



# *The Modern Centuries*

**LIFE AND SOCIETY IN THE WEST**

PETER N. STEARNS

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Carnegie-Mellon University



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For Sarah and Susan,  
Kate and Martha,  
Jo and Karin:  
extended families still count.

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# PREFACE

This book examines Western civilization during the past five centuries through the lens of social history. The focus on Western society allows us to understand the development of institutions and values that have shaped much of our own social environment and that describe the civilization whose activities, for better or worse, have influenced and shaken the entire modern world. The same focus allows us to grasp certain kinds of fundamental changes, including, but not confined to, the Industrial Revolution.

The social history approach picks up a development that has quietly revolutionized historical study in recent decades. Rather than concentrating on formal politics and great ideas alone, social historians turn their attention to the evolution of ordinary people and to such activities as family life and the rituals of health and illness. The result has been an explosion of new knowledge about the past and a massive expansion of the kind of historical perspective that can inform our understanding of the present—of why people today behave and think as they do. The social history approach also shifts attention from single events as the cornerstones of history—an election, a battle—to more basic concerns, such as changes in birthrates or new ways of defining work. At the same time, the rise of social history, precisely because of its novelty, has often been an ill-disciplined affair, more concerned with staking out new topics than with putting the pieces together or relating them to more familiar historical landmarks. This book seeks to capture the excitement of social history while building a more coherent integration, linking process and event, showing relationships between political change and social change.

Finally, our focus is modern, dealing with centuries in which Western society has been transformed in many ways. This panorama poses its own challenge to show how different developments interrelate without sketching too simple or tidy a picture.

## Getting from Then to Now: A Complex Fabric of Change

Between the sixteenth century and the twentieth century—that is, during the 450-year span before today—Western society generated a radically new set of institutions and a substantially novel culture. In 1500 almost all western Europeans adhered to basic Christian beliefs and belonged to the Catholic church. By 1950 their descendants professed various versions of Christianity and many had lost primary allegiance to any formal religion at all. In 1500 the dominant form of government was a monarchy; by 1950 this political institution had virtually disappeared, replaced most widely by democratic parliamentary regimes but in some places by new kinds of authoritarian systems. In 1500 the purpose of the family was rooted in its service as the chief unit for producing goods. By 1950 the family's production function had almost vanished, and the family itself had become the subject of confused debate—and even sharp attack from those, such as some feminists, who found it oppressive. In 1500 the average twenty-year-old in the West was a peasant waiting for a chance to marry and take over a plot of land; by 1950 the average twenty-year-old was launched on a career of factory or office work, after twelve to fourteen years of schooling, and hoping for advancement, a house in the suburbs, and individual fulfillment. In sum, the remaking of Western society involved a vast series of changes, many of them touching fundamental ways society and individuals operate. And although 450 years is no small period of time, it is clear that change of this basic sort has been unusually rapid as well.

### *The Economic and Technological Underpinnings of Western Society*

The key to the direction of change in modern Western history lies in a progressive recasting of the economic framework of Western society. Steady, often undramatic technological improvements propelled Western society to world technological leadership by 1600, for the first time in history. Commercial activity, already swelling during the Middle Ages, expanded to new levels, as the West, again for the first time, took over the direction of worldwide trade. Changes of this sort prepared the still more fundamental shifts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Western society underwent the world's first industrial revolution.

In other words, most Western history is defined in considerable measure by the underlying currents that led an agricultural society to become an urbanized, industrial society within a relatively short time. To be sure, there had been one comparable transformation in the human experience, when hunters and gatherers, initially in the Middle East (and later, independently, in Central America) learned how to farm. Like the

process of industrialization that modern Western society pioneered, this transformation fundamentally altered systems of government, the places where people lived, the way they thought about the world around them. Like industrialization, the first agricultural revolution involved a long period of preparation, often unwitting, as ordinary people and leaders alike reacted to changes in their physical and social environment. But the agricultural revolution took many centuries to unfold, whereas the economic revolution that produced industrial society reached some completion within three to four hundred years. Again, in dealing with this economic and industrial core of the recent Western experience, one is dealing with a very unusual historical episode.

Two obvious issues therefore inform modern Western history: How did Western society achieve the possibility of major change? And what impact has this change had? The first question calls attention to distinctive features of the Western experience from 1500 to about 1850, including important changes within this early modern period both at society's summit, in political institutions and formal culture, and at its base, in family forms and the economic behavior of ordinary people. The second question organizes much of the history of the West since industrialization broke through, and indeed takes us easily to the contemporary era. Westerners are still debating questions about the functions of the family as a result of industrialization, including the roles of women, and about the place of leisure in a radically new kind of society. They also debate the function of the arts in an industrial environment and certainly continue to discuss how best to organize an effective industrial state.

These two leading issues—how the West got here, and what resulted—are also interconnected. One clear source of the West's ability to innovate was its growing influence in the wider world—the spread of early colonies and trading patterns that gave the West control over a growing portion of the world's wealth. Industrialization heightened the West's international position, but it also provided models for imitation that have produced new rivals for world influence in the twentieth century. Changes in the position of women played a role in the array of shifts that prepared the West's ability to industrialize, but the same changes generated questions that still agitate Western society. Portions of the West that converted to Protestantism saw particularly marked changes in the culture surrounding women; these same areas produced, and still produce, the most vigorous feminist challenges in Western industrial society. Again, the forces that produced the Western transformation help define that transformation and its results, so that preindustrial history is linked with more recent developments at many points.

### *The Unevenness of Historical Change*

Seeing Western history, not just since the rise of factories but to an extent before, as organized around a central, sweeping transformation, involves several problems. First, by no means was *all* Western history since 1500 bent on generating and reacting to economic transformation; many developments were rather random, fitting no basic pattern or co-

herent direction. Second, other movements, such as the Renaissance and the Reformation (cultural and religious respectively), had consequences different in part from those intended by their proponents—leading to more change, particularly in the economic and social sphere, than they had wished. Certainly few people were aware of their own participation in a fundamental economic transformation at least until the eighteenth century. Third, no one sat down in 1600 to say, “Let’s plan industrialization for a century or so hence.” The record of early modern history must not be forced to make it seem more coherent or self-conscious than it was. Even after industrialization began, many developments remained separate from economic change, sometimes continuing earlier themes. For example, in the nineteenth-century and essentially to our own day, the military purposes of the modern state changed less than its technology did. Thus not every trend in modern Western history fits neatly together.

One key reason for this lack of neat fit—even in the nineteenth century, which served as the crucible of industrialization—involves the gap between the elite and ordinary people. A tempting way to visualize modern European history is to posit a shift in high culture and politics that forced the tradition-minded masses into new patterns of behavior and ultimately built the new economic framework. Indeed, changes in formal ideas and in government functions did contribute to the wider transformation of the modern West. But many elite interests were themselves traditional, or were irrelevant to the central changes. Nor were the ordinary people of Western society simply passive victims. They, too, produced new institutions and behaviors that would feed into industrialization, even though they had no explicit intention of doing so. The formula *elite equals dynamic, masses equals inert* does not work in Western history. This is one reason that the modern industrial and economic transformation cannot be viewed in any simple way. It involved causation from above, but also resistance from leading thinkers and statesmen, and a similar mixture of activity and resistance from the world of ordinary peasants and workers. Correspondingly, the *impact* of change was by no means uniform throughout society: it caused great disruption for established elites and their values, as well as for ordinary people, while bringing new opportunities at various levels as well. The complex combination of innovation and resistance, in different areas of society and at different levels, is itself a warning against seeing all of modern history moving neatly toward some single climax.

Nor is the theme of change uniform across the Western world. The same basic process of industrialization and reactions to industrialization that confirmed the parliamentary system in Britain brought Nazism for a time in Germany. The extension of Western civilization to most of North America created important divergences, as what ultimately became the United States and Canada participated in the broader pattern of Western change but with a number of cultural and social variants derived from their distinctive geography and early historical experiences.

The idea that modern Western history had a basic direction, then, must be balanced against the realization that change was uneven, that it



did not describe all important historical developments, and that it involved a complex relationship between elite and mass participation. Furthermore, change in Western history is not the story either of triumphant progress or of tragic deterioration—at least it is not automatically such a story. Many elements in the transformation of Western society look “good”: Western people have become richer, healthier, more democratic, less obviously superstitious. Many elements look “bad”: A rich popular culture has been disrupted to allow room for industrialization, more adults work for other bosses rather than on their own account, the technology of war has become steadily more menacing. Therefore, identification of a central transformation beginning to take shape from roughly 1500 onward, and extending to our own time, allows questions to be asked about losses and gains. It is not, by definition, either an optimistic or a pessimistic vision. It focuses attention on how contemporary Westerners differ from their ancestors, and how these differences gradually developed. The differences include, among other things, important changes in the way society is assessed; moderns, for example, place more weight on long life as a measure of quality of existence than their predecessors did. But this evaluation should not lead to simple ideas about contemporary superiority over a boorish past, or of contemporary tragedy played against a nostalgic past. Attention to central themes of change should not preclude sympathetic understanding of the past in its own right, or a critical examination of the present.

The Western pattern of economic transformation has not been the only one in modern history, although it was indisputably the first. The ability of Japan and eastern Europe to copy Western technologies, and generate their own, provides additional basis for highlighting what was distinctive about the Western process, including some features that may seem undesirable in this comparative context.

The transformation of Western society, grounded in crucial economic changes, provides in sum a guidepost to the history of the last four and a half centuries, not a detailed map. It helps raise questions about the relationships among seemingly diverse developments. What did the witchcraft persecution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have to do with changes in popular outlook and structures that in turn fed wider economic shifts? How did economic change relate to political revolutions or new artistic styles in the nineteenth century? The answers are not easy, for the process of change was not neatly lock-step. But the questions do allow a vision of the modern Western past that is not entirely random, not simply one period after another with no coherent relationship. For, despite their complexities, it is the ramifications of a central process of change that describe much of the evolving experience of Western people in the modern era.

Exploring the Western transformation links the past to contemporary experience in crucial ways. Issues such as what children are for and how they should be raised arose in new ways as part of Western society's premodern shifts and changed again as a result of industrialization. Such issues are still with us. The way we view children and youth is conditioned by the whole series of changes in modern Western society, in-

cluding industrialization, and can be understood and assessed only in terms of this historical perspective. The same holds true for the role of the state in dealing with problems of poverty, which began to be redefined in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and flows from this initial modern shift to the present. It holds true, relatedly, for the treatment of criminals: the first modern prisons were built in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and, although much changed—among other things by the results of industrialization—remain a central Western response to the problem of crime. The list extends—to the eating habits of families, to the relationship between art and business—wherever basic shifts began to emerge in the 1500s and 1600s that would feed the wider process of change and link to twentieth-century patterns. We live today, obviously, in a rapidly changing world. But it is a world that has been changing for some time in ways to which we are still reacting. A grasp of what the Western transformation entailed, including what caused it, is central to our definition of the issues and directions of our own society. The contemporary West is an evolving response to basic, and still quite recent, upheavals in the Western past. This is as true for the concerns of ordinary life—such as romance, sports, and protest—as it is for the more familiar stuff of history, such as the structure of the state or the philosophies of the elite.

### *The Central Areas of Greatest Change*

The best way to grasp the complexity of change as the modern West emerged and continued to evolve into our own time, without losing all sense of direction, is to focus on five interlocking areas of society's functioning. In each of these areas dramatic shifts developed between 1500 and 1700, with further changes building on the previous dynamic. Each area also involved both elite actors—great leaders, thinkers, or entrepreneurs of rare genius—and ordinary folk, who reacted to innovation and produced new departures of their own.

1. The first area is international relations. Western Europe began a historic rise in world power position after the explorations of the fifteenth century. It even managed to export Western values and institutions to new areas, notably in North America but also in Australia and New Zealand. It also was able to channel important proportions of the world's wealth into its own coffers.

2. The second area is internal political organization. With some preparation in the later Middle Ages and during the sixteenth century, the West pioneered a new political form, the nation-state, that began to come into its own in the 1600s. This nation-state involved levels of government organization new to the West, and links and loyalties between ordinary people and the state that were novel in any previous society.

3. The third area of great change featured the development of a commercialized economy and a social structure to match, in which control of money served as the basis for power and status. This involved, in turn, a new definition of gaps between haves and the have-nots within society.

The West would produce several versions of growing commercialization, first within the confines of an agricultural economy, then through industrialization and mass consumer power.

4. Technology is the fourth area of great change. Technological change helped boost the West's power in the world, with the development of mobile gunnery in the fifteenth century. Industrialization, three centuries later, consisted of a technological revolution and the introduction of recurrent technological shifts into the social fabric.

5. Finally, the development of modern Western society entailed basic changes in the ways people thought, or in *mentality*. These changes arose among intellectuals, and also in the outlook of ordinary people. In new, often deeply held ways of viewing nature, family, and the self lay causes of other changes—for example, in the roles of women or children—and also mirrors of shifts in technology, commerce, and politics. Because of its richness as cause and reflection of change, the subject of mentality or culture describes the reality of historical experience particularly well.

The great changes in the five facets of Western society did not occur neatly or in full harmony. Commercialization introduced new social divisions, where changes in outlook at times brought people closer together, across social divides. Some periods of time emphasized certain sectors over others; the sixteenth century, for example, emphasized developments in commerce and outlook more than politics or technology. Directions set at one point might be considerably altered at others, and we must especially consider how the West late in the 20th century fits, or diverges from, some of the patterns of its modern development. For all its complexity, however, the idea of five areas of great change does enable the student of modern Western history to envision the past as more than a series of scattered events. Understanding how people reacted to the great changes and contributed to them—and how their reactions and contributions differed according to social position, age, and gender—is the best way to see modern Western history for the human experience it was and still continues to be.

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*Preface*

**Peter N. Stearns**

## CHRONOLOGY

# ONE

### EUROPE AROUND 1500: STAGES IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES AND RENAISSANCE

- |                  |   |                  |  |
|------------------|---|------------------|--|
| <b>1300ff</b>    | Italian Renaissance<br>Giotto (1276–1337); Petrarch<br>(1304–1374); Leonardo da Vinci<br>(1452–1519); Machiavelli (1469–<br>1519); Michelangelo (1475–<br>1514) | <b>1485</b>      | Tudor dynasty established in<br>England<br>1509–1547 Henry VIII  |
| <b>1347–1348</b> | Black Death begins a long, recur-<br>rent series of plagues in Europe   | <b>1492–1493</b> | Columbus's first expedition to<br>West Indies<br>1493 Second Columbus expedi-<br>tion; Spanish colonial administra-<br>tion in West Indies begins      |
| <b>1418ff</b>    | Portuguese expeditions, spon-<br>sored by Henry the Navigator,<br>along African coast   | <b>1494ff</b>    | French and Spanish invasions of<br>Italy; beginning of decline of Ital-<br>ian Renaissance   |
| <b>1450ff</b>    | Northern Renaissance<br>Erasmus (1469?–1536)  | <b>1497–1499</b> | Vasco da Gama (Portugal) rounds<br>Africa, reaches India   |
| <b>1453–1471</b> | Wars of the Roses in England  | <b>1515–1547</b> | Francis I king of France   |
| <b>1453</b>      | Fall of Constantinople to the Ot-<br>toman Turks  | <b>1516–1556</b> | Charles I founds Habsburg dy-<br>nasty, rules Spain (as Charles V),<br>Flanders, Holy Roman Empire   |
| <b>1455</b>      | First European printing press,<br>Mainz, Germany  | <b>1519–1522</b> | Magellan (Spain) circumnavigates<br>the globe  |
| <b>1461</b>      | Hundred Years' War between<br>France and England ends   | <b>1521–1559</b> | Recurrent wars between Francis I<br>and Charles V<br>1559 Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis<br>ends these wars, Spain emerges<br>as leading continental power |
| <b>1462</b>      | Ivan III (the Great) frees much of<br>Russia from Tartars   |                  |  |
| <b>1479–1516</b> | Ferdinand and Isabella unite<br>Spain 1492 last Muslims ex-<br>pelled   |                  |  |
| <b>1480</b>      | Moscow region free from Tartars   |                  |  |
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