**Another Voice Podcast with Eric Nelson**

**to accompany Strayer/Nelson, *Ways of the World*, Third Edition**

**What in a Word? The Language of Revolution (Chapter 16)**

**SLIDE 16.1**

What’s in a word? For historians, words can be quite revealing.

People who study intellectual, social and political change pay careful attention to the evolution of language because the shifts in the meaning or use of words and the coining of new terms often reflect deeper changes in the core ideas on which a society is organized.

**SLIDE 16.2 [Image: Representing the Declaration]**

By this measure, the Atlantic Revolutions are of fundamental importance. Many terms in our current political vocabulary entered our language during this period of remarkable change. The modern sense of the word 'revolution' for instance is an eighteenth century creation. Prior to that, in the seventeenth century, revolution was a scientific term meaning a single rotation of a sphere, but by the nineteenth it had come to mean the overthrowing of one political system and its replacement by another.

More than any other, the French Revolution coined new political terms that are still in use today. The ‘left’ and ‘right’ of the political spectrum, for instance, refer to where groups of deputies sat in the French Assembly's debating chamber. To the right sat more conservative revolutionaries committed to a constitutional monarchy, to the left those who advocated for more dramatic change.

Other terms have also found permanent homes in our political lexicon like reactionary, a supporter of the restoration of the French monarchy, and terrorist, a supporter of the reign of terror which saw tens of thousands deemed enemies of the revolution executed. These terms speak to the relatively radical nature of the French Revolution compared to the American Revolution, and to the influence of the French Revolution on later movements in Haiti and Latin America as well as Russia, China and elsewhere in the 20th century.

**SLIDE 16.3 [Image: Revolution and the Reversal of Class Roles]**

The new political terms and the evolving meaning of older words reflected a fundamental shift in the political order of the Atlantic world. The revolutions and many of the changes in vocabulary were inspired by a couple of ideas drawn from Enlightenment thought. The first was that all human beings possessed inalienable rights. There was some variation on exactly what these rights were, but certain basic principles—including liberty, equality, religious tolerance, republicanism and free trade—were central to the concept. The second was popular sovereignty, the idea that a government and its laws should reflect the will of the people who lived in the state.

While these concepts and the terms that describe them are now firmly embedded in modern political culture, it is important to remember that at the time, these were ideas only and not in practice as no major state in the world adhered to these ideas.

Indeed, until the Atlantic Revolutions most societies were organized around a completely different set of principles: namely that all people were not equal with a few possessing special privileges while most did not, and that the state, which was sanctioned by God, existed above the people to maintain order.

The full implications of these new ideas took generations to manifest themselves in such developments as the end of slavery and women’s suffrage. Advocates for these causes proved skillful in drawing on the new political vocabulary established during the Atlantic Revolutions to frame their claims to inalienable rights and popular sovereignty. In short, words matter!