

Economic and Material Causes of Revolt

By Bennett Sherry

The world changed at the end of the eighteenth century. People took to the streets to protest their material conditions. One revolution shook the foundations of the capitalist world economy.

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A World in Crisis: The Eighteenth Century

The end of the eighteenth century found a world in a crisis as social structures changed rapidly. Three revolutions—the American, French, and Haitian—transformed global relationships. Though most people think of these events as political upheavals, here you'll explore the argument that the late eighteenth-century revolutions had economic causes.

The rise of a capitalist global economy produced social upheavals. Capitalism—an economic system in which property is privately held and profits are used to increase production—was quickly becoming the dominant economic system in Western Europe and the Americas. Three important changes accompanied this system:

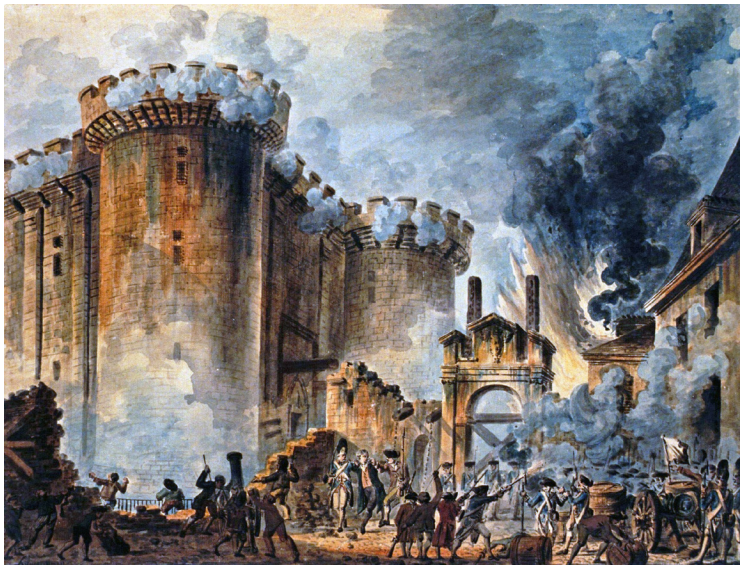
- European capitalists built plantations in their colonies abroad, mostly in the Americas. Plantation workers—mostly enslaved people— lived on plantations producing crops like sugar and cotton. These valuable harvests were then sent to industrial centers in Europe to be made into consumer goods.
- A new class of working poor emerged in European cities as more workshops and early factories popped up.
- As global trade expanded, an urban upper-middle class—known as the *bourgeoisie*—grew wealthier from trade, though most did not own land. Both the working poor and the bourgeoisie were increasingly unhappy with their governments.

All of this took place during global turmoil. Rising populations and shifting social relations from 1500 to 1800 sparked thousands of peasant revolts and urban riots. Famine was a constant threat and one bad harvest could place millions at risk of starvation. In response to rising food prices, the poor took to the streets in protest, attacking the rich. In most cases, the government and land-owning aristocracy brutally repressed resistance. In America, France, and Haiti, however, these tactics failed to stop people rising up to protest their material conditions.[1]

Material Causes of Revolt

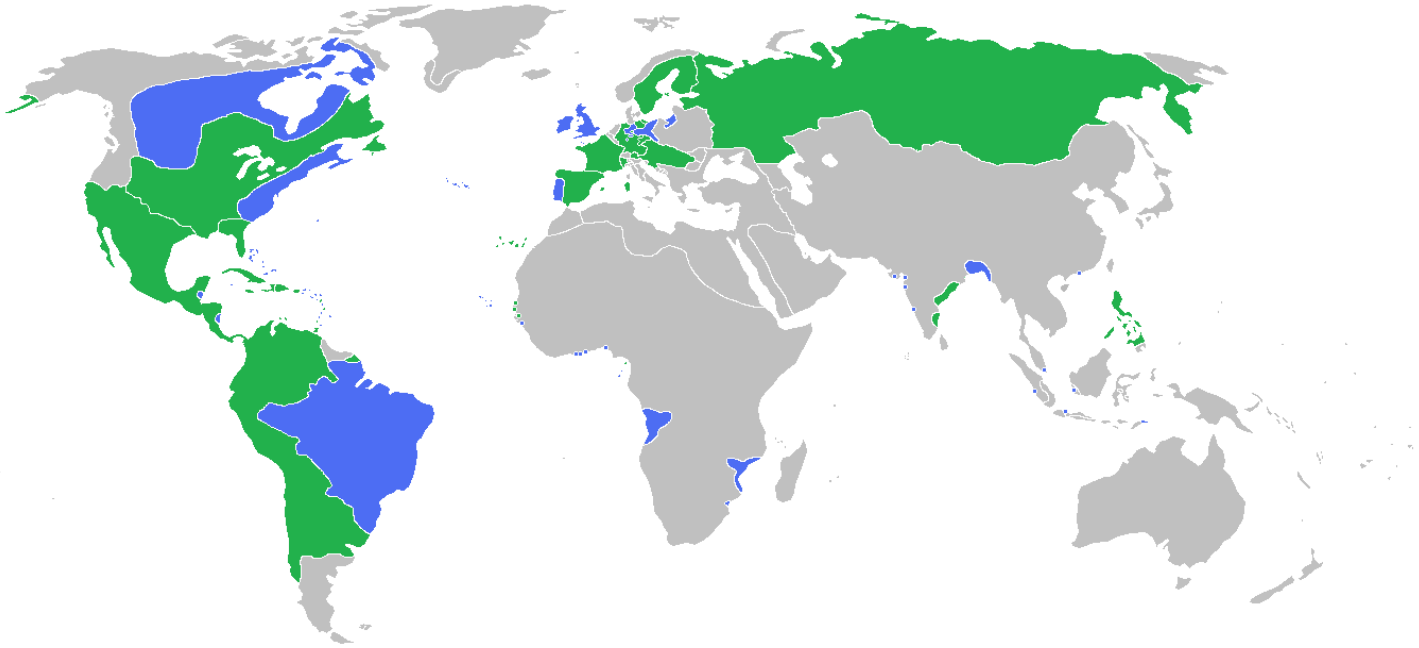
The great political revolutions of this time are usually described in political terms, but they also had economic causes. The high-minded words of the American Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man were full of ideas about liberty. However, these revolutions were as much about taxes and property as they were liberty and political representation. The revolutionaries were concerned not only with who had political power, but who controlled land, labor, and resources.

Historians argue that the American and French Revolutions were a direct result of the Seven Years' War, a conflict waged between England and France from 1756 to 1763. The war began as a struggle for territory in North America and quickly spread to the rest of the world. The aftermath of this expensive war ignited the American and French Revolutions.



The Storming of the Bastille, by Jean-Pierre Houel, 1789. By Jean-Pierre Houël, public domain.

1 In this context, material conditions means the physical things that are wanted or needed. The material conditions addressed by revolutionaries included access to food and shelter, taxation, and control of one labor.



A map showing the two alliances of the Seven Years' War. By Gabagool, CC BY 3.0.

Rich men fight the high cost of tea: The American Revolution

The American Revolution was really about taxes. Cash crops (like cotton) from the American colonies made Western European countries wealthy. But the Seven Years' War put the British empire in serious debt. To recover, the British crown planned to tax the colonies' imports.

American colonists resented the new taxes, including taxes on tea. Tea prices rose while tobacco prices fell, prompting colonists to demand representation in Parliament. American plantation owners declared independence because they weren't profiting enough from crops grown by enslaved people.



Teapot celebrating 1766 repeal of the Stamp Act—basically a low-tech meme. By Daderot, public domain.

Have you seen the price of bread? The French Revolution

In France, people at the middle and bottom of the social pyramid started to question the social order. Aristocrats and church officials were widely resented because they dominated French politics and enjoyed lives of luxury. The upper-middle class resented the fact that even the wealthiest among them lacked political rights. Meanwhile, almost everyone else struggled to eat in years of bad harvest.

The harvest of 1788 was particularly bad. Combined with the taxes that King Louis XVI imposed to pay for wars with England, the high price of bread caused revolts. In October 1789, thousands of women marched from the marketplace—where they were trying to buy bread—and took up arms outside the Palace of Versailles. Though the working poor were often the ones rising up in the streets and charging the Bastille,[2] the wealthier bourgeoise directed the course of the early revolution and wrote its documents. The bourgeoise rejected the aristocracy's dominance and revolted to seize power for themselves. As in America, these French revolutionaries grew their wealth in a system of global trade and cash crop plantations.



Women's March on Versailles, October 1789. Public domain.

There's no good year for a bad harvest, but the one in 1788 had particularly bad timing. The king raised taxes just as the middle class started to demand political representation, while the poor took to the streets to demand fair food prices. Not the best time to run out of food.

The right to property? The Haitian Revolution

The French colony of Saint Domingue (today Haiti) was the most lucrative colony in the world. Coffee, sugar and the labor of hundreds of thousands of enslaved people filled the treasury of the French Empire and the pockets of the French aristocracy. The colony produced 40 percent of the sugar and 60 percent of the coffee consumed by Europeans.

In Saint Domingue, class divisions were even more extreme than in France. Enslaved people, most of whom had been born in Africa, comprised nearly 90 percent of the island's population. At the top of the social hierarchy were

2 The Bastille was a prison in Paris that people saw as a symbol of oppression. "Storming the Bastille" has become an idiom frequently used to describe protests and uprisings.

wealthy white landowners (*grands blancs*), who controlled most of the colony's resources and labor. There were two other groups in the hierarchy: poor white laborers and artisans (*petits blancs*) and free people of color, who were typically mixed-race children of landowners and enslaved people.



Linen Market, Dominica, by Agostino Brunias. Public domain.

All four classes had complaints about their status. *Grands blancs* resented being taxed by the distant French monarch. Free people of color knew they would never be considered equal regardless of their own wealth. *Petits blancs* identified with the revolutionaries in Franc, resenting wealthier *grands blancs* and free people of color. Yet it was the bottom of the social structure that made Saint Domingue so unstable. Most enslaved people had been born in Africa before being enslaved and forced to work under horrific conditions. In 1791, these social tensions erupted into open conflict, culminating in the world's first successful revolt of enslaved people.

The Haitian constitutions took Enlightenment ideas about equality and applied them literally. Just like French and American declarations of independence, the Haitian Constitution of 1806 guaranteed a right to property. However, this provision included "the right to enjoy and dispose of one's work and industry." This stood in direct contrast to the ways that the American and French revolutionaries, among others, used the right to property to protect slavery. The Haitian Constitutions outlawed slavery, hence applying the ideals of the Enlightenment to conditions faced by enslaved people.

As a result, other nations—including the United States—excluded Haiti from the world economy. Fearful that Haiti would inspire enslaved people in the United States to claim freedom, President Thomas Jefferson refused to acknowledge the new nation.

An age of revolutions

The three Atlantic Revolutions were part of a broader world crisis at the end of the eighteenth century, which also saw major revolts in India, Russia, and China. This cycle of revolution and crisis linked distant people and continued through the nineteenth century. These revolutions were about political rights and national sovereignty. Yet on a deeper level, they were about restructuring social hierarchies and the ways that goods and wealth were produced and distributed.



Toussaint Louverture, one of the leaders of the Haitian Revolution. By John Carter Brown Library, public domain.

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Bennett Sherry holds a PhD in History from the University of Pittsburgh and has undergraduate teaching experience in world history, human rights, and the Middle East at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Maine at Augusta. Additionally, he is a Research Associate at Pitt's World History Center. Bennett writes about refugees and international organizations in the twentieth century.

Image credits

Cover: French Revolution. A crowd, mostly composed of women, is going from the Hotel de Ville (Town Hall) of Paris to Versailles, to demand bread (France). On October 5, 1789. Coloured engraving. © Photo by adoc-photos/Corbis via Getty Images

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Toussaint Louverture, one of the leaders of the Haitian Revolution. A brilliant general and diplomat, he helped defeat European armies and secure an independent Haiti. By John Carter Brown Library, public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Toussaint_L%27Ouverture.jpg#/media/File:Toussaint_L'Ouverture.jpg.

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