

Chapter 5: Devolution of Power

From Absolutism to Enlightenment (1540-1789 CE)

Europe's ascension to the prime spot in the world's hierarchical order did not happen overnight, nor did it occur by happenstance. Around the beginning of the Little Ice Age, Europe experienced a Renaissance in the fourteenth century, reinvigorating studies in classical literature, art, politics, and thought. The longstanding feudal traditions weakened after the Black Death had subsided, since plummeting property values weakened the power and wealth of the nobility. Monarchs increased their authority as the increased use of gunpowder enabled them to maintain their own military forces, thereby reducing their reliance on the nobility even further. In the late fifteenth century, the Northern Renaissance emerged, with greater emphasis on humanism and religion.



Drawing depicting the German Peasants War of 1525-1526.

and territorial wars divided Europe over decades, culminating into the Thirty Years' War, security and order were badly needed. As a result, leaders and political thinkers increasingly supported the idea of centralizing power in a single person, an **absolute ruler**. Starting in the mid-seventeenth century, Westphalian sovereignty drove European political organization, separating the region into independent states generally headed by powerful monarchs.

As these events transpired, the Europeans engaged in colonization around the world, facilitating global commerce and connections at an ever-increasing pace. Motivated by mercantilism, monarchs sponsored huge expeditions to find gold and resources to help create a favorable balance of trade for their countries. Concurrently, these monarchs sought to further centralize political power unto themselves



The *Repulse* at dock in southern England, 1820. Credit: National Maritime Museum, London.

These factors – among others – ultimately led to the Reformation in the early sixteenth century that weakened the Catholic Church, strengthening European nation-states ruled by monarchs, and leading people to question long-standing beliefs. After several religious

within their own states, and weaken other political players such as the nobility, the Church, and the citizenry. The country of France would prove to be the most successful in consolidating monarchical power during the **Early Modern Period** (1453-1789 CE).

In other European states, however, **devolution** occurred, which is the decentralization of powers from the central government to subnational levels, such as at a regional or local area. Austrian and Prussian monarchs were less effective in maintaining their sovereign supremacy due to regional differences and military opposition, respectively. Britain, with a well-established Parliament, formed a system in which the monarch perhaps was the least influential in all of Europe.

The Age of Absolutism

French Autocracy

Historically speaking, the most centralized form of government is an **autocracy**, in which supreme power is concentrated in the hands of one person, and is not effectively regulated or restrained by traditional means of control. By the mid-seventeenth century, French absolutism was indeed autocratic, as the legislature and the courts were all under the king's control. The king was somewhat restricted by state laws



Charles I of England (1600-1649), being crowned by the hand of God.

and traditions, and had to always be cognizant of the fact that excessive suppression of the citizenry could lead to mass insurrection. Nonetheless, he ruled under the **Divine Right** – in which the king's authority was said to come directly from God himself – and could not be limited or challenged. For instance, while France possessed a legislature for centuries, it could only be called into session by the king, and this did not occur from 1614 to 1789. So, while **checks** – or limits of power – were in place, they were minimally effective, and often inoperable.

The roots of this autocratic system began once **Louis XIII** became king of France when he was only nine years old. His father, Henry IV, had been stabbed to death by a radical Catholic. Being too young to effectively rule, he appointed a series of chief ministers until finally selecting **Cardinal Richelieu**, who made the major decisions for the country for many years. Richelieu's major goal was to strengthen the monarchy and remove all obstacles to royal authority, this way even a weak monarch would not incite unrest or a rebellion, and stability would be maintained.



Portrait of Cardinal Richelieu. Credit: Philippe de Champaigne, National Gallery, London.

The two main obstacles to total monarchical control were the Huguenots and the nobility. Concerning the Huguenots, Richelieu maintained the part of the Edict of Nantes that guaranteed civil and religious rights, but he had the king annul the section that guaranteed “places of safety” - or fortified cities. Several protestant cities rebelled against this decree; however, in time, the French army crushed all opposition.

Although Richelieu did not remove

the nobility itself, he sent royal agents across the country to deal with citizens directly, weakening the nobles’ authority over their own lands. Richelieu also ordered the leveling of any unnecessary castles, except for those located along the state borders, providing the country with a means of national defense.

The Consolidation of Absolutism



One of the battles during the Fronde, referring to the “slings” Parisian crowds used to smash the windows of royal supporters.

erupted known as the **Fronde**. The nobility effectively took control of the country until 1653, when a French and Swiss army overthrew them. This event left a strong impression on young Louis XIV, who was determined to further weaken the power of the nobles.

When Louis XIV finally became king at age 23, he ordered the expansion of a royal hunting lodge located twelve miles outside of Paris to become the Palace of **Versailles** (*veh-er-SIGH*). Once finished, he moved his court, government, and key nobles to the palace, which was essentially an elaborate prison. In order to advance in favor and in power, the nobles had to serve the king – quite literally – hand and foot. By assembling his most powerful adversaries in one location, the king’s servants

could spy on them and report any treasonous intentions. Similar to the Tokugawa shoguns of Japan who ordered the daimyo to spend every other year in the capital city, Louis XIV “kept his friends close and his enemies closer.”

Perhaps the king’s favorite motto was “L’etat c’est moi,” which means, “I am the state.” In 1685, believing the religion of the ruler should be the religion of the state and to create a more cohesive **nation-state**, Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes. This enforced his philosophy of “one faith, one law, one king.” As a consequence of his actions, over 200,000 Huguenots emigrated out of France; this hurt the country economically as many productive people left the country. Louis XIV adopted the Sun as his emblem, and has often referred to as the *Sun King*, in which its rays symbolized the extent of his power. To extend the power and wealth of France, their vast array of colonies were expanded around the globe, predominantly in North America, Western Africa, and Southeast Asia. Monopolistic trading companies generated increased revenues for France, creating a strong middle class.



In this painting, Louis XIV is depicted as Apollo, god of the sun.

Louis XIV had a vast army raised – the greatest in the world at that time. Many ranks in today’s modern armies reflect the French influence, with titles such as sergeant, lieutenant, and colonel. Throughout his reign France fought several major wars, expanding French territory, but at a tremendous cost. In order to maintain a **balance of power** in Eu-

rope, many countries united their forces to halt France’s expansion. By the eighteenth century, French revenues were drained. Although France was the most powerful country in the world, they faced massive debts as well as an uncertain future.

Limited Absolutism in Austria and Prussia

In France, most peasants were free, and the country possessed a strong middle class. This social and economic reality kept the nobles relatively weak, leading to a more absolutist French political system. In Austria, as with Prussia, the peasants were mostly **serfs** – who were bound to land they worked on. Since there was no strong middle class in either state, the monarchs relied on powerful nobles to collect the taxes and staff their armies. As a result, these countries displayed a mixture of absolutism and aristocracy.

The Austrian Hapsburgs ruled over a multinational state, and acted as hereditary rulers of Austria and Bohemia. In 1683, they successfully defended their capital, Vienna, against the Turks; and then drove them out of Hungary by the end of the seventeenth century, making the Hapsburg domains even more diverse. While a Hapsburg monarch was sovereign over all the territory, Austria, Bohemia, and Hungary each maintained its own assembly, its own language (German, Czech, and Magyar, respectively), and its own laws and customs. Nobles in these lands acquiesced to Hapsburg absolutism, as neighboring powerful states – France, Prussia, and Russia – represented a gathering threat to their territory. However, the Hapsburgs were checked by regionalism, as they agreed to respect Bohemian and Hungarian traditions. By the nineteenth century, Austria was one of the most powerful states in Europe. However, unlike autocratic France, the Austrian Hapsburgs ruled by means of a multinational form of absolutism. Their supremacy was weakened through devolution, in which certain regions gained power at the expense of the Hapsburg’s central authority.



dating back to the medieval times, containing a **House of Lords** (made up of the aristocracy) and a **House of Commons** (representing wealthy commoners). Due to mercantilism and a massive increase in trade, the House of Commons eventually grew to hold the most power in England. Unlike elsewhere in Europe, the nobility and citizenry collaborated to restrict the ruler, establishing a **limited monarchy** that provided an alternative to absolutism.



Prussian soldiers in the latter seventeenth century.

In Prussia, the **Hohenzollerns** acquired a multinational and fragmented empire in northern Europe. In the 1640s, the king of Prussia made a deal with his nobles – the **Junkers** (YOONG-kers) – that if they provided loyal military service to him – they would be exempt from taxes and could completely rule over their peasants.

The Junkers recruited tall-imposing soldiers, and by 1688 they had a powerful army of around 40,000 men. The Junkers willingly granted the Hohenzollerns extensive political authority, however, the monarchs’ power had devolved, and they were indeed checked by the power of the military.

England’s Limited Monarchy

In England, the monarchs attempted to become as absolute as they had in France, Austria and Prussia. However, they would become the least successful of all. English monarchs were checked by **Parliament**, a legislature

Charles I (ruled from 1625 to 1649) of the House of Stuart attempted to rule absolutely, however, this ended badly for him. He attempted to pass laws and levy taxes without consulting Parliament. In turn, the members of Parliament drew up the **Petition of Right**, a document that guaranteed the people certain rights and limited the king’s authority. For example, the monarch could not tax without Parliamentary consent, imprison English subjects without due process, or quarter troops in peoples homes.



Charles I of England

Charles assented to the petition, however, due to continued disagreements, he dissolved Parliament and ruled in what was known as the “Eleven Years’ Tyranny.” This period of relatively unchecked power led to revolts, and would eventually plunge England into bloody conflict. The **English Civil War** (1642-1651) erupted, pitting the Cavaliers – or the king’s supporters, against the Roundheads – or Parliamentary forces allied with the Scots.

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In this famous portrait, Oliver Cromwell asked to be painted exactly as he looked, “warts and all.”

After Charles I surrendered, **Oliver Cromwell**, leader of the Roundheads, charged the king for treason and had him beheaded in 1649. This action was highly irregular for any age, and was received with great disparagement throughout the European aristocracy. Desiring to lead a Puritan revolution, Cromwell dismissed Parliament, and ruled as a dictator under the title “Lord Protector.” Under his Puritanical rule, he outlawed dances, drinking, theater, and other things the Puritans found objectionable. By the time of his death in 1658, Anglicans and Catholics alike despised his autocratic rule.

By popular support the monarchy was restored under the Stuart dynasty. However, after a king attempted to rule absolutely, Parliament organized the short and relatively bloodless **Glorious Revolution** in 1688. William of Orange successfully invaded England with his Dutch fleet, forcing the English king to flee, and essentially abdicating – or relinquishing - the throne. Parliament invited **William and Mary of Orange** to assume power, and had them sign the English Bill of Rights, guaranteeing many civil liberties to the people. As time progressed the highest office in the House of Commons, the **prime minister**, increasingly became the most powerful executive, surpassing the authority of the monarchy.

The Scientific Revolution

Despite the varying degrees of absolutism and the vast changes facilitated through expanding global trade, Europe was still a relatively traditional region. Despite advances through the Renaissance and printing press, their understanding of the human body, mathematics, and the universe around them generally lagged far behind other world powers. In sixteenth century Europe, almost everything known about science in the West had come from Africa, Asia, and the Islamic world. However, as Europe expanded in territory, wealth, and intercontinental connections, they journeyed into an unprecedented period of scientific discovery.

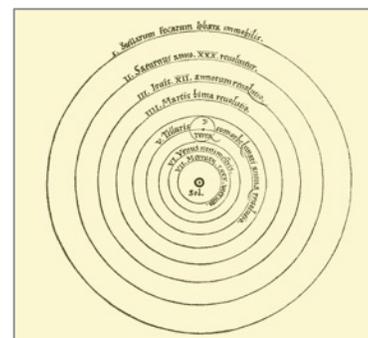
The Scientific Revolution would transform the views of nature and society through developments in mathematics, physics, and other intellectual pursuits. No longer would the world be viewed as a mysterious and impossibly incomprehensible realm. This era championed the notion that everything in the natural world had a reasonable explanation, and there were rules that governed the universe. This idea was applied to physics, politics, economics, and has permeated into virtually every human

endeavor. Without this revolutionary change in thought, our modern world would simply not exist as we know it.

The Copernican Revolution

The theory that caused Europeans to question centuries of accepted thought - quite literally - revolved around the Sun, and the defense of this theory inaugurated the Scientific Revolution. **Nicolaus Copernicus**, a Polish monk and scientist, proposed the **heliocentric model** - with the Sun at the center of the known universe. In doing so, he rejected centuries of European scientific dogma that trusted in Ptolemy’s geocentric model, with the Earth at the center.

However, Copernicus’ great discovery was not that the Earth revolved around the sun, since it wasn’t actually all that original. While studying in Italy Copernicus read the works of ancient Greek astronomers who had proposed the heliocentric theory 1,800 years earlier. In 1543, on his deathbed,



Copernicus’ heliocentric model

Copernicus consented to have his work published. For centuries, most of the scientific community, as well as the Catholic Church, had accepted Ptolemy’s geocentric model as proven fact. Challenging this belief could, in turn, prove to be a dangerous endeavor since it would contest the infallibility of Church thought as well as upturn centuries of accepted study.

Despite his personal contributions, many of Copernicus’ explanations proved to be wrong, and most scientists and theologians at that time rejected his heliocentric model. Copernicus’ great contribution was that studying and contemplating this idea, would solve *other* problems. Thus began the Scientific Revolution, and the methodical pursuit to prove if Copernicus’ theory was actually correct. This “revolution” would begin in only a handful of Western European countries, but its impact would change the world forever.

The Scientific Method

In 1572, a new star was observed by a Danish nobleman and astronomer, **Tycho Brahe** (tay-koh bra-hey). What he witnessed was, in fact, a supernova, which occurs when a star collapses and explodes from the inside out. Brahe used self-made instruments that were arguably the best in the world, and his measurements placed this new star, or “nova stella,” beyond the moon and known planets. This observation went counter to the accepted belief that that the stars and comets were close to the Earth’s atmosphere. Later, Brahe established an observatory in Denmark, and hired several gifted mathematicians and astronomers.

Johannes Kepler, a German mathematician and astronomer, was an assistant to Tycho Brahe for years. In the early seventeenth century, through extensive mathematical calculations, he concluded the Copernican model was correct - to a degree. He determined that each planet revolved around the Sun in an elliptical orbit, not circular, as Copernicus had predicted.

What was emerging through the efforts of thinkers such as Copernicus, Brahe, and Kepler was a new and emerging methodology, different from the previous assertion that the universe was simply too complicated to truly understand. In England, **Francis Bacon**, a lawyer, statesman, and scientist (with a fantastic last name), called for a new approach to scientific study. In 1620 he wrote that scholars should focus on observing reality, rather than relying on analyzing the work of past thinkers. He is one of the pioneers of **empiricism**, the practical approach that necessitates extensive observation, and rigorous experimentation. In doing so, he laid the groundwork for the modern scientific method.

Rene Descartes, a French philosopher and scientist, further developed the modern scientific method. In 1637, he published a work emphasizing human reasoning, which inspired the pursuit for mechanical laws that govern the material universe. Descartes stressed that everything must be proven, except basic ideas that were true beyond a doubt. Perhaps his most famous quote encapsulated what he called the first truth, "cogito ergo sum," which means, "I think, therefore I am." Descartes, similar to many learned men of this age were religious individuals, who followed the philosophy of **deism**, believing that reason and observation of the natural world were sufficient to determine the existence of a single creator of the world. Thinkers, such as Descartes, sought to discover the design of the universe as created by God.



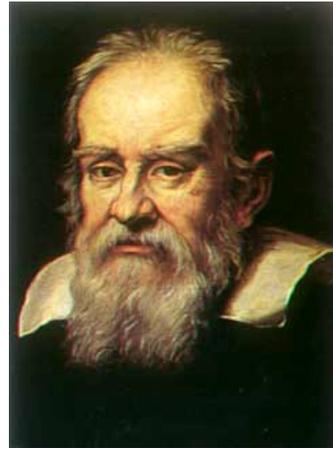
Rene Descartes believed, "the physical laws he had uncovered revealed the mechanical perfection of the workings of the universe to be akin to a watchmaker, wherein the watchmaker is God."

The Synthesis of Science

Arguably, the greatest mind of the era was **Galileo Galilei**, an Italian astronomer, who combined his excellent creativity with experimentation and mathematics. In the late sixteenth century, he worked with pendulums as a means of keeping time and ran experiments to measure acceleration.

Although Galileo was not the first to assemble a telescope, he formulated several improvements, and was the first to observe four moons revolving around Jupiter in 1610. Observing these "Galilean moons," he noted the smaller objects revolved around the larger object by some unknown force; the discovery of celestial bodies orbiting something other than the Earth all but proved the helio-

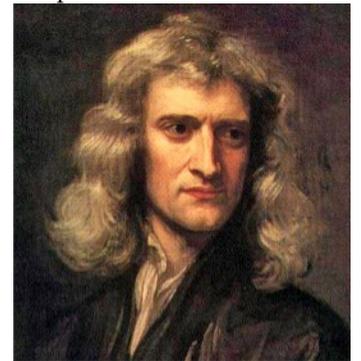
centric model. Most people then, as today, could not understand Kepler's mathematical proofs, however, people could see with their own eyes.



Galileo Galilei. According to legend, after Galileo stated the Earth stood motionless, under his breath he said, "and yet it moves."

influence from their home base in Rome. Distance decay prevented the Church from effectively containing their seemingly heretic works. Galileo - an Italian - challenged ideas supported by the Church. Since he resided around the **core** - or hearth - of the Church's sphere of influence, Galileo was forced into house arrest for the remainder of his life. Nonetheless, he still researched, experimented, and made many new discoveries. Today he is often referred to as the "father of modern physics."

While Galileo showed that planets revolved around the Sun, he couldn't prove how it happened. Later in the seventeenth century, **Isaac Newton**, an English physicist and mathematician, assimilated and consolidated Galileo's work - with others - synthesizing a new explanation as to how the universe operated. It is often recorded that Newton's epiphany occurred after witnessing an apple fall from a tree; if the force of gravity could reach to the top of a tree, couldn't it reach all the way to the moon - and beyond?



Sir Isaac Newton

Newton used mathematics to discuss the measurable force of gravity and motion, which explained why the planets moved as they did. To more accurately measure the changes of orbits and other calculations, Newton created the mathematical study of **calculus** (as did Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz independently of Newton). Due to the scholarly giants of the European Scientific Revolution - among others - the universe became more understandable and less mysterious; and the world became more intellectual and less superstitious.