

# Unit 17

## Ideas Shape the World

### Section 1

#### Unit Materials

#### Questions To Consider

Question 1.

How do ideas affect human actions in ways that can change the world?

Question 2.

What happens to ideas when people from diverse areas interpret them differently, according to their own cultural settings?

Question 3.

What were the historical conditions that made it easy for ideas to spread widely and so quickly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries?

Question 4.

What is the relationship between the spread of ideas and charismatic individuals? In other words, is it the message or the messenger that gives ideas their power to effect change?

### The Big Picture

#### How is this topic related to Increasing Integration?

Ideas can integrate people by inspiring them to work toward a common goal, whether the goal is independence, religious purity, or equality. Ideas can also connect people across cultures, the way Simon Bolivar connected with Enlightenment thinkers during his travels in Europe.

#### How is this topic related to Proliferating Difference?

Ideas can also be a source of difference, because they can encourage people to draw distinctions between themselves and others who have different ideas.

### Unit Purpose

- Ideas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were transmitted around the world, but were interpreted differently in different cultural settings.
- Ideas can inspire both revolutionary change and a rejuvenation of traditional values.
- Ideas can effect profound change in individuals and societies.

- Ideas can gain special power when powerful or charismatic individuals transmit them.

## Unit Content Overview

Ideas by themselves are intellectual abstractions. However, when ideas inspire people to action, they become powerful agents of change in the material world. We often identify individuals with the discovery or creation of particular ideas — such as Isaac Newton and gravity — but those ideas only have an impact through the cumulative and collective actions of others. All ideas are products of particular times and places, of specific historical and cultural contexts. At the same time, ideas are not limited by these historical and cultural boundaries. Instead, ideas are frequently transmitted widely over time and space, where they take on new meanings in new settings. The people who transmit ideas are those who use them as tools for analysis or for action. Frequently, these are people who move between cultural boundaries themselves, including scholars, rebels, travelers, sailors, pilgrims, and journalists. Those who promote new ideas may not accept ideas in their entirety, but rather tend to selectively adapt or reject certain aspects that fit their own political, social, or cultural circumstances. In this way, ideas of all kinds are refracted through the lenses of specific cultures. However, these altered and adapted ideas can still be powerful agents of change, whether they advocate the creation of a new world or urge a revival of past ideals.

This unit explores the creation, transmission, and adaptation of ideas — as well as the actions they inspired — in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This period was especially abundant in the transmission of ideas because an increasingly global economy facilitated the transportation of peoples and ideas across oceans and continents. As a result of this global economy, ideas as diverse as the philosophies of the European Enlightenment and the doctrines of a new reform-minded Islam inspired social and political rebellions in many parts of the world. Indeed, economic and social links within both the Atlantic world and the dar al-Islam provided avenues for the easy exchange of ideas across all parts of each region. These regions were so diverse, however, that ideas were rarely transplanted unchanged into new cultural contexts. Even so, when opportunities presented themselves, individuals with access to new ideas strove to put them into action in a wide variety of places. Yet, because of the process of adaptation and the diverse range of situations where ideas were applied, the results of such action proved to be quite different across both time and space.

## Unit References

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## Global Historical Context

- Time Period: 1700–1900
- In the Atlantic World, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were a time of rapid political, economic, and social change. Revolution in North America in 1775 helped spur the French Revolution in 1789, which itself fueled later revolutions in Haiti and South America. Beginning in 1780, industrialization also resulted in social and economic change. Elsewhere in the world, China under the Qing dynasty (est. 1644) enjoyed a period of stability, prosperity, and demographic growth. The same was true for much of the rest of East Asia. However, by the mid-nineteenth century, Western interventions in both China and Japan inaugurated a new period of instability and change. In the Islamic world, the three great Islamic empires declined. The Safavid Empire collapsed completely in 1722; the Mughal Empire lost power to the British in India by 1763; and the Ottoman Empire — although it continued to exist — was increasingly subject to the whims of European powers.

### AP Themes

- Examines interactions in economics and politics by focusing on the connections between Atlantic revolutions in North America, France, Haiti, and South America.
- Explores change and continuity by looking at the changes revolutionary movements set in motion as well as the ways that revolutionary ideals were incorporated into existing cultures.
- Discusses cultural and intellectual developments by exploring the ideas and impulses that inspired people to work for — and fight for — social and political change.
- Focuses on the changing functions of states, because the Atlantic revolutions led to the emergence of new types of states, encouraging the growth of modern nationalism.

## Related Units

- Unit 7. The Spread of Religions: How do religions interact, adopt new ideas, and adapt to diverse cultural circumstances? This unit looks at the evolutions of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam as these religions moved across cultures; absorbed new believers, beliefs, and practices; and transformed the peoples and places they encountered. It focuses on the missionaries, pilgrims, and converts who were the agents of these religions in motion. It is related to Unit 17 because it explores religious ideas as well as the human agents that transmit these ideas across cultural frontiers.
- Unit 14. Land and Labor Relationships: From Southeast Asia to Russia to the Latin American frontiers, systems of land and labor provided a diversity of ways for societies to maintain the status quo — or expand, utilize, or exploit what they valued. This unit places slavery and conquest in a wider global spectrum. It is related to Unit 17 because, like ideas, labor systems were transported into new settings across the Atlantic — where they were also adapted to suit local conditions.
- Unit 18. Rethinking the Rise of the West: This unit takes up the debate surrounding Europe's role in the creation of the world system that dominated much of the globe through the twentieth century. Interviews with authors of key works in this ongoing debate

— such as Ken Pomeranz, David Landes, and Andre Gunder Frank — are presented as we examine the evidence behind different explanations of Europe’s rise and their implications for understanding how historical interpretation works. It is related to Unit 17 because the notion of the “rise of the West” is partially dependent on ideas about the exceptional superiority of European Enlightenment ideals.

- Unit 23. People Shape the World: Once upon a time, the substance of history was the work of great men. Now the broader sweep of world history provides a different perspective. This episode examines the role of individual and collective action in shaping the world through the lives of such diverse figures as Ayatollah Khomeini, Mao Zedong, and Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo. It is related to Unit 17 because it explores the role of human agency in transmitting ideas in order to effect change.

## Section 2

### Video-Related Materials

#### Video Segment 1: Ben Franklin and Transatlantic Revolutions

In eighteenth-century Europe, thinkers influenced by recent developments in scientific theory sought to subject all social and cultural institutions to reasonable, scientific scrutiny. Most of these thinkers concluded that all societies could improve if they were based on the principles of freedom, equality, and happiness. These ideas were central to what became known as the Enlightenment. Although Enlightenment ideas originated in Europe, they were quickly transmitted to the Americas through the social, political, and economic networks of Europe’s colonial empires. This segment looks at the effects of the transatlantic transmission of Enlightenment ideas through the example of Benjamin Franklin, a North American colonist. Franklin absorbed Enlightenment ideas, and he sought to conduct his life according to the principles of rational scientific inquiry, individual improvement, and civic duty. Franklin’s scientific discoveries and his cosmopolitan understanding of Enlightenment ideas eventually made him famous on both sides of the Atlantic. He traveled widely in Europe, where fellow Enlightenment thinkers enthusiastically received him. When the North American colonies grew discontented with Britain, Franklin initially believed that Britain would remedy the situation by responding to rationality and reason. When this turned out to be a false assumption, Franklin became a critical player in the struggle for North American independence — a struggle that successfully used ideas that originated in Europe to break away from Europe.

#### Video Segment 2: Revolutions in the Americas

Enlightenment ideas also had dramatic effects in both the Caribbean and in South America. This segment uses the examples of the Haitian revolution and the independence movements led by Simon Bolivar to explore these effects. In Haiti, Enlightenment ideas — especially as reflected by the French Revolution — were received differently by the different social groups on the island. While whites tended to interpret Enlightenment ideals in terms of better colonial representation or greater social equality between whites, free blacks interpreted them in terms of racial equality. Meanwhile, slaves interpreted Enlightenment ideas in terms of emancipation. These competing interpretations led to conflict, and in 1791 slaves and free blacks engineered a massive revolt. Toussaint L’Ouverture, a free black, emerged to lead the struggle. Although L’Ouverture himself died in a French prison in 1801, his followers eventually defeated the French and declared themselves citizens of the new republic of Haiti — the first nation in history to grant full citizenship to former slaves. Enlightenment ideals also influenced Simon Bolivar, a wealthy South American plantation owner, who became committed to freeing the region from Spanish control. Bolivar, who like Benjamin Franklin traveled widely in European Enlightenment circles, sought to adapt Enlightenment ideas to the particular situation of the South American colonies. Bolivar did not trust the masses to rule, and in any case he believed that the class and racial divisions between Europeans, Native Americans, and blacks in South America would doom republican-style

governments to failure. Instead, he chose a combination of representative government and authoritarian leadership — which in turn created a unique social and political landscape in South America.

### Video Segment 3: Islamic Revitalization Movements

Sometimes, new ideas emerge that urge a return to older ideals rather than novel revolutionary change. This segment explores this phenomenon through the example of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, an Arabian Islamic cleric of the eighteenth century. Al-Wahhab came to believe that Islam had fallen into a degraded state, and that it needed to be returned to its original pure state. This return, he argued, could only be accomplished by focusing on the words and principles of the prophet Muhammad as told in the Koran. Like Franklin and Bolivar, al-Wahhab’s beliefs were shaped by his education and by two decades of travel, that he witnessed first-hand what he believed to be a lack of piety among many Muslims. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, al-Wahhab’s ideas had gained a wide following. Pilgrims who encountered al-Wahhab’s ideas at Mecca then transmitted them to their home cultures in places as diverse as Indonesia, India, and West Africa. In these new settings, Wahhabism was creatively adapted to local realities. One of these adaptations was led by the Muslim cleric Usman dan Fodio in what is now Nigeria. Dan Fodio’s mission to purify Islam and to wage holy war on unbelievers led to a revolt that overthrew the ruling class and established a confederation of Islamic states in the early 1800s. The revolt was just one example of the ways that ideas generated in one place could inspire revolutionary change in another.

### Perspectives on the Past: Hidden Voices of Women

What effects did Enlightenment ideas have on ideas about women? Historian Sue Peabody argues that, for centuries, philosophers and historians ignored women’s ideas. During the Enlightenment, however, ideas about the rational nature of humanity opened a space for new thinking about women. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published her ideas about the need for educational equality between men and women. Although these ideas did not produce immediate results, they proved inspirational for the development of later feminist thought.

## Video Details

### Who Is Interviewed

- Sue Peabody
- Peter Winn
- Richard Bulliet

### Primary Source Materials Featured in the Video

- Mary Wollstonecraft, English feminist writer
- Benjamin Franklin, American philosopher
- Toussaint L’Ouverture, Haitian revolutionary leader
- Usman Dan Fodio, West African Islamic leader

## Program Contents

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14:13	24:42	Video Segment 3. <i>Islamic Revitalization Movements</i>
24:43	25:52	Perspectives on the Past: <i>Hidden Voices of Women</i>
25:53	28:25	Show close and program credits