CHAPTER 22

Traditions of Thought and the Rise of Social Science in the United Kingdom

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1 Introduction

Studying the social sciences provides an opportunity to do at least two things. It provides a space within which to reflect upon the nature of the social circles within which we move and with which we are already familiar. It also offers us an opportunity to move beyond the familiar, to explore and come to understand social processes of which we have no direct experience but which nonetheless often impinge upon us in complex ways. If done well, a course in social science can both widen and deepen our social knowledge. It can help us to know more, and so widen our range of information; and it can take us towards a clearer understanding of the origin and character of the information we now know. In other words, it can provide us with a clearer sense of both how and why the contemporary world is organized as it is.

The widening of our knowledge often comes about in the first instance simply through reading, and reflecting upon, bodies of information that have already been put together by other social scientists. We can learn a lot simply by looking at social statistics (on things like unemployment), by reading detailed histories (of world trade, or post-war international relations), by absorbing brief descriptions of how particular institutions work or key events happened, and by examining summaries of important bodies of social research. When we do all that, we can rapidly increase the amount of information we have at our disposal about the character and origins of the contemporary world.

But if this widening of our store of knowledge is one benefit that can flow from the study of the social sciences, it is not the only one. There is also the matter of deepening our understanding of why social life is organized the way it is, and of how and why it is changing. The determinants of social life, and the patterns of change within it, cannot be fully grasped simply by gathering descriptive material of various kinds. If we want to know what is going on in the social world around us, and why, we have to put some order on that material, pattern it in various ways, and explore the social forces that are giving it shape.

We have actively to process what information we have, by approaching it through carefully defined categories of analysis and by relating it to more general bodies of social theory.

So social science involves not simply the gathering of information, the analysis of institutions and the undertaking of social research. It also involves the development and application of social theory. Indeed, the exploration of conceptual distinctions and the discovery of theoretical systems are among the most rewarding and exciting aspects of the study of social science, as I hope you will discover. And I hope you will come to see the intimate connection between the ‘empirical’ and the ‘theoretical’ faces of social science. For even the most apparently straightforward piece of empirical social research is heavily impregnated with assumptions and distinctions that are rooted in particular social theories, and theoretical development in the social sciences is heavily dependent on the gathering and sitting of research findings. In the study of the social you cannot get the ‘facts’ first and add the ‘theory’ later. It doesn’t work that way. You cannot ‘do’ social science without using some social theory: and because that is so, there is no way in which we can properly introduce you to social science without introducing you at the same time to at least some of its dominant theoretical systems.

The term ‘theory’ is often a daunting one — easier to use than to define. It can refer to such a lot of things. When we use it here we normally have in mind explanatory material of various kinds. Some of that material will be very broad in scope — whole sets of arguments about the workings of the entire social system. Other theoretical material will be narrower in focus — explaining how a particular part of society or a particular institution operates: how the economy works, or the state functions. Other theoretical material will be more modest still — offering possible explanations of a particular social phenomenon, say unemployment or racial tensions; and some theoretical material will simply take the form of suggested definitions of terms. It will say to you ‘why not understand the term social class to mean X or Y, and go off and gather some data using that definition’. In other words, theoretical material in the social sciences comes in different sizes.

It comes as grand theory. It comes as specific theories. It comes as conceptual hypotheses. It comes as different conceptual schemas. But in all its forms it is an essential ingredient of any social analysis; and for that reason anyone coming new to social science would do well to read a general introduction to its overall character and content.

That is what this essay is about. It is a survey of some of the most important examples of what was just termed ‘grand theory’. It is a survey organized around three important assumptions of its own. The first is that there is an intimate relationship between the levels of theory just described (between grand theory, specific theories, hypotheses and conceptual schemas). Because grand theory informs and shapes the rest we need to provide you with a preliminary specification of the most influential of those grand theories. The second assumption at play in this essay is that social science is characterized by disputes at every level of theory. You face different definitions of class, different theories of social division, different explanations of why individuals conform, and so on. Because this is so, any preliminary specification of the theoretical material informing contemporary social science has to cover a range of theories, not just one. And thirdly, the essay is designed on the recognition that these disputes are long-established ones. Contemporary theory within social science represents the inherited legacy of more than two centuries of debate in western intellectual circles on the character of modern society. Indeed many of the themes of that debate (on the nature of society in general, and on human potentiality within it) stretch back in western culture further still — to Greece, Rome and Judaea. And because this
is so, the broad theoretical positions described here are best understood as traditions of thought, each with their own history and internal pattern of development. What you face in this essay is a description of broad packages of theoretical material, each different from the other and each with its own development over time.

Summary

1 Social science can provide a clearer sense of how and why society is organized as it is.
2 Social theory is an integral part of any social analysis. Theory comes in various forms: grand theory, specific theories, particular hypotheses and conceptual schemas.
3 Social theory in all its forms has a long history characterized by recognizable and persistent controversies.

2 The specification of the traditions

The governing questions in any introductory survey of this kind are ‘where to begin’ and ‘what to include’. These questions could be answered in a number of ways. We could go back — and in a full survey perhaps ought to go back — at least as far as Greece and Rome, to demonstrate the origins of much modern social thought in the debates of Antiquity. We certainly ought to look too — if a full survey was our aim — at the rich reservoir of Christian social thought generated over 2000 years: thought which still informs much modern social theory and practice. And it would certainly be possible — if less valuable — to catalogue the theoretical formulations of a vast range of now long-forgotten nineteenth and early twentieth century social thinkers, whose unopened volumes occupy the basements of many a university library. But time and space permits none of that. All that we can do here is to establish a sense of the broad trends in scholarship produced in response to the emergence of modern society, and to establish a familiarity with the work of key figures within those trends, figures whose formulations continue to have a direct influence on the way contemporary social science is practised.

As we begin, it is as well to be clear about some of the limitations associated with such an approach. The broad trends in scholarship which this essay will explore are retrospective constructions. They are just one way of placing some order on the vast array of theoretical material that has come down to us. They achieve that order at the cost of simplifying (and thereby inevitably distorting to a degree) the intellectual history that they tell. So they must be understood as first approximations, as a preliminary sketch of certain tendencies in western thought in the last three centuries, a sketch that you may well want to refine and amend in important ways as you go on to later courses in the social sciences and the arts.

However, though they are a first approximation they do capture central features of the intellectual universe from which the social sciences emerged. The distinctions that we will draw were recognized, and indeed used, by many of the theorists we will cite, to characterize elements of their own position in the debates in which they were engaged. Those debates were invariably more wide-ranging and more complex than we can do justice to here, and the positions of individual thinkers were more complicated and nuanced than we can capture in a preliminary sketch of this kind. But it will be enough for our purposes to locate some of the core issues in dispute, and to trace some of the major lines of cleavage, in the analysis of modern society in which all these thinkers were engaged. We
many of the important building blocks of contemporary social thought, and enable you to establish a firmer critical stance on much contemporary debate.

These are considerable gains, but we must not forget that any schematic presentation of the kind on offer here has real costs as well. Three costs in particular spring to mind. One is the danger of conflating intellectual positions and political movements. All four of the packages of ideas to be discussed here have inspired particular sets of political parties. Each of the four traditions that we will examine as analyses of modern society also have a presence within those societies as political ideologies. We will look at their role as ideologies in the last section of this essay. Until then we will treat them as they initially were intended to be treated. We will approach them simply as bodies of ideas which are open for our use as social analysts, and pay no heed to the ways in which others have used them as inspirations for political action.

Then there is the danger of ‘over packaging’. We will need to remember that not all ideas tie up into these neat packages, and that indeed some of the most intriguing theories often stand outside, and in some tension, to mainstream thought. Moreover, these four traditions, though so influential in areas of social science, are only a part of the wealth of ideas on which social scientists can and do draw. The four we use here are, for example, all predominantly secular in character, and exist alongside traditions of religious thought that will not be discussed in this chapter. The four too have their own agenda of concerns and concepts, and though they differ from each other in many ways, they also share common silences. One of their biggest silences, as we will see, has been on questions of gender — a silence which has then made its own contribution to the reproduction of male dominance. In consequence there is also a two hundred-year-long tradition of feminist thought which lies outside, and in some tension to, the four broad packages to which we will soon turn. In fact the four positions we will establish here also reappear inside contemporary religious debate, and inside feminist discussion, but with a different inflection that derives from the distinctly religious/feminist sets of concerns and concepts evident there. We lack the time and space to follow those inflections in this essay but once more you may want to pursue them later in your studies.

There is one other question-mark to keep with us as we look at these four traditions; and that is to contemplate the possibility of their contemporary disintegration. The four traditions of thought to which we now turn are currently under review, in the sense that many contemporary social scientists draw on parts of each in quite an eclectic manner, generating new syntheses of thought that do not map directly back on to any one of the original four. You may or may not want to be equally eclectic when you review the value of these four broad positions, but before the old can be synthesized into the new, it must first be grasped in its original form. Twentieth century social science emerged into an intellectual universe shaped in large measure by the development, in the three centuries that had gone before, of four broad bodies of social thought. It is to these four (to liberalism, Marxism, social reformism and conservatism) therefore that we need now to turn.
2.1 Liberalism

As a fully-fledged way of reading the nature of contemporary society, liberalism emerged out of the vast changes that occurred in Western Europe and North America in the three centuries before 1800. In the sphere of economic life, the rise of commerce and the spread of wage labour in the leading economies of Western Europe slowly replaced feudalism with first mercantile and agrarian, and later industrial capitalism. In the sphere of politics, the three centuries saw the consolidation of the European system of nation-states, with their recurrent internal battles between absolutist and representative systems of government. Culturally, the three centuries witnessed the erosion of the Catholic domination of late medieval Europe by intellectual forces released by the twin initiatives of Renaissance and Reformation. Liberalism indeed turned out to be among the most potent of those cultural challenges, fuelled as it was by its relevance to the political battles against absolutism and to the economic transformations associated with the rise of capitalism.

The individual in liberal thought

Liberalism, like all the traditions of thought being surveyed here, was and is a working out of very basic assumptions about the nature of the human condition and the necessary starting point of social analysis. These organizing assumptions were very different from those evident in the dominant belief systems of classical Greece and late medieval Christianity with which liberalism eventually broke. To the vast majority of thinkers whose writings have come down to us from the late medieval period, the individual could only properly be understood as part of a larger social whole. For them, society came first, the individual second. Individuals were seen as part of wider social orders — social orders which were either naturally (in the case of Aristotle) or divinely (in the religious case) structured and specified. Liberal thought, as it emerged in the seventeenth century, shattered the stability of the medieval world-view, by placing at the core of its understanding a quite revolutionary emphasis on the importance of the individual. Liberal thought did not start its social analysis with God. It did not start with a specification of some natural social order. Instead liberalism's starting point was and is the individual — an individual who is driven to act socially by the presence of innate desires/sentiments, and who is able to do so effectively because of the possession of the ability to reason.

Since liberal thought put such weight on the nature of the individual, liberal thinkers were inexorably drawn to explore how individuals learnt about the world in which they acted, and to reflect upon the kinds of motivations and intellectual capacities with which individuals were equipped. Not surprisingly, their answers to such fundamental questions varied somewhat. Early liberal philosophers disagreed about how individuals acquired knowledge of the world around them, or came by the moral codes that guided their action within it. Some saw the human mind as empty and blank until filled with information gleaned from the senses, so finding the origins of knowledge and morality in experience. Others insisted that individuals approached their world with minds already equipped with innate intuitions and instincts, and attached greater weight to common sense as a source of knowledge and morality than to reason as such. There was disagreement too on the nature of the goals to which that knowledge was applied. Thomas Hobbes¹, whose writings are often cited as an important influence on the emergence of liberal thought, had individuals driven by totally selfish and self-regarding motives; and was led by the logic of his argument to advocate a most illiberal all-powerful State ("The Leviathan") to keep such selfish impulses in check. Later liberals, including John Locke², David Hume³ and Adam Smith⁴, all softened their sense of the anti-social nature of individual desires, so that by Hume's time altruism figured in much liberal thought as a basic individual characteristic.

¹Aristotle: 384–322BC. Born in Macedonia, studied in Athens under Plato. Tutor to Alexander the Great. His lectures (on a vast range of subjects from logic and ethics to rhetoric and poetry) re-entered the curriculum of Western European universities from the thirteenth century, and were a dominant presence in university learning for 500 years.

²Thomas Hobbes: 1588–1679. Philosopher, tutor to the Cavendish family, and in 1647 to the future Charles II. His publications included "Elements of Law" (1650), "De Cive" (1651), and the "Leviathan" (1651).

³John Locke: 1632–1704. Philosopher, tutor to the family of the first Earl of Shaftesbury, indirectly involved in the resistance to James II, and briefly exiled in Holland in 1683. His highly influential "Essay Concerning Human Understanding" was published in 1690, as were his "Treaties on Government."

⁴David Hume: 1711–1776. Scottish philosopher and historian. Author of, among other books, "Treatise on Human Nature" (1739), "Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding" (1748) and "Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals" (1751).

However, these internal liberal debates, though important, were essentially ones of detail. What is more significant for us than the answers given is the acceptance by all these theorists of a common approach. For all the participants in the debate were prepared to take 'the individual' as one of their key units of analysis, and to accord that individual certain rights and freedoms. Such a focus on the importance of the individual did not mean that liberal theorists normally based their arguments upon 'the existence of isolated or self-contained individuals, instead of starting from [people] whose whole nature and character is determined by their existence in society'. On the contrary, liberalism's individualistic approach to social analysis was and still is — as one of its most committed contemporary adherents, F.A. Hayek, insists — 'primarily a theory of society, an attempt to understand the forces which determine the social life of man' (Hayek, 1949, p.6).

What unites liberalism as a tradition of thought is the willingness of its participants to build their analysis upon a particular understanding of society and its constituent forces. Liberal thought understands society as an entity composed of self-interested individuals. It is with the character and the enhancement of their goals, capacities and action that liberal analysis is primarily concerned.

**Summary**

1. All traditions of thought are workings out of basic assumptions about human nature and human knowledge.
2. Liberal thinkers made a sharp break with previous modes of thought by taking as their starting point the existence of self-interested individuals.
3. Early liberal thinkers disagreed about the degree of human sociality, and about the role of intuition and reason in the formation of individual action: but they shared a common view of society as composed of individuals in the pursuit of their own ends.

**Power and the state**

The firm conviction of liberal theorists that individuals know their own self-interest best, infused a consistent liberal opposition to the claims of any other institution (be it Church or State) to know individual interests better. To the liberal mind, individuals had the right to be free from the control of kings and priests. Moreover, since those individuals were seen as being alike — in possessing their own private desires, sentiments and rationality — then it became hard to deny in principle their basic equality. Not surprisingly therefore, seventeenth and eighteenth-century liberalism was a powerfully radical creed, upholding the values of reason and tolerance, the importance of individual freedoms, and the necessity of designing state structures to protect individual rights. Late seventeenth-century liberal thought, in the hands of a philosopher like John Locke, characterized those rights as 'life, liberty and estate' (broadly meaning property), and presented them as 'natural and inalienable' to individuals. People were not 'given' rights by benign political agencies. Rather they 'had' rights because they were human individuals. By arguing in this way, liberal political thinkers were able to assert that these were rights which people possessed before entering the jurisdiction of any state, rights which in some sense they sought to protect by making a contract with the state.

Seventeenth-century liberal political tracts often described the formation of states as an act of contract between a group of free individuals and a political authority; and so introduced into western political culture the notion that states had the right to expect obedience from their subjects only for so long as the contract was maintained. The very idea of 'making a contract' carried with it the notion that the contract could be 'unmade'; and liberal thinkers in the seventeenth century — from Hobbes to Locke — disputed only the conditions under which such contracts could in fact be revoked. In the pursuit of that dispute, seventeenth and eighteenth-century liberals turned their attention to the question of what kind of state was likely to keep any bargain that was struck; and they began to advocate representative forms of government as a solution to their particular formulation of the age-old problem of political obedience and legitimacy. States would keep their side of the contract, protect basic rights of individuals, only if they faced individuals who enjoyed certain vital political and civil freedoms: of thought and expression, of association and participation, and of safety from arbitrary arrest. And states would keep their side of the bargain the better if those citizens were able to place some of their number in charge of the state, as representatives answerable to the people.

By the second half of the eighteenth-century liberal thinkers were using the language of 'natural rights' to justify their opposition to government without representation. What, after all, are the opening lines of the American Declaration of Independence, issued in 1776, but a clear liberal call for rebellion against a government to whose policies the colonists had not consented and in whose councils they were not represented.

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation... We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed — That whenever any form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.
Representation and democracy must not however be confused here. Seventeenth century liberals were not democrats in a modern sense. Voting in these representative forms of government was to be restricted to men, and then only to men with property — to those 'with a permanent fixed interest in the Kingdom', as one of Oliver Cromwell's generals put it in 1647. Such men were apprehensive about the further extension of the franchise, and their 'fear of the "Mob"', of the propertyless', was shared by many later liberal thinkers. Before 1789, the fear was one of 'popular discontent, surfacing in occasional disruptions of anger and desperation', (Arbiter, 1984, p.264). After 1789, it took the form of a fear that 'the people', if enfranchised, would use the state to erode minority rights (particularly the rights of those who owned property) and undermine the dominance of middle-class culture and values. Nineteenth century liberals like Alexis de Tocqueville saw in the emerging democracy of the United States a potential tyranny of the majority that would have to be checked if liberty was to be preserved; and in expressing that fear, de Tocqueville spoke for an entire generation of early- and mid-Victorian liberal thinkers, politicians and supporters, who favoured representative political institutions but insisted upon a limitation of the franchise to men of property.

In the last century-and-a-half the precise reasons for this liberal unease with democracy have changed, but the apprehension has not gone away. It is still there in the writings of at least some contemporary liberal thinkers (people like Hayek and Milton Friedman) who remain troubled by what they see as 'the economic consequences of democracy'. What disturbs them is the propensity of democratically elected governments to indulge in what — to liberal eyes — are unwarranted levels of public spending and economic management. According to many modern liberal thinkers, democracy has its defects as well as its virtues. Politicians find it easy to win votes by spending taxpayers' money, and taxpayers find it easier to see the immediate benefits of government spending than to spot the long-term damage caused by heavy taxation and a large public sector. Friedman put what he called democracy's 'fundamental defect' in this way: that it is a system of highly weighted voting under which the special interests have great incentive to promote their own interests at the expense of the general public. The benefits are concentrated; the costs are diffused; and you have therefore a bias . . . which leads to ever greater expansion in the scope of government and ultimately to control over the individual. (Friedman, 1976, p.13).

The normal liberal solution to such democratic tendencies to over-govern is to seal off certain areas of social and economic life from government interference.

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1Alexis de Tocqueville: 1805-1859. Widely-read nineteenth century liberal thinker: author of Democracy in America (1835) and L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution (1856).

2Milton Friedman: b.1912. Emeritus Professor of Economics at the University of Chicago, and author of, among other works, Essays in Positive Economics (1953), A Monetary History of the United States (1963), Dollars and Deficits (1968), The Optimum Quantity of Money: and other essays (1969) and, with Rose Friedman, Free to Choose (1980).
(treated simplicity as male); and because it has, as liberal thought has asserted the freedom and equality of individuals, that very assertion has itself helped to obscure the extent to which, for women, freedom and equality have yet to be won.

In the three centuries since Hobbes and Locke, few liberal thinkers raised any sustained challenge to the rights of men to exercise power over women. Instead, liberal thought concentrated its energies on the reversal of earlier dominant conceptions of the relationship of the male individual to the state. By positing a world made up of free individuals in existence before the arrival of the state, liberalism characterized individual freedom as freedom from restraint, as existing where the state was silent, and as guaranteed only by the existence of laws that restrained states and individuals alike. The job of the state was to provide the law within which men could be free: free from violence and anarchy from each other, and free from the capriciousness of arbitrary government. In this way liberal thought divided the world into private and public spaces, and prioritized the first over the second. It insisted that the public domain restrict its activity to protecting and enhancing the pursuit of individual self-interest in private, or civil, society. Liberal thinkers, that is, offered a conceptual universe divided into private and public spheres, and locked together in popular consciousness the notion that freedom and privacy are indistinguishable.

This sense of the primacy of 'civil society' made politics highly problematic for liberals. If freedom and privacy go together, why have a state at all? Early liberal answers to that question reflected a bleak interpretation of human nature. For Hobbes, since people were naturally egotistical and self-seeking, life without a state would be 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'. Later liberals, as we observed, disagreed with him by having a more optimistic view of human sociability, and thus a more benign sense of the character of civil society without a state. John Locke argued that people consented to the jurisdiction of the state only to avoid what he termed the 'minor inconveniences' of life without politics. For by then, as thereafter, liberal thinkers were highly suspicious of too much state power. Far from seeing the active state as a precondition of greater individual liberty, they saw political action as inherently dangerous for liberty. This is evident in the characteristic nineteenth century English liberal predilection for a 'nightwatchman state', one pursuing laissez-faire policies, and acting only as umpire and adjudicator to a world in which individuals were left free to act without direct political supervision. It is evident still in the plea of a contemporary liberal thinker like Robert Nozick for the establishment of what he calls a 'minimal state' - one that 'treats us as inviolate individuals, who may not be used in certain ways by others as means or tools or instruments or resources . . . (one that) treats us as persons having individual rights with the dignity this constitutes' (Nozick, 1974, p. 334).

Liberalism has always felt more comfortable with the private than with the public, and has always seen in private action and private institutions a superior capacity to co-ordinate the affairs of self-interested individuals in a mutually beneficial way. States are necessary for law and order, but really they are very dangerous, and become more so the more they do. Private institutions, free of detailed state intervention, are in general, according to liberals, the best guarantee of individual liberty and generalized prosperity: and none more so than the private institution of the market.

Summary

1 Liberal thought specified individuals as free and equal, and judged the acceptability of political systems by the degree to which states respected and enhanced individual liberty. Liberal thought divided the world into private and public spaces, and privileged the private, linking its understanding of freedom to that of privacy.
2 Liberal commitments to representative government did not make early liberal thinkers democrats; and even today, some liberal thinkers are uneasy about the tendency of democratic government to 'over-govern'.
3 Early liberal thought equated 'the individual' with 'the male', and either denied, ignored or played-down the rights and freedoms of women.

Economy and society

By the end of the eighteenth century, liberal thinkers were beginning to forge a powerful theory of economic behaviour which enabled them to explain and defend the developments of the mercantile and agrarian, and later industrial, capitalism. Again the tight logic of liberal thought was well in evidence, as now economic life, rather than politics, was subjected to an analysis based on the premise of rational individuals in the pursuit of their self-interest. If all that we can know is ourselves as individuals, then what we have as individuals gathers particular significance. The amount of our property becomes a basic measure of how well we as individuals are achieving our individual goals. According to this view, mechanisms which facilitate the growth of our property become vital tools for the enhancement of liberty as a whole. By the time Adam Smith was formulating his arguments in The Wealth of Nations, liberal thinkers were confident that the market was such a mechanism: that the producing and selling of commodities through individual enterprise would enrich the society in total. Smith himself had an ambiguous attitude to the new society he saw emerging around him, being personally unsentimental about the manufacturing and merchant classes who would soon adopt a bowdlerized version of his theory as their own. Yet none the less it was his view that when, in a market economy, an individual seeks his own advantage . . . and not that of the society . . . he is, in this as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was not part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectively than when he really intends to promote it.

(Smith, 1776, Book 4, Chapter 2)
Adam Smith was an early figure in liberal political economy. When he was writing in the 1770s, industrial development had barely begun, the bulk of the population still worked in agriculture, and it was trade, rather than industry, that attracted much capitalist enterprise. But in the decades after 1780, as an industrial capitalist economy emerged, a whole body of what became known as political economy was developed to explain its inner workings. The economic world described by these nineteenth century economists was quintessentially liberal. It was made up of individuals acting rationally in the pursuit of their self-interest. It was a world of people making and selling things, and of people driven to do so by their own ambition for personal success. It was a world whose perpetual motion required no central direction, since its dynamism was 'the spontaneity of the independent mind and the power of the liberated will' (Manning, 1976, p.16). To the liberal mind, the overriding strength and moral appeal of the emerging capitalist economy lay in this spontaneity. Its market order was what a much more recent liberal (F.A. Hayek) was to call a *catalaxy* - 'a network of many economies, firms, households etc. . . not a deliberately made organization but . . . a product of spontaneous growth' which because it has no common purpose of its own, enables a great variety of individual purposes to be fulfilled' (Barry, 1979, p.43).

For liberal thought, the self-interest of these individual purposes was all to the good. It was to be encouraged. The only question was how all those personal ambitions were to be co-ordinated: and, more to the point, how were they to be co-ordinated in a way which would bring the maximum benefit to all. Pre-liberal thought might have given that task to the Church or the State. But for liberals, neither was necessary for this purpose, and indeed each would only make matters worse. For they believed that the free and undisturbed play of market forces could normally act as the invisible hand, efficiently and effectively co-ordinating the activities of free individuals in ways which advanced the interests of all. The interplay of supply and demand, the unimpeded movement of prices and goods, would - in this view - enhance the wealth of nations and underpin the freedom of the producing and consuming individuals of this new world of trade and industry. All that was left for the state to do was to hold the ring: provide external defence and internal order, and supplement private endeavours with certain public institutions that private profit alone could not sustain (the main example of this, for Adam Smith, was publicly-funded education). To do more would be to interfere: (and indeed this notion of state 'interference' shows how strongly liberal thought was prepared to privilege the individual and the private over the collective and the public). A 'free market' and a 'strong but restrained state' became liberalism's vision of an ideal economic and political world.

This view of market forces also gave liberal political economists a way of explaining world trade. According to David Ricardo, economies specialize under the logic of market competition in that for which they are best equipped - in the production of those commodities for which they have a comparative advantage. By specializing in this way, they both enhance the productivity of their own economy and further the growth of wealth in the world economy as a whole. Individual economies, like individuals within economies, best guarantee the interests of everyone by simply looking after themselves. On a liberal view of the world, competition between nations, just like competition between individuals, is the key to prosperity for everyone.

Smith and Ricardo were highly representative figures of an entire school of liberal political economy which came to public prominence in the United Kingdom. By the century after 1800, nineteenth century liberal economists saw a new world of trade and industry emerging, and were conscious of its immense potentiality. Their view of this world had a powerful optimism written into it: optimism about the rationality of individuals and their basic ability to get on with their own lives in ways which benefited everyone; optimism that history was the story of wealth creation and cultural progress if people were free to run their own lives; and optimism that markets were the great clearing and coordinators of economic life. By 1820 at the latest their moral vision of an ideal liberal universe was in place. In an ideal liberal world, individuals would be free - free from political constraint, free from monopolies, free to act alone, to produce independently and to trade without barriers and free to enhance the common good by the unbridled pursuit of their own self-interest. By 1820 the notion that individual freedom and capitalist enterprise were fused in a liberal vision that reinforced the confidence of a rising industrial and commercial class. It was a vision, moreover, which rose to public prominence as that class rose to political power. As Keynes said, 'Ricardo's doctrine conquered England as completely as the Holy Inquisition conquered Spain' (Keynes, 1936, p.32); so that by the third quarter of the nineteenth century the tradition we have just examined was to all intents and purposes the 'conventional wisdom' of an entire society.

For this reason, even when challenged later, this tradition left behind powerful residues of its early dominance. Even today major intellectuals - of whom Hayek is one of the better known - continue to argue for the supremacy of markets as economic allocators and for the freedom of individuals to act in their own self-interest without state intervention. Indeed Hayek was instrumental in creating in 1948 the Mont Pèlerin Society, certain of whose members - most notably Milton Friedman and Hayek himself - had a considerable influence on the economic and social policies of a number of leading western governments in the 1970s and 1980s. 'A strong attachment to liberalism unites the members of the Mont Pèlerin Society', an attachment to the classical brand of liberalism - that wants the individual to be free from coercive interferences, especially from interventions by the state' (Machlup, 1977, p.xv). This is just one indication of what is undoubtedly more generally the case: that the 'classical brand of liberalism' which we have described here needs to be understood not simply as one of the earliest coherent responses to the arrival of modern industrial society. It has also to be understood as one of the most pervasive, influential and tenacious.
Summary

1. Liberal thought came to see 'the market' as an effective and impartial allocator of economic resources and an invaluable arbiter of conflicting interests.

2. The overriding appeal of markets is that they work without human direction, as an 'invisible hand' enabling a multiplicity of purposes to be reconciled and sustained.

3. This defence of markets can be applied to international trade as well as to domestic economic activity; and continues to be a major theme in contemporary thinking on state and economy.

2.2 Marxism

This is an appropriate moment in which to pause in our exposition of liberalism since we are beginning to touch on questions of its political impact to which we will return in more detail in Section 4. Our concerns in this section of the essay are with the history of ideas rather than with their influence; and we will return to our history of liberal thought when we discuss 'social reformism'. But before we do that -- before we look at liberalism in its more troubled phase -- we need to see the way in which liberalism, even at its moment of highest optimism in the years to 1870, was called into question as an interpretation of modern social life. For however much liberal political economists might assert the superiority and desirability of markets as economic allocators, not everyone was as contemptuous as they were of earlier ways of organizing economic life, nor as enthusiastic about the rise of industrialization. Instead, conservatives of many kinds, as we will see later, tried to stem the emerging social order and turn it back; and many kinds of socialists tried to circumvent the new capitalism -- going beyond it, or outside it, to create equally new, but this time non-competitive and egalitarian, forms of social organization. From the explosion of socialist thought and experimentation which the arrival of industrial capitalism precipitated in the first half of the nineteenth century, marxism emerged as the most coherent and comprehensive critique of capitalism as a social system and of the liberalism that would justify it.

The 'real premises' of marxist thought

Karl Marx's own analysis of capitalism began from a quite different point than that commonly adopted by liberal thinkers. Marx rejected as an 'insipid illusion' their belief that social analysis should begin with the examination of the isolated individual. He argued that individuals did not exist in that isolated form.

*Karl Marx: 1818–1883. German philosopher and political economist. Spent the last 35 years of his life in London, and is buried in Highgate Cemetery. His writings include The German Ideology (1845–6), The Communist Manifesto (with Engels, 1848), The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (1852), The Grundrisse (1857–8) and Das Kapital (3 volumes, 1867, 1885 and 1894).  

Individuals existed only in relationships with each other - in social relationships -- relationships which (as he put it) were 'indispensable and independent of their will' (1859). For Marx it was the social relationships into which people were inserted, and not the individuals abstracted from them, that held the key to the character of modern society. Individuals as such did not figure centrally in his work. He did not spend time, as liberal thinkers did, trying to determine their internal psychologies. He was aware of the biological dimension to human behaviour, that 'first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of loving human beings' (1846). But for Marx, individuals were overdeterminedly social beings, and it was their social being that determined their consciousness. He believed that to abstract the individual from that social context, as liberal thought did, was to obscure the way in which individuals and circumstances continually interact to shape each other. It was to miss the way in which people, in order to survive at all, are obliged to act on the natural world, and in the process to change that world and to change themselves within it.

So there is no sense of a constant human nature in Marx. There is, rather, a sense that human beings have a potentiality for fully-altruistic relationships that cannot be completely realized while they remain divided by private property. In liberal thought, property-owning individuals were left free to create their own world by their own actions. Marx too recognized the role of human agency, but was more conscious than liberalism of the constraints operating upon it. As he put it, 'men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living' (1852). For Marx, the realistic options experienced by individual social actors varied between generations, and became wide only as (and to the degree that) the productive forces within society grew over time. Individuals could not be abstracted out of society and out of time, and given constant universal characteristics, as liberal thought suggested. Instead, individuals had to be situated in the definite social relations and in the definite periods of time in which they lived.

Liberal thought had found its starting point in a vision of human beings in competition with one another, and had quickly come to characterize modern society as one in which people traded competitively in commodities. Marx found his starting point -- his 'real premises' as he called them -- elsewhere: not in competition but in co-operation, not in trade but in human labour itself. Trade may be a feature of only certain sorts of society; but in every sort of society men and women, in order to survive, have had to produce the means of their own subsistence. Marx argued that this need to labour is basic to the human condition, that men and women 'begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence' (The German Ideology, 1845–6, p.42) -- when they begin to work on the natural environment, remoulding it into artifacts (clothing, housing and so on) vital to the continuance of life. Marx argued too that if we look back over time, we see that people's capacity to do this has grown. In other words, the tools and knowledge available to people as
they work on their natural environment (what Marx called the means of production) have developed over time; and they have done so because of social pressures generated by the other feature of production which Marx also took as basic to the human condition – namely its social character.

He argued that in all human societies, men and women have normally found it advantageous to work together on the natural world, and to do so in regular and repeated ways. In other words, people do not simply labour by using the means of production at their disposal. They also enter into social relationships with each other in order to produce the things they need to survive – they enter distinct ‘social relationships of production’. According to Marx, the form that these relationships take shapes the totality of the society built upon them. The social relationships of production are the defining feature of the economic base of society, to which law, politics, religion and culture are best seen as a complex superstructure.

Summary
1 Marx rejected liberalism’s starting point of ‘the individual’, insisting instead on the primacy of social relationships.
2 For Marx, individual action was socially conditioned and socially constrained. ‘Men make their own history, but not just as they please . . .’
3 Since for Marx human labour is what distinguishes humans from animals, it is the social relationships which surround production which then shape society as a whole. Societies, that is, have an economic base and a social, political and cultural superstructure.

Economy and society

For Marx, epochs of human history were distinguishable one from the other by the way production was organized in each. Each epoch (and he tended to talk, for Europe, of the epochs of Antiquity, Feudalism and Capitalism) was defined by the way production was organized within it: on the basis of slavery in the ancient world, on serfdom in feudalism, and on wage labour under capitalism. Each mode of production, that is, differs from the one before it; and the key difference lay in the way that those who did the labouring, who actually produced the goods and services, related to those who did not produce at all.

According to Marx, in each epoch to date, production has been organized in a socially divisive way. In each epoch production has been controlled by a tiny class of non-producers (slave owners, feudal lords and now capitalists) who, because they were effectively able to lay claim to the ownership and control of the means of production, could then live off the goods and services provided by and extracted from the vast majority of producers (the slaves, the serfs and the wage labourers) who were denied that ownership. Every mode of production, that is, has been dominated by a class division, by a separation into two main classes, those who own and control the means of production and those who do not. It was Marx’s belief that capitalism would be the last mode of production to be divided in this way: that a socialist society would be free of this class division, because it would be free of the private ownership of the means of production which had hitherto set the class of producers and the class of non-producers into struggle against each other.

The existence of the private ownership of the means of production in all complex societies to date did a number of things to those societies, according to Marx. It gave individuals interests in common with others in a similar position in the property system. It turned liberalism’s isolated individuals into members of whole social classes, whose individualism was drowned in a shared set of experiences and interests. And it set class against class – with the interests of the owners of property locked into mutual incompatibility with the interests of those denied property. Slave clashed with slave-owner, serf with feudal lord, worker with capitalist in class divisions so basic as to dominate all other forms of social division, self-definition and group struggle. Indeed it was because Marx argued for the centrality of this battle around production that he and Engels were prepared to assert in The Communist Manifesto that ‘the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles’.

So where liberal thought encouraged us to emphasize the market-based nature of contemporary social life, Marx emphasized instead the capitalist framework of property relationships within which markets were obliged to operate. For Marx, capitalism had two main differentiating features from its feudal predecessor. The first was that its capital productive activity was overwhelmingly geared to the sale of what was produced, rather than to the making of things to be directly consumed by the immediate producers. Under capitalism, what were produced were commodities – things to be bought and sold. So where Adam Smith emphasized the novelty and importance of the market as a mechanism of exchange, Marx emphasized instead the novelty of sending everything to market. Capitalism’s first distinguishing feature, for Marx, was the generalized commodity production going on within it.

Its second feature for Marx, and the source both of its dynamism and of its ultimate instability as a way of organizing economic life, was its reliance on wage labour. The producing classes were no longer tied to the land in various forms of servitude. Instead they had been separated from any ownership of (or rights to) the land – had been dispossessed – and were now available as ‘free wage labour’. That is, they were free to sell their labour power where they could – so they were free, united labour – but equally they were obliged to do so, having no other means of subsistence – free to move between capitalists if they could, but never free of the need to find some capitalist to employ them. Indeed, Marx’s central criticism of liberal political economy turned on this point, their misreading of the ‘freedom’ of the individual. Liberals focus on markets – and the marketplace for commodities is a sphere of individual freedom under capitalism. People buy and sell as they choose, in what Marx characterized as the ‘noisy sphere of

Footnotes:
Frederick Engels: 1820–1895. Marx’s colleague for over 40 years. His writings include The Condition of the Working Class in England (1844), and The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State (1884).
exchange...a paradise of the rights of man. Here liberty, equality, [and] property are supreme" (Das Kapital, Volume 1, p.167). But the commodities themselves emerge from a sphere of production in which people do not enjoy an equivalent equality; because there what one person is obliged to sell (his/her labour), another is free to buy. Beneath the individual freedom of the consumer lies the class inequalities of the social relations of production.

We should note that major classes, in Marx's way of thinking, normally come in twos. There were slave-owners and slaves in antiquity; there were lords and serfs in feudal Europe; and now, under capitalism, there are capitalists and workers (or bourgeoisie and proletarians — Marx used both sets of terms). Marx argued that as the European peasantry and independent artisans were proletarianized (were obliged to sell their labour power for money wages in order to survive) the ruling classes of pre-capitalist Europe had to come to terms with a new social force — a class of merchants, industrialists and financiers — who survived only by turning money into more money by the organization of the production and exchange of commodities. Capitalism, that is, brought into existence — according to Marx — a class with the accumulated wealth to organize production: by buying raw materials and machinery (means of production) and by purchasing and utilizing the labour power of the proletariat. Within this class, individuals then prospered only by successfully competing with other capitalists, each attempting to realize his/her profits by the successful sale in Adam Smith's market-place of the commodities produced by the labour power of those they employed.

Marx's attitude to this new system of production was, of course, quite different from Adam Smith's. But it was not entirely negative. Marx realized that the emergence of a class of capitalists competing with each other had developed the productive forces of the society in a way in which the social relations of production under feudalism had no potential to do. Competition was the great locomotive of economic growth under capitalism, as Smith had recognized. This is Marx, writing in The Communist Manifesto:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguished the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. . . . The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all the preceding generations together. Subjection of Nature's forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam-navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalization of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground — what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour.

To this degree at least, Marx was at one with the optimism of the early liberal thinkers. For him, as for them, history was the story of progress. It was just that for Marx the route to progress was far stormier and more contradictory than liberalism allowed. Capitalism's historic role, for Marx, was to create the material conditions for a society of abundance. Once this had been created, in the hothouse of capitalist inequalities, more egalitarian and less exploitative sets of social relationships (to wit, socialism) became possible for the first time. It was Marx's view that capitalism would progressively outlive its usefulness and, like all modes of production before it, give way to another in what he termed 'an epoch of social revolution.'

It was Marx's view that such an epoch of social revolution now loomed, put there by the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production itself, by the fact that capitalism had now done its job and needed to go. Indeed, the sharpest point of contrast between liberal and marxist readings of the new market-based industrial economies lay here — in their attitudes to its stability. Liberal thought emphasized the market's capacity to harmonize interests for the benefit of all. Marx emphasized instead the anarchy and crisis-ridden nature of market forces in an economy in capitalist hands. It was his view that economic crises were endemic to capitalism, and that they would intensify over time. They were endemic because capitalism would always be unable to pay its workers enough to buy all the goods that it produced. They were endemic because anarchic competition between capitalists inevitably put first one sector of production, and then another sector, out of proportion with the rest. And they would get worse because capitalist production relied on the generation of profits from the labour of the proletariat, and that rate of profit would fall as machinery replaced human labour in the productive systems of ever larger capitalist units.

A second generation of marxists then began to argue that international activity by capitalist concerns was temporarily alleviating this tendency to crisis, so moving the final resolution of capitalism's contradictions up on to the international stage. If cheap raw materials could be found abroad to lower production costs in capitalism's core areas, then the squeeze on profits could be thereby delayed. If new markets could be found for capitalist goods, then deficiencies in consumption could be held in check; and if new sources of investment could be located in areas of the world not yet totally under the sway of capitalist relations of production, then imbalances between sectors of the capitalist core economy could be assuaged. In other words, marxists in the 1980–1914 period were able to look at the intensification of international economic competition, the scramble for colonies, and the growing military tension between capitalist powers, and argue that this outburst of imperialism was a direct response to economic contradictions in core capitalist economies. Instead of foreign trade being to the advantage of all its participants, as Ricardo had argued, many marxists insisted that trade was increasingly structured by the profit requirements of large capitalist concerns, acting in concert with their own state machines to capture markets, outlets for capital, and sources of raw materials, from the capitalist concerns and state machines of other national bourgeoisies. By 1914, marxism offered students of international relations categories of 'inter-imperialist rivalry' and 'capitalist crisis'
to explain the drift to war, and to reinforce their own argument that capitalism and world peace were no longer compatible.

Marxists were not arguing here that capitalism would inevitably be replaced by socialism as profits fell and war came: only that capitalism, in its crises, would create the social force which in the end would sweep it away. Its replacement was to be achieved, in Marx's view, by a proletariat radicalized by all this inequality, instability and crisis. In the broadest sense, Marx anticipated that capitalism would simplify and polarize class relationships, and because of its instabilities would not manage ultimately to legitimate itself in the eyes of its proletarian majority. Instead, over time, the size of the capitalist class would diminish (as big capitalists swallowed small ones), so pushing the whole system towards monopoly (what Marx termed the centralization and concentration of capital). In the process, the size of the proletariat would grow (as small capitalists and independent artisans were forced down into its ranks); and its levels of subsistence would fall relatively, if not absolutely, in comparison to the immense wealth of the monopolistic few. This would then radicalize more and more of them over time, and open them to the appeal of revolutionary socialist ideas.

Their capacity to implement those ideas would grow as workers were concentrated into larger and larger factories, and as the overwhelming impact of capitalism on daily life drowned out any non-proletarian divisions between workers. On a bad day, Marx was prepared to concede that the radicalization of workers would still be a problematic process, requiring astute political leadership. But on good days, his confidence in the fall of capitalism was quite overwhelming — and to later socialists, highly infectious. As he put it in The Communist Manifesto, what the bourgeoisie thereby produces, above all, is its own gravediggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.

Summary

1 Historically, societies have been divided between producers and non-producers — divided that is, into antagonistic social classes. Different social classes have developed and dominated in different periods. In capitalism the key social classes are the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

2 The contemporary economy is organized on capitalist lines. Capitalism, for Marx, is a system of generalized commodity production based on free wage labour.

3 Capitalism is more dynamic than earlier ways of organizing economic life, but it is also crisis-ridden. The ultimate source of its instability is the proletariat it creates, which comes to have an interest in its replacement and the capacity to replace it.

Power and the state

Liberal and marxist conceptions of economy and society were, and remain, poles apart. To a liberal vision of a social order composed of free individuals maximizing their personal goals to the benefit of all through market exchange, marxists offered an alternative picture of a society of social classes locked into antagonistic relationships within a crisis-ridden economy. Not surprisingly therefore, liberal and marxist treatments of power and the state were equally divergent.

Let us examine first the power exercised by men over women. As we saw earlier, the conviction of seventeenth century liberal theorists that they faced a world made up of rational, self-regarding individuals provided them with a consistent way of explaining the power that men exercised over women. We saw that they got round this problem either by ignoring it altogether or by retrospectively to earlier forms of explanation — ones that accepted power inequalities within the family, and the family unit itself, as in some way 'natural' in origin. Marxist categories of analysis began, and in large measure remain, equally sex-blind. Marx and Engels were overwhelmingly concerned with the social origins and consequences of tensions between classes rather than between sexes, and in their early writings took gender divisions and the family unit as largely natural in origin. Those early writings — the writings of the 1840s — tended to discuss the character and quality of relationships between the sexes only as an index of human progress. There are many paragraphs there in which Marx takes the treatment of women by men as an indicator of historical development: but in so doing he treats women as nothing more than passive symbols of changes in male society, with their position referred to but in no way explained.

It was left to Engels in 1884 to write the first major marxist account of gender divisions, in a pamphlet significantly titled The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State. The title is significant because it reflects Engels' attempt to explain gender divisions and class divisions as related parts of one single historical process. Drawing heavily on now discredited Victorian social anthropology, Engels wrote of a time in the past, before the arrival of private property, in which sexual relationships were promiscuous and women socially dominant. But as societies generated wealth, he argued, and as that wealth came to be held in the form of private property, it became essential for men to know their heirs, and so vital that they controlled the sexual activity of the women who bore them. Engels did not explain why the women let the men get away with this — what he termed the 'world historical defeat of the female sex' — he seemed to treat that defeat as somehow 'natural'! But he did at least seek to explain the subordination of women to men as a social process, one deriving from the emergence of private property, and by implication one that would not survive the abolition of private property in the communist society to come.

It was the wives of the property-owning class under capitalism, bourgeoisie wives, who for Engels were the most subordinate, because they were totally trapped inside the family unit, excluded from the public world of paid work, and obliged to trade sexual favours and domestic servitude for a share in the return on capital. Proletarian wives, in Engels' view, were paradoxically in a better position in relation to their husbands. The poverty of the men who would control them was such that women had to engage in paid labour. They had a public existence as well as a private subordination. Engels saw in this proletarianization of women (their entry into waged work) the crucial change that would erode the family as
best understood as 'a body of armed men'. But Marx (and indeed Lenin too) was also aware of the role that ideas, rather than force, play in the stabilization of capitalism. He wrote in the 1840s that 'the ideas of the ruling class are in each epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force'. He was fairly sure in the 1840s that the bourgeoisie’s attempt to sell liberalism to the emerging proletariat as just such a set of dominant ideas would fail, that the horrors of life in capitalism would prevent the mass of workers from accepting a liberal reading of their world. But in the 1920s this idea of the dominance of a particular set of ideas, as a key element in explaining the longevity of capitalism, was picked up again and integrated into a new Marxist theory of the state, by the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci.

By then Marx’s optimism about the inevitability of proletarian revolution had been put to a stern test in the revolutionary upheavals that swept central Europe after 1918. It had looked for a moment as though Marx’s vision of proletarian power was at hand, but then the wave of working-class and peasant revolts that had swept Bolshevism to power in Russia unexpectedly petered out in Western Europe. Fascism, not socialism, rose out of the ashes of war and capitalist crisis – first in Italy in the 1920s, then with even more terrible consequences in Germany in the 1930s. Struggling to grasp why all this should be so, Gramsci produced a series of notes on state and ideology which continue to be an important point of reference for contemporary debates among Marxists.

Gramsci explained the success of the Bolsheviks in Russia, and the failure of communism in Western Europe, by using a military image from World War I. He argued that unlike Western Europe, pre-revolutionary Russia lacked layers of middle-class social and cultural power in a developed ‘civil society’ behind the Russian State, lacked private ‘traumas’ of class power to block the socialist advance. Only the Russian Orthodox church existed as a defensive support to Tsarist power prior to 1917; and the church and state fell together in a socialist revolution that each was by then too weak to block. In Western Europe however, with its more developed capitalist economies and its more extensive bourgeois civil societies, socialists faced stalemated trench warfare of the Flanders variety. Here the capitalist state was a more substantial barrier to socialist advance because of its integral relationship to the complex capitalist society behind it. In the West, if the state was the first ‘thrust’ that socialists had to conquer, many other ‘traumas’ of private capitalist power remained behind it, and they had to be conquered too. For socialists in the West faced more than state power. They faced in addition the entrenched private world of pro-capitalist institutions – not just a world of churches, but also one of education systems, the media, even right wing trade unions. It was this world that gave capitalism its stability: by its unity against socialism, by its acceptance and articulation of a dominant set of pro-capitalist ideas.

1V.I. Lenin: 1870–1924. Russian Marxist, founder of the Bolshevik Party, and its leader in 1917. Author of many works, including What is to be done (1902), Imperialism (1916), and State and Revolution (1917).

2Antonio Gramsci: 1891–1937. Italian Marxist, founder and briefly leader of the Italian Communist Party, imprisoned by Mussolini. His writings in captivity were later published as The Prison Notebooks.
On this view, capitalism was safe from socialist revolution because, and to the degree that, a particular set of ideas ran through all aspects of society, and dominated ways of thinking. Liberal ideas in the mid-nineteenth century had played that role in the United Kingdom, and continued in large part to do so; and the ideas of national glory and imperial expansion were, in the 1920s, attempting to do the same. In each case the state had a crucial role to play in generating such an all pervasive ‘national project’, and (through its policies) in uniting a bloc of classes behind these particular ideas. Capitalism was stable, according to Gramsci, because and to the degree that the capitalist state managed to integrate significant sections of the working class (and peasantry in the Italian case) into a political coalition united behind a non-revolutionary national project.

Therefore, to overturn capitalism, it was no longer just enough to seize state power. Revolutionary socialists had to build a counter-culture of their own: create their own socialist ideology, weaken workers away from anti-socialist ways of thinking, and fuse a bloc of classes behind their revolutionary ideology in the struggle for state power. By the 1920s, that is, marxism had had to realize the important role of political and ideological forces in stabilizing capitalism, and to recognize that the economic contradictions of capitalism would not easily open the road to socialism as earlier marxists had so optimistically thought. They had come to recognize that the contradiction of interests between social classes which capitalism generated in its economic base could be ameliorated by political and ideological initiatives in its superstructure. They had come to see that capitalism would remain stable until socialist parties managed to dislodge from popular culture pro-capitalist ideas and sentiments.

Summary

1 Marxist sensitivity to questions of power relations between men and women has not been great. However, Engels did attempt to explain gender divisions as products of the emergence of private property, and as such, unlikely to survive the demise of private property in socialism.

2 Marx saw the state as the agent of the dominant class, with at most a limited degree of autonomy from control by the owners of the means of production. He expected the proletariat to establish its own dictatorship in socialism, and for all forms of the state to wither away in communism.

3 Later marxists – particularly Gramsci – emphasized the important role played by the state in orchestrating ideologies to legitimate capitalism and alliances of classes to sustain it.

2.3 Social reformism

Liberal and marxist bodies of thought quickly became, and have remained, important points of reference in the persistent debate about the character of modern society. But as presented here – one unashamedly enthusiastic about capitalism, the other totally opposed to its continuation – it is hardly surprising that they did not exhaust the range of interpretations available to twentieth century social science. It would appear that for many social thinkers what liberalism and marxism gained in the tight internal coherence of their analyses they lost either in comprehensiveness or in subtlety. They shut out the argument of the ‘middle ground’ that capitalism was a society in need of (and open to) extensive reform.

Of all the traditions of thought surveyed here, social reformism is the most ‘artificial’, in the sense of being a construct that we are imposing on a wide and in many ways disparate range of scholarship. The label ‘social reformism’ is not an entirely satisfactory one, because it gives priority to a political programme (of reform) rather than to the organizing axes of thought from which the commitment to that programme derived. But we will use it, in the absence of anything better, precisely because the intellectual positions gathered here are more in agreement on their conclusions about reform than they are on the routes by which they arrive at that agreement. Common points of reference do exist to hold these positions together as a tradition, as we will see, including: a generalized commitment to progress, a faith in the capacity of human beings to ‘improve’, an egalitarian impulse predisposing them to democracy, a faith in the role of the state as an instrument of social reform, a belief in the possibility and desirability of incremental social change and an antipathy to revolutionary movements and revolutionary change. But these underlying predispositions will not bind social reformism into as coherent and internally logical a package of ideas as we found in liberalism and marxism: and this should not surprise us. For the theorists gathered here as social reformists will often want to emphasize the gain to scholarship that comes from a certain undidness of thought, from the existence of loose ends, and from an openness to a wide range of ideas and influences. Their thought, that is, will invariably be characterized by what John Stuart Mill famously called ‘practical eclecticism’ and ‘a catholic spirit in philosophy’. Social reformism as portrayed here is very much closer as an intellectual tradition to liberalism than to marxism. (Indeed, many of the nineteenth century thinkers cited here as social reformers are often treated as major figures in mainstream liberalism – so close is the connection between liberal and social reformist bodies of thought.) Many of the late Victorian advocates of social reform shared classical liberal assumptions about the importance of the individual, about the growth of markets and about the relationship between freedom and the rule of law. But what many of our social reformists increasingly lacked as time went on, was the confidence displayed by early liberals in the potential of untramelled market forces and unbridled self-interest to generate a stable and just social order. In this centre ground we will find a growing awareness that markets do work well as allocators of economic resources, but also a sense that they do not work perfectly, and that if uncontrolled are likely to generate undesirable social consequences. By the end of the nineteenth century, when a discernible social reformist current became

\begin{footnote}
John Stuart Mill: 1806–1873. Son of James Mill, economist and philosopher, active political reformer and Member of Parliament. His writings include System of Logic (1848), Principles of Political Economy (1848), On Liberty (1859), Representative Government (1861), Utilitarianism (1863) and The Subjection of Women (1869).
\end{footnote}
The basic premises of social reformism

If there is a common starting point for this third tradition of thought, it lies in some generalized belief in progress – in some sense, as John Stuart Mill put it, ‘that the general tendency is, and will continue to be, saving temporary and occasional exceptions, one of improvement; a tendency towards a better and happier state’. There is a general recognition too, among theorists grouped here as social reformists, that ‘circumstances maketh the man’, that people are good or bad as circumstances allow, that people can be educated to be better, and that circumstances can be reformed. Individual theorists within the tradition arrived at that view from different starting points. For some – the influential English democratic socialist R.H. Tawney1 was one – the belief in the impact of environment on character derived from a serious religious commitment. For others, often referred to as utopian socialists2 to distinguish them from the Marxist variety, the belief stemmed from a condemnation of competition and a preference for small co-operative communities. And for still others, John Stuart Mill again is perhaps the prime example, the source of this belief was the utilitarian philosophy of his father’s circle (that is, of Jeremy Bentham3 and of James Mill4). Since the younger Mill was such an influence on later social reformists, it is worth closing in on his reasoning in more detail.

In liberal thought as we have presented it, it is individuals who create social institutions and effect social change. In Marxism the relationship is much the other way round. Individuals are so shaped by the social relationships in which they find themselves that social analysis rarely needs to go down to the individual level. The Marxist story of social change is told at the level of social classes, not at the level of the individuals who constitute those classes in any one generation. There is some kind of continuum of explanation here, from the individual to the social: and though liberal and Marxist thinkers often come off their starting point to explore the role of structures or individuals in social causation, their whole mode of thought pulls them away from any systematic exploration of the interplay of individuals and social structures. Yet that interplay is at the heart of the social reformist position, and certainly was a central preoccupation of John Stuart Mill. He knew how circumstances moulded people, but he was equally convinced that people could rise above circumstance, particularly if educated to do so.

The malleability of human nature was central to Mill’s faith in social progress. For him, human nature was not a constant thing. It was something made by circumstances. Mill shared Bentham’s enthusiasm for what was known as associationist psychology. In that psychology, ‘the mind is conceived, as it was by Locke, as a dark room, the senses being the windows which alone provide its knowledge of the external world’ (Thomas, 1985, p.24). What we are, what we know, what we value, all that is put together inside our mind (by certain principles of association) from the data flowing into it from outside, via our senses. But of course this doctrine ‘of the formation of character by circumstances, as James Mill called it, cuts two ways.’ (Ibid, p.25) It makes education vital, since if the educator can get in first, before the mind is formed, moral development is certain. But it also makes reform essential, because the mind also gathers knowledge of the world around it, a world which if unreformed must impair the quality of the morality it generates. Indeed the older Mill applied just this psychology to the education of his son, with the effect both of creating a child prodigy – educated far beyond his years – and of inducing a nervous breakdown in the young John Stuart Mill.

The excesses of the position, when applied in this way, need not however detract from its general importance as an alternative to both liberalism and Marxism. To liberal theorists unenthusiastic about state action, social reformists pressed the case for the improvement of ‘circumstances’. To Marxism convinced that such new circumstances could only be achieved by class-based revolution, social

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2Robert Owen: 1771–1858. The best known of the British utopian socialists, he developed his cotton mills at New Lanark in Scotland in line with his commitment to education, improved social conditions and mutual co-operation. He published A New View of Society in 1813.
3Jeremy Bentham: 1748–1832. Leading philosopher, writer and political reformer. Co-founder, with James Mill, of the influential Westminster Review. His writings include Fragmenta on Government (1779), and Introduction to Principles of Morals and Legislation (1789).
reformists argued the case for education, general moral improvement, and incremental change through the building of consensus. There is a strong strand of belief, within intellectuals grouped here as social reformist, that most social problems have a solution, one moreover that can be realized by what J.S. Mill called ‘piecemeal engineering’. There is a belief too that most people are sufficiently open to rational argument to be able to see that solution, and sufficiently socially-minded to be willing to compromise their own immediate interests in order to achieve it. So for that reason, the focus of effort should not be on the blanket defence of markets or the generalized advocacy of revolution. Effort should be directed instead to the identification of solutions to discrete social problems and to the creation of the institutions and the public morality through which those solutions can be realized.

Summary

1 Social reformism is a more diverse tradition than liberalism or marxism. It stands closer to liberalism than to marxism. It differs from liberalism in its sense of the inadequacy of unregulated markets and in its associated willingness to advocate state action to enhance individual liberty.

2 Social reformism is united around a belief in the malleability of human nature, in the capacity of circumstances to shape character, and in the role of the state as a reformer of circumstances.

3 Social reformism is united by its recognition of the importance for social life of the interplay of individual action and social structure.

Power and the state

As we saw above, early liberal thought sought to justify its case for representative government by appeals to universalistic principles – to the ‘natural rights’ enjoyed by ‘men’. But that same liberalism had been reluctant to carry the egalitarianism of those principles to its logical conclusion, had baulked at the advocacy of a state representative of ‘all men’; let alone one representative of men as well. The movement from the ‘old’ liberalism to the ‘new’ involved initially a transcendence of just this limitation.

The underlying democratic logic of a system of political representation based on universal rights had not been lost on radical thinkers even in the seventeenth century. When, at the height of the English civil war, Oliver Cromwell had debated restrictions to the franchise with delegates from his soldiers (in what are now known as the Putney debates), Colonel Rainsborough had stood before him to argue the democratic case. In one of the earliest recorded claims for democratic reform in English political history, he said:

For really I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest he . . . and therefore truly, Sir, I think it clear that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government, and I do think that the poorest man in England is not

at all bound in a strict sense to that government that he hath not had a voice to put himself under.

That same logic would surface, in a different form, more than a century later in the political radicalism of the English utilitarians. Bentham began from pristine liberal premises, of society understood as composed of self-interested individuals, in this case organizing their social life around what Bentham took to be Nature's basic forces: pain and pleasure. The tight logic of Bentham’s thought would not allow any possibility that one person’s pleasure should have greater value than another’s (for Bentham, James Mill reported, ‘pushpin is as good as poetry’); and the egalitarian implicit in this led him to urge the reform of a whole series of institutions in which social privilege still prevailed. In company with contemporary liberal orthodoxy, Bentham believed that every person was the best judge of his/her own best interest, and accordingly best placed to judge who should rule over them. In his later years, Bentham campaigned vigorously against a limited franchise precisely because it necessarily guaranteed that the state would be ruled in the interests of the few. Legislators being as self-interested – in Bentham’s eyes – as everyone else, only by making it in their self-interest to rule for the benefit of all could a state hope to escape a decline into government by ‘sixstner interests’. Bentham argued that it was ‘only through equality of power (approached in universal suffrage) that it was possible to gain security from arbitrary and tyrannical rule’ (Rosen, 1983, p.218). Create a situation in which all individuals vote, vote often and vote secretly, and you would create a state whose representative relationship with the entire electorate would meet the utilitarian test – of generating by its actions ‘the greatest happiness of the greatest number’.

So Bentham used standard liberal arguments about individuals and their interests to justify extensions of the franchise: though it should be said that in the hands of his chiefly ally, James Mill, that extension still stopped short of women and the working class. But in the hands of John Stuart Mill, a generation later, those exclusions were whittled away. Like his father, the younger Mill argued that popular participation in representative government was vital to keep the state under control, and to guarantee individual liberties of conscience, taste and association. This was the standard ‘protective case’ for democracy: but for the younger Mill there was a ‘participatory case’ to be made for democracy as well. Democratic participation was also essential to permit the full development of individual potentiality. Participation in political life (including voting, involvement in local administration, and the performance of jury service) was seen by Mill as ‘vital to create a direct interest in government, and consequently a basis for an involved, informed and developed citizenry. Mill conceived of democratic politics as a prime mechanism of moral self-development’ (Held, 1983, p.17); and opposed barriers to that moral self-development created by the unrefomed inequalities of an unregulated market order.

We must remember that behind the early liberal reluctance to carry to their logical conclusion the universalistic principles which they used to justify the rights of property, was a fear of class. Early liberals were afraid that a mass electorate
would threaten property, by putting government under the control of the 'rude masses', so replacing the tyranny of an aristocratic minority hostile to commercial property by the even more awesome tyranny of a dispossessed majority hostile to property as such. The younger Mill saw that danger and shared that fear: that democracy would produce 'a legislature reflecting exclusively the opinions and preferences of the most ignorant class' (cited in Duncan, 1973, p.228). But Mill was less worried than earlier liberals because he had what would become a typically 'social reformist' view of class. For him, incompatible class interests (between Marx's bourgeoisie and proletariat) were not a permanent feature of life under capitalism. 'Even when he viewed the impact of class as deep and discouraging, he continued to insist that men could be liberated from class by reason, by perceiving the world correctly, and he felt that the tendency for this to happen was increasing with the progress of civilization, which meant [for him] largely the diffusion of intelligence' (Duncan, 1973, p.230). Mill was confident that industrial and social improvements would in the end alter the shape of the class structure, replacing the polarities of rich and poor with a more generally middle-class society. Like many of the intellectuals grouped here as socialist reformists, he felt that class divisions and class tensions would ease over time, that class differences could be reconciled, that the centrality of class to people's sense of the world would diminish as prosperity spread, and that education and rational argument - not class conflict - held the key to social progress.

So for Mill, the 'threat' that democracy posed to property was a manageable one, a threat that could be negated by widespread popular education, and by constitutional innovations within the institutions of the democratic state. He favoured the retention of a Second Chamber, to block the excesses of the popularly-elected Lower House. He favoured extra votes for those with education. He favoured proportional representation, because he thought it likely to generate a higher quality of representative. He even opposed secret ballots, preferring people to have to defend in public their use of the vote. But with these caveats, he was prepared to support a universal franchise, because of his belief that participation in the democratic process would educate the citizenry into a less self-seeking, class-based and avaricious mode of thought. And he was prepared to advocate democratization too because he thought it was 'both inevitable and right that the majority ... should be the dominant power in a democracy' (Thompson, 1976, p.78).

Nowhere is this sense of the twin imperatives of inevitability and justice more evident in John Stuart Mill's work than in his writings on the position of women. We noted earlier Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman", in which liberal arguments on natural rights, and utilitarian claims on the social benefits of sexual equality, had been combined to discredit arguments about the 'naturalness' of women's subordination to men. As she put it:

If the abstract rights of man will bear discussion and explanation, those of woman, by a parity of reasoning, will not shrink from the same test ... Who

made man the exclusive judge, if woman partake with him of the gift of reason ... But if women are to be excluded, without having a voice, from a participation of the natural rights of mankind, prove first, to ward off a charge of injustice and inconsistency, that they want reason, else the flaw ... ever show that man must, in some shape, act as a tyrant (in denying women) civil and political rights ... Reason ... loudly demands JUSTICE for one half of the human race.

(Wollstonecraft, 1792, pp.87, 89.)

In arguing in this way, Mary Wollstonecraft deployed propositions about natural rights to insist that 'the female half of the species should be treated first as human rather than as sexed beings' (Coole, 1988, p.122). She sustained her position by utilitarian arguments as well, insisting that if women were to be good companions to men, and capable of rearing the next generation of competent citizens, then they too would need to be educated. This argument on the education of women found its way directly into the later writings of John Stuart Mill, particularly those influenced by his wife, Harriet Taylor. So too did the Wollstonecraft agenda for women's emancipation: education, civil rights, access to jobs and full political citizenship. Since Mill believed that participation in public life was vital to the moral development of those who participated, he was keen to extend that process of moral development throughout society. He saw that the family had a key role to play in inculcating such moral values, and that the family could not perform that function adequately if the women within it languished in a captive privacy, trapped in ignorance. As Diana Coole observed, for Mill: 'so long as the family [was] organized along hierarchical lines ... children (would) be schooled in tyranny, and public virtue (would) be undermined by the self-love encouraged in men and the narrow-mindedness enforced in women' (1988, p.142).

For Wollstonecraft and for Mill, sexual equality meant that women should have the right to participate in public life as well as to work in the private domain. Neither of them questioned the division of society into those two spheres, nor challenged the degree to which women were (as they still are) obliged to carry the burden of domestic responsibilities. But at least after they had made their arguments, it was no longer so easy for liberal theorists to exclude unchallenged half the population from the rights they claimed for all.

Summary

1 Social reformism carried the egalitarian logic of liberalism to its logical conclusion: arguing for a democratic franchise and equal rights for women.

2 John Stuart Mill recognized the positive impact on human capacities of participation in political life, and discounted earlier liberal fears of democracy as 'mob rule'.

Economy and society

The writings of John Stuart Mill opened the door through which the 'new liberalism' emerged. If moral self-development was vital to individual liberty,
then it was illiberal to leave unreformed the social institutions and practices which blocked the moral self-development of the poor and disadvantaged. No longer could the definition of individual freedom be restricted to a negative one—as the freedom from state levied restraints on the individual ability to act. Freedom now had to become a positive right, the actual ability to do things, with the freedom to participate and develop fully as an individual guaranteed by state action against private barriers to equality. So the state gained a new role: 'to create those conditions in which self-fulfilment of individuals could occur' (Held, 1983, p. 64); and in this way the 'new liberalism' embraced social reform, and reduced earlier liberal dependence on competition as the driving force of human progress.

It is this pursuit of social reform as the prerequisite for the full realization of individual potentiality that has inspired the British non-marxist Left in the twentieth century. Its first political flowering came in the reforming Liberal Government of 1906; and when the Liberal Party disintegrated after 1916, many of the new liberals found their way into senior positions in the British Labour Party. Indeed, social reform inspired by this revitalized liberal philosophy was thereafter largely the preserve of Labour. The Attlee Government's creation of the welfare state—on lines designed by leading New Liberals such as Beveridge and Keynes—is a living testimony to the impact of this way of thinking on twentieth century political and social life in the United Kingdom. It has been an impact which has emphasized the role of the state far more than early liberal thought allowed; and it is an impact which has challenged marxist assertions on the impossibility of capitalist reform.

A fuller discussion of the impact of these traditions of thought on contemporary political life must, however, await the final section of this chapter. What we need to extract now is the contribution of 'new liberal' thinking to the stock of concepts and theories on which we might want to draw in making our own analyses of contemporary life. And here, as in our consideration of earlier traditions of thought, we will need to be selective. We have space to look in detail only at the revision of liberal attitudes to the market that is evident in the thinking of the most influential of all the theorists here labelled social reformist, John Maynard Keynes.

The early liberal faith in the ability of markets to generate prosperity and social stability remained influential throughout the nineteenth century; and indeed (as we have already seen) remains so to this day. Certainly John Stuart Mill retained that optimism throughout his life. But in the United Kingdom in the years after his death (in 1873) early liberal optimism about the inevitability of progress through laissez-faire policies began to diminish, as the intensification of international competition from the now rapidly-industrializing German and American economies ended the monopoly of industrial production enjoyed by British manufacturers in mid-century. Later nineteenth century English liberal thinkers became increasingly aware that the social cost of laissez-faire policies to the vast reservoirs of the Victorian poor, locked as they were in the most appalling conditions of industrial and social degradation. Many liberals came to see (and to fear) in that degradation the dangers of radicalization for which marxists were calling; and this same fear of a socialist proletariat stimulated equivalent responses in liberals elsewhere in Europe. Those fears were still very much in evidence in the years after World War I, years scarred by mass unemployment, the rise of fascism and the spread of support for the Soviet Union. By then, the 'middle ground' badly needed an economic theory that could chart its way between the defenders of an unregulated market order and the revolutionary socialist claim that there was no hope of generalized prosperity while private property remained. That is why Keynes is such an important figure in the history of social reformism. For by 1936, when he produced his General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money, the 'middle way' had at last found the economic analysis it so desperately required.

Keynes was by then a critic of what he termed 'unregulated capitalism'. In direct opposition to inter-war economic orthodoxy, he argued that the unemployment of the 1930s could not be solved by cutting government spending and money wages, as the Treasury at the time appeared to think. Of course he was aware that cutting wages would enable employers to lower their prices, as his critics emphasized. But he realized that cutting wages had two effects, not one. It enabled employers to reduce their prices, retain more of their income as profits, and hopefully sell more of their now cheaper goods. But at the same time it reduced the purchasing power of the workers whose wages were cut, and left business confidence low, with employers able to sell less. In fact Keynes was not convinced that cutting money wages would actually reduce the real purchasing power of workers, since prices would also fall, to leave the situation unaltered, and the real value of company debts and taxation much increased. It was better, in his view, to tackle the Depression by expanding the economy, and allowing prices to rise; since this too would not only reduce real wages (so long as money wages remained unaltered) but would also ease the burden of corporate debt, so boosting business confidence and investment levels. Against the argument of generalized wage cutting, Keynes insisted that if full employment was to be achieved, it would come only as a consequence of firms somehow being able to produce and sell goods again in large quantities and so employ more people. The question was, how was that volume of output to be generated?

In the conditions of the 1930s, Keynes argued, what the system required was more demand and more spending, not less demand and more saving; and that could best be generated, he thought, both by redistributing income from the high savers (the rich) to the low savers (the poor), and by the government spending more money itself, generating a multiplier effect through the whole economy by an expansion of its own labour force, by its own investment-spending and by its purchasing of the products of the private sector. The Keynesian specification for the role of the state that emerged in the 1930s was one which required the

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4John Maynard Keynes: 1883–1946. Economist, member of the Bloomsbury group, his writings include The Economic Consequences of the Peace (1919) and A General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money (1936).
government to manage levels of demand in the economy as a whole (by its instructions to banks, and by its own spending), to keep demand at that level which could generate high levels of employment. It was a specification that gave social reformers for an entire generation after 1945 an answer both to liberal criticisms of state action and to marxist criticisms of capitalism.

We should remember too that, as it did so, it reinforced a characteristic social reformist view that both liberalism and marxism systematically underestimated the complexity of the social structure created by industrialism. Society was not reducible to a bilateral table on which rational isolated individuals bounces off one another in egotistical competition. Nor was it - to change the metaphor of a battlefield of polarized classes. There were class divisions, of course, and the reality of working-class life, at least in the early stages of capitalist development, was as oppressive as Marx had said. But in line with the thinking of John Stuart Mill, social reformists tended to see the abatement of class tension over time, to anticipate that class divisions would lose their ferocity and centrality as prosperity grew, and as the democratic process generated universal rights of citizenship (to vote, to unionize, to enjoy access to education, health care, pensions and so on) that cut across the experience of class-based inequalities of income and power.

Though John Stuart Mill was one source for such social reformist thinking on social divisions, by far the most important challenge to marxist views on social class came from the German 'new liberal' sociologist Max Weber. Politically, Max Weber was heavily involved in German liberal politics, advocating the democratization of the German state and its active involvement in economic and social reform. Intellectually, he saw his own work as part 'rounding out' marxism by supplementing its explanatory variables. Weber recognized the importance of class divisions in modern society, and the existence of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. He was prepared to identify the origins of class division in the way the economy was organized, but he resisted Marx's attempts to tie class to property ownership. For Weber, class divisions reflected the relative strength of groups in the market, and was best captured by variations of income, not ownership. Such variations in their turn generated a hierarchy of classes, relating to each other in more complex ways than the simple polarity of incompatible interests emphasized by marxism. And class was not, for Weber, the only form or cause of social divisions. Divisions of status and divisions of power also set groups apart, and into hierarchical relationships the one with the other; and stratification by status and power was not reducible, as marxism would argue, even in the last instance to questions of property ownership.

Weber was able to argue this because of his sense - shared by others within this broad tradition of thought - of the multiplicity of causal forces at work in society at large. But he was also able to argue it because of his sense, more particular to himself, of capitalism as being merely one, admittedly vital, manifestation of a much broader process at work in modern western society. This was a process he referred to as rationalization. From his liberal roots, Weber took as central the notion of 'reason', and defined what he termed 'instrumental rationality' as the ability to achieve specified goals by technically efficient means. In his view (and here he stood full-square with both liberalism and marxism) the rationality of western culture in this sense had grown significantly of late, as science had replaced religion as the dominant mode of understanding the natural world, and as the means of production available to successive generations had grown with rapid strides under the force of capitalist competition. Indeed, as we saw, liberal optimism in the future, and marxist certainty on the possibilities of a society of abundance, rested precisely on this view of the desirability of science and industry as 'rational'.

Weber was less sanguine about the possibilities of modern society than Smith and Marx. There was a streak of pessimism in the Weber soul, a sense of trouble that they both lacked. He sensed that western societies were not just more rational in their cultures. They were also more rational in their modes of organization. History was less to be characterized by the struggle between classes than by the growing bureaucratization of all forms of social life. The emergence of the modern bureaucracy, according to Weber, gave to contemporary societies the capacity to achieve social ends of unprecedented complexity. They could now run standardized health systems, mass armies, international economies, and so on. But as this technical capacity had grown, as scientific knowledge had developed, the moral certainties of earlier belief systems had slipped away; and life had become so complex as to be literally beyond the capacity of isolated individuals to grasp. Here for Weber was the modern paradox eating away at the optimism of early liberalism and at the certainties of marxism: that modern men and women possessed an enhanced technical capacity to achieve ends that were no longer clear to them, that they were armed with a knowledge-based culture in a world that was now too complex to know. The capitalist oppression of the working class would not forge in the collective mind of the proletariat a vision of an emancipated utopia. It would simply throw up another bureaucracy - that of the revolutionary socialist party - which, if successful, would rule in the proletariat's name. As Weber put it, with the rise of socialism, 'it is the dictatorship of the official, not that of the worker, which, for the present at any rate, is on the advance' (Essay on Socialism, 1918).

Summary

1 Social reformers, as new liberals, saw liberty as having both a negative and a positive face; and accepted the need for social reform if people were actually to realize the formal rights accorded to them by earlier liberal thought.

2 Keynes provided social reformism with its economic analysis, rejecting earlier claims that markets guarantee full employment, and advocating state action to stimulate adequate levels of consumer demand.

3 Social reformism emphasizes the complexity of social structure. Max Weber is the key figure here, arguing for a multiplicity of sources of social division, and warning of the danger of the bureaucratization of modern social life.

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2.4 Conservatism

There is a fourth reaction to the arrival of industrial society which we need to observe, because it too released into academic scholarship a particular set of concerns and ways of analyzing them. That is conservatism. We have held it back to the end not because it is unimportant, but because conservative thought has never generated the scale and detail of social analysis characteristic of the other three traditions, and because its central assertions have in modern times largely been formulated in response to the others — and particularly in reaction to liberalism. So the other traditions of thought need to be place first if the full significance of the conservative reaction to them is to be grasped.

We should not be surprised by, or see weakness in, the underdeveloped nature of conservative thought. It is only those who would change the world who feel the need to analyze it in detail, and those who would proselytize who first need an argument. ‘Conservatism becomes conscious only when forced to be so’ (Scruton, 1980, p.20). Conservatives have come to feel the need for an extended analysis only to counter the proselytization of others; reacting in our period initially to the strident optimism of eighteenth and nineteenth century liberalism. Edmund Burke is a key figure here, in English conservatism at least. Indeed it is not too much to argue that the ‘philosophical substance of modern conservatism was brought into being in 1790 by Edmund Burke... (and that) to a remarkable degree, the central themes of conservative thought over the last two centuries are but widenings of themes enunciated by Burke with specific reference to revolutionary France’ (Nisbet, 1986, p.1).

Burke condemned the revolutionaries in France for their excessive arrogance in breaking so ruthlessly with the institutions and practices of the past in their attempt to create a new revolutionary society. History was not to be broken with so decisively; for society had to be understood as a ‘partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are dead and those who are to be born’ (Burke, 1790). History in all its complexity is there to be learnt from. Customs should be valued as the consolidated wisdom of previous ages. The power of reason and intellect found in just one generation is not enough to justify sweeping away the dominant institutional legacies of the past. Intellectuals, particularly revolutionary ones, would therefore do well to recognize their own limitations, lest their hasty attempts at social engineering degenerate into a tyranny of the ‘enlightened’ over the rest. According to Burke, societies and their liberties cannot be built just upon a specification of human ‘rights’. Such societies also require strong institutions to keep human passions under check; and if these are weakened, the society will inevitably drift towards new strong institutions of a military kind. Believing this, Burke had no time for political systems or social orders consciously based on some metaphysical principle such as ‘the Rights of Man’. Such societies, by weakening traditional sources of private liberty (in the family, the church and the local community) could only pave the way for a new form of tyranny. ‘Those who attempt to level, never equalize’ Burke wrote, because they fail to grasp the importance of social differentiation and hierarchy as guarantors of both freedom and order.

The bases of conservative thought

Burke’s writings on the French Revolution demonstrate clear and characteristic attitudes to human nature and social change. Conservatism has always been a ‘philosophy of imperfection’, emphasizing the limited capacities of human reason, and counselling caution against the excessive rationalism of reformers and revolutionaries — arguing against what Roger Scruton has called ‘the principal enemy of conservatism, the philosophy of liberalism, with all its attendant trappings of individual autonomy and the “natural” rights of man’ (Scruton, 1980, p.16). Burke spoke for many conservative thinkers when he wrote that ‘we are afraid to put men to live and trade each upon his own private stock of reason — because we suspect that the stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves to the general bank and capital of nations and of ages’.

In reaction to the belief in progress and the faith in reason evident in much liberal thought, conservatives have always been keen to emphasize both ‘that the world was by no means as intelligible as [people] had come to assume’ and ‘that pain, evil and suffering were not just purely temporary elements in the human condition, originating in an unjust organization of society’ (O’Sullivan, 1976, p.11). In conservative thought, there is always a limit to the capacity of individuals to reshape social life: either because that social life has a higher, more divine, architect, or because contemporary conditions are too complex a product of the past to be easily analyzed and amended. The religious basis of human frailty is an important theme for many conservative thinkers: that, as Aristotle put it, ‘the most powerful principle which governs man is the religious principle — Man was made to adore and to obey’ (cited in Leigh, 1979, p.133). So too is the sense of the individual as occupying a brief moment in time, charged with responsibilities to the past as well as to the present, and under some generalized obligation to justify any alteration to the status quo. ‘A Conservative’, Pickthorn told us, is a person ‘who believes that in politics the onus of proof is on the proposer of change’ (ibid, p.20).

So when Michael Oakeshott came to define conservatism, he defined it not as a creed, or a doctrine, but as a disposition, a propensity "to enjoy what is available rather than to wish for or to look for something else; to delight in what is present rather than what was or what may be" (1962, p.168).

To be conservative, then, is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited...

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8Edmund Burke: 1729–1797. Lawyer, politician, supporter of the American War of Independence, but not of the French Revolution. Author of many books and pamphlets, including Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790) and An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs (1791).
to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss. Familiar relationships and loyalties will be preferred to the allure of more profitable attachments; to acquire and to enlarge will be less important than to keep, to cultivate and to enjoy; the grief of loss will be more acute than the excitement of novelty or promise. It is to be equal to one's own fortune, to live at the level of one's own means, to be content with the want of perfection which belongs alike to oneself and one's circumstance.

(Oakeshott, 1962, p. 169)

This is not to say that conservative thought is opposed to change and innovation. On the contrary, such a desire "to conserve is compatible with all manner of change, provided only that change is also continuity" (Scruton, 1980, p. 22). It is simply that for the conservative 'change is something that has to be suffered' and innovation something to be approached with caution. For even 'when an innovation commends itself as a convincing improvement' the conservative 'will look twice at its claims before accepting them ... Because every improvement involves change, the disruption entailed has always to be set against the benefit anticipated' (Oakeshott, 1962, p. 171). That is why conservatives characteristically prefer "small and limited innovation to large and indefinite" ones, and favour 'a slow rather than a rapid pace' of change (ibid, p. 172).

There is also a powerful sense, in conservative thought, of the differences between individuals: not just differences of rank, but underlying, innate and ineradicable variations in ability and aptitude. Conservative thought is inevitably elitist in character, emphasizing the importance of leadership and hierarchy, and dismissive of claims that social inequality can ever fully be removed. This sense of the differences in human beings has led conservative thinkers to resist egalitarianism. As Kirk put it, "ultimate equality in the judgement of God, and equality before the courts of law, are recognized by conservatives; but equality of condition, they think, means equality in servitude and boredom" (Kirk, 1978, p. 8).

Summary

1. Conservatives tend to be reluctant to theorize, reacting instead to the proselytizing of others. Conservatives are wary of excessive rationalism, and conscious of the dangers of radical social engineering.

2. Conservatism is a philosophy of imperfection. It rejects liberal optimism in progress and human reason, emphasizing instead the limits on human capacities, the importance of the past, and the risks involved in rapid social change.

Economy and Society

The attitude of conservative thinkers to economic life under capitalism has shown a characteristic development over time. Early conservative thought, in the hands of people like Coleridge, Carlyle, and Southey was as hostile to industrialization as it was to revolutionary politics; so the emerging capitalist industrial order faced — in its early years — a challenge of a conservative as well as of a socialist kind.

Indeed much of the support for early factory legislation came from conservative circles horrified at the inhuman working conditions created by the new employing class, and disturbed by what they saw as factory work's adverse effects on family life and individual morality. 'Commerce', as Southey said after his visit to Birmingham 'sends in no returns of its killed and wounded'. Its 'watch chains, necklaces and bracelets, buttons, buckles and snuff boxes, are dearly purchased at the expense of health and morality' (Southey, 1807, p. 196). But as industrialization became established, conservative thought shifted eventually to its defence, as both conservative arguments moved away from an attack on liberalism towards a critique of socialist movements. By the end of the nineteenth century, conservative thinkers had largely made their peace with industrialization and its dominant classes, and moved to defend their rights of property against threats posed by calls for public ownership and state planning. Indeed, except for a brief flirtation with social reformist theories of demand management in the 1950s and 1960s, conservative-inspired governments this century have normally been keen to defend the market, and to attack state planning as ineffective, inefficient, and destructive of individual freedom. This openness of modern conservative thought to liberal (and to a lesser extent, socialist and interventionist) ideas has meant that there is now no distinctly conservative way of analysing economic life; and it has given a distinctly liberal feel to the economic policies of recent Conservative governments.

If there is a considerable fusion of thought between liberalism and conservatism in their approaches to the economy, no such fusion has characterized their wider analysis of society as a whole. Indeed, in opposition to both liberals and leftists, conservative thinkers throughout the nineteenth century insisted that any society had to be understood as more than a collection of self-interested individuals or antagonistic classes. They saw it rather as an organic whole, a functionally integrated set of parts, each needing to be in harmony with the rest, and each in possession of a set of mutual responsibilities and duties. They saw in the patterned social inequalities of previous societies the manifestation of real...


10 Robert Southey: 1774–1843. One of the 'Lake poets', friend and brother-in-law to Coleridge. Author of Letters from England (1807) and of an immense quantity of predominantly narrative poetry. Initially sympathetic to Jacobinism, he had accommodated himself sufficiently to the existing social order by 1813 to be made poet laureate, but he remained throughout his life committed to government regulation and improvement of the social conditions created by industrialization.
differences between people’s social capacities and intellectual skills, and proof that within an ordered society each individual had a particular, if unequal, place or rank.

This sense of society as a functionally-integrated organic whole has long been central to conservative thought. Through it, conservatives have come to see social inequality as both inevitable and necessary — indeed, even socially desirable, because it is functional to the health of the society in total. The focus of conservative concerns in social analysis has therefore been less with individuals or classes than with features of society as a whole: questions of social balance and order, social stability, the mechanisms of social integration, and the maintenance of a sense of community. Conservative thought from Burke onwards has insisted that institutions and practices that have stood the test of time have a claim on our loyalty and respect for their longevity alone. The family, the monarchy, the church, private property and the nation have all attracted conservative support on this ground; and industrialization was initially resisted precisely because it threatened the sense of community inherited from the agrarian past. Coleridge’s unease about industrialization, for example, rested in part in his fear that ‘all traditional ties would be dissolved and . . . an impoverished mass . . . left at the mercy of the manufacturing and commercial class’ (O’Sullivan, 1976, p.87). He looked to universal education and religion to re-integrate the new industrial society; and Carlyle, in similar fashion, advocated charismatic political leadership to create a new organic society in place of the one destroyed by industrial change.

Their particular solutions are not very important — but the problem of social order and integration to which they were a response continues to preoccupy much conservative social analysis. For ‘the conservative attitude demands the persistence of a civil order’ (Scruton, 1980, p.27). It is not a civil order/society understood — as in liberal thought — as ultimately based on contractual relationships between autonomous and rational individuals. Society is not seen in that way by conservative thinkers. Instead, for a conservative like Roger Scruton2 a society has to be understood as ultimately natural in origin, as a complex social phenomenon bound together by relationships of authority, by bonds of allegiance and, by powerful traditions and customs. Since society exists ‘objectively as it were’, outside the sphere of individual choice, it — and not the individuals subject to it — becomes for conservatives the key object of study and the key concern of politics. To a man like Scruton, ‘there is, to put it bluntly, something deeply self-deceiving in the (liberal) idea of a fulfilled human being whose style of life is entirely of his own devising’ (Scruton, 1980, pp.37–8). Instead individuals are ‘stamped permanently’ by the society they inherit; and because they are, the ‘customs, traditions and common culture’ of that society ‘become ruling conceptions’ of thought and action (ibid, p.38).


Summary

1 Conservative attitudes to industrialization changed over time: from initial hostility to eventual advocacy of market forces. Conservatism no longer possses any developed and distinctive economic theory of its own.

2 Conservatives recognize the inevitability of social inequality and the necessarily organic nature of all complex societies. They accordingly attach importance to leadership and to the maintenance of social order.

Power and the state

Such conservative beliefs in the frailty of human nature and the complexity of human society have prompted a particular reading of the nature of power in industrial societies. Conservative thinkers have had relatively little to say about the power relationships between men and women, and this silence is indicative of a general propensity among conservatives to see the family, and the relationships within it, as natural in origin, and so as basic to society as to require preservation in their existing forms.

Conservative thinkers have been prepared, however, to grant a role to the state which is rather different to that canvassed in any of the other traditions considered here. The conservative sense of mutual responsibilities has often sustained a concern for the provision of welfare — a Tory paternalism. Such paternalism has not derived from any developed sense of universal human rights, but has been rooted more in the belief that traditionally privileged institutions and groups have a duty to render assistance as well as leadership to less privileged strata beneath. This attitude is very visible in Coleridge’s belief that the maintenance of an organic society required that the state play a more active role than liberalism allowed — to guarantee a minimum standard of living to all citizens, and extensive education to ‘develop those faculties which are essential to his humanity — that is, to his rational and moral being’ (O’Sullivan, 1976, p.88). Similar attitudes are evident in Disraeli’s willingness to use state power to create ‘One Nation’, and in the willingness of more recent conservative thinkers to support the welfare state.

For conservatism has rarely opposed state action, or even state-led reform, in total. It is the pace and character of such reform which has preoccupied conservative thought. Conservative thinkers have resisted radical change as ‘leaps in the dark’, preferring instead either no change at all or a return to the past (among reactionary strands of conservatism), or, more normally, orderly, incremental and controlled change that did not profoundly alter the basic structures of inherited power and rank. Conservative thought has, then, given a particularly central role to political leadership as the orchestrator of ordered change; and has preferred to keep that leadership in the hands of those who — by birth, background and training — were deemed ‘best fit to govern’.

Conservative thought has always treated the state as a key social institution and ‘government as the primary need of every man subject to the discipline of social intercourse’ (Scruton, 1980, p.19). Scruton at least has been prepared to
argue that 'one major difference between conservatism and liberalism consists ... in the fact that, for the conservative, the value of individual liberty is not absolute, but stands subject to another and higher value, the authority of established government' (ibid, p.19). Equally conservatives have always tended to see governing as a specific and limited activity, and have attached greater importance to the character of its activity than to its content. According to a modern conservative like Michael Oakeshott, there is a definite style of governing which is preferable to the conservative mind. It is a style appropriate to the role of government as umpire rather than as innovator. Government is not something to be used 'as an instrument of passion'; its task rather is to 'inject into the activities of already too passionate men an ingredient of moderation'. The role of government is to 'restrain, to deflate, to pacify and to reconcile; not to stoke the fires of desire but to dampen them down'. (Oakeshott, 1962, p.192).

On this view, the task of those who govern us is not 'to impose favourite projects upon their fellows'. It is to restrict themselves to 'the provision and custody of general rules of conduct . . . enabling people to pursue the activities of their own choice with the minimum of frustration'. These general rules of conduct constitute a body of law which embody 'as for a conservative it must embody, the fundamental values of the society which it aims to rule' (Scruton, 1980, p.17). It is about these rules that Oakeshott believes 'it is appropriate to be conservative' (op. cit. p.184).

Such a set of orientations has generated a steady if limited stream of social analysis, none of it particularly major in its innovative force, but all of it cumulatively sustaining a distinct set of analytical categories and concerns. If liberalism released into western social thought the category of the rational individual, the market and the limited state, and if marxism has given us the capitalist mode of production, classes and revolutionary change, then conservative thought has added to that repertoire notions of the organic society, of tradition and inequality, and has insisted on the importance of continuity and social order as key objects of study.

Summary

1 Conservative thinkers tend to treat the family as a natural institution, and to leave unexamined the gender relationships within them.
2 Conservative thinkers give an important role to the state as a guarantor of social order and of minimum standards. Conservatives attach central importance to the maintenance of political authority and to the rule of law. They do not look to the state for grandiose schemes of social improvement.

3 The presence of the traditions in the study of society

The individual disciplines that today constitute social science are, in the main, recent creations, products of an academic division of labour that has emerged only in the last hundred years. Their subject matter and — more importantly for our purposes — their theoretical frameworks have a much longer history: but their separate study, by individuals labelling themselves as particular kinds of social scientists (or indeed even as social scientists at all), came only with the establishment and proliferation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of a new generation of universities on the continent of Europe, in North America, and here in the United Kingdom. Before then — in the older universities, the dissenting colleges and among self-financing private scholars — attempts to analyse society wandered relatively freely across what later were to be discipline boundaries, with inquiries on, say, moral philosophy also stimulating observations by the same writer on history, politics, economics and psychology. Adam Smith, for example, though now canonized as an economist, was by profession a Professor of Logic and Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University, whose other major work (beyond The Wealth of Nations) was The Theory of Moral Sentiments. Equally, John Stuart Mill's major text on economics, published in 1848, actually carried the full title of Principles of Political Economy with Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy, and he wrote widely, as we have seen, on other matters as disparate as logic and liberty.

Yet with the advantage of hindsight, it is possible to see some pattern in the tides of thought that preceded and precipitated the emergence of separate social science disciplines in the second half of the nineteenth century. Until the Renaissance re-introduced classical non-Christian thought into western culture, late medieval writings on social life operated almost exclusively within a religious framework. But with the disintegration of Catholic dominance of European thought in the Reformation, and with the parallel rise of strong nation states, a space was created for more secular reflections on the nature of human society, and on the role of government within it. That space was initially filled (in the seventeenth century) with writings that we would now see as moral philosophy and political theory, and with the first tentative explorations of the emerging natural sciences. By the eighteenth century, the rise of a Protestant capitalism out of a feudal and a Catholic Europe had moved Europe's intellectual centre of gravity from Italy to northern Europe; and had obliged northern political philosophers to examine a range of questions that we now recognize as distinctly economic in character. A century later still, the urbanization and social tensions created by
that spread of capitalism had laid the agenda for the quite separate disciplines of sociology and geography. Psychology as a recognizable separate discipline really only flourished after 1870, its growth and application stimulated partly by the traumas of modern war, and more significantly by the consolidation – first in North America and later in Europe – of well-funded universities keen to foster high-quality discipline specialization.

So it is possible to trace the emergence of different social science disciplines in this sequential way, and to see that there is at least some connection between the way academic activity was reorganized and broad changes in the world it sought to understand. But the relationship between the academy and the world also coloured broad developments within the disciplines themselves. Each generation of practising social scientists faced a particular climate of intellectual opinion and a particular set of overriding concerns; these too affected the trajectories of their work, and the relative importance to them of the traditions of thought that we are considering here.

Much mid-nineteenth century social thought in the United Kingdom, as we have seen, was overwhelmingly liberal in its premises, and optimistic about the capacity of human reason to shape a better world. Much late-nineteenth century social thought was not: demonstrating instead that general disillusionment with the idea of progress and the nature of industrialism that touched every major form of cultural production around 1900, from art to literature and music. The roots of that disillusionment with the liberal project lay partly in the intensification of international competition, and in the growing threat of large-scale international war; but it lay too in the way that the rise of large and militant labour movements disturbed the middle class calm of the liberal intellectual world. Many leading intellectuals of the "generation of the 1890s" – including Weber and Freud – shared a common interest in the role of irrational forces in human personality and social history, and an apprehension about the ability of capitalism and democracy to guarantee property and peace. If the spirit of optimism remained to that generation, it became the property of the marxists, who still believed that history was a story of progress, specifically the progress of the proletariat towards a propertyless communism.

Inter-war political and social thought was then dominated by the twin concerns of irrationalism and marxism that had bedevilled the 1890s liberals: by the marxist question (re-cast between the wars to that of whether all industrial societies must follow the Soviet route to communism) and by the question of the irrational in politics (of whether the only alternative to communism was the abandonment of liberal democracy to the excesses of fascism). It took the defeat of fascism in World War II to re-establish the confidence of those who sought a middle way between these two extremes, a confidence which was then bolstered after 1945 by the growing evidence of the tyranny that lurked behind the mask of marxism in the Soviet bloc. In intellectual terms, the Cold War years of the 1950s were dominated in the West by social reformist ways of thinking: Keynesian in economics, democratic in politics, new liberal in basic values; and for a while it did genuinely appear that only the anachronistic remained marxist, only the reactionary remained conservative. But with the decay of social and political stability in the West after 1968 – with the American defeat in Vietnam, student and worker protest in Western Europe, and generalized world recession after 1973 – a revitalized marxism began to appeal once more to a new generation of intellectuals, and liberal critiques of managed capitalism became respectable again in academic circles for the first time since the war. All of which merely served to demonstrate the tenacity of our four traditions of thought within twentieth-century social science; and to make clear the way in which the importance of any one tradition rose and fell with circumstances: with the coming and going of war and peace, poverty and prosperity, consensus and conflict.

Yet even when we recognize this general presence of the traditions within social science, we need a sense too of their differential impact on each discipline. To do that, this time we will start with psychology, and then work back through the other disciplines in turn.

As we have now seen, 'psychology, in the sense of reflection upon the nature and activities of mind, is a very ancient discipline' (Murphy, 1967, p.x). Psychology as a specialized academic discipline, however, is not. Only in the last hundred years have university departments of psychology proliferated, and recognizable spheres of applied psychology (educational, industrial, clinical, criminal) come into existence. The centre of gravity of modern psychology is experimental, not philosophical. Its contemporary concerns derive as much from its origins in the biological sciences, and from its involvement in research projects, as from its connections to western traditions of thought; and the scale of research activity by professional psychologists now is such as to give the discipline its own internal history and set of concerns. Yet many of those projects – particularly in the field of applied psychology – do take up the concerns of social reformism; and histories of modern psychology still tend to start, as we did, with the intellectual rediscovery of Greece and Rome in the Renaissance, and with the writings on human nature, the human mind and human knowledge of important early liberal thinkers – particularly Hobbes and Locke. For modern psychology is still exploring, among other things, a range of questions that we have met before: Is the mind a blank space to be filled by sense data, as Locke argued? Is human action driven by the power to reason, as liberal thought suggested; or do non-rational processes play a major or even a determining role in human thought and action? Is human nature heavily conditioned by environmental forces: by education and social circumstances, as Bentham and Mill believed; or even by the alienating experience of a class-divided society, as marxism would imply? Or do such views ignore innate, irrevocable dimensions of human personality and character that are fixed by natural forces beyond our control, as conservative modes of thought might suggest?

The concerns of social psychology stretch out to encompass questions of culture and self-definition, and on this interface to coincide with the interests of sociology as a discipline. Liberal thought did not place great emphasis on the role of ideas
in social stability and change; but each of the other traditions has had important things to say on the origins and social consequences of ideas. Conservative thought has long recognized the importance of traditional systems of belief as guarantors of social order; and by the 1950s a conservative sociology was in place that treated societies as 'normatively integrated' — held together by shared sets of understandings and values. Intellectuals within the tradition of social reformism have been prepared to recognize that this integration could be a socially constructed one, reflective of power relationships within the society so stabilized. They have often talked of dominant value systems and of subordinate ones; and in doing so have come close to a Marxist notion of ruling ideologies as instruments of class power.

More generally, the emergence of sociology as an academic discipline towards the end of the nineteenth century coincided with the emergence of social reformism as a recognizably distinct tradition of thought. The impulse to analyse social problems in order to solve them inspired early pieces of sociological research (not least on the character and causes of poverty in industrial capitalism); whilst many of the major thinkers now listed as 'founding fathers' of sociology were 'new liberal' in their politics. Conservative concerns with social order, and their emphasis on traditional institutions as guarantors of social stability, also remain a major focus for sociology as a discipline, as does the social reformist and Marxist preoccupation with the character and pace of social change.

Economics as an academic discipline continues to give central importance to liberal-based interpretations of the market. Many modern economists would claim to be 'neo-classical' rather than 'classical' in their analyses of modern economies, and put both David Ricardo and Karl Marx into the classical camp (because of their acceptance of labour as the source of value and price). Contemporary economics prefers normally to approach the determination of the prices at which goods exchange by analysing the interplay of supply and demand, eschewing the labour theory of value in favour of theories that tie price-determination more closely to shifts in consumer preferences than 'classical' economics (of both a liberal and a Marxist kind) allowed. But in spite of this, neo-classical economics remains the main bearer of liberal ideas into twentieth-century social science, where they are challenged — if at all — only by a strong current of social reformist economics associated with John Maynard Keynes. There is no distinctly 'conservative' corpus of economic theory that is distinguishable from pro-market liberalism; and though there is a definite Marxist alternative to mainstream economics, it tends to be marginalized in most British and North American university departments, evident there only in the form of optional courses on radical economics.

Political science has long been shaped by the competing claims of the four traditions of thought discussed here. Much of contemporary political science is institutional in its focus, concerned with analysing the ways in which the machinery of government works; and these studies rarely trigger debate between the traditions. But political scientists are concerned too with how electorates behave, and how power is distributed in contemporary societies; and in those studies clear liberal, reformist, Marxist and conservative positions can be found.

And of course the other face of political science, and its older one indeed, involves the study of political theory. Hobbes, Locke, Bentham, Mill, Marx and Burke all occupy important places on the syllabus of degrees in political science: and their insights on state power still fuel an important contemporary debate on the character of modern state power.

Finally, the study of geography also shows clear signs of the presence of the four traditions of thought. Cartography and trade grew together; and the skills of the geographer were highlighted by exploration and imperial expansion in the nineteenth century and by the needs of war in the twentieth. When geography emerged as a university discipline in the UK after 1880, the bulk of its concerns were descriptive and historical, and the theoretical frameworks that emerged in the areas of social geography were either liberal or conservative in character. They drew heavily on liberal political economy, explaining the location of communities and economic activities as the products of rational calculations of an individualist kind; and to a lesser degree they drew on conservative interpretations of Darwin's theory of evolution to explain the extent to which geographical arrangements were determined by competitive struggles and natural selection. Though the bulk of academic work within university departments of geography remains largely empirical in focus, and eschews participation in wider intellectual debate, schools of welfare geography and radical geography have emerged recently: the first working 'within the framework of the existing economic and social system', the latter more openly committed to 'both revolutionary theory and revolutionary practice' (Holt-Jensen, 1980, p.72). So social reformist and Marxist ideas are represented in contemporary geography, as are ideas more obviously derived from liberal and conservative ways of thinking.

Summary

1. Contemporary disciplines in the social sciences are of recent origin, but the concerns of those disciplines are of much longer standing.

2. Social changes since the fifteenth century have shaped the agenda of social analysis in recognizable ways: stimulating the emergence of particular disciplines, and giving changing sets of concerns to successive generations of scholars, regardless of their discipline.

3. The dominance of particular traditions of thought within individual disciplines has reflected the ebb and flow of war and peace, poverty and prosperity, conflict and consensus.

4. It is possible to discern the presence of the four traditions in each of the individual disciplines in the social sciences: in psychology, sociology, economics, political science and geography.
4 The presence of the traditions in the society to be studied

We have now traced the emergence and character of four major traditions of social thought, and discussed their impact on twentieth-century social science. By way of pulling the argument together, it is worth noting in conclusion the twin presence of these bodies of thought in any social science course—not just in the categories and theories of social science which such courses use, but also in their subject matter. Since this can be a source of considerable confusion, it is worth clarifying this second ‘face’ of the traditions in the concluding section of this essay.

The four traditions of thought at which we have looked did more than influence the thinking of the social sciences. They also inspired political parties, influenced whole social movements, and left residues of their ways of thinking in popular culture and consciousness. Since social science now studies political parties, movements and culture, the bodies of thought therefore reappear as an object of study, as well as an influence on the way social objects (including themselves) are studied.

This is most obvious in the case of liberalism as a body of social thought. The new thinking of the nineteenth century—with its focus on the individual, its faith in science, its insistence on the gathering of empirical data, its association of freedom with the absence of state restraint, and its confidence in the desirability of capital and the efficiency of markets—this new thinking came to dominate every area of social life: first science, then economics, and then by 1850, in Britain at least, popular politics and culture too. By then, all other forms of social thought appeared to be in retreat before an onslaught of liberal ideology; and liberal connections (of freedom with lack of restraint, of the market with neutrality, and so on) entered popular consciousness in a very deep way. Indeed liberal ideas became so much the common sense of the age that it became difficult to recognize them as ideas at all. They were just common sense, the terms of reference within which the vast majority of late-Victorian public figures thought and spoke. The term ‘liberalism’ then became uncoupled from its own ideas-system, and was appropriated instead as the possession of one particular party—that formed in the 1860s under the leadership of Gladstone. To be a Liberal thereafter (and notice the capital ‘L’) begins to appear was to hold a political allegiance, and not just to subscribe to a particular way of analysing the world.

Yet in truth liberal ideas shaped the thinking of both the Conservative Party and later the Labour Party with which Gladstone’s Liberals clashed. Indeed the legacy of liberal thought, as we saw, was an ambiguous and contradictory one, involving both a faith in property and a commitment to the basic equality of people.

In party terms, that liberal legacy split organizationally after 1916, sending many pro-property Liberals off to the Conservative Party, and the more egalitarian-minded off to Labour. We thus need to distinguish the rise and fall of the Liberal Party from the more general rise and dissemination of liberal ideas in the society as a whole. In other words, if we are to grasp the importance of liberal ways of thinking, we need to extract liberal thought from the consequences of its own success. We need to drag it back from its status as the common sense of the late-Victorian age, and from its role as the inspirer of a major political party, and see it again as a body of thought—as one among many—which has influenced and continues to influence political parties and social movements of many kinds.

The problem of maintaining a clear distinction between traditions of thought and political parties is equally evident in the cases of conservatism and social reformism. Social reformism as a body of thought emerged alongside, not just social science, but also contemporary centre and centre-left political parties in advanced industrial societies. Its theories clearly inspired a kind of politics—moderate, reforming, humane—which came to dominate Western Europe for a generation after 1945. Tory ‘wets’, Liberals and Labourites all came to trace their politics from particular pieces of social science analysis—particularly from the wartime Beveridge Report and Keynes’s General Theory of 1936. So there is a very intimate connection between major pieces of social reformist thinking and certain forms of state action; and that connection is evident at many points.

Conservatism is more difficult, because of the longevity of the Conservative Party in England, and because of its flexibility on doctrine over time. But even here, once we grasp that flexibility, problems fall away. The Conservative Party since 1975 has been a fusion of old conservative values (of the kind laid out under ‘conservatism’ as a tradition of thought above) and of a revitalized liberalism of the Adam Smith variety. Indeed it is that fusion of two bodies of thought that both gives the clue to the nature of Conservative government in recent times, and demonstrates the value of first separating bodies of thought. Just reflect for a moment on this description of the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher:

Thatcherism brilliantly combines within a single political ideology an organic conservative emphasis on the values of tradition, family, monarchy, patriarchy, and nation with a neo-liberal emphasis on the gospel of the free market, the laws of supply and demand, the private economy, value for money, and the private sphere of the citizen against the ‘creeping socialist’ threats to liberty from an overweening state and an overextended state welfare system. The first, organic, half of this ideological formation draws directly on the ancient repertoire of conservatism; the second neo-liberal half derives, directly, from the free market and libertarian traditions of classical liberalism and political economy.

(Hall, 1986, p.67)

What we are seeing here is that bodies of thought exist at many levels in contemporary society. They exist as intellectual traditions, which is how we have looked at them in this essay; and because they do, we can use them as a storehouse of ideas, categories and approaches, to be drawn upon in our own exercise of
analysis. They also exist as political ideologies, as bodies of ideas associated with particular parties and social movements, spanning particular political and social programmes; and because they do, we can and will – where appropriate – analyse them as important forces in their own right, shaping the world in which we operate and which we are seeking to understand. But they also have a capacity to exist at the level of popular consciousness, to constitute key elements of what people take as axiomatic, as common sense; and they do this to the degree that political parties and social movements have managed, over a long period, to spread their ideologies so wide and deep in society that people almost lose their ability to see that they are subscribing to a coherent and particular body of theory at all. At this level, at the level of common sense, legacies of more than one intellectual tradition/political ideology will inevitably build up; and here too scholarship can be used, to isolate the components of dominant common sense, to trace the intellectual origins of those components, and to locate the historical processes by which this sedimentation takes place. The study of popular culture, that is, and of dominant ideologies, becomes one legitimate and important concern of social science; and to make that study, scholarship has to return to the intellectual traditions that underpin both culture and scholarship, to find a clear point from which to begin.

So traditions of thought need to be distinguished from the histories of the political activists who have used them; and that is nowhere more difficult for us to do – at this point in place and time – than when dealing with marxism. As with liberalism and its success, we need to recapture marxism from its past, though this time the overwhelming feature of that past that we need to recognize is the failure of marxism to out liberal ways of thinking in the West. Marxism emerged in England, written in the British Museum as an analysis of predominantly English capitalism; and offered to the Western European proletariat as an indigenous and revolutionary body of thought. Many socialists were attracted to it in the generation before World War I, and they competed, as marxists, with other reformist forms of socialism, and with other non-socialist bodies of thought, for the political loyalty of the emerging industrial proletariat. By 1914, in every labour movement from the United States to Imperial Russia and from Japan to Britain, the same debates between various currents of socialist and non-socialist thought went on. Yet, in the event, only in Russia in 1917 did a marxist-inspired political party take and retain power; and elsewhere in Europe marxists were defeated, normally by more moderate forms of socialism inspired by the ideas of social reform. That pattern of success and failure has shaped our exposure to marxism ever since.

After 1917, Russian marxists claimed to have built a workers’ state, and they appealed to revolutionary socialists elsewhere to give that state their prime loyalty. Marxists between the wars, organized in communist parties, did just that: building an association in the popular mind between the marxist and the foreign, and between marxism and loyalty to a foreign power, that has never gone away. In reality, the Russian revolution degenerated in its isolation from any sympathetic and equivalent revolutions in the more advanced West, and succumbed to the Stalinist terror; and marxism thus gathered an association with authoritarian rule,
have to evaluate them, by applying their precepts to case after case, and by probing for their internal coherence and for the comprehensiveness of their coverage.

And ultimately we have to decide if any of them constitutes an adequate framework for our own analysis of the contemporary world. Then, if we find none of them entirely satisfactory, we have eventually to match them with a new framework of our own. This process of *theoretical discovery, application and evaluation* will occupy part of your time throughout your studies. In one sense we are all still engaged on it, even those of us privileged enough to have had the luxury of years of study. It is certainly not a journey that anyone completes in the space of one course in the social sciences. But it is a journey which you can begin here; and we just hope that it will be a journey as full of insight and excitement for you as it continues to be for us.

**Summary**

1 Traditions of thought have a presence in the society they exist to explain: as ideologies, as political movements and as common sense.

2 This is most obvious in the case of liberalism, which inspired a major political party in the United Kingdom and influenced the parties that replaced it. Conservatism and social reformism have also attached themselves to particular parties. Marxism has had its own chequered history: being linked to the Soviet Union, to political tyranny, to economic backwardness, and to one half of the Cold War.

3 We need to separate the traditions of thought from the history of parties and ideologies, and to examine them afresh as sources for our own analysis of contemporary social realities.

**References**


