

You Say You Want a Revolution

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TOP: The storming of the Bastille in France, 1789. MIDDLE: Patrick Henry giving his speech opposing the Stamp Act. BOTTOM: Parisian women marching to Versailles during the French Revolution, 1789. Courtesy of Getty and Stefano Bianchetti/Corbis.

In the 1600s and 1700s, several global movements took place. The Age of Exploration connected the world by ship. People, goods, and ideas could now spread faster than ever before.

At the same time, the Enlightenment allowed people to see the world in new ways. People emphasized science and logic over superstition and tradition.

Enlightenment thinkers thought a lot about the idea of liberty. They connected liberty with the idea that a government gets its power from the support of its people. In the 1700s, that was a new idea. At the time, most countries were ruled by kings and queens. No one voted for them. The people did not have a say.

Where did this new idea of liberty come from?

English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) was one source. He thought about "natural rights." These are rights everyone should have, no matter where they live or who they are.

Locke believed "All people have the natural rights of life, liberty, and property."

We are born with natural rights, Locke said, and no one can take them away from us. He argued that governments should exist to protect people's rights. If a government does not protect natural rights, the people should have a revolution and create a new government, Locke said.

"Give me liberty"

For a long time, the ideas of Locke and other Enlightenment thinkers were just theories. Kings and queens still ruled.

Eventually, some took Locke's ideas and put them into practice. That meant revolution.

This period began with the Seven Years' War, which ended in 1763. It was known in North America as the French and Indian War. Great Britain defeated France in the war. Britain took over France's land in Canada and India. After the war, Britain and France owed a lot of money. The war had been expensive.

To pay off its debt, Great Britain made the American colonists pay higher taxes.

In fact, taxes were a main cause of several revolutions between 1775 and 1830. High taxes made people angry. This anger combined with the ideas of liberty.

Patrick Henry was an American colonist who did not like the new taxes. He gave a famous speech to the Virginia Convention on March 23, 1775. He said the American colonists had asked Great Britain for lower taxes, but they were rejected. He ended with a famous line: "give me liberty or give me death!"

Henry and others began the American Revolution and eventually defeated Great Britain. They formed the United States of America.

Revolution in France ...

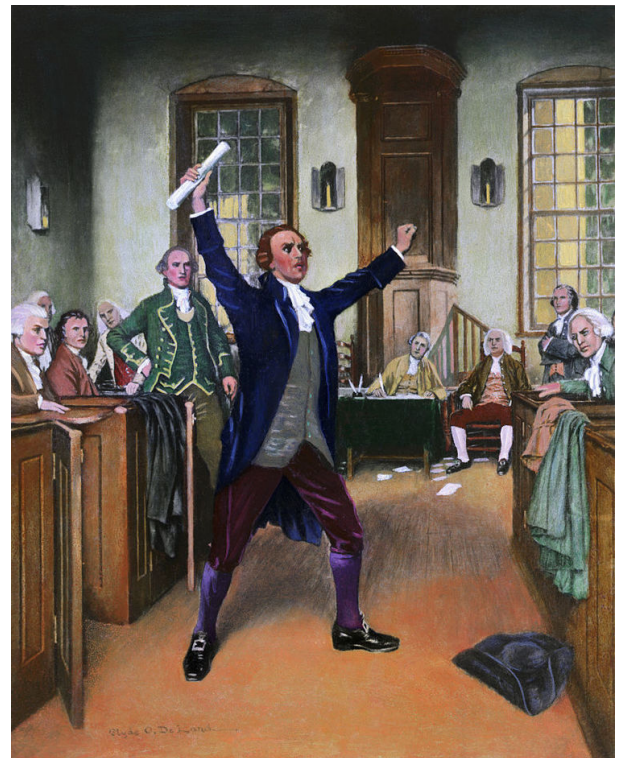
Across the Atlantic Ocean in France, something similar happened a few years later. The French government owed money from fighting the Seven Years' War and its support of the American Revolution. It raised taxes.

In France, the poorest people had to pay the highest taxes. A group of common people went to King Louis XVI with a list of complaints. The people asked for life, liberty, and property.

The king did not know how to respond. King Louis XVI was not a strong leader. He was not able to convince the rich to pay more taxes. The common people now had a reason for revolution. The government was not protecting their basic rights, the people said.

The French Revolution overthrew the king. It established a National Assembly of common people.

The idea of liberty spread to other places. It changed as it moved.



And in Saint Domingue, Mexico and Venezuela

In the Caribbean Sea is an island that is now called Haiti. At the time, it was a French colony called Saint Domingue. People on the island were split into three separate groups: whites, *gens de couleur libres* (free people of mixed European and African descent), and slaves. Only whites were given French citizenship.

The free people of color used Locke's ideas to argue for equality. They wanted the same rights as French citizens. They pointed to a document from the French Revolution called the "Declaration of the Rights of Man." Still, they did not fight for the freedom of the slaves.



The idea of liberty continued to evolve as it traveled throughout the world. In Mexico in 1810, a priest named Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla rallied the people to revolt against Spain. High taxes were one reason. Costilla argued that the Spanish government in Mexico was not respecting the people's rights. It must be overthrown.

Hidalgo's revolt was not successful, but his ideas created more resistance to Spain's rule in Mexico. In 1821, Mexico finally won its independence from Spain.

Finally, let's look at Venezuela. Venezuela was another Spanish colony where several groups were struggling for liberty. The largest group in Venezuela were *mestizos* (people of mixed Spanish and native heritage). They were usually peasants, or poor farmers. In addition, there were rich white landowners, and slaves.

These groups had different ideas of liberty, but in 1808, they all got the chance to get what they wanted. Venezuela was taken over by revolutionary Simón Bolívar. His government lowered taxes, and ended slavery. It even helped the rich white landowners. Eventually, the Spanish monarchy took back Venezuela. The country would not be free again until 1819.

Conclusion

The ideas of John Locke and other Enlightenment thinkers of the late 1600s and 1700s sparked revolutions. These thinkers probably could not have imagined what their ideas would cause.

The idea of liberty was a powerful force. It inspired people. People in Europe and the Americas rejected governments that did not respect their rights.