***Student Handout 1.1—American Revolution***

**BEFORE THE REVOLUTION**

Socially and economically, the thirteen British colonies in North America fell into two groups.

The southern colonies, Virginia the largest among them, had largely plantation-based agrarian

economies dominated by a planter elite and worked by African and African-American slave

laborers. These plantations focused on **cash crop** production for the Atlantic economy. The

northern colonies had relatively large commercial and handicraft sectors, dominated by

mercantile capitalists and worked by indentured servants and free artisan labor. Northern

agriculture featured a large population of small, independent farmers, and its scale was much

smaller than in the southern colonies. Slavery was part of the northern economy but not to the

same extent as in the south. Also present in the colonies were two groups that formed direct

links with other world societies: the British colonial government, consisting of both

administrators and soldiers, and members of Indian nations living both outside and within the

boundaries of the colonies themselves.

**CAUSES**

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European states passed laws to protect their own

commercial interests. These laws, taken together, formed an economic system called

**mercantilism**. The mercantilist system of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries benefited

colonial elites while enriching European governments. But by the second half of the eighteenth

century, many colonists began to resent the restrictions the mercantilist system placed on their

economic activity. This was true among both the increasingly-wealthy elites and the laboring

classes. Resentment intensified in British North America after the 1763 British victory in the

Seven Years’ War, which the colonists called the French and Indian War. The British imposed a

series of taxes and policies on the colonies to offset the cost of defense during the war and to

maintain an army of 10,000 in the colonies. Taken together, these exactions began to swing

public opinion against the British. Tensions came to a head after a colonial militia and British

troops exchanged shots in the Massachusetts towns of Lexington and Concord in 1775.

The causes of the American revolution were not only economic. The Enlightenment protest

against absolutism, expressed in a call for liberty and equality, found fertile soil in North

America. Different groups, however, had differing interpretations of these ideas. To the merchant

and planter elites, freedom was taken primarily to mean freedom from British mercantilist

economic restrictions. Equality was taken to mean equality before the law, not economic or

political equality among classes or races. Many people in those groups who were not in a

dominant social position, such as slaves, indentured servants, artisan laborers, mariners, and

small farmers, wanted real social and economic equality. Many were ready to attempt to gain it

by revolution, which gave the movement a second dimension—a struggle to reform society and

to rid it of anti-democratic features.

**RESULTS**

The American revolution produced freedom and equality but in terms most favorable to elite

groups. Immediately after the revolutionaries’ victory in the war, the British army departed, and

the new United States found itself outside of the British mercantilist system. After a brief

experiment in a decentralized confederation, the Constitutional Convention of 1787 created a

federation with a strong central government, shifting power from individual states to the national

government. That national government, however, was an Enlightenment project, with separate

legislative, executive, and judicial branches and elections built into the system. Racial inequality

was built into the system as well. Despite the initial objections of some delegates to the

conventions, a compromise allowed slaves to be counted as three-fifths of a person to determine

the size of a state’s representation in the House of Representatives without allowing slaves to

vote. However, northern states, through legislative and judicial decisions, gradually abolished

slavery, and all but two states halted the importation of African slaves.

The new United States shortly began to expand its borders. From the administration of George

Washington forward, the United States moved to acquire Indian lands. This led to a series of

treaties, broken treaties, and wars that would see the United States occupying North America

from the Eastern seaboard to the West Coast by the mid-nineteenth century. Indian nations were

pushed off ancestral lands and onto reservations, at the cost of many lives.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. What different groups of people lived in the British colonies before the revolution?

2. How did mercantilism and social/political inequalities provoke resentment in the colonies?

3. How did different groups in the colonies understand Enlightenment ideas?

4. What type of government did the American revolution produce?

5. In what way did the American revolution produce freedom? What were the limits of this

freedom?

6. In what way did the American revolution produce equality? What were the limits of this

equality?

***Student Handout 1.2—French Revolution***

**BEFORE THE REVOLUTION**

On the eve of the revolution, French society and, to a great extent, politics were dominated by a

hereditary nobility. On the other hand, France’s economy, increasingly tied to the growing

Atlantic economy through its colonial empire, was dominated by a capitalist **bourgeoisie**. Both

the nobility and the bourgeoisie benefited from ties to the monarchy. The nobility maintained its

social prestige through its role at the royal court, and the wealthy bourgeoisie enriched itself by

having royal protection in the mercantilist economic system.

Part of the French peasantry still owed feudal obligations to the nobility, that is, laws and

practices left over from the medieval era. But a large part of the peasantry was made up of small,

independent landowners. Similarly, French manufacturing took place in workshops rather than in

large factories. The urban, artisan laborers who worked the shops were known collectively as

*sans-culottes*—“without breeches”—because their pants hung loose to the feet, unlike the

clothing of the nobility.

France’s colonial empire shrank severely when it lost India and North America to the English in

the 1763 Treaty of Paris, which ended the Seven Years’ War. However, revenues from the

empire in the late eighteenth century, especially from the slave plantation-based Caribbean

colony of St. Domingue (later Haiti), enriched French society, especially the commercial

bourgeoisie.

**CAUSES**

Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Rousseau had criticized the French

system of absolute monarchy during the decades leading up to the revolution. Heredity was not a

rational way to choose political leaders, they argued. A better system would be one in which

each individual, freely exercising reason through the equality of a vote, would take part in

choosing a government. God did not reserve talent to the nobility. Why then, should France

reward them with privilege? While the French monarchy supported the American revolution to

check Britain’s power, Enlightened France supported it because of its ideals of freedom and

equality.

In 1787, state debt from both the Seven Years’ War and French support of the American

revolution proved too great for the French monarchy to bear. Failing in his attempt to levy taxes

on the nobility, which paid little or no tax, Louis XVI called a meeting of the Estates-General, a

large meeting of delegates representing the clergy, the nobility, and the “Third Estate,” that is,

everyone else in society. The delegates, including clerics and nobles, as well as representatives

of the Third Estate, brought with them grievances from their constituents, often phrased in the

Enlightenment language of liberty and equality.

The fiscal crisis coincided with a spike in the price of bread, which affected the *sans-culottes*

most intensely. It was not only hunger that inspired the ensuing bread riots. Beneath calls for

bread lay an anti-capitalist cry for government regulation of the market to provide a measure of

security, particularly to the poor. The call for a degree of economic equality resonated with the

Third Estate’s own grievances. Emboldened by the *sans-culottes’* action, the Third Estate

withdrew from the Estates-General and declared itself the National Assembly in June 1789. The

revolution was on.

**RESULTS**

The Constitution of 1792 guaranteed representative government, civil liberties like freedoms of

speech, religion, and assembly, and equality before the law. Furthermore, it ended the special

legal privilege of the nobility and clergy. The revolution became more radical after the execution

of Louis XVI in 1793. The National Assembly granted unprecedented legal rights to women,

abolished slavery, and instituted price controls. But these reforms were rolled back under the

Empire of Napoleon Bonaparte, who came to power in a ***coup d’état*** in 1799.

Though Napoleon was uninterested in genuinely representative government on a parliamentary

model, he enshrined many of the principles of the 1792 Constitution, such as equality before the

law and civil liberties (though not freedom of the press) in his Napoleonic Code of 1807. This

legal basis would remain intact with the 1814 restoration of the French monarchy under Louis

XVIII. The new king, too, would not be absolute, but rather would rule under the Constitutional

Convention, which placed limits on the monarch’s authority and provided for a degree of

representative government in the Chamber of Deputies, elected by a small, wealthy percentage of

French society.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. What groups of people populated France before the revolution?

2. What crises provoked the revolution in France?

3. How did different groups of people in France understand Enlightenment ideas?

4. How was the French monarchy of 1814 different from the pre-revolutionary monarchy?

5. In what ways did the French revolution produce freedom? What were the limits of this

freedom?

6. In what ways did the French revolution produce equality? What were the limits of this

equality?

***Student Handout 1.3—Haitian Revolution***

**BEFORE THE REVOLUTION**

Haiti was the French colony of St. Domingue (Santo Domingo), the most productive colonial

economy in the world. Dominated by plantation agriculture, primarily to supply sugar and coffee

to the world market, Haiti had a slave population of nearly 90 percent. African slaves were

brought to the island in the Atlantic slave trade. The balance of the population consisted of

peoples of European ancestry and of mixed heritage, defined in the law of the colony as “white”

or *gens de couleur* (people of color), respectively. Both of these groups owned slaves. French

administrators governed the island. By 1788, the native Indian population had died out

completely as a result of the Spanish conquest, harsh labor policies, and introduction of

infectious diseases from **Afroeurasia**.

In no way were any of these racial groups united, except perhaps in opposition to each other.

There were even divisions within the slave population, primarily between a larger group of

agricultural laborers and a smaller group involved in domestic service and, in some cases, the

management of the plantation system. The white population consisted of a planter elite known as

*grands blancs* and a larger class of *petits blancs*, men and women who participated in the

economy primarily as artisans or merchants in the cities. *Gens de couleur*, like whites, were

divided by class, though the disparity of wealth was not as great as that between *grands* and

*petits blancs*.

**CAUSES**

The root of the Haitian revolution was the fundamental imbalance in Haitian society. Slaves

made up the vast majority of the population and were oppressed on a daily basis in the most

naked ways and thoroughly deprived economically in a system that produced great wealth. For

this slave population, the most pressing issue was the termination of slavery and the social

inequality it entailed. As the colony was 90 percent slave, this issue was inevitably the focus of

the revolution.

Political unrest in the colony began, however, with class tensions among the white population.

As a French colony, St. Domingue did not receive representation in the Estates-General of 1789.

The *grands blancs* sent representatives anyway. These people were ultimately admitted into the

French National Assembly, but the vote was restricted to whites who owned twenty or more

slaves. This policy kept out the *petits blancs*, and it held in elections for local assemblies. The

*petits blancs*, arguing in a nationalist manner for their rights as Frenchmen, fought the *grands*

*blancs* in a civil war between town and country. Both groups, however, based their political

claims on their French heritage, the *grands blancs* arguing for liberty to represent the colony, the

*petits blancs* demanding political equality with the *grands.* This left both the *gens de couleur* and

the slaves out of the loop. After revolts by the *gens de couleur* led by Vincent Ogé resulted in a

wave of racial oppression, the slave population leapt into the opening left by the political crisis,

staging a coordinated rebellion in August 1791. By 1794, Toussaint L’Ouverture, a brilliant

general and former slave, assumed leadership of the rebellion.

**RESULTS**

Haiti proclaimed its independence from France in 1804, as a republic. As all of the groups in the

revolution except the slaves conceived of liberty and equality in terms of their own situation,

none of them had supported the abolition of slavery. It was this, however, that the slave

population demanded. The whites, both *grands* and *petits blancs*, wanted to hold on to white

privilege. The rebels accordingly drove them off the island. The *gens de couleur* wanted to keep

the right to own slaves. They were also driven off or deprived of their slave property, though

some of them stayed and retained economic and social power.

The Haitian revolution abolished slavery on the island. It was the first major successful slave

revolt in the Atlantic world, and L’Ouverture became known among the slave population of the

Americas as a liberating hero. The Haitian revolution also gave strength to the anti-slavery

movement among European peoples. In the following decades, abolitionists used the example of

Haiti to convince slave owners that using free labor was, if nothing else, a good way to avoid a

bloody uprising.

The newly-independent Haiti, however, faced two immediate economic problems. On the one

hand, slave-owning societies, like the United States, placed an embargo on Haiti, fearing that its

example would encourage other slave revolts. This embargo deprived Haiti of many of its former

markets. On the other hand, the former slaves proved very unwilling to continue plantation labor,

which they very sensibly associated with slavery. This led to continuing class tension among

those who remained on the island and a rapid transition from democracy to dictatorship.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. What groups of people lived in Haiti before the revolution?

2. How did the long-term and immediate causes of the Haitian revolution differ?

3. How did different groups of people in Haiti understand the Enlightenment ideas of liberty

and equality?

4. What did the Haitian revolution accomplish, and what problems did the new country face

following independence?

5. In what ways did the Haitian revolution produce freedom? What were the limits of this

freedom?

6. In what ways did the Haitian revolution produce equality? What were the limits of this

equality?

***Student Handout 1.4—Venezuelan Revolution***

**BEFORE THE REVOLUTION**

The revolution in Venezuela was one of several in South and Middle America that led to the

emergence of independent republics. Under Spanish rule, a planter elite, called *hacendados*,

dominated Venezuela. Among the elite, those born in Spain were known as *peninsulares* (from

the Iberian Peninsula) and those native to America as *criollos* (**creoles**). The *hacendados*

achieved their preeminence primarily through cocoa and coffee production, which was, before

the revolution, brought to the Atlantic market through the Spanish mercantilist system.

Politically, Spain ruled Venezuela as a colony, though town councils, most importantly that of

Caracas, the future capital of independent Venezuela, allowed the *hacendados* a measure of

political influence over local affairs. The bulk of the *criollo* population was less well off than the

*hacendados*. They worked primarily in urban positions as artisans, soldiers, and small-tomiddling

traders. The majority of the population was of combined Native American and

European ancestry, known in Spanish as ***mestizos***. This population was mainly made up of

peasants. Though *mestizos* wanted to end the *criollos*’ white privilege, they did not necessarily

want to end slavery.

Two groups of people were outside the political system despite being very much a part of

Venezuelan society. First, African slaves, whose labor was essential for the colony’s plantation

economy, constituted about 20 percent of the population. The foremost goal for slaves was

freedom, specifically the end of slavery. As a minority of the population, however, and with the

Venezuelan elite profiting from slave labor, slaves were not in a good position to force their

demands. Second, the native population, suffering from the disease and death brought by

Europeans in the sixteenth century and known as the **Great Dying**, made up less than 10 percent

of the total population at independence. The natives were thoroughly marginalized politically

and economically.

**CAUSES**

By the nineteenth century, the economic interests of white Venezuelans and the Spanish imperial

government had diverged. While Spain viewed its colonies as a steady source of income to be

kept under control, the *hacendados* wanted the freedom to sell their cocoa and coffee on the open

world market in order to fetch the highest price. Discontent with Spain was not limited to the

upper classes. The Spanish colonial government sought, above all, to preserve Venezuela’s

hierarchical social order. Anyone who wanted greater social, political, or economic equality in

the colony had, at some level, to oppose Spanish government.

Napoleon’s 1808 conquest of Spain provided Venezuelan revolutionaries with a window of

opportunity. In 1810, the town council of Caracas deposed the Spanish colonial governor and

established a *junta*, or group dictatorship. Simón Bolívar, a wealthy *criollo* profoundly

influenced by the European writers of the Enlightenment, traveled to Europe himself at this point

to rally support for the revolution. Though he was largely unsuccessful, he did bring back with

him Francisco de Miranda, an important Venezuelan dissident who had been in exile in England.

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Upon Bolívar and Miranda’s return, the *junta* passed the most radical legislation the revolution

witnessed. Restrictions on trade were lifted, which pleased the *hacendado* elite. The abolition of

taxes on food, of Indian tribute payments to the government, and of slavery itself satisfied the

different egalitarian goals of the other Venezuelan groups.

**RESULTS**

The revolution’s gains, however were rolled back when Spain briefly reconquered Venezuela

after Napoleon’s fall in 1814. Slavery was restored, and when Bolívar, having successfully

elicited aid from independent Haiti, permanently liberated Venezuela in 1819, it remained intact.

Venezuela continued to be ruled, as it had in 1810, by *hacendados*. White privilege, too,

remained the order of the day, *criollos* reserving a greater measure of political and economic

status than *mestizos*. The revolution did, however, end Spain’s mercantilist restrictions on

Venezuelan commerce, and the new republic traded its cocoa and coffee on the open world

market.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. What groups of people lived in Venezuela before the revolution?

2. What were the first reforms of Bolívar and Miranda?

3. How did different groups of people in Venezuela understand the Enlightenment ideas of

liberty and equality?

4. What did the Venezuelan revolution accomplish?

5. In what ways did the Venezuelan revolution produce freedom? What were the limits of this

freedom?

6. In what ways