PROGRESS AND BARBARISM

CLIVE PONTING

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ABOUT THE BOOK

How has the world changed in the last century? As we look back across a hundred years of turbulence, Clive Ponting provides a major reassessment of what the twentieth century has meant to people throughout the world. Progress and Barbarism analyses the fundamental forces of population, industry and their consequences for the environment. It traces the rise and fall of empires, the impact of nationalism examines domestic politics from all political perspectives, and con-siders the darker side of history in the growing repressive power of states across the world and the most terrible of twentieth-century crimes-genocide. *Progress and Barbarism* is a provocative and challenging interpretation of twentieth-century history, combining a global sweep and an eye for detail and individual experiences.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clive Ponting is a Reader in the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Wales, Swansea. His *Green History of the World* was an international bestseller, and his revisionist biography of Churchill raised a storm of controversy. He is the author of *Armageddon*, an analysis of the Second World War, *The Pimlico History of the Twentieth Century*, *World History: A New Perspective* and *Thirteen Days: The Road to the First World War*.

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To Laura

who makes everything possible

PROGRESS AND BARBARISM

The World in the Twentieth Century

Clive Ponting

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

Part One

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

INTRODUCTION

ANY ATTEMPT to write the history of the world in the twentieth century raises two questions. First, how should it be structured? And, second, is a century a coherent period to study? It would be possible to write a history of the twentieth century on a strictly chronological basis, year by year, but that approach would not help us to understand how world history has been shaped over the last hundred years. It would also be possible to adopt a country-by-country or region-by-region approach, which would be more coherent than the first option, but would make it more difficult to identify the common themes, problems and forces that have affected all of the world without large amounts of repetition. This book adopts an alternative approach in order to identify the deeper economic, social and political forces operating within twentieth-century history. Each chapter, apart from the first and last, is an individual journey across the landscape of the twentieth century with its own starting and finishing points, and each visits different places en route. Some of the routes cross each other or look across the same landscape from different vantage points. Each chapter is relatively self-contained and could be read on its own, but as the reader progresses through the book the relationships between the various subjects will, I hope, become clearer. The journeys begin in Part Two with the fundamental social and economic factors, move on in Part Three to international

issues and then in Part Four to domestic politics. From the chapter headings it will be clear that there are major omissions, in particular cultural and religious themes. This was a conscious decision. The book is quite long enough already and even a cursory history of twentieth-century culture would be a massive undertaking and produce an even larger volume. I decided that, given both the constraints of space and research time, I would leave these areas to the experts.

All historians would accept that any attempt to divide up the constant flow of events is artificial and bound to produce problems. However, some would question whether the twentieth century is a self-contained period for historical study. Eric Hobsbawm, for example, has argued in favour of the so-called ‘Short Twentieth Century’, from 1914 to 1989. Adopting such a framework has certain unavoidable consequences, most important being its focus on European history. The outbreak of the First World War marked an important transition for some European states, but it had little impact in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Using 1989 as an end date similarly places too much importance on European history. Although the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War undoubtedly had global effects, the impact of these events outside Europe, North America and the then Soviet Union was surprisingly limited. In addition, using 1989 as an end date almost inevitably leads to an analysis in which the conflict between liberal democracy and Communism (or even a widely defined ‘socialism’) becomes the main feature of twentieth-century history. The problems with this approach are well illustrated by the arguments in Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History*. Contrary to his assertions, the near-universal adoption of capitalism in the 1990s did not bring history to a halt. It is impossible to reduce the complexities of world history in the twentieth century

simply to a conflict between two different economic and political systems. Concentrating on the struggle between these two world-views, important as it was for some states for part of the century, not only ignores vast areas of twentieth-century history and human experience but once again introduces a bias towards a European perspective. The ideas of both liberal capitalism and 'socialism'/'communism' emerged in Europe between the late eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries. They were both products of the European experience and way of thinking. From a global perspective their spread and influence were part of the general expansion of Europe and its dominance in the early twentieth century. The fact that one of them was eventually victorious tells us something about world history, but is very far from being the whole story.

A global economic viewpoint would produce a very different chronology from the 'Short Twentieth Century' of 1914–89. From this viewpoint 1914 is of little importance. Much more crucial would be the onset of the world depression between 1929 and 1931, with the collapse of commodity prices which were vital to Latin American, African and Asian economies, and which led to the destruction of nearly all the existing political systems across Latin America. In world economic terms 1989 is far less important than 1973, which marked the end of the economic 'Golden Age' that had begun in 1950, and with the collapse of the global financial system established after the Second World War. The sharp rise in oil prices was one of the factors that produced a return to the economic conditions typical of the rest of the century – low growth and high unemployment.

Finding a single chronological framework for world history is an almost impossible undertaking. Instead, this book is based on the assumption that, handled with care,

the twentieth century is a reasonable unit of historical analysis, although neither 1900 nor 2000 should be seen as marking significant transitions. Many of the chapters look back into the late nineteenth century to identify important trends in the early twentieth century and towards the end of Chapter 22 there is an attempt to isolate some of the key trends that are already shaping the early twenty-first century. Each chapter has a chronology suitable to its subject matter. Using the relatively 'neutral' chronological framework of a single century has the advantage of not forcing world history into a Procrustean bed suitable for the history of one geographical area or one type of history whether economic, military, diplomatic or any other variety.

Any attempt to describe the course of twentieth-century world history raises acute problems of terminology. Given the huge changes during the century – the apogee and decline of the colonial empires, and the rise and eventual collapse of the Soviet Union to name but two – it is important to use consistent labels which are applicable across the century. 'East' and 'West' really only existed for part of the Cold War era and the 'Third World' of 'under-developed' countries could only exist when there was a 'Second World' of Communist states. The more recent use of 'North' and 'South' is equally inexact, when the highly 'developed' economies of Australia and New Zealand are in the 'South' and numerous 'developing' ones exist north of the equator. So the organizing framework adopted and the terminology that flows from it are based on the 'world systems theory' developed by Immanuel Wallerstein. This historical approach argues that since the sixteenth century the world economy, the nature of the states in the world and the relationship between them have been moulded by two factors: the expansion of Europe and the creation of a world economy dominated by a few prosperous industrialized states. As a consequence the majority of

people in the world and most states have been subordinated to the minority who have wielded economic and political power.

This approach has not been adopted in a strongly theoretical or rigid way, but it does provide a framework that can be applied across the century. It sees the world as dominated by a core of industrialized, wealthy states in Western Europe and North America, which in the last third of the century were joined by Japan. The majority of people and states in the world formed the periphery, which was economically and politically dependent on the core. The periphery was largely confined to producing raw materials and food for the core, for much of the century large parts of it were colonial territories and even after formal independence the dependent relationship was little altered. Between these two areas (in an economic and political but not a geographical sense) was the semi-periphery, made up of the semi-industrialized, middle-income countries in three areas – Latin America, southern Europe and central and eastern Europe. Later in the century they were joined by some of the economies in other areas such as east Asia and the Middle East. The division of the world into three highly unequal parts was no so rigid that some countries could not change their position – Japan was the most notable example of such a development – but most did not. Over the course of the century the differences between the core and the periphery became greater, not smaller.

This economic structure was also broadly reflected in politics. Most democracies were found in the core states, many of those in the semi-periphery fluctuated between semi-democracy, democracy and dictatorships of various kinds. Apart from India, the states of the periphery were either colonies or dictatorships. From this perspective, the struggle between liberal capitalism and Communism could be seen as a highly flawed and failed attempt by parts of

the semi-periphery to find a different route to economic development in a situation where political and economic isolation meant few alternatives were available. The collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, and the equally important adoption of a semi-capitalist approach in China from the 1980s, did not change the fundamental structure of the world economy. History did not come to a full stop; it continued in a slightly different guise.

Within this general framework the book begins, after a survey of the world in 1900, with the economic forces that shaped the century: the unprecedented rise in population, the phenomenal increase in industrial production, the pace of technological advance, the impact of all these changes on the environment and the growing speed of globalization. It then considers how these changes affected different national economies. The last chapter in Part Two deals with the major social changes of the century, including the nature of work, literacy, urbanization, the changing position of women and aspects of leisure and crime. Part Three examines some of the major themes of international history – the great overseas empires that dominated the world in the first half of the century and their decline, the impact of nationalism, the changing balance of power globally and the nature of conflict in the twentieth century. Part Four considers themes in domestic history. It begins with the survival of traditional political structures and ideas and then looks at the only original twentieth-century 'philosophy' – fascism. Next it examines the varieties of the century's most common form of government – dictatorship. In Chapter 16, on revolution, the experiences of Mexico, Russia and China are compared. Chapters 17 and 18 deal with the important but minority experiences of democracy and social democracy. Chapters 19–21 are about the darker side of twentieth-century history – the growing power of

the state to repress (and in extreme cases slaughter) its own citizens, the growth and decline of racial discrimination, and, finally, the worst of the century's crimes – genocide. Chapter 22 examines the balance between the various trends over the course of the century and looks forward to likely developments in the early twenty-first century.

The reader may wonder why some important developments in the twentieth century are not given chapters of their own. For example, it is clear in retrospect that Walter Lippmann's assertion that the twentieth century would be 'The American Century' has been largely correct. For the last hundred years the United States has been the largest economic power and has, to varying degrees, dominated the world's power structure (both military and diplomatic). Many Americans, including some of its most important leaders, from Woodrow Wilson through Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman to Ronald Reagan, believed that the role of the United States was to illuminate the path for other states and peoples to follow. In practice, much of its history in the twentieth century was unique and bore little relation to that of even its fellow industrialized countries in the core let alone the majority of the world's population. Although engaged in numerous wars, its mainland territory was not invaded or even attacked. Internally, although wealthier than any other country, it was divided by the greatest disparity in wealth of any of the core states and by extensive racial discrimination. Its political system was unique. Like other states the history of the United States runs through many of the chapters, but given the book's overall structure it is not given special predominance.

Another theme found in many chapters is the decline of European power – the loss of empire, strategic decline compared with the United States and the Soviet Union and,

equally important, the loss of European self-confidence, which had been so apparent at the start of the century. In a wider context this decline is part of an even more fundamental trend – the revival of Asia and other areas which were subordinate to western Europe and North America in the first decades of the century. The first signs of this trend were visible at the start of the century with the Chinese nationalist Boxer movement, Filipino resistance to American conquest, growing Indian nationalism and the increasing power of Japan, demonstrated by its defeat of Russia in the war of 1904–5. By the early 1920s the revival was apparent in the Middle East with the emergence of the nationalist state in Turkey and growing opposition to the British in Egypt. After 1945, as the European empires collapsed, the United States was unable to extend its influence into areas that had not been controlled earlier by the Europeans. By the end of the century it was clear that this trend was of wider significance than just the decline of Europe. The first signs were emerging of an end to the 'Atlantic predominance' which had moulded world history for at least the previous 400 years. The countries surrounding the Pacific were increasing in importance and becoming the focus of the world economy. In the longest historical perspective, the most important date in the twentieth century will probably turn out to be 1949 when a reunified China was established with a strong government determined to bring about economic growth and reassert China's status as a major power. Until the seventeenth century China had been not just the largest state in the world but also the most prosperous and most technologically advanced. On current trends China will once again be the largest economy in the world by the second decade of the twenty-first century.

The book's major theme, and the one that gives it its title, is the struggle between progress and barbarism. For

the European and American elites at the start of the century their recent history had been one of almost unbroken progress. The phenomenal industrialization, urbanization and growing prosperity of the previous century fuelled a massive self-confidence about their position in the world and their ability (indeed right) to rule it. There seemed little reason to believe that their optimism was misplaced or that this progress would not continue throughout the twentieth century. The origin of these views lay deep within European history, in particular in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, and was linked to ideas of free trade, capitalism, the development of a rational science, continued technological improvement and the conquest of nature. Similarly, political developments – the end of absolutism and the development of limited government, liberal institutions, partial democracy and the nation state – all seemed successful and unproblematic. All of these European developments were seen as pointing the way for the rest of humanity.

Within twenty years these illusions lay shattered. The First World War and, more importantly, the collapse of the Russian, Austro-Hungarian and German empires in 1917–18 and the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in Russia, broke the mould of the old European order, which had survived from the nineteenth century. Already conservatives such as Winston Churchill were speaking of 'the terrible twentieth century'. Worse was to follow. The rise of fascism, Nazism and the repressive state in the Soviet Union were only the forerunners of the most dreadful war of the century, in which probably 85 million people died between 1939 and 1945. Six million of them died in the greatest crime of the century – the death camps and the Jewish holocaust. At the end of the war the Japanese were the first to suffer a nuclear attack. Although the world avoided a nuclear war during the remaining

decades of the century, tens of millions more died in numerous wars and almost as many at the hands of their own governments: in the 1970s at least a third of the population of Cambodia was killed by Pol Pot's government, which was driven by its Marxist 'philosophy' derived from Europe.

The unparalleled barbarity of these events was not an aberration from the mainstream of European development. The two most destructive political movements of the twentieth century – Communism and Nazism – had their origins deep in European history and ways of thinking. They were part of the much darker side of the European inheritance from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the nineteenth century. This period had also seen the development of intolerant revolutionary universalist ideas, increasingly divisive and exclusive nationalism, racism and social Darwinist views about the 'survival of the fittest' (in terms of classes, nations and races) and the right of the successful to rule and dominate others. Economic, scientific and technological progress made it easier to carry out these ideas. By the end of the twentieth century other aspects of the European inheritance were also being questioned increasingly. In particular, the view that scientific and technological advances automatically equalled 'progress' was in doubt because of their damaging social and environmental impacts.

However, the belief in progress was not entirely misplaced. The twentieth century witnessed the greatest ever expansion in industrial output, far beyond the wildest dreams of those alive in 1900. New technologies were to transform the lives of hundreds of millions of people – the car, the telephone, the gramophone, radio and, perhaps most important of all, electricity and all the subsidiary inventions which depended upon it. At the start of the century the first primitive aircraft were being built. By the

end hundreds of millions of people were flying around the globe every year. Other technologies were still unknown in 1900 – tape recording, television, plastics, photocopying, lasers, satellites, spaceflight and, most important of all, computers, semiconductors, robots and silicon chips.

For those able to afford the products of these new technologies the increase in their standard of living was phenomenal. Over the century everybody became wealthier (at least on average). The problem was that the world's wealth was unequally distributed. Twenty per cent of the world's population enjoyed 80 per cent of its wealth – perhaps the century's greatest barbarity. The overwhelming majority of humanity lived in abject poverty with few material possessions, subject to the continual threat of hunger and starvation and, frequently, war and civil conflict. During the twentieth century worldwide disparities in wealth became greater not smaller. For much of the century the United States, about 5 per cent of the world's people, consumed more than 30 per cent of its resources. Yet within the United States, the differences in wealth and social care were such that the people who lived in the inner cities (mainly blacks) had child mortality rates little better than the cities of the periphery. Chapter 22 attempts to assess the balance between progress and barbarism across the century.

As a world history this book adopts a world framework for each chapter and attempts to assess the varying impacts of various trends in different parts of the world. For some this may be an unsettling perspective and the conclusions that flow from it may be equally unfamiliar. Most readers will probably be educated, middle-class citizens living in the prosperous countries of Western Europe, North America and Australasia. Their experience and that of their families will not be typical of the majority of the world's population in the twentieth century. The most

common human experience was that of being a peasant anywhere outside the economically ‘developed’ countries, the largest single group in this category being the Chinese peasantry. The lives of all these people were ones of grinding poverty, trying to exist on a tiny piece of land or as landless labourers, with tedious work from an early age and little if any education, as well as the threats of starvation, war and civil war. Elsewhere conditions were often bleak – only a handful of states entirely escaped war, civil war or acute internal conflict on their territory. Although, for example, the states of western Europe were by world standards relatively pleasant places to live in the twentieth century (apart from the two World Wars) only a few hundred miles to the east conditions were very different.

People born in the Ukraine at the beginning of the century experienced the First World War and German occupation, followed by civil war, mass killings and widespread starvation by the time they were in their twenties. If they survived, they would then have faced the imposition of Soviet rule, the ruthless anti-kulak and collectivization drives, mass starvation on an unprecedented scale and the Stalinist terror. If they were still alive by 1941, they would then have suffered the most ruthless war of the century, forced labour, starvation and the ‘anti-partisan’ shootings of the second German occupation. If they served in the Soviet army, they would probably have been captured and died in appalling conditions in a German prisoner-of-war camp. If they were Jewish, they would either have been massacred by mobile killing squads or condemned to the horrors of the death camps. By 1944 many of those still alive would have been sent to Germany as slave labour. Those who remained faced war, the reimposition of Soviet rule, terror and possibly being sent to the Gulag. Anybody who survived until old

age would have suffered from the consequences of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

Any attempt to tell the story of the twentieth century has to face the fact that the chance of a relatively stable and prosperous life has been confined to a very small and lucky minority of the world's people.

This book is an attempt at interpretation and is mainly based, inevitably, on secondary sources. I have tried to learn from everything I have read, but only a few of these works have been listed as a guide to further reading. I decided not to burden the text with footnotes, which would have been endless. My aim has been to try and develop a different angle of vision through a comparative approach. Carl Burkhardt, the eminent Swiss nineteenth-century historian of the Renaissance in Italy, wrote that no historical view is possible without some organizing generalizations and principles, but that the same material in the hands of a different historian would produce different conclusions. My own organizing generalizations and principles will, I hope, become clear, but naturally I accept that other historians will produce very different interpretations of the twentieth century.

1 1900

THE IDEA of the twentieth century is a Western, Christian concept. For most of the world's people 1 January 1900 was not the start of a new century. For many 1 January was not even the start of a new year in their calendars. In China the calendar was still based on the emperor's reign, as it had been for at least two millennia. In the Muslim world the calendar started in the early seventh century of the Christian era. For Jews 1900 was the year 5661, in Thailand 2443 and according to one of the Hindu religious calendars it was the year 5002. Nine out of ten people in the world lived in the countryside as peasants. They had their own rituals and calendars which were often only vaguely based on the official version. Even the western world was not agreed about the calendar. Although purists might argue that the new century did not begin until 1 January 1901, there were differences over what calendar to use. Russia and Greece still kept to the Julian calendar, which was twelve days behind the commonly used Gregorian version and which led to many misunderstandings. The Russian shooting team, for example, arrived too late to take part in the 1908 Olympics in London because they forgot to allow for the different calendar. Russia finally abandoned the Julian calendar during the 1917 Revolution, Greece did so in 1923.

However, the idea of the twentieth century as a significant historical period is justified by the importance of

the states of western Europe and North America, not just in 1900, but throughout the century. By 1900 a process that had begun in the early sixteenth century with the expansion of Europe into other regions of the world was almost complete. Until the late eighteenth century there was little difference in the relative wealth of the different parts of the world; indeed, only a few centuries earlier China had been by far the wealthiest and most powerful state in the world. As late as 1800 about two-thirds of the world's industrial output was produced outside Europe and North America. However, the expansion of Europe and rapidly growing industrialization in western Europe and North America in the nineteenth century had produced a massively unequal world by the early twentieth century. It was a world in which a handful of states dominated a global economy, from which they obtained nearly all the benefits and in which they had gradually restructured the remaining economies and societies so that these were in dependent, subordinate positions. The dominant states also directly controlled a large part of the world as their colonies. For them the nineteenth century had been a period of immense technological, economic and social progress.

The best way to analyse the structure of the world in 1900, and throughout the twentieth century, is to divide it into three very unequal parts – the core, the semi-periphery and the periphery. In 1900, just four major states – the United States, Britain, Germany and France – dominated the core. Between them they had only one-eighth of the world's population, but they produced more than three-quarters of world's industrial output, provided the same proportion of its trade and even more of its foreign investment. They had changed greatly in the nineteenth century. From rural, agricultural societies dominated, in Europe, by a landed elite, they had been transformed into

industrial, mainly urban societies with a large working class and a developed infrastructure in which over 90 per cent of the population was literate and enjoyed a standard of living far in advance of the rest of the world. The United States was the most industrialized country in the world, with Britain close behind. The core states controlled over 400 million people (about a quarter of the world's population) directly in their colonies and hundreds of millions more indirectly, through their 'informal empires' of economic influence. Within the core there were also a number of smaller, less powerful, but still wealthy states, such as Belgium, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Sweden.

The semi-periphery was made up of three types of state. The first was in south and eastern Europe – Russia, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Austria-Hungary and the Balkan states. They were still largely agricultural, less wealthy and developed than the core states though often important militarily. Some, like Russia and Italy, appeared to be developing into economies and societies more like the core states, while others, such as Spain, appeared to be in decline. The second type of semi-peripheral state was found outside Europe – the European settlement colonies of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and parts of Latin America, such as Argentina and Uruguay. These were relatively prosperous societies with economies built on the export of primary products, in particular food, to the core states. They had varying degrees of political independence. The third type consisted of just one state – Japan. It was the only state to have escaped European political control and to have embarked on a process of industrialization. That process had not gone far by 1900 (industrial output per head was one-fifteenth of the level in the United States) but, although still overwhelmingly a rural nation, Japan was

already an important regional power capable of challenging the core powers in east Asia.

The overwhelming majority of the world (comprising nearly two-thirds of the world's people) constituted the periphery. Most of Asia and Africa had been divided up by the core states as colonies. Two major states were outside the control of the core – China and the Ottoman empire – but they were in what appeared to be terminal decline and it seemed unlikely that they could survive much longer as independent entities as core pressure on them mounted. Whatever its exact political status, all the periphery was overwhelmingly rural and nearly all its population were illiterate peasants condemned to short lives of grinding poverty. (Industrial output per head in India, one of the more developed peripheral economies, was at 1 per cent of the level in the United States.) Most of the peasants were largely self-sufficient and had little, if any, contact with the wider economy or core values, although colonial authorities everywhere were trying to force them into a money economy. Where they had succeeded peripheral economies were often dominated by a single crop – over 80 per cent of Egypt's exports was raw cotton – and this was the basis for the small modern sector of the economy. A few traders (often foreigners – Lebanese in West Africa, Indians in East and South Africa) and a small urban elite were linked to the culture of the core states (hence the huge opera house built deep in the Amazon jungle at Manaus, the centre of the rubber trade). Such 'development' as there was in the periphery was linked almost entirely to the needs of the core and was therefore highly unbalanced and localized. In Africa and Latin America the interior was linked to the coast in a few places by railways, but there were few, if any, cross-country links. In Brazil the railways in the north-east were a different gauge from those in the south (the coffee-growing area), and although there was a labour surplus in

the north it was easier for the coffee producers to attract immigrant labour from Europe. In Colombia it was cheaper to bring goods to Medellin from London than from the capital Bogotá, which, although it was only 200 miles away, was cut off by two mountain ranges.

During 1900 Paris was a major focus of attention in the core states – the Universal Exposition opened on 15 April and attracted 48 million visitors. Three weeks earlier one event seemed to symbolize the industrial power of the core states and the emerging new technology of electricity. Two 275-foot-high chimneys, garlanded in flowers, let out the first smoke from 92 boilers, which drove turbines producing 40,000 horse-power of electricity to power the Exposition: the machines, a train, a 'moving staircase', and a great wheel with 80 cabins. Another major technological achievement took place a few hundred miles to the east. Internal combustion engines had only just begun to power cars (there were only 8,000 vehicles in the whole of the United States), but on 2 July the first Zeppelin airship took off from the German side of Lake Constance for a twenty-minute flight, during which it climbed to nearly a thousand feet. It was clear that aircraft would be flying soon as the power-to-weight ratio of petrol engines steadily increased.

Although the core states were the most advanced in the world industrially, they still had major social problems. At least a third of their populations lived in poverty, often on the margins of subsistence, in poor housing and social conditions. In Britain, the most industrialized country in the world, the census defined 'over-crowded' as a household of at least 2 adults and 4 children living in 2 rooms without their own water supply and sanitation. Even by this restrictive definition 8 per cent of the population were officially designated as being overcrowded and in the areas of the greatest deprivation the figure was far higher: in London the average was 16 per cent, in Glasgow it was 55

per cent and in Dundee it was 63 per cent. On 24 August a Dr Thomas Colvin was called to a family living in one room of a tenement block in Glasgow. One person was already dead and three others were seriously ill with what he thought was enteric fever. The next day the local Belvedere Hospital discovered that they were actually suffering from bubonic plague. Public health measures were able to contain the outbreak, but not before there were 27 cases, half of whom died. At the same time the British army was trying to find recruits for the war against the Boers in South Africa. In Manchester 11,000 men volunteered – all but 1,000 of them were rejected as medically unfit.

For the political, social and intellectual elites in the core states, these social conditions were only one of a series of problems they felt their states and societies had to face. The set of assumptions and opinions they brought to these problems and the solutions they suggested tell us much about the vital trends that were to influence much of the twentieth century. From the eighteenth-century Enlightenment they inherited the idea of progress. In 1793 the Marquis de Condorcet published his *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*. It was a statement of his belief in the unlimited scope for human progress:

> The perfectibility of man is truly indefinite; and that the progress of this perfectibility, from now onwards independent of any power that might wish to halt it, has no limit than the duration of the globe upon which nature has cast us . . . this progress . . . will never be reversed as long as the earth occupies its present place in the system of the universe.

Had Condorcet known that he was to die the next year in jail during the period of terror in the French Revolution he might have taken a less sanguine view of human nature and

history. The great eighteenth-century historian Edward Gibbon took a similar view. Although he thought that history was ‘little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind’, towards the end of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* he set out his belief in future progress:

> The experience of four thousand years should enlarge our hopes and diminish our apprehensions: we cannot determine to what height the human species may aspire in their advances towards perfection; but it may safely be assumed that no people, unless the force of nature is changed, will relapse into their original barbarism.

These ideas remained common throughout the nineteenth century. In 1875 *Larousse*’s entry for ‘Progress’ stated:

> Humanity is perfectible and it moves incessantly from less good to better, from ignorance to science, from barbarism to civilization . . . The idea that humanity becomes day by day better and happier is particularly dear to our century. Faith in the law of progress is the true faith of our century.

In 1883 the British historian J. R. Seeley wrote in *The Expansion of England*, ‘No one can long study history without being haunted by the idea of development, of progress.’ That most nineteenth-century belief – Marxism – was based on the idea of progress, with the inevitable march of human society from feudalism to capitalism and finally to the material abundance and social harmony of Communism. The idea of progress seemed to be enshrined in the growing scientific, technical and industrial advance of western Europe and the United States. The century saw the development of steam power, the production of iron and steel, the construction of railways, steamships and new

forms of communication. By the end of the century newer technologies, in particular electricity, seemed to point the way to even greater progress. Such progress seemed to legitimate the right of Europeans and Americans to rule the rest of the world.

However, it was the beliefs developed in western Europe in the later half of the nineteenth century, such as Marxism and racism, together with those based on long-standing prejudices, such as anti-Semitism, which produced some of the greatest barbarisms of the twentieth century. By the early part of the century it was possible to detect a much darker set of beliefs among the elite of the core states, which existed alongside their belief in progress and their own superiority. It was made up of a number of elements – social Darwinism, eugenics, racism and the fear of degeneration. Social Darwinism marked the final scientific acceptance of Charles Darwin's ideas, published in *The Origin of Species* in 1859 but transformed, mainly by Herbert Spencer and, in Germany, by the zoologist Ernst Haeckel, into a theory about how human societies function. Human life was seen as a struggle for existence in which only the fittest survived – this applied not just to individuals but also to the competition between states. In many ways this doctrine provided a pseudo-scientific justification for the reassertion of power by the old ruling class (the fittest, since they had risen to the top of society), for elitism rather than democracy, and for failing to intervene to save the weakest in society since this could only damage the overall health of the organism. One of the best statements of these beliefs came from Karl Pearson, later a professor at the University of London, in *National Life from the Standpoint of Science* published in 1901:

> the scientific view of the nation is that of the organised whole, kept up to a pitch of internal efficiency by