

The Effects of the European Enlightenment on Early American Revolutionary Ideas and Literature

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the intelligentsia of Europe and its American colonies were experiencing an intellectual revolution known as The Enlightenment. This period saw the greatest expansion of knowledge and philosophy in any time since the Renaissance. Scientists such as Newton and Galileo, Mathematicians such as Descartes, and philosophers such as Hume, Locke, Voltaire, Rousseau, and many others are associated with this period. The main connection between these seemingly different people was their desire to understand the world through reason and logic. From their concepts came a very different world than that of previous centuries, a shifting of power from traditional institutions such as the Church and monarchies to new societies based upon the desire for the "rights of man".

Previously many people considered knowledge to be directly inspired by God and to be an immutable and unchallengeable block of wisdom held from long ago, interpreted only by religious scholars. The unalterable views of the Church of Rome silenced scientists such as Galileo and tended to discourage debate and enquiry until the Renaissance and Reformation opened religious texts and debate to the common man in Europe. In this new age many still considered god to be the source of all knowledge, however in the new view god played a much more passive role in the formation of new ideas and concepts. The thinkers of this period believed that man's ability to reason would allow him to understand the world he lived in and through that knowledge better his own situation, using the world (called "Nature" in man works) to mankind's advantage.

As a result of the Enlightenment, a new religious philosophy began to gain acceptance. This philosophy, known as Deism, claimed such important followers as Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and Benjamin Franklin. The main philosophy of Deism is that the universe was created by God, who set down a number of natural laws and then let the whole thing go, much

a watchmaker, and that by observing Nature mankind could in a scientific fashion discern the "divine laws" that made the universe work. The cosmos was no longer a locked and forbidden property of the Church alone in which scientific observation was often dangerous or heretical, but the explorable and discoverable world of a "divine watchmaker" whose methods and creations were understandable and quantifiable to human observation under the discipline of "Reason". These times are often called the "Age of Reason" because of this fundamental change toward the application of scientific methods to endeavors as seemingly diverse as religion, science, mathematics, literature, architecture and music

The political philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries; most notably John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Francis-Marie Arouet (Voltaire), as well as Hugo Grotius and Thomas Hobbes, and even earlier writers such as Sir Thomas More; were to have an enormous impact on the revolutionary philosophies of Thomas Jefferson, John Hancock, and John Dickenson. Because of the writings of the Enlightenment philosophers, the "Founding Fathers" were convinced that they could use reason to build a better society based on natural and moral law which would preserve the rights of man.

These American Revolutionaries were most influenced by John Locke, he was one of the most widely read authors of his day. Some have gone so far as to accuse Thomas Jefferson of plagiarizing Locke. However, in 1775, no educated person could fail to recognize the ideas of John Locke in Jefferson's writings. Locke's writings were so pervasive in contemporary thought that Jefferson's use of similar language and ideas was a restatement of familiar ideas. It is inappropriate to imply that Jefferson was trying to pass these ideas off as his own original thoughts. Plagiarizing Locke in 1775 would be similar to trying to pass off "We have nothing to fear except fear itself" or "I have a dream" as an original thought.

Locke believed that at birth all men are a blank slate, the term "tabula rasa" (Latin for blank slate) came from a Latin translation of Aristotle's *De Anima*, and was not used by Locke in his 1690 *Essay*, but rather in a French translation of that work¹. This was in direct opposition to the concept of original sin, an idea popular among the various religious groups of the day. The concept of original sin is that all people are born evil and that we must work to reach salvation.

Locke's belief in man as a blank slate implies that evil must come after birth, it must come from outside the individual person. Locke, like many others of his day, believed that evil came from society. So, he reasoned, that in pre-civilized state man would be basically good. He believed that in this state, which he called a state of nature, man had rights to certain things, these included his life, his freedom to do as he wished, and the things which he required to live. The concept of natural rights was not new to Locke, it was present in the works of Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbes, and even Thomas Aquinas. Many of these earlier writers believed that men gave up many of their rights upon forming or joining society. In contrast, Locke believed that these rights were so basic that they could not be alienated (at the time the common usage of alienate was to give away or sell, rather than the modern usage which means to make someone feel unwelcome). Locke's most famous work *Two Treatises on Civil Government* is meant to first dispute Robert Filmer's defense of absolutism, *Patriarcha*, and second to provide an inquiry into the rights of men.

Jean Jacques Rousseau had the second greatest impact on the ideals of the American Revolution. Rousseau's most famous work, *The Social Contract*, is a summary of his ideas. He begins the social contract by arguing against "the right of the strongest," then against "the right of kings," as the basis of government. He then argues that the consent of the people is the only legitimate basis for a government, and that the only legitimate purpose of government is to provide for the safety of the people while taking as few of their natural rights as possible.

Francis-Marie Arouet, better known as Voltaire, was one of the most famous writers of his day. His fame as a philosopher was second to his fame as a satirist, he was famous for works such as *Puerto Regnato*, *J'ai vu*, *Edipe*, *La Heriade*, and *Candide*. Always poking fun at those in power, Voltaire's work often resulted in his imprisonment or exile, and many later works were written while in prison. Voltaire was a champion of religious tolerance, and wrote heavily on the subject. He also, through his plays, novels, and criticisms, helped to bring some of the lesser known philosophies of his day to a greater audience.

All of these philosophers supposed that there was a natural law, much like the laws of physics and mathematics, by which men should be governed. This idea was not new to Locke, in

fact Hugo Grotius and Thomas Hobbes had pioneered this idea years before Locke. Even farther back one could trace the origins of Enlightenment philosophy to Plutarch, or even Epicurus.

However, because of the revolutions in science and philosophy, which emphasized reason, the philosophers of the Enlightenment believed that they could create a better world through the application of scientific principles.

Thomas Jefferson is today regarded as one of the foremost philosophers and political writers of his time. While *The Declaration of Independence* was his most famous work, many of his earlier works express his political beliefs. In 1774 he wrote *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, in this document he makes numerous references to natural rights, natural law, he clearly outlines the limits of royal and parliamentary power in the colonies. His arguments frame these issues in such a way that no student of Locke could deny that the British crown was indeed violating the Americans' natural rights. In February of 1775 Jefferson wrote *Resolutions of Congress on Lord North's Conciliatory Proposal* for the Continental Congress, this paper clearly shows the influence of Locke on Jefferson. In this paper Jefferson says, "This leaves us without any thing we can call property. But, what is of more importance, and what in this proposal they keep out of sight, as if no such point was now in contest between us, they claim a right to alter our Charters and established laws, and leave us without any security for our Lives or Liberties."³ The important words in this quote are life, liberty, and property; these are Locke's basic natural rights. They will be used again by Jefferson in *The Declaration of Independence*.

Many other leaders of the patriot cause were influenced by the enlightenment. After the Boston Massacre, John Hancock delivered a speech in which he says, "The town of Boston, ever faithful to the British Crown, has been invested by a British fleet; the troops of George III. have crossed the wide Atlantic, not to engage an enemy, but to assist a band of traitors in trampling on the rights and liberties of his most loyal subjects in America — those rights and liberties which, as a father, he ought ever to regard, and as a king, he is bound, in honor, to defend from violation, even at the risk of his own life. . . ."⁴ This quote states that the king's job is to defend the rights and liberties of his subjects, an idea which obviously comes from Rousseau's *Social Contract*.

On July 6, 1775 John Dickenson, the author of *Letter From a Farmer in Pennsylvania*,

drew up a paper entitled *Declaration on Taking up Arms* for the Second Continental Congress, it states that “In our own native land, in defense of the freedom that is our birthright, and which we ever enjoyed till the late violation of it — for the protection of our property, acquired solely by the honest industry of our forefathers and ourselves, against violence actually offered, we have taken up arms. We shall lay them down when hostilities shall cease on the part of the aggressors, and all danger of their being renewed shall be removed, and not before.”⁵ Again we see the influence of John Locke, the idea that defense of one’s property is just cause for taking up arms was one of Locke’s most basic principles.

However, the most important section of the declaration is when Dickenson says, “But a reverence for our Creator, principles of humanity, and the dictates of common sense, must convince all those who reflect upon the subject, that government was instituted to promote the welfare of mankind, and ought to be administered for the attainment of that end.” This is the philosophy of Rousseau, pure and simple. This obviously comes from Rousseau’s theory of a social contract, which states that the purpose of government is to protect people and their natural rights.

Locke, the most famous philosopher of his day, was more influential than any other thinker on the beliefs and philosophy of the early American Resistance. His philosophy is seen again and again in the speeches and writings of the “Founding Fathers.” Rousseau was the second most influential on the resistance to British repression, and his ideas would become much more influential when it came time to break with the mother country. The philosophies of the enlightenment had a huge impact on the ideology of Jefferson and his contemporaries and live today in the Constitution of the United States of America, our Bill of Rights and our Declaration of Independence, the basic documents of our nation.

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