

Topic of Discussion – *The Enlightenment*

Chapter Information ~ Ch 5; 3 sections; 23 pages

The English Establish 13 Colonies (1585-1732)

Section 1 ~ Early American Culture Pages 126-135

Section 2 ~ Roots of an American Democracy Pages 66-136-141

Section 3 ~ The French and Indian War Pages 142-148

Related Topics

The Great Awakening

The English Bill of Rights

The Magna Carta

The Declaration of Independence

Key Ideas

The Age of Enlightenment is the Age of Critical Thinking

The English Enlightenment influence the colonists

It was the wealthy people who led the American Enlightenment.

Key Connections - 10 Major (Common) Themes

1. How cultures change through the blending of different ethnic groups.
2. Taking the land.
3. The individual versus the state.
4. The quest for equity - slavery and it's end, women's suffrage etc.
5. Sectionalism.
6. Immigration and Americanization.
7. The change in social class.
8. Technology developments and the environment.
9. Relations with other nations.
10. Historiography, how we know things.

Talking Points

I Introduction

- A. During the late seventeenth and early eighteen centuries, colonial America saw major changes. American cities became important seaports and Southern part of America ended becoming the major contributor to colonial America's economy. In addition, population increased exponentially with immigrants coming in large numbers and due to the growth of plantations.
- B. It was during this period of economic boom that colonial America experienced two major revivals that had lasting effects on the country with regard to religion, government and human nature. The Enlightenment focused on challenging the role of religion and divine right, and the Great Awakening was responsible in unifying colonies and bringing about the acceptance of religious tolerance.
- C. The Enlightenment actually began in Europe and it reached colonial America more than a century later. In Europe, the Enlightenment was responsible for inspiring revived interests in education, science and literature.
- D. The Enlightenment challenged the role of religion and divine right and this helped Colonial America to see that it was possible to challenge the King and divine right. The movement ended up taking a scientific approach to the world and human nature. The movement challenged the role of God and allowed people to see that they were important and had the ability to shape their own lives. The movement resulted in stimulating new interests in education, science and literature, and as a consequence many new colleges were founded.

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II What Was the Enlightenment?

- A. The Enlightenment has been defined in many different ways, but at its broadest was a philosophical, intellectual and cultural movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It stressed reason, logic, criticism and freedom of thought over dogma, blind faith and superstition. Logic wasn't a new invention, having been used by the ancient Greeks, but it was now included in a worldview which argued that the overall observation and the examination of human life could reveal the truth behind human society and self, as well as the universe. All men were deemed to be rational and understandable. The Enlightenment held that there could be a science of man, and that the history of mankind was one of progress, which could be continued with the right thinking.
- B. Consequently, the Enlightenment also argued that human life and character could be improved through the use of education and reason. The universe could also be altered. The Enlightenment thus brought interested thinkers into direct conflict with the political and religious establishment; these thinkers have even been described as intellectual "terrorists" against the norm. They challenged religion with the scientific method. The Enlightenment thinkers wanted to do more than understand, they wanted to change for, as they believed, the better: they thought reason and science would improve lives.

III When Was the Enlightenment?

- A. There is no definitive starting or ending point for the Enlightenment. Certainly, the main era was the second half of the seventeenth century and almost all of the eighteenth. When historians have given dates, the English Civil wars and revolutions are sometimes given as the start, as they influenced Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes felt that the old political system had contributed to the bloody civil wars and searched for a new system, based on the rationality of scientific enquiry.

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IV Variations and Self-Consciousness

- A. One problem in defining the Enlightenment is that there was a great deal of divergence in the leading thinker's views, and it is important to recognize that they argued and debated with each other over the correct ways to think and proceed. Enlightenment views also varied geographically, with thinkers in different countries going in slightly different ways.
- B. This might have led to some historians wishing to drop the label Enlightenment were it not for the fact that the Enlightenment thinkers actually called their era one of Enlightenment. The thinkers believed that they were intellectually better off than many of their peers, who were still in a superstitious darkness, and they wished to literally 'lighten' them and their views.

V Who Was Enlightened?

- A. The main philosophers of the Enlightenment was a body of well-connected writers and thinkers from across Europe and North America. These leading thinkers formulated, spread and debated the Enlightenment in works including, arguably the dominant text of the period, the Encyclopedia.
- B. Where historians once believed that the philosophes were the sole carriers of Enlightenment thought, they now generally accept that they were merely the vocal tip of a much more widespread intellectual awakening among the middle and upper classes, turning them into a new social force. These were professionals such as lawyers and administrators, office holders, higher clergy and landed aristocracy, and it was these who read the many volumes of Enlightenment writing, including the Encyclopedia and soaked up their thinking.

VI Origins of the Enlightenment

- A. The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century shattered old systems of thinking, and allowed new ones to emerge. The teachings of the church and Bible, as well as the works of classical antiq-

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uity so beloved of the Renaissance, were suddenly found lacking when dealing with scientific developments. It became both necessary and possible for philosophes (Enlightenment thinkers) to begin applying the new scientific methods - where empirical observation was first applied to the physical universe - to the study of humanity itself to create a "science of man".

- B. There was not a total break, as the Enlightenment thinkers still owed a lot to Renaissance humanists, but they believed they were undergoing a radical change from past thought. Historian Roy Porter has argued that what in effect happened during the Enlightenment was that the overarching Christian myths were replaced by new scientific ones.

VII Politics and Religion

- A. In general, Enlightenment thinkers argued for freedom of thought, religion and politics. The philosophes were largely critical of Europe's absolute rulers. The philosophers were also deeply critical, indeed even openly hostile, to the organized religions of Europe, especially the Catholic Church whose priests, pope and practices came in for severe criticism. Therefore, personal freedoms or liberty was widely encouraged by Enlightenment thinkers, who were in favor of international thinking.

VIII Effects of the Enlightenment

- A. The Enlightenment affected many areas of human existence, including politics; perhaps the most famous example is that of the US Declaration of Independence. There is also debate about whether the Enlightenment actually transformed popular society to match it, or whether it was itself transformed by society. The Enlightenment era saw a general turn away from the dominance of the church and the supernatural, with a reduction in the literal interpretations of the Bible and the emergence of a largely secular public who were able to challenge the previously dominant clergy.

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- B. The Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth century's era was followed by a turn back to the emotional instead of the rational. For a while in the nineteenth century it was common for the Enlightenment to be attacked as the liberal work with critics pointing out there were plenty of good things about humanity not based on reason. Enlightenment thought was also attacked for not criticizing the emerging capitalist systems. There is now a growing trend arguing that the results of the Enlightenment are still with us, in science, politics and increasingly in western views of religion, and that we are still in an Enlightenment, or heavily influenced post-Enlightenment, age.
- C. The Enlightenment was crucial in determining almost every aspect of colonial America, most notably in terms of politics, government, and religion. Without the central ideas and figures of the Enlightenment, the United States would have been drastically different since these concepts shaped the country in its formative years. Both during and after the American Revolution many of the core ideas of the Enlightenment were the basis for monumental tracts such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Concepts such as freedom from oppression, natural rights, and new ways of thinking about governmental structure came straight from Enlightenment philosophers such as Locke and forged the foundations for both colonial and modern America. All aspects of life, even religion, were affected by the Enlightenment and many key figures from American history such as Thomas Jefferson were greatly influenced by the movement.
- D. The American Revolution and many of the events to follow was a culmination of many of the ideas of the Enlightenment. The Revolution came about after a series of unfair taxes upon the colonists by the British government who needed this extra income to help them recover from their wars abroad. Until this point, the colonists were only paying taxes that would go to support localized projects and these taxes, most notably the Stamp Tax and the taxes on tea, were seen as completely unwarranted. Using the Enlightenment principles of freedom and reason, the colonists declared these taxes unfair and stood up against oppression. These early Americans wished to have their own govern-

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ment that was based on Enlightenment principles and thus the Revolution occurred. Locke's conception of natural rights for all of mankind was being violated by British oppression and it became necessary to draft a government and code that was conducive to guaranteeing everyone natural rights under law.

- E. One of the first steps in the formation of the United States that was based upon Enlightenment ideals was the creation of the Declaration of Independence. This sought to promise personal freedom to all citizens and this was to be guaranteed by means of a new form of government, one that was based on the people's right to have a say in their government. As the country moved toward the drafting of the Constitution, the ideas of several Enlightenment philosophers shaped the direction American political leaders took. For instance, the idea about the balance of power between three branches of government was used just as Rousseau's ideas about the power of democracy and consent of the people were in the formation of a new government.
- F. Another way that the Enlightenment helped to shape the colonies was in terms of religion. With the Great Awakening came a new understanding of America's early relationship to God and the Church. Instead of one all-powerful church that almost required membership, Protestant ideals based on Enlightenment principles of free will and freedom from institutions allowed people to choose membership in a church rather than be forced into one. Although during the Enlightenment there was a very secular focus, in America this was not the case. The colonies were still very religious but they used the ideas of their freedom to choose that were based on the Enlightenment. Instead of being tied to one religious authority, there were many choices in the colonies and people had a right to choose how to establish and maintain their connection to God.

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- G. Key figures in the founding of the United States such as Thomas Jefferson were greatly influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment which meant that the country was as well. Jefferson was a perfect man of the Enlightenment as he was both classically educated and trained in the humanities as well as very practical and empirical. As the author of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson shaped the country by solidifying the ideas of natural rights in terms of government and religion. In addition, he understood the importance of education in making these ideals work in the new nation and founded the University of Virginia. In many ways, Jefferson represents the way Enlightenment ideals could be put into practice in the new colonies. Other men, such as Benjamin Franklin for example, were similar and since they had such a hand in formulating many of the institutions and tracts the country is based on, their Enlightenment ideas live on
- H. Without the Enlightenment as the philosophical basis of this country, one can only imagine how different would be today. Important guarantees of human and natural rights, expressions of freedom and the rights of citizens to have free choice and practice religious freedom are all vital aspects in America still. Locke, Newton, and other Enlightenment thinkers put forth ideas about liberty and personal will that went on to be key aspects in the most important documents in America such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

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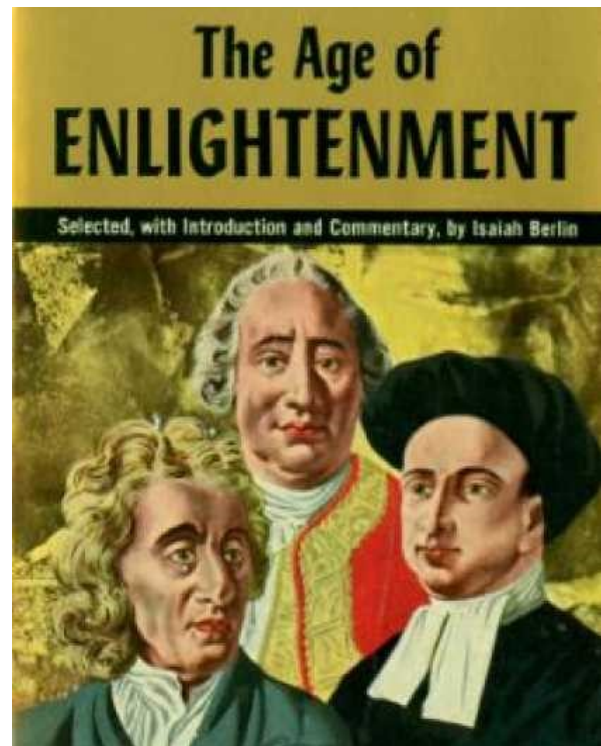
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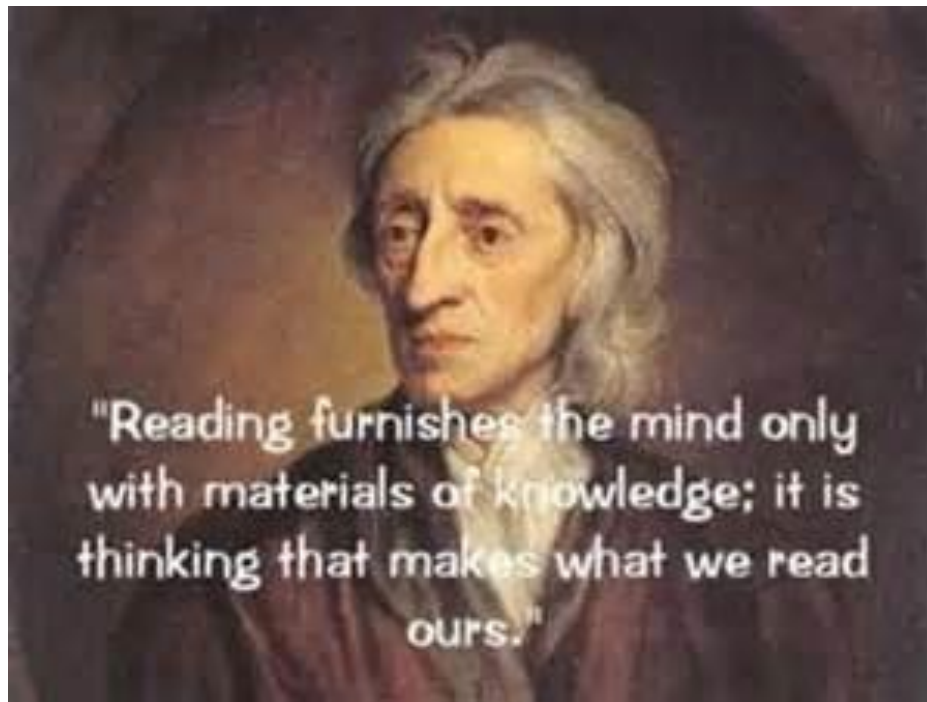
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