

CHAPTER 5

IMPACT OF THOUGHT SYSTEMS (ISMS) ON THE EUROPEAN WORLD

The mind set of Western civilization was being challenged in the first half of the 19th century by the appearance of numerous new thought systems. Not since the 18th century Enlightenment had humans sought to catalog, classify and categorize their thoughts and beliefs. Several of these systems of thought acted as change agents throughout the 19th century, while others would flow into the 20th century and continue to define the modern world.

5.1 ROMANTICISM

Romanticism was a reaction against the rigid classicism, rationalism and deism of the 18th century. Strongest in application between 1800 and 1850, the romantic movement differed from country to country and from romanticist to romanticist. Because it emphasized change it was considered revolutionary

in all aspects of life. It was an atmosphere in which events occurred and came to affect not only the way humans thought and expressed themselves but also the way they lived socially and politically.

5.1.1 *Characteristics*

Romanticism appealed to emotion rather than to reason (i.e., truth and virtue can be found just as surely by the heart rather than the head), and rejected classical emphasis on order and the observance of rules (i.e., let the imagination create new cultural forms and techniques).

It also rejected the enlightenment view of nature as a precise harmonious whole (i.e., viewed nature as alive, vital, changing and filled with the divine spirit), as well as the cold impersonal religion of Deism (i.e., viewed God as inspiring human nobility; deplored decline of Christianity).

Romanticism further rejected the Enlightenment point of view of the past which was counter-progressive to human history (i.e., viewed the world as an organism that was growing and changing with each nation's history unique), and expressed vital optimism about life and the future.

Romantics enriched European cultural life by encouraging personal freedom and flexibility. By emphasizing feeling, humanitarian movements were created to fight slavery, poverty and industrial evils.

5.1.2 *Romantic Literature, Art, Music, and Philosophy*

English romantics like Wordsworth and Coleridge epitomized the romantic movement, along with Burns, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Browning and Scott. The greatest German figures were Goethe, Schiller, Heine and Herder. French

romantics were Hugo, Balzac, Dumas and Stendahl. The outstanding Russian exponents were Pushkin, Dostoevski and Turgenev. Among the greatest American figures were Longfellow, Cooper, Irving, Emerson, Poe, Whitman and Thoreau.

The leading romantic painters in popular taste were the Frenchmen Millet and David, the Englishmen Turner and Constable, and the Spaniard Goya. Gothic Revival Style marked the Romantic era in architecture.

Music did not change as dramatically as did literature. Classical forms were still observed but new ideas and innovations were increasing. Beethoven was a crossover while straight romantics would include Brahms, Schumann, Schubert, Berlioz, Chopin and Von Weber.

Romantic philosophy stimulated an interest in Idealism, the belief that reality consists of ideas, as opposed to materialism. This school of thought (Philosophical Idealism) founded by Plato was developed through the writings of 1) Immanuel Kant whose work, *Critique of Pure Reason*, advances the theory that reality was two-fold — physical and spiritual. Reason can discover what is true in the physical but not in the spiritual world; 2) Johann Gottlieb Fichte, a disciple of Kant, and Friedrich Schelling, collaborator of Fichte; and, 3) Georg Wilhelm Hegel, the greatest exponent of this school of thought. Hegel believed that an impersonal God rules the universe and guides humans along a progressive evolutionary course by means of process called dialecticism; this is an historical process by which one thing is constantly reacting with its opposite (the thesis and antithesis) producing a result (synthesis) that automatically meets another opposite and continues the series of reactions. Hegel's philosophy exerted a great influence over Karl Marx who turned the Hegelian dialectic upside down to demonstrate the ultimate meaning of reality was a material end, not a higher or spiritual end as Hegel suggested.

5.1.3 *Impact*

Romanticism destroyed the clear simplicity and unity of thought which characterized the 18th century. There was no longer one philosophy which expressed all the aims and ideals of Western civilization. Romanticism provided a more complex but truer view of the real world.

5.2 CONSERVATISM

Conservatism arose in reaction to liberalism and became a popular alternative for those who were frightened by the violence, terror and social disorder unleashed by the French Revolution. Early conservatism was allied to the restored monarchical governments of Austria, Russia, France and England. Support for conservatism came from the traditional ruling classes, as well as the peasants who still formed the majority of the population. Intellectual ammunition came from the pens of the Englishman Edmund Burke; the Frenchmen, Joseph de Maistre and Louis de Bonald; the Austrian Friedrich Gentz; and many of the early romantics. In essence, conservatives believed in order, society and the state; faith and tradition.

5.2.1 *Characteristics*

Conservatives viewed history as a continuum which no single generation can revoke.

Conservatives believed the basis of society was organic not contractual. Society was not a machine with replaceable parts. Stability and longevity, not progress and change, mark a good society.

The only legitimate sources of political authority were God and history. The social contract theory was rejected because a contract cannot make authority legitimate.

Investing society with the theory of individualism ignored humans as social beings and undermined the concept of community which was essential to life. Conservatives said self-interest does not lead to social harmony but to social conflict.

Conservatives argued that measuring happiness and progress in material terms ignored humans as spiritual beings.

Conservatives rejected the philosophy of natural rights and believed that rights did not pertain to people everywhere but were determined and allocated by a particular state.

With its exaggerated emphasis on reason and intellect the conservatives denounced the philosophes and reformers for ignoring each human as an emotional being and underestimating the complexity of human nature.

To conservatives, society was hierarchical, i.e., some humans were better able to rule and lead than those who were denied intelligence, education, wealth and birth.

5.2.2 *Impact*

Conservatism was basically “anti-” in its propositions. It never had a feasible program of its own. The object of their hatred was a liberal society which they claimed was antisocial and morally degrading. While their criticisms contained much justification, conservatives ignored the positive and promising features of liberal society. Conservative criticism did poke holes in liberal ideology and pointed toward a new social tyranny, the aggressive middle class.

5.3 LIBERALISM

The theory of liberalism was the first major theory in the history of Western thought to teach that the individual is a self-

sufficient being whose freedom and well-being are the sole reasons for the existence of society. Liberalism was more closely connected to the spirit and outlook of the enlightenment than any of the other “isms” of the early 19th century. While the general principles and attitudes associated with liberalism varied considerably from country to country, liberals tended to come from the middle class or bourgeoisie and favored increased liberty for their class and indirectly for the masses of people, as long as the latter did not in their turn ask for so much freedom that they endangered the security of the middle class. Liberalism was reformist and political rather than revolutionary in character.

5.3.1 *Characteristics*

Individuals are entitled to seek their freedom in the face of arbitrary or tyrannical restrictions imposed upon them.

Humans have certain natural rights and governments should protect them. These rights include the right to own property, freedom of speech, freedom from excessive punishment, freedom of worship, and freedom of assembly.

These rights are best guaranteed by a written constitution with careful definition of the limits to which governmental actions may go. Examples include the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Declaration of Rights of man (1789).

Another view of liberalism was presented by individuals who came to be known as the utilitarians. Their founder, Jeremy Bentham, held the pleasure-pain principle as the key idea – that humans are ordained to avoid pain and to seek pleasure.

Bentham equated pleasure with good and pain with evil. The goodness or badness of any act, individual or public, was

found by balancing the pleasure against the pain it caused. Thus one came to test the utility of any proposed law or institution, i.e., “the greatest happiness of the greatest number.”

Liberals advocated economic individualism (i.e., laissez-faire capitalism) heralded by Adam Smith in his 1776 economic masterpiece, *Wealth of Nations*. They regarded free enterprise as the most productive economy and the one that allowed for the greatest measure of individual choice.

Economic inequality will exist and is acceptable, liberals held, because it does not detract from the individual’s moral dignity nor does it conflict with equality of opportunity and equality before the law.

Economic liberalism claimed to be based on the realities of a new industrial era. The “classical economists” (Thomas Malthus and David Ricardo) taught that there were inescapable forces at work – competition, the pressure of population growth, the iron law of wages, and the law of supply and demand – in accordance with which economic life must function. It was the duty of government to remove any obstacle to the smooth operation of these natural forces.

Internationally, liberals believed in the balance-of-power system and free trade because each track allowed individual nations the opportunity to determine its own course of action.

Liberals believed in the pluralistic society as long as it did not block progress. War and revolutionary change disrupt progress and enlarge the power of government.

Education was an indispensable prerequisite to individual responsibility and self-government.

5.3.2 Early Nineteenth Century *Advocates of Liberalism*

In England, advocates included the political economists, the utilitarians and individuals like Thomas Robington Macaulay and John Stuart Mill; in France, Benjamin Constant, Victor Cousin, Jean Baptiste Say and Alexis de Tocqueville; in Germany, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Friedrich List, Karl von Rotteck and Karl Theodor Welcker.

5.3.3 Impact

Liberalism was involved in the various revolutionary movements of the early 19th century (see Chapters 6 and 7). It found concrete expression in over ten constitutions secured between 1815 and 1848 in states of the German Confederation. Its power was demonstrated in the reform measures which successive British governments adopted during these same decades. It affected German student organizations and permeated Prussian life.

Alexis de Toqueville spoke for many liberals when he warned against the masses' passion for equality and their willingness to sacrifice political liberty in order to improve their material well-being. These fears were not without foundation. In the 20th century, the masses have sometimes shown themselves willing to trade freedom for authority, order, economic security and national power.

5.4 NATIONALISM

The regenerative force of liberal thought in early 19th century Europe was dramatically revealed in the explosive force of the power of nationalism. Raising the level of consciousness of people having a common language, a common soil, common traditions, a common history, a common culture and a shared

human experience to seek political unity around an identity of what or who constitutes the nation was aroused and made militant during the turbulent French Revolutionary era.

5.4.1 *Characteristics*

Early nationalist sentiment was romantic, exuberant and cosmopolitan as compared to the more intense, hate-filled nationalism of the latter half of the 19th century.

The breakdown of society's traditional loyalties to church, dynastic state and region began during the course of the 18th century. Impelled by the French Revolutionary dogma, new loyalties were fashioned — that people possessed the supreme power (sovereignty) of the nation and were, therefore, the true nation united by common language, culture, history, etc. Only then would people develop the sense of pride, tradition and common purpose which would come to characterize modern nationalism.

Nationalism, as loyalty to one's nation, did not originate in the early 19th century. Men and women have been fighting for, and living and dying for their respective countries for hundreds of years. It wasn't until the early 19th century that this feeling and motivation changed into something far more intense and far more demanding than it had been. The focus of the loyalty changed from dynastic self-interest to individual self-interest as part of a greater collective consciousness.

5.4.2 *Impact of Nationalism*

Nationalistic thinkers and writers examined the language, literature and folkways of their people and thereby stimulated nationalist feelings. Emphasizing the history and culture of the various European peoples tended to reinforce and glorify national sentiment.

Most early 19th century nationalist leaders adopted the ideas of the German philosopher-historian Johann Gottfried Herder (1744 – 1803), who is regarded as the father of modern nationalism.

Herder taught that every people is unique and possesses a distinct national character, or *Volksgeist*, which has evolved over many centuries. No one culture or people is superior to any other. All national groups are parts of that greater whole which is humanity.

Herder's doctrine of the indestructible *Volksgeist* led to a belief that every nation has the right to become a sovereign state encompassing all members of the same nationality. Since most Western states contained people of many different nationalities, and few states contained all the members of any one nationality, nationalism came to imply the overthrow of almost every existing government.

5.4.3 Evaluation

Because of its inherently revolutionary implications, nationalism was suppressed by the established authorities. Yet it flourished in Germany where conservative and reactionary nationalists competed with a somewhat more liberal form of nationalism associated with intellectuals like Fichte, Hegel, Humboldt and Von Ranke. In Eastern Europe, conservative nationalists stressed the value of their own unique customs, culture and folkways, while Western European nationalists demanded liberal political reforms. The influence of the Italian Nationalist Mazzini and the Frenchman Michelet in stimulating nationalist feeling in the West was a key ingredient.

It should be noted that there was always a fundamental conflict between liberalism and nationalism. Liberals were rationalists who demanded objectivity in studying society and

history while nationalists relied on emotion and would do anything to exalt the nation, even subvert individual rights. By the late 19th century nationalism was promoting competition and warfare between peoples and threatened to douse liberal ideas of reason and freedom.

5.5 SOCIALISM

With the chief beneficiaries of industrialism being the new middle class, the increasing misery of the working classes disturbed the conscience of concerned liberal thinkers (Bentham and Mill) who proposed a modification of the concept of laissez-faire economics. Other socially concerned thinkers observing the injustices and inefficiencies of capitalistic society began to define the social question in terms of human equality and the means to be followed in order to secure this goal. As cures for the social evils of industrialism were laid out in elaborate detail, the emerging dogma came to be called socialism.

5.5.1 *Characteristics*

Since biblical times humans have been concerned with the problem of social justice, but it was not until the 19th century that it possessed a broader intellectual base and a greater popular support than it had ever enjoyed in the past. The difficulty with the existing system, according to social critics of the day, was that it permitted wealth to be concentrated in the hands of a small group of persons and deprived the working classes of a just share in what was rightfully theirs. A social mechanism had to be developed so a just distribution of society's wealth could be attained. The result was a variety of approaches.

The Utopian Socialists (from *Utopia*, Saint Thomas More's book on a fictional ideal society) were the earliest writers to propose an equitable solution to improve the distribution of society's wealth. While they endorsed the productive capacity

of industrialism they denounced its mismanagement. Human society was to be organized as a community rather than a mixture of competing selfish individuals. All the goods a person needed could be produced in one community.

Generally, the utopians advocated some kind of harmonious society, some form of model communities, social workshops or the like, where the ruthless qualities of an individualistic capitalism would disappear.

Utopian ideas were generally regarded as idealistic and visionary with no practical application. With little popular support from either the political establishment or the working classes, the movement failed to produce any substantial solution to the social question. Leading Utopian thinkers included Henri de Saint-Simon (1760 – 1825), Charles Fourier (1772 – 1837), Robert Owen (1771 – 1858), and Louis Blanc (1811 – 1882).

The Anarchists rejected industrialism and the dominance of government. Auguste Blanqui (1805 – 1881) advocated terrorism as a means to end capitalism and the state. Pierre Joseph Proudhon (1809 – 1865) attacked the principle of private property because it denied justice to the common people.

Christian Socialism began in England circa 1848. Believing that the evils of industrialism would be ended by following Christian principles, the advocates of this doctrine tried to bridge the gap between the anti-religious drift of socialism and the need for Christian social justice for workers. The best-known Christian Socialist was the novelist Charles Kingsley (1814 – 1875), whose writings exposed the social evils of industrialism.

“Scientific” Socialism, or Marxism, was the creation of Karl Marx (1818 – 1883), a German scholar who, with the help of Friedrich Engels (1820 – 1895), intended to replace utopian

hopes and dreams with a brutal, militant blueprint for socialist working class success. The principal works of this revolutionary school of socialism were *The Communist Manifesto* and *Das Kapital (Capital)*.

The theory of Dialectical Materialism enabled Marx to explain the history of the world. By borrowing Hegel's dialectic, substituting materialism and realism in place of Hegel's idealism and inverting the methodological process, Marx was able to justify his theoretical conclusions.

Marxism consisted of a number of key propositions:

- 1) The economic interpretation of history, i.e., all human history has been determined by economic factors (mainly who controls the means of production and distribution).
- 2) The class struggle, i.e., since the beginning of time there has been a class struggle between the rich and the poor or the exploiters and the exploited.
- 3) Theory of Surplus Value, i.e., the true value of a product was labor and, since the worker received a small portion of his just labor price, the difference was surplus value, "stolen" from him by the capitalist.
- 4) Socialism was inevitable, i.e., capitalism contained the seeds of its own destruction (overproduction, unemployment, etc.); the rich will grow richer and the poor will grow poorer until the gap between each class (proletariat and bourgeoisie) is so great that the working classes will rise up in revolution and overthrow the elite bourgeoisie to install a "dictatorship of the proletariat". As modern capitalism is dismantled the creation of a classless society guided by the principle "From each accord-

ing to his abilities, to each according to his needs" will take place.

5.6 EVALUATION

Ideologies (isms) are interpretations of the world from a particular viewpoint. They are or imply programs of action and thrive where belief in general standards and norms has broken down. The proliferation of so many thought systems and movements based on them after 1815 suggest the basic division of society was between those who accepted the implications of the intellectual, economic, and political revolutions of the 18th and early 19th centuries and those who did not. The polarization in ideology was the result.