

# From Enlightenment to “Enfrightenment”: Romanticism as a Tool for Elite Agendas

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Theme: [History](#)

## Introduction

*Romanticism is an eighteenth century artistic, literary, musical and intellectual movement which emerged as a reaction to Enlightenment ideas of science, reason and human progress. Its effect on politics has been to reassert conservative ideas about society based on hierarchy and individualism as the Romantics looked back to medieval times and monarchism for inspiration. Enlightenment ideas focused on the laws as a counter to monarchical privilege and looked to concepts of citizenship and republicanism as the way forward, ideas which were taken up by workers movements the world over. However, Romantic ideas of the exclusivist nation are coming to the fore again in a world altered by the positive and negative effects of international worker mobility, immigration and desperate refugees.*

The Enlightenment and politics – ‘You were, crucially, a citizen, not a subject’

In the early 18c in Europe the power of the monarchical system began to wane and enlightenment ideas about the running and ruling of society began to take hold. Those ideas focused on the idea of the ‘patrie’. Like many enlightenment ideas, patria was a word derived from *pater* [father] from ancient Rome and would later be equated with republicanism. Louis chevalier de Jancourt (the biographer of Leibniz) wrote in the the *Encyclopédie* that *patrie* “represents a father and children, and consequently that it expresses the meaning we attach to that of family, of society, of a free state, of which we are members, and whose laws assure our liberties and our well-being.” [1] This new emphasis was based on equality of all before the law rather than on the narrow definitions of ethnicity used in definitions of the nation.

In the pre-modern polity, society was made up of separate feudal sovereignties that were at the same time local power centres. Different ethnic groups lived in insular, heterogeneous communities with local and agrarian independent economies. The economy developed as kingdoms expanded into other ethnic areas. The transition from ethnicity to nationhood happened when the members of different ethnic groups developed a common culture making them into a ‘nation’.

However as Anthony Pagden writes:

“Unlike the nation, the patria was a community, a group. You owed it your love and your life, but you were also a part of it. You were, crucially, a citizen, not a subject.” [2]



Image on the right: Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu (1689–1755), generally referred to as simply [Montesquieu](#), was a French judge, man of letters, and political philosopher.

The *patria* was loosely connected to the concept of a republican government where the citizen, as Montesquieu wrote, would be asked to love the laws and the homeland (*patrie*) and that this love would require “continuing preference of the public interest over one’s own.” [3]

These ideas about the *patrie* have “come to be called modern civic patriotism. It was benign, generous, outward-looking, and in principle at least excluded no one”. [4] They can be seen as universal in that they described a form of politics, republicanism, that was not concerned with language, religion or ethnicity but with the idea that all were citizens and equal before the law.

Equality before the law is the principle that each person must be treated equally by the law (principle of isonomy) and that all are subject to the same laws of justice (due process). This principle arose out of the discontent that prevailed under monarchical rule whereby the king or queen was above the law, so that equality guaranteed that no one or group of individuals could be privileged or discriminated against by the rulers.

This principle was enshrined in Article 7 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which [states](#) that:

“All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law”.



Photograph of the Great Chartist [Meeting](#) on Kennington Common, London in 1848

Equality before the law is a basic principle of legal [documents](#) like the Irish Constitution, for example:

“All citizens shall be held equal before the law (Article 40 of the Constitution). This means that the State cannot unjustly, unreasonably or arbitrarily discriminate between citizens. You cannot be treated as inferior or superior to any other person in society simply because of your human attributes or your ethnic, racial, social or religious background.”

The universal aspect of such principles is an important aspect in that universalism accepts universal principles of most religions and is inclusive of others regardless of other persons ethnic, religious or racial background.

As an approach to ethnic difference in society, universalism is similar to instrumentalist approaches which accepts a minimal set of qualifications for membership of a community, unlike the primordialism of conservative nationalism which tries to fix exclusivist kinship, historical traditions and homeland of the ‘nation’.

The Romantic reaction – ‘from patriotism to tribalism’

It was in Germany that nationalism came to emphasise the ethnic basis of the nation with the ancient origins of the German language symbolising the German Volk stretching back into pre-history. In his essay *On the Origin of Language* [1772], Johann Herder argued for the national origin of language. He wrote,

“[i]t [the urge to express] is alive in all unpolished languages, though, to be sure, according to the degree of each nation’s culture and the specific



character of its way of thinking.” [5]



La République universelle démocratique et sociale, [painted](#) by Frédéric Sorrieu in 1848. Top left: Le Pacte, Top right: Le Prologue, Bottom left: Le Triomphe, Bottom right: Le Marché. He was notable for his works testifying the liberal and nationalist revolutions in France and in Europe.

Herder's influence could be seen in the widespread cultural and linguistic movements that swept Europe from the 1780s to the 1840s. Influenced by the Romantic Movement, the cultural nationalists emphasised the *volksgeist* of the peasantry as the true basis of the nation. Language became the target and the site for conflicting political ideologies as definitions of the nation were formed on ethno-linguistic grounds.

However, the early nineteenth century also saw the rise of workers movements such as the Saint-Simonians and Fourierists in France and the Chartists and Owenites in the United Kingdom. The industrial revolution had caused a profound change in the social and economic make up of society internally which resulted in the creation of self-conscious classes and heightened class antagonism.

Thus the workers movements took Enlightenment ideas of equality to their logical conclusion in the form of class struggle and social revolution while the Romantics looked to the peasantry for their ideal, reasserting the primacy of the older vertical structure of society (containing all classes).

The rise of nationalism saw the growth of exceptionalism as ethnic exclusivity became the norm. Under the influence of Romanticism and ideas of ethnic purity, and in parallel with the rise of the centralised nation state, the ethnic homogenisation of the populace meant the (near) destruction of indigenous local languages and local foreign language communities.

For example, there existed in France about thirty patois or popular Romance languages. In *A Cultural History of the French Revolution*, Emmet Kennedy describes a report to the

Convention on 16 prairial Year II (4 June 1794) where the abbé Grégoire lists the extensive range of patois, dialects and languages in France as “Bas-Breton, Bourguignon, Bressan, Lyonnais, Dauphinois, Auvergnat, Poitevin, Limousin, Picard, Provençal, Languedocien, Velayen, Catalan, Béarnais, Basque, Rouergat, and Gascon.” According to Kennedy, “[o]nly about a sixth (fifteen) of the departments around Paris spoke French exclusively. Elsewhere bilingualism was common.” [6]

Yet, in another report to the Convention in 1794, Barère links the areas where “foreign” languages are to be found, such as Basque, German, Flamand and Breton, with the areas of insurrection and counterrevolution. Barère writes,

“[f]ederalism and superstition speak Bas-Breton; emigration and hatred of the Republic speak German; counterrevolution speaks Italian, and fanaticism speaks Basque. Let us break these harmful instruments of terror.” [7]

In post-revolutionary France linguistic redefinition took on serious political overtones as the question of self/other was redrawn along linguistic lines. Already the interests of the state were taking precedence over the rhetoric of the democratic nation.



Image on the left: Nur für Deutsche (Eng. “Only for Germans”) on the [tram](#) number 8 in occupied Kraków

Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762 – 1814) took exceptionalist and chauvinist ideas of the nation even further. He wrote:

“the German, if only he makes use of all his advantages, can always be superior to the foreigner and understand him fully, even better than the foreigner understands himself, and can translate the foreigner to the fullest extent. On the other hand, the foreigner can never understand the true German without a thorough and extremely laborious study of the German language, and there is no doubt that he will leave what is genuinely German untranslated.” [8]

Fichte, like Herder, shifted cultural value from the elites to the common people (volk).

According to Tim Blanning in *The Romantic Revolution*:

“Folk art, folk dancing and folk songs were not to be despised for their roughness but treasured for their authenticity. They were the ‘archives of a nationality’, the ‘national soul’ and ‘the living voice of the nationalities, even of humanity itself’.” [9]

The Romantics promoted popular ballads which had been seen as “the dregs of fairy-tales, superstitions, songs, and crude speech”. [10] Of particular note was the Ossian cycle of epic poems published by the Scottish poet James Macpherson from 1760. The work was an international success and was translated into all the literary languages of Europe. Even though Ossian was soon realised to be a creation of its author and not from ancient sources it was highly influential both in the development of the Romantic movement and the Gaelic revival.

As in other forms of culture the Romantics emphasised all that was backward-looking and medieval in opposition to Enlightenment figures who had tried to create a new culture based on reason and science. Moreover, Romantic folk culture was very different from working class culture which developed during the Industrial Revolution. With the influence of socialist ideas and movements over the following decades, working class authors and poets produced many fine poems, ballads and novels about the struggles of ordinary people.

It is interesting to note that in the late seventeenth century and the early eighteenth century, the cultural elites of Europe were more interested in French than their own languages and went on the Grand Tour of Europe to broaden their horizons and learn about language, architecture, geography, and culture.

Also, it is ironic that the the thrill of romanticism often came from the safety of modernity (in the form of enlightenment science) as the development of steamboats and railway systems allowed the new middle classes to experience the sublime in the beauty of dramatic landscapes like the Alps.

### **Nationalism - ‘countering the worst excesses of neoliberalism’**

The influence of Romanticism on politics shifted revolutionary thinking from burgeoning socialist movements to nationalism instead. Nationalism is the perfect class conciliatory ideology in that it retained the full social order/hierarchy (i.e. it includes the elites) and homogenised the people by excluding other national languages and foreign communities while putting the elites into positions of leadership and control.

Using divide and rule tactics and stirring up xenophobic attitudes and fears, the elites ran the new homogenised nations and used them for their old purposes: war. Modern global power struggles of the twentieth century started with nation set against nation in the First World War.





A postcard from 1916 showing national personifications of some of the [Allies](#) of World War I, each holding a national flag

Throughout the twentieth century the rise of globalism and neoliberalism led to a breakdown in nationalist ideology as the world became more and more economically interconnected leading some to believe that we had moved on to an era of postnationalism. However, postnationalism is an internationalistic process whereby power is partially transferred from national authorities to supranational entities like the European Union. Power is transferred from local elites to the super elite of the European Commission.

However, nationalist sentiments are still used to allow elites to consolidate power and new nationalist movements have risen in many parts of the world as people turn to local elites to try and counter the worst excesses of neoliberalism. This has led to Hindu nationalism in India, Trump's "Make America Great Again" and "America First" campaigns, the United Kingdom's Brexit, anti-immigration rhetoric in Hungary, Germany's Pegida, France's National Front, and the UK Independence Party.



Douaumont French military cemetery seen from Douaumont [ossuary](#), which contains remains of French and German soldiers who died during the Battle of Verdun in 1916

## Conclusion

Romanticist sentiments are still used and manipulated to keep the masses on board with the agendas of the elites thereby diverting people away from questioning the social and political systems under which they live and work. As the global economic and financial crises deepen there is the worrying possibility that more and more people will be dragged into the national and international power struggles of elites rather than examining and fighting for their own social, economic and political interests, i.e. a revival of political and social consciousness.

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## Notes

[1] The Enlightenment: And Why it Still Matters by Anthony Pagden (Oxford Uni Press, 2015) p259

[2] The Enlightenment: And Why it Still Matters by Anthony Pagden (Oxford Uni Press, 2015) p259



- [3] The Enlightenment: And Why it Still Matters by Anthony Pagden (Oxford Uni Press, 2015) p260
- [4] The Enlightenment: And Why it Still Matters by Anthony Pagden (Oxford Uni Press, 2015) p261
- [5] On the Origin of Language: Two Essays by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Gottfried Herder (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) p149.
- [6] A Cultural History of the French Revolution by Emmet Kennedy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 325-6. See also Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914 by Eugen Weber (London, Chatto & Windus, 1979) p326
- [7] A Cultural History of the French Revolution by Emmet Kennedy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 325-6. See also Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914 by Eugen Weber (London, Chatto & Windus, 1979) p326
- [8] Addresses to the German Nation [1808] by Johann Gottlieb Fichte, trans. R.F. Jones and G.H. Turnbull (Chicago and London: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1922) p130
- [9] The Romantic Revolution by Tim Blanning (Phoenix, Great Britain, 2010) p119
- [10] The Romantic Revolution by Tim Blanning (Phoenix, Great Britain, 2010) p120

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