

CHAPTER •16•
THE AGE OF REASON
 1700 — 1800

THE IDEAS OF THE PHILOSOPHES

Just as seventeenth-century scientists discovered that physical laws governed the universe, so too did eighteenth-century philosophers believe that natural law governed the relationship between people and their government. An understanding of principles basic to human nature would guarantee the future progress of nations. Although all the philosophers agreed on the importance of reason and freedom of thought, some disagreed on the use of these concepts to explain the workings of human nature and society.

READING 45**MONTESQUIEU CRITICIZES THE FRENCH MONARCHY**

One of the chief targets for the French philosophes was the monarchy. The philosophes often used satire to criticize the king and his practices. Satire is a means by which a writer sharply ridicules human weaknesses. Montesquieu was a very skilled political satirist, as is evident in this excerpt from *The Persian Letters*. In this work, written in 1721, a Persian visiting France writes home to his friend.

The King of France [Louis XIV] is the most powerful of European monarchs. He has no mines of gold like his neighbor, the King of Spain; but he is much wealthier than that prince, because his riches are drawn from a more inexhaustible source, the vanity of his subjects. He has undertaken and carried on great wars, without any other supplies than those derived from the sale of titles of honor; and it is by a prodigy of human pride that his troops are paid, his towns fortified, and his fleets equipped.

Then again, the king is a great magician, for his dominion extends to the minds of his subjects; he makes them think what he wishes. . . . If he has a costly war on hand, and is short of money, he simply suggests to his subjects that a piece of paper is coin of the realm, and they are straightway convinced of it. He has even succeeded in persuading them that his touch is a sovereign cure for all sorts of diseases, so great is the power and influence he has over their minds.

— Adapted from: Montesquieu. *The Persian Letters*, Letter XXIV. New York and London: M. Walter Dunne, 1901, as it appears in Leon Bernard and Theodore B. Hodges, eds. *Readings in European History*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958.

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1. What government practices does Montesquieu criticize? Why do you think he ridiculed them?
2. How would Montesquieu have improved the French government to make it more effective?
3. Why do you think satire might have been an effective method of criticism? How else might a philosopher make a point?

READING 46**THE CORRUPTION OF SOCIETY**

Jean Jacques Rousseau was one of the leading figures of the Enlightenment. However, unlike many of the philosophes, Rousseau believed that humans were naturally good and that civilization as it was had corrupted them. Society would be better if men and women could return to what Rousseau called the "state of nature." In 1755 Rousseau presented his ideas in his book *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. An excerpt follows.

With respect to sickness, I shall not repeat the vain and false declamations which most healthy people pronounce against medicine; but I shall ask if any solid observations have been made from which it may be justly concluded that, in the countries where the art of medicine is most neglected, the mean duration of man's life is less than in those where it is most cultivated. How indeed can this be the case, if we bring on ourselves more diseases than medicine can furnish remedies? The great inequality in manner of living, the extreme idleness of some, and the excessive labour of others, the easiness of exciting and gratifying our sensual appetites, the too exquisite foods of the wealthy which overheat and fill them with indigestion, and, on the other hand, the unwholesome food of the poor, often, bad as it is, insufficient for their needs, which induces them, when opportunity offers, to eat voraciously and overcharge their stomachs; all these, together with sit-