

CONTENTS

List of Images ix

Acknowledgments xi

Prologue	1
1 The Setting: Space Expanded and Filled Anew	6
2 Time Reinvented	33
3 Secular Lives	66
4 Paris and the Materialist Alternative: The Widow Stockdorff	89
5 The Scottish Enlightenment in Edinburgh	124
6 Berlin and Vienna	157
7 Naples and Milan	204
8 The 1790s	233
Epilogue	263

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viii CONTENTS

Glossary of Names 267

Notes 281

Index 327

1

The Setting

SPACE EXPANDED AND FILLED A NEW

BETWEEN 1500 AND 1700, Westerners discovered two new worlds: one in the heavens, the other on earth. These discoveries coincided with and helped further a vast expansion of commerce that brought yet more peoples and places into the Western orbit. Celestial and terrestrial space were reconfigured. Making sense of these monumental discoveries required new thought and language.

Christianity had to rise to the intellectual challenge presented by the new spatial reality. The findings of the new science displaced the earth from the center of the universe and thereby raised doubts about all traditional explanations. The discovery of new continents and peoples had an even more immediate effect. Why did the new peoples being discovered believe what they believed, having never heard the Christian message? Some could be converted; others not so readily. Missionaries discovered an almost unimaginable variety of beliefs and soon began to debate the meanings of this diversity. Did everyone have a notion of God, or were some newly discovered peoples natural atheists? The Greek and Roman authorities

long revered in Europe had not the slightest inkling of the existence of the Americas. Western peoples could no longer rely on the coherence and order long provided by Christian theology. In this way, the new spatial realities provided the setting wherein enlightened ideas first emerged.

Physico-theology was one of the first attempts to give coherence to the physical reality of a mathematically knowable world. Its conserving goal was to augment piety and exalt the Grand Architect, to redefine the coherence and order of Christianity. The new physics of the seventeenth century—heliocentric, mechanical, and mathematical—could reinforce the theology of order and providential design. Science in the service of Christian orthodoxy became a goal championed particularly by English natural philosophers, Francis Bacon, Robert Boyle, and most remarkably Isaac Newton (figure 1). They aimed physico-theology against the new heresies of the age: atheism, deism, and materialism. In doing so, they fashioned what became a moderate version of enlightened ideas that embraced science, eschewed doctrinal quarrels among Christians, and endorsed religious toleration.¹ The voices of physico-theology constituted the chorus that emanated from the liberal segment of the Church of England. Thanks in good part to Samuel Clarke, Newton's friend and interpreter, this segment exerted influence everywhere in Protestant Europe through personal contacts and translated sermons.

By the end of the war-torn seventeenth century, more than a science-based Christian orthodoxy was needed. The political crises of the century—revolution in three kingdoms of the British Isles, the removal of Spanish authority in the northern Netherlands, the devastation in Central Europe caused by the Thirty Years War—required new responses to political reality. Hobbes, Locke, the English republican and Commonwealth



FIGURE 1. Isaac Newton, whose science became one of the anchors for enlightened thought. (ID# 1775740). Courtesy of Bridgeman Images.

men, and not least, in the Dutch Republic, Grotius and Spinoza attempted to redefine the political order and, in the process, confounded aspects of Christian orthodoxy. They laid the foundation upon which enlightened approaches to society and government would rest. Each in his way refused to endorse

monarchical absolutism and the divine rights of kings. They invested the power of the state in social arrangements that offered security, the protection of property, and justice in return for the consent (however tacit) of the governed. Even Hobbes rested state power on a contract among the people to embrace the mortal god, Leviathan.

Aside from war and revolution, there were still other challenges to spatial order and coherence. The spread of money had the effect of revolutionizing the production and consumption of all commodities, creating new transactions, histories, and affairs. In European society, new forms of urban association emerged, and these conferred upon participants, as John Dewey wrote many centuries later, the means “of unlocking energies hitherto pent in.”² In short, faced with new dynamics and social arrangements, Europeans and later American colonists responded with language that reordered their understanding of spatial reality. To give but one example, late in the eighteenth century Thomas Jefferson broke out of the classical republican vision he inherited to argue that rather than being small, a republic could stretch across an entire Continent, from sea to shining sea.

Space conquered and negotiated by the imperialist impulse introduced unprecedented power relations between subject and conqueror. The European nation-states and then the newly created American state possessed sophisticated armaments and armies, ships and horses—accompanied by disease and the will to enslave. Their sometimes brutal actions, when reported, forced European minds in the direction of distant peoples and customs that needed to be understood. Whether the Spanish absolutist monarchy or the Dutch republican government undertook or endorsed imperialist ventures to extend their power, every occasion required knowledge of the spaces,

peoples, and heavens. Never before in Western history had such an expansion of spatial knowledge been both possible and necessary.

Therein lay the roots of the Enlightenment: the unintended consequence of commercial and state-sponsored expansion. Paradoxically, as the power of absolute monarchies and the clergy that supported them grew in Europe—augmented as they were by global conquest—inventive responses to new spatial realities multiplied. Their combined weight secularized space and removed not only its boundaries but also its supernatural powers. They undermined belief in heaven and hell and the authority of absolutist regimes. By the 1770s, major theorists from the Scottish school in Edinburgh to the French *philosophes* in Paris furthered the corrosive process by providing new vocabularies that denigrated empires, state-supported orthodoxies, and the clergy who benefited from them.

The combined impact of the subversive literature that began in the 1650s and continued into the 1790s ultimately delegitimized courts and monarchs. From the clandestine literature, early in the century to the abbé Raynal, Diderot, Rousseau, the abolitionists in its last quarter, and Herder and Kant in the 1790s, every support for unchecked authority in church and state, as well as empire, had been challenged, mocked, dismissed, or decried as immoral.

Early in the period, travel literature, complete with engravings, told of new peoples in the Americas and Africa about whom both the Bible and ancient writings had been entirely silent. Their novelty was matched only by the strangeness of their behavior. The Spanish conquerors found indigenous people in what we now know as Mexico who practiced human sacrifice, wore little clothing, and occasionally ate their victims.³ The space opened by new peoples and continents fired



FIGURE 2. De Bry's depiction of cannibalism. Theodore de Bry (1528–98) (ID# 164722). Courtesy of Bridgeman Images.

imperialist fantasy, to be sure. Just as important in the *longue durée*, imperial space also licensed bold and heterodox free-thinking in the service of trying to make sense out of the previously unimaginable.

Images of these new Amerindians were widely circulated by German and Dutch printing houses, among which the de Bry family in Frankfurt produced the most striking and bloodcurdling (figure 2). Such imagery only emphasized the challenge faced by the Iberian Church and monarchy, whose declared purpose was the conversion and “civilizing” of the indigenous peoples. The ultimate irony of the European expansion into global space—accompanied by such sanctimonious intentions—lay



FIGURE 3. Ferdinand Alvarez de Toledo eating a child. Courtesy of Wikimedia.

in the gradual undermining of European religious certainty and political authority. It became possible in Dutch propaganda, for example, to depict the Spanish authorities as tyrants and baby-eating cannibals (figure 3). Anti-authoritarian responses to European conquest and exploitation emerged only gradually

as people tried to make sense out of the recently discovered earthly and heavenly spaces.

No less exotic than the Americas, China and Africa also entered European consciousness, but they elicited wildly different responses. By and large, the Chinese were respected for the longevity of their civilization, and freethinkers even compared Buddhism to the natural religion that they espoused. Such was the approach taken by Bernard Picart, engraver, and Jean Frederick Bernard, writer and publisher of the first even-handed attempt to understand all of the known religions of the world, *Ceremonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* (1723–43) (figure 4).⁴

Africa was actually far less known than North and Central America, yet even there Picart and Bernard tried to understand the religions of people never personally experienced. Illustrations of ceremonies in honor of their deities appear along with pages describing birth and death ceremonies. The Picart-Bernard effort became justly famous as the first attempt to relativize all religions. This conclusion was the exact opposite of what the Christian missionaries at work on every continent had intended.

After roughly the year 1600, literate Westerners (and many of the illiterate) knew that vast, new, and inhabited continents filled large portions of the globe. Thinking about the world outside Europe had commenced irretrievably. But the expansion of space did not stop there. Looking into the heavens entailed new knowledge about their structure—even if thousands still doubted the Copernican system that placed the sun at the center of the universe. Also by 1700, the highly educated knew that there now existed a mathematical law to explain how the force of universal gravitation ordered the heavens and made them knowable. The almanacs might still talk about the role played by the stars in determining human fate, but followers



FIGURE 4. Frontispiece to the *Ceremonies et coutumes*, illustrating all the world's religions, with only the Catholic Church being depicted in a negative light.

of Newtonian science thought little about such influences for which no solid proof existed. At one time, heavenly space possessed the power to influence the health and well-being of mortals. After 1687, space in the *Principia* is empty and neutral, as desacralized as Henry VIII's former monastic lands.⁵

The macrocosm of global and heavenly space framed the growing diversity of public space in the microcosm of European cities.⁶ The “public sphere,” “civil society,” and “sociability” are all terms used to describe the relatively new spatial associations available to urban dwellers. Drawn to cities by ever-expanding markets, merchants, lawyers, stockbrokers, ladies of the *salon*, denizens of coffee shops and cafés stayed to see and be seen, and to read the burgeoning supply of newspapers and journals. They invented and filled urban spaces separate from court and king as well as from family dwellings (figure 5). When so occupied, they said their efforts aimed to correct “the want of a regular and publick encouragement of learning.” Small societies would publish books by their members, enhance their profits, all the while instituting “a republic of letters for the promoting of arts and sciences.”⁷

By midcentury, a London social life could revolve solely around eating clubs and the pub life that went with them. In the 1770s, John Wilkes dined nightly with the governing elite of the city and frequently, as his diary notes, at a “Tavern with the supporters of the Bill of Rights.” The Beef Steak Club, the Irish Club, and the Antigallican Club helped fill the spatial vastness of Wilkes's London, where Benjamin Franklin occasionally joined in the festivities.⁸ By the second half of the century, if not well before, the task of policing and spying on this or any other great metropolis had become formidable. The city also offered a visual feast for the curious, as brilliantly captured by artist and engraver William Hogarth (figure 6).

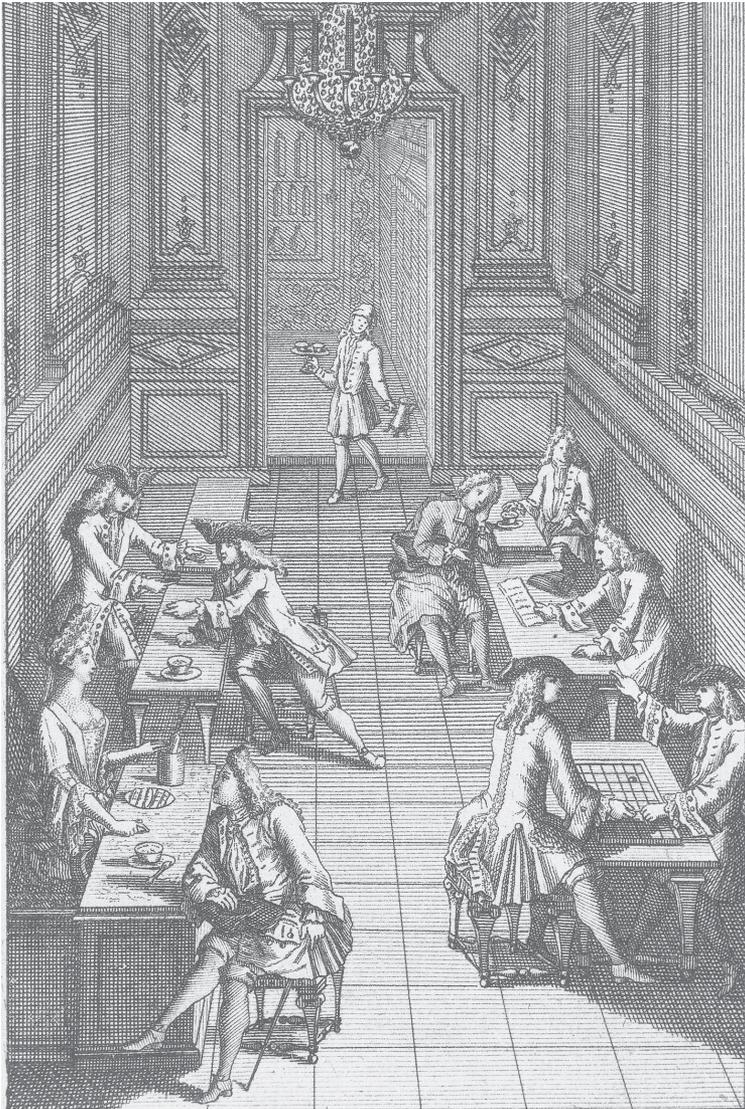


FIGURE 5. Early eighteenth-century example of casual sociability.
Bernard Picart (ID# 516565). Courtesy of Bridgeman Images.

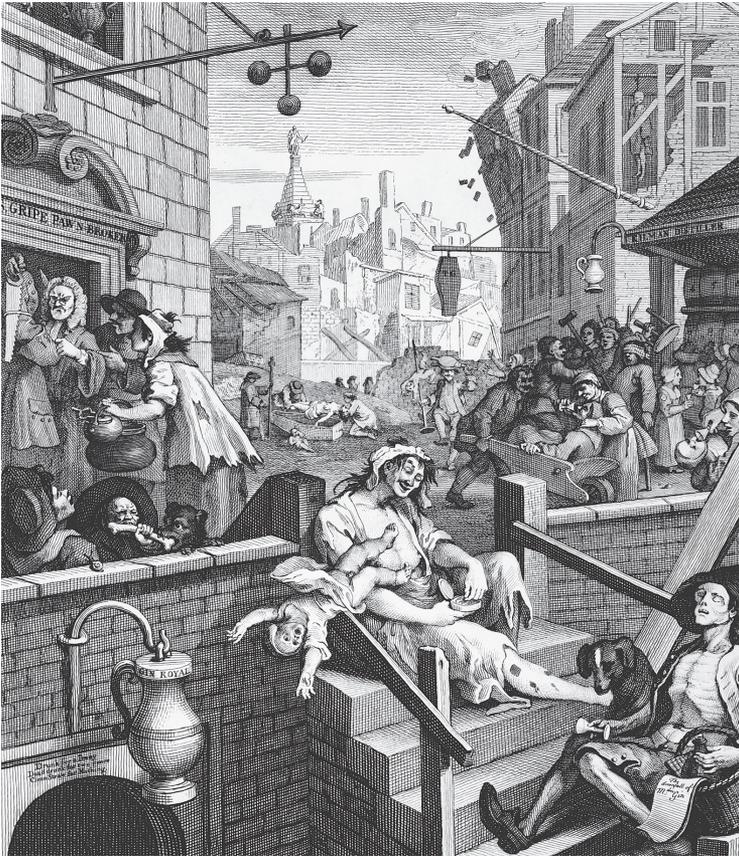


FIGURE 6. Hogarth's representation of the foibles of Londoners. *Gin Lane*, William Hogarth (1697–1764) (ID# 265846). Courtesy of Bridgeman Images.

Most aptly named, *The Spectator* burst upon the London literary scene in 1711 and was an instant success. The journalist as spectator saw himself as living “in the World, rather as a Spectator of Mankind, than as one of the Species; by which means I have made myself a Speculative Statesman, Soldier, Merchant, and Artisan.” He dared to take on so many roles in part because

he claimed to have visited every city in Europe.⁹ His *métier* as gossip, raconteur, and man-about-town signaled a new urban vitality. Not surprisingly, the Dutch cities were among the first to imitate the originally English genre of spectatorial literature.¹⁰ So too, new world cities like Boston sported imitations that claimed to be the work of a society of gentlemen. There, in 1727, the journal *Proteus Echo* sought to satisfy the curiosity of “All Mankind,” for they “burn with an unquenchable Ardour after Knowledge.” It sought to provide “Publick usefulness.”¹¹

Cities were also the natural habitat of publishers and would-be philosophes. In the period after 1650, cities from Amsterdam to Paris, Edinburgh to London grew in size and continued to do so throughout the century. In the seventeenth century, Naples was also one of the largest cities in Europe, and we know that in this period Italian bookshops, cafés, and even hat shops bristled with anti-clerical and anti-doctrinal gossip (figure 7). The Inquisition barely kept up with the irreverent banter to be found in such public spaces.¹²

The reality of global space framed not only civil society but also the imaginary realm of mercantile life. The central lobby of the Amsterdam City Hall, built between 1648 and 1665, contains a marble floor in which images of the two hemispheres of the world are inlaid in copper. Statues grace the scene and lay out themes such as “Peace,” “Providence,” and “Righteousness.” The mercantile elite of the city walked upon this floor while discussing news and global trade.

Less grand in size or aspirations, other cities throughout Europe with more than 30,000 people—like Newcastle, The Hague, or Berlin—became more numerous. Strasbourg, Danzig, and Breslau sported around 40,000, and Vienna had about 100,000. If the curious could afford books and find coffee houses where the like-minded gathered in relative anonymity—only cities of

INDEX

Note: Page numbers in italic type indicate illustrations.

- Aberdeen, 124, 135
abolitionism, 10, 31, 100, 113
absolutism, 9, 10, 31, 91, 160, 170–71, 208, 236, 258, 264
Academy of Science (Paris), 219
Accademia dei Pugni (Academy of Fists), 224
Acta eruditorum (journal), 206
Adams, John, 254
Adams, Samuel, 254–55
Adanson, Michel, 74
Africa, European discoveries in, 13
Africans, 20, 22, 72–73
agriculture, 149, 153, 215, 218, 231–32
Aikenhead, Thomas, 127–29, 131
Alembert, Jean le Rond d', *Encyclopédie*, 91
Alien and Sedition Acts, 255
almanacs, 13, 35–42, 57
Alvarez de Toledo, Ferdinand, 12
American Revolution, 186, 201, 220–21, 237–38, 245, 252, 253, 255–56, 261, 264
Americas, European discoveries in, 10–11
Amerindians, 10–11
Amsterdam, 18, 20, 26, 94, 233
Anacreon, 248
Anderson, John, 76–77
Anglicans, 49, 53–59. *See also* Church of England; episcopalians
Anglo-philias, 100–101
anthropology, 194
anti-Jacobins, 236, 242, 247–49
anti-Semitism, 112, 181–82, 191
anti-Trinitarianism, 80, 101, 127, 162
Aquinas, Thomas, 102, 206
architecture, 68, 69
Ardinghelli, Mariangiola, 219
Aretino, Pietro, 105
Argens, Marquis d', 104
Arianism, 101–2
Aristotle, 129, 160, 204, 206–7
Armenians, 30
Arpe, Peter Friedrich, 163, 165–66
Arthur, Archibald, 246
artisans, 244–45
associational life, 26–27, 156, 175. *See also* freemasonry
astrology, 3, 36, 57
atheism: atomism linked to, 204–5; criticisms of, 115; Godwin and, 239; Lessing and, 185, 190–91; physico-theology vs., 7; popularity of, 32, 108; in Scotland, 129–31; Smith and, 143; stigma of, 165, 169–70, 190–91, 259; and time, 37; Toland and, 131
atlases, 27–28

- atomism, 29, 31, 45, 204–6
Australia, 28–29
Austria, 27, 158, 173–78
authority, challenges to, 8–10, 12–13,
19, 21–23, 32, 76, 79–81, 90, 96–97,
106–7, 111, 112, 127, 166, 184, 265
Azdarar (Monitor) (newspaper), 30
- Bacon, Francis, 7, 151
La Bagatelle (magazine), 80
Bahrđt, Carl Friedrich, 203
Balber, Christopher, 165
Bancroft, Edward, 253
Barruel, Augustin, 155
Bassi, Laura, 219
Baxter, Andrew, 131
Bayle, Pierre, 67, 91–92, 94, 100–101;
Dictionnaire historique et critique,
91–92, 164, 241
Beccaria, Cesare, 209, 210, 218, 224–32;
*On Crimes and Punishments (Dei
delitti e delle pene)*, 225–26, 232, 258
Beddoes, Thomas, 247
Bekker, Balthazar, 40, 64, 79
Benedict XIV, Pope, 208
Benezet, Anthony, 93, 144, 197
Bentley, Richard, 45, 205, 207
Bentley, Thomas, 253
Bernard, Jacques, 91
Bernard, Jean Frederic, 91–96, 101, 110;
*Réflexions morales, satiriques et co-
miques sur les moeurs de notre siècle*,
94–95; *Religious Ceremonies of the
World*, 5, 13, 14, 31, 95
Beverland, Adrian, 64
Bible, 27, 32, 35, 64
La Bien Aimée, 261
Black, Joseph, 150–54
Blake, William, 245
Blue Atlas, 27
Boccaccio, Giovanni, 105
Bolingbroke, Henry St. John, Vis-
count, 106, 110
- The Book of the Three Impostors*, 162–
63. See also *Le Traité des trois im-
posteurs (The Treatise on the Three
Impostors)*
books and publishing: Bernard and,
94; in cities, 15, 20–22; Dodsley
and, 72; in Dutch Republic, 11–12,
21, 25, 91–94, 261; forbidden, 25–26,
28, 30, 87, 90, 105–13, 124; in France,
21–22, 91–94, 105–13; growth of
public-oriented, 172–73; journals,
172–73; private libraries, 27, 64–65,
182; in Venice, 209. See also cen-
sorship; pornography
Boyle, Robert, 7, 130, 151, 205
Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend
(Letters concerning the most
recent Literature), 172
Browne, Thomas, 64
Bruno, Giordano, 103, 105
Brunswick, Duke of, 182, 184
Brussels, 233
Bry, Theodore de, depiction of
cannibalism, 11, 11
Buddhism, 13
Buffon, Georges Louis Leclerc, Count
de, 42–43
Burke, Edmund, 72, 156, 188, 240, 246;
*Reflections on the Revolution in
France*, 237–38
Burnet, Gilbert, 64
Byron, George Gordon, Lord, 248,
249
- cabarets, 19
cafés, 15, 19–20
Il Caffè (journal), 231
Calas, Jean, 173
calendars, 37–38, 56, 59
Calvin, John, 141
Calvinism, 125, 143, 158, 160
cannibalism, 11, 12, 12
capital punishment, 229–30, 232

- Carolina, Queen of Naples, 219, 222, 258, 260
- Casanova, Giacomo, 261
- Cassirer, Ernst, 5
- Catholic Church: in Austria and southern Germany, 158; books forbidden by, 87, 106–7, 113, 209, 223; Counter-Reformation in, 204; Rousseau and, 117; suspicions of freemasonry, 23, 121, 177; and time/temporality, 35–36, 290n53, 293n90. *See also* papacy
- Catholic Enlightenment, 178
- censorship, 25–26, 30, 89–90, 92, 158, 177, 184, 208, 298n1. *See also* forbidden books
- Charles II, 41
- Charles of Bourbon, King of Naples, 213–14, 217, 220
- Châtelet, Madame du, 102, 159
- Chesterfield, Lord, 70
- China, European discoveries in, 13
- Christianity: freemasons and, 23; science and, 7; and spatial discoveries, 6–7; and time/temporality, 34–37. *See also* Catholic Church; Protestants/Protestantism
- Church of England, 7, 53, 101. *See also* Anglicans
- church-state separation, 161
- cities: as context for Enlightenment ideas, 3, 10, 20, 89, 124, 207; spaces of, 15–31
- civil society, 15, 18, 26, 108, 133–34, 264
- Clarke, Samuel, 7, 32, 45, 102, 116, 131, 206, 207
- classical civilization. *See* Greek and Roman culture
- Cleghorn, Robert, 246
- Cleland, John, *Fanny Hill*, 104, 107
- climate, 98, 100, 138, 200
- clocks, 46–47, 54–55
- clubs, 19
- Code Noir*, 90
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, 3, 76, 238, 240, 243, 247, 248, 249
- Collins, Anthony, 92, 107–8
- commerce and industry, 73, 77, 139–40, 146–50
- Comte, Auguste, 105
- Condorcet, Marquis de, 236
- Confucius, 27
- constitutionalism, 221
- Conti, Antonio, 207
- convulsionnaires*, 24–25
- Copernican system, 13, 206
- corresponding societies, 244–45
- cosmopolitanism, 107–8, 197, 201–2
- Counter-Reformation, 204
- court life, 26–27
- Crayenshot, J. A., 261
- creation, of the world, 34, 42
- Crell, Johann, 64
- Cromwell, Oliver, 122
- Cullen, William, 144, 150, 153–54
- Dampier, William, 74
- Darwin, Charles, 43, 44, 105
- Darwin, Erasmus, 43, 44, 247
- Davy, Humphry, 246
- Dawson, Major, 253
- Day, Thomas, 253
- death penalty, 229–30, 232
- De Benedictis, Giovan, 205
- Declaration of Independence (United States), 234, 249
- Declaration of the Rights of Man* (France), 260
- deism: Dodsley and, 72; Lessing and, 184–85; opposition to, 21; Pezzl and, 176; physico-theology vs., 7; Reimar father/daughter and, 183; Rousseau and, 116; in Scotland, 129, 130; Smith and, 143; in United States, 253; Voltaire and, 103, 111
- de la Vega, Garcilaso, 27

- democracy, 76, 81, 85, 116, 119–20, 203, 221, 236, 249–50, 255, 264
- d'Épinay, Louise, 217
- Derrida, Jacques, 201
- Desaguliers, John Theophilus, 152
- Descartes, René, 48, 97, 105, 115, 129, 159, 167, 204–5, 207
- Des Périers, Bonaventure, *Cymbalum Mundi*, 165
- Dewey, John, 10
- D'Holbach, Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron, 103, 128, 217, 230, 236; *The System of Nature*, 108–10
- diaries, 55
- Dickenson, Samuel, 72–75
- Diderot, Denis, 10, 45, 100, 103, 179–80, 217–18, 244; *Encyclopédie*, 91, 102, 146, 217
- discovery: of novel human behaviors, 6, 10–13, 28–29, 193–94; as outgrowth of imperialism, 10–13, 82; secular Enlightenment made possible by, 6–7; temporality and age of the world influenced by, 42–44
- Dissenters, 234, 238–39, 245
- divine right, 10
- division of labor, 146–47
- Dodsley, Robert, 70, 72
- Drennan, William, 238, 249
- Duillier, Fatio de, 24
- DuLaurens, Henri, *La Chandelle d'Arras*, 107
- Dunoyer, Anne-Marguerite, 91, 93
- Durand, David, 165–66
- Dutch East India Company, 261
- Dutch Reformed Church, 47–48, 80
- Dutch Republic: almanacs in, 36, 41–42; astrology in, 3; creation of, 34; francophone character of, 89, 91; freethinking in, 24; imperialism of, 81–82; literature in, 18; politics in, 8, 78, 81; publishing and book trade in, 11–12, 21, 25, 91–94, 112, 261; responses in, to revolution, 261–62; secular vs. religious sentiments in, 5, 80–81; sociability in, 26; temporality in, 46–48
- Dyer, George, 238–40, 243
- earth, age of, 34, 42–44, 48, 154, 247
- Eastern Europe, 29–30
- Edgeworth, Maria, 75
- Edgeworth, Richard Lovell, 75
- Edinburgh, 75–76, 124–26, 134–55. *See also* University of Edinburgh
- Edinburgh Society, 137
- Effen, Justus van, 80
- Emmet, Robert, 247, 250
- England: almanacs in, 41; divine-nature relationship in, 3; responses in, to revolution, 237–45; sociability in, 26; temporality in, 46, 48–52. *See also* Glorious Revolution
- enlightened absolutism, 258
- Enlightenment: Catholic, 178; French, 89–123; German, 157–74, 178–203; High, 103, 178–203; Industrial, 77; Italian, 204–32, 260; Jewish, 189; legacies of, 263; Milanese, 224; moderate, 67–70, 126, 132–34; Scottish, 77, 124–56, 250–51; secular spirit of, 1–5, 66–88; in 1790s, 233–62; Viennese, 173–78
- enthusiasm, religious, 24–25, 69, 101, 132–33, 156
- Epictetus, 243–44
- episcopalians, 125–28. *See also* Anglicans
- equality/inequality, 100, 137, 142–43, 174, 186–87, 221–22, 227–28, 250
- Eugene of Savoy, 27, 29
- Europe, imperialism of, 9–12
- Evelyn, John, 52–53, 57
- Evelyn, Mary, 53–54
- evolution, 43–44

- Federalists, 255
- Ferdinand IV, King of Naples, 218, 220, 222
- Ferguson, Adam, 130, 142–43; *The Morality of Stage Plays*, 134
- Filangieri, Gaetano, 219–23, 264; *La scienza della legislazione*, 215, 219–20
- Filangieri, Serafino, 215
- forbidden books, 25–26, 28, 30, 87, 90, 105–13, 124. *See also* censorship
- Forster, J. R., 253
- fossils, 42–44
- France, 89–123; almanacs in, 36, 41; censorship in, 89–90, 298n1; as context for Enlightenment ideas, 90–91; exile of Protestants from, 47, 92–93; freemasonry in, 121–22; secular vs. religious sentiments in, 4–5, 24–25; sociability in, 22–23; temporality in, 37–38, 47; universities in, 102. *See also* French Revolution
- Francis II, Emperor of Austria, 259
- Frankce, August, 168, 170
- Franklin, Benjamin, 15, 87, 122, 221, 232, 252–53, 263, 264
- Frederick III, Elector of Brandenburg, 168
- Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, 31, 174, 180
- Frederick William I, King of Prussia, 169–70
- freedom, 98–99, 139, 196
- freemasonry: in Austria, 175–77; ceremonies of, 4; cosmopolitanism of, 23, 84–85, 122–23; in Dutch Republic, 26, 262; in France, 22–23, 105, 121–23; Franklin and, 252–53; and French Revolution, 155; in Germany, 174, 174; and governance, 185–87, 221; Herder and, 84–85, 187; influence of, in United States, 252–54; in Italy, 219, 221–22; and Knights Templar, 181; Lessing and, 84–85, 185–87; in Scotland, 137; sociability in, 23–24, 84–85, 122–23; spread of, 22–23, 82, 121; suspicions of, 22–23, 121–22, 176–77
- freethinking, 20, 24, 78–79, 92, 166–67, 180
- free will, 169–70
- French prophets, 24
- French Revolution, 37–38, 76, 84, 86–87, 113, 118, 121, 154–56, 171, 177, 187, 201, 220, 233–34, 236–38, 240–42, 244–46, 248, 251–52, 256–58, 260, 261
- Fréret, Nicolas, *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*, 110–11
- Furly, Benjamin, 164
- Gaime, Jean-Claude, 117
- Galiani, Celestino, 206–7, 214–15
- Galiani, Ferdinando, 216–19; *Della Moneta (On Money)*, 216–17; *Dialogues on the Grain Trade*, 218
- Galileo Galilei, 32, 190, 206
- Galoche, Antoine, 21
- Gassendi, Pierre, 205
- Gay, Peter, 5, 68
- Genovesi, Antonio, 214–15, 218, 223, 227
- geology, 154
- German Idealism, 202
- Germany, 157–74, 178–203; Catholic Church in, 158; as context for Enlightenment ideas, 159; divine-nature relationship in, 3; High Enlightenment in, 178–203; Protestantism in, 158; public sphere in, 171–73; publishing in, 11; responses in, to revolution, 256–60; secular vs. religious sentiments in, 4; sociability in, 26; territories of,

- Germany (*continued*)
157–58; universities in, 26, 159–60, 169–70
- Giannone, Pietro, 208–9, 211, 223
- Glasgow, 75–77, 124, 126, 135, 147. *See also* University of Glasgow
- Glorious Revolution, 63, 125, 127, 254
- God: Australians' beliefs about, 29; characteristics of, 71; existence of, 108, 140–41, 190; as Grand Architect, 7, 122; Hume on, 140–41; Leibniz on, 159; nature in relation to, 3, 32, 92, 103, 131; Rousseau and, 116; and space, 32
- Godwin, William, 238–40; *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, 238–39
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, 178, 182, 191, 256, 257; *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 82
- Goeze, Johann Melchior, 171, 184
- Gottsched, Johann, 67
- Gottsched, Luise, 67
- Grand Lodge of the Constitutional Whigs, 254
- gravity, 13
- Greek and Roman culture, 6–7, 68–69, 83, 142
- Gregory, David, 129, 130, 207
- Grimm, Friedrich Melchior, 217–18, 244
- Grotius, Hugo, 8, 120
- Gueudeville, Nicolas, 31
- habeas corpus, 245
- Hales, Steven, 219
- Haller, Albrecht von, 67
- Hamann, Johann, 202
- Hamilton, Janet, 128
- Haren, Onno Zwier van, *Agon, Sultan van Bantam*, 261
- Hartley, David, 253
- haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment), 189
- Haydn, Joseph, 174
- Hays, Mary, 238, 243
- Hegel, Georg, 178, 197
- Helvétius, Claude Adrien, 45, 67, 103, 122, 217, 243, 244
- Hennepin, Louis, 27
- Henry VIII, King of England, 223
- Herder, Johann Gottfried von, 3, 10, 26, 82–87, 166, 178, 185, 187–88, 191, 192–99, 263; *God, Some Conversations*, 198; *Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, 199
- heresy, 79–80, 90, 99–100, 117, 128, 132, 166, 183
- High Enlightenment, 103, 178–203
- Histoire du Prince Apprius*, 28
- history: Herder's conception of, 195–97; stadial models of, 74, 77, 139, 141–42, 145, 151, 153, 200
- Hobbes, Thomas, 7, 10, 39–40, 45, 64, 105, 119, 143, 144, 162, 167, 189, 207, 209, 226, 261
- Hogarth, William, *Gin Lane*, 15, 17
- Holy Roman Empire, 158
- Holy Shroud of Christ, 208
- homosexuality, 19, 20, 28, 99, 117, 240, 246, 248–49
- Horne, George, 141
- Houdon, Jean-Antoine, 86
- Huguenots, 47, 92–93, 100–101, 105
- human nature, 98, 110, 115, 144, 161
- Humbert, Pierre, 94
- Hume, David, 100, 128, 130, 131, 133–34, 136–41, 144–45, 154, 156, 200, 251; *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, 140–41; “An Historical Essay on Chivalry and Modern Honour,” 136–37
- Hutcheson, Francis, 143–45
- Hutchinson, John, 143
- Hutton, James, 150, 154
- Huygens, Christiaan, 46, 47
- Huygens, Constantijn, 46
- Huygens, Constantijn, Jr., 47, 63–65, 78
- Huygens, Tiens, 65

- idealism, 197, 202
Illuminati, 155, 176, 256–57
imperialism, 9–12, 100, 196–97, 202, 221
Index of Forbidden Books (Catholic Church), 87, 106–7, 113, 209, 223
industry. *See* commerce and industry
inequality. *See* equality/inequality
Inquisition, 18, 30, 89, 106, 117, 204–7, 209, 211, 223
Ireland, 26, 201, 247, 249–50
Italy, 204–32
- Jackson, Thomas, 246
Jacobi, Friedrich, 183, 190–91
Jacobins, 156, 220, 245, 246, 259–60. *See also* anti-Jacobins
Jacobites, 23, 127, 128–30, 156
James VI, King of Scotland, 125
Jansen, Sue Curry, 298n1
Jansenism, 24–25, 90–91, 293n90
Jardine, George, 246
Jefferson, Thomas, 10, 32, 122, 123, 154, 232, 235–36, 235, 243–44, 251, 253, 255–56, 263
Jesuits, 102–3, 204–5, 218
Jesus, 19, 21, 69, 88, 92, 116, 127, 131, 163
Jews, 112, 181–82, 188–89, 191
Joan of Arc, 111
Johnson, Samuel, 72
Joseph II, Emperor of Austria, 27, 173–76, 189, 224, 258–59
Journal für Freymaurer, 174
- Kames, Henry Home, Lord, 153–54
Kant, Immanuel, 10, 26, 51, 83, 167, 171, 178, 192, 193, 198–202, 251; *Critique of Pure Reason*, 202; *Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent*, 201; *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, 200; “What is the Enlightenment?,” 201
Kaunitz, Wenzel, Prince, 224, 231, 258
Keill, John, 129
Knights Templar, 181, 186
Kotzebue, Augustus von, 242
Kracauer, Siegfried, 289n42
- Labat, Jean Baptiste, 27
labor, productivity of, 146–48
Lafitau, Joseph, 27
Lange, Joachim, 170
language, 194
La-Roque, Jean, 27
Lavoisier, Antoine, 151
law, 226, 232
Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm, 32, 102, 104, 159, 167, 169, 171–72, 188, 192, 197, 202, 206
Leon, Gottlieb von, 175
Leopold II, Emperor of Austria, 259
Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim, 26, 171, 172, 173, 178–88, 190–91, 194, 197, 263; *Emilia Galotti*, 180; *Ernst und Falk*, 84–85, 185–87; *Die Juden*, 181; *Leibniz on Eternal Punishments*, 182; *Miss Sara Sampson*, 179–80; *Nathan der Weise*, 181–82, 184
Leverier, Charles, 92
literacy, 29–30, 173
Lithuania, 30
Locke, John, 7, 30, 32, 34, 119, 159, 161, 162, 167, 202, 215, 261, 264; *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 90
Lodge of the Nine Sisters, 87, 252
London, 15, 17, 20
London Corresponding Society, 236
Louis XIV, King of France, 24, 45, 47, 90, 91, 93
Louis XV, King of France, 22
Luther, Martin, 184
Lutheranism, 158–60, 169, 171, 178
- MacDonald clan, 127
Machiavelli, Niccolò, 20, 105
Maclaurin, Colin, 129

- Maillet, Benoit de, 43; *Telliamed*, 70
Malthus, Thomas, 146
Marat, Jean Paul, 261
Marchand, Prosper, 91, 92, 164–65
Maria Theresa, Queen of Austria, 173, 224, 226, 258
Marie Antoinette, Queen of France, 260
marriage, 239, 240
Marshall, John, 5
Marx, Karl, 105, 178, 197
masonic lodges. *See* freemasonry
materialism: in France, 103–5, 108–11, 198; Herder and, 194–95; Holbach and, 108–10; and human nature, 109–10; Marx and, 197; Newtonian science and, 103–5; opposition to, 45, 103–4, 106, 189, 205–6; physico-theology vs., 7; Radicati and, 212; Rousseau and, 115–16; scientific theories based on, 31; secularism associated with, 44–45; in 1790s, 243–44; and time, 37, 44–45; To-land and, 103, 109, 116, 131
mathematics, 7, 83, 130, 145, 159, 168–69
Maupertuis, Pierre-Louis Moreau de, 104, 188
medicine, 130
Mendelssohn, Moses, 168, 172, 178, 180–83, 188–91; *To the Friends of Lessing*, 189–90; *Jerusalem*, 188–89; *Morning Hours*, 189
Mercier, Louis-Sebastien, 113, 115; *Discours sur l'apocalypse l'an 2440*, 112–13
Methodism, 69
Milan, 157, 223–32
Millar, John, 246
millenarianism, 24, 35, 43
Minerva (journal), 257
Mirabeau, Honoré Gabriel Riqueti, comte de, 186
miracles, 111, 184
Moderns, 204–6
Moerloose, Isabella de, 78–80, 264
Mohammed, 19, 21, 92, 163
monarchies, 9, 10
Monatsgespräche (journal), 160
money, 10, 147–48, 216–17
Monro, John, 130
Montesquieu, Charles-Louis de
 Secondat, Baron de la Brède, 30, 84, 86, 93, 96–101, 104, 122, 138, 142, 200, 225, 238, 254; *Persian Letters*, 96–97, 211
Moore, Thomas, 247–48, 249
morality: Hutcheson on, 144–45; materialist approach to, 108–10; Newtonian science as model for, 144–45; secular approach to, 76
moral weeklies, 172
Morellet, André, 217–18
Morganwg, Iolo (Edward Williams), 245
Moses, 19, 21, 92, 163, 212
Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus, 174, 175–78, 214; *The Magic Flute*, 177–78
Müller, Johann, 163
Muratori, Antonio, 27
Muratori, Ludovico, 210–11, 215–16, 227
music, 173–74

Nantes, edict of (1685), 47
Naples, 157, 204–7, 209, 211, 213–23, 233, 260
Napoleon Bonaparte, 234, 260
natural religion, 71–72, 111, 113, 115–16, 125, 253
nature: design in, 140–41; God in relation to, 3, 32, 92, 103, 131; Herder's conception of, 195–98; Rousseau and, 118–19
Necker, Jacques, 85
Necker, Suzanne (née Curchod), 85–86, 217
Nelson, Horatio, 222, 260

- Newton, Isaac, and Newtonian principles, 7, 8, 45; Dutch Republic and, 81; Germany and, 159, 167, 171, 190, 199; Italy and, 206–7, 214–16; and materialism, 97, 103–5, 109, 116, 131; and mathematics, 171; and moral philosophy, 144–45; and optics, 206; philosophes and, 102, 129; and religion, 24, 34–35, 50–51; religious suspicions of, 102–3, 130; Scotland and, 130–31, 151; and space, 15, 24, 32; and time, 34–35; 40, 50–51, 56–57; Voltaire and, 101–2
- Niccolini, Antonio, 207
- Nicolai, Friedrich, 173, 178
- Nollet, Jean, 219
- Nouveau Voyage de la terre austral*, 28
- The Oeconomy of Human Life* (also known as *Le Philosophe Indien*) [Dodsley?], 70–72
- Oldenbarnevelt, Johan van, 65
- optics, 206
- original sin, 125, 161
- Orleans, duc d', 93
- Paine, Thomas, 236, 245, 251, 253; *The Rights of Man*, 259
- Palmer, Elihu, 252
- pantheism, 21, 103, 131, 190–92, 194–95, 198, 212
- papacy, 23–25, 96–101, 177, 208, 211
- Paris, 19, 21–22, 24, 90–91
- Parlement of Paris, 37
- Parny, Évariste, 86–88; *War of the Gods* (*La Guerre des Dieux*), 87–88
- Peale, Rembrandt, *Thomas Jefferson*, 235
- pendulum clocks, 46
- Penn, William, 221
- Pepys, Samuel, 63
- Pezz, Johann, *Faustin*, 175–76
- Le Philosophe* (anonymous), 107–8
- philosophes: Austria and, 176; criticisms of, 84, 188; on equality, 100; and freemasonry, 122; and French Revolution, 121, 155; and Jews, 112; origin of name, 107–8; patronage of, 26; principles of, 134; and religion, 110, 166; and science, 102; Scottish, 143; secular theories of, 31; urban habitat of, 18
- physico-theology, 7, 71, 171, 207
- Picart, Bernard, 31, 91, 95, 101, 164–65; depiction of sociability, 16; depiction of torture, 229; *Religious Ceremonies of the World*, 5, 13, 14, 95
- Pietism, 158, 159, 169
- Pitcairne, Archibald, 130, 167
- Plumptre, Anne, 238, 242, 244
- Poland, 30, 120
- political economy, 223–24, 230–32
- Political Economy Club, 150
- politics: active engagement in, 107–8; in Dutch Republic, 81; freemasonry and, 185–87; Montesquieu on, 98–101; Rousseau and, 119–21; Scottish Enlightenment and, 132; secular approaches to, 7–9, 31, 85; temporality transformed by, 37
- Pope, Alexander, 188
- pornography, 21, 28, 65, 104, 111
- poverty, 68–69, 245
- predestination, 51, 125, 143
- presbyterianism, 125–31, 134, 143, 156
- Price, Richard, 237, 253, 255
- price controls, 224
- Priestley, Joseph, 155, 194, 235, 238–39, 243, 253
- progress, 31, 73, 76–77, 80, 113, 138–41, 147, 151, 153, 156
- property, 9, 119
- Protestant Reformation, 34
- Protestants/Protestantism: conducive to Enlightenment thought, 52; exile of, from France, 47, 92–93; in

- Protestants/Protestantism (*continued*)
Germany, 158; in Scotland, 126–28;
and time/temporality, 34–36, 48–62
Proteus Echo (journal), 18
public sphere, 15, 18, 26, 171–72, 264
publishing. *See* books and publishing
Pufendorf, Samuel von, 209
punctuality, 60–63
punishment, 99, 225–30
Puritans, 49, 51, 58
- Quakerism, 93, 100, 101
quietism, 90, 206
- Rabelais, François, 105
race and racism, 100, 139, 200–202
Radicati di Passerano, Alberto, 211–13;
Christianity Set in a True Light, 211–12;
Dissertation upon Death, 212; *True Light*, 212
Ravel, Maurice, 87
Raynal, Guillaume Thomas François,
10, 100
reason, 161–62, 188–90, 194
Reid, Thomas, 246
Reimarus, Elise, 183–84, 192
Reimarus, Hermann Samuel, 25; “On
the Toleration of the Deists,” 183–84
relativism, 97
religion: challenges to authority of,
8–9, 11–12, 19, 21–23, 32, 79–81, 90,
96–97, 106–7, 111, 112, 127, 166, 184,
265; Enlightenment in relation to,
1–4; freemasonry and, 122; Hume
on, 140–41; natural, 71–72, 111, 113,
115–16, 125, 253; relativism in, 97;
science and, 7, 24; secular approach
to study of, 5; the secular realm
distinguished from, 39–40; spatial
discoveries’ effect on, 6, 12–13;
Voltaire on, 101–2
Renaissance, 105
republicanism, 30
Restoration (England), 52
revelation, 161, 184
Revolution (1688–89). *See* Glorious
Revolution
revolutions, 31, 81, 201, 222, 233, 236,
264. *See also* American Revolution;
French Revolution
Rey, Marc Michel, 92
Richardson, Samuel, *Clarissa*, 179
Robertson, William, *Reasons of
Dissent*, 132
Robinson, Mary, 238
Robison, John, 153, 155, 257
Roche, Daniel, 5
Roman civilization. *See* Greek and
Roman culture
Romanticism, 234, 239
Rome, 208
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 10, 31, 68, 90,
92, 113, 114, 115–21, 188, 197, 217, 225,
227, 230, 243, 254, 264; *Confessions*,
115, 117; *Discourse on the Sciences and
the Arts*, 138; *Emile, or Education*,
115–17; *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, 82; and
politics, 113; *The Social Contract*, 113,
116–17, 119, 259
Rousset de Missy, Jean, 81, 91, 92, 164,
264
Royal Academy of Sciences (Berlin),
172
Royal Society of London, 246
Rush, Benjamin, 141, 232
Russia, 22–23, 82
Ryder, Joseph, 58–59
- saints, 35–38
Schiller, Friedrich, 178, 257
Schlegel, Johann, 173
Schmidt, J. Lorenz, 183
Scholasticism, 160, 205–6
science: Christianity and, 7; Italian
resistance to, 204–6; and mate-
rialism, 103–5; Newtonian, 15, 24,

- 101–4, 129–30, 144–45, 190, 199,
206–7, 214–16; philosophes and,
102; religion and, 7, 24; in Scotland,
129–30
- Scotland, 124–56; as context for En-
lightenment ideas, 124–28; issues
debated in, 135–36, 138; Protestant-
ism in, 126–29; religious vs. secular
sentiments in, 132–35; responses in,
to revolution, 245–47; temporality
in, 36; universities in, 75, 125, 129–34,
153. *See also* Glorious Revolution
- Scottish Enlightenment, 77, 124–56,
250–51
- secularism: emergence of, 39–42; En-
lightenment expansion of, 1–5; life
according to, 63–88; materialism
associated with, 44–45; meanings
of, 39
- Select Society, 129–32, 135–38, 141
- the self: in revolutionary/reform
periods, 234; and time/temporality,
50–58
- sexuality, 28–29, 63, 65, 78–80, 97,
104, 117–18, 203, 240, 248. *See also*
homosexuality
- s’Gravesande, Willem Jacob, 81, 207
- Sheridan, Richard Brinsley, *School for
Scandal*, 62
- Simon, Richard, 64
- skepticism, 140–42
- slavery, 9, 31, 72, 76, 87, 90, 93, 100, 113,
144, 196, 221, 232, 240, 245, 251, 255
- Smith, Adam, 74, 103, 126, 128, 129–31,
133, 143–50, 152–54, 156, 239; *The
Wealth of Nations*, 126, 147, 148
- Smith, Charlotte, 238, 240–41, 244
- sociability, 15, 16, 18–20, 19, 22, 26, 188,
264
- socialists, 227, 239
- Society for Belles Lettres, 138
- Society of 13, 253
- Socinians, 101–2, 162
- Socinus, Faustus, 64
- Socrates, 116
- Solander, Daniel, 253
- songs, 173–74
- Sorbonne University, 34
- Southey, Robert, 76, 237, 238, 240,
243, 248
- Southwell, Robert, 54
- space, 6–32; above the earth, 13, 15; as
empty, 15, 32; freemasons and, 22–23;
God and, 32; Herder’s conception
of, 195–96; imperialism and, 9–12;
politics and, 7–9; travel and, 27–29;
urban, 15–31
- Spain, 10–11, 82
- The Spectator* (journal), 17, 80, 85, 172
- Spinelli family, 213
- Spinoza, Baruch, 3, 8, 64, 71, 79–81, 91,
103–4, 162, 166, 167, 169, 180, 183, 185,
189–92, 194, 197–98, 207, 209, 261
- stadial models of history, 74, 77, 139,
141–42, 145, 151, 153, 200
- Staël, Germaine de, 85
- Stamp Act crisis, 254
- the state: economic role of, 148–49;
political role of, 9, 84–85, 119–20,
186–89, 199–200; religion in relation
to, 161
- steam engine, 33, 75, 147, 150–52
- Stockdorff (widow), 26, 106–13, 178
- Stuart, James, 253
- suicide, 212
- superstition, 73, 99, 112, 113, 140, 150,
151, 158, 166, 172, 176, 186, 244
- Symbolum sapientiae* (*Symbol of Wis-
dom*) [anonymous], 166–67
- Tanucci, Bernardo, 219
- Tavernier, Jean Baptiste, 27
- Taylor, Jeremy, 58
- technology, of time, 45–48, 54
- the Terror, 113, 156, 201, 234, 240, 242
- theater, 173

- theism, 116, 169, 190–91
- Thelwall, John, 238, 241, 243
- Thérèse philosophe* (anonymous), 104, 107
- Thirty Years War (1618–48), 158
- Thomasius, Christian, 160–62, 168
- Thoresby, Ralph, 54
- time and temporality, 33–65; as absolute, 50–51, 56–57, 59; age of the earth, 34, 42–44, 48, 154, 247; almanacs and, 35–42, 57; anxieties concerning, 52–61; Christian, 34–37; Herder's conception of, 195–96; materialism and, 44–45; Protestants and, 34–36, 48–62; punctuality, 60–63; religious vs. secular senses of, 49–60; secularization of, 37–38, 41, 43–44, 49–52; self in relation to, 50–58; seventeenth-century sense of, 33–34; technology of, 45–48, 54; use of, 43–44, 53–61
- Tindal, Matthew, 184
- Toland, John, 27, 31, 45, 79, 92, 109, 116, 127, 130–31, 163, 184, 189, 207, 212; *Christianity not Mysterious*, 131; *Letters to Serena*, 103
- tolerance/toleration: in Austria, 175; in England, 127; freemasons and, 23; French opposition to, 90; science and, 7; in Scotland, 127–28, 134
- Tone, Theobald Wolfe, 249–50
- torture, 226, 228–29, 229, 258
- Le Traité des trois imposteurs* (*The Treatise on the Three Impostors*), 21, 92, 105, 163–66
- travel and travel literature, 10, 27–29, 72–74, 82–83, 142, 193–94, 217
- Treaty of Westphalia (1648), 158, 160
- Turin, 208
- Turner, Thomas, 60
- Unitarians, 101–2, 263–64
- United Irishmen, 247, 249–50
- United States: Constitution of, 99, 221; Enlightenment legacies in, 264; imperialism of, 9–12; responses in, to revolution, 251–52; in 1790s, 250–56; slavery in, 221, 251, 255; temporality in, 38–39. *See also* American Revolution
- universities: in France, 102; in Germany, 26, 159–60, 169–70; in Italy, 208, 213–19; in Scotland, 75, 125, 129–34, 153
- University of Edinburgh, 129, 131, 151
- University of Glasgow, 126, 143–44, 245–46
- University of Halle, 168–69
- University of Naples, 213–15
- utopianism, 171, 227, 239
- utopian literature, 112–13
- utopian travel literature, 29
- Vanini, Lucilio (pen name: Giulio Cesare Vanini), 64, 79, 165–66
- Vaughan, Benjamin, 253
- Venice, 205, 209–11
- Venturi, Franco, 5
- Verri, Pietro, 224–25, 227, 230–32
- Victor Amadeus II, King of Sicily and Sardinia, 211
- Vienna, 173–78
- Volney, 236
- Voltaire, 21, 26, 31, 38, 43, 72, 86, 101–3, 106, 110–12, 122, 150, 173, 190, 236, 264; *Candide*, 175; *Lettres philosophiques*, 101; *La pucelle d'Orleans*, 111; *Sermon des cinquante*, 111, 112
- Vries, Simon de, 40
- Wales, 245
- Warwick, Mary Rich, Lady, 55–57
- watches, 46–47, 54
- Watt, Gregory, 76, 245–46, 249
- Watt, James, 147, 150–52, 155, 241
- Watt, James, Jr., 241–42, 246

- wealth, 149
- Wedgwood, Josiah, 241, 253
- Wedgwood, Josiah, Jr., 241–42
- Weisse, Christian, *Jean Calas*, 173
- Whig party, 125–26, 128, 130, 132, 143, 156
- Whitehead, Paul, *The Manners, A Satire*, 72
- Whitehurst, John, 253
- Wilkes, John, 15
- William III (William the Orange), King of England and Scotland, 64, 65, 125, 127
- Williams, David, 253
- Windham, William, 60–61
- Wolff, Christian, 167–71, 173, 180, 188
- Wollstonecraft, Mary, 240
- women: in Dutch science, 81; in Enlightenment circles, 85–86, 183, 217, 219; and freemasonry, 122; journals intended for, 172; Kant's views on, 201; Scottish Enlightenment and, 136–38; secular lives of, 85–86; status of, 97–98, 136–38, 240
- Wordsworth, William, 76, 238, 240
- worldliness, 63–88
- Wyndham, Henry Penruddocke, 67–70, 137
- Yorke, Henry, 244