



History & Geography

In this session, we have included mini biographies of **twelve key thinkers of the Age of Enlightenment**.

For history, your students will read chapters 44-55 of *The Story of Mankind* (TSOM). This book is linked for free on our site. For a well-rounded overview of the Enlightenment, we also recommend *George Washington's World*, by Genevieve Foster. [Here](#) is a free version, and [here](#) is a link to Amazon to purchase your own copy.

For geography, we have also included two maps for you to study and use for map drills:

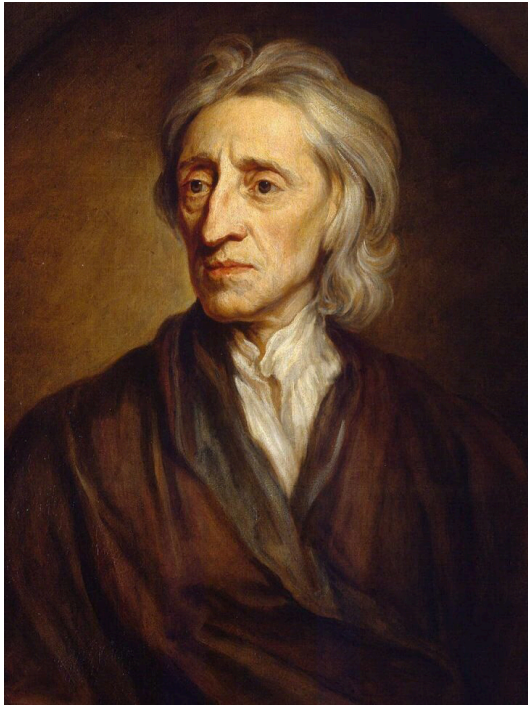
- "Europe, 1700s"
- "The Thirteen Colonies, 1775" (This map is provided by TheCollector.com).

"Think for yourself and let others enjoy the privilege of doing so too."

~ Voltaire

History & Geography

12 Key Thinkers of the Enlightenment



John Locke (1632–1704) was an English philosopher whose ideas laid much of the groundwork for Enlightenment thought. Living during a time of political upheaval in England, he developed theories about government, human nature, and knowledge that would shape modern democracy. Locke argued that all people are born with natural rights—life, liberty, and property—and that governments are formed to protect these rights. If a government fails to do so, the people have the right to change or replace it.

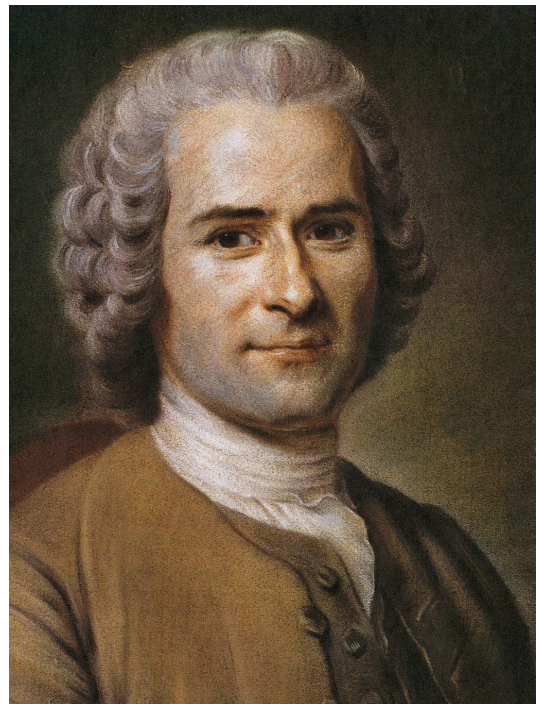
In addition to his political ideas, Locke contributed to philosophy through his theory of the mind. He believed that the human mind begins as a “blank slate,” or *tabula rasa*, and that knowledge comes through experience. This emphasis on observation and learning influenced both education and scientific thinking during the Enlightenment.

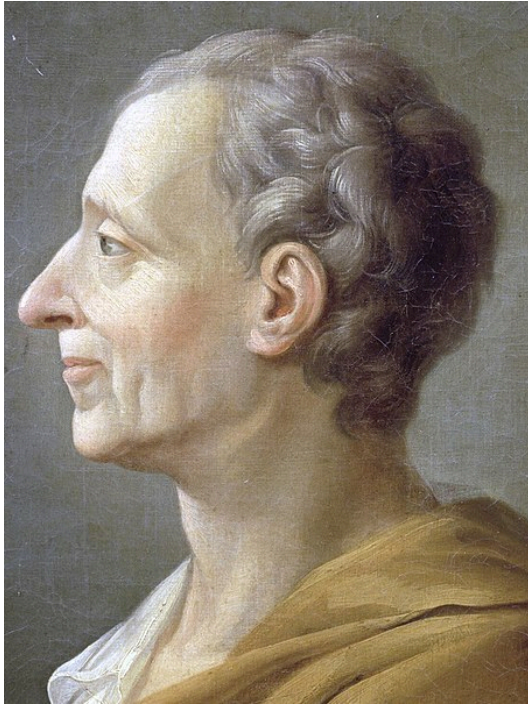
“The end of the law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom.”

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), born in Geneva (modern-day Switzerland) but active in France, was a philosopher who explored the tension between individual freedom and society. He believed that humans are naturally good but are corrupted by social institutions and inequalities. His work challenged the idea that civilization always leads to improvement.

In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau argued that legitimate political authority comes from the “general will” of the people. He believed that laws should reflect the collective good rather than the interests of a ruler. His ideas had a strong influence on the French Revolution and continue to shape political philosophy today.

“Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.”





Montesquieu (1689–1755) was a French thinker best known for his analysis of political systems. In *The Spirit of the Laws*, he studied governments across history and argued that power should be divided into separate branches to prevent tyranny. This concept, known as the separation of powers, became a foundational principle in many modern constitutions.

He believed that laws should reflect the culture and circumstances of a society, rather than being imposed in a rigid or universal way. His work emphasized balance, moderation, and the careful structuring of authority.

“To become truly great, one has to stand with people, not above them.”

Voltaire (1694–1778), born François-Marie Arouet, was one of the most famous writers from the Age of Enlightenment. A French philosopher, playwright, and satirist, he used his sharp wit to criticize injustice, religious intolerance, and abuses of power. He strongly defended freedom of speech and the right to question authority.

Through works like *Candide*, Voltaire exposed the flaws of blind optimism and encouraged critical thinking. He believed that reason and open discussion were essential for improving society and protecting individual freedoms.

“Judge a man by his questions rather than by his answers.”





Denis Diderot (1713–1784) was a French philosopher and writer who played a central role in one of the Enlightenment’s most ambitious projects: the *Encyclopédie*. As its chief editor, he helped gather and organize knowledge from many fields, making it accessible to a wider audience.

Diderot believed that knowledge should not be limited to the elite but shared openly to promote progress. His work reflected the Enlightenment confidence that education and information could improve society and empower individuals to think for themselves.

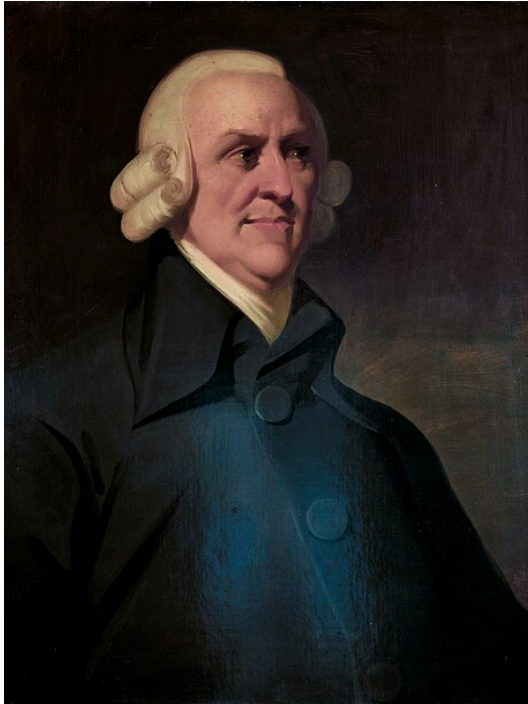
“Man will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest.”

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was a German philosopher who defined the Enlightenment as humanity’s emergence from self-imposed immaturity. He argued that people must have the courage to think independently rather than rely on tradition or authority.

Kant’s philosophy focused on reason, morality, and the limits of human knowledge. He believed that individuals have a duty to act according to moral principles that can be universally applied. His work helped shape modern ethics and philosophy.

“Dare to know! Have courage to use your own reason.”





Adam Smith (1723–1790) was a Scottish thinker and economist whose work laid the foundation for modern economics. In *The Wealth of Nations*, he explained how markets function through supply, demand, and individual self-interest.

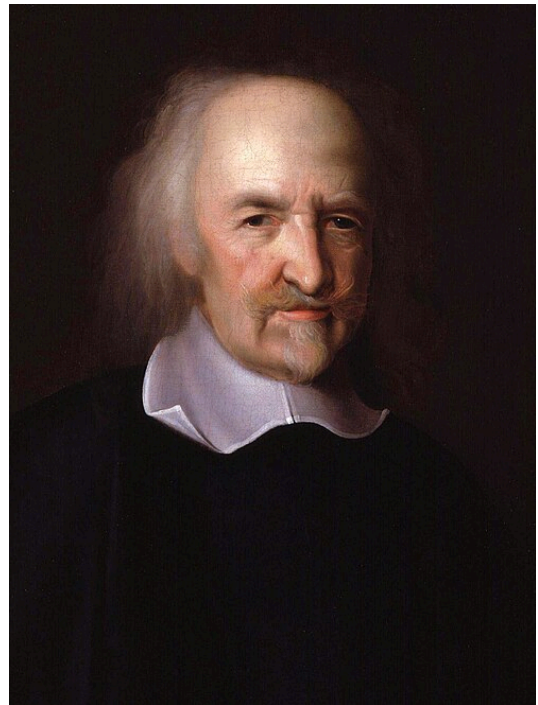
Smith believed that when people pursue their own economic interests within a system of freedom, it can lead to overall prosperity. He introduced the idea of the “invisible hand,” suggesting that individual actions can unintentionally benefit society as a whole.

“It is not from the benevolence of the butcher... that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.”

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) was an English philosopher whose ideas influenced later Enlightenment thinkers. Writing during the English Civil War, he believed that without government, human life would be chaotic and dangerous.

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes argued that people give up some of their freedom to a strong authority in exchange for security and order. His view of human nature was more pessimistic than that of Locke or Rousseau, but it sparked important debates about the purpose of government.

“The life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”





Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) was an English writer and one of the earliest advocates for women's rights. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she argued that women are rational beings who deserve education and opportunities equal to men.

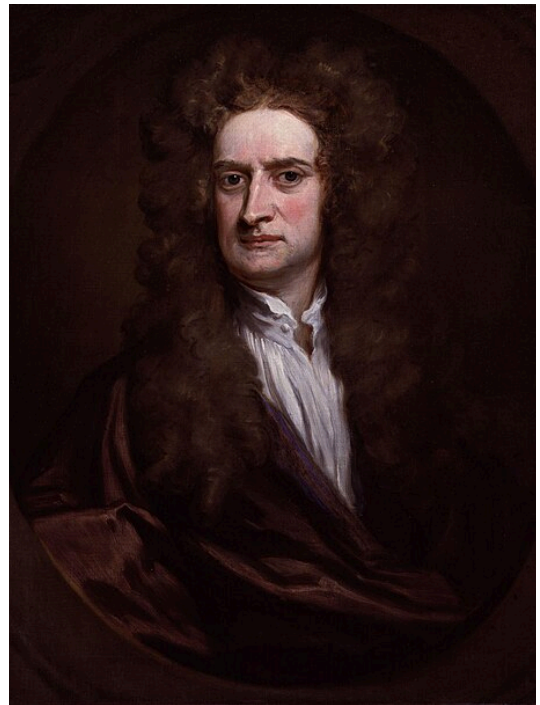
Her work expanded Enlightenment ideas of reason and equality to include women, challenging long-standing social and cultural norms. She believed that society would improve if women were allowed to develop their minds and contribute fully.

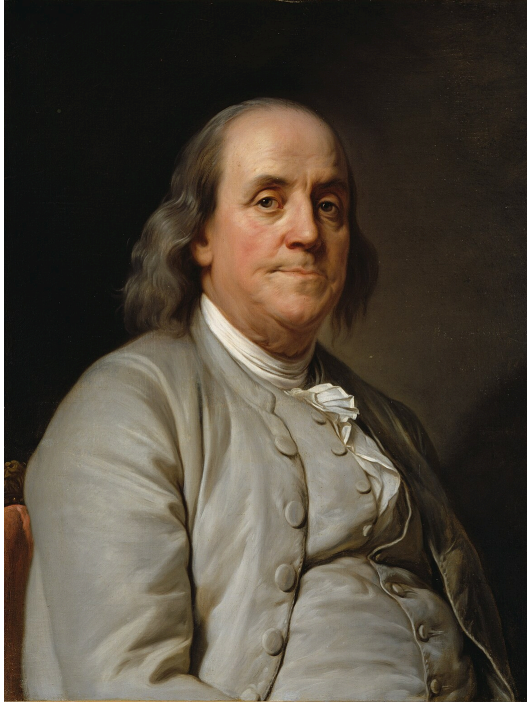
"I do not wish [women] to have power over men; but over themselves."

Isaac Newton (1643–1727) was an English scientist whose discoveries transformed humanity's understanding of the natural world. His laws of motion and gravity showed that the universe operates according to consistent, discoverable principles.

Newton's work gave strong support to the Enlightenment belief that nature is orderly and can be understood through observation and reason. His influence extended beyond science, shaping how people thought about knowledge and the structure of the universe.

"If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."





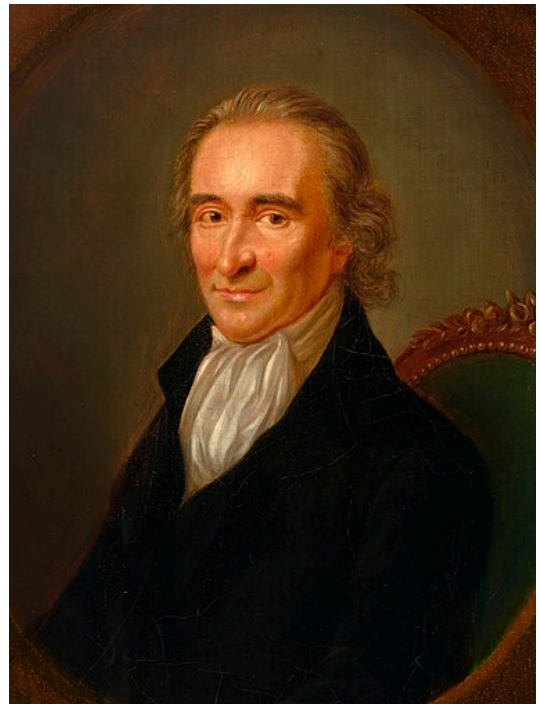
Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) was one of the most influential figures of the Enlightenment in America. Born in Boston, he was largely self-educated and became a successful printer, writer, scientist, and inventor. Franklin was deeply curious about the natural world and is best known for his experiments with electricity, including his famous kite experiment. He believed strongly in the power of reason, observation, and practical knowledge to improve everyday life.

In addition to his scientific work, Franklin played a key role in public life. He helped shape early American society through his writing, diplomacy, and civic involvement, contributing to important documents and institutions. His writings, including *Poor Richard's Almanack*, offered practical wisdom about hard work, discipline, and character. Franklin's life reflects the Enlightenment ideal of a well-rounded individual who uses knowledge, creativity, and reason to better both himself and society.

"An investment in knowledge pays the best interest."

Thomas Paine (1737–1809) was an English-born writer who became one of the most influential voices of the Enlightenment in the American colonies. After emigrating from England in 1774, he quickly gained attention for his clear and persuasive writing. In *Common Sense*, he argued that the American colonies should seek independence from Britain, presenting complex political ideas in a way ordinary people could understand. His words helped shape public opinion at a critical moment in history.

Paine continued to write during the Revolutionary War, encouraging perseverance and courage in *The American Crisis*. He later supported the French Revolution and wrote *Rights of Man*, defending the idea that governments should be based on the will of the people and exist to protect their rights. Through his writing, Paine brought Enlightenment ideas out of philosophy and into everyday life, showing how powerful ideas could inspire real change.

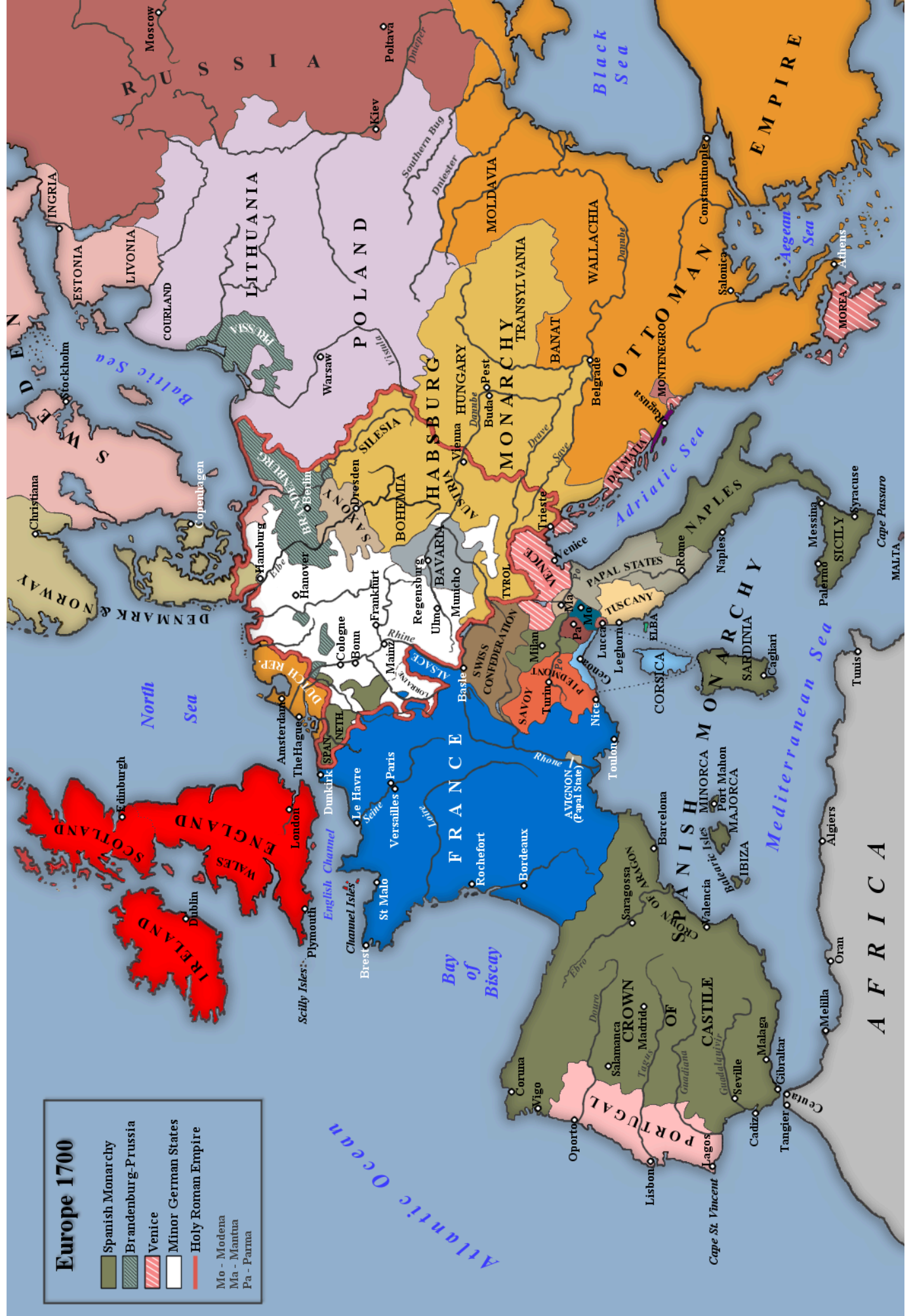


"We have it in our power to begin the world over again."

Europe 1700

- Spanish Monarchy
- Brandenburg-Prussia
- Venice
- Minor German States
- Holy Roman Empire

Mo - Modena
 Ma - Mantua
 Pa - Parma





The Thirteen Colonies (1775)