The Enlightenment: Crash Course European History #18

Crash Course: European History
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Hi I'm John Green and this is Crash Course European History.

So far, we've seen a ton of political change and continuing warfare in the midst of the seventeenth century's little ice age, and history often focuses on these types of political and military stories, but there were also other changes occurring: shifts in how people perceived the everyday world. The linking of phenomena like earthquakes and eclipses with human events goes back a very long way, like to the beginning of our species, as does the belief that supernatural forces are deeply shaping the lives of individual humans.

For instance, in a previous video about witchcraft, we discussed how earthquake tremors in Istanbul in 1648 were seen as portents of a sultan's death a few months later. But a century after that, a huge earthquake struck Lisbon, Portugal on All Saints' Day of 1755. Tens of thousands of people died, many from a tsunami that followed the quake.

Now, some theologians argued this was punishment from God for the world's sins, but others pointed out that the earthquake had destroyed a lot of churches while sparing a lot of brothels. Voltaire wrote a famous poem in response to the earthquake that included the memorable lines "As the dying voices call out, will you dare respond to this appalling spectacle of smoking ashes with, "This is the necessary effect of the eternal laws Freely chosen by God?" The way Europeans were looking at the world had changed between the Istanbul earthquake and the Lisbon one: The Enlightenment was thriving. [Intro] So, today we want to emphasize that the Enlightenment wasn't all high fallutin' calculations of the sun's orbit or theories about the mathematical laws of the universe or for that matter theories about earthquake causality. It also considered more down-to-earth situations like how people of different social classes relate to one another, how trade and manufacturing should function, and what the relationship of ordinary people should be to their government.

The Enlightenment or Age of Light refers to the belief that the musty old ideas needed to be exposed to rational investigation to see if they were still valuable. The bright light of reason needed to shine on tradition. And this momentous challenge to tradition came about during a time in which Europe was being completely transformed in many ways that are sometimes forgotten amid all the excitement about Voltaire and reason.

So let's go straight to the Thought Bubble today. 1. Beyond the wars and state-building we've already seen, 2. increasing abundance and novelty was creeping into the everyday lives of Europeans. 3. Coffee, tea, chocolate, tobacco, and other commodities led to experimentation. 4.

For instance, one English housewife saw tea for the first time and thought it was meant to be baked as a kind of pie filling. 5. A diplomat said that tea and coffee had brought a greater "sobriety" and "civility" to everyday life in Europe. 6. Europe had previously been a land of famine and mere subsistence for essentially all of its history. 7.

But now the cultivation of new foods from the Americas like potatoes and corn, 8. along with literally thousands of other new plants, meant that available calories were increasing, 9. And it also introduced the idea that maybe the world didn't have to be perpetually on the brink of starvation and catastrophe. 10. Also, by this time, tens of thousands of Europeans had traveled the world, and had experienced other social orders first hand. 11.

For instance, travelers discovered that people across Asia didn't seem as quarrelsome as Europeans. 12. Drivers of carts did not block narrow streets for hours arguing over who had the right of way. 13. They politely agreed to let one or the other pass. 14.

They also saw that not all social orders were as hierarchical as most European ones, 15. and that some societies even gave less weight to a person's parentage 16. and more to that person's individual skills and talents. Thanks Thought Bubble. [[TV-Montesquieu]] One of the first ways writers criticized outmoded ways of life was to make fun of them...writers like Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, aka Just Montesquieu. (He really was the person to criticize outmoded ways of life because, boy did he have an outmoded name.) Montesquieu was a jurist who owned an estate near Bordeaux, which still makes wine under his name, and in 1721, he published the Persian Letters in which Uzbek visitors find Europe amusing if not shocking. The visitors, for instance, are amazed at the magic of priests who somehow perform the trick of turning wine into blood.

And although they clearly see the problems in French society, they firmly adhere to the mustiness of their own ways, such as keeping women secluded in a harem and guarded by eunuchs. The message was that both easterners and Europeans were imperfect. The author Voltaire--who, slightly off topic, was very handsome.

I mean, very striking eyes. At any rate, he had similarly critical and amusing takes; his discourtesy to aristocrats eventually got him sent to the Bastille prison, in fact. In many rollicking tales, he made fun of overweening rulers and their endless corruptions.

He valued honesty and those who lived simple lives "cultivating their gardens," as he famously put it in his satirical novel Candide (1759), which you can learn more about in Crash Course Literature. Full of horrors and injustice, Candide appeared four years after the Lisbon earthquake, which Voltaire thought was firm evidence that we did not live in the best of all possible worlds. To replace the old stuffy ways of monarchs and aristocrats, people needed to learn how to embrace the newly-desirable traits of the Enlightenment, like being honest, and inquisitive, and open.

Swiss thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau had many ideas about education reform, for instance. He was not a wealthy or titled person but rather was born into a watchmaking family and lived among artisans. His best-selling novel Emile (1762) describes a boy who grows up not in a city or palace but in a countryside where one can be oneself—a natural individual.

Instead of experiencing common rote learning, with large doses of religious and classical reading, Emile learns carpentry, and gardening, and other practical skills. In the countryside he behaves in the best possible way—naturally and without pretentious airs. Rousseau promoted what would come to be called middle-class values, like hard work, practicality, and domesticity for women.

When Emile becomes a young man, the spouse chosen for him is plump and smiling and devoted to taking care of him—not studying or reading or practicing a craft or working hard to support the family like farm women did. Also, she will breast feed their children, whereas both aristocratic women and busy working women at the time commonly used wet nurses. As with Emile's upbringing, all of this is presented as "natural." Meanwhile, wealthy women in Europe instituted the Enlightenment salon: regular get-togethers in their homes to hear the latest idea, learn about the latest book, or meet the latest philosopher-influencer—called a philosophe in French.

Slightly off topic, but I just love the idea of Rousseau and Voltaire as influencers. Like, I would have loved to see their Instagram feeds. Voltaire's smoldering selfies, Rousseau's weird rants written in the notes app and then screenshot-ed.

It would have been gold. At any rate, 18th Century Salon goers were often great readers or experimenters with the latest commodities and fashion. Just like contemporary influencers, actually.

And in terms of fashion, instead of looking to the courts for fashion inspiration, men like Voltaire now sported cottons from India made into handkerchiefs that were worn around the neck, which would soon metamorphose into the necktie). They also sported banyans—that is loose bathrobe type garments—that did not need corsets, which men traditionally wore. As Rousseau believed, men should take off their make-up, wigs, and high heels and be natural—just like people did in other parts of the world.

Just natural man as he is naturally made in the countryside, wearing a Banyan and a feathered hat. Transformation was in the air for everyone, not just the elites. Although imported foreign cottons were still illegal in France, for instance, many people now wore them, including servants, who received cast-off cotton dresses or shirts that were bright and easy to keep clean.

And to help people learn, there were many more texts. Like in France, there was the Encyclopedie (you'll notice my amazing French pronunciation). It provided discussions of topics such as natural rights and the status of women.

Its main editor Denis Diderot wrote: "All things must be examined, debated, investigated without exception and without regard for anyone's feelings."[1] Diderot favored social and political reform. But the Encyclopedie--you know what, I'm gonna just translate it--Encyclopedia, also contained technical drawings of machinery, including machinery for mining. And that reflected practical values and also provided a spur to inventiveness and growing prosperity in Europe.

Also, mining, which was already pretty important, was about to become EXTREMELY important, thanks to coal. In general, Enlightenment aims were more worldly than spiritual. In Scotland, philosopher David Hume promoted reason above religion, concluding that belief in God was mere superstition.

Some people, called Deists, argued that God existed but that he didn't influence everyday life after having set the machine of the universe in motion. Many important "founding fathers" of the United States were deists, and if you believe, as many philosophers did, that God keeps a distance from human affairs, then the persecution of people for their religious beliefs starts to seem like cruel fanaticism. And some philosophes became activists.

Like, Voltaire was outraged by the torture of Jean Calas, who had been accused of murdering his son to prevent him from converting to Catholicism. (Calas's son had in fact committed suicide due to gambling debts.) Calas was waterboarded and had every bone in his body broken before eventually dying under torture. Is there a bone back there? All right, listen.

This is a femur. I don't think this is an actual femur, I think it's, like a recrea--Stan is this a real femur? It is NOT a real femur.

So I asked our brilliant writer Bonnie if Calas really had every bone in his body broken and she responded, "It's hard to know whether they got every one," and then she described Calas's torture to me with a level of detail that led me to conclude that ONE they probably did break every bone in his body, and TWO oh my god torture in 18th century Europe was THE WORST. So, last thing I'm going to say about this: if you invent a time machine, and I believe absolutely that you can, do not go back in time before like, maybe 2003? Don't get me wrong--things are bad, but remember: they used to be so much worse.

Speaking of terrible, let's talk about slavery. So, Enlightenment views also fed into rising movements in Britain, France, the Netherlands, and their colonies to abolish slavery. By this time, the slave trade was massive and there was growing acknowledgement of its cruelty.

In 1770, the French Catholic abbé (or, clergyman) Guillaume Raynal laid out the violent devastation of native peoples by invading Europeans. And in 1788 the freed slave Olaudah Equiano described the middle passage after he had been kidnapped in present-day Nigeria and enslaved. Now Equiano is often believed to have been born in South Carolina, and his riveting memoir may have been cobbled together from the harrowing tales of others.

Still, it was a bestseller. It captured the inhumanity of whites towards blacks, advocated Enlightenment freedom and human rights for all. It also stirred freedmen and slaves to struggle for abolition.

And there was also growing movements for other kinds of freedom. The Scotsman Adam Smith took on the mercantilist theory that global wealth was static and states could only increase wealth by taking it from others when he rejected ideas about stockpiling gold, and refusing entry of goods into one's country, and also remaining a subsistence agricultural economy with serfs. He advocated for manufacturing, the division of labor, and free trade.

In a free or laissez-faire market, an individual would work and interact with others in the economy on the basis of their self-interest. And the sum of all self-interests would make for a balanced, harmonious, and prosperous society. Smith is best known as the father of the free market, free trade, and individualism thanks to his 1776 book An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations.

But he also opposed absolutism and urged concern for the overall well-being of society. In addition to the benefits of laissez-faire that he saw, Smith saw the potential harms, so he also argued for healing social policies. Another important Enlightenment book was Jean-Jacques Rousseau's The Social Contract, which famously begins "Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains." Rousseau picked up on John Locke's theme of the contract that individuals made with one another to form a state or nation.

And he believed that Once freely formed, the state embodied the best that was in the collective community; thus individuals needed to give the state unconditional obedience because it represented the "general will." Today, thinkers see that this call for obedience to the general will planted the seeds of dictatorial governments in the twentieth century and beyond. But, Rousseau did also emphasize individual sentiments as valuable. At the opposite end of Rousseau's "general will" was German philosopher Emmanuel Kant's attention to individual reason.

He famously exclaimed, "Dare to Know" as he advanced the Enlightenment's commitment to the human mind and the ability of every person to think for themselves instead of simply obeying old commands and ideas. The human mind, he argued, housed "categories of understanding" with which information interacted to produce purely rational judgments. And in this way, Kant shared the faith in the individual of both Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith, and we can trace our own culture's individualism back to the Enlightenment.

And many other individuals took refuge in Enlightenment thought as well as taking it as a call to action. Upper-class Jewish women across Europe found the world of ideas so inspiring that they began salons, too. In Berlin, they established nine of the fourteen salons in the city.

And philosopher and author Moses Mendelssohn used the more tolerant atmosphere to express his optimism about the future of Jews in Europe. Because of the Enlightenment emphasis on reason, he believed that the age-old persecution of Jews would soon end. Of course, we now know that that wasn't the case.

And much exploitation and oppression has taken place in the guise of reasoned thought. Pseudoscientific "reason" has been used to justify many forms of structural inequality, from racism to sexism to class systems. Rationality would not prove to be a way out of the human urge to create and marginalize outsiders.

But Enlightenment thought was nonetheless transformative, and seeking worldly explanations for inequality and injustice did have significant real-world consequences. I mean, no longer would we see Earthquakes merely as acts of God. Enlightenment challenges to the idea that we already were living in the best of all possible worlds would help us to imagine, and eventually live in, better worlds--albeit ones that are still profoundly imperfect.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.

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[1] Quoted in Lynn Hunt et al., The Making of the West: Peoples and Cultures, 6th ed. (Boston: Bedford St. Martins, 2019) 616.