

Enlightenment, Age of, a term used to describe the trends in thought and letters in Europe and the American colonies during the 18th century prior to the French Revolution. The phrase was frequently employed by writers of the period itself, convinced that they were emerging from centuries of darkness and ignorance into a new age enlightened by reason, science, and a respect for humanity.

The precursors of the Enlightenment can be traced to the 17th century and earlier. They include the philosophical rationalists René Descartes and Baruch Spinoza, the political philosophers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, and various skeptical thinkers in France such as Pierre Bayle. Equally important, however, were the self-confidence engendered by new discoveries in science and the spirit of cultural relativism encouraged by the exploration of the non-European world.

Of the basic assumptions and beliefs common to philosophers and intellectuals of this period, perhaps the most important was an abiding faith in the power of human reason. The age was enormously impressed by Isaac Newton's discovery of universal gravitation. If humanity could so unlock the laws of the universe, God's own laws, why could it not also discover the laws underlying all of nature and society? People came to assume that through a judicious use of reason, an unending progress would be possible—progress in knowledge, in technical achievement, and even in moral values. Following the philosophy of Locke, the 18th-century writers believed that knowledge is not innate, but comes only from experience and observation guided by reason. Through proper education, humanity itself could be altered, its nature changed for the better. A great premium was placed on the discovery of truth through the observation of nature, rather than through the study of authoritative sources, such as Aristotle and the Bible. Although they saw the church—especially the Roman Catholic church—as the principal force that had enslaved the human mind in the past, most Enlightenment thinkers did not renounce religion altogether. They opted rather for a form of Deism, accepting the existence of God and of a hereafter, but rejecting the intricacies of Christian theology. Human aspirations, they believed, should not be centered on the next life, but rather on the means of improving this life. Worldly happiness was placed before religious salvation. Nothing was attacked with more intensity and ferocity than the church, with all its wealth, political power, and suppression of the free exercise of reason.

More than a set of fixed ideas, the Enlightenment implied an attitude, a method of thought. According to the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, the motto of the age should be "Dare to know." A desire arose to reexamine and question all received ideas and values, to explore new ideas in many different directions—hence the inconsistencies and contradictions that often appear in the writings of 18th-century thinkers. Many proponents of the Enlightenment were not philosophers in the commonly accepted sense of the word; they were populizers engaged in a self-conscious effort to win converts. They liked to refer to themselves as the "party of humanity," and in an attempt to mold public opinion in their favor, they made full use of pamphlets, anonymous tracts, and the large numbers of new journals and newspapers being created. Because they were journalists and propagandists as much as true philosophers, historians often refer to them by the French word *philosophes*.

In many respects, the homeland of the philosophes was France. It was there that the political philosopher and jurist Charles de Montesquieu, one of the earliest representatives of the movement, had begun publishing various satirical works against existing institutions, as well as his monumental study of political institutions, *The Spirit of Laws* (1748; trans. 1750). It was in Paris that Denis Diderot, the author of numerous philosophical tracts, began the publication of the *Encyclopédie* (1751-1772). This work, on which numerous philosophes collaborated, was intended both as a compendium of all knowledge and as a polemical weapon, presenting the positions of the Enlightenment and attacking its opponents. The single most influential and

representative of the French writers was undoubtedly Voltaire. Beginning his career as a playwright and poet, he is best known today for his prolific pamphlets, essays, satires, and short novels, in which he popularized the science and philosophy of his age, and for his immense correspondence with writers and monarchs throughout Europe. Far more original were the works of Jean Jacques Rousseau, whose *Social Contract* (1762; trans. 1797), *Émile* (1762; trans. 1763), and *Confessions* (1782; trans. 1783) were to have a profound influence on later political and educational theory and were to serve as an impulse to 19th-century romanticism. The Enlightenment was also a profoundly cosmopolitan and antinationalistic movement with representatives in numerous other countries. Kant in Germany, David Hume in England, Cesare Beccaria in Italy, and Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson in the American colonies all maintained close contacts with the French philosophes but were important contributors to the movement in their own right.

During the first half of the 18th century, the leaders of the Enlightenment waged an uphill struggle against considerable odds. Several were imprisoned for their writings, and most were hampered by government censorship and attacks by the church. In many respects, however, the later decades of the century marked a triumph of the movement in Europe and America. By the 1770s, second-generation philosophes were receiving government pensions and taking control of established intellectual academies. The enormous increase in the publication of newspapers and books ensured a wide diffusion of their ideas. Scientific experiments and philosophical writing became fashionable among wide groups in society, including members of the nobility and the clergy. A number of European monarchs also adopted certain of the ideas or at least the vocabulary of the Enlightenment. Voltaire and other philosophes, who relished the concept of a philosopher-king enlightening the people from above, eagerly welcomed the emergence of the so-called enlightened despots, of whom Frederick II of Prussia, Catherine II of Russia, and Joseph II of Austria were the most celebrated examples. In retrospect, however, it appears that most of these monarchs used the movement in large part for propaganda purposes and were far more despotic than enlightened.

During the later 18th century certain changes in emphasis emerged in Enlightenment thought. Under the influence of Rousseau, sentiment and emotion became as respectable as reason. In the 1770s writers broadened their field of criticism to include political and economic issues. Of seminal importance in this regard was the experience of the American Revolution. In the eyes of Europeans, the Declaration of Independence and the Revolutionary War signaled that, for the first time, some individuals were going beyond the mere discussion of enlightened ideas and were actually putting them into practice. The American Revolution probably encouraged attacks and criticisms against existing European regimes.

The Age of Enlightenment is usually said to have ended with the French Revolution of 1789. Indeed, some see the social and political ferment of this period as being responsible for the Revolution. While embodying many of the ideals of the philosophes, the Revolution in its more violent stages (1792-94) served to discredit these ideals temporarily in the eyes of many European contemporaries. Yet the Enlightenment left a lasting heritage for the 19th and 20th centuries. It marked a key stage in the decline of the church and the growth of modern secularism. It served as the model for political and economic liberalism and for humanitarian reform throughout the 19th-century Western world. It was the watershed for the pervasive belief in the possibility and the necessity of progress that survived, if only in attenuated form, into the 20th century.

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CHAPTER 5

The European Enlightenment

The period of the European Enlightenment derives its name from writers who believed that they were entering a new period of European history. Reason, broadly understood, would in the future guide the actions of governments and other social institutions. Because of the progress made in science, the authors of the Enlightenment were convinced that they had found laws that were applicable to all areas of human behavior.

Voltaire sounded the call of the Enlightenment in his statement, "This century begins to see the triumph of reason." He and other writers of the age were quite a different breed of thinkers than those who led the Renaissance, Europe's last great intellectual movement. Renaissance scholars looked for truth through an examination of the literature of ancient Greece and Rome. The Enlightenment drew its inspiration from the work of the seventeenth century's mathematicians and scientists. For them the discoveries of this period were of such magnitude that they demanded reexamination of human existence.

Personalities of the Enlightenment

The proponents of the Enlightenment were a talented elite to whom the French word *philosophes* has been given. To be a philosophe was to be a lover of wisdom, to belong to an international community of scholars anxious to "enlighten" their fellow men and women. They corresponded with one another to compare their latest views and to announce their most recent publications. Frequent travel was another mark of the Enlightenment's thinkers that enabled them to make their observations.

Most of the philosophes were French, with a generous sprinkling of Englishmen, Scots, Germans, and Italians. Few were found in Spain, Scandinavia, or East Europe where there was less interest in reforming society. Many of the philosophes gathered in the salons of Paris where wealthy women supervised the discussions of their guests.

The most influential of the early philosophes, Charles Louis de Secondat, the Baron de Montesquieu, was a many-sided man. A lawyer of Bordeaux, he was an avid reader of Isaac Newton and John Locke. In 1721 he published anonymously *The Persian Letters*, a fictional account of two Persians traveling through France and their observations on the country's government and religion.

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Baron de Montesquieu
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power in government.

To Montesquieu, the British Parliament was a model of good government. In 1748 he published *The Spirit of the Laws*, in which he argued that Great Britain's separation of powers between executive, judicial, and legislative branches of government was the key to British political achievement.

One of France's best-known philosophes was Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Born in a watchmaker's family of Geneva, his relatives raised him without much supervision. At 16 he ran away from home, arriving in Paris without a job. He and his mistress, Thérèse Levasseur, had five children; all of them were placed in foundling homes.

Rousseau gained sudden fame when he was given a prize for his essay, "Discourse on the Arts and Sciences," in which he held that civilization corrupted people. He lived under the motto, "Everything is naturally good if left alone." Rousseau idealized the past when, he believed, civilization and its institutions had still not corrupted men and women. For him the "noble savage" was the ideal, free to choose his or her way of life untrammelled by laws and traditions that other people wanted to impose.

Rousseau was a strong advocate of universal education, believing it to be the foundation of a nation's prosperity. Although hardly a model for parenting himself, in *Émile, or an Essay on Education*, he urged that children find their own way, only learning things when they have an interest. Above all, no memorization should be required of a child.

Rousseau's *Social Contract* became one of the most influential political works ever written. His political theories attacked the monarchical principle, holding that all citizens are equal. The accident of birth that brought European kings to power was rejected as contrary to reason. The *Social Contract* later provided the slogan for the French Revolution, the struggle for "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity."

François Arouet, better known as Voltaire, was another of the Enlightenment's popular authors. Voltaire was a man of great energy and a prodigious writer. His works fill over a hundred volumes on a wide variety of subjects: drama, history, poetry, politics, and religion. During his youth he spent time in prison for attacks on Louis XV's regent, an incident that turned him to call vigorously for a reform of the French government. Much

Hume advanced the idea that all religions were of little value, arising out of human hopes and fears, the product of imagination. Only one area of human knowledge was certain, because it rested on evidence that could not be challenged. This was mathematics. Otherwise, all else was uncertain, for evidence was neither sufficient nor convincing.

Prussia's contribution to the Enlightenment came from Immanuel Kant, a teacher of philosophy in the city of Königsburg (now Kaliningrad in Russia). Kant published his ideas in two volumes, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, printed in 1781, and *The Critique of Practical Reason*, a work that appeared seven years later. While acknowledging that information comes from sense perception, Kant believed that reason, an innate quality, was alone responsible for conceptualization. Certain concepts were absolute, "whose truth or falsity cannot be discovered or confirmed by any experience." Priority was given to the categorical imperative of duty. A person's most impelling motivation depends on doing what one must. Kant defined duty as "the necessity to act out of reverence for the law."

Cesare Bonesana, Marchese of Beccaria, an Italian jurist and economist, took up another issue of concern to Enlightened thinkers. How should penal laws be reformed? His work *On Crimes and Punishment* urged a reform of the harsh and strict laws that punished so many minor crimes against property.

Although the major individuals of the Enlightenment have already been listed, dozens of others espoused the reforms advocated by these dominant thinkers. The only idea that appealed to all was abiding skepticism toward established institutions.

Basically, the Enlightened critics wanted a political reform that ensured that all men, but not yet women, should be treated equally before the law and their rights as citizens acknowledged. They urged that ethics replace religion, democracy supplant absolutism, and education of all male citizens dislodge the general governmental indifference to learning.

It is important to note that none of the prominent Enlightened authors had a political career but preferred to follow a private life of writing. Their most important legacy was to appear in the future, in the American and French Revolutions, which drew from them their guiding principles.

Politics in the British Isles

The British government enjoyed remarkable stability during the eighteenth century, despite a series of ineffective kings of German ancestry from Hanover. Parliament was in control, with landowners and merchants lining up in either the Whig or Tory parties.

The elections that entitled members to a seat in Commons were hardly fair. Some districts were "owned" by individuals; others were won because of bribery. Half the seats were controlled by a handful of people. Interest groups saw to it that candidates supporting them would not lose, donating sums of money to guarantee that result.

The House of Lords, made up of titled nobles and the Church of England's bishops, was generally Whig in sentiment, filled with the descendants of those who effected the Glorious Revolution. They supported the