



Unit 2 Overview

In 1750 CE, most people didn't take part in the government of the state in which they lived. For most people, the most important communities were religion, family, or local. With increasing interconnections between societies, however, new ideas emerged about sovereignty—who has the right to govern. These ideas gave birth to many of the concepts of community we have today, such as democracy, human rights, citizenship, and the nation-state. In some places, the mix of ideas and conditions was right for revolution. But there were limits to who could participate in the new political order being created.



00:01

*Kim Lochner and Colby
Burnett in conversation*

Okay, so I think we should completely change how we do these overview videos.

But, it's only the second one.

Yes, but it's time to revolutionize the system.

I see what you did there.

Yeah.

*Nation-State: A state that
represents and governs a
community of citizens*

Hi, I'm Kim Lochner, and along with Colby Burnett, we're introducing Unit 2: Liberal and National Revolutions. We live in a world of nation-states, of countries where the people largely share both a political status and a government. Unlike most of our ancestors who lived before the "long 19th century," from 1750 to 1914, we expect to—we and our neighbors, have the right to participate politically in a state that represents and governs us as a community of people, or citizens. This is the very definition of a nation-state.

01:00

*Photos of crowded cities
around the world; a
photo of the Universal
Declaration of Human
Rights*

As we look around the world, we see that almost everyone is a citizen of a nation-state. We are Australians, or Americans, or Russians, or Paraguayans, or Nigerians—both by law and in terms of the identities we claim. Many of the rights we have are civil rights: guaranteed mostly by our governments, whether through a constitution, or laws, or just practice. There are also some kinds of rights—what we call human rights—that we believe apply to everyone, no matter their government.

01:35

*Political Sovereignty: The
right of a nation to govern
its territory and people*

All of these ideas are tied together by the idea of sovereignty—the right to govern. In our modern world, the nation-state has political sovereignty—the right to govern a country. But we also believe that individuals have personal sovereignty—the right to govern their own bodies and minds.

*Personal Sovereignty: The
right of an individual to
govern their own bodies
and minds*

These ideas are expressed most often through democracy—the system of government in which all or many people participate in governing their state or electing people to represent them in government.

*Photos of people voting –
taking part in democracy*

02:11

*Colby Burnett
Contrasting artworks
depicting different
religious practices around
the world*

In fact, for most people in 1750, the community most present in their lives was not the state or government, but their religion. Everyday life in a neighborhood was often centered around a church, temple, or mosque. Religion gave people many of the rules by which they lived. In many cases, religion played the role of a government. In other cases, religion and government were tied together; many religious leaders played a key role in the organization of the state. While religion was present on a daily basis in most peoples' lives, however, government was usually quite distant—something that only a small group of wealthy, important people participated in.

02:50

Beginning soon after 1750, however, ideas about the rights of the governed, and who had the right to govern, began to change.

Animated map shows revolutions popping up around the globe

Text: Secularization: The separation of religion from the state

03:36

Kim Lochner

Animated map shows the location of the mentioned cities, zooming in on Saint-Louis.

04:29

Colby Burnett

Picture of an old map showing Saint-Louis

Drawings of great buildings in West Africa and trade ships in the sea

Artwork depicting a city at war: smoke filled and crumbling buildings and men fighting with guns

Photo montage of artworks depicting French revolutionaries; merchants of Saint-Louis; the National Assembly

05:50

Photo of young children by the sea in West Africa

The growth of trade in the 18th century circulated ideas around the world and led to the development of new ideas. These ideas found just the right conditions to ripen into political revolutions that gave birth to both the nation-state and modern ideas about citizenship and rights, as well as the division between religion and the state, which we call secularization. Of course, such changes had their limits, and in many cases, the new kinds of governments and new ideas about individual sovereignty did not extend to everyone. Nevertheless, they marked a giant transformation in the way the world worked.

So how were these ideas about political identity and political experience transformed by the liberal and democratic revolutions that created nationalism and nation-states? What were the limits of these transformations?

To answer these questions, we must look at revolutionary change in the long 19th century from several perspectives—not only the great revolutionary cities of the age, such as Port-au-Prince, Paris, and Philadelphia, but also other locations around the world that participated in this age of revolutions in different ways. One of these was the port town of Saint-Louis, in West Africa. Often ignored by world histories of this period, this city was connected both to the African interior and the Atlantic world.

Legally governed by France when the French Revolution began in 1789, Saint-Louis's leading citizens often spoke both French and local languages. They were mostly Muslims, although some were Catholics. Their religions played a large part in their lives, and in many cases connected them to trading partners in distant parts of Africa or Europe who were of the same faiths. But their differences in religion didn't stop them from being able to work together or to think of themselves as French subjects.

Most of the leading citizens of Saint-Louis were also merchants by trade. They were involved in trade between the African interior and France, competing for business and profits with a French company that was associated with the French king, and got special privileges from that king. When the French Revolution broke out in 1789, these merchants of Saint-Louis, Senegal, quickly embraced the language of rights and "the nation of citizens" that was a hallmark of revolutionary France thousands of miles to the north, but connected to Saint-Louis by ties of trade and migration. These French-speaking African merchants saw themselves as natural allies of the revolutionaries in France seeking to overthrow a king and hoped that they could overthrow the French company they competed with as well. They also hoped to be allowed to govern themselves through an elected mayor and to be represented in the new National Assembly—the first attempt at democracy in France.

Quickly, they wrote to the French revolutionaries, calling them brothers. Despite differences in skin color, they wrote, "We are all French, and no people show more patriotism and courage than we do." But despite this spirit and claim to citizenship, there were limits to French political revolution. The merchants of Saint-Louis were not invited to join the National Assembly, and it was only in 1916, more than 120 years later, that they would get representation. By then,

West Africa was embarking on a 50-year pathway to independence from the French empire.

06:29

*Black and white photo
of uniformed people of
Senegal*

*Chart shows a mostly-
steady increase in
democratic countries over
time*

In 1959, 170 years after the French Revolution, the people of Saint-Louis would become citizens of their own, independent, West African country of Senegal. The story of Saint-Louis stretches across the long history of the spread of the nation-state and democracy around the world. This spread was not inevitable. It was the result of 250 years of hard work by people and populations around the world. This chart shows time across the x-axis and measures the number of democratic states on the y-axis. As it shows, more and more democratic countries have been created over time—gradually in the 19th century, more rapidly in the late 20th century.

07:07

*Photo of soldiers in Nazi
Germany*

*Another chart shows
number of citizens living
under different political
regimes around the world;
The chart is shown again,
this time we notice how
many people still do **not**
live in democracies*

There have been times, like the late 1930s, when the number of democracies diminished and some countries went back to rule by an individual or a few people. But overall, the trend has been towards democracy. This chart shows something similar. It shows that the number and percentage of people living under democracies has grown substantially over time, from less than half a billion in 1816, to almost four billion today.

But this conclusion may obscure the fact that many struggles for democracy and the rights of citizenship have not succeeded. Like the inhabitants of Saint-Louis, Senegal, people in many parts of the world tried to gain political rights during this era, only to be denied. Indeed, as this chart shows, many people still do not live in states considered democracies. We have no proof that the trend to democracy is continuing, or will continue in the future.

08:04

Kim Lochner

Although it was gradual and uneven, the political transformation of the long 19th century revolutionized how we think of ourselves and our rights, and it was an important element in creating the world in which we live today. That doesn't mean that the nation-state, or citizenship, or even democracy is the last transformation we'll see. There are probably a lot of political innovations to come. But the liberal and national revolutions of the long 19th century definitely played an important role in creating the world in which we live today.

We can't understand our world, or orient ourselves to it, unless we know where these revolutions came from, and what their legacy is to us.

*Colby Burnett and Kim
Lochner in conversation*

Countries almost seem like teams sometimes. Like, why do people feel the need to sort themselves into competing sides?

Oh, I swear if you start talking about Gryffindor and Slytherin again...

It's a perfect analogy.

No.