

The Enlightenment and the Colonies

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Today, Americans have a tendency to celebrate American freedom. Individual liberty and natural equality, or the notion that everyone is born equal, are the basic tenets of our civic ideology. We look to founding documents such as the Declaration of Independence (1776) as the basis of these tenets.

This tutorial examines how American colonists understood liberty and governance before the American Revolution by considering the impact of the Enlightenment on their understanding.

1. A Transatlantic Flow of Ideas

A transatlantic flow of ideas about liberty and governance occurred alongside the trading and consumption of goods in the Atlantic World. Ideas about freedom and unfreedom in American colonial society were profoundly influenced by English society.

American colonists looked to Europe for ideas and knowledge. No newspapers were printed in colonial America before 1680. During the 18th century, however, a flood of journals, books, pamphlets, and other publications became available to readers on both sides of the Atlantic. This shared trove of printed matter linked members of the Empire by creating a community of shared ideas.

In 1731, when **Benjamin Franklin** and his friends created the Library Company of Philadelphia, their initial order from London included editions of classical works as well as books on mathematics, chemistry, architecture, and history. Their library also included intellectual documents and pamphlets that addressed topics such as liberty of conscience and freedom of speech.

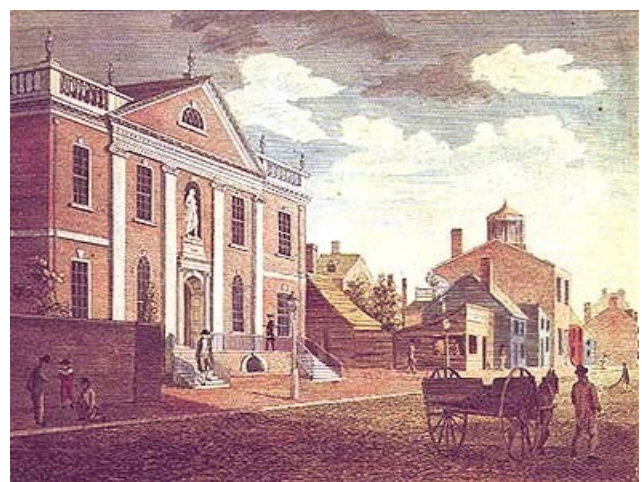


PEOPLE TO KNOW

Benjamin Franklin

Printer, writer, scientist, philosopher, diplomat, politician, and American Founding Father.

Pamphlets were particularly effective in prompting discussion of ideas related to liberty and governance.



A depiction of the building that housed the Library Company of Philadelphia, as it looked in 1800

Most were between 10 and 50 pages long—long enough for an author to develop an argument. Polemical pamphlets, aimed at specific targets, alerted the reading public to developing problems or controversial individuals. Some pamphlets were political documents, which attempted to convince readers and potential opponents that an author's position on a particular issue was correct.

Franklin's library likely included "Cato's Letters", a popular series of 144 pamphlets published between 1720 and 1723 by Englishmen John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon. The letters emphasized the achievements of England in the wake of the Glorious Revolution, especially its commitment to liberty. They also cautioned readers to remain vigilant regarding attacks on that liberty, asserting that there were constant efforts to undermine and destroy it.

Another popular publication was an English gentleman's magazine titled "Spectator", published between 1711 and 1714. In each issue, "Mr. Spectator" observed and commented on the world around him. What made the "Spectator" popular was its style; the essays were meant to persuade and cultivate a refined set of behaviors. Readers were encouraged to reject deceit and intolerance and focus instead on the development of genteel taste and manners.



DID YOU KNOW

Novels made their first appearance in the 18th century and were very popular in the British Atlantic. For instance, Daniel Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe" (1719) and Samuel Richardson's "Pamela: Or, Virtue Rewarded" (1740) found large and receptive audiences in Great Britain and in the American colonies. Writers, printers, and publishers also emerged in the American colonies at this time, issuing their own newspapers and pamphlets.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In 1718, Benjamin Franklin was apprenticed to his brother to work in a print shop. There he learned how to write by copying the style he found in the "Spectator", which his brother printed. At the age of 17, Franklin ran away and ended up in Philadelphia, where he began publishing the "Pennsylvania Gazette" in the late 1720s. In 1732, one year after creating his Library Company, Franklin started his annual publication "Poor Richard: An Almanack", in which he gave readers much practical advice, such as "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise."

2. The Enlightenment

Colonial writers and intellectuals such as Franklin were profoundly influenced by ideas and attitudes associated with the **Enlightenment**.



TERM TO KNOW

The Enlightenment

An intellectual and cultural movement of the 17th and 18th centuries that emphasized reason and science over superstition, religion, and tradition.

Enlightenment Thinking


Humans can understand these rules and thus can uncover the mysteries of nature through scientific observation.

Nature functions according to certain rules.



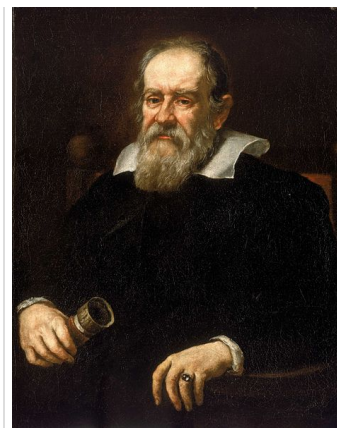
The Enlightenment movement suggested that humans could discover natural laws in human society and the natural world through the use of reason and their senses. Enlightenment thinkers used the rapidly expanding transatlantic press to describe their experiences, empirical observations, and scientific experiments.

Among the most profound effects of the Enlightenment was the conclusion that the behavior of our solar system was complex but predictable.

Enlightenment Thinkers	Portrait
Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) Discovered that the planets' orbits resembled ellipses rather than circles	

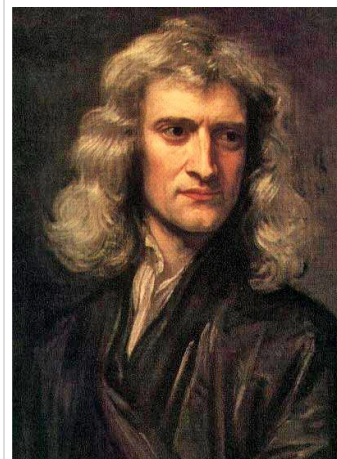
Galileo Galilei (1564–1642)

Built one of the first telescopes (in 1609) and confirmed that Earth revolves around Sun



Isaac Newton (1642–1727)

Published "Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy" in 1687, which attributed the orbits of the planets around Sun to a universal law—gravity



Francis Bacon (1561–1626)

Reinforced the idea that knowledge came from experience and observation by advocating inductive reasoning and the scientific method; Known in some circles as the father of empiricism



Enlightenment thinkers such as Francis Bacon and Newton observed natural phenomena, developed questions, and created hypotheses. The scientific method dictated that scientists test hypotheses by gathering data, refining results, and ultimately developing a theory to explain the phenomena in question.

Francis Bacon saw Enlightenment scientists, not religious figures, as seekers of truth, because of their use of the scientific method. According to this view, Enlightenment thinkers were rational: they believed that any phenomenon could be explained through the use of reason and logic. They also believed that their findings contributed to progress; the linear improvement of human society over time. Finally, they considered themselves cosmopolitan; as having a broad worldview rather than one that was provincial or closed-minded.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Francis Bacon

Key Enlightenment thinker known as the “Father of Empiricism” for his support of the scientific method and his insistence that knowledge came from experience and observation.

3. The Social Contract

Some Enlightenment thinkers applied the principles associated with rationalism, empiricism, and progress to society and government. John Locke (1632–1704) was among the most notable.

Locke was a doctor and educator who had lived in exile in Holland during the reign of James II. After the Glorious Revolution of 1687–1688, he returned to England and published *Two Treatises of Government* in 1690. In this work, Locke took Enlightenment ideas about the natural world and applied them to the government. He argued that all people were born free and equal, a concept known as natural equality, and insisted that this was a universal truth. People could discover this truth by exercising reason and developing a government based upon the principles of natural equality.

According to Locke, the creation of private property was crucial to this process. If all people were born free and equal, then all people had the right to own property and develop it as they saw fit.

To protect this process, Locke argued that government should represent a **social contract** between the leaders and the people. The sole purpose of government, Locke continued, was to protect an individual's "life, liberty, and property." Moreover, Locke argued that the people should have the power to make changes in their government when it fails to protect these natural rights. For these reasons, Locke rejected the divine right of kings (claimed by James II) and advocated the central role of Parliament with a limited monarchy.



TERM TO KNOW

Social Contract

A theory of government espoused by John Locke, in which the purpose of government was to protect the life, liberty, and property of individuals.

John Locke's political philosophy had an enormous impact on future generations of colonists and established the paramount importance of representation and balance in government.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

John Locke

Enlightenment philosopher whose writings, including his 1690 *Two Treatises of Government* and his reflections on the natural rights of man, provided an intellectual foundation for the American Revolution.

4. The Nature of Power

Under the influence of the Enlightenment, and in the context of England's tumultuous politics during the 17th century, a vigorous debate over the nature of power took place on both sides of the Atlantic. Following the Glorious Revolution, discussions of power in colonial America and in England usually centered on its aggressiveness, or power's tendency to expand beyond certain boundaries, to the detriment of liberty. Kings naturally sought to acquire power at the expense of others.

As a result, a bill of rights and constitution, which defines the limits of government, was of paramount importance to English and colonial political thinkers during the 18th century. Abuse of power could be identified as such when actions crossed boundaries specified by a bill of rights and constitution. To prevent this abuse, English and colonial intellectuals wanted to make sure that their governments constituted a proper

arrangement of institutions, laws, and customs. Such an arrangement would check and balance forces within society, including human nature and the aggressiveness of power.

Following the Glorious Revolution, Enlightenment thinkers believed that they were on the way to creating a form of government that best accommodated the nature of power. According to the English model, there were three forces that required balance: royalty (the Crown), nobility (the aristocrats in the House of Lords), and the common people (the House of Commons).

The nobility and the common people were represented in the legislative branch, Parliament, which comprised the House of Lords and the House of Commons. Executive functions were the responsibility of royalty, or the Crown. Members of the judiciary, though appointed by the Crown, were independent arbitrators in disputes between royalty, nobility, and the common people. Finally, the English Bill of Rights outlined the rights and liberties of all Englishmen.

As long as these components—royalty, nobility, and the common people—remained in balance, English citizens would enjoy political liberty. This liberty required them to recognize the importance of hierarchy and deference. English commoners (through the House of Commons) made sure that the nobility (the House of Lords) kept their interests in mind. Likewise, the nobility would challenge any efforts by the Crown to consolidate power at the expense of others.



SUMMARY

Prior to the series of crises that contributed to the American Revolution, many colonists believed they lived in the freest society on earth. Englishmen and colonists alike read and discussed ideas about governance and liberty by engaging in a transatlantic flow of ideas. By doing so, they were influenced by Enlightenment ideas regarding nature and government, most notably John Locke's argument on behalf of the social contract. Following the Glorious Revolution, colonists were confident that England was creating a government based upon that principle by enacting a bill of rights and constituting an arrangement of laws and customs that checked and balanced competing spheres within English society.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Social Contract

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The Enlightenment

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DATES TO KNOW

1571–1630

During his lifetime, Johannes Kepler discovers that the planets’ orbits resembled ellipses rather than circles.

1561–1626

Francis Bacon popularizes the scientific method during his lifetime.

1609

Galileo builds a telescope and argues that the Earth revolves around the sun.

1687

Isaac Newton publishes “*Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*”.

1688–1689

The Glorious Revolution involves the overthrowing of James II and the installment of William of Orange and his wife Mary as king and queen of England.

1689

Parliament issues the English Bill of Rights, and the colonies enter a period of salutary neglect extending into the 18th century.

1690

John Locke publishes *Two Treatises of Government*.

1731

Benjamin Franklin creates the Library Company of Philadelphia.