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YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION

Political Change on Both Sides of the Atlantic

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A HISTORIAN'S JOURNAL ENTRY / BY SAUL STRAUSSMAN

A lot of stuff changed for people around the world as a result of several movements that converged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.



BIG HISTORY PROJECT



For example, due to the Age of Exploration, goods from eastern Asia were made available in Europe in greater quantities than ever before. Likewise, goods from the Americas were made integral to the people of Afro-Eurasia. Never before had so much stuff and so many people been moved around the globe at such a great rate. However, there wasn't just a transfer of goods and people to new places but also the exchange of new ideas.

As the Age of Exploration and the Columbian Exchange progressed, Europeans began to colonize other parts of the world, particularly the Americas. At the same time, Enlightenment thinkers started to question the idea of liberty and what that actually meant. For some Enlightenment thinkers, liberty was about popular sovereignty. Popular sovereignty is the idea that the citizens of a nation need to enter into a contract with the government in order for it to be legitimate. Think about that for a moment, because in the 1700s pretty much all of the governments that existed around the world were monarchies, and nobody was voting for who would be the king.

So where did this idea of liberty or popular sovereignty come from? In large part the idea of liberty was best articulated by the English philosopher John Locke (1632 — 1704). For Locke, the idea of popular sovereignty was synonymous with his belief that “All people have the natural rights of life, liberty, and property.” Natural rights, according to Enlightenment thinkers, are those rights that we are born with and that no entity (that is, government) has the right to take away. If I break down each part of that short statement, I can determine that Locke believed that once born we have a right to live a good life without being subjugated to the whims of rulers; that we are all equals; and that we have a right to acquire wealth and that wealth should be protected. Locke continued this thought by stating the origin and purpose of any government: “The power of government comes from the people and the duty of the government therefore is to protect those natural rights.” (qtd. in Tierney 94) So those three natural rights we have — life, liberty, and property — should be safeguarded by a government, which is elected by the people.

If that's the case, then the next question would be what if the government fails at that task? According to Locke, “If the government fails in its duty to protect those rights, then the people have the right to overthrow the government, by force if necessary.” (qtd. in Tierney 94) Wow! Now if you were a seventeenth-century monarch who believed very strongly that your right to rule was given to you by God, and that only God could take away your power, this idea of Locke's would not only be bizarre it would be treasonous. Imagine if people took this idea of Locke's seriously! These ideas might just start a revolution.

CAUSES OF REVOLUTION IN THE ATLANTIC WORLD

Prior to the 1760s, the ideas expressed by the *cahier* (another term for the Enlightenment thinkers) were mostly theoretical. While many people read their ideas, who would be crazy enough to actually put them into action? Well, it would seem that these ideas were the ingredients for revolution but the Goldilocks Conditions were a series of unfortunate events that caused people on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean to begin questioning their relationship to the government.

Many historians point to the Seven Years War in Europe (known as the French and Indian War in North America) as a leading cause for creating the conditions necessary for revolutions to begin on both sides of the Atlantic. Great Britain was victorious over the French and, as a result, gained all of France's territories in Canada and India. That sounds like a great thing for the British, but the war between England and France was rather costly and left both sides heavily in debt. The question then became how to pay off that debt and for Great Britain the answer was clear. The American colonists would foot the bill for the war because the victory and acquisition of new territory made them more secure. And how did governments get money from the people? Taxes.

In fact, there is a common thread of burdensome taxes, whether real or perceived, that provided much of the fuel for the Atlantic revolutions between 1775 and 1830. The words of the Enlightenment thinkers thus provided the justification for getting rid of the ruling governments and their taxes. To help pay for the Seven Years War, the British government passed the Stamp Act, a tax on goods in the Americas to help defray “the expenses of defending, protecting, and securing” the American colonies. This tax was known as the Stamp Act because the government would place a stamp on the article to prove that the appropriate tax had been paid.

Needless to say, the American colonists were not happy about this tax. But the question is why? The purpose of the tax seems clear enough; its goal was to help pay the cost of defending the colonies. One of the more vocal colonists to express his outrage about this and other taxes was Patrick Henry. For Henry, the actions of the British government were about more than taxation, they were about his rights. In his speech to the Virginia Convention on March 23, 1775, Henry outlines all the steps the colonists took to fix the tax problem, but to no avail:

We have done everything that could be done to avert the storm which is now coming on. We have petitioned; we have remonstrated; we have supplicated; we have prostrated ourselves before the throne, and have implored its interposition to arrest the tyrannical hands of the ministry and Parliament. Our petitions have been slighted; our remonstrances have produced additional violence and insult; our supplications have been disregarded; and we have been spurned, with contempt, from the foot of the throne!...I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!

For Patrick Henry, this was not about taxes; it was about the fact that the government in London ignored the colonists' wishes. Henry cites a long list of attempts to get the attention of Parliament. Each time, according to Henry, the colonists were at best ignored and at worst they were treated badly. Since the government had decided to not only ignore the colonists but to impose its will upon them, then — according to the ideas of John Locke — the colonists were well within their rights to throw off this government. What does this mean? Revolution!

There was a similar situation playing out across the ocean in France a few years later. The French people were also being forced to pay for France's debts due to the Seven Years War and her support of the Americans in their revolution against Britain. At this time, French society was divided up into three big groups called Estates. The First Estate consisted of the clergy, the Second Estate included nobles, and the Third Estate was made up of everyone else. Historians figure that about three percent of the population were in the First and Second Estates, which meant the Third Estate included about 97 percent of the population. Because the First and Second Estates were exempt from paying most of the king's taxes, the burden for paying for these wars fell on the people who could least afford it. The members of the Third Estate attempted to present their complaints to King Louis XVI in the form of a petition or *cahiers de doléances*. On March 29, 1789, the citizens from the county of Dourdan presented their grievances and demands to the king. The underlying sentiment of their *cahier* is equality.

1. That his subjects of the third estate, equal by such status to all other citizens, present themselves before the common father without other distinction which might degrade them....

3. That no citizen lose his liberty except according to law; that, consequently, no one be arrested by virtue of special orders, or, if imperative circumstances necessitate such orders, that the prisoner be handed over to the regular courts of justice within forty-eight hours at the latest....

5. That the property of all citizens be inviolable, and that no one be required to make sacrifice thereof for the public welfare, except upon assurance of indemnification based upon the statement of freely selected appraisers. (qtd. in Stewart 76 — 7)

Within this *cahier* I can see all three of John Locke's ideas of life, liberty, and property. For example, the first grievance is about the right to equality and to lead a life free from being oppressed just because of one's class or station. Likewise, the next item notes that all citizens have a right to their liberty and to be treated equally under the law. Finally, the last item notes that all people have a right to their property and the state cannot take it without providing fair compensation for what was lost. While these demands probably appeared reasonable to the individuals making them, the king was at a loss in how to deal with them. Besides not being a terrifically able leader, King Louis XVI was unable to get the other two estates to agree to pay some of the taxes. Louis' inability to lift the tax burden from the Third Estate ultimately provided the justification for that group to revolt against a government that did not protect their rights to life, liberty, and property. The French Revolution, while successful in the short term in that the French people replaced the monarch with a National Assembly composed of members of the Third Estate, was longer, bloodier, and ultimately a failure when compared to the American Revolution.

What is fascinating is how this idea of liberty changed as it bounced back and forth across the Atlantic. For instance, in the French colony of Saint Domingue (modern-day Haiti), the idea of liberty was interpreted as being only for the free people of the island. The island's population consisted of three distinct groups: whites, *gens de couleur libres* (free people of mixed European and African ancestry), and slaves, with almost 90 percent of the population classified as slaves. However, according to the laws of the time, only whites were accorded French citizenship.

Once again, the ideas of liberty as espoused by Locke, and successfully implemented by the Americans a few years earlier, led a group of free people of color to petition the newly enacted National Assembly of the French Revolution. Using the same logic as the petitioners in Dourdan, the following demands were made:

Article I. The inhabitants of the French colonies are exclusively and generally divided into two classes, Freemen and those who are born, and live, in slavery.

Article II. The class of Freemen includes not only all the Whites, but also all of the colored Creoles, the Free Blacks, Mulattos, small minorities, and others.

Article III. The freed Creoles, as well as their children and their descendants, should have the same rights, rank, prerogatives, exemptions, and privileges as other colonists.

Article IV. For that purpose, the colored Creoles request that the Declaration of the Rights of Man, decreed by the National Assembly, be applied to them, as it is to Whites. Therefore, it is requested that Articles LVII and LIX of the Edict [the Black Code] dated March 1685, be rewritten and carried out in accordance with their form and content. (qtd. in Cohen 14)

When comparing this text to the ideas of Locke, I can see how the petitioners built their argument for rights to the new revolutionary government of France. They acknowledge a class of people without rights and then go on to state that there is a large group of free people who are not white, but of various backgrounds. The petitioners then note that they should have the same rights as any Frenchman — rights that had been spelled out in the revolutionary document “Declaration of the Rights of Man.” In order to achieve this equality, the colonists requested that a 100-year-old law (the Black Code) needed to be changed. However, even with this logic, their idea of liberty did not apply to the enslaved.

The idea of liberty continued to change in its travels throughout the Atlantic world. In Mexico as in Haiti, people began discussing liberty and rights for people of mixed heritage (in this case for the *mestizos* — people of mixed Spanish and native heritage). In 1810, a priest named Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla rallied the people to revolt against Spain’s oppressive rule. One of the underlying causes was unjust taxation, but Hidalgo also infused nationalism and religion into the mix as he encouraged the people to revolt.

My friends and countrymen: neither the king nor tributes exist for us any longer. We have borne this shameful tax, which only suits slaves, for three centuries as a sign of tyranny and servitude.... The moment of our freedom has arrived, the hour of our liberty has struck; and if you recognized its great value, you will help me defend it from the ambitious grasp of the tyrants.... [W]ithout a patria [fatherland] nor liberty we shall always be at a great distance from true happiness.... The cause is holy and God will protect it.... Long live, then, the Virgin of Guadalupe! Long live America for which we are going to fight! (qtd. in Cohen 15)

While Locke’s idea of being able to overthrow a government that is not responsive to the people’s will is present in Hidalgo’s speech, the idea of liberty has changed to include a nationalist message. The revolt is not just against oppression; it is against

foreign oppression (that is, Spain). Furthermore, Hidalgo provides religious justifications for the revolt too. However, this makes sense given that he was a priest and that in all likelihood many of his followers were believers. Even though Father Hidalgo’s revolt was unsuccessful, his ideas fueled additional resistance to Spain’s rule in Mexico, and in 1821 Mexico won its independence from Spain.

Finally, in Venezuela, another Spanish colony, there were several groups struggling for liberty, but each group’s definition of this term was not the same. Economically and politically, the white privileged landowners were made up of two groups, the *peninsulares* (people born in Spain) and *criollos* (people of Spanish descent born in the Americas). Both were interested in selling their coffee and cocoa on the open market instead of being forced to only sell their goods to Spanish authorities. Members of the *criollos* usually worked as artisans, soldiers, and traders, and they wanted to have the same opportunities as the wealthier and more privileged *peninsulares*. *Mestizos* made up the largest group within Venezuela. They were generally peasants, or poor farmers. The *mestizos* were primarily interested in ending the privileges enjoyed by the landowners, but they were not interested in ending slavery. Slaves made up about 20 percent of the population of Venezuela, and their focus was on ending slavery. However, their status as a minority within the population did not provide them with much opportunity to force the issue.

With so many competing interests, it is a wonder that any idea of liberty would take root. Interestingly, it was the French ruler Napoleon Bonaparte’s occupation of Spain in 1808 that provided Venezuelans the opportunity to declare their independence. The military junta (group of people who took over the country by force), led by the Venezuelan revolutionary Simón Bolívar, passed sweeping reforms. Trade restrictions were lifted, which gave white landowners the opportunity to trade with whomever they wished, thus providing this group with the economic liberty they desired. The junta also abolished taxes on food, which aided the *criollos* and *mestizos*; ended the tribute payments from native people, and abolished slavery. In a single stroke, all of the different groups achieved the liberty they desired.

It should be noted that the Venezuelan revolution of 1808 was short-lived. After the French emperor Napoleon was defeated and exiled, the Spanish monarchy regained control of many of its colonies, including Venezuela in 1814. Many of the gains achieved by all groups were lost, including the abolishment of slavery. Fortunately, Spain’s hold on Venezuela would only last a few years and in 1819, Venezuela finally won its independence from Spain. Unfortunately, the slaves did not. (Chapman, 14 — 15)

CONCLUSION

The ideas of John Locke and the Enlightenment thinkers of the late seventeenth century and eighteenth century unleashed revolutionary forces that many of them could not have foreseen. The concept of liberty, in all of its forms, was a potent force that inspired people on both sides of the Atlantic to reject governments that did not respect their rights as individuals. However, as we saw, the rights that were won differed, depending on who was doing the fighting.

But the idea of liberty, once unleashed, became a global force that inspired people first on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean and then throughout the world. By the mid-nineteenth century, people throughout Europe and the Americas were demanding liberty from oppressive rule. Every country was not necessarily successful in gaining independence, but these ideas were certainly spreading. By the beginning of the twentieth century, this revolutionary spirit had spread to parts of the Middle East and Asia. In 1909, the last sultan of the Ottoman Empire was exiled after the Young Turk Revolution. And after thousands of years of being controlled by emperors, China was overtaken by a nationalist government led by Sun Yat-sen in 1912. Sun's ideas on liberty and the role of government would influence both the nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek and the future communist leader of China, Mao Zedong.

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Cover image: Parisian Women Marching to Versailles during the French Revolution, 1789. Courtesy of Stefano Bianchetti/Corbis.

This short journal entry is an example of how historians go about exploring important questions and looking at new information. They use a mixture of historical documents and the writings of other historians to inform their thinking. All sources are listed in the working bibliography.