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World History Honors Block 2

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Primary Source Essay

Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Voltaire were all philosophes from the European Enlightenment. The European Enlightenment was the period these philosophes lived in. During the Enlightenment the philosophes debated and came up with many ideas about how government, culture, and politics should be. This was during the 18 century and is also known as the Age of Reason because at the time reason was valued above all else and everything was questioned based on if it was reasonable or not, like church acts. Many of the ideas the philosophes had later influenced the creation of the founding American documents such as the Declaration of Independence, The Constitution, and Bill of Rights.

Thomas Hobbes was an English philosoph and like many other philosophes he believed that in society there existed a social contract and that all men had rights that needed to be protected. “NATURE hath made men so equal in the faculties of the body and mind, as that, though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body or of quicker mind than another, yet when all is reckoned together the difference between man and man is not so considerable as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit to which another may not pretend as well as he. For, as to the strength of body, the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest” with this quote we can tell he believed that nature made all men equal to one another. We can tell the Founding Fathers agreed with Hobbes belief of rights that needed to be protected because they created the Bill of Rights. They also took Hobbes belief in all men are created equal, which we can prove because we can read it in the Declaration of Independence “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” In this quote we see the Founding Fathers believed in both Hobbes ideas of equality between all men and his belief that all men had certain rights. Many philosophes inspired the Founding Fathers when they wrote the first documents of early American government.

John Locke heavily influenced the American system of government in a variety of ways. For example Locke had the idea that governments should have checks and balances to prevent tyranny. The Founding Fathers obviously incorporated that into the American government by giving each branch in our government their own checks and balances. Another example of Lockes’ influence on the American government is in this quote “When legislators try to destroy or take away the property of the people, or try to reduce them to slavery, they put themselves into a state of war with the people who can then refuse to obey the laws. When legislators try to gain or give someone else absolute power over lives, liberties, and property of the people, they abuse the power which the people had put into their hands. It is then the privilege of the people to establish a new legislature to provide for their safety and security. These principles also hold true for the executive who helps to make laws and carry them out.” This quote is incorporated into American government by, like in the quote it says the people have the right to establish a new legislature when they find their current government to be jeopardizing their natural rights, well in America when the people feel that their president is not a good leader or is somehow jeopardizing their rights the people have the right to impeach him and establish a new president. However there are numerous other philosophes that effected the American government and the writings of the Founding Fathers as well.

Jean Jacques Rousseau was a Genevan philosoph that heavily influenced the American Revolution. His main beliefs were that community interests should be more important than the individual interests and he believed the ideal form of government was a democracy. We can tell Rousseau’s beliefs are easily seen in our government because we have a democracy and we vote for things, which is an example of majority rule or interest. Also Rousseau believed that it was unfair that some people were richer than others and that the rich should not enjoy special privileges. These beliefs are also evident in our government because the more money you make the more taxes you have to pay which helps to keep things more fair between social classes and the rich do not get special privileges when it comes to the law, which was not the case in Rousseau’s time. Each philosoph contributed immensely to American government in their own way.

Montesquieu was a French philosoph that believed there should be a “separation of powers” in government between legislative, executive, and judicial branches. This belief has transcended into our government because as we all know we have three branches of government known as the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Another one of Montesquieus’ beliefs that is exercised in today’s government is that a man is innocent until a jury finds him guilty; his belief is seen in the U.S. Constitution as well as the sixth amendment in The Bill of Rights. Montesquieu also firmly believed in the rule of law “Democratic and aristocratic states are not in their own nature free. Political liberty is to be found only in moderate governments; and even in these it is not always found. It is there only when there is no abuse of power. But constant experience shows us that every man invested with power is apt to abuse it, and to carry his authority as far as it will go. Is it not strange, though true, to say that virtue itself has need of limits? To prevent this abuse, it is necessary from the very nature of things that power should be a check to power. A government may be so constituted, as no man shall be compelled to do things to which the law does not oblige him, nor forced to abstain from things which the law permits.” with this quote we can gather that Montesquieu thought that the only way to prevent the abuse of power was by using rule of law because laws never change, once they are written their meaning stays the same forever for everyone. The Founding Fathers of America were influenced by Montesquieus’ philosophy and made their own laws to govern the people, the evidence of this being The Bill of Rights and other documents containing the laws of America. The philosophes influenced their government at the time as well as many foreign governments even many years after they died.

Voltaire was a French philosoph who believed, like most of the other philosophes, that all men should be treated equally and should have freedom of speech and freedom of the press. “It is clear that men, enjoying the faculties connected with their nature, are equal; they are equal when they perform animal functions, and when they exercise their understanding. The King of China, the Great Mogul, the Padisha of Turkey, cannot say to the least of men: “I forbid you to digest, to go to the privy and to think." All the animals of each species are equal among themselves.” This quote is one of many showing how much Voltaire valued equality and believed that all men in the world were equal. Voltaire thoughts about equality were very influential to our Founding Fathers, the evidence of this being the First Amendment in our Bill of Rights “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a [redress](http://www.usconstitution.net/glossary.html#REDRESS) of grievances.” The Founding Fathers put some of Voltaire’s’ exact beliefs into the Bill of Rights proving his influence on them.

The philosophes of the 18th century had many beliefs that were considered radical for their time but today we take for granted. For example, equality, freedom of speech and press, and many other luxuries we could never dream of living without. Their beliefs and ideas greatly influenced the writings of America’s Founding Father and the government system of America. The philosophes ideas continue to influence governments around the world even today in modern society. The writings of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Voltaire will probably inspire many people for centuries to come.

**Citation**s

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Locke, John. “The State of Nature” *Excerpts from Two Treaties on government*

Rousseau, Jean. “Democracy” *Excerpts from The Social Contract*

Montesquieu. “Meaning of Liberty” *Excerpts from the Spirit of the Laws*

Voltaire. “Equality” *Excerpts from Equality*

Hobbes, Thomas. “The Law of Nature and the Need for a Strong Government” *Excerpts from Leviathan*

“The Enlightenment” multiple page packet