

WHAT IS A REVOLUTION?



Most societies change over time. Sometimes, change comes from the outside, like an invasion from a competing group of people or insects destroying a society's most important crop. Other times, these changes start from within. For example, a new invention might change how people do work in society, or a new idea might cause people to rethink how they live their lives. These changes can happen slowly, over time, and might not feel particularly big as they are happening. But sometimes these changes happen quickly and dramatically. When this happens, the change might be called a revolution.

The word “revolution” comes from the word “revolve,” which means to spin around or to orbit around. For example, the Earth's orbit revolves around the sun, and the moon revolves around the Earth. These changes impact people's experiences of the world – the temperature gets hotter or cooler, the weather gets drier or wetter, the days get longer or shorter. When revolutions occur in society, they also impact people's experiences in the world. In fact, when American colonists successfully won their war against the British Empire and established a new form of government, they saw themselves as turning the world upside down. This became known as the American Revolution.

TYPES OF REVOLUTIONS

There are many types of revolutions, including political, social, economic, and technological. A revolution could even be several of these together.

A **political revolution** is a complete overthrow of a government or a radical change in how the government relates to the people it governs. For example, in the French Revolution, the aristocracy (a class of people believed to be superior in wealth, rank, or intelligence) was overthrown by the middle and poorer classes.

A **social revolution** is a change in the way that people relate to one another.

Economic revolutions are complete changes in the way people work. For example, the Industrial Revolution in the United States and Europe completely changed the way that people manufactured products. Machines took over some of the repetitive jobs that workers had previously completed.

Economic revolutions are often fueled by **technological revolutions**, massive changes in the tools people use to accomplish tasks in their lives. The switch from mostly wired phones and computers to wireless ones is a recent example.

What we call the American Revolution was a political and social revolution, a radical change in how people related to each other and the people who governed them. But other words might apply here as well. A rebellion is an attempt – maybe organized and maybe by a large group of people – to remove a government or person in power. A revolt is an attempt to forcefully deny the authority of a person or government. Which word or words do you think best apply?

WHAT WAS THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION?

Historians use revolt, rebellion and revolution to describe the American Revolution, and they disagree among themselves about which word is best. They also disagree about exactly what the American Revolution was, and especially when it began and ended. People who helped found the nation also disagreed on this. For example, Philadelphia doctor and revolutionary Dr. Benjamin Rush argued in 1787 – the same year that the Constitution was drafted – that the Revolution and the War were two different things, and that even though the War was over, the Revolution was just getting started. Years later, John Adams argued that the Revolution actually started before the War. Why might Rush and Adams have held these views?

Before the American colonial struggle against the British in the 1760s – 1780s, scientists, philosophers and others in the Western world were beginning to imagine a new way of looking at the world. They argued that logic and reason were more important than faith and tradition, and that men had “natural rights” that should govern how they were treated, and how they treated each other. This was a different way of thinking for societies that had been governed by rulers who were born into their roles (a tradition called hereditary rule), by religious leaders, or both. In fact, before this time, many rulers – and the people they ruled – believed in the “divine right of kings,” which meant that God gave kings their authority to rule. The idea that people could select their own rulers or rebel against a king seemed to suggest that they were defying the God they worshipped. But in the Enlightenment Era or Age of Reason – two names historians use for this period – these ideas grew and spread.

Before the War began, the American colonies were a part of the British empire. They had a ruler who had been born into his role. There were two bodies of men in the British Parliament who were meant to represent them, the House of Lords and the House of Commons, but they had not elected either of them. After the war, Americans lived in independent but associated states and eventually agreed on a form of government where leaders were elected by the people – and more people were involved in choosing the leaders. Was this the revolution?

If so, what does that mean for women, free and enslaved people of African descent, and Native Americans? Before the War, most people of African descent in British North America were enslaved. The War provided opportunities for some of them to seek freedom, but most people of African descent in the United States remained enslaved until the Civil War, one hundred years later. The fight for equal treatment under the law

continues into the present day. Before the War, Native Americans fought to keep their land and families safe while European colonists moved further and further west. After the War, this struggle continued. Many saw their communities pushed onto reservations far from their homes and experienced attempts from colonists and their descendants to erase their cultures and traditions. Their fight to maintain their culture while being represented in American society continues today. Before the War, women were often seen as the property of their fathers or husbands and their opinions were not valued highly in public. It wasn't until 1920 that a federal law was passed acknowledging women's right to vote across the United States, but not all women had access to this right. And women continue to fight for equal pay for equal work and other rights today.

How we understand and define the American Revolution is often shaped by how we view our own world and by whose stories we choose to pay attention to in the past. Would you call the changes in the former British colonies of the late 18th century a revolution? Why or why not? Or was it a rebellion or revolt that didn't actually radically change the world of 18th-century individuals? Perhaps there is a third option to consider. As you think, ask yourself whose stories am I considering and why?