

Atlantic Revolutions Introduction

In global terms the idea of liberty as popular sovereignty (the people as the source of the government's legitimacy) has some limited precedent in the past, for example, in the various ancient Greek city-states. In the eighteenth century, however, it was really brand new as an explicit idea. Enlightenment thinkers like John Locke and Montesquieu argued that political legitimacy rested with the people, not from monarchs who claimed they had received it from God. Once the idea of popular sovereignty was applied in the British North American colonies, its appeal spread around the world. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, leaders in many countries struggled with the ideas and implementation of liberty, popular sovereignty, natural rights, and democracy. In some places these ideas prevailed, at least to some extent, while in others monarchy or other forms of authoritarian government reasserted themselves. Sometimes, as in the case of Haiti, the rhetoric of liberty was perpetuated, but it had little substance in the series of dictatorships that ruled the country.

In this unit we will highlight two main ideas:

- One is that liberty and related ideas became a global, not just Western, issue in the course of the nineteenth century. These ideas do not “belong to the West” alone because in fact they were interpreted and struggled over in different ways depending on cultural contexts and circumstances.
- The other idea is that in relation to all of world history, the political changes in this period were new and seemed utterly bizarre to kings, queens, and aristocrats. They represented revolutionary new ways of thinking and acting worldwide.



The Atlantic world encompasses all the landmasses that border the Atlantic Ocean: Europe, North America, South America, the Caribbean Islands, and Africa. Historians who noted the convergence of political revolutions in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries called these political shifts “the Atlantic revolutions.” It is important to recognize how much the revolutions inspired and affected each other. The American Revolution drew on ideas of the European Enlightenment. In turn, the success of that revolution in creating a modern republic deeply influenced the French, Haitian, and Latin American revolutionaries in separating themselves from perceived political oppression. Ultimately, we can see these revolutions as starting points for new attitudes about politics and society, moving subjects to begin to see themselves as citizens and slaves to seek freedom and equality with even more vigor. All of the revolutions shared the political goal of liberty, but their leaders applied the concept of political liberty differently in the United States, France, Haiti, Mexico, Venezuela, and other countries. Most of the revolutions resulted in republics, where the succeeding governments were selected through elections. In the case of France and Haiti, however, imperial or authoritarian

systems subsequently were put into place, giving the executive branches much more power perhaps than intended by the revolutionaries who overthrew the previous regimes. The period of the Atlantic revolutions was a time of great but also diverse change.

The main issue for those who led the revolutions in the Atlantic world of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was unreasonable exploitation of economic resources of less powerful people by more powerful people. While the governments of both Great Britain and France may have needed more money to finance their military operations, the people who were asked to pay resented the new taxes or new labor obligations. The cause of the British and French government's indebtedness was in part the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), which was fought between France and Great Britain over land in North America, the Caribbean, West Africa, and the Indian subcontinent. In its global scope, the Seven Years' War is considered the first world war, and it is fitting that one consequence was the common dissatisfaction with the way the British and French governments then chose to pay off their war debts. Specifically, in the British colonies in North America, the problem was the Stamp Act. In France it was the new taxes requested by Louis XVI. The other financial burden that angered the subjects of the European powers was the *exclusif*, a mercantile policy that restricted colonists to trade exclusively with the colonial power.

It is lucky for historians that most of the grievances were put into print. The American colonists published pamphlets and newspaper articles attacking the new taxation policies. The French peasants recorded their complaints in the *cahiers de doléances* (lists of grievances) solicited by the king. The ideas of the bourgeoisie, or propertied middle class, appeared in pamphlets, newspapers, and books. The inhabitants on Saint Domingue also had their local newspapers and pamphlets, as well as books from France and the newly founded United States. Finally, the South Americans copied their predecessors by using printing presses, as well as public lectures and coffeehouses.

Many Enlightenment publications influenced the trends of thought. Philosophers, such as Locke and Montesquieu, supported the need for liberty when either political or economic pressures by monarchs were too great to bear. Most importantly, the idea of political liberty developed into a belief in freedom as a natural right. The Enlightenment thinkers believed that humans were born with the ability to think and act for themselves, as in Locke's words: "Liberty, it is plain, consists in a power to do, or not to do; to do, or forbear doing, as we will." How then did the transition from grievances to demands for liberty happen?

Reading Questions:

1. What is popular sovereignty?
2. What area encompasses the Atlantic world?
3. How did the different revolutions inspire and affect one another?
4. What was one of the main issues/grievances of those who led the Atlantic revolutions?
5. How did the Seven Years' War add to the dissatisfaction of the time?