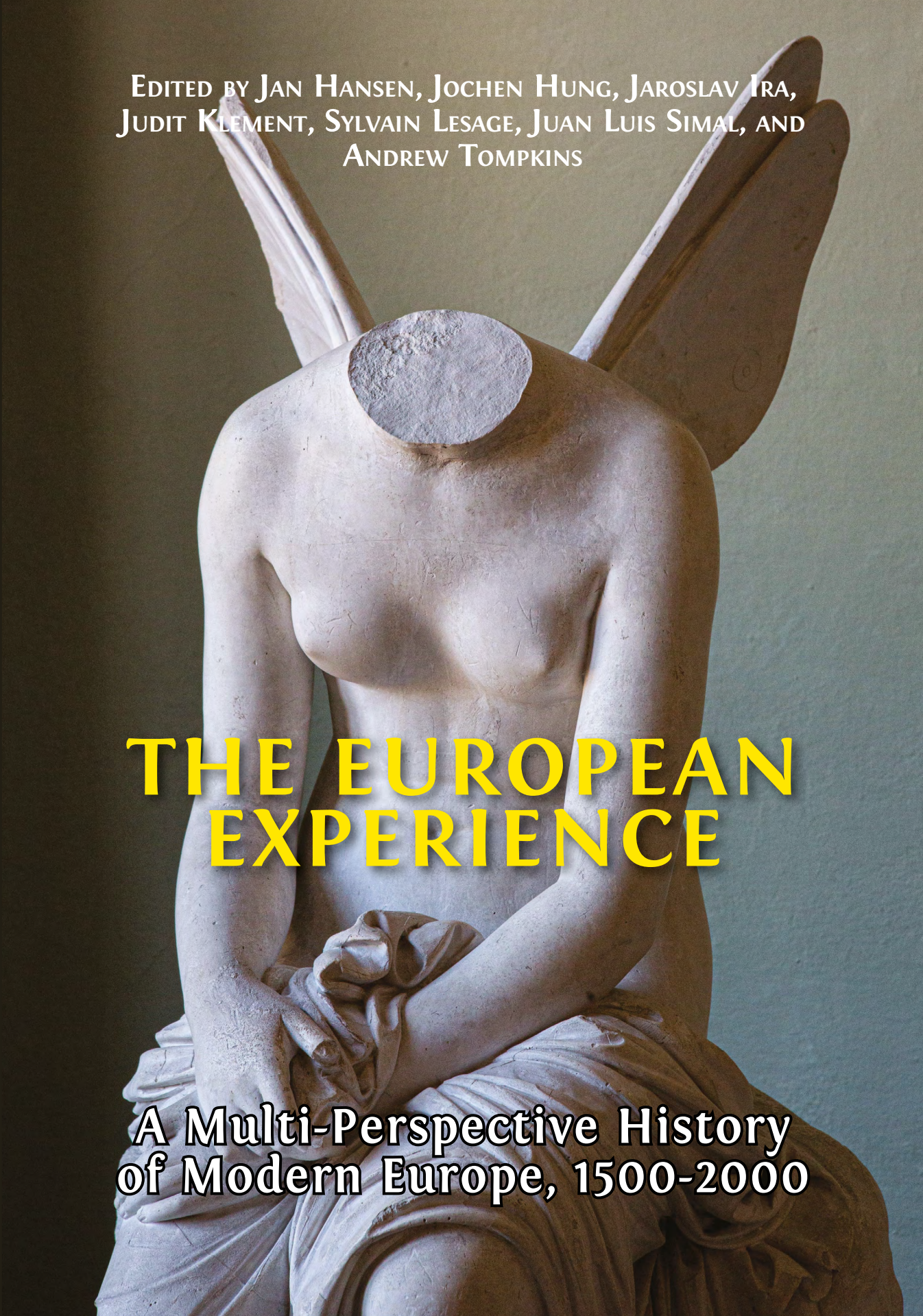
Edited by Jan Hansen, Jochen Hung, Jaroslav Ira, Judit Klement, Sylvain Lesage, Juan Luis Simal, and Andrew Tompkins



The European Experience

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

https://www.openbookpublishers.com

Jan Hansen, Jochen Hung, Jaroslav Ira, Judit Klement, Sylvain Lesage, Juan Luis Simal and Andrew Tompkins (eds), *The European Experience: A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023, https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0323

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0323#resources

This book is one of the outcomes of the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership "Teaching European History in the 21st Century", which ran from 2019-2022 and was funded by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ Key Action 2 (Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices).

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80064-870-8
ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80064-871-5
ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80064-872-2
ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 978-1-80064-873-9
ISBN Digital ebook (azw3): 978-1-80064-874-6
ISBN XML: 978-1-80064-875-3
ISBN HTML: 978-1-80064-876-0
DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0323

Cover image: Wilhelm Gunkel, *Fly Angel Fly* (2019). Cover design by Katy Saunders

6.2.2 Ideologies in Modern History (ca. 1800–1900)

Nere Basabe Martínez and Ido de Haan

Introduction

The nineteenth century can rightly be called the century of ideologies. The French Revolution, in which so-called 'ideologues' played a central role, sparked the development of a range of political movements, from liberalism to socialism, that would shape European society. Enlightenment philosophy was an important influence on these modern ideologies, and the idea of rationality and the question of the natural rights of man were their central tenets. At the end of the century, however, the attraction of rationalism and human rights seemed to fade.

The Rise of Ideologies

At stake in the period after the French Revolution was not only the question of which ideology deserved support, but also of how the rise and rule of ideologies should be evaluated. Initially, ideology was perceived in a positive light. The term 'ideology' was coined around 1795 by the French philosopher and revolutionary Antoine Destutt de Tracy (1754–1836), who published *Élémens d'idéologie* (1801–1819), in which he defined ideology as the science of ideas. Ideology was a doctrine of truthful ideas that would serve to create a just society and help to improve the moral state of its members. Destutt built on the ideas of Enlightenment thinkers like the French philosophers Voltaire (1694–1778), Nicolas de Condorcet (1743–1794) and Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1714–1780), but also the German thinker Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). In his essay *Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?* (1784), Kant defined as the core idea of the Enlightenment that the autonomous use of human reason

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0323.68

allows us to determine what is true and just, and to liberate ourselves from prejudice and delusions.

The rise of ideology, or 'ideologisation', was part of what the German historian Reinhard Koselleck has defined as the *Sattelzeit*, the transitional period between 1750 and 1850, when many people in Europe embraced the idea that a future society could be arranged on the basis of a rational blueprint, independent from the traditions of the past. Ideas thus became movements. This is what is meant by the suffix '-ism' (as in liberalism, conservatism, socialism, nationalism, and so on): a political movement with its own system of ideas and political culture, from which emerges a programme that seeks to project itself towards a future horizon.

The design of such a rational order relied on supposedly universal principles. These entailed the idea, derived from the English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) and expounded by the French thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), that the rules of a civil government emanate from a social covenant between autonomous individuals with inalienable and equal human rights. A second idea, formulated by the French philosopher Montesquieu (1689–1755), specified that in order to limit any possible abuse of power, the powers of the state are divided in a constitutional system of 'checks and balances' between executive, judicial, and legislative powers. Yet a third idea, formulated by Rousseau, but also by the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), was that the power of the state emanated from, and thus could be revoked by, the sovereignty of the people. A final idea, formulated by Adam Smith (1723–1790) in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) was that a prosperous society required civil liberties and a state that respected the free-market principle of '*laissez-faire*'.

All of these ideas inspired the French revolutionaries to declare the rights of man and citizens; to create a democratic constitution, based on the sovereignty of the people and the rule of law; and to abolish the aristocratic privileges and the guilds that stood in the way of a free market. In order to preserve the accomplishments of the French Revolution, Destutt de Tracy and like-minded thinkers gathered from 1795 onwards in the Society of Ideologues, a loose-knit group of people who met in the salon of Anne-Catherine Helvétius (1722–1800). Like some of the Enlightenment philosophers, the ideologues assumed a leading political role, with the conviction that a society ruled on the basis of rational principles and empirical knowledge was better served by an enlightened elite than by the fickle opinions of the people. They welcomed Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821), who they saw as the forceful protector of the revolutionary spirit. Yet Napoleon did not return the favour: he introduced the pejorative use of the term 'ideologues' and denoted those who criticised his encroachment on liberty and justice as 'metaphysicians', intellectuals, or

outright imbeciles, who failed to understand the realities of power. Although the ideologues around Destutt were side-tracked by the increasingly despotic Napoleon, they nonetheless stood at the frontier of the emergence of the nineteenth century's leading ideologies.

Liberalism and Democracy

Liberalism was born in the struggle to find a middle way between the revolution, which created liberty as well as licence, and Napoleon, who had introduced the revolutionary order through all of Europe by means of a military despotism. In France, Germaine de Staël (1766–1817) and Benjamin Constant (1767–1830) acknowledged Napoleon's ability to save the revolution by embedding the rights of man and citizens in a stable legal structure, yet they deplored the stifling of public opinion and the limits to the freedom of the press and association, which they deemed essential for a prosperous society. In the process, they reformulated the notion of freedom. Notably, Constant distinguished between the positive liberty of warrior societies, or the "liberty of the ancients", and the negative liberty of modern commercial societies, the "liberty of the moderns". In ancient warrior societies, being free meant assuming the autonomy as well as the responsibility of self-government—of not being a slave. Being free was assimilated to collective rights such as political participation and self-government (a meaning that, according to Constant's interpretation, was wrongly applied by the French Revolution). Modern liberty, in reverse, was based on individual liberty free of prohibitions and oriented towards the private sphere, where political rights are exercised through representation. Liberty was also protected by a constitutional balance between different powers in the state, in which the neutral power of the king was juxtaposed to the executive, the aristocratic power of the senate or the intermediate powers of local politics. Strongly influenced by his companion Germaine de Staël, Constant initiated a more moderate liberalism in Europe. This cleavage was already patent in the Spanish Liberal Triennium (1820–1823) between the *doceañistas* (an elder generation of constitutionalists) and *afrancesados* (liberals who supported the regime of Napoleon's brother, José I), and the radicals of the more popularly based secret societies. French liberalism, chastened by revolutionary excesses, opted for a middle way between absolutism and revolution: that is why the Doctrinaire liberals, with François Guizot (1787–1874) at their head, called themselves the men of the *juste milieu* (the middle way), and seized power after the July Revolution of 1830. Supporters of the doctrine of *laissez-faire*, the Doctrinaires conceived of the state as an instrument at the service of the bourgeoisie, and to demands for

universal suffrage, Guizot simply replied "enrich yourselves" (through hard work and thrift) to those who wanted to vote.

Meanwhile in Britain, nineteenth-century liberalism took the path of radicalism under the name of *utilitarianism*. Its leading representatives were Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). Utilitarianism left behind the doctrine of natural law and focused on the social 'utility' of individual rights. Bentham conceived of the legislator as a social reformer whose aim should be to achieve "the greatest happiness for the greatest number", harmonising individual interests and the common good, even if the latter was understood as the sum of those individual interests. He believed that happiness was calculable in terms of empirical pleasures, material well-being, and the concrete aspirations of individuals. The result would be a pluralistic society in which individuals act rationally (and know what is best for themselves, hence the advocacy of universal suffrage) under a neutral state that allows them freedom of action. To limit any abuse of power by the state, he added the idea of annual elections, as well as other radical ideas such as the abolition of the monarchy and the House of Lords, the importance of education, equality of the sexes, and animal rights. Mill, for his part, critical of the utilitarianism of his elders, responded that happiness was not quantifiable, and introduced social aspects into his economic liberalism: an interventionist state (without renouncing private property or the free market) that would not abandon the weakest members of society. Mill was a convinced feminist—much of his work was written jointly with his partner, Harriet Taylor Mill (1807–1858)—and critical of the principle of selfishness. His defence of freedom and individuality was nevertheless radical: sovereignty of the individual over his body, his life, and his conscience was inalienable, and he reclaimed the right to dissent. To this end, he introduced the principles of proportionality in legislative representation (which would also represent minorities), along with pluralism and weighted voting, seeking to unite the idea of universal suffrage with that of the social quality of individuals based on education and merit.

While Bentham, Mill, and Taylor were staunch defenders of universal suffrage, including the vote for women, other liberals were much more hesitant about this. This was the case, for instance, with the French liberal Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859). Having grown up in an aristocratic family repressed by the revolution, Tocqueville travelled on a government mission to the United States in 1831, where his impressions of political life inspired him to write his most famous book, published in two volumes between 1835 and 1840, *Democracy in America*. More than a political system based on popular sovereignty, democracy was for Tocqueville a society in which all perceive each other as equals. He acknowledged that the "democratic revolution" was an irresistible force, yet he was concerned about the place of liberty in a society

where equality prevailed. Initially, he mainly worried about the "tyranny of the majority", but in the second volume of *Democracy in America*, his main concern became the fact that in a democratic society, without the intermediate power of aristocracy that had characterised the *ancien régime*, individuals were powerless against the "tutelary power" of the state. In his view, American society had managed to avoid the predicament of "democratic despotism" thanks to participation in social networks of communal self-government, churches, voluntary associations and a free press. These institutions functioned as the new "intermediate powers" that curbed any possible abuse of central power. That is how freedom was preserved in a regime of equality, something which, in his opinion, had not yet been achieved in Europe, because the old continent did not understand that democracy was a social revolution rather than a political revolution.

Fig. 1: William Edward Kilburn, View of the Great Chartist Meeting on Kennington Common (1848), Public Domain, Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chartist_meeting_on_Kennington_Common_by_William_Edward_Kilburn_1848_-_restoration1.jpg.

Socialisms and the Marxist Critique of Ideology

Ideology was a positive, programmatic vision for liberals of the first half of the nineteenth century. They inspired the fight for equal political rights, seen on the largest of scales in the English Chartist movement between 1838 and 1857. In this respect, liberals resembled the early utopian socialists, like Claude Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825), Robert Owen (1771–1858), Charles Fourier (1772–1837) and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1856). In fact, there was considerable

overlap, first of all in their rationalist expectations that a well-ordered and just society was feasible, but also in the social composition of these movements' protagonists and supporters: aspiring middle-class people and self-reliant skilled workers in crafts, trade, or the liberal professions. Utopian socialists also differed from the liberals, however, in the sense that they focused less on equal political rights and argued instead that it was primarily the organisation of production and the distribution of wealth that formed the most important source of injustice. The utopias they sketched were proposals—and in some cases also real-world experiments—for communal forms of production and solidaristic modes of distribution. However, for some socialists, realising social justice in this way was a chimera: following the analysis of François Noël Babeuf (1760–1797; also known as Gracchus Babeuf) and other French revolutionaries, some expected that leading by utopian example would never convince the property-owning classes to share their wealth. Nor would the owners of the means of production be persuaded to cease exploiting their workers as nothing more than a tool to maximise their profit. This could only change by way of a popular uprising, in which the masses would take their rightful share by force.

All of this utopian and populist optimism of the early socialists was delusional, according to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. They argued that the history of societies was determined not by ideas or ideals, but by the objective relations of production: the conflict between social classes programmed into the basic structure of society due to unavoidable tension between the bourgeois owners of the means of production (capital) and those who had no other property than their own physical power to sell (labour). This class conflict had its own logic to follow, from increasing immiseration of the workers, to the seizure of state power to expropriate the bourgeoisie, as an intermediate phase towards real freedom for all under communism. In this context, ideas were nothing but the expression of these conflicted relations of production, and the dominant ideology was thus a legitimation of the interests of the ruling class. In this context, ideology was no longer a positive projection of a future just society, but an idealist hindrance to the inevitable coming of a communist society, and the opposite of the scientific nature Marx and his followers claimed for his ideas.

The advent of Marxism in the 1840s and its development into the creed of the socialist movement and mass parties that were to emerge—in the 1860s in Germany, later in other parts of Europe—was as impressive as it was problematic. In the logic of scientific Marxism, there was no active role to play for the organisations of workers; the realisation of communism just had to wait for the objectively right moment in the history of the class conflict. If Marxism had a role to play as an ideology, it was only to prepare the working class for

its role in world history. For many on the left, this was too limited. Anarchists returned to the activist stance of the first radical socialists by launching a violent campaign, culminating in the murder of a number of prominent European leaders at the end of the nineteenth century. Yet they also pleaded for the creation of a real utopia in the present, and rejected the Marxist deviation via the dictatorship of the proletariat and the seizure of the state, before the state would finally wither away under communism. For anarchists, it was not just the capitalist state, but the state as such that was the problem—in that sense they paved the way for the libertarians of the twentieth century.

Yet much more influential were the revisionist social democrats, notably Eduard Bernstein (1850–1932), one of the founders of the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD, 1890), who gained prominence in the socialist movement across much of Europe by sketching a highly active role for organisations of the working classes. By formulating concrete reforms (including universal suffrage, the eight-hour working day, social insurance against the risks of hard labour, good education, and a decent retirement) and actively mobilising the working class in electoral support of their party, the SPD hoped to create a parliamentary majority that could peacefully legislate socialism into a reality.

From Liberalism to Social Darwinism

In their reformist endeavours, social democrats at the end of the nineteenth century found some support from progressive liberals, who, in the footsteps of John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill, acknowledged the rights and needs of the working classes—and in many cases those of women too. Yet these social liberals were an exception to the conservative turn most liberals took in response to the rise of the working class as a political force to be reckoned with.

Already in the 1850s, many liberals lost their faith in the potential of rational progress. They were put off by the rise of the masses and abhorred the cynical manipulation of democratic ideals. Their fear of the masses was confirmed by the rise and rule of Emperor Napoleon III (1808–1873) in France, who created an authoritarian regime under the guise of democratic legitimation—elections, referenda, plebiscites—and legitimated by the nostalgic ideology of Bonapartism. Similar tendencies were developing in the newly established German Empire, where the rule of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898) was founded on domestic military shows of force. Yet at the same time, liberals and bourgeois entrepreneurs felt attracted by the active investment policies of the imperial state, both within Europe and increasingly also beyond it, in the parts of the world it had colonised.

These changes in the liberal outlook were accompanied by an intellectual reorientation. From the mid-century onwards, liberalism evolved towards a confluence with new scientific theories, receiving a new conservative twist. The positivism of Auguste Comte (1798–1857) looked for a 'scientific' solution to political and social problems, modelled on the natural sciences. He abandoned any idea of individualism, revolution or democracy, and opted for the famous slogan "Order and Progress". The idea of progress, a central concept of Enlightenment liberalism (the faith that humanity was advancing in infinite perfectibility) was now restrained by the conservative idea of 'social order', pitted against the new workers' movements. In Britain, through Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), positivism took the form of evolutionism in the light of Charles Darwin's new discoveries. It soon became 'Social Darwinism': based on alleged biological arguments, the evolution of mankind was now understood as a struggle for survival in which the strongest would prevail ('the survival of the fittest'). Social Darwinism therefore justified inequalities while rejecting any idea of redistributive policy as state intervention that would disrupt what was seen as a 'natural' evolutionary process, based on competition for resources and the survival of the fittest.

The new *fin-de-siècle* liberalism, then, abandoned the premise of natural human rights to embrace the new Darwinism. In opposition to the Marxist idea of a class struggle, reactionary thinkers like Arthur de Gobineau (1816–1882) professed a struggle of peoples and races, and thus the reactionary liberals who adopted his line of reasoning were drawn closer to nationalism and imperialism. The 'liberal utopia' of peaceful commercial societies, increasingly interconnected and perpetually progressing (many liberals in the first half of the century even advocated projects of European unification) eventually turned into the dystopia of colonial exploitation, nationalist clashes and militarisation. If liberalism was a revolutionary force in the face of monarchical absolutism, it later became a reactive current against the push for democracy and workers' movements.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the French Revolution, Europe saw a proliferation of ideologies that shaped the political and intellectual life on the continent. Their common denominator was a new idea of society as something that could and should be planned and shaped along rational principles. The political, social and economic upheavals over the course of the century sparked ideological reactions and counter-reactions that added to this abundance. At the dawn of the twentieth century, the intellectual landscape of Europe was thoroughly

'ideologised', preparing the ground for the violent political and ideological clashes that would characterise the coming decades.

Discussion questions

1. What was Marx and Engels' main criticism of ideologies? Do you agree with them?
2. In which ways is today's politics still shaped by nineteenth-century ideologies?
3. "The European Union is a liberal project." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

Suggested reading

Burrow, John W., *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848–1914* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2002).

Fawcett, Edmund, *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea*, Second Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

Head, Brian W., *Politics and Philosophy in the Thought of Destutt de Tracy* (Oxford: Routledge, 1987).

Jaume, Lucien, *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

Morina, Christina, *Die Erfindung des Marxismus: Wie ein Idee die Welt eroberte* (München: Siedler Verlag, 2017).

Singh Mehta, Uday, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

Sperber, Jonathan, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* (New York: Liveright, 2013).