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**ASCC module**

**Lecture Title: The Age of Enlightenment G1, G2, G8**

**What was the Age of Enlightenment?**

Immanuel Kant argues that “the motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! [**Dare to be** **wise**] Have courage to use your own understanding!”

The **Enlightenment**, also known as **The Age of Reason**, was a philosophical and cultural movement that dominated the world of ideas in Western Europe during the 18th century. In the simplest words possible, states that the Enlightenment was “born of the idea that all human beings share the same basic needs and as such should enjoy the same rights and privileges” (Hourly History, 21). Enlightenment philosophers believed that human reason, rationality, and benevolence would lead to the natural progression of society and the betterment of life on Earth. The preceding scientific revolution that took place in Europe convinced many European thinkers that reason is the most powerful tool that human beings can use to achieve truth, study human nature, and solve all human problems. Philosophers of the Enlightenment started to convince people that truth could only be achieved through Empirical investigation and deductive reasoning.

Little consensus is available concerning specific dates of the movement. Most historians agree that the Enlightenment began around the 1680s and lasted until the early 1800s. Some historians and philosophers have argued that the beginning of the Enlightenment is when **Descartes** shifted the epistemological basis from external authority to **internal certainty** by his *cogito ergo sum* “I think, therefore I am” (1637). **Francis Bacon** is another thinker and the founder of the **empiricist** strain that conceived the new sciences as based mainly on empirical observation and experimentation and whose ideas paved the way for the major thoughts of the Enlightenment. As for its end, the French Revolution (1789) is mostly chosen to date the end of the Enlightenment era. However, historians have also listed numerous historical movements as wellsprings of enlightened thought. These mostly include:

* **Renaissance**: For some, the Enlightenment was the direct result of the Renaissance and the Reformation as the “Cultural rebirth” of Europe. Renaissance era encouraged the revival of classical art, literature, and even architecture.
* **Reformation**: It shook the authority of the Church in Europe to its core as the Protestants rebelled against Catholic Church, putting individual conscience ahead of authority of the Church
* **Scientific Revolution**: Scientists discovered new truths about natural life by using experimentation, logic, reason, and observation. Newton’s influence was the strongest single factor. Isaiah Berlin notes that “Newton had performed the unprecedented task of explaining the material world…to determine the properties and behavior of every particle of every material body in the universe” (Berlin, 5). As a result, thinkers started to conclude that reason and logic could also be used in understanding the human mind, human relations, social, religious, and political life.

**Major Enlightenment Thinkers**

**Jean Jacque Rousseau**: in his writings, especially *The Social Contract,* he challenged the long living idea that the king has a **God-given right** to rule his people. He also questioned the King’s absolute power. Rousseau argued that **democracy** was the best form of government. It would **defend individual** **rights** and assure **prosperity** for all people. Rousseau also asserted that People should **choose** how to be ruled. He opposed **absolute monarchs** and **titles of nobility** because of his belief that all people are born equal.

Rousseau claimed that advocates of the Enlightenment relied too much on reason. Instead, people should pay more attention to their feelings. According to Rousseau, human beings were naturally good, but civilized life corrupted them. To improve themselves, he thought people should live simpler lives closer to nature.

**John Lock**: He did not oppose monarchies, but **disagreed with the divine right of kings** and argued that the **power of the government came from people** who gave their **consent** to be governed. Hence, the government was bound to protect what Lock terms as people’s “**natural rights**”. He argued that people had the right to **revolt** if the government fails in protecting these rights of **life**, **liberty**, and **property**.

**Voltaire**: Born Froncois Marie Arouet: Voltaire wrote against **superstition** in church and against **religious intolerance**. Despite being jailed many times and being exiled out of France, he kept spreading his ideas and insisting on **freedom of speech.**  He strongly insisted on the idea that **every** **person** has the right to **liberty**. His famous quote is “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.

Voltaire became known for his strong dislike of the Roman Catholic Church. He blamed Church leaders for keeping knowledge from people in order to maintain the Church’s power. Voltaire also opposed the government supporting one religion and forbidding others. He thought people should be free to choose their own beliefs. Voltaire, like many philosophes, supported deism.

**Baron de Montesquieu**. He came up with the idea of the **Separation of Powers** to prevent the possibility that a government will be too powerful. Montesquieu proposed that a government should be divided into three parts: 1. one that makes laws (**legislative**). 2. One that enforces them (**executive**). 3. The third one is the (**judiciary**) to interpret these laws. This division of powers assures that each part will keep the others in check. He published a book entitled *the Spirit of Laws*.

**Women in the Age of Enlightenment:**

Most Enlightenment philosophers supported the equality of men, but not women. Rousseau wrote that “woman was specifically made to please man”. This urged many women to call for their rights as reasoning beings. As an attempt to change this reality, women used reason to argue for equal rights. In France, wealthy and intelligent Women hosted social gatherings called “**salons**”. Most philosophers of the time were invited and women extracted their ideas and wrote those discussions in newspapers to assure the spread of “equality ideas” among all social groups.

In addition to that, women showed real thirst for **education**. In 1792 **Mary Wollstonecraft** published **A Vindication of the Rights of Woman** where she argued that well educated women will serve society by bringing up enlightened generations. As a result, eighteenth-century writers increasingly came to believe that “the status and educational level of women in a given society were important indicators of its degree of historical progress, and a number argued that the low educational level of women in their own times was itself an impediment to further social improvement” (O’Brien 2).

Natural Rights of Women Mary Wollstonecraft argued that the natural rights of the Enlightenment should extend to women as well as men. “In short, in whatever light I view the subject, reason and experience convince me that the only method of leading women to fulfill their peculiar [specific] duties is to free them from all restraint by allowing them to participate in the inherent rights of mankind. Make them free, and they will quickly become wise and virtuous, as men become more so, for the improvement must be mutual.” —Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects.

**Impact**

The Age of the Enlightenment paved the way to numerous historical events such as The French Revolution, Religious tolerance, the creation of modern, liberal democracies, and the spread of equality among further social and ethnic groups (women, people of color, working masses). In America, Enlightenment ideas were brought and applied by figures such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson and used in historical documents such as The U.S Bill of Rights and the American Declaration of Independence.

HOMEWORK

**Struggles of Faith**: Because the Scientific Revolution led many people to **rely more on reason than faith**, it **diminished the power and influence of Christian churches**. This was particularly true with the Roman Catholic Church. However, Christianity did not cease to exist. Missionaries continued to gain converts throughout the world, and church membership continued to increase in many areas. Although scientists supported reason as a way of gaining knowledge, many continued to believe in God. They argued that **God had created the universe according to mathematical laws. God then allowed the universe to run itself by these laws**. This religious approach is called **deism**. **Isaac Newton was foremost among the deist scientists**. He believed that **God had created natural laws** that could not be explained in any other way. For example, he believed that the force of gravity was a scientific law. However, it could not exist unless God had made it. In this way, religion coexisted with reason during the Scientific Revolution.