5.1: The Enlightenment

The 18th-century European intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment included philosophers and artists such as Voltaire, Baron de Montesquieu, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who, inspired by the advances of the Scientific Revolution, insisted that reason could lead to progress in all aspects of societies. Determined to root out superstition and religious dogma, they sought to end religious persecution, slavery, and serfdom. At the same time, they proposed new models for legal systems, education, economics, and government.

Newton and Locke
English scientist Isaac Newton laid an important foundation for the Enlightenment with his explanation of gravitation and three laws of motion. Newton’s contributions provided a framework for understanding the motions of not only billiard and cannon balls but also the motions of the planets, comets, and other heavenly bodies. His successful application of reason to the natural world inspired many Enlightenment thinkers in science and also in political philosophy, since it helped inspire the idea that reason should also be applied to improving social systems.

The Enlightenment thinkers also took inspiration from Newton’s friend John Locke, a leading 17th-century philosopher and founder of the school of empiricism. Offering a “scientific” model of mind, he proposed that all humans begin life as blank slates and slowly absorb impressions through their senses. This concept had radical political implications, particularly in nations ruled by aristocrats and tradition, as it suggested that all humans are equal at birth. Locke rejected absolutism and the divine right of kings and insisted that in a state of nature humans had rights that should be surrendered to governments only to ensure mutual protection.

French Philosophers
Empiricism indicated that rational principles could replace traditional beliefs and customs and encouraged the Enlightenment thinkers in France known as the philosophes. These philosophers, novelists, and playwrights sought to critique the status quo and employ science and reason to enact political and social reforms.

While Enlightenment thinkers could be found throughout Europe, the movement was largely based in France where it included such key figures as Voltaire and the Baron de Montesquieu. Known for his critical eye and savage wit, Voltaire wrote works in which he critiqued society’s cruelty, injustice, and superstition while promoting Enlightenment theories of social improvement. Montesquieu wrote works that skewered contemporary France and court life as well as works of political philosophy. He provided a history of law, classified and defined different forms of government, and suggested that liberty was heightened when the executive, legislative, and legal branches of government were clearly separated. His work provided a model for other theorists of democracy, including the framers of the U.S. Constitution.

Enlightened Absolutism
Although Enlightenment thinkers were critical of monarchy and its excesses as well as of aristocratic privileges, they enjoyed the patronage of many rulers who were considered "enlightened absolutists," including Frederick II of Prussia and Holy Roman emperor Joseph II. Enlightenment thinkers encouraged these rulers to use their power to heighten social justice in their realms.

These rulers were keen on adopting reforms to ensure that their nations thrived and to use as a wedge against powerful aristocracies. Frederick II, for example, allowed non-nobles to become military officers and government officials, and he also abolished serfdom on Crown lands. Joseph II created a universal education system that increased the pool from which to draw government bureaucrats.

Legacy
The ideas and achievements of the Enlightenment have had enormous and enduring consequences, including the establishment of the United States as a democratic republic, the French Revolution, the Latin American wars of independence, and continuing demands for human rights. The age of political revolutions led to conservative backlashes, as well as artistic backlashes in such movements in arts and letters as Romanticism, which cultivated emotion over reason.

The Enlightenment thinkers' privileging of reason over tradition proved to be a genuine revolutionary force, reshaping societies for centuries. As the Industrial Revolution developed, science became even more clearly the guiding force of civilization. The principles of the Enlightenment were adopted by proponents of liberalism, such as John Stuart Mill and, later, John Dewey in the U.S. Reconfiguring the Enlightenment program for the 20th century, Dewey insisted that progress was made through restructuring institutions based on scientific knowledge to heighten opportunities for discovery, liberty, and personal growth.

5.2: Ideas of the Enlightenment

The Enlightenment was a movement led by 18th-century European thinkers. They included storytellers, editors, playwrights, critics, and philosophers. The most famous group of Enlightenment thinkers were the French *philosophes*. The Enlightenment varied from country to country, and the thinkers disagreed on many subjects. However, they shared many basic ideas. The goal of the Enlightenment thinkers was to enlighten—or inform—the public. They aimed to convince others of their ideas. Their hope was to crush superstition, intolerance, and slavery. They wanted to make people "freer, richer, and more civilized."

Criticism was at the heart of the intellectuals' efforts. Enlightenment thinkers aimed to criticize everything. They examined *monarchy*, religion, government, education, law, prisons, history—even human nature. One philosopher called his time "the very age of criticism."

Roots of Enlightenment Thinking

Two great thinkers of the 1600s helped to set the stage for the Enlightenment. They were both from England: the scientist Sir Isaac Newton and the philosopher John Locke.

Newton used painstaking experiments to test mathematical ideas. One of his most important discoveries was the law of *gravity*. His work helped to explain the universe—the movement of planets and stars and the nature of light. Newton and other scientists of the *scientific revolution* inspired 18th-century thinkers. They applied scientific methods to examine and understand life. By using scientific reasoning, Enlightenment intellectuals believed they could discover the truth about human society and nature.

The philosopher Locke tried to explain how people learn. He said that everyone's mind is blank at birth. Through experience, people gain knowledge. Even our understanding of good and evil comes from our experience of pleasure and pain. Locke's thinking led to the notion that people are born equal. His work inspired the Enlightenment thinkers in their criticism of church and state.

By 1660, Europeans were aware of distant civilizations. They recognized that some, like China, had impressive governments, cultures, and histories. Yet those societies had evolved *without* Christianity.

Enlightenment thinkers used that information to support their views on tolerance. Geography and climate, they said, determined government and customs. Christianity was not the only path to the truth. Those ideas brought the philosophers into conflict with the Christian church and eventually with the ruling elite.

In addition, the *Lisbon earthquake* of 1755, which killed tens of thousands of people, shattered faith and optimism. Some philosophers saw the event as a sign of God's indifference. Others proclaimed that God did not exist.

Thinkers and Influence of the Enlightenment

The Enlightenment produced many famous thinkers. Among them were Benjamin Franklin (American); David Hume (Scottish); Adam Smith (English); Immanuel Kant (German); and Baron de Montesquieu, Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Denis Diderot, and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert (French).

Two Frenchmen, Voltaire and Montesquieu, towered above the rest. Voltaire was born François-Marie Arouet in 1694. His keen wit got him into trouble when he was still a young man. He left Paris for England, where he discovered Locke and Newton. Later, he introduced the ideas of those great men to the rest of Europe. He wrote many influential plays, essays, and novels.

Montesquieu was born in 1689 to an old aristocratic family. In *The Persian Letters*, he created a group of fictional characters from Persia who visited France. Through their eyes, he criticized French society and government. He argued for religious tolerance and took on the established Catholic Church. He classified various systems of government, and his political thinking influenced both the American Revolution and the French Revolution.

The age of Enlightenment was not truly an enlightened age, as the philosopher Kant declared. Most people still clung to old superstitions and customs. Enlightenment ideas had spread through the educated elite, but the lower classes remained uninformed.

Yet in their own day, Enlightenment thinkers became respectable, influential, and even feared. Monarchs sought their advice and corresponded with them. Toleration gradually became more widespread. Witchcraft trials declined, and torture disappeared in many places. Education increased. Across Europe, laws were reformed.

The concept of divine right rule was popularized through religious discourse and political theory during the 16th and 17th centuries, giving rise to absolute monarchs claiming their authority to rule single-handedly was given to them by God. King Louis XIV of France was the first example of an absolute monarch, a pattern of rule that would soon spread throughout all of Europe. Without having to compete with authority from the Church and local governments, these monarchs were able to establish kingdoms solely according to their will, yet often with the use of force.

At first, many Europeans welcomed this system of rule after experiencing years of instability due to widespread warfare. Absolute monarchs were able to set up relatively stable kingdoms that expanded and prospered. However, their popularity waned; the priorities of monarchs did not always match the priorities of the people. Entering into the 18th century, Enlightenment thinkers began proposing alternative systems of governance that were adopted by absolute monarchs. These "enlightened despots" saw the benefit in adopting certain Enlightenment ideals surrounding more rational governance, all while maintaining their belief in divine right and positions of absolute power.

Effective Government

During the 18th century, Enlightenment thinkers criticized everything, including government and monarchy. Yet most thinkers did not wish to do away with kings or queens. They believed that monarchy was an effective way to build a richer, freer, and more civilized society. As long as the monarch served the people, he or she was fulfilling his or her duty as protector of the public good, which the Enlightenment thinkers referred to as the "social contract." Achieving Enlightenment goals—greater tolerance, less superstition, and more freedom—was most important.

Enlightenment thinkers had a limited audience. Superstition and ignorance were still widespread in the 1700s. However, the ideas of the thinkers did reach the educated elite. More important, the rulers of Europe felt their influence. Many monarchs read Baron de Montesquieu, Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Denis Diderot, Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, and others. Some rulers corresponded with the thinkers. Those so-called "enlightened despots" ruled with an iron hand. They wanted both an effective government and a prosperous economy, which were goals that the Enlightenment thinkers supported. Europe's rulers also leaned toward Enlightenment reform in their social policies.

The nature and extent of reform varied from state to state and occurred more in the west and north than in the east and south. Serfdom was abolished in parts of Europe, though not in others. Literacy increased, though many people still could not read or write. Tolerance spread, though freedom of religion was not a general right. Throughout Europe, legal codes became more uniform and fairer. What's more, torture and extreme punishment were eliminated in most places. The Enlightenment thinkers supported and influenced those changes.

Limits of Reform

Despite some progress, monarchs were limited in what they could—or would—do. Antagonizing the aristocrats could be dangerous. Gustav III of Sweden, for instance, pushed his reforms too far; the nobles assassinated him. Catherine II of Russia admired the philosophes. She invited Diderot to Russia and corresponded with other French thinkers. She also wrote plays, stories, and memoirs. Although she owned more serfs than any other European monarch, perhaps she wanted to free them; however, she couldn't, for in doing so, she would have provoked the nobility. Instead, after a peasant uprising, she strengthened serfdom.

Joseph II worked doggedly to abolish serfdom and increase religious freedom. Yet his plans met with resentment from nobles and peasants alike. He died believing he had accomplished nothing. And indeed, after Joseph's death, many of his reforms were overturned.

In short, the ideas of the Enlightenment thinkers were not fully realized during the Age of Enlightenment. However, the 18th-century monarchs did help to build a foundation for greater political and social freedom in the future.
