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Romanticism and the Modern World: Re-Examining Emotion and Justice in Enlightenment Ideals

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Theme: History

"We are slipping back from the age of reason into the mire of mystery, into a world of gods and devils, ghouls and angels. The difference this time is that we have chosen ignorance over knowledge, vapidity over insight, folly over realism. Consequently, we only have ourselves to blame when the rich and powerful take advantage of us." – Andrew Davenport

Introduction

Why do we need to talk about Romanticism? What is Romanticism? And how does it affect us in the 21st century? The fact is that we are so immersed in Romanticism now that we cannot see the proverbial wood for the haunted-looking trees. Romanticism has so saturated our culture that we need to stand back and remind ourselves what it is, and examine how it has seeped into our thinking processes to the extent that we are not even aware of its presence anymore. Or why this is a problem. The Romanticist influence of intense emotion makes up a large part of modern culture, for example, in much pop music, cinema, TV and literature, e.g. genres such as Superheroes, Fantasy, Horror, Magical realism, Saga, Westerns. I will look at the origins of Romanticism, and its negative influence on culture and politics. I will show how Enlightenment ideas originally emerged in opposition to an absolute monarchy and the fixed dogmas of the Church and led to the formation of a working class ideology and culture of resistance.

Romanticism and the modern world

> "The whole exuberance, anarchy and violence of modern art … its unrestrained, unsparing exhibitionism, is derived from [Romanticism]. And this subjective, egocentric attitude has become so much a matter of course for us … that we find it impossible to reproduce even an abstract train of thought without talking about our own feelings." Arnold Hauser

Romanticism arose out of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century as a reaction to what was perceived as a rationalisation of life to the point of being anti-nature. The Romantics were against the Industrial Revolution, universalism and empiricism, emphasising instead heroic individualists and artists, and the individual imagination as a critical authority rather than classical ideals.

The Enlightenment itself had developed from the earlier Renaissance with a renewed interest in the classical traditions and ideals of harmony, symmetry, and order based on reason and science. On a political level the Enlightenment promoted republicanism in opposition to monarchy which ultimately led to the French revolution.

The worried conservatives of the time reacted to the ideas of the Enlightenment and reason with a philosophy which was based on religious ideas and glorified the past (especially Medieval times and the 'Golden Age') – times when things were not so threatening to elites. This philosophy became known as Romanticism and emphasised medieval ideas and society over the new ideas of democracy, capitalism and science.

Romanticism originated in Europe towards the end of the 18th century, and in most areas was at its peak in the approximate period from 1800 to 1890. It was initially marked by innovations in both content and literary style and by a preoccupation with the subconscious, the mystical, and the supernatural. This period was followed by the development of cultural nationalism and a new attention to national origins, an interest in native folklore, folk ballads and poetry, folk dance and music, and even previously ignored medieval and Renaissance works.

The Romantic movement "emphasized intense emotion as an authentic source of aesthetic experience, placing new emphasis on such emotions as apprehension, horror and terror, and awe—especially that experienced in confronting the new aesthetic categories of the sublimity and beauty of nature." The importance of the medieval lay in the pre-capitalist significance of its individual crafts and tradesmen, as well as its feudal peasants and serfs.

Thus Romanticism was a reaction to the birth of the modern world: urbanisation, secularisation, industrialisation, and consumerism. Romanticism emphasised intense emotion and feelings which over the centuries came to be seen as one of its most important characteristics, in opposition to 'cold', 'unfeeling' Enlightenment rationalism.

Origins of Enlightenment emotion

> "Whence this secret Chain between each Person and Mankind? How is my Interest connected with the most distant Parts of it?" – Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746)

However, this 'cold', 'unfeeling' scenario is actually very far from the truth. In fact, the Enlightenment itself had its origins in emotion. Enlightenment philosophers of the eighteenth century tried to create a philosophy of feeling that would allow them to solve the problem of the injustice in the unfeeling world they saw all around them.

Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury (1671 – 1713) believed that all human beings had a 'natural affection' or natural sociability which bound them together, Francis Hutcheson (1694 – 1746) wrote that "All Men have the same Affections and Senses", while David Hume (1711 – 1776) believed that human beings extend their "imaginative identification with the feelings of others" when it is required. Similarly, Adam Smith (1723 – 1790), the writer of Wealth of Nations, believed in the power of the imagination to inform us and help us understand the suffering of others. [1]

Image on the right: Portrait of Denis Diderot (1713-1784), by Louis-Michel van Loo, 1767

For the Enlightenment philosophers the relationship between feeling and reason was of absolute importance. To develop ideas that would progress society for the better, a sense of morality was essential. Denis Diderot (1713–1784) a prominent French philosopher of the Enlightenment in France, for example, had strong views on the importance of the passions. As Henry Martyn Lloyd writes:

> "Diderot did believe in the utility of reason in the pursuit of truth – but he had an acute enthusiasm for the passions, particularly when it came to morality and aesthetics. With many of the key figures in the Scottish Enlightenment, such as David Hume, he believed that morality was grounded in sense-experience. Ethical judgment was closely aligned with, even indistinguishable from, aesthetic judgments, he claimed. We judge the beauty of a painting, a landscape or our lover's face just as we judge the morality of a character in a novel, a play or our own lives – that is, we judge the good and the beautiful directly and without the need of reason. For Diderot, then, eliminating the passions could produce only an abomination. A person without the ability to be affected, either because of the absence of passions or the absence of senses, would be morally monstrous."

Moreover, to remove the passions from science would lead to inhuman approaches and methods that would divert and alienate science from its ultimate goal of serving humanity, as Lloyd writes:

> "That the Enlightenment celebrated sensibility and feeling didn't entail a rejection of science, however. Quite the opposite: the most sensitive individual – the person with the greatest sensibility – was considered to be the most acute observer of nature. The archetypical example here was a doctor, attuned to the bodily rhythms of patients and their particular symptoms. Instead, it was the speculative system-builder who was the enemy of scientific progress – the Cartesian physician who saw the body as a mere machine, or those who learned medicine by reading Aristotle but not by observing the ill. So the philosophical suspicion of reason was not a rejection of rationality per se; it was only a rejection of reason in isolation from the senses, and alienated from the impassioned body."

Michael L. Frazer describes the importance of Enlightenment justice and sympathy in his

book *The Enlightenment of Sympathy*. He writes:

"Reflective sentimentalists recognize our commitment to justice as an outgrowth of our sympathy for others. After our sympathetic sentiments undergo reflective self-correction, the sympathy that emerges for all those who suffer injustice poses no insult to those for whom it is felt. We do not see their suffering as mere pain to be soothed away when and if we happen to share it. Instead under Hume's account, we condemn injustice as a violation of rules that are vitally important to us all. And under Smith's account, we condemn the sufferings of the victims of injustice as injustice because we sympathetically share the resentment that they feel toward their oppressors, endorsing such feelings as warranted and acknowledging those who feel them deserve better treatment." [2]

Cooper, Hume and Smith were living in times, not only devoid of empathy, but also even of basic sympathy. Robert C. Solomon writes of society then in *A Passion for Justice*: "There have always been the very rich. And of course there have always been the very poor. But even as late as the civilized and sentimental eighteenth century, this disparity was not yet a cause for public embarrassment or a cry of injustice. […] Poverty was considered just one more "act of God," impervious to any solution except mollification through individual charity and government poorhouses to keep the poor off the streets and away from crime." [3]

Enlightenment emotion eventually gave rise to social trends that emphasised humanism and the heightened value of human life. These trends had their complement in art, creating what became known as the 'sentimental novel'. While today sentimentalism evokes maudlin self-pity, in the eighteenth century it was revolutionary as sentimental literature

> "focused on weaker members of society, such as orphans and condemned criminals, and allowed readers to identify and sympathize with them. This translated to growing sentimentalism within society, and led to social movements calling for change, such as the abolition of the death penalty and of slavery. Instead of the death penalty, popular sentiment called for the rehabilitation of criminals, rather than harsh punishment. Frederick Douglass himself was inspired to stand against his own bondage and slavery in general in his famous Narrative by the speech by the sentimentalist playwright Sheridan in The Columbian Orator detailing a fictional dialogue between a master and slave."

As Solomon notes:

> "What distinguishes us not just from animals but from machines are our passions, and foremost among them our passion for justice. Justice is, in a word, that set of passions, not mere theories, that bind us and make us part of the social world."[4]

Writers such as the Scottish author Henry Mackenzie tried to highlight many things that he perceived were wrong during his time and showed how many of the wrongs were ultimately caused by the established pillars of society. In his book, *The Man of Feeling*, he has no qualms about showing how these pillars of society had, for example, abused an intelligent woman causing her to become a prostitute (p44/45), destroyed a school because it blocked the landowner's view (p72), and hired assassins to remove a man who had refused to hand over his wife (p91), etc. [5] Mackenzie shows again and again the injustices of British military and colonial policy, and who is responsible. As Marilyn Butler writes:

> "Henry Mackenzie's The Man of Feeling (1771), is pointedly topical when it criticizes the consequences of a war policy – press-ganging, conscription, the military punishment of flogging, and inadequate pensions – and when, like the same author's Julia de Roubigné (1777), it attacks the principle of colonialism. An interest in such causes was the logical outcome of art's frequently reiterated dedication to humanity. It was a period when the cast of villains was drawn from the proud men representing authority, downwards from the House of Lords, the bench of bishops, judges, local magistrates, attorneys, to the stern father; when readers were invited to empathize with life's victims". [6]

It took a long time for the ideas of sentimentalism (emotions against injustice) to filter down to the Realism (using facts to depict ordinary everyday experiences) that Dickens used in the nineteenth century to finally evoke some kind of empathy for people impoverished by society. As Solomon notes: "It wasn't until the late nineteenth century that Dickens shook the conscience of his compatriots with his riveting descriptions of poverty and cruelty in contemporary London, [...] that the problem of poverty and resistance to its solutions [e.g. poorhouses] has become the central question of justice." [7]

Dickens's Dream by Robert William Buss, portraying Dickens at his desk at Gads Hill Place surrounded by many of his characters

European literary sentimentalism arose during the Enlightenment, and partly as a response to sentimentalism in philosophy. In England the period 1750–1798 became known as the Age of Sensibility as the sentimental novel or the novel of sensibility became popular.

Romanticist emotionalism: the opposite of Enlightenment sentimentalism

> "Classicism is health, romanticism is sickness." – Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe (1749-1832)

However, sensibility in an Enlightenment sense was very different from the Romanticist understanding, as Butler notes: “It is, in fact, in a key respect almost the opposite of Romanticism. Sensibility, like its near-synonym sentiment, echoes eighteenth-century philosophy and psychology in focusing upon the mental process by which impressions are received by the senses. But the sentimental writer’s interest in how the mind works and in how people behave is very different from the Romantic writer’s inwardness.” [8]

She writes that ‘neither Neoclassical theory nor contemporary practice in various styles and genres put much emphasis on the individuality of the artist’ (p29). This is a far cry from the apolitical, inward-looking, self-centered Romantic artists who saw themselves outside of a society that they had little interest in participating in, let alone changing for the better. Butler again:

> “Romantic rebelliousness is more outrageous and total, the individual rejecting not just his own society but the very principle of living in society – which means that the Romantic and post Romantic often dismisses political activity of any kind, as external to the self, literal and commonplace. Since it is relatively uncommon for the eighteenth-century artist to complain directly on his own behalf, he seldom achieves such emotional force as his nineteenth-century successor. He is, on the other hand, much more inclined than the Romantic to express sympathy for certain, well-defined social groups. Humanitarian feeling for the real-life underdog is a strong vein from the 1760s to the 1790s, often echoing real-life campaigns for reform.” [9]

This movement over time towards the Romanticist inward-looking conception of emotion and feelings has had knock-on negative effects on society’s ability to defend itself from elite oppression (through cultural styles of self-absorption, escapism and diversion rather than exposure, criticism and resistance), and retarded ‘art’s frequently reiterated dedication to humanity’. Solomon describes this process:

> “What has come about in the past two centuries or so is the dramatic rise of what Robert Stone has called “affective individualism,” this new celebration of the passions and other feelings of the autonomous individual. Yet, ironically, it is an attitude that has become even further removed from our sense of justice during that same period of time. We seem to have more inner feelings and pay more attention to them, but we seem to have fewer feelings about others and the state of the world and pay less attention to them.”[10]

Thus while Enlightenment sentimentalism “depicted individuals as social beings whose sensibility was stimulated and defined by their interactions with others”, the Romantic movement that followed it “tended to privilege individual autonomy and subjectivity over sociability”.

Romanticism as a philosophical movement of the nineteenth century had a profound influence on culture which can still be seen right up to today. Its main characteristics are the emphasis on the personal, dramatic contrasts, emotional excess, a focus on the nocturnal, the ghostly and the frightful, spontaneity, and extreme subjectivism. Romanticism in culture implies a turning inward and encourages introspection. Romantic literature put more emphasis on themes of isolation, loneliness, tragic events and the power of nature. A heroic view of history and myth became the basis of much Romantic literature.

Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, painted by Jean-Jacques-François Le Barbier

It was in Germany that Romanticism took shape as a political ideology. The German Romanticists felt threatened by the French Revolution and were forced to move from inward-looking ideas to formulate conservative political answers needed to oppose Enlightenment and republican ideals. According to Eugene N. Anderson:

> "In the succeeding years the danger became acutely political, and the German Romanticists were compelled to subordinate their preoccupation with the widening of art and the enrichment of individual experience to social and political ideas and actions, particularly as formulated in nationalism and conservatism. These three cultural ideals, Romanticism, nationalism and conservatism, shared qualities evoked by the common situation of crisis. […] The Germans had to maintain against rationalism and the French a culture which in its institutional structure was that of the ancien régime. German Romanticism accepted it, wished to reform it somewhat, idealized it, and defended the idealization as the supreme culture of the world. This was the German counter-revolution. […] They endowed their culture with universal

> validity and asserted that it enjoyed the devotion of nature and God, that if it were destroyed humanity would be vitally wounded." [11]

The reactionary nature of German Romanticism was demonstrated in its hierarchical views of society, its chauvinist nationalism, and extreme conservatism which would have serious implications for future generations of the German populace. As Anderson writes:

> "The low estimate of rationalism and the exaltation of custom, tradition, and feeling, the conception of society as an alliance of the generations, the belief in the abiding character of ideas as contrasted with the ephemeral nature of concepts, these and many other romantic views bolstered up the existing culture. The concern with relations led the Romanticists to praise the hierarchical order of the Ständestaat and to regard everything and every-one as an intermediary. The acceptance of the fact of inequality harmonized with that of the ideals of service, duty, faithfulness, order, sacrifice – admirable traits for serf or subject or soldier." [12]

Anderson also believes that the Romanticists remained swinging "between individual freedom and initiative and group compulsion and authority" and as such could not have brought in fundamental reforms, because: "By reverencing tradition, they preserved the power of the backward-looking royalty and aristocracy." [13]

Thus Romanticist self-centredness in philosophy translated into the most conservative forms for maintaining the status quo in politics. Individual freedoms were matched by authoritarianism for the masses. The individual was king alright, as long as you weren't a 'serf or subject or soldier'.

Beyond morality: Working Class perspectives on Reason and Sentiment

> "We have never intended to enlighten shoemakers and servants—this is up to apostles." – Voltaire (1694–1778)

Around the same time of the early period of Romanticism, Karl Heinrich Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) were born. They grew up in a very different Germany. Capitalism had become established and was creating an even more polarised society between extremely rich and extremely poor as factory owners pushed their workers to their physical limits. On his way to work at his father's firm in Manchester, Engels called into the offices of a paper he wrote for in Cologne and met the editor, Marx, for the first time in 1842. They formed a friendship based on shared values and beliefs regarding the working class and socialist ideas. They saw a connection between the earlier Enlightenment ideas and socialism. For example, as Engels writes in Anti-Duhring: "in its theoretical form, modern socialism originally appears ostensibly as a more logical extension of the principles laid down by the great French philosophers of the eighteenth century. Like every new theory, modern socialism had, at first, to connect itself with the intellectual stock-in-trade ready to its hand, however deeply its roots lay in economic facts." [14]

However, once they had connected themselves to the Enlightenment they soon saw the limitations of both Enlightenment concepts of reason and sentiment. They realised that the new bourgeois rulers would be limited by their conceptions of property, justice, and equality, which basically meant they only applied universality to themselves and their own property.

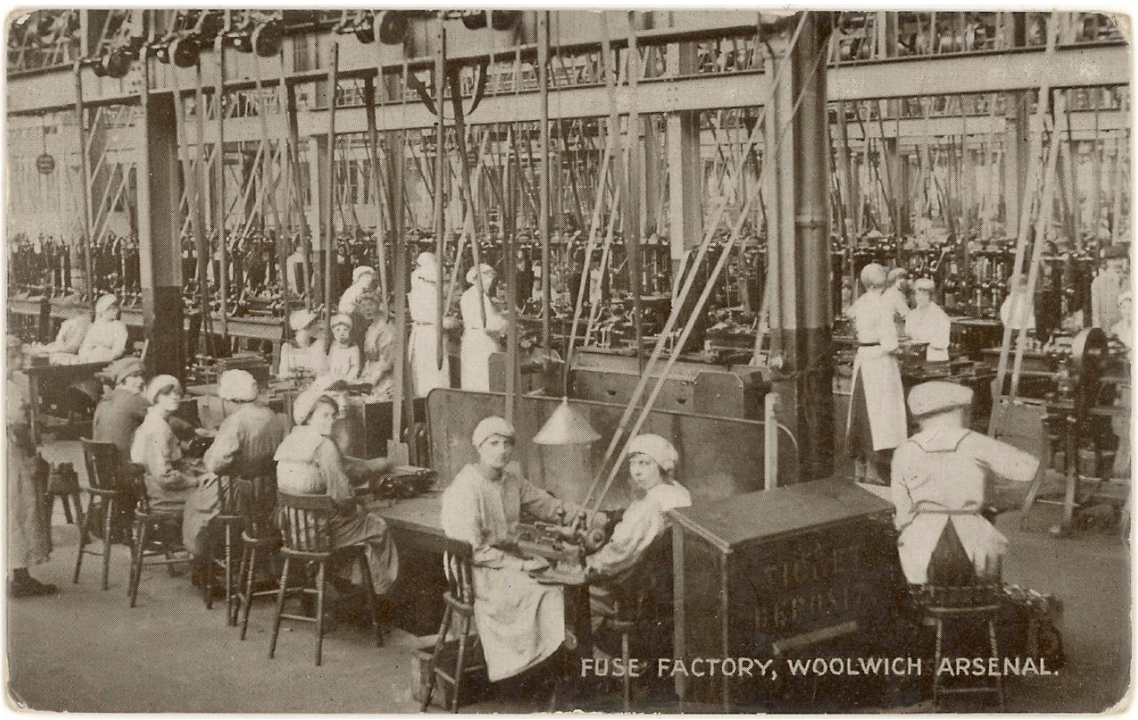
The new rulers were buoyed up by the victory of their ideological fight over the aristocracy but incapable of applying the same ideas to the masses who helped them to victory. Thus Marx and Engels viewed the struggle for reason as important but limited to the new ruling class' world view, just like the aristocracy before them:

> "Every form of society and government then existing, every old traditional notion was flung into the lumber room as irrational; the world had hitherto allowed itself to be led solely by prejudices; everything in the past deserved only pity and contempt. Now, for the first time, appeared the light of day, henceforth superstition, injustice, privilege, oppression, were to be superseded by eternal truth, eternal Right, equality based on nature and the inalienable rights of man. We know today that this kingdom of reason was nothing more than the idealised kingdom of the bourgeoisie; that this eternal Right found its realisation in bourgeois justice; that this equality reduced itself to bourgeois equality before the law; that bourgeois property was proclaimed as one of the essential rights of man; and that the government of reason, the Contrat Social of Rousseau, came into being, and only could come into being, as a democratic bourgeois republic. The great thinkers of the eighteenth century could, no more than their predecessors, go beyond the limits imposed upon them by their epoch." [15]

As for sentiment, they were well aware of the Realist critical nature of modern writers (the Realist movement rejected Romanticism) and indeed praised them (e.g. G. Sand, E. Sue, and Boz [Dickens]), but limited themselves to offering some advice. While recognising that progressive literature had a mainly middle class audience (and were happy enough with these authors just 'shaking the optimism' of their audience), they knew that this was not by any means a socialist literature and were well aware of sentimentalist limitations. Engels states:

> "I think however that the purpose must become manifest from the situation and the action themselves without being expressly pointed out and that the author does not have to serve the reader on a platter — the future historical resolution of the social conflicts which he describes. To this must be added that under our conditions novels are mostly addressed to readers from bourgeois circles, i.e., circles which are not directly ours. Thus the socialist problem novel in my opinion fully carries out its mission if by a faithful portrayal of the real conditions it dispels the dominant conventional illusions concerning them, shakes the optimism of the bourgeois world, and inevitably instills doubt as to the eternal validity of that which exists, without itself offering a direct solution of the problem involved, even without at times ostensibly taking sides." [16]

Sentimental literature focused on individual misfortune, and constant repetition of such themes certainly appeared to universalise such suffering, so that, as David Denby writes, "In *this* weeping mother, *this* suffering father, we are to read also the sufferings of humanity." Thus, "individualism and universalism appear to be two sides of the same coin". Sentimental literature gives the reader the 'spectacle of misfortune' and a representation of the reaction of a 'sentient and sensible observer' who tries to help with 'alms, sympathy or indeed narrative intervention.' Furthermore, the literature of sentiment "mirrors eighteenth-century theories of sympathy, in which a spontaneous reaction to the spectacle of suffering is gradually developed, by a process of generalisation and combination of ideas, into broader and more abstract notions of humanity, benevolence, justice." [17]



Workers in the fuse factory, Woolwich Arsenal late 1800s

This brings us then to the problem of interpretation, as Denby suggests: “should the sentimental portrayal of the poor and of action in their favour be read as an attempt to give a voice to the voiceless, to include the hitherto excluded? Or, alternatively, is the sentimentalisation of the poor to be interpreted, more cynically, as a discursive strategy through which the enlightened bourgeoisie states its commitment to values of humanity and justice, and thereby seeks to strengthen its claims to universal domination?” [18]

While such ideas of giving a ‘voice to the voiceless’ was a far cry from monarchical times, and claims of commitment to humanity and justice were laudable, the concept of universality had a fundamental flaw: “The universal claims of the French Revolution are opposed to a [aristocratic] society based on distinctions of birth: it is in the name of humanity that the Revolution challenges the established order. But for Sartre this does not change the fact that the universal is a myth, an ideological construct, and an obfuscation, since it articulates a notion of man which eliminates social conflict and disguises the interests of a class behind a facade of universal reference.” [19]

Striking teamsters battling police on the streets of Minneapolis, Minnesota, June 1934

Thus for Marx and Engels defining concepts such as good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, justice and crime, that is, a universal moral theory, could not be achieved while society is divided into classes:

> "We maintain […] that all moral theories have been hitherto the product, in the last analysis, of the economic conditions of society obtaining at the time. And as society has hitherto moved in class antagonisms, morality has always been class morality; it has either justified the domination and the interests of the ruling class, or ever since the oppressed class became powerful enough, it has represented its indignation against this domination and the future interests of the oppressed. That in this process there has on the whole been progress in morality, as in all other branches of human knowledge, no one will doubt. But we have not yet passed beyond class morality. A really human morality which stands above class antagonisms and above any recollection of them becomes possible only at a stage of society which has not only overcome class antagonisms but has even forgotten them in practical life."

Marx and Engels worked towards that morality through their activism with working class movements and culture. Their critical writing also formed an essential part of working class ideology and culture of resistance and has remained influential in resistance movements the world over.

The culture of resistance today still uses realism, documentary, and histories of oppression to show the harsh realities of globalisation. Like during the Enlightenment, empathy for those suffering injustice forms its foundation. And unlike Romanticism, reason and science are deemed to be important tools in its struggle for social emancipation and progress.

Conclusion: Enlightenment and Romanticism today

> "When we are asked now: are we now living into an enlightened age? Then the answer is: No, but in an age of Enlightenment." – Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

There is no doubt that the influence of Romanticism has become ever stronger in twentieth and twenty-first century culture. Romanticist-influenced TV shows on Netflix are watched world wide. Love songs dominate the pop industry and superheroes are now the mainstay of cinema. Even Romanticist nationalism is making a comeback. Now and then calls for a new Enlightenment are heard, but like the original advocates of the Enlightenment, they are limited to the conservative world view of those making the call and whose view of the Enlightenment could be compared to a form of Third Way politics, that is, they avoid the issue of class conflict.

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Notes

[1] Anthony Pagden, *The Enlightenment: And Why it Still Matters* (Oxford Uni Press, 2015) p72/73

[2] Michael L Frazer, *The Enlightenment of Sympathy: Justice and the Moral Sentiments in the Eighteenth Century and Today* (Oxford Uni Press, 2010) p126/127

[3] Robert C Solomon, *A Passion for Justice: Emotions and the Origins of the Social Contract* (Rowman and Littlefield Pub., 1995) p13

[4] Robert C Solomon, *A Passion for Justice: Emotions and the Origins of the Social Contract* (Rowman and Littlefield Pub., 1995) p45

[5] Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling* (Oxford World's Classics Oxford Uni Press, 2009)

[6] Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760-1830*(Oxford Uni Press, 1981) p31

[7] Robert C Solomon, *A Passion for Justice: Emotions and the Origins of the Social Contract* (Rowman and Littlefield Pub., 1995) p13

[8] Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760-1830*(Oxford Uni Press, 1981) p29/30

[9] Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760-1830*(Oxford Uni Press, 1981) p30/31

[10] Robert C Solomon, *A Passion for Justice: Emotions and the Origins of the Social Contract* (Rowman and Littlefield Pub., 1995) p37

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[14] Marx and Engels, *On Literature and Art* (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1978) p270

[15] Marx and Engels, *On Literature and Art* (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1978) p271

[16] Marx and Engels, *On Literature and Art* (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1978) p88

[17] David J. Denby, *Individual, universal, national: a French revolutionary trilogy?* (Studies of Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, 335, Voltaire Foundation, 1996) p28/29

[18] David J. Denby *Sentimental Narrative and the Social Order in France, 1760–1820* (Cambridge Studies in French, 1994) p117

[19] David J. Denby, *Individual, universal, national: a French revolutionary trilogy?* (Studies of Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, 335, Voltaire Foundation, 1996) p27

Featured image: Satire on Romantic Suicide (1839) by Leonardo Alenza y Nieto (1807–1845)

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