

# Impact of the enlightenment on french society during the revolution



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The way of life in Western Europe underwent drastic transformations during the late seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries. The lifestyles of the populace and aristocrats alike were transformed through the Enlightenment. People began to travel between the various countries of Western Europe, studying and exchanging philosophical views. This diversification of thought sparked one of the most significant periods of change in modern history. The Enlightenment educated the common man, handing them an invaluable tool in their struggle to free themselves from the oppression of the monarchies that controlled much of the world. As the common man became increasingly educated and empowered, they began to create thoughts devoid of the Crown's influence. These thoughts were the foundation for many of the most critical rebellions and uprisings, such as the French Revolution in 1789. The works of the Enlightenment writers inspired the minds of the French populace, effectuating one of the most transformative, influential events in modern history. Baron de Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Voltaire challenged the authority of the monarchy which governed France through their works, as they undermined the ideologies that the Crown's rule was rooted in.

One of the most influential, controversial concepts of the Enlightenment was the disparagement of the long-held belief of a King's divine right to rule, which was championed by one of the most prominent writers, Montesquieu. "In his view, no political system could claim divine sanction," (Bernard and Flower). Montesquieu's scorn of the divine right of kings was rooted in his deist beliefs, that there is no divine being that interferes with the laws of the universe (Deism). The absence of a divine being's interference in the world

contradicts the King's divine right to rule. Montesquieu culminated this belief in his reasoning for the separation of powers, which he argued would protect the individual rights and liberties of the citizen (Bernard and Flower).

Montesquieu used the British constitution as a basis for his ideal form of government, as he believed the parliament would resist the royal authority, preventing abuses by the monarch. The populace widely accepted this belief, and it shaped the minds of the young revolutionaries. However, the old regime was vehemently refuted this claim, which led Montesquieu to publicly dispute members of the old regime. One such member of the old regime was Bishop Bossuet, a staunch defender of absolutism and the Divine Right of Kings.

Montesquieu wished to undermine Bossuet's approach, to steer history away from telling stories about how the divine will and providence of God are realized through human history. In its place, he wished to substitute a thoroughly human account rooted in the interplay between human nature and the world in which human history occurs (Reill and Wilson).

The repudiation of the King's divine right to rule undermined the core principles of the Old Regime in eighteenth-century France, as their influence and status were entrenched in the power and authority of the King.

The disdain for the monarchy and aristocracy that governed France was further influenced by the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his political philosophy. One aspect of his political philosophy that had a profound impact on the authority of the French Monarchy was his conception of the different types of freedom of the individual.

The connection between freedom of choice and morality is central to his argument against despotic government, where he writes that the renunciation of liberty is contrary to human nature and that to renounce freedom in favour of another person's authority is to "deprive one's actions of all morality" (Bertram).

This derision of a despotic government became a commonality in the ideologies of French Revolutionists. They used Rousseau's works to substantiate their vilification of the King and the aristocracy. The revolutionists drew upon Rousseau's concept of the general will of the citizens in their reformation of French politics and society.

The concept of the general will had a profound and lasting influence on modern republican thought, particularly in the French tradition. The *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* of 1789 (article 6), a founding document of the current French Constitution, defined law as the expression of the general will (Munro).

Munro highlights the influence of Rousseau's works on the revolution, as the definition of law as the expression of the general will was a fundamental aspect of Rousseau's political philosophy found in *The Social Contract*. The impact of the Rousseau's Enlightenment ideals was further illustrated through his celebrity and admiration by some of the most influential groups and figures of the French Revolution, such as the Jacobin Club. The Jacobins cited many of Rousseau's works in their reasoning and rationale behind the Revolution. One of the most influential Jacobins, Maximilien Robespierre, idolized Rousseau and drew inspiration from many of his works (McNeil

206). The adoption of Rousseau's political philosophies by members of the French Revolution helped to undermine the ideals of the Old Regime of eighteenth-century France.

The freedoms and liberty of man was of a principle aspect of the Enlightenment used by the Revolutionists to challenge the core principles of the Old Regime in eighteenth-century France. The significance and influence of this concept on the Revolution were furthered by the Enlightenment writer Voltaire. Voltaire fervently fought to expose the hypocrisy of the Old Regime through his works by using critical reason. This outward challenge of authority is what many scholars to consider his works to be a cause of the revolution (Shank). The disruptive nature of Voltaire's writings often led to his exile from France and his works to be banned by the monarchy. "The monarchy feared the power of written word so deeply that they used any means possible to keep it under lock and key. This was shown by their desperate attempts to exile Voltaire as far away from them as possible..." (Hight 70). This quote illustrates the significance of Voltaire's work and the power it had over the people of France. The reverence with which the monarchy treated Voltaire is detailed, as they so deeply feared the influence of his works that they took extraordinary measures in an attempt to ensure that his works would not be read by the populace in France. One of the reasons for which the monarchy banned much of his works was his advocating for the liberty of speech. Voltaire believed that the liberty of speech was sacred and could not be taken away from a citizen no matter the context (Shank). This became one of the most influential philosophies of the Enlightenment as it became a fundamental aspect of the French Revolution

and a crucial instrument in challenging the authority of the Old Regime. Voltaire's public opposition to the censorship of the French monarchy enabled other Enlightenment thinkers in France and revolutionists to voice their opinions, undermining the authority and control of the Old Regime.

The works of Baron de Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Voltaire helped to undermine the sovereignty of the Old Regime in eighteenth-century France by challenging and refuting the ideologies in which the monarchy was rooted in. Montesquieu argued against the validity of an absolute monarchy, reasoning for a form of government that would better represent the populace. Rousseau expanded on Montesquieu's ideas, as his philosophy of the freedoms of the individual became commonplace in the minds of revolutionists. Voltaire fought for the freedom of speech for all citizens, openly challenging the monarchy and exposing its hypocrisy in his works. The writings of these three Enlightenment thinkers had a profound impact on the French Revolution, as they helped the citizens of France openly challenge the authority of the Old Regime in eighteenth-century France. The influence of these thinkers drastically transformed French society, shaping the ideals of the French citizen.

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