Topic 5.1

The Enlightenment

You Will Learn To:

- Explain how Enlightenment philosophies applied new ways of understanding the natural world, human relationships, and religion.
- Identify theories philosophers used to explain natural rights and the social contract.
- Explain the rise and spread of Enlightenment thinking that examined long-standing traditions, contributing to revolutions and rebellions against established governments.
- Explain how nationalism shaped the historical development of states and empires.
- Explain how Enlightenment ideas and religious ideals influenced reform movements, including those promoting universal suffrage, the abolition of slavery, and the end of serfdom.
- Explain how women's suffrage and feminism challenged political and gender hierarchies.

Origins of the Enlightenment

In the 16th century, Europe was culturally transformed as missionaries spread Christianity worldwide. At the same time, European philosophers examined the natural world as scientists explored the forces that shaped it, launching the Scientific Revolution.
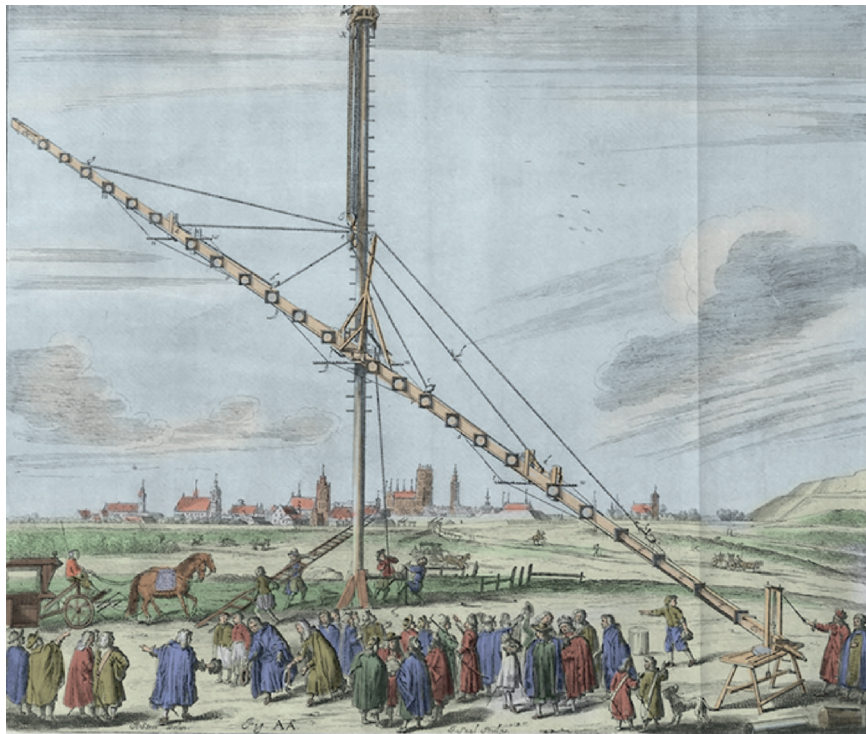
New scientific instruments, such as the Keplerian astronomical refracting telescope,
enabled scientists use of empiricism to understand the world.

The Scientific Revolution encouraged understanding the world through reasoning and empiricism—the theory that knowledge comes from experience, observation, and evidence. This shift contributed to the Enlightenment.
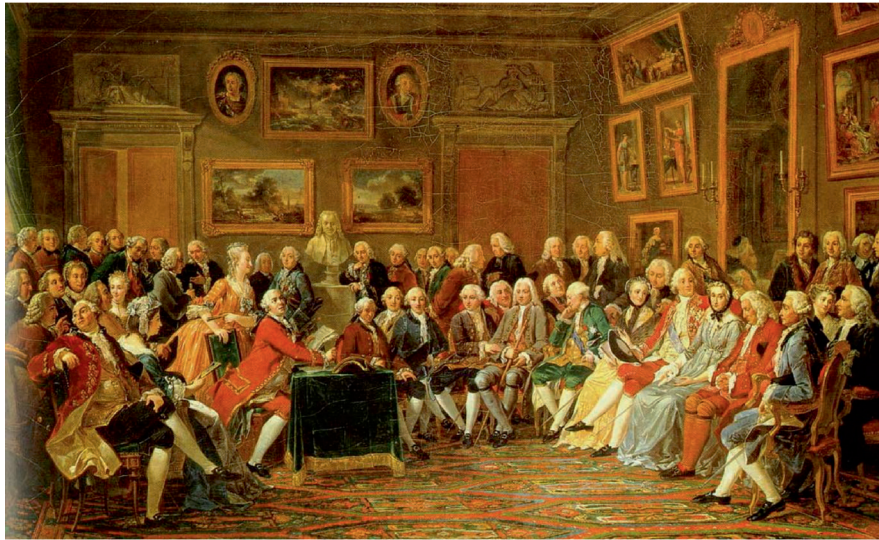
Enlightenment thinkers gather to discuss intellectual and philosophical ideas

Enlightenment philosophers used reason to reexamine the natural world, human relationships, and the role of religion in public life. These thinkers impacted political and cultural norms by questioning absolute monarchies and organized religions—traditional power structures that had shaped Europe's social and political order.

Spread of the Enlightenment

Enlightenment thinkers challenged monarchies by spreading new political ideas, including John Locke's theory of natural rights and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's views on the social contract. These political philosophers asserted that humans are born free and that the government should protect people's natural rights. Their ideas inspired revolutions and rebellions against established governments and societal norms.

European Enlightenment writers believed government and society should be improved through human action rather than dictated by natural rights. This belief challenged conventional thinking that included blind devotion to one's country, the divine right of kings, papal authority, and aristocratic privilege.

By the late 18th century, Enlightenment ideas had spurred organized challenges to established authorities, such as in the American and French Revolutions.

During the American Revolution, Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence, which was heavily influenced by Enlightenment philosophers and English Common Law. The Declaration highlighted natural rights, popular sovereignty (the will of the people), and the social contract.

The social contract stated that governments should protect the natural rights of men—particularly life, liberty, and property. Power is derived from the governed, who give up some control in exchange for the benefits of being governed. Enlightenment ideas would also figure heavily into the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

In France, King Louis XVI wanted to raise taxes after decades of debt and expensive wars. The Parlement of Paris suggested he call the Estates General into session for approval. The Estates General consisted of three groups, which represented:

- clergy (First Estate).
- nobles (Second Estate).
- commoners (Third Estate).

The meeting was intended to represent the interests of all people. But when their voices were suppressed, members of the Third Estate took inspiration from Enlightenment philosophers.


The Tennis Court Oath, 20th June 1789

The Third Estate delegates, who opposed the Ancien Regime's harsh oppression, swore the Tennis Court Oath, vowing not to disband until France had a new constitution and demanded their natural rights be recognized. Borrowing from the American Declaration of Independence, this new constitution—The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen—was one of two indicators of the beginning of the French Revolution.

Deism challenged traditional religious ideas

Enlightenment rationalism also caused tension about religion. Some Enlightenment thinkers still believed in the existence of a supreme being but rejected the idea of Jesus' virgin birth and resurrection.
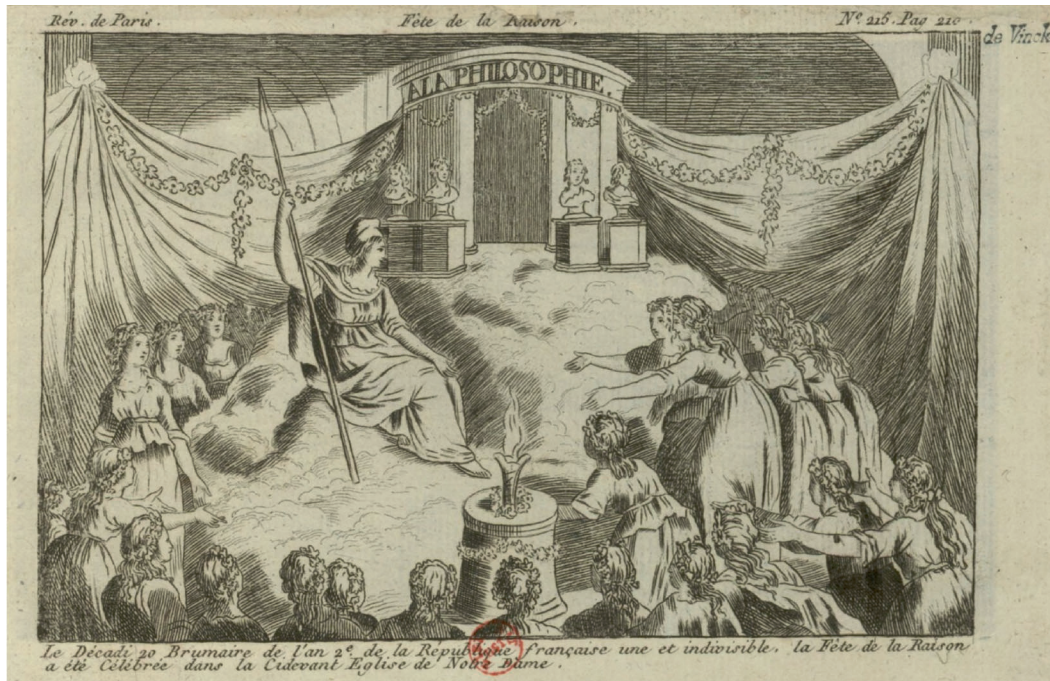
"The Festival of Reason" celebrated Enlightenment-inspired deist philosophy

Called Deists, they believed a supreme being created and set the universe into motion, governed by natural laws. This supreme deity, however, did not intervene in the affairs of the universe.

Deism's popularity rose in Revolutionary France and replaced Catholicism as the national religion in 1794. The Enlightenment's focus on natural rights and radically progressive ideas led to tensions that erupted into revolutions against governments and societal norms.

Growth of nationalism

Although Enlightenment ideals inspired revolutions, other factors encouraged Europeans to fight for liberty and equality. One of these factors was nationalism—a person's attachment to a particular nation—which emerged in western Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

The principles of nationalism stated that people who shared languages, traditions, and cultures were linked as a community, or "nation." By the mid-19th century, nationalism had become an influential ideology that would shape states.

Nationalists promoted self-determination—the belief that groups should form and govern their own states. This ideology was popular in areas where unified countries never existed, such as in Germany, Italy, or Greece, which sought independence after centuries of Ottoman subjugation.

Germania was the symbol of German Nationalism. Commonalities such as language, religion, and cultural traditions became the factors fo the unification of Germany.

Reform movements expanded rights

In the 18th century, Enlightenment thinkers believed the individual's condition was more important than societal improvement. This viewpoint caused Europeans to reexamine many aspects of humanity, especially individual human rights.

Generally, Enlightenment philosophers believed that "all men are created equal" and emphasized natural rights. To protect these natural rights, Enlightenment thinkers and religious leaders influenced reform movements, including:

- universal suffrage (right to vote) for all White men, regardless of property ownership or social status.
- prison reform, the end of corporal punishment, and shorter sentences.
- abolishing the slave trade and slavery.

The establishment of universal male suffrage in France, 1848

As Enlightenment thinkers pushed for universal White male suffrage, a women's suffrage movement emerged. Notable writers, such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe de Gouges, challenged women's traditional roles in society. In their writings, these authors advocated placing women on equal political footing with men. Despite their efforts, they failed to effect meaningful policy change during their generation.

In 1893, New Zealand became the first country to grant all women the right to vote in national elections. After WWI, many countries—such as Canada, the US, and Britain—passed laws granting women's suffrage.
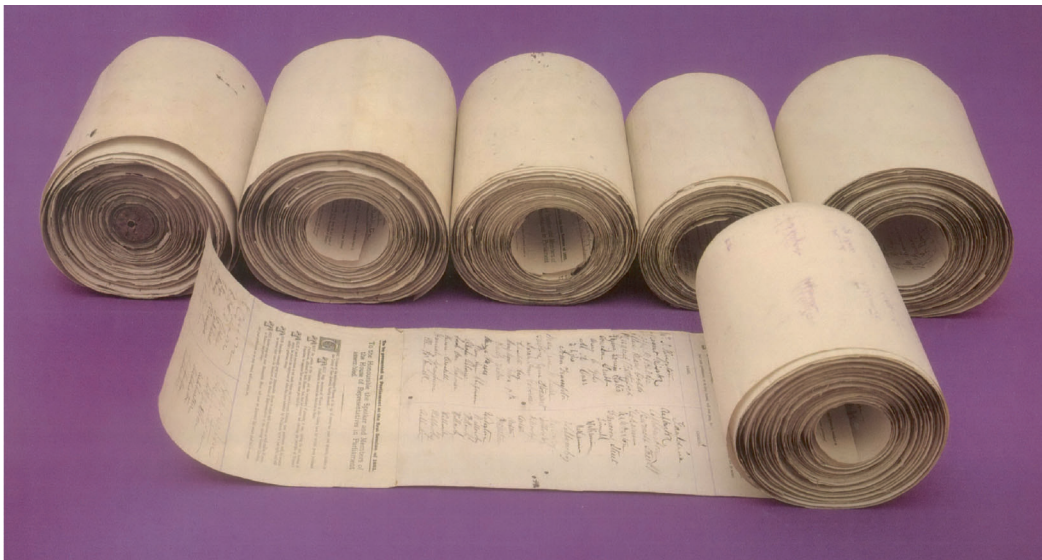
New Zealand suffrage petition roll, 1893

Things to remember

The Enlightenment was born from forward thinkers of the Scientific Revolution, who used reason and empiricism to understand the world outside established religion and politics. Enlightenment thinking quickly spread, encouraging numerous movements, including:

- the American and French Revolutions, during which Enlightenment philosophers promoted the ideas of natural rights, popular sovereignty, and the social contract.

Nationalism, influenced by revolutionary ideals of liberty and equality, encouraged:

- self-determination—the belief that groups should form and govern their own states.
- unification movements in Germany and Italy.
- independence movements in Greece.

The Enlightenment led to reform movements aimed at expanding individual human rights. These movements included:

- universal suffrage (right to vote) for all White men, including those without property or elevated social status.
- prison reform, the end of corporal punishment, and shorter sentences.
- abolition of the slave trade and slavery.
- women's suffrage movements, with New Zealand becoming the first nation to grant women the right to vote in 1893.

5.1 Check for Understanding

1. **Which of the following is an example of how the Enlightenment influenced western societies?**

   A. It discouraged the idea of popular sovereignty

   B. It encouraged the challenge of the rule of absolute monarchs

   C. Both are true

2. **Which of the following groups in the Estates General initiated the French Revolution?**

   A. First

   B. Second

   C. Third

3. **Which of the following inspired self-determination for certain groups?**

   A. Nationalism

   B. Natural rights

   C. Social contract

4. **In the 18th and 19th centuries, universal suffrage granted the right to vote to everyone, regardless of property ownership and social status.**

   A. True

   B. False

5. **Which of the following countries was the first to permit women's suffrage?**

   A. England

   B. Germany

   C. New Zealand