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Enlightenment and Revolution

Europe and the Americas, 1650–1850

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The modern world puts its faith in science, reason, and democracy. The seventeenth-century scientific revolution established reason as the key to understanding nature, and its application directed thought, organized society, and measured governments during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Most — though, as we shall see, not all — people believed that reason would eventually lead to freedom. Freedom of thought, religion, and association, and political liberties and representative governments were hailed as hallmarks of the Age of Enlightenment.

For some, enlightened society meant a more controlled rather than a more democratic society. Philosophers like Immanuel Kant and Jean-Jacques Rousseau wanted people to become free but thought most people were incapable of achieving such a state. Rulers who were called "enlightened despots" believed that the application of reason to society would make people happier, not necessarily freer.

Ultimately, however, the Enlightenment's faith in reason led to calls for political revolution as well as for schemes of order. In England in the seventeenth century, in America and France at the end of the eighteenth century, and in Latin America shortly thereafter, revolutionary governments were created according to rational principles of liberty and equality that dispatched monarchs and enshrined the rule of the people. In this chapter we will concentrate on the heritage of the Enlightenment, examining competing tendencies toward order and revolution, stability and liberty, equality and freedom. We will also compare the American and the French Revolutions, and these with the later revolutions in Latin America. Finally, in reflection, we will briefly compare

these distinctly European and American developments with processes in other parts of the world.

THINKING HISTORICALLY

Close Reading and Interpretation of Texts

At the core of the Enlightenment was a trust in reasoned discussion, a belief that people could understand each other, even if they were not in agreement. Such understanding demanded clear and concise communication in a world where the masses were often swayed by fiery sermons and flamboyant rhetoric. But the Enlightenment also put its faith in the written word and a literate public. Ideas were debated face to face in the salons and coffeehouses of Europe and in the meeting halls of America, but it was through letters, diaries, the new world of newspapers, and the burgeoning spread of printed books that the people of the Enlightenment learned what they and their neighbors thought.

It is appropriate then for us to read the selections in this chapter — all primary sources — in the spirit in which they were written. We will pay special attention to the words and language that the authors use and will attempt to understand exactly what they meant, even why they chose the words they did. Such explication is a twofold process; we must understand the words first and foremost; then we must strive to understand the words in their proper context, as they were intended by the author. To achieve our first goal, we will paraphrase, a difficult task because the eighteenth-century writing style differs greatly from our own: Sentences are longer and arguments are often complex. Vocabularies were broad during this period, and we may encounter words that are used in ways unknown to us. As to our latter goal, we must try to make the vocabulary and perspective of the authors our own. Grappling with what makes the least sense to us and trying to understand why it was said is the challenge.

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VOLTAIRE

On Patriotism, and On Tolerance

François Marie Arouet, known to the world by his pen name, Voltaire, came to personify the Enlightenment during his long life (1694–1778), which spanned most of the eighteenth century. As a philosopher, wit, playwright, and cultural critic, he dedicated himself to confronting power and prejudice with skepticism and reason. Partly as a consequence of his biting wit, he was imprisoned in the Bastille and exiled from his native France to England and Prussia. After his return to France, however, Voltaire's country house near Switzerland attracted so many visiting intellectuals from all over Europe that it became a kind of cultural capital of the continent.

At the core of the Enlightenment was the idea that people could use reason to overcome the bias and self-interest of their own region, nation, religion, group, or tribe and empathize with a larger group. With what group did Voltaire urge people to empathize and identify in these selections? Why might he have done so?

Thinking Historically

In the selection on patriotism, notice how Voltaire makes the reader gradually question the ostensibly harmless idea of loving one's country. What exactly are his arguments against loving one's country? How would you paraphrase Voltaire's argument for tolerance? In what ways is his argument for tolerance similar to his argument against patriotism?

Patrie (Country) in The Philosophical Dictionary *(1752)*

A young journeyman pastry cook who had been to school, and who still knew a few of Cicero's phrases, boasted one day of loving his country. "What do you mean by your 'country'?" a neighbor asked him. "Is it your oven? Is it the village where you were born and which you have never seen since? Is it the street where dwelled your father and mother who have been ruined and have reduced you to baking

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Voltaire, on patriotism, from "Patrie" in *The Philosophical Dictionary,* 1752, H. I. Woolf, ed., *Voltaire's Philosophical Dictionary* (London, 1923), 131–32. Adapted by the editor.
On tolerance, from *Traite sur la Tolerance* (1763), Institut et Musée Voltaire, Genève, trans. by the editor.

little pies for a living? Is it the town hall where you will never be a police superintendent's clerk? Is it the Church of Our Lady where you have not been able to become a choirboy, while an absurd man is archbishop and duke with an income of twenty thousand golden louis?"

The journeyman pastry cook did not know what to answer. A thinker who was listening to this conversation, concluded that in a large country there were often many thousand men who had no country at all.

You, pleasure-loving Parisian, who have never made any great journey save that to Dieppe to eat fresh fish; who know nothing but your varnished town house, your pretty country house, and your box at that Opera where the rest of Europe persists in feeling bored; who speak your own language agreeably enough because you know no other, you love all that, and you love further the girls you keep, the champagne which comes to you from Rheims, the dividends which the Hôtel de Ville pays you every six months, and you say you love your country!

In all conscience, does a financier cordially love his country? The officer and the soldier who will pillage their winter quarters, if one lets them, have they a very warm love for the peasants they ruin? . . . Where was the country of Attila and of a hundred heroes of this type? I would like someone to tell me which was Abraham's country. The first man to write that the country is wherever one feels comfortable was, I believe, Euripides in his *Phaeton*. But the first man who left his birthplace to seek his comfort elsewhere has said it before him.

Where then is the country? Is it not a good field, whose owner, lodged in a well-kept house, can say: "This field that I till, this house that I have built, are mine; I live there protected by laws which no tyrant can infringe. When those who, like me, possess fields and houses, meet in their common interest, I have my voice in the assembly; I am a part of everything, a part of the community, a part of the dominion; there is my country"?

Well, now, is it better for your country to be a monarchy or a republic? For four thousand years has this question been debated. Ask the rich for an answer, they all prefer aristocracy; question the people, they want democracy; only kings prefer royalty. How then is it that nearly the whole world is governed by monarchs? . . . It is sad that often in order to be a good patriot one is the enemy of the rest of mankind. To be a good patriot is to wish that one's city may be enriched by trade, and be powerful by arms. It is clear that one country cannot gain without another losing, and that it cannot conquer without making misery. Such then is the human state that to wish for one's country's greatness is to wish harm to one's neighbors. He who should wish his country might never be greater, smaller, richer, poorer, would be the citizen of the world.

On Universal Tolerance

It does not require great art, or magnificently trained eloquence, to prove that Christians should tolerate each other. I, however, am going further: I say that we should regard all men as our brothers. What? The Turk my brother? The Chinaman my brother? The Jew? The Siam? Yes, without doubt; are we not all children of the same father and creatures of the same God?

But these people despise us; they treat us as idolaters! Very well! I will tell them that they are grievously wrong. It seems to me that I would at least astonish the proud, dogmatic Islam imam or Buddhist priest, if I spoke to them as follows:

"This little globe, which is but a point, rolls through space, as do many other globes; we are lost in the immensity of the universe. Man, only five feet high, is assuredly only a small thing in creation." One of these imperceptible beings says to another one of his neighbors, in Arabia or South Africa: "Listen to me, because God of all these worlds has enlightened me: there are nine hundred million little ants like us on the earth, but my ant-hole is the only one dear to God; all the other are cast off by Him for eternity; mine alone will be happy, and all the others will be eternally damned."

They would then interrupt me, and ask which fool blabbed all this nonsense. I would be obliged to answer, "You, yourselves."

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The American Declaration of Independence

If anyone had taken a poll of American colonials in the thirteen lower colonies (and certainly the colony of Canada to the north) as late as 1775, independence would not have won a majority vote anywhere. Massachusetts might have come close, perhaps, but nowhere in the land was there a definitive urge to separate from the British empire. Still, tensions between the colonies and Britain were inevitable. Three thousand miles was a long way for news, views, appointees, and peti-

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A Documentary History of the United States, ed. Richard D. Heffner (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 15–18.