfected so that it is now succeeding in analyzing bodies into their component elements and is on the verge of being able to put them together again. Only in this way has nautical sciences made such progress that now we can speed from one hemisphere to the other in great safety. It is undeniable ... that in Medicine, where hypothetical systems are dangerous, only sober reason and ... passionate observation can bring improvement and development. What then remains for us? Nothing but the responsibility to observe ourselves attentively....” for this alone will lead our “mind towards truth”.

Working with this conception of knowledge the Enlightenment thinkers attempted to observe and systematically explain the world around them and the society in which they lived. They focussed on the observable and attempted to understand the complexities of individual and national character by relating them to other physical and social elements that are given to empirical investigation. Montesquieu examined the connections between political and civil laws of a country and its physical character – the climate, temperature and other demographic configurations. Adam Ferguson and David Hume undertook a scientific analysis of the mind by examining empirically the process of socialization. The manner by which individuals internalize moral, social and intellectual ideas and come to acquire a notion of virtue and propriety was a subject that received their attention. Even as they studied the process of ‘moral education’ they believed that men of reason could only accept data that is given in observation. Hence, almost all of them focused on the empirical manifestations of objects and in their work they tried to build relationships between observable dimensions of different phenomena. Through systematic observation of concrete particulars, these philosophers sought to arrive at the general principles and laws by which nature and society are governed.

Theorists of Enlightenment believed that the world was like a machine, controlled by and functioning in accordance with certain general laws. Consequently, by discovering these underlying laws they hoped to understand the mysteries of the universe and gain control over them. Knowledge was intended to serve, what Habermas calls, a technical interest. Its purpose was to enable individuals to gain greater control over their environment so that they can protect themselves against the ravages of natural forces and, at the same time, harness the energies of nature in a way that is advantageous to humankind.

To the Enlightenment mind, increasing degree of control over physical and social world, and the success of technological applications indicated progress and truth. Indeed, they signified scientific knowledge and validated its claim to truth. Although technical success was favoured for the sake of improving human condition, what was desired above all was freedom and happiness. It was believed that the ability to explain and control natural and social environment would enable individuals to construct a world in which these twin goals can be realized. To quote Hume, “happiness was the end to which all human life was directed and as society provides men with these ideas which made life intelligible and happiness possible, men can find happiness in society”. Hume was not alone in claiming this. Most of his

contemporaries maintained that expanding knowledge of the laws of the universe would enable humankind to fashion their lives and create a perfect society. At the very least, it will give men the satisfaction of knowing that they have the correct methods of enquiry, consequently they will never 'relapse into barbarism'.

What needs to be reiterated here is that the Enlightenment thinkers did not simply associate knowledge with science, they wanted to apply the "experimental method" used in the physical sciences to the study of society. Like the natural scientists they searched for laws of human nature and laws of social development. Montesquieu maintained that "[E]verything which exists has its laws: the Diety has its laws, the material world its laws, the spiritual beings of a higher order than man their laws, the beasts their laws, and man his own laws. . . . As a physical being, man is governed by invariable laws in the same way as other bodies". However, as an intelligent being he continuously violates those laws and creates new ones. With this basic understanding he analyzed two kinds of laws: those that are common to all men and all societies, and those that are peculiar to a society. While both were to be analyzed and discovered, the former was regarded to be particularly important. In fact, by identifying and enumerating the qualities that are common to all men they hoped to determine those customs and institutions which were in harmony with the universal natural order and sort those that did not have a place in that order. Discovering the constant and universal principles of human nature was thus of the utmost importance, especially for the task of reconstructing a better and more perfect world.

2.4 SCIENCE VERSUS RELIGION

Science was, for the Enlightenment, more than a method of enquiry. It was synonymous with a rationalist orientation. In the attempt to create conditions in which men would be free to explore their potentialities to the fullest, the theorists of Enlightenment launched a thorough critique of the institutions of Christianity and, with it, of existing religions and sects. Almost all of them, from Voltaire to Holbach, wrote about the harmful effects of religion over individual and social life. Voltaire pointed to the violence engendered in the name of religion. "It is asked why, out of the five hundred sects, there have scarcely been any who have not spilled blood?" And why "there is scarce any city or borough in Europe, where blood has not been spilled for religious quarrels". He noted further, "I say that the human species has been perceptibly diminished because women and girls were massacred as well as men. . . . In fine, I say, that so far from forgetting these abominable times, we should frequently take a view of them, to inspire an eternal horror for them; and that it is for our age to make reparation by toleration, for this long collection of crimes, which has taken place through the want of toleration, during sixteen barbarous centuries".

The Enlightenment critique of religion stemmed from the understanding that religion has been a source of oppression in history. It was the basis of intolerance and hatred among men. It promoted inequality and 'unfreedom' of man. "It is as a citizen that I attack religion, because it seems to me harmful to the happiness of the state, hostile to the mind of man, and contrary to sound morality", wrote an Enlightenment thinker. What was perhaps equally important for the Enlightenment was the role that religion played in the Medieval Ages. Under the hegemony of the Established and Unified Roman Catholic Church men were expected to renounce reason and place their faith instead in revealed truth. Religious authorities spoke of the limits of human reason and asked individuals to listen passively to the voice of tradition as communicated by the Church. Theorists of Enlightenment were particularly critical of this world-view. The attempt to propound a doctrine that could not be questioned by men and that gave men a fixed view of the world and their role in it was, in their

view, inimical to reason. “Instead of morality the Christian is taught the miraculous fables and inconceivable dogmas of a religion thoroughly hostile to right reason. From his very step in his studies he is taught to distrust the evidence of his senses, to subdue his reason...and to rely blindly on the authority of his master”.

The Enlightenment thinkers attacked the Church for promoting superstition and ignorance. On the one hand, its doctrine was anchored in miracles and mysteries that were irreconcilable with reason, and, on the other, it was intolerant of true knowledge. This perception of religious institutions and religion was reinforced by the hostile attitude of the Church towards the new thinking that came with the Copernican Revolution. The persecution of the scientists and the philosophers for their beliefs led Voltaire to comment that “those who persecute a philosopher under the pretext that his opinions may be dangerous to the public are as absurd as those who are afraid that the study of algebra will raise the price of bread in the market; one must pity a thinking being who errs”. It is to break free of a “frantic and horrible” persecutor that the Enlightenment thinkers derided the Church and all existing religion.

Anti-clericalism and rejection of existing religions does not however imply that the *Philosophes* were atheists. Indeed many of them provided rational grounds for accepting the presence of a supreme creator. Diderot went a step forward. He rejected atheism. To quote him: “Atheism leaves honesty unsupported; it does worse, indirectly it leads to depravity”. Thus, while their critique of Christianity led them to question the belief that the world was created in seven days, they nevertheless believed that the world was a “beautifully crafted machine” and it must have been designed by a Supreme Being according to some rational plan. Belief in a creator did not however imply an acceptance of a religious orientation or the faith that a religion embodies. Voltaire wrote, “He who recognizes only a creating God, he who views in God only a Being infinitely powerful, and who sees in His creatures only beautiful machines, is not religious towards Him any more than a European, admiring the King of China, would thereby profess allegiance to that prince. But he who thinks that God had deigned to place a relation between Himself and mankind; that He has made him free, capable of good and evil; that He has given all of them the good sense which is the instinct of man, and on which the law of nature is founded; such a one undoubtedly has a religion, and a much better religion than all those sects....”.

While pointing to the injustices perpetrated by existing religions, theorists of the Enlightenment presented a new ‘natural religion’ – Deism – that did away with rituals and supernatural elements and anchored itself in the principles of tolerance and equality of all persons. Explaining the distinctiveness of a person who affirms this new faith Voltaire writes, “It is he who says to God: ‘I adore and serve you’; it is he who says to the Turk, to the Chinese, the Indian, and the Russian: ‘I love you’”. He doubts, perhaps, that Mahomet [Mohammad] made a journey to the moon and put half of it in his pocket; he does not wish that after his death his wife should burn herself from devotion; he is sometimes tempted not to believe in the story of the eleven thousand virgins, and that of St. Amable, whose hat and gloves were carried by a ray of the sun from Auvergne as far as Rome. But for all that he is a just man. Noah would have placed him in his ark, Numa Pompilius in his councils; he would have ascended the car of Zoroaster; he would have talked philosophy with the Platos, the Aristippuses, the Ciceros....”. Philosophers like Voltaire cast the true believer of this new religion in their own image.

Deism expressed the beliefs and the vision of the *Philosophes*, and through it they articulated their belief that there is a Supreme Being, that all creatures in the world were His creations and they deserve to be treated with kindness and without cruelty.

The natural religion was thus a religion of humanity. It was expected not to be a source of derision and hatred among men, instead it was to incorporate true principles of human nature and a universal system of morality that arises from the latter. Although tolerance was central to the new religion, the *Philosophes* denounced all those creeds of Christianity that claimed a right to destroy all those that differed from them. These theorists showed no signs of tolerance towards those who perpetuated religious intolerance. Indeed their main aim was to destroy all traces of religious fanaticism that were visible in their world.

2.5 OF MAN AND SOCIETY

The Enlightenment demolished the Heavenly City of St. Augustine but they never lost faith in the ability of human beings to construct a new society in which peace, liberty and abundance would prevail. While they denied the possibility of miracles happening, they continued to believe in the perfectibility of the human species. With complete confidence in rationalist will and a humanist pride in the capacity of human beings to overcome all hurdles they hoped to construct a world in which there will be a steady increase in felicity. They were aware that this was a difficult task. “To prolong life, clear the roads of assassins, keep men from starving and give them hope of enjoying the fruits of their labour” would, they knew, require more than just political stability. It would need a moral and intellectual revolution and it was this that the *Philosophes* hoped to accomplish through their writings. Their belief in scientific rationality and the accompanying critique of the institutions of the Church and existing forms of religion, were essential components of this bigger agenda of social and cultural revolution.

The *Philosophes* saw scientific knowledge as power, consequently, those who tried to challenge it were identified as men who wished to keep everyone in ignorance. They were seen as the ‘enemies’ of humankind. However, the Enlightenment did not merely target religious institutions. Anti-clericalism may have been the predominant sentiment but it was blind obedience to authority *per se* that they were most critical of. Whether the authority was that of the priest or the ruler, tradition or custom, each was subject to the same critical gaze. To put it in another way, fighting the dogmatism of religion and its institutional structures was an important pillar in their struggle for freedom but it was by no means the only one. Challenge to religious authority was supplemented by a parallel attack on the absolutist monarchies that existed all over Europe in the post-reformation period. Writing in defense of the liberty of the individual, Diderot asserted that “no man has received from nature the right to command others.... Liberty is a gift from heaven, and every person of the same species has the right to enjoy as much liberty as he enjoys reason”.

Theorists of Enlightenment cherished liberty and freedom. For them, these were the highest and the most cherished values, and they were critical of despotism for not sufficiently safeguarding these values. Liberty required, on the one hand, a government in which one has the freedom to depose a tyrannical ruler and, on the other, the option to elect people whom one is expected to obey and be governed by. A democratic regime based on the principle of popular sovereignty followed from their defence of liberty. Although many of them were skeptical of the possibility of establishing a popular, democratic government, they maintained that power that comes from the “consent of the people” alone is legitimate, and advantageous to society. Montesquieu added another dimension to the discussion on political liberty. He maintained that liberty entails two elements: 1) a moderate government and 2) not being compelled to do anything other than what one should do. Experience shows that individuals are easily tempted to misuse their power for personal ends.

It is therefore essential to place limitations upon the exercise of power. Montesquieu spoke of the need to curb the power of each wing of the government. “When legislative power is united with the executive power in a single person, or in a single body of the magistracy, there is no liberty, because one can fear that the same monarch or senate that makes tyrannical laws will enforce them tyrannically. Nor is there liberty if the power of judging is not separated from the legislative and from executive power. If it were joined to legislative power, the power over the life and liberty of the citizens would be arbitrary, for the judge would be legislator. If it were joined to executive power, the judge could have the force of an oppressor. All would be lost if the same man, or the same body of leading men or of the nobility or of the people, exercised all these powers, to make the laws, to carry out public decisions and to judge crimes or disputes among individuals....”.

A government in which the three aspects of government – namely, formulation of laws, execution of laws and arbitration or interpretation of laws – are separated and each wing checks the powers of the other is only one dimension of a system committed to protecting the liberty of its citizens. It had to be supplemented by the privilege of being governed by one’s own laws or by people of one’s choice. A democratic government was regarded to be important for giving power to the individual. Most Enlightenment theorists recognized that power to the people may not translate into freedom of the people. The latter entailed “doing what one should want to, and in not being compelled to do what one should not want to”.

Liberty did not however imply the freedom to follow one’s whims or to do that which is not permitted by law. Almost all of them accepted the importance of law. For them, obeying laws was a necessary condition of protecting liberty. If individuals were to follow their own impulse by infringing the law then there would only be anarchy in society. Political liberty could exist only when individual citizens acknowledge the centrality of law and subject themselves to its command. Indeed, the presence of political and civil laws was seen as a continuous reminder to the individual of his duty to his fellow citizens. Some theorists of Enlightenment even represented law as an embodiment of reason. For them laws place the necessary restraint upon passions of individuals to violate the natural order and, at the same time, they induce men to channel their sentiments in a direction that facilitates social and civil life in the world. Individuals, in their view, can enjoy liberty only when public safety is ensured and crimes of all kinds are reduced, if not eliminated. It was regarded to be the task of the legislature to ensure this; in particular, to ensure that crime of all kinds becomes less frequent, even if that means using powerful means at its disposal to prevent disorder in society.

The point that needs to be emphasized here is that the Enlightenment men accepted that individuals tend overwhelmingly to pursue their own interest and this can be a cause of political disorder. Laws were, for this reason, considered necessary to place certain restraint upon unchecked pursuit of one’s own private interest. However, they felt that it was equally important to see that punishments for defying the law are in proportion to the evil produced by the act. Marcese di Baccaria in fact spoke of the need to devise a universal scale for measuring crime and for determining the punishment proportionate for it. If we could have a universal scale of this kind, Baccaria believed, it would be possible to measure the degree of liberty and slavery, humanity and cruelty that exists in different nations. What must also be mentioned here is that the Enlightenment was concerned not only with the excesses perpetrated by despotic regimes but also by the inhumanity of man to man, and it was the latter that they hoped to minimize. Reforming the system of government and the practices incorporated in existing laws was but a means to realize this end. In other words,

civility for the Enlightenment meant something more than rule of law. Obeying laws was necessary but what was equally necessary was that laws reflect the principle of general reason. Indeed, obedience was emphasized because laws were supposed to create conditions in which individual liberty is protected and enhanced.

The discourse on crime and punishment formed a part of the Enlightenment's larger concern for creating a free and enlightened society. Just as the natural scientists hoped to achieve greater control over the physical elements through their knowledge, the social scientists believed that their understanding of the laws of human nature and society would enable them to eliminate evil and create a better world. Theorists of Enlightenment were full of optimism in this regard. They felt that all limitations could be overcome and a free world could be created. In part this optimism was fostered by the new forms of production introduced by the capitalist economy and the technological innovations spurred by the growth of scientific knowledge.

The Enlightenment thinkers favoured freedom of enterprise. Adam Smith argued that even though individuals seek this freedom to further their own private gain, nevertheless the pursuit of self-interest is likely to promote the interest of society as a whole. Freedom of enterprise would lead to growth in production, more employment opportunities, and this would benefit all citizens. Although these philosophers defended capitalist enterprise and argued that a life of virtue did not entail forsaking commercial society, they created space for themselves away from the world of business, politics and fashion. In the salons, coffee-houses and taverns of the emerging modern cities they would meet, discuss and express opinions that would be among the most influential ideas of their times. More importantly, men, and sometimes even women, would meet as friends and as equals. Addison and Steele saw coffee-house conversation as a form of social interaction that "taught men tolerance, moderation and the pleasure of consensus. It also taught them to look at their own behaviour with a critical detachment which was difficult to acquire in public life". The Enlightenment theorists placed considerable stress on the spirit of critique. For them virtue lay in teaching ourselves to be critical of our beliefs and in learning how to review our opinions in the light of experience. Cultivating skeptical habits of mind would, according to Hume, help to release men from the bondage of myth and prejudice which corrupts the mind and generates enthusiasm that can stand in the way of human happiness.

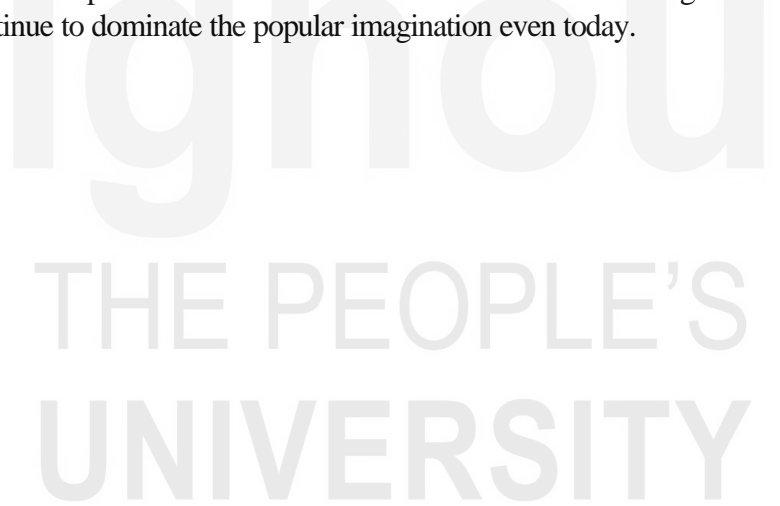
Education was to play an important role in this regard. The Enlightenment had tremendous faith in the power of human beings brought up rationally from infancy to achieve unlimited progress. They also entrusted the state with the responsibility of changing the structure of laws and institutions, and undertaking the work of reform. Surrounded by a world that was full of promise for a better tomorrow, the Enlightenment thinkers wished to instill the spirit of tolerance and minimize crime and torture. They were of course aware that knowledge about human nature and society would not automatically create virtue, but they believed that it could certainly shed light upon ignorance and warn us against the misuse of power.

2.6 SUMMARY

The ideas of the Enlightenment, in particular, its faith in scientific method of investigation, its optimism that the new era of scientific-technological advancement and industrialization would lead to a world filled with happiness for all and its attempts to create a social order based on the principles of human reason, tolerance and equality, effected a profound social and intellectual revolution. Although votaries of Enlightenment had little political clout in the first half of the 18th century, theirs was

perhaps the most popular voice by the end of that century. Certainly it was the most effective in determining what constitutes a 'modern' outlook. The distinction that they posited between tradition and modernity, religion and science, their reliance on reform and state initiatives for re-structuring society provided a model of development that would be endorsed not only in the advanced industrialized societies but also in the colonized world. Indeed, all over the world Enlightenment was to become synonymous with modernity.

The influence of Enlightenment is evident as much in the modernization theories that dominated the study of societies in the mid-twentieth century as it is in the social reform movements of the nineteenth century in India. The former invoked Enlightenment's understanding of the past and present, tradition and modernity to rank societies and to construct a model of a modern, democratic polity. The latter drew upon the humanist liberalism of the Enlightenment and attempted to bring religion and custom in line with the principles of human reason. They subjected traditional practices to critical scrutiny and struggled to change those that violated the fundamental principles of equality and tolerance. So strong was the impact of the Enlightenment upon these reformers that they welcomed the new ideas that came with the British rule and believed that when they ask for self-government it would be granted to them. Although the exploitative nature of the colonial rule is readily acknowledged today, the Enlightenment conception of individual and its faith in scientific knowledge and free enterprise continue to dominate the popular imagination even today.



UNIT 3 CRITIQUES OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Structure

- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 The Romantics
- 3.3 Nietzsche
- 3.4 Karl Marx
- 3.5 Marcuse and the Frankfurt School
- 3.6 Critics of Science
- 3.7 Postmodernism
- 3.8 Summary

3.1 INTRODUCTION

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.

3.2 THE ROMANTICS

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.

3.3 NIETZSCHE

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.

3.4 KARL MARX

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.

3.5 MARCUSE AND THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

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.

3.6 CRITICS OF SCIENCE

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.

3.7 POSTMODERNISM

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.

3.8 SUMMARY

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”.

SOME EXERCISES FOR THIS BLOCK

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?

SUGGESTED READINGS FOR THIS BLOCK

(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).

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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.

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