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### Voltaire

The discussion on 18th-century society and culture highlights the impact of modern education on the social, cultural, and economic dynamics of the European community. Starting in the late 17th century and throughout the 18th century, social classes, political power, and economic dominance were privileges of a handful of aristocrats who occupied all the influential positions in society and controlled the economic, cultural, political, and social lives of the non-aristocratic majority. However, the eventual disintegration of the aristocracy and the ultimate narrowing of the gap between the wealthy and the poor, as well as the increased prominence of people from the middle and lower social classes in positions of political leadership coincided with the widespread acknowledgment and adoption of modern education, thus emphasizing the critical role education played in fostering social, political, and economic justice and equality across Europe.

The introduction of a learning culture, particularly the founding of art schools, encountered significant hostility from the aristocrats because of their fear of an enlightened general population which would inevitably threaten their positions as the all-knowing minority. For instance, the western European countries gradually embraced a lifestyle that stressed the value of refinement, learning, and the appreciation of fine art, which was a new phenomenon in European culture. Nonetheless, some of the aristocrats succumbed to the increased pressure for formal education, mainly out of fear of losing their prestigious intelligence tag to persons of

lower social standing. For example, the central and western European aristocrats started offering education to their children in private academies and universities, in addition to allowing the children to learn social graces and manners approved by the courts. Hence, education was primarily viewed as a weapon of self-defense against the progressively enlightened general population, which would soon acquire the equal and even superior intellectual abilities needed to take control of the economic and political landscape of the European continent.

Evidence of the increasing influence of education in upsetting the economic and political status quo was manifested through the sustained expansion of the aristocratic class throughout Europe. At that time, talent and artistic expertise were revered by the aristocracy, which was increasingly developing a sophisticated appreciation of the high culture influenced by artists of the day. For instance, the homes of the wealthy aristocrats were furnished with extensive artwork collections, for which they paid a significant portion of their wealth. As a result, artists and art schools became famous because of the economic significance of the products made by those with artistic expertise, which ultimately earned them higher social statuses in society. Steadily, the once poor and oppressed peasants gained entry into the group of economically powerful elites, and this presented them with a crucial opportunity to influence the political and economic dynamics of European communities.

The expanded market and value for artistic works, including architecture and music, increasingly underlined the importance of education in disrupting the traditional economic, social, and political structures established by the aristocracy. For example, there was the growing popularity of classicism among aristocrats in the 18th century. Lemonnier describes classicism as the style of art, music, literature, and architecture, which emphasizes conformance to traditional forms, proportion, and a departure from enthusiasm and emotion (591). By having

such a significant influence on the European cultural practices, beliefs, and values, the artists, who were mostly peasants and people from the servants' class, achieved a critical milestone in their quest to share in and understand the power and control that the wealthy aristocrats enjoyed. Therefore, the increased acknowledgment of artists by society motivated more people to acquire education for their own enlightenment and empowerment, both economically and politically. Apart from artistic skills, there was a growing interest in modern agricultural skills and trade, which were sources of wealth and power for the formerly downtrodden peasants.

The enlightenment and empowerment acquired through education were responsible for the gradual decline of aristocratic dominance starting from the middle of the 18th century. Notably, the initially powerful and oppressive aristocrats faced increasingly acrimonious threats to their power as the middle and lower class populations criticized the lifestyles and values advanced by the upper-class members of society (Lemonnier 592). Because of the newly diversified means of acquiring wealth through artistic, economic, and agricultural education, the peasants, whose economic statuses had improved considerably over the recent years, lost respect and fear for the aristocrats, inevitably upsetting the political and social structures that had existed for several centuries in Europe. Among the acts of resistance and intolerance performed in this period was the French revolution, which occurred in the last decade of the 18th century, as well as the reform movements witnessed throughout Europe in the early 19th century. Eventually, the sustained pressure on and rejection of aristocracy brought an end to the oppressive rule of the wealthy landowners and ruling class across the continent.

The revolts against economic and political injustices that were so prevalent across Europe in the 18th century is also a relevant topic in modern society, mainly in regions where citizens are increasingly embracing modern education. For instance, the Arab uprisings in Libya,

Egypt, and Algeria were spearheaded by middle and lower social class groups whose recent enlightenment as a result of embracing formal education made them realize the need to reject the dictatorial governance in these countries. Ultimately, the tyrannical leaders who once enjoyed political power and control over a middle and lower-class population that far outnumbered them succumbed to pressure from the empowered and enlightened citizenry. These citizens continue to appreciate the need for their involvement in the economic and political decisions and policies of their countries, which stresses the role of education in political and economic empowerment.

The political, cultural-political, and economic dynamics of the 18th-century European community provide a valuable lesson to different communities worldwide on the importance of self-empowerment, enlightenment, and actualization. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the European populations were dominated by a comparatively small but wealthy group of men, who controlled the political and economic policies and practices across the continent. In this environment, leadership abilities and effectiveness were associated with an individual's social class, hence the sustained reigns of wealthy individuals and families characterized by the monarchs that were established in the majority of European countries. Accordingly, the upper social class was deemed to be the main source of wisdom, knowledge, and mobilization, which were the core components of leadership. Looking at leadership as it is understood in the modern age, the sustained dominance of the aristocracies in the economic and leadership spheres can be tied to the lack of widely available formal education, which had led to the marginalization and suppression of the low social class groups in influential political and cultural positions.

Works Cited

Lemonnier, Anicet Charles Gabriel. Eighteenth-Century Society and Culture: *A reading of Voltaire's tragedy L'Orpheline de la Chine in the salon of Madame Geoffrin. 1743-1824*