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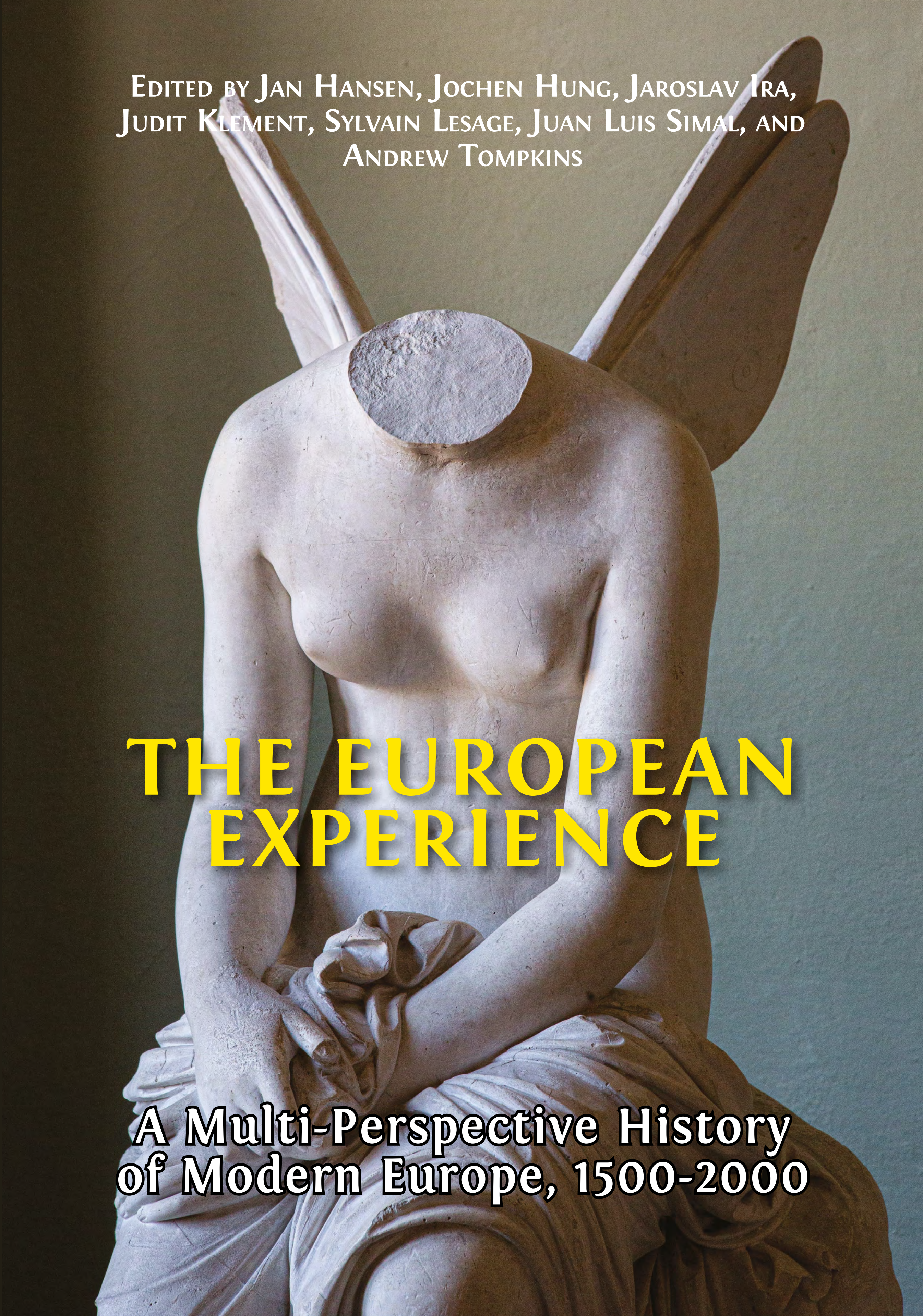

THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

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

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2.4.3 Inequalities in Contemporary History (c. 1900–2000)

Eszter Bartha, Sarah Carmichael, Julie V. Gottlieb, and Juan Pan-Montojo

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Introduction

Inequality is a multi-dimensional concept, and this applies to early-modern, modern and contemporary history. This subchapter focuses on dimensions related to income and wealth, gender, ethnicity and racial inequality, and disability, all of which saw distinct patterns of development over the course of the twentieth century. Issues of inequality defined political change and conflict in the twentieth century, including the priorities placed on addressing inequalities exacerbated by urbanisation and industrialisation, and the many grassroots campaigns and new systems of rule dedicated to redressing stark inequalities—real and perceived. From the First World War to the crises of the interwar period, the Second World War, and then the Cold War, competing interpretations of economic, social, racial, and gender inequalities polarised Europe and account for the major shifts in boundaries and borders, state ideologies and governments, and alliances and rivalries.

Income and Wealth Inequality

Income inequality in the twentieth century followed two broad trends: globally, income inequality between countries decreased but, within countries, inequality often increased. Looking at the case of Europe in the contemporary period, the trend toward declining inequality that persisted until around the 1970s was followed by an increase which is still ongoing. In terms of the divide within Europe, the rise of communism in Eastern Europe resulted in a sharp fall in income inequality in those countries, followed by a sharp rise after

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the dissolution of the USSR. Generally speaking, Europe is characterised by lower income inequality than the United States, but recent decades have seen income inequality in many European countries start to edge upwards again. With the publication of the French economist Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* in 2013, the topic of income versus wealth hit centre-stage for policymakers across Europe. What Piketty observes for France, which can also be demonstrated for other Western European countries, is that wealth inequality historically far outstrips inequality from labour, by about seven times. This pattern can be disrupted and in the twentieth century was dramatically altered thanks to the First and Second World Wars, which destroyed much of the capital from which wealth derives. This was followed by a period of extraordinary economic growth and high taxation, which kept inequality in check. However, since the 1980s wealth versus income inequality has been growing again and, although it has not reached the seven-to-one level seen prior to the World Wars, it seems set to continue growing in the absence of a concerted attempt to tax wealth rather than income.

Interesting contrasts emerge when you compare wealth inequality to income inequality. The Netherlands, for instance, has relatively low levels of income inequality but extraordinarily high levels of wealth inequality, with the wealthiest one percent of the population owning one third of private assets.

One classic way to grasp and explain wealth inequalities in the world is rooted in the Marxist tradition, whose central concept is class. According to the Marxist analysis, social classes are formed in relation to the possession of the means of production, whose forms change historically and geographically. In the feudal era, this was land, and the main contrast lay between landowners (landlords) and landless peasants. In the era of capitalism, the main means of production were factories, and the two main classes were capitalists and workers. While the German scholar Karl Marx (1818–1883) recognised the economic and social development and human energies that capitalism unleashed, he also thought that the relationship between these two classes was antagonistic, and that capitalism greatly increased income inequalities in the countries where this system developed (first and foremost in England). He and the German scholar and businessman Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) summarised their thoughts in *The Communist Manifesto*, published in 1848, in which they called for a revolution led by the working class, with the aim to abolish capitalism and the private ownership of the means of production in order to liberate workers from the exploitation of the capitalist class.

This idea was first realised in Soviet Russia, where the October Revolution in 1917 sought to establish a new economic and social system, which was later called state socialism or communism. War communism was abandoned by Lenin in 1921, and the NEP (New Economic Policy) followed, which established a mixed economy (factories could be privately owned and land was in the hands of the peasantry). Stalin broke with this policy in 1929. Under his leadership, privately owned factories and land were transformed into state property. While income inequalities radically decreased in the Soviet Union, the omnipotence of state ownership created new inequalities between ‘ordinary’ people and the party cadres (*nomenklatura*), who controlled the means of production and the distribution of wealth in the whole of society.

The failure of the socialist experiments and workers’ revolts that took place after 1918 in countries such as Germany, Italy, and Hungary led to the consolidation of the capitalist order, which still preserved some of its former feudal characteristics in Southern and Eastern Europe. Redistribution of land—where it happened—was often at the expense of ethnic minorities. This, however, could not satisfy the demands of the peasantry. Instead of democratic rule, authoritarian regimes were formed in countries such as Poland, Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia. In Italy, Mussolini’s fascist movement grasped political power and crushed the labour movement. Intensifying class conflicts and the survival of a semi-feudal society led to civil war in Spain, which ended with the defeat of the left-wing forces.

Class inequalities were overall greater in less-developed countries than in Western Europe. In addition, in many Eastern and Southern European countries, a feudal caste system further increased social distance between the poor peasantry and the landed classes.

The end of the Second World War brought about a division between the capitalist west and the socialist east. While there was a civil war between the political right and left in Greece, this ended with the defeat of the latter. The landed classes in the socialist east were deprived of their estates, and the churches also lost much of their property. The aim of the communist regimes that were established through Soviet support in Eastern Europe was to create a classless society, where all political power belonged to the working class.

After the collapse of the communist regimes, new class inequalities were formed in Eastern Europe and the distribution of wealth became much more unequal than before. Private property now played a much greater role in creating social differences—this was a new phenomenon for many people who were accustomed to a more equal society. Public goods such as free education and healthcare were also seen as important achievements of socialism. This is why communist ‘nostalgia’ should not be dismissed as a false consciousness; many people sincerely regretted the loss of the socialist communities and the former networks, where the market was much less important in creating inequalities than in the new, capitalist societies.

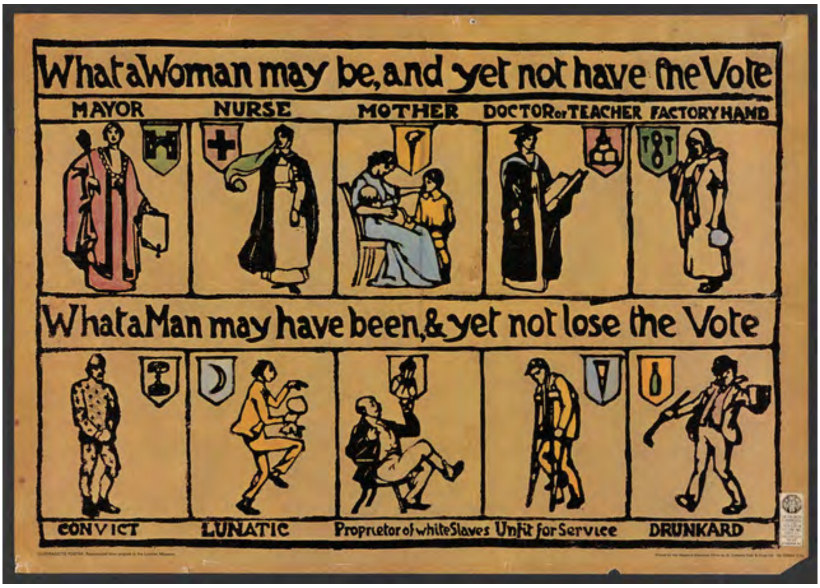
What a Woman may be, and yet not have the Vote
MAYOR
NURSE
MOTHER
DOCTOR or TEACHER
FACTORY HAND
What a Man may have been, & yet not lose the Vote
CONVICT
LUNATIC
Proprietor of white Slaves
Unfit for Service
DRUNKARD

Fig. 1: The Suffrage Atelier, "Pro-Female Suffrage propaganda poster" (ca. 1912), CC 4.0, Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Poster_sul_suffragio_femminile.jpg.

Gender Inequalities

The dramatic shifts and development of the status, representation, and experience of women over the course of the twentieth century does, on the surface, suggest steady progress. Just think how dramatically differently women dressed, behaved, worked and spent their leisure time in 1900 than in 2000. But the attainment of political rights and citizenship, the entry of large numbers of women into the workforce, and the legal and attitudinal shifts about sex and sexuality, all mask the cyclical nature of women's emancipation and the peaks and troughs of the feminist movement. Women in the twentieth century began to organise internationally and transnationally in their shared struggles for political, social and economic equality, but the strength of feminism varied widely over time and space. There were important differences in the scope and size of European feminist movements between north and south, between democracies and dictatorships—or, during the Cold War, between communist and capitalist or mixed-economy welfare states.

The first European country to give women the vote was Finland (in 1906), followed by Denmark (1908). The First World War would prove to be a catalyst for the extension of citizenship rights to women in many countries. This was both the result of effective and inspiring suffrage campaigns (the militant suffragettes in Britain became international icons), and due to women's sacrifices and war service on the home front.

Women were granted the vote in Russia in 1917, and in Britain, Germany, and Austria in 1918. The framing of suffrage as a reward for women's exercise of patriotic duty helps us make sense of why even some conservative governments supported women's suffrage legislation. In 1928, when British women were granted the vote on the same terms as men (the legislation dubbed the 'Flapper's Vote'), the Conservative Party was in power. Women in Spain had to wait until 1931 for the vote, those in France until 1944, and elsewhere even longer (1945 in Italy; 1952 in Greece; 1971 in Switzerland; and, finally, 1976 in Portugal).

With the overthrow of democracies by dictatorships during the interwar years, however, the rights of citizenship could just as easily be withdrawn, showing the cyclical pattern of women's emancipation. For example, in the Weimar Republic there were high turnouts of women voters at elections, and, by 1932, 112 women had been elected to the Reichstag. Under the Nazi regime women were divested of these rights and representation. The Nazis had only contempt for feminism, depriving women of their rights and rewarding them instead for their prolific motherhood.

The communist regimes boasted of achieving gender equality—and it was indeed true that millions of women entered the labour market because extensive industrialisation demanded a larger workforce. While state propaganda promoted gender equality in every field (an example being the field of education), policy towards women often encountered resistance based on traditional gender and family ideologies inherited from the semi-feudal past, in which women were prevented from being placed on an equal footing with men. Nurseries, kindergartens, and evening schools, however, did indeed help socialise housework and childcare, and they were available to almost everybody in the 1970s and 1980s.

The wave model for the feminist movement applies to many Western European countries. The first wave crested from the turn of the century to the First World War, when women agitated to have the grossest sexual inequalities addressed: voting rights, property rights, and access to education and to the professions. In a period of relative decline of feminism, advances were nonetheless made at the national and international level, and women made their voices heard at the League of Nations between the wars, and at the United Nations after the Second World War.

The second wave of feminism, the women's liberation movement, came in the late 1960s and through the 1970s, emerging from—and often in reaction to—the sexism still embedded in radical and student politics and civil rights campaigns. In turn, campaigns for gay liberation, calling for decriminalisation and the end of the stigmatisation of homosexuality, were part of this moment of permissiveness and progressive ideas represented by a generation of baby boomers. Lesbians, who often felt marginalised in gay liberation groups, mounted their own campaigns. If the first wave was preoccupied with securing the vote and women's constitutional rights, the second wave recognised that 'the personal is political', leading women to seek radical and innovative ways to challenge patriarchal hegemony in the state, the workplace, in their personal relationships, and in the family. The attainment of sexual equality in politics could, however, be paradoxical. When Margaret Thatcher became British Prime Minster in 1979, the first elected female leader in Europe, she did so without any feminist conviction and her government did little to advance women's rights.

Third wave feminism started in the early 1990s and built on the foundations laid in the second wave, but brought to the forefront intersectionality, transfeminism, and postmodern feminism. Rising out of punk subculture (known as 'riot grrl'), this wave was largely driven by women of colour based in the United States who wanted to correct second wave feminism's focus on the experiences of white, middle-class women. Confusion as to what exactly third wave feminism is characterises the wave itself. In terms of inequality, it is important to point out though that this wave is very much focused on how different types of inequality intersect to create different problems for different groups of people.

Finally, since the early 2000s, fourth wave feminism has been characterised as combining issues of justice with increasing spirituality. In the context of contemporary feminism, the Everyday Sexism project (https://everydaysexism.com/) of Laura Bates as well as the more recent #MeToo movements are obvious examples, with a distinct focus on Western societies. These social media generated campaigns and flashpoints for discussion around the treatment of women globally have also resulted in a lot of pushback from the so-called 'manosphere' or 'Men's rights' activists, some of whom openly argue for a return to a so-called 'natural order' where women are subservient to men. A deep misunderstanding of history frequently permeates these debates, with the cliché image of women as they may have been in Victorian England held up as an ideal: homemaker, child-bearer, wife. Women have long occupied a far more active place outside the home, and it is debatable to what extent this image was even true for the Victorian era.

Racial and Ableist Inequalities

Income, wealth, and gender were not the only types of inequalities among Europeans in the twentieth century. Ethnic differences played a key role in the nation-states that came out of the First World War, after the break-up and territorial losses of the Russian and Ottoman Empires and Austria-Hungary.

Minorities were seen as potential traitors to the new national communities; majoritarian public opinion saw them as obstacles to the nation-building process or as politically inclined to challenge the new territorial status-quo. There were big differences in the social and cultural conditions of these minorities and in the way they were dealt with by legislation and by social norms, but discrimination existed everywhere. During and after the Second World War, millions of people were subject to ethnic cleansing (a 'solution' already put in place by Turkey, which expelled thousands of Greek Orthodox families from Anatolia, and by Greece, which exchanged them for its Muslim subjects in 1923), a highly traumatic experience that contributed to a homogenisation of the post-war nation-states.

Among the minorities that suffered systematic discrimination in the interwar period were the Jews. The Nazi regime first segregated them, then ghettoised their communities, and finally launched their extermination in all areas it controlled. The genocide of Jews, which had a precedent in the massacres of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War, was often welcomed by sectors of the population that had been won over by antisemitism in countries across Europe and, for this reason, found the support and the collaboration of many local groups. The death of around two thirds of European Jews was followed by a large emigration to the state of Israel, established in 1948. Open discrimination of Jewish citizens tended to disappear in post-war Europe, although antisemitism did not, and it was even translated, sometimes and in certain countries, into measures that implied a discriminatory treatment of those considered to be Jews.

The Roma and Sinti were also isolated by the Nazis and then subjected to measures aiming at their extermination, in what is nowadays called the Porajmos. For centuries, the Roma and Sinti had been a subaltern ethnic group in Europe, often subject to prosecutions and penal sanctions, and their position in most European countries did not improve after the war, to the point that their suffering under Nazism was not even made visible. They continued to live at the margins of society. Fordist capitalism and communism gradually closed many spaces in which the Roma had previously lived and operated, whilst a varying combination of social policies and repression tried to force them to abandon their ways of life.

A new dimension of inequality took off in Europe during the 1950s and 1960s. The demand for labour in the fastest-growing economies of northwestern Europe fostered a south-north migration that took millions of Portuguese, Spaniards, Italians, Yugoslavians, Greeks, and Turks to the more industrialised countries. North African and Caribbean groups were also recruited to work in France and Britain, while the arrival of people from other continents was initiated by decolonisation, especially when the process ended in civil wars. Immigrants performed the lowest-paid jobs and very often did not have easy access to citizenship, a condition that was coupled with social prejudices against poor foreigners. However, collective discrimination was (and remains) more active when immigrants do not come from Christian countries, and when they have external traits (colour of skin, type of hair) that can be used as the basis of their racialisation. For this reason, the last wave of immigration that started in the 1990s, with many immigrants coming from the old European colonial empires, has fostered a widespread rise in xenophobic attitudes, reflected in the rise of ultra-right political parties.

Ethnic and racial groups have not been the only ones to be treated unequally by European societies. The position of chronically ill or disabled persons was subject to contradictory trends in the twentieth century. From the First World War and especially after the Second World War, families and religious or lay charities were partially supplanted by public centres and pensions. This led to the homogenisation of treatments and long-term improvements in medical and psychiatric care. However, until the 1970s and 1980s, this often resulted in new bio-political measures that implied total or partial confinement, and even the application of eugenic policies. Even though Nazi policies discredited eugenics, some countries like Norway and Sweden maintained the norms of the interwar period to legalise eugenic sterilisation. It was only in the 1980s that a new social sensitivity towards people with disabilities started to emerge, eugenic policies disappeared, integration became the general social aim, and confinement started to be seen as an extreme solution. The results of the new views on disabilities were curtailed, though, by the stagnation or deconstruction of welfare institutions and policies that have characterised the evolution of most European countries since the 1980s.

Conclusion

In conclusion, inequality as a concept and as lived experience has shifted considerably in the course of the twentieth century. It has been a century of rapid technological change, dramatic patterns of migration, chronic political crisis, death and destruction on a mass scale, but also a period of remarkable social mobility. Many of the most obvious inequalities in terms of class, race, and gender were addressed, even if the full realisation of equality remains elusive. What has remained consistent has been the focus of the left (from communism to social democracy) on inequalities. In contrast, the right (from fascism to conservatism) has advocated the idea of a meritocracy, or embraced traditional hierarchies.

Discussion questions

1. How did the development of gender equality differ in Western and Eastern Europe? Why?
2. What was the role of political conflict and wars in the development of inequalities in twentieth-century Europe?
3. Do you think the inequalities of the twentieth century still exist today? Why or why not? Are there new inequalities in the twenty-first century?

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