**THE ENLIGHTENMENT (1650–1800)**

**The Enlightenment was a sprawling intellectual, philosophical, cultural, and social movement that spread through England, France, Germany, and other parts of Europe during the 1700s. Enabled by the Scientific Revolution, which had begun as early as 1500, the Enlightenment represented about as big of a departure as possible from the Middle Ages—the period in European history lasting from roughly the fifth century to the fifteenth.**

**The millennium of the Middle Ages had been marked by unwavering religious devotion and unfathomable cruelty. Rarely before or after did the Church have as much power as it did during those thousand years. With the Holy Roman Empire as a foundation, missions such as the Crusades and Inquisition were conducted in part to find and persecute heretics, often with torture and death. Although standard at the time, such harsh injustices would eventually offend and scare Europeans into change. Science, though encouraged in the late Middle Ages as a form of piety and appreciation of God’s creation, was frequently regarded as heresy, and those who tried to explain miracles and other matters of faith faced harsh punishment. Society was highly hierarchical, with serfdom a widespread practice. There were no mandates regarding personal liberties or rights, and many Europeans feared religion—either at the hands of an unmerciful God or at the hands of the sometimes brutal Church itself.**

**The Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, however, opened a path for independent thought, and the fields of mathematics, astronomy, physics, politics, economics, philosophy, and medicine were drastically updated and expanded. The amount of new knowledge that emerged was staggering. Just as important was the enthusiasm with which people approached the Enlightenment: intellectual salons popped up in France, philosophical discussions were held, and the increasingly literate population read books and passed them around feverishly. The Enlightenment and all of the new knowledge thus permeated nearly every facet of civilized life. Not everyone participated, as many uneducated, rural citizens were unable to share in the Enlightenment during its course. But even their time would come, as the Enlightenment also prompted the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, which provided rural dwellers with jobs and new cities in which to live.**

**Whether considered from an intellectual, political, or social standpoint, the advancements of the Enlightenment transformed the Western world into an intelligent and self-aware civilization. Moreover, it directly inspired the creation of the world’s first great democracy, the United States of America. The new freedoms and ideas sometimes led to abuses—in particular, the descent of the French Revolution from a positive, productive coup into tyranny and bedlam. In response to the violence of the French Revolution, some Europeans began to blame the Enlightenment’s attacks on tradition and breakdown of norms for inducing the anarchy.**

**Indeed, it took time for people to overcome this opinion and appreciate the Enlightenment’s beneficial effect on their daily lives. But concrete, productive changes did, in fact, appear, under guises as varied as the ideas that inspired them. The effects of Enlightenment thought soon permeated both European and American life, from improved women’s rights to more efficient steam engines, from fairer judicial systems to increased educational opportunities, from revolutionary economic theories to a rich array of literature and music.**

**These ideas, works, and principles of the Enlightenment would continue to affect Europe and the rest of the Western world for decades and even centuries to come. Nearly every theory or fact that is held in modern science has a foundation in the Enlightenment; in fact, many remain just as they were established. Yet it is not simply the knowledge attained during the Enlightenment that makes the era so pivotal—it’s also the era’s groundbreaking and tenacious new approaches to investigation, reasoning, and problem solving that make it so important. Never before had people been so vocal about making a difference in the world; although some may have been persecuted for their new ideas, it nevertheless became indisputable that thought had the power to incite real change. Just like calculus or free trade, the very concept of freedom of expression had to come from somewhere, and it too had firm roots in the Enlightenment.**

**http://www.sparknotes.com/history/european/enlightenment/context.html**

**Baron de Montesquieu, Charles-Louis de Secondat**

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Montesquieu was one of the great political philosophers of the Enlightenment. Insatiably curious and mordantly funny, he constructed a naturalistic account of the various forms of government, and of the causes that made them what they were and that advanced or constrained their development. He used this account to explain how governments might be preserved from corruption. He saw despotism, in particular, as a standing danger for any government not already despotic, and argued that it could best be prevented by a system in which different bodies exercised legislative, executive, and judicial power, and in which all those bodies were bound by the rule of law. This theory of the separation of powers had an enormous impact on liberal political theory, and on the framers of the constitution of the United States of America.

## 4. *The Spirit of the Laws*

Montesquieu's aim in *The Spirit of the Laws* is to explain human laws and social institutions. This might seem like an impossible project: unlike physical laws, which are, according to Montesquieu, instituted and sustained by God, positive laws and social institutions are created by fallible human beings who are "subject ... to ignorance and error, [and] hurried away by a thousand impetuous passions" (SL 1.1). One might therefore expect our laws and institutions to be no more comprehensible than any other catalog of human follies, an expectation which the extraordinary diversity of laws adopted by different societies would seem to confirm.

Nonetheless, Montesquieu believes that this apparent chaos is much more comprehensible than one might think. On his view, the key to understanding different laws and social systems is to recognize that they should be adapted to a variety of different factors, and cannot be properly understood unless one considers them in this light. Specifically, laws should be adapted "to the people for whom they are framed..., to the nature and principle of each government, ... to the climate of each country, to the quality of its soil, to its situation and extent, to the principal occupation of the natives, whether husbandmen, huntsmen or shepherds: they should have relation to the degree of liberty which the constitution will bear; to the religion of the inhabitants, to their inclinations, riches, numbers, commerce, manners, and customs. In fine, they have relations to each other, as also to their origin, to the intent of the legislator, and to the order of things on which they are established; in all of which different lights they ought to be considered" (SL 1.3). When we consider legal and social systems in relation to these various factors, Montesquieu believes, we will find that many laws and institutions that had seemed puzzling or even perverse are in fact quite comprehensible.

Understanding why we have the laws we do is important in itself. However, it also serves practical purposes. Most importantly, it will discourage misguided attempts at reform. Montesquieu is not a utopian, either by temperament or conviction. He believes that to live under a stable, non-despotic government that leaves its law-abiding citizens more or less free to live their lives is a great good, and that no such government should be lightly tampered with. If we understand our system of government, and the ways in which it is adapted to the conditions of our country and its people, we will see that many of its apparently irrational features actually make sense, and that to 'reform' these features would actually weaken it. Thus, for instance, one might think that a monarchical government would be strengthened by weakening the nobility, thereby giving more power to the monarch. On Montesquieu's view, this is false: to weaken those groups or institutions which check a monarch's power is to risk transforming monarchy into despotism, a form of government that is both abhorrent and unstable.

Understanding our laws will also help us to see which aspects of them are genuinely in need of reform, and how these reforms might be accomplished. For instance, Montesquieu believes that the laws of many countries can be made be more liberal and more humane, and that they can often be applied less arbitrarily, with less scope for the unpredictable and oppressive use of state power. Likewise, religious persecution and slavery can be abolished, and commerce can be encouraged. These reforms would generally strengthen monarchical governments, since they enhance the freedom and dignity of citizens. If lawmakers understand the relations between laws on the one hand and conditions of their countries and the principles of their governments on the other, they will be in a better position to carry out such reforms without undermining the governments they seek to improve.

http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/montesquieu/