# T. C. W. Blanning, Short Oxford History of Europe: The Eighteenth Century, 1688-1815, pp. 3-5

[E]ighteenth-century culture was, of course, much more than state propaganda. Indeed, it offers an attractive alternative point of entry for understanding the period. In western, northern, and central Europe at least, it was just then that the ability to read and write ceased to be the preserve of a small élite and became accepted as a desirable and realizable goal for everyone. By 1800 adult literacy rates exceeded 50 per cent in many places, and reactionaries such as the Austrian aristocrat Count Auersperg, who told Emperor Leopold II in 1790 that education should be confined to nobles and that 'the mass of the people must remain stupid and pious', were in a dwindling minority. It was a development that caused a seismic shift in European culture. If representational complexes exemplified by Versailles did not disappear overnight, the values they represented faced a growing challenge. To meet the requirements of the newly literate, a flood of novels, periodicals, pamphlets, and newspapers poured from the presses. In France, the number of titles doubled between mid-century and the outbreak of the Revolution, while in Germany it has been estimated that more than half a million publications of various kinds appeared during the course of the century.

Two characteristics of what can reasonably be called a cultural revolution should be noted. First, culture became increasingly commercialized. Access was no longer governed by royal, aristocratic, or clerical patrons but depended solely on the consumer's ability to pay. Of course 'culture as commodity' was not the invention of the eighteenth century—Londoners had paid for admission to Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, for example—but the scale and scope of the expansion constituted a real watershed in European history. Secondly, the increase in the number of active participants created a new kind of cultural space—the public sphere. Situated between the private world of the family and the official world of the state, the public sphere was a forum in which previously isolated individuals could come together to exchange information, ideas, and criticism. Whether communicating with each other at long range by subscribing to the same periodicals, or meeting face to face in a coffee house (very much an eighteenth-century phenomenon) or in one of the new voluntary associations, such as a reading club or Masonic lodge, the public acquired a collective weight far greater than the sum of its individual members.

It was from the public sphere that a new source of authority emerged to challenge the opinion-makers—or rather opinion dictators—of the old regime: public opinion. By the middle of the eighteenth century, it was already clear that a new arbiter had emerged. In 1747, for example, La Font de Saint Yenne (usually regarded as the first modern art critic) wrote: 'It is only in the mouths of those firm and equitable men who compose the public... that we can find the language of truth.' Even the chief government censor in France, Malesherbes, recognized that in the literary world 'only the public is entitled to judge'. And not only in the literary world: having cut its teeth criticizing paintings or novels, the public moved on to politics. The timing of this transition naturally varied across Europe. First in the field were Britain and the Dutch Republic, for they had in common relatively high rates of literacy and urbanization and enjoyed a relatively liberal censorship regime. *Mutatis mutandis*, at the other extreme and the other end of Europe, it is next to impossible to find anything resembling a public sphere or public opinion in Russia before the nineteenth century. Yet even there the German born Catherine the Great was at pains to cultivate a Russian image, out of deference to national sensitivities.

No less than war, the influence of public opinion was ubiquitous. Indeed, public opinion often had to be taken into account before states decided to go to war, Even before the French Revolution institutionalized public opinion as a determinant of foreign policy, its influence could make itself felt. It helped to propel a reluctant Sir Robert Walpole into making war in 1739 and helped to propel a reluctant George III into making peace in 1783. The developments that underpinned the emergence of public opinion were perhaps even more influential in promoting social and economic change, for they promoted that mobility which destabilized the static society of orders. As Sheilagh Ogilvie tells us below, 'societies constrained economies as much as economies revolutionized society', so this cultural shift had important economic consequences. So it did for Europe's relations with the rest of the world. On the one hand, it helped to generate a popular imperialism more ambitious than anything seen hitherto; on the other hand, it helped to make colonists less inclined to accept metropolitan subjection. In other words, by promoting literacy and thus the formation of public opinion as an alternative source of legitimacy, authoritarian governments were digging their own graves, both at home and abroad.

So, whether a political, social, economic, or cultural point of entry is chosen for access to the eighteenth century, the fluidity of these categories will soon become apparent. Within each of them too, boundaries were in a constant state of flux, as power relationships waxed and waned.