

The Enlightenment

Except our own thoughts, there is nothing absolutely in our power.

—René Descartes (1596 -1650)

Essential Question: How did the Enlightenment shape the intellectual and ideological thinking that affected reform and revolution after 1750?

As empires expanded and trade routes led to more interactions, intellectuals in the 17th and 18th centuries such as Descartes began to emphasize reason over tradition and individualism over community values. These shifts were called the **Enlightenment**. The ideals of this movement, such as individualism, freedom, and self-determination, challenged the roles of monarchs and church leaders and planted the seeds of revolution in the United States, France, and around the world.

An Age of New Ideas

Growing out of the Scientific Revolution and the humanism of the Renaissance, Enlightenment thought was optimistic. Many writers believed that applying reason to natural laws would result in progress. While not denying the existence of God, they emphasized human accomplishments in understanding the natural world. Such beliefs led to the conclusion that natural laws governed the social and political spheres as well. While traditional religion did not disappear, it became less pervasive.

New ideas emerged about how to improve society. Schools of thought including *socialism* and *liberalism* arose, giving rise to the period being called “the Age of Isms.” Opposing socialism and liberalism were the currents of *conservatism*, particularly popular among the European ruling class. (All of these “isms” are defined later in this topic.)

The clash between new ideas and old political structures led to revolutions that often had two aims: independence from imperial powers and constitutional representation. The breakup of empires and the emergence of new forms of government often followed. These developed out of the concept of **nationalism**, a feeling of intense loyalty to others who share one’s language and culture. The idea that people who share a culture should also live in an independent nation-state threatened to destroy all of Europe’s multiethnic empires.

New Ideas and Their Roots

In the 17th century, Francis Bacon emphasized empirical methods of scientific inquiry. **Empiricism** is the belief that knowledge comes from sensed experience, from what you observe through your experience, including through experiments. Rather than relying on reasoning about principles provided by tradition or religion, Bacon based his conclusions on his observation of natural data.

Hobbes and Locke In the same century, philosophers Thomas Hobbes (author of *Leviathan*, 1651) and **John Locke** (author of *Two Treatises of Government*, 1690) viewed political life as the result of a **social contract**. Hobbes argued that people's natural state was to live in a bleak world in which life was "nasty, brutish, and short." However, by agreeing to a social contract, they gave up some rights to a strong central government in return for law and order.

Locke, on the other hand, argued that the social contract implied the right, even the responsibility, of citizens to revolt against unjust government. Locke thought that people had natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of property. Another of Locke's influential ideas is found in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), in which he proposed that a child was born with a mind like a "blank slate" (**tabula rasa**) waiting to be filled with knowledge. In a world in which most people believed that an individual's intelligence, personality, and fate were heavily determined by their ancestry, Locke's emphasis on environment and education in shaping people was radical.

The Philosophes In the 18th century, a new group of thinkers and writers who came to be called the **philosophes** explored social, political, and economic theories in new ways. In doing so, they popularized concepts that they felt followed rationally upon those of the scientific thinkers of the 17th century. Taking their name from the French word *philosophe* ("philosopher"), these writers included Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin from America, Adam Smith from Scotland, and several French thinkers

Of particular importance to writers of the new constitutions in France and America in the 18th and 19th centuries were the ideas of **Baron Montesquieu**. His famous work *The Spirit of Laws* (1748) praised the British government's use of checks on power because it had a Parliament. Montesquieu thus influenced the American system, which adopted his ideas by separating its executive branch (the president) from its legislative branch (Congress) and both from its third branch (the federal judiciary).

Francois-Marie Arouet, pen name **Voltaire**, is perhaps best known for his social satire *Candide* (1762). He was famous during his lifetime for his wit and for his advocacy of civil liberties. Exiled for three years due to a conflict with a member of the French aristocracy, Voltaire lived in England long enough to develop an appreciation for its constitutional monarchy and a regard for civil rights. He brought these ideas back to France, where he campaigned for



religious liberty and judicial reform. His correspondence with heads of state (such as Catherine the Great of Russia and Frederick the Great of Prussia) and his extensive writings, including articles in Diderot's *Encyclopedia*, are still quoted today. His idea of religious liberty influenced the U.S. Constitution.

A contemporary of Voltaire was the writer **Jean-Jacques Rousseau**, who expanded on the idea of the social contract as it had passed down through the work of Hobbes and Locke. One of Rousseau's early works was *Emile, or On Education* (1762) in which he laid out his ideas on child-rearing and education. A later work, *The Social Contract* (1762), presented the concept of the General Will of a population and the obligation of a sovereign to carry out that General Will. An optimist who believed that society could improve, Rousseau inspired many revolutionaries of the late 18th century.

Adam Smith One of the most influential thinkers of the Enlightenment was **Adam Smith**. In his book *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Smith responded to mercantilism by calling for freer trade. While Smith did support some government regulations and saw the benefits of taxes, he generally advocated

for **laissez-faire**, a French phrase for "leave alone." This approach meant that governments should reduce their intervention in economic decisions. Smith believed that if businesses and consumers were allowed to make choices in their own interests, the "invisible hand" of the market would guide them to make choices beneficial for society. His ideas provided a foundation for **capitalism**, an economic system in which the means of production, such as factories and natural resources, are privately owned and are



Source: Getty Images

Adam Smith was one of the first modern economists.

operated for profit. (Connect: Create a chart or Venn diagram that compares and contrasts mercantilism and the free market. See Topics 4.4 and 4.5.)

Deism The Enlightenment's emphasis on reason led some thinkers to reexamine the relationship of humans to God. Some adopted **Deism**, the belief that a divinity simply set natural laws in motion. Deists compared the divinity to a watchmaker who makes a watch but does not interfere in its day-to-day workings. Deists believed these laws could be best understood through



scientific inquiry rather than study of the Bible. Despite their unorthodox ideas, many Deists viewed regular church attendance as an important social obligation and a way people received moral guidance.

Thomas Paine, never one to shrink from conflict, was militant in his defense of Deism in the book *The Age of Reason* (1794). Paine’s previous work, *Common Sense* (1776), made him popular in America for advocating liberty from Britain, but his anti-church writings damaged much of his popularity.

European Intellectual Life, 1250–1789		
Period	Representative Thinkers	Characteristics
Medieval Scholasticism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used reason to defend faith • Argued through writing and debating • Relied heavily on Aristotle • Used little experimentation
Renaissance Humanism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Erasmus (1466–1536) • Mirandola (1463–1494) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wrote practical books, such as Machiavelli’s <i>The Prince</i> • Emphasized human achievements • Focused on secularism and the individual
Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Francis Bacon (1561–1626) • Isaac Newton (1642–1727) • Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) • John Locke (1632–1704) • French philosophes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasized use of empirical data • Believed in natural rights, progress, and reason • Wanted new constitutions • Supported religious toleration • Wrote for the reading public

The Age of New Ideas Continues

In Europe and America, Enlightenment thinkers reacted to the social ills caused by increasing urbanization and industrialization. Poverty in the cities increased. Poor workers lived in slums without proper sanitation and without political representation. Various writers proposed solutions to the observable problems. Some wanted more government regulations and programs, and many Christians called for greater private charity. But some conservatives blamed the poor themselves and called on them to change. **Conservatism** is a belief in traditional institutions, favoring reliance on practical experience over ideological theories, such as that of human perfectability.

Utopian Socialism The economic and political theory of **socialism** refers to a system of public or direct worker ownership of the means of production such as the mills to make cloth or the machinery and land needed to mine coal. Various branches of socialism developed in the 19th century, providing alternative visions of the social and economic future. Those who felt that society could be channeled in positive directions by setting up ideal communities were often called **utopian socialists**:

- **Henri de Saint-Simon**, of France, believed that scientists and engineers, working together with businesses, could operate clean, efficient, beautiful places to work that produced things useful to society. He also advocated for public works that would provide employment. He proposed building the Suez Canal in Egypt, a project that the French government later undertook and which opened in 1869.
- **Charles Fourier** identified some 810 passions that, when encouraged, would make work more enjoyable and workers less tired. Like other utopian socialists, Fourier believed that a fundamental principle of utopia was harmonious living in communities rather than the class struggle that was basic to the thinking of Karl Marx.
- **Robert Owen** was born in Great Britain. He established intentional communities—small societies governed by the principles of utopian socialism—in New Lanark, Scotland, and New Harmony, Indiana. He believed in education for children who worked, communal ownership of property, and community rules to govern work, education, and leisure time.

In the later 19th century, socialist groups such as the **Fabian Society** formed in England. The Fabians were gradual socialists: they favored reforming society by parliamentary means. Writers H. G. Wells, Virginia Woolf, and George Bernard Shaw were prominent Fabians. By the mid-20th century, socialist principles would influence most of Western Europe.

Classical Liberalism Others advocated **classical liberalism**, a belief in natural rights, constitutional government, laissez-faire economics, and reduced spending on armies and established churches. Most classical liberals were professionals, writers, or academics. In Britain they pursued changes in Parliament to reflect changing population patterns so that new industrial cities would have equal parliamentary representation. Classical liberals backed the Reform Bills of 1832, 1867, and 1884, all of which broadened male suffrage.

Feminism This period saw the emergence of the movement for women's rights and equality based on Enlightenment ideas. The French writer Olympe de Gouges fought for these rights in the era of the French Revolution. In 1789, France had adopted the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the (Male) Citizen," a pioneering document in the history of human rights. In 1791, de Gouges published a "Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the (Female) Citizen," to point out that women's rights had not been addressed.

In 1792 in England, the pioneering writer **Mary Wollstonecraft** published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. In it, she argued that females should receive the same education as males. Universal education, she argued, would prepare women to participate in political and professional society, enabling them to support themselves rather than relying on men. Wollstonecraft's ultimate goal was for women to gain the same rights and abilities as men through the application of reason. Women won the full right to vote in 1928.



Source: Library of Congress
Mary Wollstonecraft,
engraving by James
Heath, c. 1797 after the
painting by John Opie

In 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York, activists gathered to promote women’s rights and suffrage (the ability to vote). In the convention’s “Declaration of Sentiments,” organizers Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton declared, “All men and women are created equal.” They demanded women deserved the right to vote and hold office, hold property and manage their own incomes, and be the legal guardians of their children. The Seneca Falls Convention was a landmark in the history of the women’s rights movement.

Abolitionism Reform movements to provide rights and equality extended to the freeing of slaves and the end of serfdom. **Abolitionism**, the movement to end the Atlantic slave trade and free all enslaved people, gained followers in the 18th century. Slave trading was banned earlier than slavery itself. The first states to ban the slave trade were with Denmark in 1803, Great Britain in 1807, and the United States in 1808. In most countries, the slave system depended on a steady supply of new enslaved people in order to function. As a result, as soon as the slave trade stopped, slavery began to decline. In most parts of the Americas, slavery was abolished within 30 years of the end of the slave trade. The United States was the rare country where the number of slaves increased after the importation of slaves was legally ended. The last country in the Americas to end slavery was Brazil, in 1888.

The End of Serfdom Serfdom in Europe had been declining as the economy changed from agrarian to industrial. Peasant revolts pushed leaders toward reform. Queen Elizabeth I abolished serfdom in 1574. The French government abolished all feudal rights of the nobility in 1789. Alexander II



of Russia abolished serfdom in 1861. The Russian emancipation of 23 million serfs was the largest single emancipation of people in bondage in human history.

Zionism Yet another “ism” in the late 19th century was the emergence of **Zionism**—the desire of Jews to reestablish an independent homeland where their ancestors had lived in the Middle East. After centuries of battling **anti-Semitism**, hostility toward Jews, and pogroms—violent attacks against Jewish communities—many European Jews had concluded that living in peace and security was not a realistic hope. To be safe, Jews needed to control their own land. Leading the movement was an Austro-Hungarian Jew, **Theodor Herzl**.

Support for Zionism increased after a scandal in France known as the **Dreyfus Affair**. In 1894, Alfred Dreyfus, a military officer who was Jewish, was convicted of treason against the French government. However, the conviction had been based on forged documents by people promoting anti-Semitism. Dreyfus was ultimately pardoned after time in prison, but the case illustrated how widespread anti-Semitism was in France, one of the countries where Jews seemed least oppressed.

Zionists faced many obstacles. The land they wanted was controlled by the Ottoman Empire, and Palestinian Arabs were already living in the region. Both the Ottomans and the Palestinians were predominantly Muslim, which added a religious aspect to the conflict. However, the Zionist movement grew in strength until 1948, when the modern country of Israel was founded.

KEY TERMS BY THEME		
<p>GOVERNMENT: Reforms</p> <p>John Locke social contract tabula rasa philosophes Baron Montesquieu Voltaire Jean-Jacques Rousseau</p>	<p>CULTURE: Isms</p> <p>Enlightenment deism liberalism conservatism empiricism nationalism classical liberalism feminism abolitionism Zionism anti-Semitism Theodor Herzl (Zionism) Dreyfus Affair</p>	<p>ECONOMY: Reforms</p> <p>Adam Smith <i>The Wealth of Nations</i> laissez-faire capitalism socialism utopian socialists Henri de Saint-Simon Charles Fourier Robert Owen Fabian Society</p>