

The Making of the Modern World, Part I, 1450–1850

The world of 1450 was one steeped in long-standing traditions, with most cultures holding to religious and intellectual visions of unchanging human cycles. Though the peoples living in Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, and the Americas were largely or completely ignorant of one another, they all lived in societies that appeared fixed by God or the gods. All of these societies were agricultural, highly contingent on environmental factors, often within a single bad harvest of famine, rigidly hierarchical, barely literate or entirely lacking in a written culture, and mostly adhering to dogmatic religious beliefs not open to question. Most societies had childhood mortality rates of 50 percent, with the vast majority of the people on the planet lucky to make it to the age of forty and highly unlikely ever to travel more than twenty miles from their place of birth. A fifth-century peasant from nearly any place in the world would recognize key continuities in that same society one thousand years later. Few people questioned social structures or cultural ideas, and fewer still thought that the world would change until some divine figure brought this earthly cycle to a close.

But signs of change were evident, especially in Europe. Starting with the rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman texts, a vaguely defined series of cultural explorations called the Renaissance excited the continent's intellectuals. Even more significantly, in 1450, in the German city of Mainz, Johannes Gutenberg started publishing books using movable type. Few inventions so totally transformed the world as did the printing press. This collection begins in that pivotal year precisely because the printed book made its public appearance and changed everything. It was also in 1450 that a series of French military victories drove the English from their last holdings in France, setting the stage for the Battle of Castillon that effectively ended the Hundred Years' War. The following year, Cristoforo Colombo, known to history as Columbus, was born in the Italian city of Genoa. Across the Atlantic, the Inca consolidated their empire and begin work on their Andean citadel of Machu Picchu, while further north Moctezuma I led the Aztec people in creating the powerful Triple Alliance. And then in 1453 came a terrifying reminder to the people of Europe that failure to change could lead to the destruction of their way of life. In that year, the Muslim Turks captured Constantinople, putting an end to the thousand-year-old Christian Byzantine Empire.

As the fifteenth century proceeded, the culture of Europe came alive, shrugging off the slumber of centuries. Over the next four hundred years, the people of the western end of the Eurasian landmass changed the entire planet, conquering much of it and creating a culture that questioned every aspect of life, including the very perception of the Earth's place in the cosmos. Along the way, the Europeans launched highly significant political and social revolutions, altered the world's economic workings with the Industrial Revolution, spread their people and culture into the Western Hemisphere, destroyed numerous civilizations, and recorded everything possible in print form. Thus this collection.

Those living through these numerous transformations understood that their world was changing and sought to understand the causes and consequences of these rapid alterations. Often these authors feared the change around them, as with Edward Burrough, certain that dramatic transformations were portents of the coming of the Antichrist and the end of the world (Burrough, *A Measure of the Times* [1657]). Others embraced the new world, some in a purely celebratory fashion (Michael G. Mulhall, *The Progress of the World* [1880]) and others from a liberal reformist perspective

(John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy* [1848]). Defenders of the emerging status quo argued that increased economic inequality enhanced social change (William Graham Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* [1883]), while some critics of the emerging industrial world went so far as to call for complete social revolution (Karl Marx, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei* [1848]). Within the expanding diversity of opinion lay the simple fact that for the first time in history, humans sought to understand the nature of their world in every particular.

A significant aspect of this developing self-consciousness of change over time was the development of the field of history. The study of the past had never captured much attention, being largely the purview of amateur antiquarians such as Richard Verstegan in the sixteenth century or Thomas Madox in the early eighteenth century (Verstegan, *The Post of the World* [1576]; Madox, *The History and Antiquities of the Exchequer of the Kings of England, in Two Periods* [1711]). But starting in the late eighteenth century scholars turned their talents to the past, seeking more than just a compilation of dates and facts; they now sought to draw lessons from a close study of the world they had lost in order to understand the present. Numerous historians attained national and even international prominence: Christian Molbech in Denmark, Erik Gustaf Geijer in Sweden, Joachim Lelewel in Poland, Jules Michelet and François Mignet in France, Edward Gibbon and Thomas Carlyle in England, George Bancroft and William Prescott in the United States, and, most famously, Leopold von Ranke in Germany. The late nineteenth century witnessed the formation of a historical profession, with graduate programs and scholarly institutions that legitimated history as more than just an amateur pursuit for gentleman antiquarians.

This desire to understand one's own world accelerated through the nineteenth century, producing a continuous blizzard of books devoted to both the minutia and the sweeping overview. Starting in the seventeenth century, intellectuals refused to accept the world as it was and demanded explanations. Why did workers suffer from ill health? (Bernardino Ramazzini, *A Treatise of the Diseases of Tradesmen* [1705]). Why were so many common people dying from alcohol consumption? (Adam Holden, *The Trial of the Spirits* [1736]). Prominent scholars like Max Weber in Germany and Charles Francis Adams in the United States wanted to know what impact the new technology of the railroad had upon a nation (Weber, *Nationalität und Eisenbahn-Politik* [1876]; Adams, *Railroads: Their Origin and Problems* [1878]), while the scientist Wyndham Harding was more interested in what trains demonstrated about theories of velocity (*On the Resistances to Railway Trains at Different Velocities* [1846]). Was slavery moral? Granville Sharp said no (*A Representation of the Injustice and Dangerous Tendency of Tolerating Slavery* [1769]); John C. Calhoun said yes (*The Works of John C. Calhoun* [1853]); Thomas Jefferson said both yes and no (*Notes on the State of Virginia* [2nd American ed., 1794]). Did women have any rights independent of a man? Mary Wollstonecraft thought so (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* [1792]), but the writer Hannah More thought it best if women limited themselves to home and Bible. Was it possible for people to float above the surface of the planet? The Montgolfier brothers gave it a try and found that ascent was possible, though descent could be a bit tricky (*Description des expériences de la machine aérostatique de MM. de Montgolfier*, 1783). And in every country, people just wanted the numbers: how much wheat was grown, how much steel produced, how far is it between various towns and cities, what are the properties of a steam engine, and what statistics are available about any given country (*The Price of Wheat in Europe* [1850]; Frank Popplewell, *Some Modern Conditions and Recent Developments in Iron and Steel Production in America* [1906]; S. Augustus Mitchell, *Mitchell's Traveller's Guide through the United States* [1836]; Philipp Wirth, *Gemeinfassliche Darstellung der wesentlichsten Theile von Dampf-Maschinen* [1839]; *Documents statistiques sur la France* [1835]). People wanted answers, and by the nineteenth century there was

little resistance to asking nearly any question. Perhaps there was no greater difference between the traditional societies and the modern age than this willingness to question everything.

The Making of the Modern World focuses its attention on these vital centuries from a largely economic perspective, though with a broad social and intellectual reach. This project began with the work of two economists in the early twentieth century, Herbert Somerton Foxwell of Cambridge University in England and Edwin R. A. Seligman of Columbia University in the United States. Foxwell and Seligman set out independently to build extensive collections of books and other documents on the history of economic development from the mid-fifteenth century through 1850. Foxwell's efforts led to both the Goldsmiths' Library of Economic Literature at the University of London and the Kress Collection of Business and Economics at Harvard Business School, while Columbia University created the Seligman Library from the massive archive built over the years by Edwin Seligman. Taken together, these three collections would constitute the largest archives of economic history in the world, but would still represent only a fraction of the resources in *The Making of the Modern World* as a whole.

Including more than 61,000 books and 466 serials, *The Making of the Modern World* is the largest single collection of documents addressing the development of capitalism, the expansion of world trade, the acceleration of technological change, and the Industrial Revolution. But much more is addressed in these pages. The documents span a multiplicity of subjects. One may explore works on finance and economics, war and diplomacy, gender relations and family, theology and philosophy, crime and the justice system, art and music, and even narrower topics from specific places to prominent individuals, from fashion to coal production. These books come from countries throughout Europe and North America and were published in seventeen languages; though two-thirds of the collection is in English, there are thousands of texts in French, German, and Italian, with hundreds in other languages. The collection's easy-to-use search engine makes it possible to seek out information scattered throughout dozens of disparate texts at one time, allowing for thorough research of nearly every aspect of the modern world's development.

This collection also documents the most dramatic cultural shift of all: the normalization of change. Someone from the fifteenth century would have found almost nothing recognizable in the year 1900. Powerful nation-states, several of them republics or constitutional monarchies, had replaced weak fiefdoms, and Europe had extended its hegemony around the world. Some nations prized religious diversity and free speech, and where literacy had once been limited to a very few men, modern nations encouraged all their people to read, as books, magazines, and newspapers poured from the presses. Education had barely existed in 1450; now public schools were available to the children of all industrial nations. Isolation had broken down, as cables spanning the floor of the Atlantic Ocean made it possible for people in the Eastern Hemisphere to communicate quickly with those in the Western Hemisphere, telephone networks allowed people in distant cities to speak directly to one another, and a web of railroads spanned the European and North American continents. Slavery had officially ended across most of the globe, workers organized themselves into unions dedicated to protecting their interests, and in some countries women mobilized for equal rights. Feudal relations had given way to capitalism, and technological advances altered nearly every aspect of daily life. In the fifteenth century only brute physical force and wind power drove production, with agricultural implements little different from those used by the ancient Romans; now steam and coal sent fleets of steel ships racing across the world's oceans, powered enormous industrial plants, heated buildings, and drove farm machinery. Where the world had once been lit only by fire, now electric lights beat back the darkness in the homes, buildings, and streets of an

urban industrial world. And most significantly in 1900, the pace of change kept accelerating. Within three years humans would take to the skies in flying machines, within ten years automobiles would become a common sight, and within fourteen years weapons production would reach a lethality allowing a continent to tear itself apart in the most violent war yet known to man. Stasis had once been the accepted norm of humanity; by the turn of the twentieth century, as this collection clearly demonstrates, change had become the expected standard.

Suggested Readings

There is a vast library of books written on the development of the modern world. For general studies of the period covered by this collection, see:

Carter, James, and Richard Warren. *Forging the Modern World: A History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Ferguson, Niall. *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World*. New York: Penguin, 2009.

Heilbroner, Robert L. *The Worldly Philosophers: The Lives, Times and Ideas of the Great Economic Thinkers*. 7th ed. New York: Touchstone, 1999.

McClellan, James E., III, and Harold Dorn. *Science and Technology in World History: An Introduction*. 3rd ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015.

Neal, Larry, and Rondo Cameron. *A Concise Economic History of the World: From Paleolithic Times to the Present*. 5th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Pollard, Sidney. *Peaceful Conquest: The Industrialization of Europe, 1760–1970*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1981.

Wiesner-Hanks, Merry E. *Early Modern Europe, 1450–1789*. 2nd ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.