



The Discourse of Rationalism in Early Modern Europe During the 17th and 18th Centuries

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the development of Rationalism and Romanticism as two major intellectual discourses that significantly shaped the evolution of modern European civilization. It explores the continuity of intellectual ideas from the Renaissance through the Enlightenment (Aufklärung) and analyzes the emergence of Romanticism as a critical response to the limitations of Enlightenment Rationalism. The study employs a historical approach grounded in R. G. Collingwood's concept of the history of thought. Historical analysis is conducted through systematic stages of heuristics (source collection), source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. Furthermore, textual analysis, contextual analysis, and the examination of the relationship between ideas and society are applied to investigate the genesis, development, dissemination, and historical influence of Rationalist and Romantic thought. The findings demonstrate that Rationalism evolved beyond an epistemological doctrine into a broader historical and sociological discourse that profoundly influenced philosophy, science, politics, religion, education, and culture throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. The study also reveals that the intellectual dominance of Rationalism during the Enlightenment generated philosophical, social, and cultural tensions that contributed to the rise of Romanticism. Rather than representing a complete rejection of Rationalism, Romanticism reoriented European intellectual thought by emphasizing imagination, emotion, individuality, and the organic dimensions of human existence while preserving important elements of Enlightenment thought. It is concluded that Rationalism and Romanticism should be understood as interconnected intellectual traditions whose dynamic interaction played a decisive role in shaping the intellectual foundations and historical development of modern European civilization.

Keyword: Rationalism; Romanticism; Enlightenment; Renaissance; European intellectual history.

INTRODUCTION

Historical facts cannot be defined with absolute precision. Although historical events may be accepted as factual, their meanings, significance, and interpretations vary across different perspectives. The complexity and inconsistency of historical reality inevitably leads to rational simplifications in any attempt to define it (Crocker, 1992). Consequently, historians often encounter difficulties in providing definitive explanations of historical events, as this reflects the inherent limitations of the act of definition itself. Historical reality can only be understood through description and interpretation, approaches that inevitably simplify the complexity of the past. Even then, they merely extract a portion of historical reality and treat it as though it represents the whole. From this perspective, the present study should be understood as a necessary simplification of historical facts rather than a complete representation of historical reality.

The early modern period in Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries witnessed a profound intellectual transformation driven by the discourse of Rationalism. After centuries of intellectual life dominated by theological doctrine and ecclesiastical authority, thinkers of this period increasingly regarded human reason as the primary source of knowledge. Rationalism maintained that genuine knowledge is acquired not through sensory perception, which may be misleading, but through logical reasoning and deductive thought. This intellectual movement challenged established modes of thought and laid the foundations for the emergence of the modern scientific method.



Key figures such as René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz laid the intellectual foundations of Continental Rationalism. Descartes, through his famous dictum *Cogito, ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am"), introduced the method of systematic doubt as a means of attaining philosophical certainty. Spinoza, meanwhile, advanced a pantheistic philosophy that conceived God and nature as a single rational order, while Leibniz developed the theory of monadology as an explanation of the fundamental structure of reality. Despite their philosophical differences, all three thinkers shared the conviction that the universe possesses a rational order that can be understood through human reason.

By the 18th century, this intellectual discourse had evolved into the Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*), whose influence extended far beyond philosophy. Reason was no longer confined to metaphysical inquiry but was increasingly employed to reform social, political, and legal institutions. Enlightenment thinkers criticized absolutism, social inequality, and superstition while advocating the organization of society according to rational principles in order to promote liberty and justice.

The long-term influence of Rationalism transformed both European civilization and the wider world. Confidence in the power of reason contributed to major political transformations, including the French Revolution, while simultaneously fostering rapid advances in science and technology. Although later challenged by empiricism and Romanticism, Rationalist thought remained one of the principal intellectual foundations of modernity. Its legacy continues to shape modern intellectual life by encouraging critical inquiry, intellectual independence, and the application of reason to social and scientific problems.

It is difficult to deny that the widespread discourse of Rationalism across the European continent, particularly following the emergence and spread of the Renaissance during the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries, was a major factor in shaping the course of European modernization. Nevertheless, the meaning and significance of Rationalism in early modern Europe (c. 1700-1800) cannot be reduced to a single historical reality. Rather, it encompassed diverse interpretations, values, and manifestations. It is precisely this diversity that makes the study of historical facts both compelling and worthy of further scholarly inquiry.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a historical analysis of facts, ideas, and intellectual developments in human civilization. This approach is grounded in R. G. Collingwood's view that "all history is the history of thought" (Collingwood, 1946). Accordingly, the history of ideas examines the evolution of human thought in the past through systematic stages, including heuristics (source collection), source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. The primary analytical framework consists of textual analysis, contextual analysis, and the examination of the relationship between ideas and society, with the aim of understanding both the background and the influence of particular ideas within their historical context (Gottschalk, 1969) (Kuntowijoyo, 2003).

In textual analysis, historians examine the genesis of ideas, their internal consistency, historical development, and variations or typologies of a thinker's thought. Contextual analysis focuses on the social, cultural, political, and economic conditions that shaped the emergence of these ideas, thereby minimizing the risk of anachronistic interpretation. Furthermore, the relationship between ideas and society is examined through their dissemination, implementation, and socialization. Analyzing this relationship provides a deeper understanding of how philosophical and theoretical ideas evolve into intellectual forces capable of influencing and transforming civilization.

DISCUSSION

Education and the Formation of Rationalist Discourse

Each historical period is characterized by its own distinctive discourse, reflecting unique intellectual and cultural features. At the same time, historical periods are interconnected through continuity and reciprocal influence. In this sense, every historical period shapes the development of subsequent periods, although the nature and extent of its influence may vary. Likewise, each period inherits and transforms the intellectual discourse of its predecessor, creating a continuous process of historical development.



The Renaissance movement of the 14th to the 16th centuries paved the way for the modernization of Europe in the centuries that followed. Its successful challenge to the abstract and deductive philosophy of the Middle Ages, together with its emphasis on worldly existence and the realities of human life, constituted two fundamental intellectual currents that profoundly shaped the character of modern European civilization. During the 17th and 18th centuries, Europe witnessed remarkable progress, particularly in the field of science (Brinton, Christopher, & Wolff, 1960). Scientific achievements during these two centuries became a major driving force behind broader transformations in European society, culture, economy, and politics.

From the Renaissance to the emergence of the Aufklärung movement in the first half of the 18th century, Europe was profoundly influenced by the discourse of rationalism as both a system of values and a worldview¹. The rationalism discussed here should not be understood merely in its narrow epistemological sense, referring to a particular school of philosophy, but rather in a broader and more comprehensive sense as a system of values and a worldview that played a significant role in shaping *the mentality of the civilized man* (Brunschwig, 1974). Rationalism, in this broader sense, was closely related to, and largely the product of, the overall process of education.

Formal education in Europe, from the Middle Ages to the beginning of the modern era, experienced remarkable intellectual and scientific development, attracting broad participation from various social groups. During the Middle Ages, formal education was largely under the authority of the Church, making it the center of intellectual life. Several of Europe's most prestigious universities, including the Universities of Bologna and Padua in Italy, Heidelberg in Germany, Oxford and Cambridge in England, and the University of Paris, originated from church schools (Brinton, Christopher, & Wolff, 1960). At that time, the Church served as the primary source and shaper of public opinion, as it was through this institution that ideas in philosophy, literature, politics, and other fields emerged and spread throughout Europe.

The influence of European universities during the 17th and 18th centuries became increasingly evident across all aspects of social, political, economic, and cultural life. It was within these institutions that what came to be known as the discourse of rationalism was formed. Through the work of scientists and rationalist thinkers, two fundamental concepts were instilled in the minds and consciousness of educated people throughout Europe. These concepts subsequently provided the 18th-century Enlightenment with intellectual frameworks for social transformation and the driving forces of human progress. The first was the concept of a *regular "natural" order* underlying the apparent disorder and ambiguity of the universe as perceived in everyday human experience. The second concept was the existence of a human faculty called reason (ratio), which remained latent in most individuals as a consequence of deficiencies in education (Brinton, Christopher, & Wolff, 1960). Although both concepts can be traced back to the tradition of classical Greek thought, they did not receive widespread attention among academics, thinkers, scientists, and philosophers until the beginning of European modernization.

In its historical and sociological context, rationalism was not merely a defining characteristic of the Aufklärung (Enlightenment); it had already shaped the Renaissance and had even begun to emerge during the late Middle Ages. The discourse of rationalism throughout the Renaissance and the Aufklärung placed human beings at the center of the universe. Consequently, philosophical and scientific thought shifted from a theocentric worldview, which had dominated medieval Europe, to an anthropocentric one. Intellectual inquiry increasingly focused on the realities of life in this world rather than on the transcendent realm emphasized by religious authority. This transformation, however, did not imply that reason should be placed in opposition to, or reject, religious authority. Rather, many rationalist philosophers and scientists sought to understand religion including divine revelation and the Church through the faculty of reason, believing that religious truth should be compatible with rational inquiry.

In addition, rationalism encompasses a variety of perspectives and interpretations. Its more radical form recognizes reason as the sole source of truth while rejecting the possibility of other sources of knowledge, such as those emphasized by empiricism. This extreme interpretation, however, gained little acceptance and failed to develop into a dominant intellectual tradition because it found limited support within philosophical circles

¹ Rationalism is used here not merely from the perspective of an epistemological school concerned with the source of knowledge, namely the philosophical view that reason is the adequate and reliable source of knowledge, in contrast to Empiricism, which holds that experience is the primary source of knowledge. (Brunschwig, 1974)



(Honderich, 1995). A more moderate conception of rationalism, by contrast, continued to acknowledge the role of intuition alongside reason as a source of truth.

The role of intuition within rationalism can be observed in the arts, particularly in the literature and painting of the Aufklärung period, which continued to be inspired by the classical spirit and the cultural legacy of ancient Greece and Rome (Brinton, Christopher, & Wolff, 1960). Nevertheless, the discourse of rationalism in Europe during the early 17th and 18th centuries was expressed most prominently in philosophy and science, where it first emerged and developed. This development was marked by the emergence of progressive ideas and groundbreaking discoveries made by philosophers and scientists.

The Age of Genius

Some historians have referred to the 17th century in Europe as "*The Age of Genius*" because it witnessed the emergence of numerous remarkable achievements produced by exceptional individuals. These figures made significant contributions to European civilization, the influence of which was subsequently felt throughout various parts of the world. The 17th century also served as a transitional period between the Renaissance and the Aufklärung movement, which reached its peak in the second half of the 18th century.

In this context, it is impossible to overlook the role of major thinkers such as René Descartes (1596-1650), the French philosopher who died in Stockholm, Sweden, in consolidating the discourse of rationalism. France also produced Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), a critic of rationalism as an epistemological doctrine while simultaneously an admirer of Descartes' thought. Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715), who attempted to reconcile rationalism with the Greek philosophical tradition, likewise contributed a distinctive character to the discourse of European rationalism during this period (Bertens, 1988) (Brinton, Christopher, & Wolff, 1960).

England, meanwhile, produced a number of prominent scientists, thinkers, and philosophers, including Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Isaac Newton (1642-1727), Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), and John Locke (1632-1704). Much of British philosophy developed from an empirical perspective that contrasted with rationalism. Whereas rationalism maintains that genuine knowledge is derived primarily from reason, empiricism argues that knowledge originates from experience, making sensory perception the clearest and most reliable source of knowledge (Bertens, 1988). Nevertheless, from the perspective of this study, these figures may still be regarded as thinkers who played a major role in shaping the discourse of rationalism in its broader historical and sociological sense.

A number of prominent thinkers also emerged from other parts of Europe, including the Dutch philosopher of Jewish descent Baruch de Spinoza (1632-1677), the Italian scientist Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), and the German philosophers Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) and Christian Wolff (1679-1754). Many other influential figures could also be mentioned, as the discourse of rationalism in 17th-century Europe had expanded so extensively that it influenced almost every aspect of social, cultural, economic, and political life. The flourishing intellectual climate of this period was likewise reflected in music through the works of composers such as Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), Joseph Haydn (1732-1809), and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791), leading some historians to refer to this period as "*the Age of Music*" (Farmer, 1951).

Indeed, it was the 17th century, rather than the 16th century, that marked the true emergence of the modern age. During this period, remarkable advances in science, technology, and economic life enabled people to improve their material well-being and broaden the possibilities for human prosperity and happiness in this world (Brinton, Christopher, & Wolff, 1960). The intellectual achievements of the 17th century also laid the essential foundations for the emergence of the Aufklärung movement, which reached its peak in the second half of the 18th century.

The Enlightenment: The Maturation of the Renaissance

As with almost every period and movement in the history of civilization, the Enlightenment, or Aufklärung, cannot be assigned to a single, clearly defined point in time. Its defining characteristics had already begun to emerge during earlier historical periods and intellectual movements. The Renaissance, for example, initiated significant developments in knowledge and philosophy through its challenge to the authority of the Church. It also paved the way for scientific discoveries and fostered the spirit of realism in politics and social thought. In



this respect, the Enlightenment demonstrates the continuity of intellectual discourse and the interconnectedness of successive historical periods.

The most important factor contributing to the emergence of the Enlightenment was the remarkable scientific discoveries of the 17th century. The movement gained decisive momentum with the publication of Isaac Newton's *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* in 1687, which marked a turning point in the intellectual history of Europe (Caponigri, 1963). The Enlightenment initially developed in England, where the political climate following the Restoration of the 17th century provided greater freedom for intellectual inquiry and the expression of new ideas. From England, the movement spread to France, where it flourished before gradually extending across the European continent (Hadiwijono, 1995).

The mission of the Enlightenment was to apply the scientific method to all areas of human experience and reality, extending beyond the natural sciences to the social, psychological, and historical sciences. Its defining characteristic was a profound confidence in the power of reason to dispel the ignorance and mystery that burdened the human mind, thereby enabling humanity to achieve greater happiness as well as moral and spiritual progress. In this respect, the Enlightenment owed much to René Descartes, the Father of Modern Philosophy, whose concept of clear and distinct ideas derived from reason profoundly influenced Enlightenment thought (Caponigri, 1963). Once again, this demonstrates that the discourse of rationalism, understood as a historical and sociological dynamic, occupied a dominant position in European civilization. The intellectual origins of the Enlightenment can be traced partly to the development of Cartesian rationalism in France and partly to the evolution of the English empirical tradition (Caponigri, 1963).

The Enlightenment represented the intellectual maturation of the Renaissance. In this regard, Immanuel Kant, one of the greatest German philosophers of the period, argued that the Enlightenment was humanity's emergence from a state of self-imposed immaturity, brought about by the failure to make use of its own faculty of reason. Accordingly, the Enlightenment adopted the motto *Sapere aude* ("Dare to think for yourself") (Hadiwijono, 1995) (Bertens, 1988). Although the Enlightenment spread throughout Europe, it assumed different forms in different countries. In England, it developed as a dynamic and creative intellectual movement; in France, it generated profound criticism of existing social, political, and ecclesiastical institutions, thereby contributing to the conditions that culminated in the French Revolution of 1789. In Germany, by contrast, the Enlightenment evolved in a relatively moderate and orderly manner (Hadiwijono, 1995).

A closer examination of the Enlightenment in Germany reveals its particularly profound influence. It was in Germany that the leading proponents of rationalism were most firmly established, where their ideas contributed to the transformation of Protestant Christianity and influenced the development of public administration. In Prussia, now part of modern Germany, particularly during the reign of Frederick II (Frederick the Great), the Enlightenment was officially embraced as a guiding philosophy in politics, religion, and government (Brunschwig, 1974). The German Enlightenment was characterized by three principal features: rationalist philosophy, religious tolerance, and enlightened absolutism. It was this last characteristic that distinguished the German Enlightenment from its counterparts elsewhere in Europe².

The Enlightenment produced numerous influential thinkers, scientists, and philosophers across Europe. In England, prominent figures included Thomas Chubb, William Wollaston, and David Hume (1711-1776), whose philosophical thought was closely associated with Deism (Bertens, 1988).³ In France, the Enlightenment assumed a more radical character through the development of materialism, while also drawing inspiration from English Deist thought. Among its leading figures were Voltaire (1694-1778), Charles de Montesquieu (1689-1755), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). Germany, meanwhile, produced some of the Enlightenment's greatest philosophers, including Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), along with many other distinguished intellectuals whose contributions cannot all be discussed here.

² The author suggests that the concept of "enlightened despotism" may have provided the intellectual inspiration for the emergence of constitutional monarchy as a form of government.

³ Deism is the belief that God exists and created the universe but does not intervene in its subsequent operation or in human affairs.



Romanticism and the Limitations of the Enlightenment

For historians, the concept of Romanticism is both important and difficult to define. It is important because understanding its essential characteristics enables scholars to distinguish it from other intellectual movements, such as Classicism. At the same time, it is difficult because Romanticism cannot be reduced to a single, precise definition (Honderich, 1995). The term Romantic was originally associated with 18th-century discussions of fictional literature, in which the growing popularity of the novel was accompanied by an increasing appreciation for imaginative narratives. In the 17th century, however, the term Romantic was primarily used to refer to medieval romances and the epic poems of Ludovico Ariosto and Torquato Tasso (Yolton, Porter, Rogers, & Stafford, 1992).

The discourse of Romanticism therefore originated in literature and the arts, with its roots extending back to the Middle Ages. However, it was not until the beginning of the 19th century that Romanticism became firmly established as a defining characteristic of the works of prominent writers and artists. The term gained wider recognition after Thomas Rymer translated the French expression *poésie romanesque* as Romantick Poetry in 1674 (Yolton, Porter, Rogers, & Stafford, 1992). Over time, Romanticism expanded beyond literature, art, and music to influence religion, moral values, political thought, and philosophy (Honderich, 1995). As an intellectual movement, it emerged as a counterpart to the Enlightenment and, in many respects, as a reaction to the ideals of rationalism and intellectualism that dominated the Enlightenment.

The German writer Novalis was among the first to popularize the term Romantic, interpreting it as the art of writing romance. In the development of Romanticism as a broader intellectual conception, significant contributions were also made by the German brothers Friedrich Schlegel and August Wilhelm Schlegel (Yolton, Porter, Rogers, & Stafford, 1992). In comparison with other fields, Romanticism developed most rapidly in literature and the arts. A central theme of Romantic art was the restoration of art to its fundamental role in expressing the human psyche (Caponigri, 1963).

In the political sphere, Romanticism generally centered on evaluating the experience of the French Revolution of 1789 and its relationship to democratic institutions (Caponigri, 1963). Nevertheless, the political implications of Romanticism varied considerably from one country to another. In France, Romanticism was closely associated with efforts to preserve and sustain the principles of the Revolution. In Germany, by contrast, political movements were regarded as "Romantic" when they opposed Napoleon as a usurper of political power while also rejecting the French Revolution, both of which were perceived as products of what was described as "*a conspiracy of Enlighteners*." (Caponigri, 1963)⁴

The retrospective orientation of German Romanticism and the future-oriented perspective of French Romanticism found a distinctive expression in Britain. Edmund Burke, one of the leading proponents of English Romanticism, consistently advocated gradual social progress and the expansion of liberty. In England, Romanticism was expressed primarily through aesthetic concerns, although it also encompassed broader social and political themes (Caponigri, 1963).

Romanticism represents a fundamental worldview and attitude toward the possibilities of human existence. Consequently, it developed into a philosophical discourse encompassing themes such as history, art, and the various dimensions of human experience. As a philosophical discourse, Romanticism is characterized by a synthetic methodological approach, giving rise to doctrines commonly described as spiritualism or actualism. These doctrines emphasize that the essence of human beings lies in their capacity for creative activity and value formation (Caponigri, 1963). Romantic philosophy cannot be separated from the influence of Immanuel Kant's critique of pure reason, which, to a considerable extent, supported the Romantic aspiration to create "*room for faith*." In this context, Kant also distinguished between reason (*Vernunft*) and understanding (*Verstand*) (Honderich, 1995). Following Kant, German Idealist philosophers such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel made significant contributions to the development and flourishing of Romanticism.

⁴ Here, Romanticism appears as an effective and immediate return to history, presenting a more concrete conception of humanity than the abstract humanism of the Enlightenment, which found expression in Napoleon's cosmopolitan imperialism.



According to John Stuart Mill, Romanticism emerged as a reaction to the limitations of the 18th century, which was dominated by the discourse of rationalism. It developed along the intellectual trajectory between Immanuel Kant and Hegel by rejecting the connection between the concept of the thing in itself (*Ding an sich*) and the Cartesian construction of a comprehensive system of reason (Caponigri, 1963). As a critique and antithesis of the intellectualism and rationalism that had elevated the authority of reason and dominated the Enlightenment, Romanticism can be understood as the product of the social, cultural, political, and moral crises, as well as the intellectual limitations, that characterized the closing decades of the 18th century (Brunschwig, 1974).

CONCLUSION

From the perspective of philosophical discourse, Rationalism emerged as an epistemological tradition that emphasized reason as the primary source of knowledge and truth. Since its formulation by René Descartes in the first half of the 17th century, Rationalism developed beyond a philosophical doctrine into a dominant intellectual discourse that profoundly influenced various aspects of European civilization, particularly during the 17th and 18th centuries. As the intellectual foundation of the Enlightenment, Rationalism shaped scientific inquiry, philosophical thought, and broader conceptions of social progress. In a broader historical and sociological sense, it also represented a worldview characterized by confidence in the capacity of human reason to understand reality and promote human advancement, a tendency whose origins can be traced back to the late Middle Ages.

By the end of the 18th century, however, the Enlightenment encountered a series of intellectual, social, and cultural crises that gave rise to Romanticism as a response to the perceived limitations of Rationalism and Enlightenment intellectualism. Romanticism emphasized values that contrasted with the rationalist outlook, including the concrete rather than the abstract, diversity rather than uniformity, the infinite rather than the finite, the natural rather than the artificial, the organic rather than the mechanical, and freedom rather than rigid rules and constraints. Like Rationalism, Romanticism extended beyond philosophy to shape social, religious, cultural, and political thought, while exerting a particularly profound influence on art, literature, and music. Together, Rationalism and Romanticism represent two interconnected intellectual traditions whose interaction significantly shaped the development of modern European civilization.

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