

La Belle Époque: the Twilight of the 19th Century, 1871-1914

After the Franco-Prussian War ended in 1871, Europe enjoyed more than forty years of peace and rapid development until the First World War erupted in 1914. In principle, people living in this period were confident, optimistic, and had a faith in mankind's progress towards a bright, harmonious future. European empires and the United States commanded the globe, challenged only by each other. Looking back at this era after the end of the First World War, the French nostalgically began calling it *La Belle Époque* (the Beautiful Age). This time period corresponds roughly to the Gilded Age (late 1860s-mid 1890s) and Progressive Era (mid 1890-1920s) in the United States.

The second wave of the industrial revolution swept the world. Steam, coal, and iron gave way to combustion, oil, and steel. Industrial output tripled. The chemical industry and electrical engineering emerged. Machines grew more efficient and more powerful. Ships became bigger, faster, and their construction less expensive. Railways expanded and trains became heavier, longer, and faster too. The first automobiles took to the roads. The first airplanes and massive Zeppelin airships were launched into the sky. Tractors, reapers, and artificial fertilizers expanded agriculture. The telegraph and telephone revolutionized communication.

Living standards for all classes improved dramatically but especially so for the upper and middle classes. The age of the mass consumer was born thanks to the ability to mass produce goods and the rise in wages. Salaries increased between 1850 and 1890 by more than 60 % whereas consumer prices decreased by 6.5 %! *La Belle Époque* saw the beginning of mass transit, mass education, mass production, mass accommodation, mass entertainment, mass media, and art for the masses. Food quality and quantity improved. Consumption of bread and wine increased 50%, beer by 100%, spirits by 300%, and sugar and coffee by 400%. Luxuries like running water, gas, electricity and proper sanitary plumbing gravitated downwards to the middle class, sometimes even to the peasantry and lower class. The life expectancy of children rose. The joy of life awoke in all social classes, filled with desire for new, extraordinary, sensational things.

The middle classes had enough disposable income to concern themselves with fashion. Bicycles rose from 375,000 in 1898 to 3.5 million by 1914. Transport improvements meant that people could now travel further for holidays. Sport became an increasing pre-occupation, both for playing and watching. Mass entertainment was transformed by venues like the Moulin Rouge, home of the Can Can, by new styles of theatre, by shorter forms of music and by the realism of modern writers. Print grew in even greater importance as technology drove prices down and literacy expanded.

But this was no golden age. Because of the massive growth and social changes, reactionary groups saw the age as decadent, even degenerate. Racial tensions rose as Jews were blamed for the perceived evils of the age. While some of the lower classes experienced improved living conditions, most urban poor still lived in cramped homes, received low wages, and faced terrible working conditions and poor health. Politics became more divided, with the extremes of the left and right gaining support.

Before the end of the 19th century, the organized bodies of men that ran the affairs of the world—parliaments, bureaucracies, churches, guilds, and corporations—had been, for the most part, concerned with preserving the status quo of those in power. However, new technologies had a liberating force on society and created new economic and educational prospects for everyone. Little by little, the elite were stripped of their power over the rest of society.

Traditional, rural societies had been transformed into modern industrial nations. The old aristocracy of birth and inheritance was being replaced by a new one of wealth and economic power. Unable to deal with modern life, the ancient landed aristocrats retreated into a frivolous, fairy-tale kind of existence of their own making. Above all, this society wanted to cling to an ordered world that would withstand the forces of modernity. They rejected reality and constructed a rigidly structured society based on the domination of the weak—whether the poor, the opposite sex, or children. They regarded the newly rich as “vulgar” intruders in their social circles. The aristocracy also felt threatened by the hordes of poor people who had abandoned the countryside for city factories and were about to declare class warfare. The aristocracy believed that modern civilization was moving towards an inevitable collapse due to society’s moral deterioration. They regarded the poor as “degenerates” who, because they were inferior, could not control their animal-like passions, and who, if not kept in their place, would bring about universal moral ruin. The best way, or so they thought, of remaining in control was to preserve appearances by living by a very strict, rigid code of behavior. The overriding consideration was to “put up a front”. Strictness was maintained on every level. Above all, one was not allowed to exhibit feelings. Thus, for the sake of maintaining control, morality was authoritarian and taboo-ridden.

Aristocrats saw themselves as rightful leaders who, because of their position, were entitled to live a life of leisure and extravagant consumption. French and British elite lived their lives in the pursuit of beauty and culture and demanded the highest degree of refinement in everything that they experienced—beautiful women, fine dining, couture, and all of the fine arts. Their days were spent in luxurious splendor going to fine restaurants, the races,

and the theater in order to be seen by the rest of society. In the United States, great fortunes were made in a period of growth following the Civil War. But lacking an aristocracy, rich Americans looked to Europe to marry their daughters off to the highest titles available. Many young American women were sent to Europe in order to socially validate their parent's fortunes. Germany, which had recently become a unified nation, focused its manpower and capital on becoming the most technologically-advanced country in the world. What Germany lacked was the acknowledgement of their mastery by other nations, and so its reaction was to show off how capable they were. Ultimately, Germany's need for validation would be one of the causes of World War I.

There were many forces that were trying to undermine the elite's stronghold over government. The most violent was the anarchist movement. Envisioning a stateless society where men would be free to be good as God intentioned to be, the anarchists wanted to do away with government, with law, and with ownership of property, the root of all evil. Anarchists believed that once Property was eradicated, no man would live off the labor of another and then human nature would then be released to seek justice. The role of the State would be replaced by voluntary cooperation among individuals, and the role of law by the supreme law of general welfare. For the anarchists, only a revolutionary overthrow of the existing systems would bring about a new society. Consequently, between 1890 and 1914, a Russian tsar, an Austrian empress, a Spanish prime minister, a French president, an American president, a Portuguese king, and a Greek king were all assassinated by anarchists along with scores of others. Attempts on the German Kaisers and the kings of Spain and Belgium narrowly failed.

Industrialization meant that the nature of work had changed. Factory work was monotonous and the workers grew discontent. In order to galvanize others in the struggle against the privileged, many anarchists eventually joined trade unions and transformed themselves into labor leaders. They began educating others and creating class consciousness, and with it, the beginning of class warfare. Between 1868 and 1906, trade unions and socialist labor parties grew in size and influence. Workers were directed to strike against capitalists. The rich and the poor were pitted against each other.

Revolutionary artists and intellectuals challenged the values of those in power and worked for the liberation of the mind. They were rebelling against a conservative world view that did not want to accept or adjust to the new scientific discoveries and technological inventions that were transforming society. Rather than admitting that their values and lifestyles had to evolve to meet the challenges of the new age, the tradition-bound elite embraced very rigid forms of behavior devoid of any authenticity. Fundamentally, the only

thing that the elite cared about was keeping up appearances and not being caught in their peccadilloes. In Vienna, Sigmund Freud's writings exposed how oppressive these codes of behavior were, oftentimes leading many to repress their feelings thereby causing all kinds of emotional anxieties and mental illness.

During the 1870s and 1880s, women gained admission to universities for the first time. Enlightened women also refused to play by the old rules. At this time, a woman was a piece of decorative property. Her role was to run a man's home and rear his children. If she was rich, she received his guests and hired and fired his servants; if she was poor, she cooked his meals and darned his socks. Modern women rejected these roles and boundaries and organized to win their civil rights and the right to vote. Suffragettes, as they were called, fought for social and economic equality of the sexes. They interrupted political meetings and conducted attention-seeking, violent public actions- slashing famous works of art in museums, committing arson, and tearing the clothes off political leaders. Many who were taken into custody went on hunger strike and were force fed through the mouth and the rectum. In England, Emily Davison threw herself in front of the king's horse during a high-profile horse race and was trampled to death.

Peace was largely a myth as well. Whereas on the surface it appeared that *La Belle Époque* was a period defined by harmony and hope, there was, in fact, a good deal of tension concealed beneath the surface calm caused by nationalism, imperialism, and a series of alliances between European nations. Although nationalism had brought people to unity through the forging of national identity, it also gave rise to competition between nations as well as a sense of superiority. Anger in France at the loss of Alsace-Lorraine in the Franco-Prussian war combined with a growing and xenophobic fear of the new Germany developed into a belief, even a desire, for a new war to settle the score. While imperialism had opened the markets of the world to Europe, at the same time it created a sense of resentment and bitterness between competing nations. Finally, nationalism and colonialism would lead many European nations to create alliances amongst themselves.

On April 15, 1912, the *Titanic* sank and with it the naïve, optimistic faith in industrial progress and modern life was shattered. Confidence gave way to anxiety. Two years later, *La Belle Époque* ended with the outbreak of the First World War, when the technologies of the age which had improved lives were used to slaughter millions and reshape the map of Europe. The old order of the elite met its final blow when the young from all the classes died side by side in the trenches. In the end, death was the great leveler.