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The Shaping of the "Second Europe" by Revolutions 1750-1914

The Impact of Revolutions and "isms" as a Theme

Outline of Lecture

- I. Introduction - Impact Of Revolutions
 - II. Conservatism
 - III. Liberalism
 - IV. Nationalism
 - V. Romanticism
 - VI. Socialism
 - VII. Optimism, Pessimism, and Realism
 - VIII. Nihilism (Anti-Rationalism)
 - IX. Imperialism
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Introduction

Revolutions were decisive in shaping the period 1789-1914. From the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and the revolution caused by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution came all the major movements and important figures of the period. These movements and people differed widely except for the one thing they had in common, the suffix **"ism:"**

- **Conservatism**

- **Liberalism**
- **Nationalism**
- **Romanticism**
- **Socialism**
- **Optimism, Pessimism, and Realism**
- **Nihilism (Anti-Rationalism)**
- **Imperialism**

For several sessions we shall be looking at each of these in some detail, showing at the same time that the "ism" is an outgrowth of revolutionary forces and that it has an effect on the basic ideas, beliefs, and values of the Second Europe. In some cases the effect is to affirm the Enlightenment outlook in one or more ways. In others it is to modify that outlook. In still others it is a basic rejection of the Second Europe and its affirmations about man, the world, God, society, and the future. You need to be looking at the broader question of what each "ism" had to say about the Enlightenment as well as what the "ism" was.

The first two "isms" we take up were directly inspired by the French Revolution which itself was influenced by the American Revolution: Conservatism and Liberalism. Conservatism rejected the French Revolution not only for its effects but also because of its methods. A revolution, according to Edmund Burke, necessarily destroys its ideals as it attempts to achieve them. Social and political progress are not brought about through violence and destruction; only through conserving and enriching the traditions of the past can man hope to make changes for the better. Any change, to produce beneficial results, must be slow and evolutionary in nature. Anything else is worse than doing nothing at all. Sudden change always ends in disaster. Conservatives, then, questioned the efficacy, if not the validity, of Second Europe ideas and ideals.

Liberalism, on the other hand, believed that progress could occur through peaceful, lawful change. Primarily English but also found later on the Continent, Liberals trusted in the rationality and goodness of man. They thought it possible to adapt the ideals of the Enlightenment to the political and economic conditions being created by the Industrial Revolution. They too questioned the effects and methods of the French Revolution, but for them the problem lay not in what the French Revolution sought to accomplish, but in the way it sought to accomplish it. They believed that each individual must be given the maximum freedom to develop himself as he thought best. At the same time they wanted to keep government interference to a minimum. They believed in Laissez-faire economics. Liberalism was torn by dissension during the period we will be looking at because Liberals held contradictory ideals: governmental non-interference and humanitarianism. These two ideals clashed, particularly in the 19th century. Liberals, then, affirmed the Enlightenment and believed its values and ideals could be implemented in the actual conditions of society by peaceful, constitutional changes.

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1. What are the differences between modern conservatives and liberals?
 2. Should government interference be kept to a minimum? Is more government better for the individual or worse? Your reasons?
 3. It comes back to the theory one holds about human nature, doesn't it?
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Nationalism was the third of the "isms" we shall examine. Its effect was profound in the 19th century, and still is. In fact, in our century there seems to be no end to the effort of each "people", using the term loosely to characterize a group which sees itself as distinct for whatever reason it sees itself as distinct, to achieve separate status as a "nation" and freedom to determine its own destiny. In the 19th century "nation" identified a people sharing an identity through occupation of a territory, a history, a language, common traditions and other common elements. This attitude toward a people as unique and worthwhile compared to other peoples was first made an ideology during the French Revolution. The French proclaimed the French "nation" as the authority underlying the state (not the King who had been executed, or France in the abstract, but the people, the "nation"). They spread this attitude across Europe during the Revolution and found it turned back against them when they became an occupying force in the countries they conquered. Because the French nation and its culture became equated with French occupation and rule, the subject peoples searched their own history and traditions, each trying to find a national culture which would surpass that of the French. This cultural nationalism led to political nationalism and helped inspire opposition to the French both before Napoleon and during his imperial reign in Europe. It took a variety of forms after the French Revolution and Napoleonic period. In Germany it led to the worship of the state (G. W. F. Hegel). In Italy it became the basis for the a humanitarian crusade for independence from foreign oppressors (Giuseppe Mazzini). It led to movements for independence in other cases: the Greeks from the Turks; the Belgians from the Dutch. Its most important practical result in the 19th century was the unification and creation of Germany and Italy as nation-states.

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The tendency of nationalism is to idealize ever smaller groupings of "peoples" as nationalities. How does that compare with the tendency of radical individualism to idealize the solitary person? Is it too much of a stretch to compare them?

Romanticism, a movement of wide and varied character in literature, philosophy, and the arts, was a fourth "ism" spawned by revolutions which shaped the Second Europe. As a general outlook on life, it was a reaction against central tenets of the Enlightenment, particularly the emphasis on reason and logic and the scientific spirit with which men

sought to understand themselves and their world. Romantics were sympathetic to the French Revolution and willing to join any crusade for political freedom. At the same time they steadfastly opposed the Industrial Revolution which they saw as crippling and deadening the spirit of man. Romanticism as a general outlook survives today in the trend towards individualism and primitivism as themes in our society (individualism-maximum freedom from any kind of restraint; primitivism-the destruction of traditional standards and the idealization of the "unfitting" in personal and social behavior). Romanticism, then, basically rejected the Enlightenment.

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Perhaps it is premature to raise the question about the Romantic influence so early, but let's do it anyway. Individualism and primitivism. Do you see these today? Examples?

A fifth "ism" was Socialism, the most radical of the lot. This was particularly so in the case of Karl Marx's brand of socialism. Socialism sprang up in reaction to the Industrial Revolution and the industrial society which followed. Socialism differed from Liberalism in one important way. Liberals rejected the pre-revolutionary social structure of Europe, but accepted the new middle class or bourgeois society which grew out of industrialization. Socialists rejected the bourgeois society and championed the industrial working class or proletariat also a product of the Industrial Revolution. Some socialists advocated peaceful, gradual changes to industrial society. Marxian Socialists preached violent, revolutionary change. As we shall see, Socialism affirmed many of the tenets of the Second Europe, although its stance as a broad movement was that of a counter-culture, hostile to the established order in all respects.

Optimism was a sixth "ism", perhaps the most pervasive of them all. With few exceptions, leaders of the 19th century were firm believers in progress. G. W. F. Hegel said progress was a metaphysical necessity. Marx pronounced it a historical necessity; Darwin, a biological necessity. John Stuart Mill in his work Utilitarianism (1863), said "...no one whose opinion deserves a moment's notice can doubt that most of the great positive evils of the world are in themselves removable. . . .All the grand sources ... of human suffering are in a great degree, many of them almost entirely, conquerable by human care and effort." In that progress was one of the watchwords of the Second Europe, optimism affirmed the Enlightenment.

To many it seemed undeniable that progress was being made as man conquered nature through industrialization, technology, and engineering. No single event was more symbolic of this belief than the opening of the Great Exhibition of 1851 in the marvelous Crystal Palace. Designed by Sir Joseph Paxton (himself a model of the self-made man) and erected in London's Hyde Park, the Palace was both a triumph of engineering and a thing of beauty, perfectly embodying the hope and confidence of the age that progress was unending and universal. It was what would today be called prefab construction. Over

a million square feet of clear glass rested on a framework of iron trusses and rods covering an area of almost 800,000 square feet of exhibition spaces. Fittingly, this cathedral of progress contained a huge Centre Transept housing the largest organ in the world. Inside were the proofs of man's genius in manufacturing and the arts: [13,000 exhibits](#) from Great Britain and other nations, including the [Jacquard loom](#) (punch card operated to automatically produce intricate textile patterns), the Colt repeater pistol, and a reaper from the United States. Queen Victoria pronounced the opening of the Exhibition "one of the greatest and most glorious days of our lives."

Even a brief discussion of 19th century optimism and the engineering marvels which this "ism" evoked must mention [Isambard Kingdom Brunel](#) (1806-1859). At the astonishing age of 20 he was resident engineer on the [Thames Tunnel](#). He designed and built several suspension bridges. Turning to railway engineering, he designed and built the Great Western Railway which linked London to Bristol and required a [box tunnel](#) of over 2 miles; Brunel insisted the railway be built on a new wider gauge for greater speed. Not content with these projects, he also conceived and constructed several iron-hulled transports, one of which first incorporated [the screw-propeller](#). (Brunel silenced objections to the propeller's feasibility by staging a demonstration in which his ship out-pulled a paddle wheeler.)

Optimism seemed to promise unending progress based on the ever greater works of Paxton, Brunel and others. Would these advances one day be extended to the whole world? Who could doubt it? The lack of a general war from 1815 to 1914 seemed to confirm it. So in literature, a subject we examine later, there is a strong strain of optimism in the first half of the 19th century. But the human misery of industrial society and the ideas of Charles Darwin also called forth pessimism and realism in literature as the century moved into the second half.

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1. Progress, Yes or No? Maybe?
2. Are better things progress?

A seventh "ism" was [Nihilism](#), a philosophy identified with Friedrich Nietzsche. Nihilism is the philosophical stance (school is too strong a word) that all rational, systematic thought is unfounded, that life is senseless and useless, that objective truth can not be known, and that the task of the philosopher is to tear down existing philosophical systems and statements of truth. It is an oversimplification to say that something so complex as nihilism or Friedrich Nietzsche could be produced by any single event or movement. But the upheaval in thought produced by Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection is certainly an important factor. If a blind force is driving the development of organisms in interplay with their environment, then what is there of an order or purpose in the grand scheme of things? None, said Nietzsche. All one can do is point out the "truth" that there

is no truth in any systematic sense. It is a chimera to be grasped and conveyed, if stated at all, in highly personal aphorisms. The only reality and "truth" is that a blind Will is working itself out in this world. The 19th century did not feel the impact of his ideas very much, but the 20th century certainly did. Obviously Nietzsche and Nihilism are totally opposed to the Second Europe.

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Here's one way to apply what Nietzsche said. Truth is what I perceive. But I recognize that you may not see it as I do, so your perception is equally valid. Which means that no one is Right. Or Wrong. So I shouldn't make judgments about Right and Wrong. The terrorist who flies a plane into a building and kills a lot of people is not Wrong. He is part of a great cause which has commanded his *will*, a cause which he authenticates by voluntarily dying and taking many others with him. So I have no objective standard by which to judge him. Or do I?

An eighth and final "ism" was Imperialism which developed out of the Industrial Revolution, Optimism and Darwinism. The imperial countries of the 19th and early 20th centuries were the industrialized nations of Europe. Part of the attitude of imperialists was the idealistic notion that Western Man should take the benefits of Civilization and Progress to those who did not enjoy them in the non-western world. But practical, selfish ideas also entered into imperialist thinking. And the influence of Darwin. As Theodore Roosevelt said at the turn of the 19th - 20th centuries "Nations that expand and nations that do not may both ultimately go down, but the one leaves heirs and a glorious memory, and the other leaves neither."

These were then the major movements or "isms" which appeared in reaction to the Enlightenment, the great Revolutions, and the impact of Darwin. To understand them and their effect on the shaping of the Second Europe is to understand much about the late 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries. Now we will take up the Revolutions and "isms" in order.