

# EUROPEAN SOCIETY IN UPHEAVAL

SECOND EDITION

*Social History Since 1750*



PETER N. STEARNS



# EUROPEAN SOCIETY IN UPHEAVAL

SOCIAL HISTORY SINCE 1750

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**For T. E. D., who enhanced my knowledge of the subject**

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

The basic fact of European history since 1750 has been an unprecedented social upheaval. Every age is a time of change, and Europe had not been static in the previous centuries. But in the last two hundred years a new kind of society has been formed, as different from its predecessor as agricultural society was from the hunting culture with which man first began to fight for survival. Beginning in the eighteenth century, demographic, economic, and political forces arose that were truly revolutionary in their intensity. The population of the Continent began to expand rapidly and, in addition, grew exceptionally mobile. Europe became urbanized; for the first time in human history the majority of people lived in cities, and the countryside was partially urbanized as well, as a city economy and culture spread outward. The economy of Europe was transformed. Production expanded greatly, and new methods of marketing and transport arose. Finally, governments gradually adopted new methods and policies, often spurred by pressures from below as new groups gained political consciousness. The result was an increasingly active government that sought change in many areas—in agricultural methods, in the organization of cities, in industry and technology, and in more conventional matters such as police and military structure. Population growth, the industrialization of the economy, and the modernization of the state—here were the most obvious motors for change.

The result was a transformation that touched every aspect of life; and in many ways the less familiar changes were more important. People

became sexier. They had intercourse more often, both in and out of marriage. Their bodies changed. Modern European man is taller, is heavier, and has bigger feet than his premodern counterpart. Women are taller as well, but ultimately their physical image, and with a bit of a lag their physical reality, stressed greater slenderness, along with an increase in bust size. The age of puberty declined, ultimately by as much as eight years; in 1700, most lower-class girls began to menstruate only at age eighteen to twenty. These basic biological changes seem an integral part of modernization, and are occurring today in other parts of the world, such as Japan, where a similar social upheaval has been underway for some time. The list of fundamental transformations is lengthy, and this book will cover many of them in detail. Premodern society had a different notion of work from modern society. It had little specific sense of leisure; the notion of vacations and regular, off-the-job recreation was born in the nineteenth century.

There are a number of labels commonly used to describe the social upheaval of the last two centuries. Industrialization is one. It is useful to think of two fundamental economic revolutions in human history, the first, agricultural, bringing men out of the caves and into settled communities, and the second, industrial, creating the urban society we live in today. But a vaguer term, *modernization*, may be better. Modernization includes industrialization and the extension of a profit-making, market mentality to shops, farms, and even individual families to some extent. It embraces political change. A modern political society has an active state (whether totalitarian or democratic) and a population that is conscious of the national political process and insistent on having at least a pro forma voice in it; hence the universality of popular elections in all modern countries. Most of all, modernization involves a change in outlook. Compared to premodern people, modern man is rational, believing that planning and good order are important and possible; secular, with little or no interest in traditional religion; and progressive, holding that change is desirable and that the future is likely to be better than the past. Obviously these values are not absolutes; modern people are not completely rational and they often worry about the future. But as a model that indicates trends in values, the idea of a modernization of outlook has considerable validity.

Any change as great as industrialization and modernization creates a great deal of stress. At every stage of the modernization process large groups of people were fearful of change. Ironically, the same transformation that spread an idea of progress also enhanced a more traditional notion that somehow the past was better. An example: polls in France as late as the 1950s revealed that the majority of the population believed that people lived longer in the past than in modern society, apparently assuming that the stress of modern life, in contrast to the peaceful existence of the countryside, must have reduced longevity. The facts were quite different, for

longevity has steadily increased with modernization. But the point is that most people, even today, are ambivalent about change, wanting it in some respects but fearing its consequences in others. Certain groups, throughout the modernization process, have been positively antimodern, specifically attacking the values and institutions of change, and although they have yet to win out they play a consistently important historical role.

Modernization from the first has involved continuing tension between efforts to protest basic changes and efforts to adapt to them. The history of protest itself is divided between attacks against modern society and agitation for gains within its framework. In either case protest is dramatic and has readily drawn the attention of historians. It is easy to assume that great change caused great unrest and that even when people were not taking to the streets they were just waiting for a chance to rise up. In fact, without minimizing the importance of protest, particularly in key stages of the modernization process, the theme of adaptation is more important. People learned to live with change, sometimes surprisingly quickly, although often with a certain amount of tension. One of the basic questions in the history of European modernization is why adaptation was so widespread, for there are areas of the world in which it is still not clear that modernization can take hold at all.

The terms *modernization* and *industrialization* can be loaded ones. When we say that a group was antimodern or that an area was slow to industrialize we do not mean that they were therefore bad. There are eminently good reasons to oppose or delay change. But there is a bias in this book, and it is well to state it frankly at the outset. On the whole I believe that the modernization process has been a liberating one. Not only are modern people richer and healthier than ever before, they are also freer. Premodern society, though by no means completely dismal or static, was stifling for many people, whether they recognized it or not. In both town and countryside close-knit groups regulated the lives of individuals very closely. Modernization steadily weakened these structures, replacing them with more impersonal but also more remote sources of control.

This is not a claim that all is well with modern society. There are immense evils, some of them correctable; in certain areas quite radical change is needed. And the modernization process, in addition to bringing considerable stress to most groups (for the very fact that individual freedom and choice increased caused great confusion), undoubtedly damaged the position of some types of people. The insane are one example, by no means insignificant. It is impossible at this point to compare rates of insanity from premodern to modern society. They have not necessarily gone up. But insanity in modern society is identifiable; it is feared; and from the early stages of modernization its worst victims were institutionalized. In premodern society the insane were normally treated within family and village, for the boundary line between normal and abnormal

behavior was less clear. Modern man, more rational, perhaps in some ways more fearful, tries to isolate the deviant. In general one can note a number of types of people whom modernization has hurt, because they cannot mesh easily with its canons of behavior. At an extreme the suicide rate has probably gone up, although we need real caution here, for the rate varies greatly from one modern country to the next, generally along the same lines that one finds in premodern rates. In Europe the countries with the darkest winters, notably in Scandinavia, along with Austria had the highest suicide incidence in the seventeenth century and they still have today. But it is possible to argue that the stress of modernization pushes more people to the brink of despair, or over it, than was true before.

But although many historians would disagree, this is not the case for large groups in the population. It has been argued that modernization reduces the status of women; we will contend that the reverse is true. It has been argued that the elderly are worse off; here the evidence is murkier, particularly for the late nineteenth century, but by the twentieth century the elderly, too, were benefiting from a certain kind of liberation. It is easy to romanticize the past. Very early in the modernization process city dwellers picked up a nostalgia for the countryside that had been part of Europe's literary tradition since ancient times. Many historians and social scientists have followed suit. Certainly there have been some losses; the reader can judge for himself how many. But most European people have clearly come to believe that modern society is better than premodern, which is why they continue to flock to the cities and, with rare exceptions, refuse to leave once there. This study will attempt to show why they make this kind of decision.

We are dealing with the modernization process from the standpoint of social history. It would be possible to concentrate on more specific aspects of modernization, which would bring us closer to the concerns of conventional history. The social historian is concerned with changes in the values and behavior patterns of a whole society or large groups within it. He deals with changes in formal ideas—the Enlightenment, for example—when they affect the thinking of large groups, but not with the ideas in detail. Political processes are interesting as they affect people. A law can be passed whose impact differs greatly from its intent; the social historian is not concerned with the details of its passage (the changes in ministries or even the parliamentary debates), but with this impact. And there are major areas of behavior that have little or no direct political or intellectual significance but are more important for understanding people—family ties, for example, or the development of new recreation patterns.

Social history thus has a rather different focus from other branches of history. It is an approach more than a special set of topics, for the social historian attempts to judge every aspect of society, politics as well as toilet training, in terms of what it reveals about widely held values and behavior.

Every aspect of modern society has a history. Newspapers and other popular media constantly comment on novelty and change in the basic fabric of society, and it is only through social history that we can evaluate what they are talking about. For example, we constantly hear about the decay of family life. This is a historical judgment, yet too few students of the family bother to study its past and too few historians, who do deal with the past, have bothered to study the family. The result leaves vast room for ignorance. In fact the family has not necessarily decayed with modernization; in some ways it has been strengthened, but only a historical perspective reveals this. And complaints that the family is collapsing go back to the beginnings of modernization, which suggests that laments about declining family ties play a major role in anxiety about the whole process of change, perhaps stemming from this kind of concern more than from actual changes in the family. The social history of modernization attempts to give perspective to every major aspect of modern society, so that we can judge what is new and what not new, which is the only way to gain a sense of social trends.

Obviously, the modernization process did not affect each group in the same way, nor did it proceed at a constant pace. To grasp its essentials we will rely heavily on concepts of periodization and social stratification. This involves some major simplifications. Important changes occur within major periods, marking off subsections. Individuals vary greatly within even a carefully defined social group. We will later describe, for example, how the working class around 1900 spent relatively little of any extra income on housing; but individual workers can be found who devoted great attention to improving their living quarters. We deal, inevitably, with averages and general trends, not year-by-year or person-by-person detail.

In 1750 Europe was divided into a number of social groupings. With modernization the nature of the groupings changed, but society remained far from homogeneous. Not only economic position but also family structure and religious life divided the major social classes of every country.

The term *social class* is used very broadly as a descriptive category. It denotes people who have a roughly similar style of life and social status. Some sociologists prefer the word *stratum* to *class*, reserving the latter for groups that sense a common interest and try to act upon it. In 1900 only a minority of workers belonged to class-conscious organizations such as unions or socialist parties. We will deal with this group, but when we discuss the working class a much larger number of people is involved. Some of them disagreed vigorously with others in the same class about political goals, for although there is usually a general relationship between class and political outlook, politics is not the best way to define a class. But workers shared a roughly common employment situation, similar recreational patterns and attitudes toward work, a comparable family life, and so on. And in all these respects they differed from other classes at the time. Finally, although they did not necessarily share a positive sense of class

unity, they knew they were different from nonworkers. They would regard both peasants and businessmen as outsiders, whether they felt a sense of class conflict against them or not.

European social classes were defined by several fundamental factors, whose combination tended to change over time. In traditional society, status was the key criterion. Many groups were marked off by law, so that they had different rights, different taxes to pay, even distinctive styles of dress. With modernization legal status was largely erased, but a sense of status continued to define many groups who would try to distinguish themselves by intermarriage and special patterns of consumption. The perpetuation of the old notion of status most obviously differentiates aristocrats from big businessmen in Europe, well into the recent period, for aristocrats tried to set themselves off even when they no longer had legal privileges or unusually high incomes. But similar distinctions mark artisans off from factory workers and, to an extent, professional people, like lawyers, off from businessmen.

Type of work often supplemented descriptions of status. The key traditional distinction was between people who worked with their hands and those who did not, and this remains important today. In particular it came to mark off the lower middle class from the working class, even when levels of earnings were not much different.

Increasingly, in industrial society, money was the great determinant of social class. It also played a role in premodern society, within the status groups. Rich peasants, for example, must be discussed somewhat separately from ordinary peasants, and the latter from landless laborers, even though all were usually in the same legal category. By the nineteenth century earnings and property ownership spoke more loudly, and groups with the same earnings could rarely stay apart too long. Hence aristocrats and big businessmen, artisans and the better-paid factory workers increasingly coalesced into single classes because of shared economic position.

By the twentieth century, stratification became more complex. Not only law but also property ownership had disappeared as the major criteria of social divisions. They still had influence, directly and through tradition. Modernization did not neatly replace one kind of social definition with another. But increasingly job position was the key, not only dividing manual from nonmanual workers but also differentiating the latter in terms of position in a bureaucratic hierarchy. Earnings would usually reflect the main distinctions, but sometimes less sharply than before.

All of these distinctions must be explored more fully as we discuss the major stages of modernization. For now the main point is that we are looking for ways to define groups that shared values and styles of life, for this is the only way to grasp social reality. There were, of course, trends that cut across class lines. Religion or, later, nationalism were shared by

many groups. Family patterns, though rarely the same at any one time, could be copied, so that it is possible to talk of trends in family structure quite apart from class. The whole modernization process indeed would ultimately touch society generally, which is why an overall definition is possible. But at any given point, even in the present day, social classes differed in important respects even when they were moving in the same direction. Any effort to label a period's culture usually means that only one or two social classes are being considered, at best. A good example is Victorian England, which has been praised or blamed for its harmony, rigid morality, and optimism. The definition almost completely ignores the lower classes. In fact, as we will see, it distorts the middle and upper classes as well.

For the unfortunate fact is that most historians, although recognizing class lines in principle, have generalized about classes more than they have studied them. When the middle class or bourgeoisie is mentioned, many notions come to mind (depending a bit on what kind of historian has been read most recently): dynamic (the businessman); cruel and exploitative (the businessman again); puritanical and repressed (middle-class women, and possibly the poor old businessman again); fearful and incipiently fascist (the shopkeeper and clerk). Yet the middle class has almost never been examined closely. As for the more inarticulate levels of society, the workers and peasants, they come to attention usually only when they protest, which was not their normal activity. In taking class lines seriously, as the social historian must to understand the impact of modernization, a fresh look is required at the upper levels of society, who are too often known only by a few articulate individuals, and a much more comprehensive survey of the masses of the population.

How many social classes should be considered? In English history there is a longstanding tradition, for the nineteenth and twentieth century, of dividing into threes: upper, middle, and lower. This trinitarian impulse is lazy and inaccurate, taking only the grossest kind of economic divisions into consideration. We will require a more elaborate framework, given the various criteria that set groups off from each other. Moreover, within even more limited social classes there was often a division, admittedly fuzzy, between elements that could basically accept modernization and those that were frightened by it. The lower middle class, for example, has often been seen (particularly in Germany) as a backward-looking unit, terrified by big business and impersonal organization. In fact the group was divided, even though it shared a similar life style in other respects. Here and in other cases social classes constantly tended to pull apart, between those who could adapt and those who could not. Finally, factors of age and sex must be introduced. Age has yet to receive due attention, but we are beginning to know something about the history of key groups like adolescents (a



creation of modern society) and the elderly. Sex considerations are more obvious, and special attention needs to be given to women within each major social class.

A society at any given stage of modernization can be understood in terms of certain general trends and institutions, such as technological levels and political structure. Its people, however, must be broken down by class and often by subgroup, by age level, and by sex. A complex array, to be sure, but not indigestible and essential to grasp the way contemporary society came into being.

Periodization, fortunately, can be somewhat simpler. Because it is less concerned with single events and great men, social history does not need a detailed chronology. What happened in a decade is more important than what happened in a year. What follows is based on a fourfold periodization of the development of modern society, after an initial section on the preindustrial setting. It derives from a combination of major changes in demography; key economic changes, in terms ultimately of major stages of industrialization; and related alterations in social structure. It may be that this periodization needs further refinement, for the bases of periodization are not well worked out in social history and the field has long relied on divisions established by political events; but the present divisions constitute a reasonable first step.

It is increasingly recognized that essential aspects of the modernization process were taking shape in Western Europe from about 1750 onward, in the form of population increase and the spread of new forms of manufacturing. From this base flowed industrialization itself, from about 1820 onward (a bit earlier in England). This second phase of modernization saw only a minority of the population touched by the factories directly, but it witnessed the most rapid urbanization. Together the first two stages of modernization, 1750–1820 and 1820–1870, constitute the period in which change was most bewildering and the institutions of society most severely challenged.

From about 1870 onward industrial society matured. Family life stabilized; population growth declined. But stabilization brought new tensions as key social groups defined their interests more clearly, and continued innovation in technology and social organization produced its own strain. In fact the last two decades of this third phase of modernization saw much of European society in disarray. Staggered by World War I, the social structure that had been tossed up by mature industrialization was no longer adequate. Many people viewed the 1920s as a new, and horrible, kind of society. In fact the basic trends were not novel, but cruelly distorted by the impact of the first total war.

Gradually, by around 1950, a fourth phase of modernization emerged. Some have labeled it postindustrial or postmodern, claiming that the very basis of industrial society has been overturned. It is more accurate to view