Modern Life: Crash Course European History #30

Crash Course: European History
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===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

Hi, I'm John Green and this is Crash Course: European History. So, we've come a long way. Electric powered streetcars, gas lighting of urban avenues, crowded railway hubs, vast outdoor cafes, workers in their Sunday best strolling through parks and along broad new boulevards, all of this signaled the arrival of modern life in European cities, and those cities swelled because of massive internal migration from rural areas to capitals such as Berlin, which grew to over 4 million people by the end of the 19th century. Today, we're covering the leap to modern life and what exactly "modern life" meant, and as we've seen so many times in our study of history, what it meant depends upon perspective, both for those living in 19th century Europe and for those of us looking back on it today.

(Intro)

In 1885, German engineer Karl Benz invented an internal combustion engine and six years later, French manufacturer Armand Peugeot produced a functioning automobile, bringing further speed to everyday life in cities. Initially, doctors and their far-flung patients were the people who benefited most from these new cars while bicycles gave ordinary people a newfound sense of freedom and adventure, and also an opportunity to break their wrists, and alongside revolutions in transportation and lighting and many others, there was also a chemical revolution taking place around 1900, which led to synthetic drugs like German pharmaceutical company Bayer produced the first aspirin to help alleviate pain.

Did the globe just open? It says right here on this bottle of Bayer aspirin, #notspon, "the wonder drug" and it really is. So before aspirin, pain was treated primarily with opioids like morphine and codeine, but aspirin differed from opioids in many important ways. For one thing, it wasn't addictive but also it reduced fevers and inflammation.

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But what's most amazing about aspirin is even though it was one of the first synthetic drugs, it's still super useful. It is an effective pain reliever, even 120 years later. Okay, let's turn our attention to the big trends of early 20th century Europe.

So, across Europe, populations continued to grow despite the immigration to distant continents that we talked about last time, but populations weren't going up because people were having more babies. In fact, the opposite was true. Europe experienced a birth control revolution between 1880 and 1930. With very few regional exceptions, in that 50 year period, fertility rates dropped some 50% because knowledge of birth control expanded thanks to a few occurences, better understanding of women's ovulatory cycles, the vulcanization of rubber used in condoms, and the invention of the cervical cap or diaphragm, but populations rose due to lower child mortality and increased longevity. Breakthroughs like pasteurization and greater understanding of germs were just two scientific findings that helped extend life. There was also better sanitation, such as improved sewage systems, which made people less likely to die of diseases like cholera, which had ravaged European cities repeatedly in the 18th and early 19th centuries.

But still, this decline in fertility gave politicians an issue that they could use to get votes: women, they claimed, were conducting a "birth strike" which would lead to a decline in the national strength. It was true that womens' lives were changing as a modern woman began forging her own way outside the confines of the household. Working women had already been laboring long hours for low wages, but now middle class women, supposedly too fragile and ignorant of the world to work, began to take jobs.

As industry, communications, marketing, and needed skills became more complex, women took jobs in the new service sector. They became secretaries or sales clerks or telephone and telegraph operators or teachers or nurses, and they had the skills necessary to do these jobs, thanks to the spreading system of public schools, which taught literacy and basic mathematics.

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If you want to look for a single cause of why life is better today than it was 50 or 200 or 500 or 800 years ago, public schools! But despite gains in access to education and employment, women were employed in the service sector because they could be paid less, since they were seen as inferior and not as skilled as men. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Obviously the reputation women had for being inferior and less skilled was false. For instance, women entered universities in the sciences and math, which were open to them in part because at the time, they were less prestigious and lucrative than the Latin and Greek based humanities dominated by men. Polish-born Marie Sklodowska Curie was one of these new scientific women, although the French Academy of Science would not grant her membership even after she'd won two Nobel Prizes, one for Physics and a second for Chemistry, making her the first person to win a Prize in different fields.

It was widely believed that because she was a woman, her husband Pierre must have done the work for her, but for the record, Pierre Curie had been dead for five years when Marie won her second Nobel. She coined the term 'radioactivity' and discovered two new chemical elements, polonium and radium. She also helped pioneer radiation treatment for cancer before dying due to the high exposure to radiation she experienced through her research.

So-called modern women like Curie challenged the established belief in womens' incompetence and professional inferiority although the myth prevailed. In fact, it remains powerful today moreso in the United States than in most other wealthy countries, as measured by UN and OECD statistics. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So changes in sexuality accompanied the rise of modern women, and this led to massive scandals and the creation of a new political tool whereby politicans sought support by haranguing the mostly male electorate about sin and the purpotedly declining morals of the age as exemplified by the rise of women, and the fact that the male electorate was growing was another sign of modern life, indicating the development of so-called 'mass society' which broadened the number of people who had power and somewhat diluted the power of elites.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

Inventions like cheaper newsprint also facilitated mass society because more people had access to more information, but then as now, the amount of information available was increasing but not always the quality of that information, also then as now. Sex scandals were big news. Both true and fabricated stories abounded. For example, successful author Oscar Wilde was imprisoned and widely condemned because of his relationship with a young man. In members of the German Kaiser's entourage, meanwhile, higher ranking generals and other aristocrats were found to be regularly cross-dressing and engaging in male-male relationships. The press dramatized that scandal so much that royal publicists had to reassure the German public that the Kaiser himself had a "healthy family life", code at the time for heterosexuality.

In 1902, Friedrich Alfred Krupp, the owner of the famed arms manufacturer, committed suicide when the press revealed his relationships with young Italian men and politicians spoke often of a crisis of male virility, much of it caused by "new women". In short, there's nothing like, innovative about harkening back to an age of "traditional values" that never actually existed.

It was true that women had been making demands for change through the 19th century. They wanted legal ownership of their wages and other property and access to higher education. Increasingly, young women could enter universities and even rank higher than men in exams, but places like Oxford and Cambridge would not grant them degrees. Cambridge didn't until after World War II.

Women also wanted the right to divorce and to have custody of their children after divorce. By law, custody of children went to the father because children were considered his property. By the early 20th century, feminist movements had developed across the globe and included an extremely diverse group of activists.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

In Europe, some organizations had begun with interest in the abolition of slavery, while others had greater concern for the situation of women working in factories or other low-wage conditions, including their health, access to good jobs, and personal safety. Many pro-women advocates were also in favor of temperance, given the prevalence of domestic abuse that so often accompanied drunkenness. Other groups lobbied to end laws denying prostitutes their civil rights. In many countries, from Britain and France to Austria-Hungary, police could and did arrest and incarcerate women found on the street and then subject them gynecological exams on the grounds that they might be prostitutes.

Austrian activist Marianne Hainisch defined feminist broadly as the "call of one half of humanity for its civil rights," but others saw feminism's goal as uplifting humanity as a whole because it was a diverse movement without one single narrative, so feminists literally hundreds of thousands of them by the end of the 19th century, were seeking to address a broad range of issues, which makes sense, of course, because women, depending on class and race and experience and profession, were oppressed in a broad range of ways.

Some viewed the feminist movement as an entirely middle class project that was unconcerned with working women, but in fact, working women such as those from the textile mills in Northern England also campaigned as feminists. Other working women wanted unions to be more active in supporting women, while others wanted the social democratic parties to do more for them, but although women did operate within labor movements, union men were generally opposed to women having jobs in their industries because their presence would drag down wages.

Social democratic parties at the time usually took the Marxist position, that middle class feminists were the enemy of working women and that the eventual overthrow of the industrial owners by working class people would lead to the liberation of women alongside the liberation of everyone else. Marxists argued that the private property upon which capitalism was based necessarily led to the oppression and regulation of women, so once capitalism had been destroyed, freedom would naturally follow.

===== (10:00) to (12:00) =====

Gradually, feminist activists did begin to achieve gains under laws throughout much of Europe, but one aspect of citizenship long eluded them: the right to vote. In England, philosopher John Stuart Mill, a classical liberal interested in principles of personal freedom, spoke in Parliament on behalf of women suffrage as early as 1866, but that initiative went nowhere and across Europe, other efforts to gain the vote were thwarted as well.

Mill went on to publish on the subjection of women in 1869, which drew on the ideas of his wife, Harriet Taylor Mill, and became one of the most translated books of its day, but again, the actual vote for women was very slow in coming. In 1897, New Zealand granted women's suffrage. In 1902, Australia did, and in 1906, Finland became the first European country where women could vote. Norway followed in 1913, and I know it's easy to forget just how recently that was, but context, both of my grandmothers were born before women who didn't own property could vote in Great Britain.

In Britain, a group of women led by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Sylvia and Christabel decided to take forceful action, so in 1903, they founded the women's social and political union, which sponsored mass mobilization in which thousands of women would parade through the streets. The reaction was brutal, as men attacked the marchers, grabbing and twisting their breasts and generally assaulting them. Other feminist non-violent protests included chaining themselves to the gates of Parliament and refusing to eat when imprisoned for their actions. Authorities then used the brutal tactic of force feeding those on hunger strikes, and alongside those non-violent activities, feminists also blew up mailboxes and slashed works of art in galleries and museums and broke store windows with hammers, all of this because for men, it's only property they love.

===== (12:00) to (14:00) =====

In 1913, militant suffragist Emily Wilding Davison cast herself in front of the King's horse at a horse race and was killed, and so a lot of what we think of as contemporary protest tactics have their roots in feminist movements. Misogynists struck back against these protests, of course. In Austria, men declared that feminists had been corrupted by "crude dark men of the lower races", combining racism with misogyny, which as long been a tactic for dehumanization. Feminists were also portrayed as oversexed and unable to appreciate the "refined sexuality" of the "heroic white races". These people argued that for gender order and thus political stability to be maintained, a man needed a woman who looks up to his intellectual superiority and wishes to do nothing but subordinate herself.

Womens' hands, the prime minister of Italy said in the 1890s, were not meant for voting, but for kissing. So okay, let's go back to the question we asked at the beginning. How do we characterize the term "modern life"? Some maintain that technology is the key ingredient while others say there have been technological advances across the millennia. Some point to urbanization or changes in the role of women or the control over reproduction that appeared across Europe by 1900.

I revealed my own bias in this episode by talking about the modern practice of public funding for education. Still others note that the idea of "modern" has been used for many centuries. The Roman historian Tacitus, for instance, born in the first century BCE was happy to have lived in modern times, and so maybe modern is just a term to positively compare one's own times to other places and periods in history, and in that sense, to call one society modern is mostly just propaganda. All of that leaves me wondering what makes our contemporary world feel modern, and to what extent modernity is a judgment on ourselves and otehrs. What does modern mean to you and who is included in that definition of modern and who is excluded by it?

===== (14:00) to (14:33) =====

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.

Crash Course is filmed here in the Jaden Smith Studios in Indianapolis. Thank you to Jaden Smith and indeed all of our Patrons at Patreon.com/crashcourse. We've got lots of other Crash Courses, including one about Artificial Intelligence that is absolutely fascinating. Thanks again for watching, and as they say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome.

(Endscreen/Credits)