

The Enlightenment and Revolutions 1550-1800

THE STORY MATTERS...

The Scientific Revolution led to the Enlightenment, a major European intellectual movement that applied reason to all human experience. The English mathematician Sir Isaac Newton was a key figure in the Scientific Revolution. His fundamental scientific insight, that the physical world operated according to natural laws discovered through scientific investigation, influenced every area of Enlightenment thought.

Lesson 21-2

The Ideas of the Enlightenment

READING HELPDESK

Academic Vocabulary

generation arbitrary

Content Vocabulary

philosophe

separation of powers Deism *laissez-faire*
social contract salons Rococo

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Why do new ideas often spark change?
- How do new ways of thinking affect the way people respond to their surroundings?

IT MATTERS BECAUSE

Applying the scientific method to their physical world, Enlightenment thinkers, or *philosophes*, reexamined all aspects of life – from government and justice to religion and women’s rights. They created a movement that influenced the entire Western world.

New Social Sciences

GUIDING QUESTION *What role did philosophes play in the Enlightenment? How did the belief in logic and reason promote the beginnings of the social sciences??*

The Enlightenment was an eighteenth-century philosophical movement of intellectuals who were greatly impressed with the achievements of the Scientific Revolution. One of the favorite words of these intellectuals was reason. By this, they meant the application of the scientific method to an understanding of all life. They hoped that by using the scientific method, they could make progress toward a better society than the one they had inherited. Reason, natural law, hope, progress – these were common words to the thinkers of the Enlightenment. The ideas of the Enlightenment would become a force for reform and eventually revolution.

The intellectuals of the Enlightenment were especially influenced by the ideas of two seventeenth-century Englishmen – John Locke and Isaac Newton. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke argued that every person was born with a tabula rasa, or blank mind. Locke’s ideas suggested that people were molded by the experiences that came through their senses from the surrounding world. Enlightenment thinkers began to believe that if environments

were changed and people were exposed to the right influences, then they could be changed to create a new, and better, society. The ideas of Isaac Newton also influenced eighteenth-century intellectuals. Newton believed that the physical world and everything in it was like a giant “world machine,” operating according to natural laws that could be uncovered through systematic investigation.

The Enlightenment thinkers reasoned that if Newton was able to discover the natural laws that governed the physical world, then by applying his scientific methods, they would be able to discover the natural laws that governed human society. If all institutions would then follow these natural laws, the result would be an ideal society.

The Role of Philosophy

The intellectuals of the Enlightenment were known by the French word **philosophe** (FEE • luh • ZAWF) meaning “philosopher.” Not all philosophers were French, however, and few were philosophers in the strict sense of the term. They were writers, professors, journalists, economists, and above all, social reformers. They came chiefly from the nobility and the middle class.

Most leaders of the Enlightenment were French, although the English had provided the philosophical inspiration for the movement. It was the French *philosophes* who affected intellectuals elsewhere and created a movement that influenced the entire Western world.

To the *philosophes*, the role of philosophy was to change the world. The use of reason and a spirit of rational criticism were to be applied to everything, including religion and politics. In the first half of the eighteenth century, three individuals dominated the intellectual landscape – Montesquieu (MAHN • tuhs • KYOO), Voltaire, and Diderot (dee • DROH).

Montesquieu

Charles-Louis de Secondat, the baron de Montesquieu, was a French noble. His famous work *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) was a study of governments. In it, Montesquieu tried to find the natural laws that govern the social and political relationships of human beings.

Montesquieu stated that England’s government had three branches: the executive (the monarch), the legislative

(Parliament), and the judicial (the courts of law). The government functioned through a **separation of powers**. In this separation, the executive, legislative, and judicial powers of the government limit and control each other in a system of checks and balances. By preventing anyone person or group from gaining too much power, this system provides the greatest freedom and security for the state.

The system of checks and balances through separation of powers was Montesquieu's most lasting contribution to political thought. Translation of his work into English made it available to American *philosophes*, who worked his principles into the United States Constitution.

Voltaire

The greatest figure of the Enlightenment was François-Marie Arouet, known simply as Voltaire. A Parisian, Voltaire came from a prosperous middle-class family. His numerous writings during the eighteenth century brought him both fame and wealth.

Voltaire was well known for his criticism of Christianity. He often challenged the actions of the Church, one of the most powerful institutions of the time. He had a strong belief in religious toleration, fighting against religious intolerance in France. Voltaire championed **deism**, an eighteenth-century religious philosophy based on reason and natural law. Deism built on the idea of the Newtonian world machine. In the Deists' view, a mechanic (God) had created the universe. To Voltaire and most other *philosophes*, the universe was like a clock. God, the clockmaker, had created it, set it in motion, and allowed it to run without his interference and according to its own natural laws.

Diderot

Denis Diderot went to the University of Paris. His father hoped Denis would pursue a career in law or the Church. He did neither. Instead, he became a writer, covering many subjects. Diderot's most famous contribution to the Enlightenment was the *Encyclopedia*, or *Classified Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Trades*, a 28-volume collection of knowledge that he edited. Published between 1751 and 1772, the purpose of the Encyclopedia, according to Diderot, was to "change the general way of thinking."

The *Encyclopedia* became a weapon against the old French society. Many of its articles attacked religious superstition and supported religious toleration. Others called for social, legal, and political reforms. Sold to doctors, clergymen, teachers, and lawyers, the Encyclopedia spread Enlightenment ideas.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Summarizing What roles did Adam Smith believe the government should fulfill in society?

New Social Sciences

GUIDING QUESTION How did the belief in logic and reason promote the beginnings of the social sciences?

The *philosophes*, as we have seen, believed that Newton's methods could be used to discover the natural laws underlying all areas of human life. This led to what we would call the social sciences – areas such as economics and political science.

The Physiocrats and Scottish philosopher Adam Smith have been viewed as the founders of the modern social science of economics. The Physiocrats, a French group, were interested in identifying the natural economic laws that governed human society. They maintained that if individuals were free to pursue their own economic self-interest, all society would benefit. The state, then, should not interrupt the free play of natural economic forces by imposing regulations on the economy. Instead, the state should leave the economy alone. This doctrine became known by its French name, **laissez-faire** (LEH • SAY • FEHR), meaning "to let (people) do (what they want)."

The best statement of *laissez-faire* was made in 1776 by Adam Smith in his famous work, *The Wealth of Nations*. Like the Physiocrats, Smith believed that the state should not interfere in economic matters. Indeed, Smith gave to government only three basic roles. First, it should protect society from invasion (the function of the army). Second, the government should defend citizens from injustice (the function of the police). And finally, it should keep up certain public works that private individuals alone could not afford – roads and canals, for example – but which are necessary for social interaction and trade.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Summarizing What roles did Adam Smith believe the government should fulfill in society?

The Spread of Ideas

GUIDING QUESTION How did Enlightenment ideas influence society and culture?

By the late 1760s, a new generation of *philosophes* had come to maturity. Ideas about liberty and the condition of women were spread through an increasingly literate society.

The Social Contract

The most famous *philosophe* of the later Enlightenment was Jean-Jacques Rousseau (ru • SOH). In his *Discourse on the Origins of the Inequality of Mankind*, Rousseau argued that people had adopted laws and government in order to preserve their private property. In the process, they had become enslaved by government and needed to regain their freedom.

In his major work *The Social Contract*, published in 1762, Rousseau presented his concept of the **social contract**. Through a social contract, an entire society agrees to be governed by its general will. Individuals who wish instead to follow their own self-interests must be forced to abide by the general will. "This means nothing less than that [they] will be forced to be free," said Rousseau. Thus, liberty is achieved by being forced to follow what is best for "the

general will” because the general will represents what is best for the entire community.

Unlike many Enlightenment thinkers, Rousseau believed that emotions, as well as reason, were important to human development. He sought a balance between heart and mind, between emotions and reason.

Women’s Rights

For centuries, male intellectuals had argued that the nature of women made them inferior to men and made male domination of women necessary. By the eighteenth century, however, female thinkers began to express their ideas about improving the condition of women. Mary Wollstonecraft, an English writer, advanced the strongest statement for the rights of women. Many see her as the founder of the modern European and American movements for women’s rights.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Wollstonecraft identified two problems with the views of many Enlightenment thinkers. She noted that the same people who argued that women must obey men also said that government based on the arbitrary power of monarchs over their subjects was wrong. Wollstonecraft pointed out that the power of men over women was equally wrong.

Wollstonecraft further argued that the Enlightenment was based on an ideal of reason in all human beings. Therefore, because women have reason, they are entitled to the same rights as men. Women, Wollstonecraft declared, should have equal rights in education, as well as in economic and political life.

The Growth of Reading

Of great importance to the Enlightenment was the spread of its ideas to the literate elite of European society. The growth of both publishing and the reading public during the eighteenth century was noticeable. Books had previously been aimed at small groups of the educated elite. Now many books were directed at the new reading public of the middle classes, which

included women and urban artisans. Especially appealing to these readers were the works of novelists who began to use realistic social themes. The English writer Henry Fielding wrote novels about people without morals who survive by their wits. Fielding’s best-known work is *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*, which describe the adventures of a young scoundrel. An important aspect of the growth of publishing and reading in the eighteenth century was the development of magazines and newspapers for the general public. The first daily newspaper was printed in London in 1702. Newspapers were relatively cheap and were even provided free in many coffeehouses. Coffeehouses also served as gathering places for the exchange of ideas.

Enlightenment ideas were also spread through the **salon**. Salons were the elegant drawing rooms of the wealthy upper class’s great urban houses. Invited guests gathered in these salons and took part in conversations that were often centered on the new ideas of the *philosophes*. The salons brought writers and artists together with aristocrats, government officials, and wealthy middle-class people. The women who

hosted the salons were in a position to sway political opinion and helped spread the ideas of the Enlightenment.

Religion in the Enlightenment

Although many philosophes attacked the Christian churches, most Europeans in the eighteenth century were still Christians. People also sought a deeper personal devotion to God. The desire of ordinary Protestants for greater depths of religious experience led to new religious movements.

In England, the most famous new religious and evangelical movement – Methodism – was the work of John Wesley, an Anglican minister. Wesley had a mystical experience in which “the gift of God’s grace” assured him of salvation. This experience led him to become a missionary to the English people to bring them the “glad tidings” of salvation. Wesley often preached two or three times a day.

His sermons often caused people to have conversion experiences. Many converts then joined Methodist societies to do good works. One notable reform they influenced was the abolition of the slave trade in the early 1800s. After Wesley’s death, Methodism became a separate Protestant group.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Evaluating How did Mary Wollstonecraft use the Enlightenment ideal of reason to advocate rights for women?

Enlightenment and the Arts

GUIDING QUESTION *How did Enlightenment ideas influence society and culture?*

The ideas of the Enlightenment also had an impact on the world of culture. Eighteenth-century Europe witnessed both traditional practices and important changes in art, music, and literature.

Architecture and Art

The palace of Louis XIV at Versailles, in France, had made an enormous impact on Europe as other European rulers also built grand residences. These palaces were modeled more on the Italian baroque style of the 1500s and 1600s than on the late seventeenth-century French classical style of Versailles.

One of the greatest architects of the eighteenth century was Balthasar Neumann. Neumann’s two masterpieces are the Church of the Fourteen Saints in southern Germany and the Residence, the palace of the prince bishop of Würzburg. In these buildings, secular and spiritual become one, as lavish and fanciful ornament, light, bright colors, and elaborate detail greet the visitor. The baroque and neoclassical styles that had dominated seventeenth-century art continued into the eighteenth century. By the 1730s, however, a new artistic style, known as **rococo**, had spread all over Europe. Unlike the baroque style, which stressed grandeur and power, rococo emphasized grace, charm, and gentle action. Rococo made use of delicate designs colored in gold with graceful curves. The rococo style was highly secular. Its lightness and charm spoke of the pursuit of pleasure, happiness, and love.

Rococo’s appeal is evident in the work of Antoine Watteau. In his paintings, gentlemen and ladies in elegant

dress reveal a world of upper-class pleasure and joy. Underneath that exterior, however, is an element of sadness. The artist suggests such sadness in his paintings by depicting the fragility and passing nature of pleasure, love, and life. One of his masterpieces, the Embarkation for Cythera, shows French rococo at its peak.

Music

Eighteenth-century Europe produced some of the world's most enduring music. Two geniuses of the second half of the eighteenth century, Franz Joseph Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, were innovators who wrote classical music rather than the baroque music of Bach and Handel. Haydn spent most of his adult life as musical director for wealthy Hungarian princes. Visits to England introduced

him to a world in which musicians wrote for public concerts rather than princely patrons. This "liberty," as he called it, led him to write two great works, *The Creation* and *The Seasons*.

Mozart was truly a child prodigy. He gave his first harpsichord concert at age six and wrote his first opera at twelve. His failure to get a regular patron to support him financially made his life miserable. Nevertheless, he wrote music passionately. His works *The Marriage of Figaro*, *The Magic Flute*, and *Don Giovanni* are three of the world's greatest operas. Haydn remarked to Mozart's father, "Your son is the greatest composer known to me..."

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Making Inferences How do Haydn's interests as a composer reflect the influence of Enlightenment ideas?

REVIEWING VOCABULARY

philosophe	French for "philosopher"; applied to all intellectuals during the Enlightenment
separation of powers	a form of government in which the executive, legislative, and judicial branches limit and control each other through a system of checks and balances deism an eighteenth-century religious philosophy based on reason and natural law
laissez-faire	the concept that the state should not impose government regulations but should leave the economy alone
social contract	the concept that an entire society agrees to be governed by its general will and all individuals should be forced to abide by it since it represents what is best for the entire community
salons	the elegant urban drawing rooms where, in the eighteenth century, writers, artists, aristocrats, government officials, and wealthy middle-class people gathered to discuss the ideas of the philosophes
Rococo	an artistic style that replaced baroque in the 1730s; it was highly secular, emphasizing grace, charm, and gentle action