Chapter 10

Conclusion

The Enlightenment as an intellectual movement is commonly taken to end with Kant. The early modern political and social world that Enlightenment thought arose out of and theorized about was disrupted and transformed by the American, Haitian, and, especially, French Revolutions. By the time self-conscious and self-identified *liberal* political thought and political parties coalesced in the era after the Napoleonic wars had ended, the problems faced in politics seemed very different. States became much more powerful and centralized under the force of wartime military competition. Religious persecution and censorship and the power of absolute kings faded by comparison with the rise of nationalism and worries about the kind of violent, mob rule seen in France during 1793 and 1794. A generalized commitment to constitutional government or republicanism gave way to complicated institutional questions about how much to democratize government, how quickly: how much of a society could take part in voting and elections at any given level of economic and educational development without risk of revolution.

The economic world was transformed by changes that began in the late eighteenth century. But the effects of this transformation took time to build. This observation is especially true for the first stage of the Industrial Revolution. This first stage included a tremendous increase in the efficient productive capacity in the economies that had been thought of as "commercial societies," which by the mid-1800s came to be called "capitalist." This rapid economic change also brought new political problems to the fore. Debates about individual free speech and keeping the press free from state and church censorship were supplemented by, if not replaced by, concerns about social conformism arising from the force of public opinion in increasingly equal societies; eccentricity and individuality, it came to be feared, were luxuries

of aristocrats who didn't have to worry about what their neighbours thought of them.

The work of thinkers such as the Swiss-born French Benjamin Constant (1767-1830), the French Germaine de Staël (1766-1817) and Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-59), and the English John Stuart Mill (1806-73)—all of whom were active in liberal politics and government as well as in theoretical writing—was concerned with questions like these. Their ideas lacked the confident optimism of much of Enlightenment thought; the Kantian hope that humanity might be on the verge of an intellectual and moral "emergence from self-incurred immaturity" was replaced with a keen awareness that even desirable social changes could have serious if not catastrophic side effects.

Moreover, after the intellectual era that spanned Kant, Adam Smith (1723-90), and Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), the more or less unified domain of human social inquiry that the Enlightenment thinkers inhabited, fragmented. Smith's work helped to create a separate field of inquiry of political economy or, simply, economics. Bentham was the founder of the philosophical and political doctrine known as *utilitarianism*. This doctrine evaluated the goodness of actions only in terms of their calculable consequences, which had the result of expelling moral questions from self-consciously social scientific inquiry. Kant, then, through his work, helped to remove moral philosophy from engagement with the social world. Thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries might make contributions to the moral theory of rights, or the economic understanding of free markets, or the study of the political effects of expanding suffrage, but more and more rarely could try to do several of those things at once, as their Enlightenment predecessors had done.

But the full-fledged liberalism of nineteenth and twentieth century political thought nonetheless grew out of those Enlightenment roots. The idea of a republican constitutional form of government under the rule of law and grounded in social contract legitimacy and the ultimate sovereignty of the whole people—ideas that ran through the era from Spinoza to Kant—took institutional form in the practices of constitution writing and ratification developed in the new United States of America during and after its revolution. Those new written constitutional founding documents also included an explicit enshrinement of Montesquieu's understanding of a separation of powers and, often, explicit commitments to rights of religious liberty, freedom of belief, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press, rights that drew

support from the foundational commitments to free thought and free inquiry in Spinoza and Kant. That package of constitutional practices was imported into France in the early stages of its Revolution, and spread from there. By the early-to-mid 19th century, liberal political movements routinely demanded such constitutions, first as a way to prevent a return to royal absolutism, and later as a way to channel and limit increasingly democratic governments.

Even beyond constitutional texts and forms of government, liberal politics and political thought were marked by particularly deep commitments to the rule of law and to those rights of free belief and debate, principles that we have seen developed through the three Enlightenment thinkers in this book. There are some differences in their legacies beyond that. In Mill's concern with individuality against social conformity, we hear an echo of Kant's *saper aude! Think for yourself!* The increasingly non-negotiable demand that legitimate states rest on some form of sovereignty of the whole people—a demand that in the nineteenth century animated nationalist and democratic as well as liberal politics, and movements that overlapped these ideas—has complicated roots that include Spinoza's thought. Tocqueville and Constant both explicitly drew on Montesquieu in developing their critiques of state centralization and their defenses of local and associational pluralism. And, although support for free trade was increasingly offered in the language of economics that derived from Smith, Montesquieu's theory of international commerce as a source for peace had lasting influence here too, an influence that endured until World War I in the twentieth century. The political ideas and movements that came to be identified as liberal (or, later, as "classical liberal") may have responded to a social world that came after the Enlightenment. But they did so using ideas, beliefs, and principles the Enlightenment thinkers left behind.