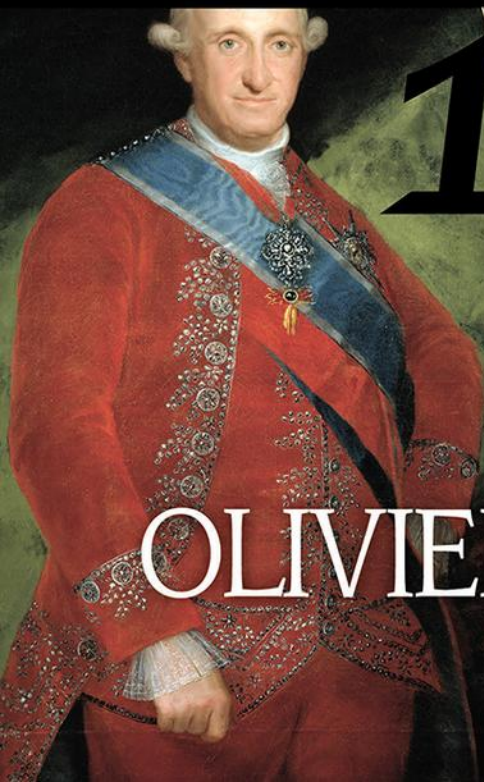




The World in

1800



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Introduction

TWO WORLDS, ONE WORLD

Two centuries, two worlds: In 1700, people everywhere were prepared to obey their hereditary rulers; in 1776, the U.S. Declaration of Independence claimed freedoms that came to be seen as everyone's birthright. In 1789, for the first time in Europe, the French Revolution asserted that the basic necessities of civilized life included equality before the law, liberty, and the right for every people to choose its government. By 1800, the United States had a constitution that guaranteed this. France was just entering an era of dictatorship, but the way of life that had prevailed in the old European monarchies was clearly seen to be doomed.

That sense of progress, of the superiority of the modern age, was widespread throughout Europe and the Americas. Science, freed at last from the shackles of religion, had begun to explore and explain the world. Manufactures were giving way to industries in which new, advanced techniques prevailed. The middle class was expanding rapidly, and education was spreading. Wars, of course, continued, and so did the slave trade: The world, in 1800, was no paradise, but there was a new hope for change and improvement. Even the most reactionary rulers knew it. They hardly liked it, but they could not fail to understand the difference between the recent past and the present.

There was still a radical separation between the well-to-do and the rest of the population. Those without capital or significant property were the overwhelming mass of the population from about 97 percent in Central Europe to about 80 percent in Great Britain, but only 10 or 15 percent in the United States. The United States was seen as the land of hope. Elsewhere, the rich, the noble, the powerful were highly visible: They ruled countries, built palaces, and were patrons of the arts. Because of that, they have remained visible. The poor tend to be almost invisible: They wrote no letters and left no memoirs.

For everyone, life was radically different from what we know at the end of the twentieth century. Many women died in childbirth - rich as well as poor, of course, but the poor had greater chances of infection; and for them, medical care was nonexistent. Wounds, most often, did not heal; broken bones were set, usually badly. Pain was an everyday presence.

For the poor, or nearly poor, the world was a small place. They

knew about their village or small town; they heard the local gossip, and rumors about the great events from the world outside. Some, perhaps a third, were literate in France and in England; in the rest of Europe, most were not. In those years, on the Continent, or in India, China, or Africa, the world often intruded suddenly into their lives as armies marched back and forth. Set against this, however, was their sense of belonging to the village community, to an extended family. Comfort was available when things went badly; rejoicing was often collective. As the world changed, and the poor began to understand that they could be free, they were still sustained by the traditional structures on which they had always relied, but they were also able to look forward to a time when they would be in charge of their own lives.

The world was still a simple place. Except in the big cities, only basic consumer goods were available: cloth, needles, thread, some instruments with which to work wood or metal, pottery, knives, and not much else. Food was grown locally: Many villages still functioned as almost closed economic units. Houses had no plumbing, no services built in. That made them less comfortable than they are today, but it also meant that they were cheaper and easier to build and to buy. There were very few machines, of even the simplest kind. Transport was by horse or sailing ship. There was no machine a reasonably intelligent person could not understand with a little effort.

Still, there were signs of impending change in the structure of this simple, well-ordered world: When, in the 1790s, Babeuf preached that all property should be held in common, he began stirring aspirations that eventually produced cataclysmic change. When the French armies appeared, they often brought with them new ideas about the structure of society - and the rich began to worry. Revolution was thought to be catching; and that, in the end, brings the world of 1800 closest to that of today: Dimly, fearfully, the poor began to see that they might one day claim a better standard of living.

Just as much of life in Europe was primitive, so it was in the rest of the world. There was not a great deal of difference between peasants in France, in Mexico, or in India. That sort of similarity, though, tends to divide rather than unite: It creates small, closed-in communities, distrustful of their neighbors and

uninterested in anything far away.

It took, often, as much as six months to go from London to Calcutta, more than six weeks to go from Le Havre to Boston. If you were rich and could afford your own traveling carriage, the fees of the postilions, and the charges for the - horses, you might get to Saint Petersburg from Paris in ten to twelve days, but that rate of speed was thought to be remarkable. And, of course, letters went no faster - and postage was expensive. How then, without phones, faxes, computers, and television, could the world have become one?

In many ways, it was not. Indeed, some of it was utterly unknown to any given group of people. The Europeans knew nothing about the interior of Africa, and very little about the islands in the Pacific; the Chinese and the Japanese knew very little about Europe and almost nothing about the Americas. Africans, kidnapped from their continent by the slave traders, did not even suspect the existence of the countries to which they were taken, and so it went.

In spite of all this, for the first time ever, the world was becoming one, united by war and by the survival of that most ancient of evils, slavery. Already during the Seven Years' War, from 1756 to 1763, fighting had ranged across the continents and across the oceans, but it had been disorganized and relatively brief, a series of spasms rather than a new sense of connection. The wars of the French Revolution, from 1792 to 1815, changed all that. Now the leading nations - France and Great Britain particularly - had worldwide strategies. What happened in Rio, Cairo, Calcutta, or Cape Town mattered to the governments in Paris and London; and each movement of the adversaries caused consequences thousands of miles away.

Sometimes these consequences were utterly unexpected: When Napoléon invaded Spain, he did not think that he was bringing about the independence of her American colonies; when the British government decided to conquer most of India, it did not know it was founding an empire. Most of the time, however, these interventions were meant to further an immediate goal. Communications might be slow, but in Whitehall or at the Tuileries Palace, they thought in terms of the entire world.