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Historical Significance in Ideological Shifts

Many events in history have short term, insignificant consequences, and people seemingly continue living their lives similar to the way they did before. However, some events are so significant that they change the direction of history by changing people’s thoughts from a fatalistic worldview to specific ideas about how to take action and control their own destiny. The Spanish conquest of the Americas, the Scientific Revolution, and the American Revolution are examples of three such transformative events.

The Spanish conquest of the Americas changed Europe by opening up new lands to be exploited for personal and national gain. Columbus was an explorer for Spain trying to find a sea route to India who instead “discovered” the new world. In a letter to the king and queen of Spain, he claimed he could give them as many resources, including gold and slaves, as they wanted.[[1]](#footnote-0) Some people might argue that this was merely an expansion of Spain’s already vast trade network, but Columbus spread the transformational idea that the New World had people and resources that could be exploited. Other Spaniards came after Columbus with the clear intent to conquer. After killing the Cholula, Cortes went into Tenochtitlan, where the Spaniards were greeted by Montezuma, who showed them hospitality, which the Spaniards took advantage of. The Aztec account says that “The Spaniards searched through the whole treasure house, questioning and quarrelling, and seized every object they thought was beautiful”[[2]](#footnote-1). Even though Montezuma was being generous and welcoming, the Spaniards feared that that might change at any time. A few of the Spanish captains argued to Cortes that “the hearts of men are very fickle, especially among the Indians, and begged him not to trust the goodwill and affection that Montezuma was showing us, because from one hour to another it might change”[[3]](#footnote-2). The Spaniards’ uncertainty of Montezuma’s intentions and their desire for wealth led them to attack first. The success of this attack established the idea that resources could be taken and people could be exploited. Previously, Spain had dealt with its global trading partners on a roughly equal footing. However, this experience in the New World led the Spaniards to take advantage of the people and resources.

Another example of a historical turning point is the scientific revolution. As Jack Goldstone, modern historian, notes, before the scientific revolution, “any inconsistencies [between science and religious or philosophical beliefs] were generally resolved in favor of preserving the established religion”. However, at the dawn of the scientific revolution, many things were happening to challenge established scientific and religious beliefs. Goldstone argues, “Two major directions were proposed to deal with this dilemma - rationalism and empiricism”[[4]](#footnote-3). Rationalism is the method of using logic and reasoning. Empiricism is the method of gathering evidence by testing and observation. The combination of rationalism and empiricism is the scientific method. The Royal Society of London was an organization that used the scientific method to do research and then published the results of that research. Newton, a scientist at the Royal Society of London, wrote about the scientific method. “We are to admit no more causes of natural things, than such as are both true and sufficient to explain their appearances”[[5]](#footnote-4). Instead of jumping to conclusions, the scientific method allowed people to use logic and evidence. This change in the process of thought and research allowed for scientific advancement. For example, Lady Mary Wortley Montague observed smallpox inoculation in Turkey. She described and promoted the method in a letter to her friend. “I am patriot enough to take pains to bring this useful invention into fashion in England”[[6]](#footnote-5). This technology was something that already existed in Turkey, but her endorsement helped to convince medical professionals in England to adopt and improve the procedure and even eventually apply it to other diseases. Instead of just accepting death and disease as inevitable, doctors were able to use science to find solutions to problems. This is an example of the way the scientific revolution changed people’s view of the natural world from immutable to something that could be changed.

The American revolution changed people’s ideas by changing their perception of their ability to determine the course of their own government. To understand the American revolution it is first important to go back to the Enlightenment, from which many of the American revolutionary ideas are derived. The Enlightenment continued the ideas of rationalism established in the scientific revolution and applied that process to thought. A French philosopher named Rousseau suggested the idea of “a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone and remain as free as before”[[7]](#footnote-6). After reading ideas such as this, the Americans came to the conclusion that they had natural rights that the British were denying to them. The Americans then wrote the Declaration of Independence, in which they stated that “under absolute despotism, is their [the citizens’] right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security”[[8]](#footnote-7). This was an idea established earlier in enlightenment philosophy, but the Americans took it one step further. They applied the ideas of equality and rebellion against injustice to real life by declaring independence from the British government. Their success inspired other people in similar circumstances to rebel. The Third Estate in France was oppressed by the upper class and “resolved to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of man, in order that such declaration, continually before all members of the social body, may be a perpetual reminder of their rights and duties”[[9]](#footnote-8). The attempted revolution was not as successful, but the ideas of liberty, equality, and revolution continued to spread such that the slaves in the French colony of Saint Domingue also revolted. The slaves became free, but when it seemed like their freedom might be taken away again, Tousaint L’Overture wrote the French government a letter reminding them that “we have known how to face dangers to obtain our liberty, we shall know how to brave death to maintain it”[[10]](#footnote-9). These revolutions marked a shift in ideology because people learned to stand up against oppression. Instead of just accepting oppression, people took action to control their own destiny.

The Spanish conquest of the Americas, the scientific revolution, and the American revolution all are examples of historical events that changed people’s perspectives. Prior to these events in history, people saw the world as simply an immutable part of their existence. These events changed the way people viewed the world as they realized that they could change things about the world and about their own lives. The change from a fatalistic worldview to ideas about how to control one’s own destiny allowed people to change the course of history rather than just passively accept it.

1. “First Voyage of Columbus,” in *Worlds of History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin, 2013) ed. Kevin Reilly, 594. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* in *Worlds of History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin, 2013) ed. Kevin Reilly, 624. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Bernal Diaz, *The Conquest of New Spain* in *Worlds of History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin, 2013) ed. Kevin Reilly, 620. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Jack Goldstone, *Why Europe? The Rise of the West in World History 1500-1850* in *Worlds of History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin, 2013) ed. Kevin Reilly, 729 and 735. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Isaac Newton, *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* in *Worlds of History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin, 2013) ed. Kevin Reilly, 743. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Lady Mary Wortley Montague, *Letter on Turkish Smallpox Inoculation* in *Worlds of History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin, 2013) ed. Kevin Reilly, 754. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract, Or Principles of Political Right* in *Worlds of History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin, 2013) ed. Kevin Reilly, 775. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. *A Documentary History of the United States* in *Worlds of History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin, 2013) ed. Kevin Reilly, 780. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. *A Documentary History of the French Revolution* in *Worlds of History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin, 2013) ed. Kevin Reilly, 784. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Toussaint L’Ouverture, “Letter to the Directory, November 5, 1797” in *Worlds of History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin, 2013) ed. Kevin Reilly, 775. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)