



# Revolutions 1750 to 1914

*By Trevor Getz*

New forms of communities emerged in the long nineteenth century for a variety of reasons, and these helped lead to the political system we have in the world today.



A period stretching from about 1750 to 1914 has come to be known as the *long nineteenth century*. I know, 164 years is *not* a century. So sue me.<sup>1</sup> The name is a useful container for grouping the unusual, yet related, events of this period.

The long nineteenth century saw revolutions in politics, economics, culture, and social life. The word *revolution* makes us think of rebellion and war. While that is often part of it, the word really just means “change”—on a pretty epic scale. We can view these changes through different frames and see how they were related to each other. We’ll see how changes in production and distribution came together during the Industrial Revolution to change the way people lived and to create industrial capitalism, and later, socialism. We’ll see how networks of activists and reformers transformed our experiences of labor, childhood, and gender. We’ll see how empires embodied some of these changes, and defied others.

In this unit, however, we’re going to get started by using the communities frame to study the development of new political ideas like liberalism and nationalism. These ideas helped to create political revolutions that led to new states. These states practiced democracy more than any large countries ever had.

## Political change in the long nineteenth century

The political changes of the long nineteenth century were so lasting, we’re still experiencing most of them right now. So to really understand what happened we have to remember how communities were governed earlier. Before 1750, government pretty much everywhere in the world was a small group of people making decisions for a larger group of people. Often, these people ruled by right of birth. Nobles, kings, shahs, emperors, sultans, chieftains, and members of the elite never applied for the job—they inherited it from their parents. They made decisions and wrote laws that suited them, and their commands were carried out by clerks, scribes, soldiers, or servants. Most people had no real political rights or role in government at all. A scattering of small states were administered by councils, of sorts, with many participants. But these were rare exceptions. In 1750, the few ruled the many in almost all parts of the world, and the many had little choice in how they were ruled.

After 1750, things began to change. In today’s world of nation-states, we’re pretty used to the idea that many or most of the population have some say in how they are governed. The political system we live in today started with those changes. The new ideas that emerged in this period are generally called liberal political ideas, with emphasis on the word *liberty*, suggesting people should have the freedom to govern themselves, as a group and as individuals.



*The splendor of Aurangzeb, Emperor of the Mughal Empire. Eighteenth-century rulers, whether Aurangzeb or his counterparts in Europe or elsewhere, ruled because of their own authority, not the will of their people. Public domain.*

<sup>1</sup> Please do not sue me.

## Ingredients for revolution

We begin our look at this transformation in the organization of communities by asking why the change happened in this period. Part of the answer actually requires us to take a brief trip through the production and distribution frame. We'll see how this period saw new economic opportunities for some people, while for others it meant more suffering and repression. These experiences were key causes of the political revolutions of this era.

Then we'll move beyond economics to examine how intellectual and economic changes leading up to the long nineteenth century set the stage for wider political participation. In the years before 1750, new ideas had been circulating around the world, and the European colonies in the Americas were listening. Some of this new thinking called for greater personal and group rights. Trade-hungry European merchants, religious travelers, and others had encountered new ideas as they traveled around the world. They brought home new concepts about technology, government, religion, and individuality. These new movements around technologies and ideas have come to be called the "Scientific Revolution" and the "Enlightenment."

It's a sad fact that history is full of great ideas that didn't go anywhere. But this time there were many groups of people who found these new concepts useful, even if for different reasons. For starters, those who were economically oppressed, like enslaved people in the Americas and peasants in Europe, had everything to gain. The idea of more individuals getting a say in government seemed to promise liberation and a better life. At the same time, wealthy people saw the revolutions as a chance to take power from the kings and nobles who ruled them. Then there were the business people—plantation owners and merchants in the European empires in the Americas and in Europe—who thought they could profit from these new ideas. Economic and political ideas combined in these revolutions to help these groups of people get a share of power in government for the first time. But this "Enlightenment" did not quickly end the rule of the few. Far from it. Even where these political revolutions happened most completely, many people—particularly women and the enslaved—still lacked basic political rights and a share in government.

## Revolutions, beginning in the Atlantic

In the second part of this unit, we zoom in on four major political revolutions of this era. We see how the Haitian, French, American, and Latin American revolutions were born from the economics and ideas of this era. Each of these revolutions was its own, unique reaction to the world. And you'll remember from the last unit how that world now included the Atlantic slaving system and the Columbian Exchange. But the revolutions were also tied together through networks of ideas and revolutionaries, just as the places where they occurred were tied together by shared experiences and ideas.

We follow each one of these revolutions to identify their causes and consequences, and how they influenced each other—and what limited them. Who got to participate in the new politics in each place? Who was left out?



*Toussaint Louverture*, one of the leaders of the Haitian Revolution. A liberated Black man himself, he fought a war both to abolish slavery and to provide new opportunities for free Blacks in Haiti. Public domain.

## Nationalism

In the third lesson, we will explore these changes through one of the principal ideas that emerged from all this change—nationalism. Nationalism is the idea that a people should govern a state of their own. It is tied to another important idea from this era: *sovereignty*, meaning “self-rule.” Nationalism played an important role in the creation of a Haitian nation, a French nation, an American nation, and many new nations in Latin America. Each nation—defined in this context as a community of people—wanted their own state,<sup>2</sup> and each of them got it.

But nationalism didn’t end with these revolutions. Revolutionaries around the world seized on the ideas of sovereignty and nationalism to fight for, and sometimes create, more nations throughout this era. Nationalists built the nations of Italy and Germany from dozens of smaller European states. At the same time, ethnic minorities in the Ottoman Empire, the Hapsburg Empire, and other large states argued that they deserved a state of their own. In China and India, nationalism played a role in rebellions, though these were ultimately unsuccessful.

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<sup>2</sup> Okay, *state* can be a confusing word. Here it means a country, though it can also mean a province or territory within a country. The United States of America is one state in this sense, but it contains 50 territories that are called *states* in the other sense of the word. In this course, we only use the word state to mean a country with laws, borders, and self-government.



*A scene from the Taiping Revolution. Public domain.*

## Conclusions

I can hear you asking, “But who cares about this stuff? It all happened more than a century ago!”

Well, for better or for worse, liberal political ideas and nationalism continue to have an impact long after the end of the long nineteenth century. Wherever you are, you very likely live in a country whose constitution and laws developed because of the ideas that emerged in this period. These laws created new opportunities for equality and liberty for all, but they also fell short of that promise in many cases. Understanding those patterns can help you when you look at the world around you.

The long nineteenth century brought a lot of changes in the way that communities are organized. They built on the transformations of the era before—like the Columbian Exchange, and the vast empires in Afro-Eurasia—to create the world we live in today. But it would be a mistake to think this is the end of change. Could other political revolutions happen in the future? Could they be happening now?

## Trevor Getz

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