



Western Civilization from 1650 to the Present

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TOPIC 5.2. MODERN POLITICAL THEORY

Supplement to Chambers, *The Western Experience*, Chapter 19: The Age of the Enlightenment, pp. 667-697.

ORIGINS OF GOVERNMENT	Governments almost certainly evolved gradually, and no one can give a definitive explanation of how they first came to exist. Four theories, however, help us consider their possible origins.
Evolution Theory	THE EVOLUTION THEORY sees government as an extension of family relationships. Even in prehistoric times, families were organized under a system that gave parents authority over children. As more families banded together over time to form tribes, the system of parental rule evolved into tribal rule. Often the elder adults assumed the leadership role, forming a type of mini-government.
Force Theory	THE FORCE THEORY claims that governments were formed as a result of one group's conquest of another. The victorious group would then impose its rules on the conquered group, forcing it into submission. Supporters of this theory cite evidence from both prehistoric and modern times. For example, during World War II, Adolph Hitler forced other European countries to submit to Germany through his blitzkrieg ("lightning war") tactics.
Divine Right Theory	THE DIVINE RIGHT THEORY was widely accepted in most European nations from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries. According to divine right, rulers inherit their power from God. Once blessed with this power, the royal family and its heirs become God's representation on earth. Therefore, defiance of the ruler represents a sin against the church. Ancient civilizations such as those in China, Egypt, and South America also believed in divine right and gave godlike qualities to their leaders.
Social Contract Theory	THE SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY was developed as a response to the Divine Right theory by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers, such as John Locke, James Harrington, Thomas Hobbes, and Jean Jacques Rousseau. According to the theory of social contract, humans developed government and named rulers to establish order in the chaotic natural world in which they lived. By agreeing to cooperate with each other and follow a set of rules, people brought order and safety to their lives. The power to govern was a result of decisions made freely by people, not handed down by God. This theory was the inspiration for the American and French revolutions.
PURPOSES OF GOVERNMENT	From their earliest beginnings, governments almost certainly have had three basic purposes:
Protection	PROTECTION: One characteristic of all government is sovereignty, or the right to be free from outside interference. Throughout history, leaders have organized warriors to defend the community, from prehistoric tribes to modern armies. The United States, for example, has a military force of more than 1.5 million troops, as well as powerful nuclear weapons.
Maintenance of Public Order	MAINTENANCE OF PUBLIC ORDER: Almost always, governments have taken responsibility for protecting citizens from violence against one another. Modern governments pass hundreds of laws and maintain large police forces and court systems to protect the public, ensure an orderly daily existence, and promote a sense of justice.
Resolution of Social Conflicts	RESOLUTION OF SOCIAL CONFLICTS: In human societies conflicts between groups are unavoidable. Central to many of these disagreements is the idea that some groups are unjustly treated. Left unresolved, these conflicts may lead to rioting or war. Traditionally,

	<p>governments sometimes have suppressed conflicts by use of force, but if their authority is respected, people have tended to accept their decisions peaceably, whether by a king's decree or a democratic election.</p> <p>In modern times, governments are expected to serve several other purposes:</p>
<p>Responsibility for a Stable Economy</p>	<p>RESPONSIBILITY FOR A STABLE ECONOMY: The role of government in creating and maintaining a healthy economy has varied widely throughout history. For example, in the late nineteenth-century United States, government was expected to leave the economy alone. In contrast, some modern governments actually own the major industries, and others regulate business practices of private citizens and monitor the currency or money.</p>
<p>Provision of Public Service</p>	<p>PROVISION OF PUBLIC SERVICE: Many modern governments provide a transportation and communications network for public use, and most take some measures to protect public health and safety. More controversial is the extent of government responsibility for individual welfare, such as the needs of the poor, unemployed, aged, and disabled. Some countries have extensive welfare benefits. Others do not.</p>
<p>ELITES</p>	<p>Most Americans – who believe in equality for all, not special privileges for the few – do not like to think about the existence of political elites, at least in the United States. But as much as we might not want to admit it, elites may be identified in nearly every country, past and present, including the United States. Political scientists have four main theories to describe and explain the actions of elites, whose political or economic power give them unusual influence in government.</p>
<p>Marxist Theory</p>	<p>MARXIST THEORY: In his famous theory, Karl Marx argued that those who hold control of the economy have the real power in a society, and government is merely a tool of the rich. In American society, the elites would be leaders of the biggest corporations and financial institutions.</p>
<p>The Power Elite</p>	<p>THE POWER ELITE: Other theorists believe that corporate leaders are important, but that some elites come from other areas as well. For example, C. Wright Mills, an American sociologist, argued in his book <i>The Power Elite</i> that important policies are made by three groups: corporate leaders, top military officers, and a few key political leaders.</p>
<p>The Bureaucrats</p>	<p>THE BUREAUCRATS: According to this theory, elites are not well-known, visible heads of state or business tycoons, but the people behind the scenes, the bureaucrats whose expertise and specialized talents are responsible for managing societies. Leaders may come and go, but the bureaucrats carry out the day-to-day workings of government and hold the real power. The scholar most often associated with this theory is Max Weber, a German historian and sociologist who believed that all institutions, not just government, have fallen under the control of large bureaucracies.</p>
<p>The Pluralists</p>	<p>THE PLURALISTS: According to the pluralists, elites are not easily identified as one specific group holding power, money, or prestige. In modern society, these resources are held by a variety of people, and no single elitist group has a monopoly on them. Pluralists do not argue that all resources are held equally. They believe that power is split among so many different types of elites (business people, political leaders, union bosses, journalists, bureaucrats, university leaders) that many people have the chance to influence decision-making.</p>
<p>SOURCES OF ENLIGHTENMENT INSPIRATION</p> <p>Roman Republic</p>	<p>Enlightenment political ideas greatly influenced the framers of the American constitution and the architects of the French Revolution. Their sources of inspiration included:</p> <p>The ROMAN REPUBLIC. They read that during the Republic the people governed themselves, without a king. The common people and the upper class (the aristocrats)</p>

<p>Cincinnatus and Civic Virtue</p>	<p>shared the power to govern. The people chose their leaders to make and administer laws for their country. A republican government had the following characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The citizens have the power to govern. ■ The citizens give power to elected leaders to represent them and serve their interests. ■ The representatives are responsible for promoting the common welfare (the good of the entire community). <p>Enlightenment thinkers believed that the republican form of government worked well, because (1) the laws made by representatives would be fair and would serve the common welfare instead of selfish interests and (2) people would have greater freedom and would be able to live secure and comfortable lives.</p> <p>In the year 460 B.C., Rome was in great danger. An army from the east was burning and plundering the countryside. The defending Roman army was surrounded on all sides by enemies. The leaders of Rome asked CINCINNATUS, a skilled military leader, to help them during this crisis. Messengers were sent asking him to serve as a dictator for as long as the crisis would last.</p> <p>Cincinnatus was a hard working farmer with only four acres of land. When the messengers found him, he was quietly plowing his fields. Because he loved his country, he left his plow to go to Rome and lead the army in battle. His army defeated the enemy and saved Rome. Cincinnatus was honored and praised by his people. But when the battle was over, he did not try to remain a dictator of his country. He did not want continued fame. Instead, he returned to his home and his life as a citizen.</p> <p>By returning to his home, Cincinnatus showed that he valued being a citizen of Rome more than he valued fame and personal power. This was an example of CIVIC VIRTUE that the Romans were known for during the period of the Roman Republic.</p> <p>Enlightenment thinkers believed that civic virtue was important to making a new government work.</p>
<p>Magna Carta and the Rule of Law</p>	<p>The MAGNA CARTA, an agreement in 1215 between the king of England and the nobles, contained two very important ideas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Governments are based on an agreement or CONTRACT between the ruler and the people to be ruled. The people (i.e., the nobility) would obey the King as long as the King protected their rights. ■ The RULE OF LAW: Both the government and the governed must obey the law. <p>Although it did not protect all people's rights, the Magna Carta was an important step in protecting the rights of the people and limiting the power of the government.</p>
<p>John Locke (1632-1704)</p> <p>The English Bill of Rights</p>	<p>John Locke's <i>Two Treatises of Civil Government</i> dealt with the idea of natural rights. He said that the main purpose of government should be to protect people's natural rights and that the rulers of the government should not have absolute power.</p> <p>Locke also believed in the social contract. People give up some of their freedom in exchange for security and protection. They agree to set up a government and obey the laws that are passed by the government in order to protect their rights.</p> <p>In the late 1600s, Parliament (elected officials) took over the power of the English government in what was known as the Glorious Revolution. In 1689, Parliament passed the English Bill of Rights. This law gave certain rights to Englishmen and further limited</p>

<p>Montesquieu (1689-1755)</p>	<p>the powers of the monarch or king. The ENGLISH BILL OF RIGHTS guaranteed that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Elections must be free ■ People have the right to keep and carry weapons ■ The king could not collect taxes without the consent of Parliament ■ Speech and debate were free in Parliament ■ The king could not maintain an army at times of peace ■ No excessive bail or cruel and unusual punishment ■ Trial by jury was guaranteed <p>Enlightenment thinkers used the English Bill of Rights as a model for state bills of rights and the American Bill of Rights.</p> <p>An expert on republican government, MONTESQUIEU specified in <i>The Spirit of the Laws</i> (1748) that the best government had:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ SEPARATION OF POWERS: Different parts of the government should be separate so that no one branch becomes too powerful ■ BALANCED POWERS: The separate powers of the government should be equal in power ■ CHECKS: Each part of the government should be able to check the power of the other branches <p>Montesquieu believed that no single branch could control the entire government if its powers were separated, balanced, and checked. The result would be a government that would promote the common welfare of the people and not the selfish interests of the few.</p> <p>Montesquieu also advocated the preservation of civil liberties, the abolition of slavery, gradualism, moderation, peace, internationalism, social and economic justice with due respect to national and local tradition. He believed in justice and the rule of law; detested all forms of extremism and fanaticism, put his faith in the balance of power and the division of authority as a weapon against despotic rule by individuals or groups or majorities, and approved of social equality, but not when it threatened individual liberty or orderly government.</p>
<p>Declaration of Independence</p>	<p>The Declaration of Independence, written and adopted in 1776, set forth many of the important ideas concerning a constitutional democracy, especially natural rights, the purpose of government, and the right of the people to overthrow the government:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The rights of the people are based on natural law, which is higher than laws made by people and government cannot violate these laws. ■ The only purpose of government is to protect the rights of the people. ■ People can overthrow the government if it fails to protect the rights of the people
<p>ONLINE RESOURCES</p>	<p>Seventeenth Century Enlightenment Thought: Discussions of Hobbes, Spinoza, and Locke.</p> <p>The Enlightenment: Summarizes Enlightenment political theory.</p> <p>Thomas Jefferson Online: PBS website that focuses on Jefferson's thoughts and actions regarding five basic freedoms (political, religious, social, intellectual, and personal).</p>
<p>DISCUSSION QUESTIONS</p>	<p>Drawing on the resources you have had an opportunity to explore (textbook, course documents, online resources, library resources), answer one or more of the following questions:</p>

	<p>What are the origins of government? What is the relationship between natural rights and the social contract?</p> <p>What are the different types of government? Who rules in each type?</p> <p>What are the different purposes of government?</p> <p>How did each of the following influence the American and French revolutions? Roman Republic, Cincinnatus and civic virtue, the Magna Carta and the rule of law, John Locke (natural rights and the social contract), the English Bill of Rights, Montesquieu, and the Declaration of Independence?</p>
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