Chapter 12: The Enlightenment

The Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason, was the dominant intellectual movement of the eighteenth century. The achievements of the Scientific Revolution had revealed the ability of the human mind to penetrate the secrets of the physical universe. While the makers of the Scientific Revolution had used their intellectual powers to discover the natural laws that governed the operation of the physical universe, the thinkers of the Enlightenment sought through reasoning to discover the natural laws that governed the affairs of human beings and human society. They criticized the existing institutions of absolute monarchy and established church and proposed a broad range of reforms designed to eliminate abuses and to promote individual freedom.

The *Philosophes*

While the Enlightenment was a broad international movement, many of its leading thinkers were French. The Enlightenment thinkers are known collectively as philosophes, the French word for philosophers. In fact, the *philosophes* were not philosophers in the traditional sense. Instead, they were critics of the Old Regime who developed new ideas about government, economics, and religion and advanced proposals for the improvement of the human condition and the reform of society.

The *philosophes* shared the Enlightenment's faith in the supremacy of human reason, believing that people, through the use of their reason, could find answers to their questions and solutions to their problems. In particular, reason could be used to reveal the natural laws that regulated human affairs. Once these natural laws were discovered, the institutions of society could be reformed to bring them more in accordance with the natural order.

Condorcet and the Doctrine of Progress

In addition to their emphasis on rationalism, the *philosophes* believed in the progress of human beings and society toward a more perfect condition. In their view, human beings were basically good but had been corrupted by society. If the institutions of society were reformed, then this human goodness would prevail. The Enlightenment doctrine of progress was set forth most strongly by the Marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794) in the *Progress of the Human Mind* (1795). Condorcet traced the development of human history through nine eras, contending that in the tenth era peace, virtue, and justice would prevail.

John Locke (1632-1704)

The English thinker John Locke was one of the most widely read political philosophers during the Enlightenment. In two works published in 1690, Locke provided a vigorous defense of England's Glorious Revolution of 1688, which had resulted in the overthrow of King James II.

Knowledge from Experience

In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke advanced his theory of the tabula rasa. At birth, Locke argued, every human being's mind is a blank page, and all knowledge comes from experience. Rejecting the doctrine of innate ideas, Locke repudiated the view that human beings were born with a tendency to submit to authority.

The Social Contract and Natural Rights

Locke based his *Second Treatise of Government* on the social-contract theory. In Locke's view, people had come together in a social contract. By mutual consent, they had created a government to protect their natural rights to life, liberty, and property. The authority of government is thus derived from the consent of the governed. When government fails to protect the people's natural rights and instead, interferes with them by attempting to rule absolutely, the people have a right to rebel, as they had done in the Glorious Revolution. Locke supported the creation of a constitutional government that placed limits on the ruler's authority.

The thinkers of the Enlightenment accepted Locke's doctrine of the natural rights of human beings and his views on constitutional government. The doctrine of natural rights influenced Thomas Jefferson, for example, who wrote in the American *Declaration of Independence* about the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Voltaire (1694-1778)

François-Marie Arouet, better known as Voltaire, was a prolific and witty critic of the Old Regime, producing a host of essays, letters, stories, plays, and histories that helped popularize the ideas of the Enlightenment. The first collected edition of Voltaire's works, published from 1784 to 1789, totaled ninety-two volumes.

One of Voltaire's most famous works, the satirical tale *Candide* (1759), attacked superstition, religious persecution, war, and an uncritical optimism about the human condition.

Enlightened Despotism

In politics, Voltaire was a proponent of enlightened despotism and conducted a correspondence with Frederick the Great of Prussia and Catherine the Great of Russia (see Chapter 9). Enlightened despotism involved the idea that an absolute ruler would use his authority to promote reform. While some monarchs did in fact promote reforms designed to make their governments more efficient, even the most enlightened ruler could not contemplate, much

less enact, any reforms that would serve to undermine his absolute authority. Beyond that, the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 brought terror to rulers in all lands, and they became adamant in their opposition to even moderate reforms, lest the floodgates of revolutionary upheaval be opened.

Deism

In religion, Voltaire was an advocate of deism, which many *philosophes* regarded as a more rational and natural approach to religion than the supernatural and mystical teachings of Christianity. The deists believed in a God who created the universe and set it in motion to operate in accordance with natural laws. This God, the prime mover, did not then interfere with the operation of his creation. He was not involved with people's daily lives and did not respond to prayer. Many deists believed in life after death, however, and believed further that God would reward and punish individuals according to their moral conduct during their lives. Nevertheless, the deists rejected the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith.

Tolerance

After having been imprisoned briefly when some of his ideas offended the French authorities, Voltaire left France and lived in England from 1726 to 1729. There he came to admire England's spirit of tolerance in both politics and religion. Returning to France, he published *Letters on the English* (1733), expressing his admiration for England's constitutional government and criticizing the abuses of French absolutism.

Campaigning in support of tolerance, Voltaire defended Jean Calas, a Huguenot merchant from Toulouse, who was executed in 1762 for allegedly murdering his son in order to prevent his conversion to Catholicism. In his *Treatise on Tolerance* (1763), Voltaire contended that the case against Calas was groundless and that he had been convicted by a court dominated by anti-Protestant hysteria. Voltaire urged the authorities to conduct a new investigation, and the verdict convicting Calas was reversed in 1765.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)

Born in Geneva, the son of a watchmaker, Rousseau rebelled against the restrictions imposed by the Calvinist tradition of the city. As a *philosophe*, he urged reforms in education and government.

Natural Education

Rousseau believed that people living in a state of nature had once been virtuous, free, equal, and happy. They had been corrupted by civilization. What they needed, therefore, was a natural education, free of the corruption and artificiality of society. Rousseau set forth his ideas on education in *Émile* (1762),which is part treatise and part novel. The story has two heroes: Rousseau, the teacher, and Emile, his pupil. In place of the formal schooling typical of the eighteenth century, Emile learned by direct experience, rather than from books. He was not forced to read at a young age, nor was he subjected to severe discipline.

The General Will

The Social Contract (1762), Rousseau's treatise on politics and government, opens with the words: "All men are born free, but everywhere they are in chains." Although government restricted individual freedom, it was nevertheless a necessary evil. There would be less evil, however, if government and individual liberty could be reconciled. In an effort to promote this reconciliation, Rousseau advocated a radical form of the contract theory of government. Rejecting the extreme individualism emphasized by many of his fellow *philosophes*, Rousseau stressed the role of the individual as a member of society. The social contract that he proposed was a contract in which the members of society agreed to be ruled by their general will. Although Rousseau never made it clear how the general will would operate in actual practice, he believed that all members of society would participate in the formulation of the general will, which would then be executed by a small group. Convinced that the general will is always right, Rousseau contended that obedience to the: general will is an act of freedom.

Rousseau himself did not actually favor democracy, in the modern sense of the term, but his view of the general will-and particularly the idea that ultimately sovereignty resides with all the people-helped promote the development of the democratic ideology.

Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755)

Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, was a French attorney and philosopher. Montesquieu did not believe that there was any single ideal political system. Instead, different systems were appropriate for different peoples, depending on the size of the area to be governed, its population, its economic system, and its social and religious traditions. Nevertheless, he greatly admired the British political system and advocated the establishment of constitutional monarchy in France.

Separation of Powers

In *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), Montesquieu set forth the concept of the separation of powers between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the government. This division of authority, with its checks and balances, would place effective limits on the power of the executive and thereby protect the rights of the individual citizens.

Montesquieu's ideas influenced the writers of the American Constitution, as well as of the French Constitution of 1791.

The *Encylopedia*

Virtually all of the important French *philosophes*, including Voltaire, Rousseau, and Montesquieu, were among the some 160 contributers to the *Encyclopedia*, edited by Denis Diderot (1713-17848) and Jean le Rond d'Alembert (1717-1783). The *Encyclopedia* was both a compendium of knowledge and a means for spreading the *philosophes'* often radical ideas on government, economics, religion, philosophy, and other subjects. Despite the opposition of state and church authorities, the first twenty-eight volumes of the Encyclopedia were published between 1751 and 1772, and five additional volumes appeared in 1776-1777.

Law and Justice

In their criticism of the Old Regime, the *philosophes* were particularly outspoken in their condemnation of outmoded and unjust laws and systems of justice, especially the use of torture and capital punishment.

In his *Essay on Crimes and Punishments* (1764), Cesare Beccaria, an Italian aristocrat, advanced his proposals for bringing law and justice into conformity with the rational laws of nature. Barbarous punishments, he believed, failed to deter crimes; the certainty of punishment was a far more effective deterrent than its severity. He believed further that justice should be swift and that punishment should focus on the rehabilitation of the criminal.

Economic Thought

In economics, the Enlightenment introduced the doctrine of *laissez-faire*. The term is derived from the dictum of the French Physiocrats: "*Laissez faire, laissez passer*" ("Let do, let pass"). The advocates of *laissez-faire* believed that the economy should be left free to regulate itself by its own natural laws. In advancing this doctrine, they repudiated mercantilism, the prevailing economic doctrine and practice of the age, which emphasized state regulation of economic activity.

François Quesnay (1694-1774) and Physiocrat Theory

In France, the Physiocrats appeared as the main advocates of laissez-faire. Quesnay, the leading Physiocrat, was a biologist and surgeon who served as physician to King Louis XV and his mistress, Madame de Pompadour. Rejecting the mercantilist view that stressed the importance of a nation's accumulating gold and silver, Quesnay insisted that land was the only source of wealth. Instead of regulating trade, as the mercantilists urged, it should remain free of control. Rather than making goods more expensive by imposing tariffs and other taxes on them, the state should establish only one tax, on income derived from land.

Adam Smith (1723-1790) and Economic Self-interest

Smith, a Scottish economist, was the eighteenth century's most influential advocate of laissez-faire. In *The Wealth of Nations* (l776), Smith attacked mercantilist doctrine and practice. A nation's wealth, he contended, was based on its production of goods by its farmers, artisans, and factory workers. Mercantilist regulations interfered with production and thereby restricted the expansion of a nation's wealth. Smith believed that people should be free to pursue their own economic self-interest. Each individual's pursuit of economic self-interest in a free economy would promote the prosperity of the entire society. Instead of regulating economic activity, the government should restrict its role to protecting the life, liberty, and property of its citizens. The state should content itself with being a passive policeman.

The thinkers of the Enlightenment proposed a broad program for the reform of government and society. Although they often tended to oversimplify human nature and to exaggerate the supremacy of reason in human affairs, they offered forthright and often courageous criticisms of the inadequacies of the Old Regime. Their ideas had a powerful impact on the thought and action of the makers of the American and French revolutions and on advocates of reform generally in the Western world.