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THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History
of Modern Europe, 1500-2000



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2.4.2 Inequalities in Modern History (ca. 1800–1900)

Esme Cleall and Juan Pan-Montojo

Introduction

At the dawn of the modern period, European society continued to be structured by sharp inequalities, some of them inherited from earlier periods and some of them new. Many different hierarchies, including those of class, gender, 'race', and disability intersected and overlapped, creating complex patterns of privilege and disadvantage throughout the nineteenth century and across Europe. These forms of inequality were in some cases connected and interlocking. As well as that, they changed over time. Here we tackle four main axes of inequality: (1) class and economic inequality, (2) gender and sexual inequality, (3) forms of inequality supposedly justified by ideas about race, religion, and ethnicity, and (4) those that were orientated around ideas about disability. However, whilst our structure is organised around these four areas of concern, they neither cover all the forms of inequality present in nineteenth-century Europe, nor should they be taken as discrete categories. Issues of inequality in this period were, as today, profoundly relational.

Class and Economic Forms of Inequality

Thanks to the collection and analysis of data by economist Thomas Piketty and his team of collaborators, we know that at the end of the eighteenth century, economic inequality was very high in Europe. The nineteenth century saw liberal revolutions and diverse reforms that brought about the end of legal privileges in some European societies, the end of serfdom where it existed in Central and Eastern Europe between 1848 and 1865, and that gradually opened social elites up to new groups almost everywhere. Yet inequality

did not diminish. By the end of the long nineteenth century, both property and income were at least as unequally distributed as they had been at its beginning—and very often even more so. Moreover, European economic growth was based on the transfer of income from the wider world, as a return of financial, commercial, and industrial investments. European inequality was fed by flows from formal and informal colonies and by asymmetric exchanges that by 1914 covered almost all the regions in the world.

As our references to revolutions, reforms, and growth imply, the persistence of inequality did not mean the reproduction of ancient social hierarchies. The various legal devices that sustained the property of aristocrats and members of the clergy were gradually abolished or reshaped and, almost everywhere, rich merchants, bankers, industrialists, and other affluent proprietors joined the ranks of the social elite. The social prestige of aristocratic titles and the political entitlements connected to them did not disappear. Many noble families kept their estates and some accumulated new wealth thanks to their urban property, to mining projects, or to the business opportunities presented by their gainful social and political connections. However, new families benefitting from social dynamism and economic changes also took part in enjoying the privileges of aristocrats, sometimes marrying into old, established families.

At the bottom of society, new forms of destitution were born from the weakening of communitarian resources and links, the differentiation of peasant groups, and the growing deficits of nutrition and sanitation in many urban areas throughout Europe. There has been a long debate among historians on the living standards during industrialisation, with no clear and general results. However, we know that during most of the nineteenth century some indicators point towards a lower quality of life in urban areas, the so-called urban penalty. Growing public concern over the 'social question' was multiplied by a burgeoning literature that portrayed the 'dangerous classes' as a fuel of crime, sex work, and forced or free emigration overseas. This became a common element all over Europe, including countries where industrialisation had not taken place. We cannot tell what happened with much of the rural population: even where they had more access to property, as in many countries, it seems that their average consumption increased only very slowly and underwent setbacks. Villages tended to become more unequal micro-societies, since the privatisation or nationalisation of common goods, as well as the commodification of natural resources and human labour, widened the distance between the elites and the lower groups in rural communities. Where serfdom had been the generalised condition of peasants, emancipation offered some of them the possibility to accumulate certain wealth and other forms of capital and to distinguish themselves from their peers. At the

same time, the middle classes—integrated by shopkeepers, professionals, civil servants, military, artists, and other new categories—increased their demographic weight and social influence in most countries, although their size and material conditions varied greatly from place to place.

All in all, social mobility was greater in the early stages of industrialisation and after major socio-political changes. In the last decades of the century and during the Belle Époque, class barriers might have become more rigid, a fact that would partly account—together with the expansion of suffrage—for the relative success of working-class and agrarian movements in a highly unequal world.

Gender and Sexuality

Liberalism was deeply rooted in gender differentiation. Prevailing views of gendered roles spread through Christian churches and Muslim and Jewish communities were gradually replaced in the nineteenth century by new secular discourses that combined images inherited from religion with new ‘scientific’ approaches to the nature of women and, therefore, of masculinity. Civil and commercial codes, statutes, and jurisprudence translated these changes into new norms, defining roles and appropriate and inappropriate behaviours in a sharper manner than in early modern Europe.

In most European societies, the image of separate spheres became very powerful, especially among the middle classes and, through them, in public opinion. However, what this separation actually meant for the daily life of men and women varied greatly from country to country, from class to class, and from one religious group to another. Despite those differences, women were second-class citizens on every level. They had less access (if any) to formal education, they earned less when they worked for a wage, and they were subordinated to men in workshops and farms. Women could not dispose of family goods without paternal or marital permission and often were discriminated by inheritance laws or customs, while their sexual behaviour was subject to a more rigid discipline. Social habits reinforced by norms turned women into permanent minors, ostensibly protected by—and of course subordinated to—their male relatives.

It is true that scientific discourses, liberalism, and (even more so) democratic and socialist projects held a progressive and emancipatory narrative of society that opened the path to new views on the relationship between genders, and eventually to new social practices. The growth of cultural and educational markets created some spaces for women writers, dramatic actresses, or singers. State-building and nation-building processes allocated cultural and

political tasks to women as mothers of future citizens, which demanded their civic formation, whilst concerns about the 'social question' increased the value of motherhood and supported those who demanded some kind of education for women. However, the existence or creation of these windows of opportunity for women, especially for middle-class ones, sometimes triggered social attitudes and legal norms that veered towards closing or limiting the disruption of socially accepted gender roles.

Religion, 'Race', Ethnicity

The nineteenth century was a period in which 'race' was profoundly influential in shaping questions of identity and structuring inequality. Overseas, race was used to justify the gaping inequalities of empire, patterns of exploitation that included the transatlantic slave trade, and the reappropriation of land across the globe. Back in the European metropolises, the language of racial difference was also used to articulate other forms of inequality such as that based on class or ethnicity. The language of racial difference was used to frame perceptions of working-class irreligion. Missionary organisations, important vectors of information about the overseas empire, also performed extensive work amongst those they called the 'heathen at home'.

Ideas about ethnicity were intimately bound up with questions of religion. Even though almost all European states kept an established church or a state religion, different legal reforms gradually introduced religious tolerance and some even accepted equality before the law of all citizens whatever their religious adscription. Belonging to religious minorities entailed social discrimination and often legal barriers that banned access to certain positions in the military, in politics, and in the professional world. Protestantism became a key part of what it meant to be British, for example, despite substantive Catholic populations, particularly in Ireland, and minority Jewish populations. Irish Catholics were seen as so very different from English Protestants as to constitute an entirely separate 'race' or 'ethnicity' from Anglo-Saxon. Over the course of the century, with the development of Fenianism and Irish nationalism, these tensions, whilst taking on new inferences, continued to remain important and, amongst other things, shaped attitudes to migrants from Ireland who migrated elsewhere in the United Kingdom, particularly to large cities.

State-building nearly always implied the choice of a language as the state language, and as such its becoming the language for the school system, the language of courts, the language of the military forces, the language of political institutions, and so on. Those who did not master the state language faced

a strong barrier in their relationship with civil servants and a real obstacle to climbing the social ladder. In Britain, for example, English, which already held legal and political dominance, increasingly displaced the indigenous languages of Irish Gaelic, Scots Gaelic, and Welsh, which were discriminated against in the legal system and outright banned in many schools. In some cases, children were punished for using mother tongues other than English, and there were a great many cultural disadvantages to not being able to speak English. Very often, when a linguistic group had a cultural elite of its own, its members organised a defence of the collective culture that could lead to the creation of regionalist or nationalist movements, as happened in the Austrian Empire, the Russian Empire, Belgium, and Spain.

Jewish migration across Europe increased over the course of the nineteenth century in part due to pogroms and other antisemitic violence in Russia. Within this timeframe, antisemitism became increasingly laden with ideas about 'racial' as well as religious difference, as demonstrated by antisemitic cartoons and caricatures which increasingly depicted Jewish people as being ethnically different. Whilst some historians have focused on the specific roots of antisemitism in Germany due to the later rise of Nazism, antisemitism was widespread in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe. In France, where a strong tradition of anti-Jewish and eventually antisemitic literature developed following the different measures that emancipated Jews, the Dreyfus Affair (1894–1906) revealed deep schisms in society over questions about Jewishness and belonging to the nation. In Britain, Jewish migrants, who largely moved to major cities, particularly London, were used as cheap labour. New Jewish migrants, mainly of Ashkenazi origin, who started arriving from 1880 onwards, tended to remain distinct from the established British Jewish community, with the former occupying a more impoverished and less enfranchised position. Here we can strongly see the relationship between class, religion and ethnicity, as the hostility towards Jewish migrants in part arose from their impoverished position and in part contributed to it.

All over Europe, Romani people faced discrimination in social and legal terms. Industriousness, honest ways of earning a living, and other new socio-political understandings of what was 'proper' and 'improper' effectively criminalised their activities. The nomadic way of life of many Roma and Sinti people excluded them from political rights at all levels, even after the introduction of universal male suffrage, because those rights were associated with permanent residence. Racist discourses cast them as members of the European underworld or, alternatively, as primitive people. Liberalism therefore did not bring about the emancipation of the dispersed Roma and Sinti groups.



Fig. 1: Johan Braakensiek, "Zola en de zaak-Dreyfus", Rijksmuseum.nl, 1898, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.771622>. This drawing shows how Zola literally pulls the personification of truth or veritas out of a well, while the personification of humanity or humanitas crowns him for his deed. The French officers are unable to look at the truth, in this case the deep-rooted antisemitism in society. The text is a quote from an open letter, sent by Zola to the President of France. It reads as follows: 'The deed I am fulfilling is nothing but a revolutionary means to hasten the breakthrough of truth and justice.'

Inequalities of Disability and Health

Although not part of the commonly repeated trinity of class, gender, and race—typically seen as the dominant categories for analysing inequality—disability and health were also important lines along which privilege and discrimination were drawn. Like the other categories of difference discussed in this chapter, disability and health were also intersectional. Rapid industrialisation throughout the century created disability on a large scale due to the unsafe working conditions found in factories, mills, and mines. In some workplaces, the sound of the industrial machinery was so loud as to be literally deafening, and workers developed lip-reading and basic signs to communicate with other workers. The cramped living conditions that followed intense patterns of urbanisation also generated disability by facilitating the spread of disease and other life-changing conditions. However, disability was of course not limited to one particular class. Whilst the relationship between poverty and

disability was strong, congenital and acquired disability were both found across boundaries of class and economic wellbeing. Disability thus constitutes an axis of inequality in its own right.

This period saw the growth of what we might tentatively call 'special' education. In late eighteenth-century Paris, the Abbé Charles-Michel de L'Épée, watching deaf Parisians conversing with each other in the street using sign language, was inspired to develop a form of deaf education that used a manual sign language. A few years later, in Scotland, Thomas Braidwood founded the first school for the deaf in the British Isles. After a rather hesitant start, by the mid-nineteenth century deaf people, previously seen as 'uneducable', were increasingly being taught in schools and institutions using a diversity of methods including both 'manual' systems (which used sign language) and 'oral' systems (which focussed on lip-reading). Teachers of these methods across Europe became increasingly antagonistic towards each other and in 1880, an international conference was held in Milan. The conference aimed to advocate oralism as a 'superior' method of deaf education, a controversial move that has since been accredited by many deaf historians not only as a demonstration of the low regard in which sign languages were held, but also as a direct contribution to the alienation of and discrimination against the deaf community. Blind education also developed in this period across Europe, with Louis Braille's new system of writing in France, completed in 1829, being a particularly important development internationally.

Alongside educational institutions for disabled people, the nineteenth century also saw the increased institutionalisation of disabled people for other reasons. In Britain, the workhouses, introduced in 1834 ostensibly to deal with poverty, housed vast numbers of disabled people in terrible conditions. Specialist institutions and asylums for disabled people also grew, sometimes under the pretext of providing specialist care. They also performed a function in allowing non-disabled family members to remove stigmatised disabled relatives from the household. Psychiatric illnesses and mental distress were also addressed for the first time in a systematic manner in the nineteenth century, through the creation of so-called 'insane asylums', institutions that aimed to achieve, at best, the 'recovery' of people with mental illness, or at least their 'containment'. The quality of life in these institutions varied enormously and was also shaped by class and economic wellbeing. Some were highly abusive institutions whilst others provided a more well-intentioned, if in many ways deficient, standard of living. Gender, too, heavily inflected the experience of life in institutions of all sorts, with female inmates often enlisted to help with the domestic running of the institution, whilst male inmates were instructed in other forms of early occupational therapy, such as woodwork.

Despite widespread patterns of discrimination and prejudice, the nineteenth century also saw the emergence of what we might today describe as ‘self-advocacy’ groups for disabled people across Europe. These included blind organisations such as the British and Foreign Blind Association for Improving the Embossed Literature of the Blind and Promoting the Employment of the Blind, which was founded in Britain by Thomas Armitage (who was partially sighted) in 1869. Deaf clubs, churches, newspapers, and organisations were prolific in the second half of the nineteenth century. There was a considerable degree of internationalism in these organisations and the famous banquets which were held each year in Paris were important occasions in the development of an international deaf community.

Conclusion

The long nineteenth century was a period of increasing inequality in Europe, but simultaneously a time of a diffusion of new discourses that called for the general emancipation of human beings and the progressive attenuation of suffering through the combined action of social solidarity, state institutions, and the advancement of science. Income differences were widened by the creation of national and imperial markets, the gradual increase in the number of waged workers, and the destruction of resources and regulations that had previously protected the poor sectors of the population. Whereas the legitimising ideas of the diverse *ancien régime* monarchies had justified inequality, liberalism did not: it promised a utopia of an open society where the destiny of each man would be determined by his work and his values. Precisely for this reason, the growing socioeconomic distances—between peasants and manual workers on the one hand, and the middle classes, the new industrial and commercial bourgeoisie, and the aristocracy on the other—generated all kinds of demands, organisations, and collective actions. Those discourses inspired social movements, which then reshaped their language and created new concepts and new practices. The contrast of liberal utopias with the actual outcomes of reforms and revolutions and the traits of new capitalist societies inspired not only those who joined democratic and socialist movements. Women, whose role had been reimagined by liberal societies through the metaphor of the ‘separate spheres’ that gave men the ‘burden’ of ordering the public space, could also claim rights on the basis of liberal programmes—and on the basis of anti-liberal ones. Quite a few women and some men did so, which at the end of the century was starting to set a new political agenda: feminism. The revolutionary triplet of equality, liberty, and brotherhood was also used to denounce the differences founded on ethnic prejudices and on disability and illness. Ethnic inequality was legally suppressed in most countries, although it

was not socially or politically dismantled. Its defence came under the banner of ‘scientific’ racism, which reframed old forms of discrimination so that they could still be applied to Jews, Sinti and Roma, and to other minorities, as well as to non-European peoples. As for the disabled and the ill, civil charities and public institutions tended to replace the pre-existing communitarian and religious ones, whilst new medical and philanthropic techniques were developed to alleviate suffering (and, sometimes, hide it from the public eyes).

Discussion questions

1. What was the ‘social question’ and why was it so important in nineteenth-century Europe?
2. What was the role of religion in inequalities in nineteenth-century Europe?
3. Can you identify any inequalities in current European society? How are they related to developments in nineteenth-century Europe?

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