LECTURE 6

**The Atlantic Revolutions & Limits of Enlightenment, 1700s-1800s**

**Two types of revolutions rocked the Atlantic World (Americas and Europe) in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, JUST AS THE TRANS-ATLANTIC SYSTEM OF SLAVERY AND PLANTATION LIFE WAS AT ITS HEIGHT:**

1. **Political revolutions or revolutions of "national" independence”** (in the U.S., France, Haiti, and the Spanish Americas)

2. The **industrial revolution** (mainly in Britain, but emulated elsewhere) accelerated British-driven imperialism and colonialism, and the process that we call global capitalism.

**We will** discuss the political revolutions that reordered the Atlantic system between 1700s and 1850, then fast becoming an important oceanic region of global commerce and hemispheric colonization. These revolutions have been called the "Atlantic revolutions.” They **signaled the unraveling of the Old World mercantile empires** controlled by monarchies in Great Britain, France, Portugal and Spain. [MAP]

Although the rhetoric of Atlantic revolution was radical, **the goal of this huge uprising was quite narrow in terms of who was to be “liberated” from tyrannical control. The top goal, “National Independence,” was not necessarily the sudden and immediate social leveling of hierarchy, whether in the nation, market and home. Nor was the Atlantic revolution an idea that required the elimination of glaring class, gender, and racial inequalities (the abolition of slavery took a back seat to specific demands of “non-slaves”:** liberty, equality, fraternity). Nonetheless, Atlantic revolutionary ideals echoed throughout the world and, today, they continue to shape our globe.

Indeed, whether we know it or not, **we have all internalized the rhetoric of the Atlantic Revolution (even when spurning it):** liberty, equality, fraternity. Here are other (soaring) rhetorical flourishes: the pursuit of happiness; merit over birth; the free flow of goods and ideas; as well as open speech and religious tolerance. These principles reflected Enlightenment thought in the 1700s. This Enlightenment thought elevated faith in the reason of “Man,” in the individual, and idea of justice for all (always qualified, and women were not in this “qualification”). These ideals coalesced into this concept: “Rights of Man” (allude to Haitian revolution).

During the Atlantic revolutions of the late 1700s and the early 1800s, **we see both the radical potential of Enlightenment values AND the limitations of Enlightenment ideals in favor of those with long-standing access to wealth and power**. Indeed, we can’t understand the complexities of Atlantic Revolutions without first recognizing how Enlightenment ideals were put to use—and not in the interests of broader justice and equality—but first for profit and domination--two major pursuits of the pre-Enlightenment economic end-game called **Mercantilism**.

**Here, we turn to the pre-Enlightenment hegemonic system known as mercantilism:**

1. We focus on mercantilism and its relationship to the (global/regional) trade in silver and other commodities, which were all under strict rules of finance and deal-making enforced by European metropolitan powers (and often the monarchies controlling these countries).

In many ways, the Atlantic Revolutions channeled strong reaction against the **profit and power** relationships in European metropolitan countries, which restricted oceanic trade and investments.

**What is "mercantilism"?**

The mercantilist goal was to divert profits from each ‘colonial’ leg of the complicated Atlantic trade back to the national coffers (treasuries, trading houses, and markets) of the metropole, as represented by the capital cities that sheltered the major monarchy of each European power: London, Paris, Lisbon, and Madrid.

**This mercantilist vision** of political and economic relations rested upon a number of assumptions:

1. The Americas would supply agricultural raw materials and precious metals.
2. Africa would supply the human labor (enslaved workers) used to produce and extract these resources.
3. Europeans would consume American products (sugar, coffee, tobacco, silver and gold) and process raw materials into manufactured goods, and then sell these goods back to the Americas and Africa at a handsome profit—thus amassing huge fortunes.

4. The goal was to make European states, which were frequently at war with each other (in the colonies, e.g., the North American Seven Years’ War), wealthy by imposing mercantilist regulations on overseas trade. Monopoly profits from the Atlantic economy promoted further militarization and economic expansion of European governments/monarchies.

N**o matter what the institutional forms or the actual policies, the European powers agreed on one goal of commercial regulation: NOT PROMOTING FREE TRADE. In fact, they went to war to prevent “free trade,” not least the great “free-trading” titan of them all, Great Britain, which flooded Boston with tea; the city denizens protested, dumping the tea in Boston harbor. In this telling of history, the American Revolution was really the British war against “free trade” in the Thirteen Colonies.**

If you were a merchant and wanted to get a piece of the American colonial pie, you had to get permission from your British colonial/imperial government and especially HRH, English King George. Getting a monopoly charter or license from the English King often meant that any merchant had to be politically and socially connected, or simply a merchant had to be a crony of the aristocracy.

Ideally, each European power ruled over its colonial possessions in the New World and kept them sealed off from the colonies of rival powers.

Exceptions had to be allowed from the beginning.

For example, **Spain** controlled **no African trading posts** and thus “permitted” Portuguese and other foreign shippers to supply slaves to the Spanish Empire.

**Thousands of individual shippers—whether they were British or French or Spanish or Portuguese—were willing and able to ferry goods from one imperial system to another, regardless of nationality**. **From the metropolitan European perspective**, these shippers were just trying to maximize their own profits and market share in a lucrative system of trade.

But **from a mercantilist government's point of view (London, Paris, Lisbon, Madrid . . . ) these shippers were smugglers or "freebooters**" who broke imperial trade laws. As such, they were no better than **pirates** and deserved no protection.

In any case, **this sort of "smuggling" or "freebooting" punched holes in the mercantilist fantasy of a sealed system of long-distance trade, particularly across the Atlantic**.

1. **The Enlightenment**

**Set against the institutions of mercantilist governments were the ideals of Enlightenment thinkers**, who **reflected on economic as well as political and philosophical concerns**.

Enlightenment theorists such as Adam Smith (1723-1790) promoted economic principles of "free trade, free markets, and free labor." It's worth noting here that Adam Smith was a Scotsman and his theories tended to bolster the interests of Scottish "free traders"—small merchants from the Scottish highlands who were increasingly frustrated with mercantilist restrictions of the British Crown. We will encounter these Scottish free traders in India and China in two classes from today.

**Other small businessmen and free-trading profiteers in Holland and Great Britain's North American colonies embraced Adam Smith's theories, not only because Adam Smith served their economic interests, but also because he seemed to legitimize the act of hustling and getting/winning through sheer will and (underdog) competitiveness**. After all, Adam Smith was an Enlightenment thinker, and the Enlightenment was not just about profiting from free trade and free markets; it was also about the noble causes of freedom and liberty and equality—in short, the Enlightenment was also supposedly to be about social justice**.**

So, it's no coincidence that the Enlightenment flourished in urban bastions of free-traders—global cities like Amsterdam [Holland] and Edinburgh [Scotland], and also spread to more peripheral, if important “hinge” colonial ports such as Philadelphia and Boston (hinging—as in a door swinging--back out into the Atlantic).

**It's no coincidence, as well, that we can see economic & political ideals converge in a classic slogan from the American Revolution: "No taxation w/out representation!"** In other words, don't tax me and take my money, unless I have a seat at the political table and at least a voice in how the government's run and trade is conducted. Or, give me a piece of “the piece” that I helped make and serve.

**"No taxation w/out representation!" was a slogan trumpeted by the "bourgeoisie,” an increasingly wealthy business class of merchants and landowning (sugar) planters—a class that was predominantly white, male, and propertied, with access to slaves, either as owners or as business partners of slave owners.**

Slogans like "no taxation without representation!" were aimed at Europe's mercantilist rulers and aristocratic nobles, all of whom enjoyed the high station and finer things in life, earned through birth, not by merit. **Rallying cries for freedom, equality and justice, when uttered by members of the bourgeoisie, were not intended to inspire vote-less women, the property-less poor, and enslaved people.** Nevertheless, the imaginations of women, the poor, and slaves were fired by the potent rhetoric of Enlightenment ideals.

The major **Enlightenment ideals sparked a series of** Atlantic Revolutions:

Let's talk more specifically about these **Atlantic Revolutions**. **The first Atlantic Revolutions were the American Revolution (of 1776) and the French Revolution (of 1789).** Both can be traced back to a tightening of mercantilist policies in the wake of the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), which began in the Americas and then spread to Europe. The Seven Years' War is better known in American history as the French and Indian Wars. This conflict was basically a struggle between Britain and France for control of Canada, the Great Lakes region, and the valleys of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. Britain emerged victorious.

**The main point is that the war was costly for both Britain and France, and both the British Crown and the French Crown endeavored to pay for the war by raising taxes on all subjects in their respective Empires.**

The British decided to make its American colonies foot the bill for the war; after all, the British colonials benefited most directly from the conflict, gaining control of more territories from the French (to the victors go the spoils of territory).

In particular, King George III's attempt to clamp down on smuggling by American colonists in the 1760s and then to tax the global trade pulsing through the American colonies in the 1770s led to increasing resentment and eventually open warfare in 1775.

[**PICTURE OF BOSTON MASSACRE, ca. 1770]**

By 1776 a new, independent country—the United States of America—had been declared, and by 1787 its own Constitution was in place.

**Now let’s turn to the French Revolution (1789-99)**

**Both the Seven Years' War and the American Revolution had a deep impact on France.** The French king (Louis XVI, r. 1774-93) spent enormous amounts of money supporting the American revolution, which greatly weakened France's primary European rival—the British. France’s support of the American cause, however, created a financial crisis in France, which ballooned into a full-scale political revolution—the French Revolution.

Here, I only want to note that the French Revolution was much more radical (and much bloodier) than the American Revolution.

**The radical nature of the French Revolution is evident in the Declarations of Man and Woman, and of Citizen. We discuss 2 assigned primary readings.**

By mid-1793, France's King Louis XVI had been guillotined, the Reign of Terror set in.

In 1794, this bloodletting had run its course. The leaders of the Reign of Terror were themselves executed by more moderate forces who tried to restore some order.

In 1795 a new ruling committee known as the Directory took over. Then in 1799, the Directory itself was overthrown in a coup-d'etat by a 30-year old general named Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821). Bonaparte set himself up as a dictator and then as the French emperor in 1804.

Napoleon then made war on all of Europe.

The unfolding of the French Revolution and Napoleon's rise reverberated not only throughout Europe, but also across the Atlantic Ocean in St. Domingue or Haiti.

**Now let’s turn to the** Haitian Revolution (1791-1804)—St. Domingue

Nowhere was the radical potential of revolutionary rhetoric more apparent than in Haiti. **In this most lucrative of the French plantation colonies, news of the French Revolution caused larger fractures in an already deeply divided plantation society.**

Some, but not all, white planters—some of the richest men in the world at the time—were enthusiastic upon hearing about the French Revolution in 1789. Their enthusiasm for Revolution, like that of white planters in North America, stemmed from their desire for more political power as well as from the promise of making more profits under the banner of free trade.

These sugar planters tended to live on the island in a society determined by the plantation demographics of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The **vertically integrated** sugar plantations of Saint-Domingue and its nearby British competitor Jamaica had some of the largest numbers of slaves of any colony in the Americas, with a financial industry (boards of directors, shareholders, IPO-type offerings to raise seasonal capital, etc.). Roughly 20% of the slaves on these Caribbean plantations worked in occupations other than fieldwork, as specialists who processed the sugarcane (in the “factory” mill), as artisans making barrels to transport the pressed and boiled cane (in the “factory” mill), and as domestics serving masters or managers running the fields and “factory” mill. **The combination of "field" and "factory" made the plantation regions of the Caribbean early islands of “capitalism” in the eighteenth-century world. It also made Caribbean plantations some of the most brutal places to work**—the average lifespan of a slave in St. Domingue was only 15 years.

By the eighteenth century, labor in the Caribbean had been deliberately and obsessively racialized. With the exception of a few managers and overseers, plantation workforces were entirely of African descent.

In Saint Domingue in 1750, there were nearly 150,000 slaves and fewer than 14,000 whites.

On the eve of the Haitian Revolution, 90% of the colony's population was enslaved. Roughly 40,000 whites ruled over 500,000 enslaved Africans, approximately 2/3rds of whom had recently arrived from Africa.

**So, in 1789, when whites in Saint-Domingue embraced the ideals of the French Revolution—liberty, equality, fraternity—in pursuit of their own interests, they were playing with fire.** After all, there was a broad current within Enlightenment thought that was explicitly against the idea of slavery. **Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau**—these towering figures of the French Enlightenment had all written novels and plays whose heroes were rebelling slaves, though the plots never ended in a post-slavery society with the former slaves living as free people.

The **French planters**, for their part, **were political opportunists, but they were not abolitionists.** Instead, what they demanded on the eve of the French Revolution was that the French colonies should have political representatives in the Estates General—France's national legislature back in Paris. These colonial planters hoped to fill such posts themselves.

Such a request was rejected as dangerous by the French authorities in both metropolitan Paris and colonial Saint Domingue. After all, if white deputies from the colonies were invited to participate in the creation of national policies, these new white deputies would put the colonies under the control of the Estates General [as opposed to the French Crown]. If the French colonies were under the jurisdiction of the Estates General, the system of slavery (upon which the entire sugar economy depended) might be open to attack by abolitionists and antislavery forces. We need to discuss these forces.

**But white colonial planters continued to press for what they saw as their political rights.** In Saint Domingue groups of white planters organized in secret and elected deputies. In almost all cases, free men of color, even those who were wealthy property owners (but not planters), were shut out. This was a sugar affair.

**These secretly organized deputies then went to Paris to agitate for admittance to the Estates General, which they eventually won. (They got 6 seats for Saint Domingue.)**

In August 1789, these Saint Domingue deputies—all of whom were white planters—wrote to their fellow planters in the colony: "People here [in Paris] are drunk with liberty." But their celebrations over gaining seats for themselves at the political table in Paris were overshadowed with fears about what "liberty" might mean in the colonies.

**Many other planters in Saint Domingue saw the ideals of the French Revolution as a clear threat to slavery and reacted to the rhetoric of "liberty" as if it were a disease from France, to be quarantined. Some proposed that "all blacks or mulattoes arriving from Europe be banned from entering Saint Domingue.”**

In April 1790, local officials in Haiti secretly confiscated and read mail addressed to mulattoes or slaves in order to uncover evidence of sedition or conspiracy.

**Of course, it was impossible to control the circulation of information. Even as attempts were being made to prevent information and people from moving across the Atlantic, many whites in the colonies responded with excitement to the revolutionary changes back in France.**

According to a surgeon named Antoine Dalmas, white French colonials "spoke loudly of liberty [even] in front of slaves" and "bitterly attacked privileges, prejudice and despotism."

**The poor landless whites of Saint Domingue—overseers and managers, small-time merchants—saw the French Revolution as an opportunity to express grievances against wealthy whites. When news of the fall of the Bastille arrived in the colony, some celebrated by pillaging island towns.**

**While the whites of Saint Domingue were busy carrying out their revolution, they reacted violently to the possibility of another radical revolution that threatened to turn their world upside down.**

Indeed, this was just the beginning of a war over the MEANING of the French Revolution itself—over **whether the laws of France would apply in the colonies as well as the mother country—and whether the very ideals of revolution actually meant universal human rights.**

**Haitian Insurrection of 1791, the start of another “American” revolution:**

It was in this broader context that a mass insurrection of slaves broke out in northern Haiti in August 1791. This insurrection soon spread to other parts of the island.

Bands of slaves, sometimes as big as 2,000 people, went from plantation to plantation, killing whites, burning houses, and torching cane fields. Haiti was, quite literally, on fire.

**A few weeks after the insurrection started, an insurgent was captured by a troop of white soldiers.** The insurgent tried to escape by saying he was innocent, but, according to one of the soldiers, when he "saw that his fate was sealed," he began to "laugh, sing, and joke" and "jeered at us in mockery." Finally, the white soldiers executed the insurgent, who "met death without fear or complaint."

When the soldiers searched the insurgent's body, they found "pamphlets printed in France, filled with commonplaces about the Rights of Man and the Sacred Revolution"; a "little sack full of hair, herbs, and bits of bone, which they call a fetish" (African relationship/Kongo). In all, the insurgent carried with him the newly universal law of liberty, ingredients for firing a gun, and a powerful religious amulet to call on the help and power of African spiritual ancestors.

1. Insurgent ideology

**Many planters believed the ideals of the French Revolution, spread by overenthusiastic whites, were responsible for bringing fire and carnage to the colonies.** There was a chorus of writers who blamed the revolt on the spread of egalitarian ideals within Saint Domingue, as if these ideals all by themselves had the power to set the colony aflame.

Of course, the insurgents had their own ideologies, their own (deeply African unifying) histories, and their own hopes for future freedom in the New World.

Early in the insurrection, one insurgent group presented a clear set of demands. They **approached a French officer and told him that they would surrender if "all the slaves should be made free."** They also made it clear that they were "determined to die, arms in hand, rather than to submit without a promise of liberty." French officials rejected the idea of setting the slaves of Saint Domingue free, but the official did offer amnesty to all slaves who returned to bondage on the plantations and denounce their leaders. When a group of 9 people—mainly whites—were sent to deliver this official response, 6 of them were killed by the insurgents.

**In a few cases, slave insurgents explicitly phrased their demands in the language of the Enlightenment.** When a group of slaves were questioned about the meetings they had attended just before the insurrection began, they said that "they wanted to enjoy the liberty they are entitled to by the Rights of Man and their King."

**What we have to understand is that insurgents in Haiti had complex reasons for calling on the French Revolution Rights of Man and the “enemy” King of France as their (contradictory) allies.**

**First, calling on the king did not necessarily mean insurgents had to reject the language of the French Revolution.** In 1791, France was still nominally a constitutional monarchy, not a republic, and many did not see the Rights of Man and the authority of the king as mutually exclusive.

**Second, insurgents often described their own African leaders as kings.** Indeed, the act of calling on the King of France was also informed by African political cultures, especially that of the K/Congo, where most of Haiti's slaves originated.

In Congolese political culture, there was a long-standing conflict over the nature of kingship, between traditions that emphasized a more authoritarian form of rule and others that limited the power of kings and provided for more decentralized forms of rule by a number of paramount or royal-family chiefs. **In other words, the naming of "kings" among the insurgents involved a transcultural dialogue between European and African visions of leadership and government.**

**Now we turn to Haitian insurgent military tactics:**

**Enslaved African people from the Congo also arrived with another kind of experience in Saint Domingue.** Many of them had been soldiers in the civil wars that ripped apart the kingdom of Kongo before they had been captured and sold into slavery. In other words, many slave insurgents who rose up in 1791 were "African veterans" who had knowledge and experience of warfare and knew how to shoot a gun.

**The military tactics of the Congo were different from those of European armies.** They involved organization into small, relatively independent groups, repeated attacks and retreats aimed at confusing the enemy and firing from behind bush cover no open field set-piece battles in the HR!). **In short, Congolese warfare was a lot like guerilla warfare—it was based on hit-and-run tactics and superior military intelligence collection and assessment, not on a massive firepower advantage.**

African veterans were not the only ones who brought military experience to the slave insurgents. **Free people of African descent who had served in the French colonial militias also joined the insurgents.** In fact, when French authorities in Haiti mobilized troops to put down the slave insurrection of 1791, they relied heavily on militias made up of mulattoes and free blacks. Some of these free-colored militias ended up joining the rebels.

**The insurgents of 1791 were a diverse group**—women and men, African-born and creole, overseer and field worker, slaves on mountain coffee plantations and sugar plantations. And they carried with them many different motivations and hopes. **Using violence against a violent system, they shattered the economy of one of the richest regions of the world.**

**A REVOLUTIONARY LEADER COMES TO THE FORE: Toussaint L'Ouverture (1743-1803)**

**One man who joined in the insurrection of 1791 WOULD soon become its leader. He was Toussaint Louverture**—"Toussaint the Opening" or "Toussaint the Beginning".

Toussaint had been born into slavery in 1743. As a slave, he worked as a coachman and took care of livestock. Sometime in the 1770s, Toussaint was emancipated by his plantation's manager. **When he joined the slave insurrection in 1791, Toussaint had already been a free man for nearly 20 years.** As a free-man he acquired a slave of his own, an African-born man named Jean-Baptiste, whom he freed in 1777.

**Legend has it that Toussaint's father was an African prince**, the second son of a West African Arada king (in an area located near present-day Ivory Coast) who had been captured and sent to Saint Domingue as a slave. Toussaint was this prince's oldest son. As a child, Toussaint learned the African language of his parents and was educated by his godfather, a free black named Pierre Baptiste who had been educated by missionaries. **Under Pierre Baptiste's guidance, Toussaint studied geometry, French, and some Latin.** By all accounts, Louverture was a brilliant political and military leader befitting a major figure in world history.

**It is tempting to paint Toussaint Louverture as a great hero of the Haitian Revolution, a former slave who liberated his black brothers and sisters from an oppressive social order.** And to some extent this is true. But all of us in this room are probably too sophisticated to believe in such straightforward tales of heroism. The **study of history shouldn't be reduced to the study of villains and heroes, or saints and sinners for that matter. The study of history is, above all, the study of ordinary complicated human beings.**

Yes, Toussaint Louverture was a brilliant political and military leader and a major figure in world history. But he was also rife with contradictions and inconsistencies. He was human.

**We discuss T. L’Ouverture’s Letter to the Directory, 1797**

**As was the case with the American Revolution, colonial unrest was like blood in the water.** **France's European rivals—Spain and Britain—saw the insurrection in Haiti as a chance to advance their own power.** Both the British and the Spanish fought to incorporate the rich colony of Saint Domingue into their own empires. The British sent thousands of troops to the Caribbean.

Meanwhile Spain supported the slave insurgents and their leader Toussaint Louverture by sending troops and supplies from their adjoining colony of Santo Domingo.

Toussaint, for his part, accepted Spanish support while it served his purposes. When it did not, he turned on his Spanish patrons. In 1793, he switched allegiance from Spain to France in exchange for the legal abolition of slavery, which the revolutionary government in France ratified in 1794.

For the next several years, Toussaint was the governor of the colony, which he successfully defended for France against the Spanish and English. **In order to maintain and rebuild the production of sugar and coffee, Toussaint sought to limit the liberty of the ex-slaves. He did this by constructing a coercive legal order that was meant to limit the ability of ex-slaves to move freely, acquire land, and escape plantation labor.**

Then in 1802, a new government in France—under Napoleon—moved to restore slavery in its colonies. Toussaint Louverture and his fellow generals resisted. The French successfully captured Toussaint, who died in a French colonial jail in 1803. But other rebel generals continued to fight and declared the independence of Haiti in 1804.

**By 1804 there were two independent nation-states in the Americas: the United States and Haiti.** The United States reasserted the privileges of slave owners, though in the face of significant internal opposition. Haiti wiped out the colonial planter class and asserted the priority of slave emancipation, and the basic idea of FREEDOM for every human being.

Toussaint Louverture's failure to construct a multiracial, egalitarian and democratic society in Haiti might strike us as confusing or tragic, or simply as a missed opportunity. I say this because of Toussaint Louverture's own background. But this was a failure that he shared with the leaders of every other postcolonial and post-revolutionary society in the Atlantic world. Although Toussaint had himself experienced slavery and was thus unique among Atlantic revolutionaries, his policies still resembled those of men such as Thomas Jefferson in the US and even Napoleon in France.

**The Atlantic Revolutions, then, did not necessarily produce the broadest Enlightenment ideals of liberty and social justice for all—that is for the millions of poor, the millions of women--or for the millions of people of color, particularly in the Atlantic zone’s New World territories. Instead, the Atlantic Revolutions produced new nation-states that served the interests of powerful (rising) elites (breaking from their monarchy and mercantilism) under the fluttering banner of liberty and justice, which remained a banner in the wind, above the realities of ordinary people on the ground**.