

The enlightenment revolution

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



The Enlightenment was an intellectual revolution in the thought domain in the 18th century. During the early modern era in the Europe, it was the third significant movement after the Renaissance revolution and the Protestant revolution. The Enlightenment took a new world-view for people to change the world. It emerged from the scientific revolution and was pushed to the top by intellectual thinkers. The thinkers of the Enlightenment developed the Enlightenment by their works, which changed not only the traditional religion and views of the world, but also the societal system and political institution. There is no doubted that the Enlightenment was one of the greatest social progress in the human history.

The scientific revolution between the 16th and 17th Centuries was the one of most fundamental factors that the Enlightenment emerged in the 18th century. It was a movement focusing on astronomy and physics. “ About the middle of the second century C. E., when the Greek scholar Claudius Ptolemy composed a work known as the Almagest” (Bentley et al., 2003, p. 659), the world was not as same as past. More astronomers bravely proposed their ideas about the universe which not only challenged traditional scientific theories but also shook devout religious beliefs. It was these theories that led to the appearance of scientific revolution. In the scientific revolution, Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), who “ elaborated the experimental method and formulated the law of inertia” (McKay et al., 2006) respectively. Basted on accurate observation and mathematical, great physicist Isaac Newton published his famous Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy. Kepler, Galilei and Newton all got progress by denying the theories of predecessors . Their theories

developed the knowledge about not only the natural world, but also people self. As Bentley and Ziegler (2003) described, “ his(meaning of Newton) work suggested that rational analysis of human behavior and institutions could lead to fresh insights about the human as well as the natural world”, all the scientists, contributed to the scientific revolution, which liberated the thought of people from religion and prepared the emergence of Enlightenment.

In the Enlightenment, there were a lot of great thinkers. The most intelligent and influential thinkers included John Locke (1632-1704), Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755), Voltaire (1694-1778) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. They were actively engaged in coming up with their own views about the social development and political democracy. And the entire attempt they did was help to shape a better world. As McKay, Hill and Buckler said:

“ John Locke was the pioneer of empiricism. He insisted that all ideas are derived from experience. Montesquieu was renowned for *The Spirit of Laws*, which discussed a separation of powers. For Voltaire, he sharply criticized the dark reign of the Catholic Church and feudalism, and believed in natural rights. He also affirmed that people are essentially equal. Rousseau was passionately committed to individual freedom but attacked rationalism and civilization”. (McKay et al., 2006)

Even though all of opinions from intense thinkers were consumed by a desire to explore and build an advanced society, there were also some differences with their theories. For instance, Locke and Voltaire had different views on religion. Locke approved of religion “ but only with respect to vital issues that

lie beyond the reach of reason; to allow any further extent to non-rational religious convictions would leave us at the mercy of foolish and harmful speculations” (Kemerling, 2001). But Voltaire opposed completely to religion. Locke was often seen as the modern founder of the concept about political freedom. He considered that the government’s authority can only be based on the basis of support from people. In the book *Two Treatises on Government*, he claimed that “ people have the right to overthrow its regime when the government against the theory he put forward” (Kemerling, 2001). For Voltaire, he against the monarchy, and supported deistic God, advocated the freedom of thinking and speech. Montesquieu was the supporter of the separation of powers doctrine. He devoted himself to seek a way to “ establish a science of politics and discover principles that would foster political liberty in a prosperous and stable state” (Bentley et al., 2003, p. 662). Based on the theory of Locke, Montesquieu created separation of powers, which had a great influence for the modern institution of democracy. One of common points between Voltaire and Montesquieu was that they all admired the English enlightened absolutism. Both Voltaire and Montesquieu looked forward to establish a political institution just like England did. Rousseau’s most important work was *The Social Contract*, which discussed “ the two fundamental concepts: the general will and popular sovereignty” (McKay et al., 2006, p. 612). He believed an ideal society was established between people but not the government and contract. Except supporting individual freedom like other Enlightenment thinkers, Rousseau came up with a theory to attack rationalism and civilization (McKay et al., 2006, p. 612), which was so characteristic and pioneering.

As a great pioneering movement in the thought domain, the Enlightenment had a cumulative effect to the whole world. The thinkers were strongly criticized the feudal dictatorship and Catholic Church, described the future rational kingdom, and also provided a preparation for blueprint to achieve dominance in ideology and theory. Furthermore, these thinkers not only made the adequately prepared for French Revolution, but also spanned beyond the national boundaries to make significant and far-reaching effects. The most obvious impact was that it had a far-reaching impact on the political system of United States and its constitution in 1787. Meanwhile, Enlightenment thinking also have a cumulative effect to political system around the world. It gave impetus to modern civilization process and provides a model for political system in other countries, not only “ west countries, like German, Italian, Spain and Russia” (McKay et al., 2006), but also Asian countries, like China and Japan.

In the course of the 18 century, the Enlightenment was a rational revolutionary focused on social institution and political system. It was one of mentality emancipatory innovations for people. The romantic thinkers came up with a lot of valuable theories, such as the concept about political freedom by John Locke, separation of powers by Montesquieu, natural rights by Voltaire and theory of Social Contract by Rousseau. Those romantic and critical theories dedicated to discovery more scientific and elaborate laws for human society. What the most cumulative effect of the thinking was it made out a blueprint for modern political system, which became the cornerstone of civilized evolution. It is certain that the Enlightenment will never be

forgetting as a movement for political democracy and social development in human history.