**Enlightenment Notes**

**Enlightenment Background**

The Enlightenment marks the intellectual beginning of the modern world.

Many governments today have Enlightenment principles as the basis of their constitutions and forms of government. Including the United States

When historians discuss the “Enlightenment,” they are usually referring to 18th-century Europe (France and England in particular), although other parts of the world (including the U.S.) are often included as well.

The Enlightenment was a period of intellectual ferment that gave rise to a range of new theories about:

society

Government

Philosophy

Economics

religion.

The most important factor in the development of the Enlightenment was the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries.

**Enlightenment Principles**

* Religion, tradition, and superstition limited independent thought. To truly achieve independent thought, one had to throw off all limits and rely solely on reason.
* Accept knowledge based on observation, logic, and reason, not on faith. Like the pioneers of the Scientific Revolution, Enlightenment thinkers also strove to make conclusions based on observation, logic, and reason, rather than on faith.
* Scientific and academic thought should be secular. Enlightenment thinkers revived the spirit of the Renaissance quest for knowledge, choosing to focus on human nature and the workings of society rather than on spiritual matters and religious tenets. This secular approach led to the development of the social sciences

**Deism**: Deists firmly believed in God, but rejected organized religion. Rather than looking to the church or the supernatural for moral guidance, deists believed that morality could be achieved by following reason. Even though deismaffirmed the existence of God, it discarded virtually all Church traditions and practices as irrational and unnecessary, a fact which led many to criticize deistsas anti-Christian, or even to portray them as atheists.

Deists viewed God as the “great watchmaker” whose creation—the universe—operated as smoothly as a fine Swiss watch. The task, as Enlightenment thinkers envisioned it, was to try to discover the principles that governed the functioning of this “watch.” *Deism* thus centered around a belief in a God who operated according to reason and whose existence could be seen in the natural order and logic of all that He had created.

**Thomas Paine**: Thomas Paine, famous primarily for writing the classic pamphlet *Common Sense,* was also a key theorist of deism. In his essay “Of the Religion of Deism Compared with the Christian Religion,” Paine asserted that “there is a happiness in Deism, when rightly understood, that is not to be found in any other system of religion” because deism did not force its followers to “stifle reason” in order to accept its tenets

**Enlightenment Thinkers:**

**Thomas Hobbes (*Leviathan)***

* Applied rational analysis to the study of government
* Attacked the concept of divine right, yet supported a strong monarchy
* Believed that humans were basically driven by passions and needed to be kept in check by a powerful ruler. (State of nature or human nature)

**John Locke**

* The “State of Nature”: also disagreed with the notion of divine right; however, he held a very different view of human nature than Hobbes did. Locke posited that in the past, before people formed societies, they lived in a “state of nature.” He believed that all men were equal in the state of nature because they were “creatures of the same species and rank” with the “same advantages” and “same faculties.”
* *Tabula rasa:* *argued that the mind of a newborn baby was a “tabula rasa”—a “blank slate” upon which environment and experience would transcribe ideas and beliefs. Locke saw human nature as something that was externally determined rather than internally determined; correspondingly, he stressed the importance of education.*
* *Treatises of Government: Locke attacked the divine right of kings and authoritarian government. He promoted a constitutional monarchy that derived its power from the law and from the consent of the people. He also believed that a government’s primary responsibility was to protect individual property*
* Rights: Locke believed that in the state of nature, individuals had natural rights, which he referred to as “all the rights and privileges of the law of Nature.” Locke claimed that one such right was to defend one’s “property” (which he defined as “his life, liberty, and estate”) against the “injuries and attempts of other men.”

**Jean-Jacques Rousseau:**

* Philosophized on the nature of society and government
* *The Social Contract: Locke had viewed societies as having been created through mutual consent of all members. Rousseau went a step further, claiming that instead of mere consent, individuals forming a society entered into a “social compact” with one another. The social compact balanced benefits with obligations. Those who entered into it would receive mutual protection and defense, along with assistance in overcoming obstacles that they could not conquer individually. In return, the social compact obligated members of society to subordinate their “natural liberty” (i.e., the freedom enjoyed by individuals in the state of nature) to “the supreme direction of the general will.”*

***Baron de Montesquieu:***

* *French noble and political philosopher*
* *The Spirit of the Laws*
* *Separation of powers: Montesquieu identified three sorts of governmental power: legislative, executive “in respect to things dependent on the law of nations,” and executive “in regard to those things that depend on civil law” (i.e., the judiciary). Montesquieu believed that if one person or group of people held any two or all three of these powers, it would result in “tyrannical laws” executed in a “tyrannical manner.” His ideas here provided the basis for the doctrine known as “separation of powers,” which significantly influenced the framers of the U.S. Constitution and thus the shaping of the American government.*
* *Constitutional monarchy: Montesquieu did not believe that democracy was the best form of government. Instead, he favored a constitutional monarchy based on the British model. He greatly admired Britain’s government because he felt that Parliament, the king, and the courts worked separately and efficiently since each could limit the power of the other. This idea of the different branches of government each preventing the others from obtaining too much power later led to the theory of “checks and balances,” which also influenced the framers of the U.S. Constitution.*

**The Enlightenment and the American Revolution**

* Influence of Locke and Montesquieu
* The Declaration of Independence; Jefferson drew upon Locke’s concepts of natural rights and equality in the “state of nature” when he wrote, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Jefferson also employed Locke’s conclusion that if a government denied citizens their natural rights, the people had the right to change the government. He stated, “when a long train of abuses and usurpations…evinces a design to reduce them [the people] under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.”
* US Constitution: The framers of the Constitution essentially took Montesquieu’s concept of separation of powers and put it into practice, creating a tripartite government that split authority between executive, legislative, and judicial branches. They also instituted measures designed to ensure that no one branch would become too powerful. Popularly known as “checks and balances,” these measures included things like the president’s veto power, the fact that only Congress can declare war, and the provision that federal and Supreme Court judges hold their terms for life.