

liberalism definition ap world history

Liberalism is a political and economic philosophy that emerged in the late 17th and 18th centuries, significantly influencing the development of modern democratic societies. Rooted in the Enlightenment ideals of individual liberty, equality, and justice, liberalism advocates for the protection of individual rights and freedoms against the encroachment of government and societal norms. In the context of AP World History, understanding liberalism is crucial because it has shaped political ideologies, movements, and revolutions across the globe, marking a departure from feudalism and authoritarian rule towards more participatory forms of governance.

The Historical Context of Liberalism

The Enlightenment and its Influence

Liberalism emerged during the Enlightenment, a period characterized by intellectual exploration and the questioning of traditional authority. Key Enlightenment thinkers laid the groundwork for liberal thought:

1. John Locke: Advocated for natural rights, including life, liberty, and property. He argued that governments are formed to protect these rights, and should be accountable to the people.
2. Voltaire: Championed freedom of speech and religion, emphasizing the importance of individual expression and tolerance.
3. Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Introduced the concept of the social contract, suggesting that individuals consent to form a society that protects their rights while promoting the common good.

These ideas were revolutionary, challenging the divine right of kings and advocating for a system where power derives from the consent of the governed.