CHAPTER 17

Eighteenth-Century Society and Culture

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. Introduction

In 1745 a poor peasant named Thomas Brown was jailed in England for shooting deer and rabbits on his landlord’s land, in violation of the game laws. These anti-poaching laws were created by Parliament to reinforce the social distinction between aristocracy and the commoner. The aristocracy controlled most of the wealth, state office, Parliament and judiciary in the countries of Europe in the eighteenth century. They also set the standards of cultural life. Their power came under attack in the eighteenth century by the middle ranks of society demanding political reform and by the intellectuals’ philosophical movement known as the Enlightenment.

A. The Aristocracy

1. Introduction

In the eighteenth century the aristocracy included the wealthiest and most powerful people in society. The aristocracy was made up of the nobility and the lower nobility or gentry. The nobility held hereditary titles and privileges and usually numbered only a few hundred persons. The gentry numbered several thousand families, and although it had status, it was much less powerful than the nobility. The aristocracy was not completely closed to outsiders. Commoners with great wealth and land could sometimes gain entrance. In the eighteenth century the number of newcomers declined.

2. The Wealth of the Aristocracy

As the wealthiest social group in European society, the aristocracy lived in luxury and showed off wealth as a sign of social status. Most of their income came from land. Aristocrats owned at least 1/3 of the land. In the eighteenth century their wealth continued to increase. In Western Europe their wealth increased through investment in new economic enterprises such as mining and in Eastern Europe through increase demands on the serfs.

3. The Political Power of the Aristocracy

In the mid-eighteenth century the aristocracy was at the height of its power. In England it had taken power in the glorious revolution of 1688. In Poland and Hungary it dominated the provincial assemblies. Even in the absolutist monarchies the aristocracy controlled the provincial assemblies, many offices of the bureaucracy and the judiciary.
4. The Cultural World of the Aristocracy

The lifestyle of the aristocracy emphasized learning and appreciation of the fine arts. Their homes were built in the neoclassical style and housed large art collections. The aristocracy also was made up of patrons for musicians and artists. Composers such as Franz Joseph Haydn (1756-1791) and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) worked primarily for aristocratic audiences.

B. Challenges to Aristocratic Dominance

1. Introduction

Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, the aristocracy’s values and lifestyle came increasingly under attack.

2. Encounters with the Rural Peasantry

One of the groups challenging the aristocracy was the peasants and serfs. The serfs of Eastern Europe suffered under oppressive burdens and had no personal freedom. In Western Europe serfdom had given way to tenant farming, but the peasants were coming under great pressure because of increased taxation and the elimination of common pasture rights as landlords began to turn their lands to commercial use. In the west peasants’ resistance appeared in form of lawsuits against their seigneurs or landlords and on occasion in the form of rural violence. In Eastern Europe, the decaying economic conditions of the peasants led to large-scale revolts such as the Pugachev Rebellion in Russia. Peasant revolts sought to regain lost privileges and did not seek a social or political revolution.

3. The Social Position of the Bourgeoisie

Another source of challenge to the aristocracy came from the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie was made up of the prosperous merchants and professionals of the cities. The bourgeoisie had acquired its own social and cultural identity; it was literate and politically active. They became the main critics of the aristocracy.

4. The Bourgeoisie Critique of the Aristocracy

The bourgeoisie criticism of the aristocracy was centered on three elements: first, the aristocracy’s luxury and idleness; second, sexual immorality and promiscuity; and third, a decadent internationalist culture at the expense of wholesome patriotic values. The bourgeoisie critique received much support from the intellectuals that were part of the movement called the Enlightenment.
C. The Enlightenment

1. Introduction

The Enlightenment was an eighteenth-century intellectual movement that promoted gaining understanding of humanity only by the use of a person’s reason. It had roots in the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century and was influenced by the ideas of Sir Isaac Newton and John Locke. Its influence spread throughout Europe and the Americas.

2. Themes of Enlightenment Thought

According to the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1772-1804) the enlightenment was an approach to attaining knowledge as well as a frame of mind. The writers of the Enlightenment, known as *philosophes*, emphasized several themes. First, they had unlimited confidence in human reason. Second, they believed that the universe was governed by natural laws which human reason could discover. Third, they believed that society and human beings were also governed by natural laws. Fourth, they argued for the application of natural law to society. David Hume (1711-1776) proposed a science of the human mind in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) and Adam Smith (1723-1790) proposed a set of natural laws of economics.

The spread of scientific knowledge gave the philosophes a new understanding of the relationship between God and mankind. Most believed that God was the creator and author of natural law, but that he did not intervene in the day-to-day operation of the universe or humanity. This was known as *deism*. The Enlightenment thinkers disliked Christianity and denied that there was one true religion. They believed that morality did not need to be based on scripture. Rather, humans could use reason to discover what was natural and live accordingly. A more extreme position was that of Baron d’Holbach (1723-1789) who denied the existence of God.

The philosophes were firm believers in progress. Through the use of reason, the political and social order could be reformed to produce more efficient institutions and a better society. Cesare Beccaria called for legal reforms that would use criminal punishment to rehabilitate the individual.

3. Voltaire and the Spirit of the Enlightenment

The most representative of the ideas of the Enlightenment was Francois Marie Arouet (1694-1778) (better known as Voltaire). He attacked religion as irrational and barbaric. He attacked the aristocracy and the government for injustice.
4. Enlightenment Political Theory

Enlightenment thinkers were best known for their political theories and calls for reform of the state. Baron Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1785) satirized the ways of European governments in *The Persian Letters*. In *The Spirit of Laws*, Montesquieu proposed a separation of power as the best constitutional structure. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) rejected civilization and customs as slavery that corrupted humanity. He disliked aristocracy and monarchy and instead called for sovereignty of the people. He believed laws should be determined by the General Will, by which he meant not the will of the majority but the consensus of what was in the best interest of the community. Thomas Paine (1737-1809) advocated for human freedom and equality arguing in his *The Rights of Men* that people possess natural rights that could never be taken away.

5. Women and the Enlightenment

The Enlightenment thinkers spoke of human beings as being equal, but did not believe that natural law made men and women equal. They believed that men and women belonged to separate spheres. Women belonged in the domestic sphere and were denied civil rights. Only in the 1790s did Enlightenment writers such as the Marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794), Marie Olympe Aubrey de Gouges (1748-1793) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) begin to call for equality of men and women.

6. The Enlightenment and Sexuality

One theme of the enlightenment was the call for greater sexual permissiveness. Many philosophes lived openly with women out of wedlock. Giacomo Casanove (1725-1798) gained fame for seducing thousands of women while Alphose Donateau François, Marquis de Sade (1740-1814) became infamous for violent sexual encounters.

D. The Impact of the Enlightenment

1. Introduction

The ideas of the enlightenment spread among the educated classes of Europe and the Americas.

2. The Spread of the Enlightenment Ideas

The ideas of the Enlightenment spread quickly because printing technology allowed for printing of pamphlets and newspapers in large quantities. The major publication of Enlightenment ideas was the *Encyclopedia* edited by Denis de Diderot and Jean de Rond d’Alembert. Its seventeen volumes were filled with articles that advanced the ideas of the Enlightenment. Enlightenment ideas were also spread by library societies and book clubs,
which appeared in the major cities and promoted discussion of the latest publications. Another group that advocated the ideas of the Enlightenment were the freemasons. The freemasons called for the creation of a society based on reason and virtue.

3. The Limits of the Enlightenment

There was a limited appeal for the Enlightenment. Most Enlightenment publications did not sell well. People preferred to buy religious books, novels and literature on popular science topics. There was also popular interest on mesmerism and other forms of spiritualism. The illiterate masses remained untouched by the Enlightenment. Popular culture continued to believe in a world dominated by the supernatural. It also continued to practice violent sports, despite the criticism of the educated against these amusements.

4. Enlightened Absolutism

Rulers were generally suspicious of the Enlightenment though a few Eastern European rulers did enact reforms based on Enlightenment ideas. These rulers were known as Enlightened despots. The ruler of Prussia, Frederick II “the Great,” hosted Voltaire in Berlin. Frederick introduced religious toleration, codified Prussian law, abolished judicial torture, and introduced compulsory education. In Austria, Empress Maria Therese enacted a new code of criminal law that abolished torture. Her successor, Joseph II abolished capital punishment and granted religious toleration. Catherine II “the Great” of Russia implemented some educational and judicial reforms, but failed to abolish serfdom.

5. The Enlightenment and Revolution

Enlightenment ideas also inspired the reform and revolutionary movements that appeared in Europe and the Americas in the late eighteenth century. In Britain parliamentary reform and expansion of voting rights was inspired by the Enlightenment. In France many of the leaders of the French revolution were also influenced by the Enlightenment especially its attacks on the royal court. In the Americas, advocates of independence such as Thomas Jefferson and Simon Bolivar were also influenced by Enlightenment ideas.

6. Enlightenment and Western Identity

Enlightenment ideas influenced Western values, legal tradition, and politics, but have never been fully accepted because of their attack on religion and social order.
TIMELINE

Insert the following events into the timeline. This should help you to compare important historical events chronologically.

- Voltaire’s *Philosophical Letters*
- Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws*
- De Gouges’s *On the Rights of Women*
- Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*
- Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*
- Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*

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TERMS, PEOPLE, EVENTS

The following terms, people, and events are important to your understanding of the chapter. Define each one.

- **hidalgos**
- **szlachta**
- **philosophes**
- **Adam Smith**
- **Voltaire**
- **deism**
- **progress**
- **Emelian Pugachev**
- **Marquis de Condorcet**
- **Giacomo Casanova**
- **Frans Anton Mesmer**
- **aristocracy**
- **separate spheres**
- **mesmerism**
- **class**
- **Cesare Beccaria**
- **David Hume**
- **neoclassicism**
- **bourgeoisie**
- **bourgeoisie**
- **Catherine II, the Great**
- **Thomas Paine**
- **Marquis de Sade**
- **Frederick II, the Great**
- **nobility**
- **freemasons**
- **Old Regime**
- **Jean Jacques Rousseau**
- **Encyclopedia**
- **Cesare Beccaria**
- **David Hume**
- **neoclassicism**
- **bourgeoisie**
- **Catherine II, the Great**
- **Thomas Paine**
- **Marquis de Sade**
- **Frederick II, the Great**
- **nobility**
- **freemasons**
- **Old Regime**

- **gentry**
- **Enlightenment**
- **Denis Diderot**
- **Immanuel Kant**
- **Montesquieu**
- **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**
- **seigneurs**
- **Gotthold Lessing**
- **Mary Wollstonecraft**
- **freemasons**
- **Joseph II**
- **classicism**
- **enlightened despots**
- **franchise**
MAP EXERCISE

The following exercise is intended to clarify the geophysical environment and the spatial relationships among the important objects and places mentioned in the chapter.

1. Locate the country in which each of the following philosophers worked.

   Diderot  Voltaire  Hume
   Beccaria  Kant  Smith

2. In which countries did monarchs attempt to impose reforms based on the Enlightenment?
MAKING CONNECTIONS

The following questions are intended to emphasize important ideas within the chapter.

1. What were the contributions of Voltaire, Hume, and Montesquieu? How did these men reflect the general world view of the Enlightenment?

2. Why did the thinkers of the Enlightenment believe in progress?

3. What impact did the Enlightenment have on European governments?

4. Define, insofar as possible, the European nobility. In what ways did they differ from country to country?

5. Who were the bourgeoisie? Who was a member in this social class?

6. What was the nature of aristocratic culture?

7. What was the difference between enlightenment culture and popular mass culture?

DOCUMENT QUESTIONS

The following questions test your ability to interpret the primary source documents in the textbook.

1. What evidence did Daniel Defoe present for social mobility in eighteenth-century England?

2. What does Montesquieu say about the behavior of aristocratic women in Europe?

3. In what ways does Diderot criticize the Christian morality of the Western world?

PUTTING LARGER CONCEPTS TOGETHER

1. How did the ideas of the Enlightenment spread throughout the West?

2. What were the bases of the aristocracy's political power? How did it perpetuate itself in this period?
SELF-TEST OF FACTUAL INFORMATION

1. Which of the following statements concerning the European nobility is most accurate?
   a. The nobility throughout Europe was an undifferentiated class.
   b. The nobility retained considerable influence and power.
   c. All who were noble were wealthy.
   d. The nobility had ceased to play a role in the cultural life.

2. The collection that attempted to summarize all acquired knowledge was the
   a. Almanach.
   b. Omnibus.
   c. Dictionaire.
   d. Encyclopedia.

3. In government, Montesquieu advocated
   a. enlightened despotism.
   b. separation of powers.
   c. pure democracy.
   d. atheism.

4. The architectural style preferred by the eighteenth-century aristocracy was
   a. renais sance.
   b. baroque.
   c. neoclassical.
   d. modernist.

5. In the eighteenth century, the European bourgeoisie
   a. was shrinking in size and economic importance.
   b. was made up of merchants, financiers, and other professionals.
   c. often lived in the countryside.
   d. played no political role.
6. Which of the following Enlightenment philosophes argued that criminal punishments should be used to rehabilitate the criminal?
   
a. Voltaire  
b. Cesare Beccaria  
c. Denis Diderot  
d. Adam Smith

7. Giacomo Casanova became famous for
   
a. writing the *Philosophical Dictionary*.  
b. seducing thousands of women.  
c. violent sexual encounters.  
d. Enlightenment reforms in Russia.

8. All the following are true of Jean-Jacques Rousseau EXCEPT
   
a. he believed laws should be determined by the will of the majority.  
b. he had a negative view of civilization.  
c. he believed man was uncorrupted in the state of nature.  
d. he distrusted human reason.

9. Which of the following countries attempted to implement Enlightenment-inspired reforms?
   
a. Spain and Portugal  
b. France and England  
c. Prussia and Austria  
d. Italy and Germany

10. Which of the following statements concerning popular culture is most accurate?
   
a. The European masses were almost entirely illiterate and untouched by Enlightenment ideas.  
b. The masses began to hear the music of Mozart and Haydn.  
c. The masses were experiencing a period of increasing prosperity and rejected violence.  
d. The European masses fully accepted the ideas of the Enlightenment.