

Identity & Culture in 18th-Century Europe

How did people living in Europe and its colonies imagine their identities in the eighteenth century? And how did discussions of identity interact with new calls for equality and rights?

In this era, Europe and its colonies all had deeply unequal and hierarchical societies. Tradition and social structures supported the view that aristocrats should hold power over peasants, Christians over Jews, men over women, masters over slaves, and Europeans over non-Europeans. But the Enlightenment, the major cultural movement of the 1700s, produced debate on inequality and “natural human rights.”

We will look at how all sorts of women and men, from slaves to aristocrats, reflected on their position in society, their sense of self, and perceptions of injustice.

Europe’s increasing global empire also played a pivotal role in this story. It produced both European self-questioning and devastating power systems, such as plantation slavery.



*Women's rights advocate
Mary Wollstonecraft*



Celebrating the 272nd birthday of abolitionist author Olaudah Equiano

At the end of the course, we will examine the longer-term significance of these debates by looking at the French and Haitian Revolutions.