

K.M. Boughan * History 104 * The Citadel
MAJOR ENLIGHTENMENT THINKERS

I. English Precursors to the Enlightenment

A. Builders of the New Science

FRANCIS BACON (1561-1626) – Exponent of *EMPIRICISM*. Most important idea: Knowledge of the natural world is to be gained by a program of experiments; the knowledge produced will be an approximation of the absolute truth, and have PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS.

ISAAC NEWTON (1643-1727) – Birthed modern physics. Most important idea: The cosmos governed by a single set of universal natural laws, verifiable by experiment, and precisely expressible in the language of mathematics. The universe runs according to *LAWS*, not through a *HIERARCHY of ANIMATE POWERS*.

B. JOHN LOCKE (1632-1704): Theorist of the Glorious Revolution

- 1) Contract theory of government: *Two Treatises on Government* (1690). Man's natural rights: life, liberty, property.
- 2) Cognitive theory and human perfectibility: *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690)
- 3) His anti-authoritarian ideas about education.

II. Principal French *PHILOSOPHES* (lit. "philosophers"; more precisely: "free-thinkers")

VOLTAIRE (Francois-Marie Arouet, 1694-1778). The quintessential Enlightenment man. Against "infamy" (i.e., all repression, fanaticism, bigotry). Weapons: Wit and humor, unflattering comparisons of France to Britain, which he idealized. Popularized Newtonian physics and optics.

Baron de MONTESQUIEU (1689-1755)

Political theory in the Lockean tradition: *The Spirit of Laws* (1748) . Three basic forms of govt.: the republic (guided by a spirit of virtue); the monarchy (honor); despotism (fear). Promoted British system of *separate* and *balanced* executive, legislative, and judicial branches as ideal. M.'s notion "checks and balances" heavily influenced the formation of the U.S. constitution in 1787.

DENIS DIDEROT (1713-1784)

The organization of knowledge: *The Encyclopedia* (1751-1772). 17 vols. of text, 11 vols. illustrations. Expressed anti-slavery sentiments and poked fun at Roman Catholic religious dogma. Meant to educate the educated public, entertain them, and inspire them toward progressive change.

III. Beyond France: The Enlightenment as an International Movement

CESARE BECCARIA (1738-1794). Enlightenment values of reason and human dignity applied to the law: *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764).

- Punishment should not be about *vengeance*; rather, about *maintaining social order* and *deterring future crimes*.
- Punishment should fit the crime: Punish no more than absolutely necessary.
- No judicial torture, no death penalty.

ADAM SMITH (1723-1790). Liberty and economy: *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). Anti-mercantilist. *Mercantilism* in the 18th c. a term applied to a collection of policies in which govt. controls, or attempts to control, economic activity. Smith's alternative: *LAISSEZ-FAIRE* ("let it be") economics. Free, open competition (with minimal govt. interference) produces the strongest economy; markets tend to regulate themselves in the best possible way. Smith called this natural self-regulation – the sum of individuals making decisions in their own economic self-interest -- the "invisible hand."