

The American Declaration of Independence as an Epitome of Enlightenment Ideas

Posted on September 18, 2018

Enlightenment Thought and the American Declaration of Independence

The American Declaration of Independence document is regarded as one of the greatest texts in American history. Thomas Jefferson, its author, was influenced by some ideas and political philosophies and did not claim that the text had original ideas. He mentioned in 1825 that “Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion.” Some different philosophers and authors had an influence.

Similarly, the drafters of the United States Constitution were influenced by documents, works and ideas of people of other countries, political philosophers who developed and worked on the ideas of enlightenment from 17th and 18th century Europe. The American Revolution itself was a result of several ideas, inspired by principles that developed in the age of enlightenment.

Some of the people whose ideas influenced these documents and America’s forefathers include the works of John Locke, Thomas Paine, Adam Smith, William Blackstone, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, among others. Among most of these political thinkers and philosophers, universal themes that are noted include the concept of a social contract between the state and its subjects. That the government protects the rights to life, liberty, and property in exchange for the people’s consent to be ruled by them legitimately. The American constitution echoed the notions of such a contract. No one’s liberty, property, or life could be taken unless due process of the law is taken, and there would be a separation of powers to ensure that power does not converge to a single office, thereby rendering it less likely for the rulers to take the natural rights of the citizens away (USCIS).

In the Declaration of Independence, the text of the preamble drafted by Thomas Jefferson referred to the Laws of nature and “man’s unalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” These were inspired by the works of John Locke in his ‘Two Treatises of Government’ issued in 1690. Locke argued that the natural rights of man “existed in the state of nature” and that they could not be usurped by the state or even forfeited by the individual. The text of the declaration says: “That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,” Inspired by Locke’s theory that a social contract exists between the government and the governed, where the governed consent to be ruled. In the Declaration of Independence, the text of the preamble drafted by Thomas Jefferson referred to the Laws of nature

and “man’s unalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” These were inspired by the works of John Locke in his ‘Two Treatises of Government’ issued in 1690. Locke argued that the natural rights of man “existed in the state of nature” and that they could not be usurped by the state or even forfeited by the individual. The text of the declaration says: “That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” Inspired by Locke’s theory, a social contract exists between the government and the governed, where the governed consent to be ruled in exchange for having their natural rights protected and for having their natural rights protected (CRF-USA).

Rousseau, Locke, and the Intellectual Foundations of American Liberty

John Jacques Rousseau’s most important work, *The Social Contract*, in 1762, argued in favor of a contract between a citizen and government that lets them as a people unite together while preserving their freedom. Self-determination and internal liberation, coupled with the principles of popular sovereignty presented by Rousseau, are reflected in the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution. He imagined a form of direct democracy in which the majority vote would decide the general will of the people, who would jointly consider the laws of the government. These principles are reflected in the beginning of the text as “We the people . . .” at the start of the U.S. Constitution (Ford). Similarly, Charles Montesquieu’s vision of a branch-based structured government instead of a single large body is visibly reflected in the structure and purpose of government outlined in historical US Documents. In his work, *The Spirit of Laws*, in 1748, Montesquieu viewed the power of the King of England, with two Houses of Parliament, a divided executive, legislature, and an independent court system, as the favored mode of government. In his view, this structured form of government prevented one front of power from turning too dominant, and a unification of these branches of government would lead to despotism (CRF-USA).

The ideas that formed the basis of America, such as freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and a state where there would be no national religion, were inspired by Voltaire’s ideas. Voltaire strongly advocated that all citizens should have the right to free speech without censorship and freedom of faith in a tolerant society where no one would be persecuted for their beliefs. The two things Voltaire argued strongly against in his plays, poems, letters, essays, and works were religious freedom and an absolutist state (Mastin). Similarly, Adam Smith’s ideas, which establish the three separate branches of government, as well as his perspectives on political economy, were studied by US forefathers, who were influenced by his ideas, and that reflected themselves in the US Constitution and the Declaration of Independence (CRF-USA).

Enlightenment ideas that helped shape the Declaration of Independence and influenced American forefathers were also not borne overnight but were themselves a product of centuries of thought and philosophy. The work of Greek philosophers that were preserved by the Arabs was brought to Europe

after the Renaissance period, where they began to be translated and studied. Greek literature can provide a useful source for understanding the polis, i.e., the Greek state that was composed of different nations. Homer, the Greek poet and thinker, wrote his *Illiad* and *Odyssey* in 750-700 BCE when the Greek state was rising. In *Odyssey*, Homer describes the island of Cyclopes, which was despotic and undemocratic like Athens, where men lived wildly outside the Greek state.

Classical Philosophy and the Development of Democratic Ideals

“Neither assemblies for council have they, nor appointed laws, but they dwell on the peaks of mountains in hollow caves, and each one is lawgiver to his children and his wives, and they have no regard for one another.” (Gillian Cross)

Homer criticized the people of Cyclopes for not living according to the philosophical ideas of the Greek state and compared it to Athenian democracy and how, inside the Polis, matters of the state were debated in a fashion that is similar to a democratic parliament. Ideas such as the rule of law, the rule of the people, moral ideals, critical thinking, and heroic characters of society were discussed in his works (Gillian Cross), which were also critically studied by later scholars (Howell). They are regarded as one of the most important documents to study Greek history and thought. Ancient Greece produced thinkers who tried to study the human mind and how best to cultivate or utilize it, whereas progressive intellectuals of the Enlightenment, inspired by them, studied and worked on the implications of the mind’s cultivation (Johnson C). Notable Intellectuals of the Enlightenment era, including Jean Jacques Rousseau, Mary Wollstonecraft, John Locke, etc, held many views that were built upon the foundation of Greek philosophy, politics, and education (Feldman).

The thoughts of Ancient Greek scholars centered mainly on understanding and realizing the fundamental competencies and capabilities of human knowledge, whereas thinkers of the Enlightenment built upon these teachings and sought to utilize them in order to create ideals of the state and society. The result of these evolved ideas translated to the framing of historical documents, such as the Declaration of Independence, in which citizens received a voice in their government and announced the ending of their trust in autocratic regimes that restricted their rights. They led to many other freedom movements in the world besides inspiring the American Revolution and the ideals held by US forefathers.

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