## Political and Social Impact of the Enlightenment

Many of the ideas developed during the Enlightenment underpin elements of our society today. The idea that government is a social contract between the state and the people, for instance, is fundamental to democracy. It is critical to note, however, that many of the ideas of the Enlightenment have had a negative impact since their elaboration in the eighteenth century. When examining how ideas influenced later events, historians must also consider many other causes and contingencies; we must therefore be careful not to ascribe to ideas more importance than is warranted.

*Democracy*

The political and social impact of Enlightenment ideas related to democracy is difficult to summarize. Many of the ideas that the philosophes developed are intrinsic to modern democratic society, and they were often developed with the intent of creating such a society. English philosopher John Locke's principles of religious tolerance, the separation of church and state, and the social contract, for instance, greatly influenced the Founding Fathers of the United States as they planned their new country. Locke's idea of a social contract, which Rousseau in particular developed, was also of great importance in France both before and after the French Revolution. These are only two of many examples of how these ideas influenced later events.

It is important to note that Enlightenment thinkers were not the only source of such ideas. Democratic institutions were in existence to some degree in England, Switzerland, and the United Province of the Netherlands when Rousseau elaborated his social contract. In fact, these three countries were important centers for printing and discussion, even though much of the discussion was about how to change the repressive society in France; French exiles, including both Rousseau and Voltaire, took refuge in these countries when the French state sought to silence them. Principles of democracy had also existed in ancient Greece and Rome, and were elaborated in, among other places, various institutions of Christian denominations.

While the role of ancient and contemporary precedents stimulated Enlightenment thinking, the importance of the philosophes should perhaps be traced to their role in expressing these ideas clearly and cogently in a time and place where many people were interested in them and they became popularized. The elaboration of Enlightenment ideas on democratic life have been used many times since as part of the philosophical underpinnings for revolutions and resistance movements.

*Enlightened Despotism*

Many Enlightenment thinkers argued that "enlightened despotism" was the best way to rule the people. According to this theory, the people could not necessarily be trusted to govern themselves properly. Rather, a wise and cultured prince could best determine what their needs were and govern accordingly. Enlightened despotism, which is also called "enlightened absolutism," assumes that the ruler is an absolute monarch. Unlike repressive absolute monarchs like France's Louis XIV, however, an enlightened

despot was expected to cultivate freedom of speech and religious toleration, among other liberties.

Enlightened despotism became popular in a number of eighteenth-century European countries where the leaders embraced the ideals of the Enlightenment. In Prussia, for instance, Frederick the Great (r. 1740–86) fancied himself as the leading prince of the Enlightenment and invited Voltaire to his court. Catherine the Great of Russia (r. 1762–96) also attempted to rule according to Enlightenment principles and received the philosophes' adulation as a result. Joseph II of Austria (r. 1780–90) tried to implement a vast array of Enlightenment reforms, but was unsuccessful. In all cases, however, such reforms as were implemented did not reduce the power of the monarch.

*Church*

At many points in European history, the Catholic Church (and, after the Reformation, various Protestant churches as well) fought to retain influence over state and/or monarchical power. For centuries before the Enlightenment, monarchies and governments had retained supremacy over ecclesiastical bodies, especially bishoprics (and sometimes even the papacy), but the church still maintained a significant presence in political life. The philosophes were hardly the first Europeans to argue in favor of the separation of church and state, but they were influential advocates, both at the time and afterward. The philosophical argument behind the separation of church and state has had great influence in the formation of democratic societies. At the time, it strongly influenced some of the Founding Fathers, especially Thomas Jefferson. It is important to note, however, that arguments for the separation of church and state had particular resonance in France, where the clergy had traditionally supported the power of the monarchy.

Though most philosophes were Christians or deists, they considered religion in society to be primarily for keeping people moral. In their opinion, the Golden Rule was the central part of all religion, and everything else was merely designed to attract people to hear the core message. As long as religion ensured that the people remained moral, the philosophes argued, it served its public purpose.

*Economy*

The philosophes generally favored reducing government control over the market, which we call "laissez-faire" economics. The most prominent school of laissez-faire thinkers in France were the physiocrats, who believed that the only real source of national wealth was agriculture. An unobstructed supply of grain in France would be a means of increasing total output. Their idea was to allow the price to rise, which would increase production. As a result of the greater grain production, prices would go back down and everything would balance out.

In 1776 Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations*, which forwards similar ideas. Smith was somewhat different from the physiocrats, though, because he believed that labor and the market were the prime creators of wealth. In making these arguments, both the physiocrats and Adam Smith struck at the hold that the aristocracy

was trying to maintain on the economy. The laissez-faire economists believed that wealth should not be confined to one class. Rather, everyone ought to have an equal opportunity. As articulated in France, therefore, the argument for laissez-faire economics was an argument that the ancient regime should be abolished and replaced with a more equal basis for society.

*Civilization*

The term *civilization* is another legacy of the Enlightenment. In the 1770s dictionaries in French and English introduced the term with reference to "the increase of wealth and the refinement of manners." Along with this understanding came another – that civilization could occur in degrees. With the existence of civilization established, Enlightenment thinkers were quick to claim that Europe – specifically the centers of Enlightenment thinking in France, Britain, and Germany, which roughly correspond to our idea of Western Europe – was the most civilized place on the planet. The rest of the world was further down the scale of civilization, ranging from the underdevelopment that Western Europeans perceived in Eastern Europe to the barbarity that they saw in the "Orient" and among the Amerindians.

While such ideas of cultural superiority had existed for Europeans since the beginning of their imperial adventures in the sixteenth century, Enlightenment thinkers gave these ideas a clearer definition – and one with a scientific veneer. Though ideals of civilization became and remained ideas to which European societies could aspire, they also provided a stronger philosophical underpinning for European empire. This underpinning would prove critical in the nineteenth century as European powers, especially France and England, attempted to justify extending their control over the peoples of the entire world.

*Summary*

- Enlightenment ideals underpinned the American and French Revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century, and some aspects of modern society. Nonetheless, a study of their impact must balance the importance of ideas with other factors.
- Enlightenment ideas about democracy, in particular the idea that government is a social contract, have become very influential as the number of democratic societies has increased.
- Some Enlightenment thinkers espoused enlightened despotism, in which a wise and cultured ruler determines the needs of his people and acts accordingly.
- Enlightenment thinkers advocated the separation of church and state as an ideal.
- Enlightenment philosophers also developed their ideas about how civilizations came about, and in so doing provided a justification for considering Western Europe (sometimes including the European colonies in the United States) as the pinnacle of civilization. This provided some of the philosophical backing for European imperialism and colonialism for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.