

The impact of the enlightenment

[History](#)



As the word suggests the movement celebrated human reason above everything and presented a worldview that expressed in terms of knowledge, freedom, and happiness. The themes of the Enlightenment were popularly human dignity, freedom, equality, and religious forbearance. The ideologies of the movement would not have gained impetus if the print media had not yet flourished, which promoted a renewed interest in the discovery of knowledge, especially among the elites. One of the founding centers of the Enlightenment was France. Voltaire (1694-1778) was a French radical thinker who epitomized the Enlightenment ideals of freedom of speech and rational thought over blind faith in religion. Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755) was another Enlightenment figure who revolutionized political discourse. He praised the republic as the best form of government and paved the way for the division of the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary. Diderot was the architect of the Encyclopedia which was published over a period of twenty-one years (1751-1772). Though the Enlightenment ideals originated in France it spread to different parts of Europe and the world. Each country saw the emergence of a bunch of radical thinkers in various fields. In England, it was epitomized by Isaac Newton. John Locke, Adam Smith, David Hume were the other exponents of the Enlightenment in England. In America the writings of Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin created waves. It encouraged a widespread thirst for knowledge among the elites and the cultivation of scientific rationalism. Many of these philosophes set the mood for a tremendous intellectual and cultural revolution which left no stone in the society unturned. In the essay let us look at the political, economic, and scientific ripples created by the Enlightenment across the world.

Many leaders of the American Revolution like Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Paine were greatly influenced by the English and French Enlightenment thought, especially John Locke's idea of liberalism. The Enlightenment clearly defied the absolutism of monarchy and upheld democracy. The common man was tired of being suppressed under the absolutist monarchs and they were influenced by the teachings of the philosophes that reached them by the printed word. The American Revolution was the political uprising of the latter half of the 18th century which led to the founding of the sovereign United States of America. In the Revolution thirteen of Britain's colonies in North America rejected the authority of the Parliament of Great Britain and finally the British monarchy. The armed conflict against the British was known as the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783). They broke away from the British Empire on July 1776 and the American victory was won in October 1781. The greatest revolution in the field of economics was led by Adam Smith (baptized 1723-1790), one of the key figures of the Scottish Enlightenment. He opposed the consolidation of mercantilism and supported the free market which he believed would bestow complete economic freedom for a nation's development. In his *Inquiry into the Wealth of Nations* (1776), he stressed the benefit of the pursuit of individual interest (self-interest) in maximum production and growth of the capital in an economy free from state-run monopolies. He provided a decent intellectual rationale for free-trade and capitalism, wherein many economists including Karl Marx benefited from his theories. Adam Smith, known as the Father of Modern Economics, set milestones that positively affected the economic situation of his times and the subsequent generations. To cite stray instances of economic

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advancement during the Enlightenment, in the Netherlands new procedures were found to drain swamps which increased the available agricultural land. Stock-breeding improved and new techniques like seed-drills enhanced productivity. Another noteworthy change toward the end of the 17th century was the spread of potato as a New World crop. Enlightened leaders and the common man embraced the nutritional and economic value of this efficient crop (Lewis). A striking feature of the Enlightenment was the focus on the new role of women. There were severe restrictions for women in the 18th century and they were excluded from scientific societies and universities. Despite these barriers, some women made valuable scientific contributions. Laura Bassi (1711–1778) was an Italian scientist and the first woman to teach in a college in Europe. She was appointed a professor of anatomy at the University of Bologna in 1731. In 1732 she was elected to the Academy of the Institute for Sciences. She was interested in Newtonian physics and was responsible for introducing Newton's physics and natural philosophy to Italy.