

Topic 5.1 — The Enlightenment (Parts 1 & 2)

Standards Table

Thematic Focus	Learning Objective	Key Concept
Cultural Developments and Interactions (CDI) – The development of ideas, beliefs, and religions illustrates how groups in society view themselves, and the interactions of societies and their beliefs often have political, social, and cultural implications.	Unit 5: Learning Objective A – Explain the intellectual and ideological context in which revolutions swept the Atlantic world from 1750 to 1900.	KC-5.3.I.A – Enlightenment philosophies applied new ways of understanding and empiricist approaches to both the natural world and human relationships; they also reexamined the role that religion played in public life and emphasized the importance of reason. Philosophers developed new political ideas about the individual, natural rights, and the social contract.
		KC-5.3.I – The rise and diffusion of Enlightenment thought that questioned established traditions in all areas of life often preceded revolutions and rebellions against existing governments.
		KC-5.3.II.i – Nationalism also became a major force shaping the historical development of states and empires.
Social Interactions and Organization (SIO) – The process by which societies group their members and the norms that govern the interactions between these groups and between individuals influence political, economic, and cultural institutions and organization.	Unit 5: Learning Objective B – Explain how the Enlightenment affected societies over time.	KC-5.3.I.C – Enlightenment ideas and religious ideals influenced various reform movements. These reform movements contributed to the expansion of rights, as seen in expanded suffrage, the abolition of slavery, and the end of serfdom.
		KC-5.3.IV.B – Demands for women’s suffrage and an emergent feminism challenged political and gender hierarchies.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Explain the key intellectual ideas of the Enlightenment.
- Identify how Enlightenment ideas challenged traditional authority.
- Describe how Enlightenment thought influenced reform movements.
- Analyze how Enlightenment ideas contributed to revolutionary movements.

Lesson Overview

The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement that spread across Europe and the Atlantic world during the 17th and 18th centuries. Enlightenment thinkers believed that human reason could be used to understand society and improve government. Many philosophers challenged traditional authority, including absolute monarchy and the power of established churches.

These new ideas encouraged people to think about rights, liberty, and equality. Enlightenment philosophies helped inspire revolutions in the Americas and Europe. They also influenced movements that sought to expand rights for different groups, including enslaved people and women.

Essential Vocabulary

- **Enlightenment** – An intellectual movement emphasizing reason, science, and individual rights.
- **Natural Rights** – Rights believed to belong to all humans, such as life, liberty, and property.
- **Social Contract** – The idea that government authority comes from an agreement with the people.
- **Empiricism** – The belief that knowledge comes from observation and experience.
- **Feminism** – A movement advocating equality between men and women.

Background Reading

The Enlightenment developed during a period of major intellectual change. Earlier scientific discoveries by thinkers such as Isaac Newton showed that the natural world followed logical laws. Enlightenment thinkers believed that similar principles could be applied to human society. Instead of relying only on tradition or religion, they argued that reason and evidence should guide political and social decisions.

Philosophers such as John Locke, Voltaire, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote about natural rights, religious tolerance, and the role of government. Many argued that political authority should come from the consent of the governed rather than divine right. These ideas challenged long-standing political systems, including absolute monarchies.

Over time, Enlightenment ideas spread through books, pamphlets, and discussions in salons and universities. These ideas helped inspire reform movements and revolutions. Movements for expanded political rights, abolition of slavery, and

women's rights drew heavily from Enlightenment principles about equality and justice.

Primary Sources

Source 1

John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (1689)

Full text: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/locke-sel.asp>

The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions.

Men being naturally free, equal, and independent, no one can be subjected to the political power of another without his own consent. The only way whereby any one divests himself of his natural liberty is by agreeing with other men to join and unite into a community.

The great and chief end, therefore, of men uniting into commonwealths and putting themselves under government is the preservation of their property, which includes their lives, liberties, and estates.

Guided Analysis Questions

1. Identify ONE Enlightenment idea expressed in the excerpt.
2. Explain how Locke's ideas challenged traditional political authority.
3. Explain ONE way Locke's ideas influenced later revolutionary movements.

Source 2

Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)

Full text: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/wollstonecraft-rights.asp>

I do not wish women to have power over men; but over themselves. The mind has no gender, and the improvement of reason should be the same for all human beings. Women are not naturally inferior to men. They appear to be so only because they lack education. If women were given the same opportunities for education and intellectual development as men, they would become equally capable citizens. Society will benefit when women are allowed to develop their talents and participate fully in civic life, rather than being confined to narrow domestic roles.

Guided Analysis Questions

1. Identify ONE argument Wollstonecraft makes about women's rights.
2. Explain how Enlightenment ideas influenced Wollstonecraft's arguments.
3. Explain ONE way movements for women's rights challenged traditional social hierarchies.

Major Enlightenment Thinkers

Thinker	Key Idea	Impact
John Locke	Natural rights and consent of the governed	Influenced democratic revolutions

Voltaire	Religious tolerance and freedom of speech	Challenged church authority
Rousseau	Social contract and popular sovereignty	Inspired democratic reforms
Wollstonecraft	Women's rights and education	Early feminist thought

Enlightenment Ideas and Social Impact

Idea	Social or Political Impact
Natural rights	Inspired revolutions and constitutional governments
Reason and empiricism	Encouraged scientific thinking and reform
Equality	Influenced abolitionist and feminist movements
Popular sovereignty	Challenged absolute monarchy

Change / Continuity / Comparison

Changes

- Increased criticism of absolute monarchy.
- Expansion of reform movements.
- Growth of ideas about equality and rights.

Continuities

- Many social hierarchies remained in place.
- Monarchies continued to rule in many regions.
- Gender inequality persisted despite new ideas.

Comparison

In Europe and the Americas, Enlightenment ideas inspired revolutionary movements. In other regions, rulers sometimes adopted Enlightenment ideas selectively while maintaining traditional authority.

Key Takeaways

- Enlightenment thinkers emphasized reason and individual rights.
- Philosophers questioned traditional authority and political systems.
- Enlightenment ideas helped inspire revolutions in the Atlantic world.
- Reform movements sought expanded rights for enslaved people and women.
- Enlightenment ideas reshaped political and social debates.

Reflection Activity

- Identify ONE Enlightenment idea that challenged traditional authority.
- Explain ONE way Enlightenment ideas influenced reform movements.
- Explain ONE continuity in social structures despite Enlightenment thought.

Primary Source Citations

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