

# The Rise of New Ideologies in the Nineteenth Century

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## Introduction

The French Revolution had challenged Europeans' beliefs in and assumptions about society; the Second Industrial Revolution seemed to be transforming society at a dizzying pace. In order to cope with these changes, and to answer the questions posed by them, nineteenth century European intellectuals created, or elaborated on, a variety of ideologies, each claiming to hold the key to creating the best society possible.

## Conservatism

In the nineteenth century, **conservatism** was the ideology that asserted that tradition is the only trustworthy guide to social and political action. Conservatives argued that traditions were time-tested, organic solutions to social and political problems. Accordingly, nineteenth century conservatives supported monarchy, the hierarchical class system dominated by the aristocracy, and the Church. They opposed innovation and reform, arguing that the French Revolution had demonstrated that they led directly to revolution and chaos. Supporters of the conservative position originally came from the traditional elites of Europe, the landed aristocracy.

The British writer and statesman Edmund Burke is often considered "the father of conservatism," as his *Reflections the Revolutions in France* (1790) seemed to predict the bloodshed and chaos that characterized the radical phase of the revolution. The French writer Joseph de Maistre's *Essay on the General Principle of Political Constitutions* (1814) is a prime nineteenth-century example of conservatism's opposition to constitutionalism and reform.

## Liberalism

Nineteenth-century *liberalism* was the ideology that asserted that the task of government was to promote individual liberty. Liberals viewed many traditions as impediments to that freedom and, therefore, campaigned for reform. Pointing to the accomplishments of the Scientific Revolution, nineteenth-century liberals asserted that there were God-given, natural rights and laws that men could discern through the use of reason. Accordingly, they supported innovation and reform (in contrast to conservatives), arguing that many traditions were simply superstitions. They promoted constitutional monarchy over absolutism, and they campaigned for an end to the traditional privileges of the aristocracy and the Church in favor of a *meritocracy* and middle-class participation in government. Supporters of liberalism originally came from the middle class.

Two British philosophers, John Locke and Adam Smith, are usually thought of as the forefathers of liberalism. In *The Second Treatise of Government* (1690), Locke made the argument for the existence of God-given natural rights and asserted that the proper goal of government was to protect and promote individual liberty. In *Wealth of Nations* (1776), Smith made the case for the existence of economic laws which guided human behavior like an "invisible hand." Smith also promoted the notion of *laissez-faire*, which stated that governments should not try to interfere with the natural

workings of an economy, a notion that became one of the basic tenets of liberalism in the nineteenth century.

Late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century thinkers extended and hardened Smith's ideas. In *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), Thomas Malthus asserted that free and constant competition would always be the norm in human societies because the human species would always reproduce at a greater rate than the food supply. By midcentury, liberal economic thinkers alleged that there was an iron law of wages, which argued that competition between workers for jobs would always, in the long run, force wages to sink to subsistence levels. The "law" is sometimes attributed to the English economist David Ricardo, but was promoted most prominently by the German sociologist Ferdinand LaSalle.

As the nineteenth century progressed, liberalism evolved. The followers of the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham espoused *utilitarianism*, which argued that all human laws and institutions ought to be judged by their usefulness in promoting "the greatest good for the greatest number" of people. Accordingly, they supported reforms to sweep away traditional institutions that failed the test and to create new institutions that would pass it. Utilitarians tended to be more supportive of government intervention than other liberals. For example, they drafted and supported new legislation to limit the hours that women and children could work in factories and to regulate the sanitary conditions of factories and mines.

Early-nineteenth-century liberals had been leery of democracy, arguing that the masses had to be educated before they could usefully contribute to the political life of the country. But by midcentury, liberals began advocating democracy, reasoning that the best way to identify the greatest good for the greatest number was to maximize the number of people voting. The best example of midcentury utilitarian thought is John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859), which argued for freedom of thought and democracy but also warned against the tyranny of the majority. Together, Mill and his companion Harriet Taylor led the liberal campaign for women's rights, Taylor publishing *The Enfranchisement of Women* (anonymously in 1851) and Mill publishing *The Subjection of Women* (1869).

## **Romanticism**

*Romanticism* was a reaction to the Enlightenment and industrialization. The nineteenth century Romantics rebelled against the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason and urged the cultivation of sentiment and emotion. Fittingly, Romantics mostly avoided political tracts and expressed themselves mostly through art and literature. Their favorite subject was nature.

The roots of Romanticism are often traced back to the works of Jean Jacques Rousseau because in *Emil* (1762), he had argued that humans were born essentially good and virtuous but were easily corrupted by society, and that the early years of a child's education should be spent developing the senses, sensibilities, and sentiments. Another source of Romanticism was the German *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress) movement of the late eighteenth century, exemplified by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), which glorified the "inner experience" of the sensitive individual.

In response to the rationalism of the Enlightenment (and to some degree, of liberalism) the Romantics offered the solace of nature. Good examples of this vein of nineteenth century

Romanticism are the works of the English poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who extolled the almost mystical qualities of the Lake District of northwest England.

Romantic painters like John Constable in England and Karl Friedrich Schinkel in Germany offered inspiring landscapes and images of a romanticized past. Beethoven, Chopin, and Wagner expressed the imaginative, intuitive spirit of Romanticism in music.

## **Nationalism**

*Nationalism*, in the nineteenth century, was the ideology that asserted that a nation was a natural, organic entity whose people were bound together by shared language, customs, and history. Nationalists argued that each nation had natural boundaries, shared cultural traits, and a historical destiny to fulfill. Accordingly, nineteenth-century nationalists in existing nation states like Britain and France argued for strong, expansionist foreign policies. Nationalists in areas like Germany and Italy argued for national unification and the expulsion of foreign rulers.

In the early nineteenth century, nationalism was allied to liberalism. Both shared a spirit of optimism, believing that their goals represented the inevitable, historical progress of humankind. In the nonunified lands of Germany and Italy, occupation by Napoleonic France had help to foster a spirit of nationalism. Under Napoleon's rule, Germans and Italians came to think of their own disunity as a weakness. The best early examples of this kind of nationalism are the German writers Johann Gottlieb Fichte, whose *Addresses to German Nation* (1808) urged the German people to unite in order to fulfill their historical role in bringing about the ultimate progress of humanity, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who argued that every nation had a historical role to play in the unfolding of the universe, and that Germany's time to take center stage in that drama had arrived.

Like the Romantics, early-nineteenth-century nationalists emphasized the role that environment played in shaping the character of a nation, and sentimentalized the past. A good example of Romantic nationalism is the work of Ernst Moritz Arndt, who urged Germans to unify through a shared heritage and through love of all things German. Strains of Romanticism can also be seen in the work of the great Italian nationalist of the early nineteenth century, Giuseppe Mazzini, whose nationalist movement, Young Italy, made appeals to unity based on natural affinities and a shared soul.

## **Anarchism**

Anarchism was the nineteenth-century ideology that saw the state and its governing institutions as the ultimate enemy of individual freedom. Early anarchists drew inspiration from the writings of Pierre Joseph Proudhon, who argued that man's freedom had been progressively curtailed by industrialization and larger, more centralized governments. Anarchy had the greatest appeal in those areas of Europe where governments were most oppressive; in the nineteenth century, that meant Russia. There, Mikhail Bakunin, the son of a Russian noble, organized secret societies whose goal was to destroy the Russian state forever. Throughout Europe, nineteenth-century anarchists engaged in acts of political terrorism, particularly attempts to assassinate high-ranking government officials.

## **Utopian Socialism**

Nineteenth-century socialism was the ideology that emphasized the collective over the individual and challenged the liberal's notion that competition was natural. Socialists sought to reorder society in ways that would end or minimize competition, foster cooperation, and allow the working classes to share in the wealth being produced by industrialization.

The earliest forms of socialism have come to be called *utopian socialism* for the way in which they envisioned, and sometimes tried to set up, ideal communities (or utopias) where work and its fruit were shared equitably. In the nineteenth century, there were three distinct forms of utopian socialism, described in the following sections.

### **Technocratic Socialism**

This type of socialism envisioned a society run by technical experts who managed resources efficiently and in a way that was best for all. The most prominent nineteenth-century advocate of technocratic socialism was a French aristocrat, Henri Comte de Saint-Simon, who renounced his title during the French Revolution and spent his life championing the progress of technology and his vision of a society organized and run by scientifically trained managers or "technocrats."

### **Psychological Socialism**

This type of socialism saw a conflict between the structure of society and the natural needs and tendencies of human beings. Its leading nineteenth-century advocate was Charles Fourier, who argued that the ideal society was one organized on a smaller, more human scale. He advocated the creation of self-sufficient communities, called *phalansteries*, of no more than 1,600 people, in which the inhabitants did work that suited them best.

### **Industrial Socialism**

This type of socialism argued that it was possible to have a productive, profitable industrial enterprise without exploiting workers. Its leading advocate was a Scottish textile manufacturer, Robert Owen. Owen set out to prove his thesis by setting up industrial communities like the New Lanark cotton mill in Scotland and, later, a larger manufacturing community in New Harmony, Indiana, that paid higher wages and provided food, shelter, and clothing at reasonable prices.

### **Scientific Socialism and Communism**

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the exploitation of European workers had grown more evident and the dreams of the utopian socialists seemed less plausible. In their place arose a form of socialism based on what its adherents claimed was a scientific analysis of society's workings. The most famous and influential of the self-proclaimed scientific socialists was the German revolutionary Karl Marx. In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), a slim pamphlet distributed to workers throughout Europe, Marx and his collaborator Friedrich Engels argued that, "all history is the history of class struggle." In the *Manifesto*, and later in the much larger *Capital* (vol. 1, 1867), Marx argued that a human being's relationship to the *means of production* gave him a social identity. In the industrial age of the nineteenth century, Marx argued, only two classes existed: the bourgeoisie, who controlled the means of production; and the *proletariat*, who sold their labor for wages. The key point in Marx's analysis was that the bourgeoisie exploited the proletariat because

competition demanded it; if a factory owner chose to treat his workers more generously, then he would have to charge more for his goods and his competitors would drive him out of business.

Marx's analysis led him to adopt a position that came to be known as *communism*, which declared that the only way to end social exploitation was to abolish private property. If no one could claim to own the means of production, then there could be no distinction between owner and worker; all class distinctions would disappear and the workers would be free to distribute the benefits of production more equally.

## **Social Darwinism**

The socialist notion that competition was unnatural was countered by yet another nineteenth-century ideology that came to be known as *social Darwinism*. In 1859, the British naturalist Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, which argued that all living things had descended from a few simple forms. In *Origin*, Darwin described a complex process in which biological inheritance, environment, and competition for resources combined over millions of years to produce the amazing diversity in living forms that exists in the world.

The social philosopher Herbert Spencer argued that Darwin's theory proved that competition was not only natural, but necessary for the progress of a society. Spencer coined the phrase "survival of the fittest" (a phrase adopted by Darwin in the sixth and final edition of *Origin*) and argued along liberal lines that government intervention in social issues interfered with natural selection and, therefore, with progress. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, social Darwinism was being used to argue that imperialism, the competition between nations for control of the globe, was a natural and necessary step in the evolution of the human species. *Eugenics*, the notion that a progressive, scientific nation should plan and manage the biological reproduction of its population as carefully as it planned and managed its economy, also flourished in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

## **Rapid Review**

In the nineteenth century, intellectuals articulated numerous ideologies in order to make sense of a rapidly changing world. By the end of the century, a thinking person could choose from or create combinations from a spectrum of ideologies that included and can be summarized as follows:

- Conservatism—championing tradition
- Liberalism—urging reform
- Romanticism—encouraging the cultivation of sentiment and emotion
- Nationalism—preaching cultural unity
- Anarchism—scheming to bring down the state
- Socialism—trying to design a more equitable society
- Communism—working to abolish private property
- Social Darwinism—advocating the benefits of unfettered competition