Revolutions in America

Causes of the Latin American Independence Movement

The American Revolution created a ripple effect in both the Western and Eastern hemispheres. Inspired by the Americans’ successful campaign for independence and by the great thinkers of the Enlightenment—among them, John Locke and the Baron de Montesquieu—other revolutions in Europe and Latin America emerged as a way to secure independence and upend the rigidity of the preexisting social structure.

Foreign Influences

Numerous foreign influences inspired and fueled the Latin American independence movement.

The American Revolution

Following the French and Indian War, the British colonies came under increased scrutiny by Parliament. The colonists grew increasingly dissatisfied with their relationship with Great Britain. Taxation without representation and various other abuses by the British Crown led many colonists to the conclusion that action must be taken.

As the author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson drew inspiration from Enlightenment thinker John Locke’s concept of natural rights. While Locke contended that all people have the right to “life, liberty, and property,” Jefferson adapted his words to include in the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence, stating that “all men” are entitled to certain natural rights, including “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” Jefferson further expanded upon Locke’s conception of the social contract by explaining that “governments are instituted among Men” for the purpose of protecting such rights, and “That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government.”

This momentous document marked the beginning of the United States’s seven-year fight for independence from Great Britain. The success of the former British colonies in asserting their independence from the most powerful country in the world proved formative for other independence movements around the globe, especially in France and, shortly after, in Haiti.

The Ancien Régime

The ancien régime, or “old order,” refers to the social and political order that existed in France from the late Middle Ages until the French Revolution. Under this system, all men were subjects of the king of France, who ruled as an absolute monarch. The king’s subjects were organized into three social classes known as the Three Estates. Each Estate was considered an institution, with its own entitlements and privileges.

The First Estate—the highest level of the feudal class system—was the clergy. Before the French Revolution, there were approximately 130,000 members of the First Estate. The clergy’s wealth was a product of taxes and tithes paid by the commoners. Many clergy lived extravagantly, similar to the nobles of the Second Estate. Yet, despite their social and political dominance, they only made up 0.5 percent of the population of France during the ancien régime.
The Second Estate—the next highest level of the feudal class system—was the nobility, or aristocracy. The nobility was the wealthiest of the three social classes. Like the clergy, the nobles amassed wealth through taxation of the lower class. They were landowners, and land renters, collecting rent from their tenants. They also did not have to pay taxes.

The Third Estate—the lowest level of the feudal class system—included every French commoner who did not have a noble title and was not ordained through the Church. This amounted to 27 million people, or 98 percent of the nation. The Third Estate was enormous, but it had no power in the feudal system. It contained penniless beggars and wealthy merchants, laborers and artisans, farmers and city dwellers.

Though much of the Third Estate comprised poor people, a middle class emerged. Known as the bourgeoisie, they were the business owners and professionals who were able to make enough money to live with relative comfort. As they became successful in their professions, many were eager to acquire the status of those in the Second Estate. A few could purchase noble status, but by the 1780s, even that was out of reach of their financial pockets. The bourgeois became frustrated. They were the economic developers of the nation, they were the ones making profit for the nation, yet they had no control in the running of it. The Enlightenment ideals that were floating around the salons of Paris soon came to the attention of the bourgeois, and they liked what they heard.

**Political Changes in France**

By the mid-1780s, France had reached a crossroads. The extravagance of the French monarchy and the aid given to the Americans during the American Revolution placed France in financial disarray. To make matters even worse, the country had suffered twenty some years of poor harvests and livestock disease that caused agricultural commodities to skyrocket, most notably, rendering the cost of a loaf of bread—a staple in the diets of many members of the Third Estate—entirely unaffordable.

Growing unrest among the nobility and the poor alike led King Louis XVI to call a meeting of the Estates-General—the Three Estates—to discuss financial reform at the Palace of Versailles in May 1789. Though accounting for the majority of France’s population, the Third Estate had little say at the meeting, and its leaders were overruled by the First and Second Estates. This led to an increased demand by the middle class for government reform and equitable treatment with the other social classes. The Third Estate was soon joined by members of the nobility, leading to the formation of the National Assembly, a new governing body for France.

The National Assembly began work on a new constitution that limited the power of the French monarch and adopted the articles of the Declaration of the Rights of Man in August 1789. The document drew inspiration from Enlightenment thinkers and played a significant role in inspiring the Haitian Revolution that would begin two years later.

To many, these reforms were long overdue and a welcome change. To others, however, the political upheaval fomented hysteria. Shortly after the formation of the National Assembly, rumors of a military coup incited riots in Paris, including the storming of the Bastille for munitions and supplies. The French Revolution became increasingly radical as it progressed into the 1790s and entered a period known as the “Terror” in 1793, during which political parties and individuals jockeyed for power through a campaign of intimidation and extreme violence. The French Revolution effectively came to an end in 1799 with the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte.
Social Classes

Latin America had a highly rigid social class system with Spanish and Portuguese colonists at the top and poor indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans at the bottom, similar to social class systems in other parts of the world at this time.

Aristocracy in Latin America

Spain’s and Portugal’s colonies were dominated by an aristocracy formed by the Spanish and Portuguese colonists who had relocated to Latin America, known in Spanish as *peninsulares*. It’s important to note that not all of these individuals were considered aristocrats in their home countries. Rather, one of the appeals of the new world colonies for those emigrating from Spain and Portugal was that the class system was more malleable in the colonies. One could go there and improve one’s lot in life. Also, the class system in Iberia was about birth and privilege—not money. One could gain wealth but still be outside of the nobility—or conversely lose wealth but still retain the privilege of birth. In New Spain, one could more easily work his or her way into the nobility, for example, by buying a title. It is true that money usually followed class, but it was not a precondition. The aristocracy dominated politics in the colonies, holding all appointed government positions and excluding other social classes from power. The aristocrats were generally the wealthiest people in the colonies and owned vast plantations that employed or subjugated workers of lower classes.

Creoles

Creoles made up the second-highest social class in Latin America. Born in the colonies, Creoles were descended from men and women originally born in Spain. Despite being white like the colonial aristocracy, and in many instances possessing significant wealth and education, the Creoles were originally excluded from colonial government and politics. Additionally, Creoles faced greater commercial and economic constraints than the ruling class. These factors ultimately led the Creole class to be a dominant force in the struggle for Latin American independence during the 1800s. It is important to note that the term *Creole* holds several meanings. In the Student Reader, it is used to denote white colonists of Spanish descent who were born in New Spain.

Mestizos

Beneath the Creoles was the mestizo class. Whereas the Creoles were of purely Spanish descent, mestizos had mixed parentage, generally of both European and indigenous descent. Mestizos were born free; however, they were not afforded the liberties of Creoles and the aristocrats, despite their partial European heritage. Many mestizos grew wealthy from trade and successful businesses, and received an education in the colonies. Eventually, mestizos became the fastest growing group in colonial society. However, they were treated as second-class citizens and had little influence in colonial government.

Indigenous Peoples and Enslaved Africans

When Christopher Columbus first arrived in the West Indies, he encountered a significant indigenous population, by some estimates as many as six million people. Columbus, and eventually other explorers and colonists, subjugated these native peoples, using them as enslaved labor on the massive
plantations that would emerge in the Caribbean as well as in Central and South America. Treated as less than human, indigenous peoples had no rights in New Spain and were generally the poorest members of society aside from enslaved Africans. By 1542, however, many Spaniards, led by Bartolomé de las Casas, advocated for laws that protected indigenous people.

Between disease and the forced labor policies of the Spanish, the native population on some islands disappeared completely. Some experts believe that in the 1500s and 1600s, anywhere from 50 to 80 percent of the Native American population across North and South America died. In the Caribbean, this meant that there was no longer a cheap supply of forced labor to work the mines and farms that the Spanish established. This need for a new source of labor was the impetus to the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade. A few Africans had been brought to work the mines on Hispaniola, but the need for large numbers of workers spurred the African slave trade.

As one historical account states, “The story of sugar in the Caribbean goes hand in hand with the story of slavery.” The warm, moist climate and rich soil of the Caribbean islands were well suited to the cultivation of sugar cane. The Spanish knew from their experience on the islands off the African coast that sugar agriculture took vast amounts of labor, which had to be cheap in order to make the plantations profitable. Therefore, they made great efforts to transport enslaved Africans to work these new plantations in the Caribbean. When the English captured islands from the Spanish and colonized other islands on their own, they followed the Spanish example and that of the Portuguese in Brazil. Enslaved Africans not only planted the sugar cane and harvested it, but also worked in the mills where the raw cane was crushed and boiled down to make sugar and molasses.