**AMERICAN REVOLUTION**

**BEFORE THE REVOLUTION**

Socially and economically, the thirteen British colonies in North America fell into two groups.

The southern colonies, Virginia the largest among them, had largely plantation-based agrarian economies dominated by a planter elite and worked by African and African-American slave laborers. These plantations focused on cash crop production for the Atlantic economy. The northern colonies had relatively large commercial and handicraft sectors, dominated by mercantile capitalists and worked by indentured servants and free artisan labor. Northern agriculture featured a large population of small, independent farmers, and its scale was much smaller than in the southern colonies. Slavery was part of the northern economy but not to the same extent as in the south. Also present in the colonies were two groups that formed direct links with other world societies: the British colonial government, consisting of both administrators and soldiers, and members of Indian nations living both outside and within the boundaries of the colonies themselves.

**CAUSES**

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European states passed laws to protect their own commercial interests. These laws, taken together, formed an economic system called mercantilism. The mercantilist system of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries benefited colonial elites while enriching European governments. But by the second half of the eighteenth century, many colonists began to resent the restrictions the mercantilist system placed on their economic activity. This was true among both the increasingly-wealthy elites and the laboring classes. Resentment intensified in British North America after the 1763 British victory in the Seven Years’ War, which the colonists called the French and Indian War. The British imposed a series of taxes and policies on the colonies to offset the cost of defense during the war and to maintain an army of 10,000 in the colonies. Taken together, these exactions began to swing public opinion against the British. Tensions came to a head after a colonial militia and British troops exchanged shots in the Massachusetts towns of Lexington and Concord in 1775.

The causes of the American Revolution were not only economic. The Enlightenment protest against absolutism, expressed in a call for liberty and equality, found fertile soil in North America. Different groups, however, had differing interpretations of these ideas. To the merchant and planter elites, freedom was taken primarily to mean freedom from British mercantilist economic restrictions. Equality was taken to mean equality before the law, not economic or political equality among classes or races. Many people in those groups who were not in a dominant social position, such as slaves, indentured servants, artisan laborers, mariners, and small farmers, wanted real social and economic equality. Many were ready to attempt to gain it by revolution, which gave the movement a second dimension—a struggle to reform society and to rid it of anti-democratic features.

**RESULTS**

The American Revolution produced freedom and equality but in terms most favorable to elite groups. Immediately after the revolutionaries’ victory in the war, the British army departed, and the new United States found itself outside of the British mercantilist system. After a brief experiment in a decentralized confederation, the Constitutional Convention of 1787 created a federation with a strong central government, shifting power from individual states to the national government. That national government, however, was an Enlightenment project, with separate legislative, executive, and judicial branches and elections built into the system. Racial inequality was built into the system as well. Despite the initial objections of some delegates to the conventions, a compromise allowed slaves to be counted as three-fifths of a person to determine the size of a state’s representation in the House of Representatives without allowing slaves to vote. However, northern states, through legislative and judicial decisions, gradually abolished slavery, and all but two states halted the importation of African slaves. The new United States shortly began to expand its borders. From the administration of George Washington forward, the United States moved to acquire Indian lands. This led to a series of treaties, broken treaties, and wars that would see the United States occupying North America from the Eastern seaboard to the West Coast by the mid-nineteenth century. Indian nations were pushed off ancestral lands and onto reservations, at the cost of many lives.

**FRENCH REVOLUTION**

**BEFORE THE REVOLUTION**

On the eve of the revolution, French society and, to a great extent, politics were dominated by a hereditary nobility. On the other hand, France’s economy, increasingly tied to the growing Atlantic economy through its colonial empire, was dominated by a capitalist bourgeoisie. Both the nobility and the bourgeoisie benefited from ties to the monarchy. The nobility maintained its social prestige through its role at the royal court, and the wealthy bourgeoisie enriched itself by having royal protection in the mercantilist economic system.

Part of the French peasantry still owed feudal obligations to the nobility, that is, laws and practices left over from the medieval era. But a large part of the peasantry was made up of small, independent landowners. Similarly, French manufacturing took place in workshops rather than in large factories. The urban, artisan laborers who worked the shops were known collectively assans-culottes—“without breeches”—because their pants hung loose to the feet, unlike the clothing of the nobility.

France’s colonial empire shrank severely when it lost India and North America to the English in the 1763 Treaty of Paris, which ended the Seven Years’ War. However, revenues from the empire in the late eighteenth century, especially from the slave plantation-based Caribbean colony of St. Domingue (later Haiti), enriched French society, especially the commercial bourgeoisie.

**CAUSES**

Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Rousseau had criticized the French system of absolute monarchy during the decades leading up to the revolution. Heredity was not a rational way to choose political leaders, they argued. A better system would be one in which each individual, freely exercising reason through the equality of a vote, would take part in choosing a government. God did not reserve talent to the nobility. Why then, should France reward them with privilege? While the French monarchy supported the American revolution to check Britain’s power, Enlightened France supported it because of its ideals of freedom and equality.

In 1787, state debt from both the Seven Years’ War and French support of the American revolution proved too great for the French monarchy to bear. Failing in his attempt to levy taxes on the nobility, which paid little or no tax, Louis XVI called a meeting of the Estates-General, a large meeting of delegates representing the clergy, the nobility, and the “Third Estate,” that is, everyone else in society. The delegates, including clerics and nobles, as well as representatives of the Third Estate, brought with them grievances from their constituents, often phrased in the Enlightenment language of liberty and equality.

The fiscal crisis coincided with a spike in the price of bread, which affected the sans-culottes most intensely. It was not only hunger that inspired the ensuing bread riots. Beneath calls for bread lay an anti-capitalist cry for government regulation of the market to provide a measure of security, particularly to the poor. The call for a degree of economic equality resonated with the Third Estate’s own grievances. Emboldened by the sans-culottes’ action, the Third Estate withdrew from the Estates-General and declared itself the National Assembly in June 1789. The revolution was on.

**RESULTS**

The Constitution of 1792 guaranteed representative government, civil liberties like freedoms of speech, religion, and assembly, and equality before the law. Furthermore, it ended the special legal privilege of the nobility and clergy. The revolution became more radical after the execution of Louis XVI in 1793. The National Assembly granted unprecedented legal rights to women, abolished slavery, and instituted price controls. But these reforms were rolled back under the Empire of Napoleon Bonaparte, who came to power in a coup d’état in 1799.

Though Napoleon was uninterested in genuinely representative government on a parliamentary model, he enshrined many of the principles of the 1792 Constitution, such as equality before the law and civil liberties (though not freedom of the press) in his Napoleonic Code of 1807. This legal basis would remain intact with the 1814 restoration of the French monarchy under Louis XVIII. The new king, too, would not be absolute, but rather would rule under the Constitutional Convention, which placed limits on the monarch’s authority and provided for a degree of representative government in the Chamber of Deputies, elected by a small, wealthy percentage of French society.

**HAITIAN REVOLUTION**

**BEFORE THE REVOLUTION**

Haiti was the French colony of St. Domingue (Santo Domingo), the most productive colonial economy in the world. Dominated by plantation agriculture, primarily to supply sugar and coffee to the world market, Haiti had a slave population of nearly 90 percent. African slaves were brought to the island in the Atlantic slave trade. The balance of the population consisted of peoples of European ancestry and of mixed heritage, defined in the law of the colony as “white” or gens de couleur (people of color), respectively. Both of these groups owned slaves. French administrators governed the island. By 1788, the native Indian population had died out completely as a result of the Spanish conquest, harsh labor policies, and introduction of infectious diseases from Afroeurasia.

In no way were any of these racial groups united, except perhaps in opposition to each other. There were even divisions within the slave population, primarily between a larger group of agricultural laborers and a smaller group involved in domestic service and, in some cases, the management of the plantation system. The white population consisted of a planter elite known as grands blancs and a larger class of petits blancs, men and women who participated in the economy primarily as artisans or merchants in the cities. Gens de couleur, like whites, were divided by class, though the disparity of wealth was not as great as that between grands and petits blancs.

**CAUSES**

The root of the Haitian revolution was the fundamental imbalance in Haitian society. Slaves made up the vast majority of the population and were oppressed on a daily basis in the most naked ways and thoroughly deprived economically in a system that produced great wealth. For this slave population, the most pressing issue was the termination of slavery and the social inequality it entailed. As the colony was 90 percent slave, this issue was inevitably the focus of the revolution.

Political unrest in the colony began, however, with class tensions among the white population. As a French colony, St. Domingue did not receive representation in the Estates-General of 1789. The grands blancs sent representatives anyway. These people were ultimately admitted into the French National Assembly, but the vote was restricted to whites who owned twenty or more slaves. This policy kept out the petits blancs, and it held in elections for local assemblies. The petits blancs, arguing in a nationalist manner for their rights as Frenchmen, fought the grands blancs in a civil war between town and country. Both groups, however, based their political claims on their French heritage, the grands blancs arguing for liberty to represent the colony, the petits blancs demanding political equality with the grands. This left both the gens de couleur and the slaves out of the loop. After revolts by the gens de couleur led by Vincent Ogé resulted in a wave of racial oppression, the slave population leapt into the opening left by the political crisis, staging a coordinated rebellion in August 1791. By 1794, Toussaint L’Ouverture, a brilliant general and former slave, assumed leadership of the rebellion.

**RESULTS**

Haiti proclaimed its independence from France in 1804, as a republic. As all of the groups in the revolution except the slaves conceived of liberty and equality in terms of their own situation, none of them had supported the abolition of slavery. It was this, however, that the slave population demanded. The whites, both grands and petits blancs, wanted to hold on to white privilege. The rebels accordingly drove them off the island. The gens de couleur wanted to keep the right to own slaves. They were also driven off or deprived of their slave property, though some of them stayed and retained economic and social power

The Haitian revolution abolished slavery on the island. It was the first major successful slave revolt in the Atlantic world, and L’Ouverture became known among the slave population of the Americas as a liberating hero. The Haitian revolution also gave strength to the anti-slavery movement among European peoples. In the following decades, abolitionists used the example of Haiti to convince slave owners that using free labor was, if nothing else, a good way to avoid a bloody uprising.

The newly-independent Haiti, however, faced two immediate economic problems. On the one hand, slave-owning societies, like the United States, placed an embargo on Haiti, fearing that its example would encourage other slave revolts. This embargo deprived Haiti of many of its former markets. On the other hand, the former slaves proved very unwilling to continue plantation labor, which they very sensibly associated with slavery. This led to continuing class tension among those who remained on the island and a rapid transition from democracy to dictatorship.

**VENEZUELAN REVOLUTION**

**BEFORE THE REVOLUTION**

The revolution in Venezuela was one of several in South and Middle America that led to the emergence of independent republics. Under Spanish rule, a planter elite, called hacendados, dominated Venezuela. Among the elite, those born in Spain were known as peninsulares (from the Iberian Peninsula) and those native to America as criollos (creoles). The hacendados achieved their preeminence primarily through cocoa and coffee production, which was, before the revolution, brought to the Atlantic market through the Spanish mercantilist system. Politically, Spain ruled Venezuela as a colony, though town councils, most importantly that of, the future capital of independent Venezuela, allowed the hacendados a measure of political influence over local affairs. The bulk of the criollo population was less well off than the hacendados. They worked primarily in urban positions as artisans, soldiers, and small-tomiddling traders. The majority of the population was of combined Native American and European ancestry, known in Spanish as mestizos. This population was mainly made up of peasants. Though mestizos wanted to end the criollos’ white privilege, they did not necessarily want to end slavery.

Two groups of people were outside the political system despite being very much a part of Venezuelan society. First, African slaves, whose labor was essential for the colony’s plantation economy, constituted about 20 percent of the population. The foremost goal for slaves was freedom, specifically the end of slavery. As a minority of the population, however, and with the Venezuelan elite profiting from slave labor, slaves were not in a good position to force their demands. Second, the native population, suffering from the disease and death brought by Europeans in the sixteenth century and known as the Great Dying, made up less than 10 percent of the total population at independence. The natives were thoroughly marginalized politically and economically.

**CAUSES**

By the nineteenth century, the economic interests of white Venezuelans and the Spanish imperial government had diverged. While Spain viewed its colonies as a steady source of income to be kept under control, the hacendados wanted the freedom to sell their cocoa and coffee on the open world market in order to fetch the highest price. Discontent with Spain was not limited to the upper classes. The Spanish colonial government sought, above all, to preserve Venezuela’s hierarchical social order. Anyone who wanted greater social, political, or economic equality in the colony had, at some level, to oppose Spanish government.

Napoleon’s 1808 conquest of Spain provided Venezuelan revolutionaries with a window of opportunity. In 1810, the town council of Caracas deposed the Spanish colonial governor and established a junta, or group dictatorship. Simón Bolívar, a wealthy criollo profoundly influenced by the European writers of the Enlightenment, traveled to Europe himself at this point to rally support for the revolution. Though he was largely unsuccessful, he did bring back with him Francisco de Miranda, an important Venezuelan dissident who had been in exile in England.

Upon Bolívar and Miranda’s return, the junta passed the most radical legislation the revolution witnessed. Restrictions on trade were lifted, which pleased the hacendado elite. The abolition of taxes on food, of Indian tribute payments to the government, and of slavery itself satisfied the different egalitarian goals of the other Venezuelan groups.

**RESULTS**

The revolution’s gains, however were rolled back when Spain briefly reconquered Venezuela after Napoleon’s fall in 1814. Slavery was restored, and when Bolívar, having successfully elicited aid from independent Haiti, permanently liberated Venezuela in 1819, it remained intact. Venezuela continued to be ruled, as it had in 1810, by hacendados. White privilege, too, remained the order of the day, criollos reserving a greater measure of political and economic status than mestizos. The revolution did, however, end Spain’s mercantilist restrictions on Venezuelan commerce, and the new republic traded its cocoa and coffee on the open world market.