THE ENLIGHTENMENT

I. Introduction: Purpose of the Lecture
   A. To examine the ideas of the Enlightenment (explore the issue of how important is the "old" kind of intellectual history)
      1. Alas, Dead White Males again
   B. To attempt some broad generalizations about it
   C. To look at some specific examples (3 of the most famous philosophes)
   D. To examine the determinants or causes of these ideas
      1. How did they arise and why were they attractive to people in the 18th century?
      2. Which classes of people (or kinds of people) were attracted to them?
   E. To indicate the relationship of these matters to the previous lecture on the balance of power

II. The ideas of the Enlightenment
   A. The word "enlightenment" suggests what these ideas were
      1. The men of the Enlightenment believed they were coming into the "light," away from the darkness of the past:
         French: siècle des lumières (century of lights)
   B. From this sense of coming into the light emerges a complex of other ideas and values:
      1. Esteem for clarity, simplicity, directness, order, regularity
         a) Thus, they hated obscurity, unnecessary complexity, deviousness of thought, artificiality (all of which they associated with previous centuries)
         b) These were the Dark Ages—feudal law, scholastic philosophy, rule by corrupt and incompetent hierarchies, "irrational" tradition, etc.
      2. Reason: The men of the Enlightenment, or philosophes, believed that "reason" was the embodiment of "light"
Thus the Enlightenment has been called the Age of Reason

3. **Nature**: Similarly, reason and "nature" went together
   a) Observing nature and using reason allowed one to find the proper path, to discover nature's secrets, to arrive at proper guidelines to how life should be lived

4. **Hatred of Unreason**: Again, one must note that the philosophes' esteem for reason was exceeded by their hatred of "unreason"
   a) Thus, they were inclined to distrust strong emotions, those that overcame reason, unbridled enthusiasms
   b) Such emotions led to fanaticism—to all that was so hateful about the past, the wars of religion, the persecutions, tortures

5. **Secular Humanism**: Life on earth is itself a good; human beings are the measure of all things
   a) Clear connections can be seen with classic philosophies, those that esteemed man as "god-like" in potential

6. **Liberalism**: Freedom and toleration is necessary for reason to be able to work
   a) Especially important is freedom of thought and expression (political freedom is a more complex and controversial matter)

III. **The Enemy: the Church (and organized religion)**
   A. It is not difficult to understand how the Church, organized religion, symbolized all that was hateful to the men of the Enlightenment
      1. The Church was the central institution of the Dark Ages
      2. The Church, in their eyes, encouraged superstition, hatred, fanaticism
         a) It was known for obscurantism, deviousness, repression
3. It was similarly enmeshed in the "irrational" and hopelessly confused institutions of feudalism

4. The Church looked at the world as a vale of tears, a place of suffering and testing—the opposite of secular humanism

5. The Church was intolerant, repressive, illiberal—it forced its dogma on people, persecuted those who disagreed

IV. The "religion" and dogma of the philosophes

A. In some regards it may be said that the philosophes did not quite live up to their own ideals of reason, nature, and toleration

B. At least by twentieth century standards, they were not particularly tolerant (of course "toleration" is an elusive concept)
   1. They accepted certain beliefs basically on faith
   2. In ways that are not immediately obvious, they fell into obscurity and confused, contorted reasoning

C. Many philosophes found it difficult to believe that a sincere, honest, and intelligent person could also willingly be a Christian or a deeply religious Jew
   1. And the Christianity or Judaism that they presented to their readers was often a twisted parody of those faiths, or at least a one-sided version, seeing only the faults
   2. They did much the same, in other words, that the Church and the rabbis did went they discussed Enlightened ideas—resembling what the French term a "dialogue of the deaf"
   3. There was of course this difference: The Church and the rabbis had power to force their ideas on others—and often did so
      a) However unfair or bigoted the philosophes were in regard to genuinely religious people, they did not suggest that their opponents should be put into jail, or tortured, or brutally silenced—burned at the stake, stoned
D. What the philosophes did with "unaided reason" was at times not all that different from what Christians and Jews did with it

1. That is, they, too had a kind of basic body of belief, accepted on faith, that they reasoned about
   a) For example: They rejected a Christian god but still retained a belief in a deity who created and ordered the universe
   b) That cannot be demonstrated by unaided reason to the satisfaction of all

2. Very few philosophes were atheists or agnostics; most were Deists (believing in a god, but not a personal Judeo-Christian god)

3. Similarly, nearly all of them retained a belief in some kind of future state, where good men would be rewarded and bad punished
   a) Again, such beliefs cannot be demonstrated by unaided reason

4. Finally, in a more general way, many had a remarkably naive belief that "nature" was a sufficient guide for human action

5. That, somehow, people could easily and without danger of error, learn from "nature" about how best to organize their society, their lives

6. And what they claimed to learn from nature often strikingly resembled Judaeo-Christian ethics, the Ten Commandments, Sermon on the Mount, etc—in other words, "revealed" religion, not "natural" religion

E. In sum, we might say that the philosophes believed in a "secular religion"

1. One with its own articles of faith, its own intolerances, its own vagueness and contradictions

2. Still, there was unquestionably one large difference between this secular religion and traditional Christianity or Judaism
   a) It avoided theological or metaphysical speculation
b) It was centered mostly around this world, around secular matters, in other words

c) The beliefs of the philosophes moved away from speculation about God, the angels, the Trinity, etc.

d) And they had little use for the authority of the Bible, the Church Fathers, the Scholastic philosophers, or the Talmud

3. Still, the point remains that for them "nature" was a kind of buzz word, just as more traditional theological terms were for others

   a) Their faith in "nature" might be termed nearly as "blind" as a faith in "revelation"

V. Three Philosophes: Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau

A. We need to see as concretely as possible how these various generalizations apply (for there are many exceptions)

B. Looking at three specific philosophes will also help us to appreciate the considerable diversity of the Enlightenment

   1. This was a diversity of individuals but also a diversity of period, since the tone and emphases of Enlightenment thinkers changes in the course of the 18th century

C. I have chose three of the most famous, each of which may be said to be typical of what has been termed the three different generations of the Enlightenment

D. Montesquieu

   1. Mentioned briefly last lecture as author of The Spirit of the Laws, defender of the parlements, spokesman for conservative opposition to the exercise of unlimited royal power

   2. He was also known for his other writings, especially for theories of geographical determinism

   3. He is typical of the First Generation, what some have called the "pre-Enlightenment"
a) cautious, relatively conservative, with an aristocratic conception of liberty (or, better, "liberties" that are closely linked to the idea of "privilege")

b) He admired England because of its aristocratic ruling orders, the "freedoms" it enjoyed in relation to the king

4. What he shared with later generations are the following:
   a) Secular, social interests, not theological or metaphysical
   b) He was not really a Christian
      (1) However, he did not much emphasize that, nor make direct attacks on Christianity
c) He was concerned with this world much more than the next

d) He showed a definite esteem for the powers of reason—especially what reason applied to an observation of nature could accomplish

5. But his social and political views were quite distinct from those of later generations

a) For them, his notion of the separation of powers, of the value of "intermediary bodies," represented the height of "irrationality" and a too great respect for "tradition" and "privilege"

b) They were much more inclined to see the state's role as rationally reordering society, the economy, etc—to make them more efficient, harmonious, just

c) Montesquieu's idea of separating the powers, of limiting the power of the state, really meant, as far as his critics were concerned, to preserve privilege, the irrational class and economic structures of the past

E. Voltaire: The Middle Generation

1. He is often presented as the personification of the Enlightenment, the philosophe par excellence

2. Voltaire excelled in the technique of making highly complicated scientific findings understandable to a broad, unscientific audience

3. In contrast to Montesquieu, his political ideal was closer to "Enlightened Despotism."

a) Liberty in a political sense was not so important to him as getting the job done

b) And he doubted that it would get done properly with aristocrats in power (to say nothing of the common people)—better to have an enlightened, all-powerful ruler

4. Yet, liberty was also important to him

a) But that was intellectual rather than political liberty
b) He did not think that the Enlightened Despot should have the power to prevent the free expression of ideas

5. For this reason he, too, admired England, where he had spent a number of years

6. Voltaire's ideas on religion:
   a) Probably his best known, or notorious
   b) Here we see the secular, anti-Christian, anti-Church (and even "anti-Semitic") ideas at their strongest
   c) *Écrasez l'infâme!* (crush the infamous thing—that is, organized, dogmatic, repressive religion)

VI. **Rousseau: The Third Generation (almost "post-Enlightenment")**

A. Perhaps most notable about him was a new tone, an emotionalism that presages the Romantic period of the early 19th c.

B. Rousseau, too, esteemed "reason", yet unlike his "rational" contemporaries, he emphasized the importance of impulse, spontaneity, emotion
   1. He was at times inclined to believe that mystical insights or intuitions were more useful than what was discovered through cool reason
   2. He believed that there were important "non-rational" faculties of the mind

C. In his political ideas as well, he is more representative of future developments
   1. He looked to republican democracy, not rule by aristocracy or monarchy
      a) And he stipulated a "social contract" as its foundation
   2. In other words, "the people" were the ultimate source of political authority, the "consent of the ruled" rather than the rights of the privileged or rational
   3. The collective will of the People fused into the General Will (*Volonté générale*)
a) This concept will have a long and notorious history, as we will see

(1) especially in the hands of "rational" minorities who believe that they know better what the majority needs than the majority itself does
VII. Origins of the Ideals of the Enlightenment

A. The sense of "coming into light" was encouraged by many developments, going back deep into the past

1. The discoveries of the 17th century
   a) Geographic (voyages of discovery), which greatly enhanced the sense of diversity (and worth) of other cultures, put the centrality of Christendom into doubt
   b) Scientific (somehow the natural world no longer seemed ultimately mysterious; human beings could understand its deepest mysteries)
   c) Newton's discoveries were most important, but they really were only the culmination of a series of discoveries that put the traditional view of things into question
   d) The beliefs about "reason" and "nature" ultimately had their origin and validation here

B. General revulsion from religious passion, bigotry, the death and destruction of the seventeenth century—"religion" seemed to cause so much bloodshed and suffering

VIII. The social foundations of the Enlightenment

A. Key question: Who was it that was attracted to the ideas of the Enlightenment?

B. This is a question that historians have given particularly close scrutiny in the past few generations

C. A few obvious conclusions have been firmed up by close research of local conditions:

1. The peasants and lower orders were largely unaffected, at least in any direct way (most of them could not read)

D. But a few other conclusions that were once widely accepted have been challenged or qualified

1. Among them is the assertion that Enlightened ideas appealed to those whose personal interests were obviously forwarded by them
Lecture 3, The Enlightenment

a) The "Marxist" interpretation was especially important among these

b) That is, the assertion that the emerging bourgeoisie or middle class was most attracted to the ideas of the Enlightenment

c) They were attracted because they perceived that a "rational" and "liberal" world would benefit them

d) Or, negatively put, they resented the inefficiency, corruption, and privileges of the ruling orders of the old regime

e) Similarly, the older privileged orders could be expected to be hostile to ideas that suggested they should be replaced

2. Evidence shows that elements of both the bourgeoisie and aristocracy rallied to the ideas of the Enlightenment (just as other elements of both classes resisted those ideas)

3. Nevertheless, it is clear that economic and social change was creating a more numerous and influential bourgeoisie

a) And certainly large parts of the bourgeoisie were interested in reform

4. We might still, similarly, speak of a "revolutionary class" turning to a "revolutionary ideology"—however many qualifications must be made in that regard as well

E. Perhaps the least controversial conclusion: the regime of Louis XVI was increasingly unpopular and suffered defeat after defeat in the field of battle

1. That turned many Frenchmen against it, whatever their immediate class interests

2. Most concretely, that regime proved itself unable to collect taxes to finance its operations

3. And that inability brought growing dissatisfactions to a head
F. The 18th century saw, already before 1789, a "revolution" in the minds of people in France and elsewhere

1. A "break" with the past was developing

G. That revolution would, in the last decade of the century, take on far more concrete forms -- although also forms that were highly ambiguous and would in many regards be alien to what any of the philosophes had intended (or indeed the bourgeoisie)

H. And a new state form was about to be created, one that would also revolutionize relations of states, and produce a state more powerful than anything experienced beforehand.