

The Enlightenment (17th-18th centuries)

Definition of the Enlightenment

An intellectual and cultural movement after the Renaissance

Enlightenment thinkers stated that people enjoyed 'natural rights' such as equality and liberty

They also opposed political and social inequalities.

Background to the Enlightenment

Change of Europeans' values

The Renaissance, the Reformation and the Scientific Revolution had promoted the ideas of humanism, challenging authority and rational thinking in Europe.

The Europeans applied these ideas to political and social aspects

European's discontent with absolutism

Absolutism (Absolute monarchy) rose in Europe during 16th-17th centuries.

King had complete power over government.

King used force to maintained the rule

Promoted the theory of the 'Divine right of kings'

The king's power to rule came from God and people must obey them.

Laws of nature and natural rights

Enlightenment thinkers believed the human society was controlled by the laws of nature

Natural rights include the property, equality and liberty

No one can infringe and deprive other's rights

Government should protect people's natural rights

Protect natural rights

Major Enlightenment ideas

Social Contract

Social Contract was about relationship between people and the government and states the responsibilities of people and the government

Relationship between people and the government

The Locke and Rousseau stated that the power of government came from the people

When a government 'breaks the contract' (refuse to admit the contract) and cannot protect people's natural rights, people have the rights to overthrow it

Responsibilities of people and the government

People

People follow the civic responsibility

They are willing to give up some of their rights/freedom when there is conflict of social interest

Government

Government will protect his people, give them rights, freedom and stabilities, especially in politics

The separation of powers

Montesquieu suggested the 'separation of powers'

Divide powers among three branches of government, namely the legislature, the executive and the judiciary

Prevent absolute rule

Legal protection: Constitutional

Voltaire proposed the implementation of constitution and reforms to limit the power of the king and protect people's right

Spread of Enlightenment ideas

Academic journals become popular and Enlightenment ideas were written in academic journal

Academic journals were an important means for Europeans to absorb Enlightenment ideas

Publishers were eager to translate and print the works of Enlightenment thinkers

The ideas were widely spread in Europe and other continents.

Impact of the Enlightenment

Liberating the mind of Europeans

Freed Europeans from the Church's control and shackled by absolutism

Criticized the 'divine right of kings' and promoted the ideas of natural rights

Fostering political transformations in the West

The ideas redefined the relations between people and government challenged absolute rule

Enlightenment ideas spread in American and Europe.

Absolute rulers carried out social, legal, religious and educational reforms to give more rights to the people

Led to American Revolution and French Revolution