

THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF  
MODERN EUROPEAN THOUGHT

\*  
VOLUME I:  
The Nineteenth Century

This first volume of *The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought* surveys late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European intellectual history, focusing on the profound impact of the Enlightenment on European intellectual life. Spanning twenty chapters, it covers figures such as Kant, Hegel, Wollstonecraft, and Darwin, major political and intellectual movements such as Romanticism, Socialism, Liberalism, and Feminism, and schools of thought such as Historicism, Philology, and Decadence. Renouncing a single “master narrative” of European thought across the period, Warren Breckman and Peter E. Gordon establish a formidable new multi-faceted vision of European intellectual history for the global modern age.

WARREN BRECKMAN is the Sheldon and Lucy Hackney Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania, where he has taught since 1995. He is the author of *Marx, the Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory* (1999), *European Romanticism: A Brief History with Documents* (2008), and *Adventures of the Symbolic: Postmarxism and Radical Democracy* (2013). He served as co-editor of the *Journal of the History of Ideas* (2006–2016), and co-edited the volume *The Modernist Imagination: Essays in Intellectual History and Critical Theory* (2008), also with Peter E. Gordon.

PETER E. GORDON is Amabel B. James Professor of History at Harvard University. He is a resident faculty member at Harvard’s Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies, and has held fellowships from the Princeton Society of Fellows and the Davis Center at Princeton University. He is the award-winning author of *Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy* (2003), *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (2010), and *Adorno and Existence* (2016) and co-editor of several books, including *The Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School*, with Espen Hammer and Axel Honneth (2018).

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MODERN EUROPEAN THOUGHT

*The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought* is an authoritative and comprehensive exploration of the themes, thinkers, and movements that shaped our intellectual world from the late eighteenth century to the present. Representing both individual figures and the contexts within which they developed their ideas, this two-volume history is rich with original interpretive insight, and is written in a clear and accessible style by leading scholars in the field.

Renouncing a single “master narrative” of European thought across the period, Warren Breckman and Peter E. Gordon establish a formidable new multi-faceted vision of European intellectual history for the global modern age.

VOLUME I

*The Nineteenth Century*

EDITED BY WARREN BRECKMAN AND PETER E. GORDON

VOLUME II

*The Twentieth Century*

EDITED BY PETER E. GORDON AND WARREN BRECKMAN

THE CAMBRIDGE  
HISTORY OF  
MODERN EUROPEAN THOUGHT

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VOLUME I  
The Nineteenth Century

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*Edited by*  
WARREN BRECKMAN  
*University of Pennsylvania*  
PETER E. GORDON  
*Harvard University*



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## Contributors

NAOMI J. ANDREWS is Associate Professor of History at Santa Clara University. She is the author of *Socialism's Muse: Gender in the Intellectual Landscape of French Romantic Socialism* (Lexington, 2006). Her recent work includes "Breaking the Ties: French Romantic Socialism and the Critique of Liberal Slave Emancipation," *Journal of Modern History* (2013) and "The Romantic Socialist Origins of Humanitarianism," *Modern Intellectual History* (2019).

TUSKA BENES is Associate Professor of History at The College of William & Mary. She is the author of *In Babel's Shadow: Language, Philology, and the Nation in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Wayne State University Press, 2008).

ERICA BENNER was formerly Fellow in Political Philosophy at Yale University and currently lives in Berlin. Her books include *Really Existing Nationalisms* (Oxford University Press, 1995; Verso, 2018) and *Machiavelli's Ethics* (Princeton University Press, 2009).

FRANCESCO BOLDIZZONI is Professor of Political Science at the University of Helsinki. He is the author of *Means and Ends: The Idea of Capital in the West, 1500–1970* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and *The Poverty of Clio: Resurrecting Economic History* (Princeton University Press, 2011).

WARREN BRECKMAN is the Sheldon and Lucy Hackney Professor of Modern European Intellectual History at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Marx, the Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory: Dethroning the Self* (Cambridge University Press, 1998) and *Adventures of the Symbolic: Postmarxism and Radical Democracy* (Columbia University Press, 2013), and he was the executive co-editor of *Journal of the History of Ideas* from 2006 to 2016.



*List of Contributors*

CHRISTIAN J. EMDEN is Professor of German Intellectual History and Political Thought and Chair of the Department of Classical and European Studies at Rice University. Among his publications are *Nietzsche's Naturalism: Philosophy and the Life Sciences in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2014) and *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

DAVID FERGUSSON is Professor of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh. He is the author of *The Providence of God: A Polyphonic Approach* (Cambridge University Press, 2018) and editor of the *Blackwell Companion to Nineteenth-Century Theology* (Blackwell, 2010).

MARY GLUCK is Professor of History and Judaic Studies at Brown University. She is the author of *The Invisible Jewish Budapest: Metropolitan Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2016) and *Popular Bohemia: Modernism and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Harvard University Press, 2005).

PETER E. GORDON is Amabel B. James Professor of History and Faculty Affiliate in the Department of Philosophy at Harvard University. His more recent books include *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Harvard University Press, 2010) and *Adorno and Existence* (Harvard University Press, 2016).

NICHOLAS HALMI is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Oxford and Margaret Candfield Fellow of University College, Oxford. He is the author of *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol* (Oxford University Press, 2007) and the editor, most recently, of the Norton Critical Edition of *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose* (Norton, 2013).

ADAM KUPER teaches in the Anthropology Department of Boston University and is a Fellow of the British Academy. He is author, most recently, of *Incest and Influence: The Private Life of Bourgeois England* (Harvard University Press, 2009) and *The Reinvention of Primitive Society* (Routledge, 2005).

JERRY Z. MULLER is professor of history at the Catholic University of America. His books include, as editor, *Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought from David Hume to the Present* (Princeton University

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Press, 1997) and *The Mind and the Market: Capitalism in Modern European Thought* (Knopf, 2002).

MARY PICKERING is Professor of Modern European History at San José State University. She is the author of *Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography* (three volumes, Cambridge University Press, 1993–2009), and the editor of *Love, Order, and Progress: The Science, Philosophy, and Politics of Auguste Comte* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018).

TERRY PINKARD is Professor of Philosophy at Georgetown University. His most recent books are *Does History Make Sense? Hegel on the Historical Shapes of Justice* (Cambridge University Press, 2018) and *Hegel's Naturalism: Mind, Nature, and the Final Ends of Life* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

JENNIFER PITTS is Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago and the author of *Boundaries of the International: Law and Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2018) and *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

GREGORY RADICK is Professor of History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Leeds. His books include *The Simian Tongue: The Long Debate about Animal Language* (University of Chicago Press, 2007) and, as coeditor, *The Cambridge Companion to Darwin* (Cambridge University Press, 2003; second edition 2009).

PHILIP SCHOFIELD is Professor of the History of Legal and Political Thought in the Faculty of Laws, University College London, and Director of the Bentham Project and General Editor of the new authoritative edition of *The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham* (Athlone and Clarendon Press, 34 vols., 1968–2019, and continuing).

JERROLD SEIGEL is Kenan Professor of History emeritus at New York University. Among his books are *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830–1930* (Viking, 1986) and *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

GARETH STEDMAN JONES is Professor of the History of Ideas at Queen Mary, University of London. He is also a Director of the Centre for History

*List of Contributors*

and Economics, Cambridge, and a Life Fellow of King's College, Cambridge. His most recent book is *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (Penguin, 2016).

JOHN TOEWS is professor of History and the Comparative History of Ideas emeritus at the University of Washington. He has held a number of endowed professorships and was the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship. His publications include *Hegelianism: The Path toward Dialectical Humanism, 1805–1841* (Cambridge University Press, 1981) and *Becoming Historical: Cultural Reformation and Public Memory in Early Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

CLAUDIA VERHOEVEN is associate professor of history at Cornell University. She is the author of *The Odd Man Karakozov: Imperial Russia, Modernity, and the Birth of Terrorism* (Cornell University Press, 2009) and coeditor of *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Terrorism* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

## *Preface*

When one steps back to reflect upon the historical course of modern European thought since the French Revolution, it is difficult to avoid the impression that the old master narratives have lost all credibility. It is one of the characteristics of the modern condition that our stories and conceptual schemes have grown increasingly pluralistic: fragmentation, not unity, is the sign of the modern. In this regard, cultural and intellectual activity followed a general trend of modernity toward greater differentiation of spheres and tasks. Relations between workplace and home, public and private, state and society, secular and sacred all changed as modern Europe redefined or created new boundaries between these domains. Likewise, modernity has witnessed an ever more complex division of labor. Just as much as other members of society, intellectuals and artists have been affected by these changes, which have drawn (or blurred) anew the lines between producers and consumers of ideas and between mental and manual labor, even while they have also spawned new subcultures of expertise and disciplinary practice. These larger societal conditions and the torsions they produced are an important factor in the extraordinary creativity of European intellectual life in all fields during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Political ideologies have multiplied, and so too have the various fields of philosophical, theological, and scientific inquiry. Intellectual and cultural movements have waxed and waned; various schools have come into being, declaring themselves as avant-garde before hardening into new orthodoxies. Intellectuals announce a breakthrough only to be overtaken in turn by new currents of restoration or rebellion; and yet even those phenomena that seemed to vanish without a trace have in fact left an enduring mark on future generations. Nothing is ever truly past. Our present intellectual and cultural life remains unintelligible without some awareness of the persistent force of debates, problems, and styles of

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thought that emerged over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

*The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought* offers a capacious and detailed survey of this rich and varied intellectual terrain. It combines state-of-the-art research with accessible presentations that can serve as both touchstones for the seasoned scholar and points of entry for students both beginning and advanced. Individual chapters trace crucial movements and figures across a broad range of disciplinary fields and domains of thought; they do so with sensitivity to the complexities both of the internal debates and traditions of intellectual life and of the larger contexts within which writers and artists have pursued their work. The focus is on intellectual concerns that fall roughly into the domain of humanistic inquiry and artistic practice – questions of the self, knowledge, and truth, human nature, the political order, ethics, justice, religion, ontology, psychology, and the symbolic modes whereby humans represent their ideas and experiences. More or less absent are the natural sciences and medicine. While these did of course exercise an important influence, they have their own deep and complicated histories. Their inclusion might have toppled the scale of even the most ambitious compendium of European thought in this period. The two notable exceptions, however, are the Darwinian revolution and the twentieth-century revolution in physics, both truly paradigmatic shifts that found strong resonances in the broader culture. The focus is also narrowed to emphasize the major countries of Western and Central Europe, chiefly but not exclusively France, Germany, Austria, and Great Britain. These were the national cultures that, during the modern era, could be said to have exercised the greatest influence on the intellectual life of the European continent and beyond. But the volumes and chapters also recognize the many entanglements across time and space that must defeat any attempt to narrate a merely provincial history of European ideas. Especially in the modern era during the age of imperialism and decolonization, the intellectual history of Europe cannot be confined within the boundaries of a single nation or geography. Ideas travel, and they also travel back, enriched and transformed by their peregrinations around the globe.

Absent from *The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought* is any master narrative that would tightly unify all of the numerous strands that thread through these volumes. If the French Revolution brought to an end the feudal age of absolutist monarchy, we would do well to recognize that in the history of ideas there is likewise no sovereign theme that wields all of the

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threads of intellectual history in its powerful hands. But differentiation does not entail chaos. Even as we recognize the manifold of themes and ideas we also understand that nothing in intellectual history can remain wholly apart from the world. Amply present in this volume is an awareness of the irreducible complexity – the ambiguity but also the creativity – of European intellectual life during these two centuries, alongside a recognition that intellectual history shares in whatever has been good and bad in modern European history. As we embark on the twenty-first century we trust that the ideas of the past may still provide us in some modest way with guidance for the future no matter how formidable its challenges.