On the threshold of the 19th century a paradigm change occurs. Political theorists begin to search for ways to construct a science of politics based on empirical methods derived from the exact sciences. Practical politics comes to depend more on analyses and forecasts and less on the dictates of religion. These efforts would provoke turbulent debates on what exactly might constitute a secure basis for a science of politics. This quest for a rational model of politics is at the focus of an LMU excellent project currently being pursued by three LMU historians, Professor Eckhart Hellmuth, Dr. Martin Schmidt and Dr. Iain McDaniel.

The years between 1750 and 1850 saw the birth of the Modern Age, and the period forms a watershed in European history. Political discourse too assumes a new configuration at the end of the 18th century. In Western European countries, political thinkers set out to find a methodology that would allow them to derive demonstrably valid conclusions from empirical studies of human behavior and social institutions. Among the factors that motivated this search were the radical changes that were occurring in the world of work. The rise of mechanization was reducing the age-old dominance of the agricultural sector, and economic and social changes were altering the acquisition, transmission and application of knowledge, science and technology. Traditional structures gradually lost the capacity to provide the cohesion necessary for societal stability. The old order, founded on the notion of the Three Estates, was fatally weakened or abolished outright. The customary norms and modes of thought that had hitherto enabled people to find their bearings in society gradually lost the potential to provide both individuals and ruling elites with a reliable compass, as the world around them became ever more complex. The natural and social sciences would, it was hoped, supply the means for coping with the growing complexity that characterized all areas of life and work. New organizational forms and procedures needed to be developed to tame the disruptive forces unleashed by social change, and create stable social structures that would absorb the impact of individualization and diversification. Historians
have tended to view the early development of the modern world as a process of unceasing progress, but this interpretation is now widely disputed. On closer inspection, it is clear that nowhere in Europe did the process of modernization really follow the models constructed by theorists. It may be more precisely described as a series of oscillations between reform and regression. The climax of the Age of Enlightenment (between 1750 und 1780), the Napoleonic Wars and the subsequent Restoration Era gave rise to a great diversity of ideas, but none of them could set the course and direction of public debate and politics for long. In the final phases of the Enlightenment, Romanticism and Idealism overlap with the first glimmerings of a Proto-Positivism. Their central concepts all take the stage together, often fusing into tangled skeins of old and new threads of thought. In order to comprehend this transformation process, the LMUexcellent project “The Science of the Political: Realignments in the Perception of Nature, Society and Politics Around 1800” focuses on contemporary debates on the nature of politics. The project was initiated in October 2008 with the financial support of the Excellence Initiative, under the direction of Eckhart Hellmuth, Professor of Western European History (with particular emphasis on the Early Modern Period). At the center of concern lie the attempts made to provide the elites with information on which to base policies that could meet the upcoming challenges – and the conflicts that arose over competing definitions of ‘reliable’ knowledge in this field.

CONSTRUCTING A ‘SCIENCE OF POLITICS’

At the time, the disputants were confident that their debates would lead to trustworthy social analyses, forecasts and proposals for reform – and accurate assessments of the consequences, which would convince the public at large and act as guidelines for State bureaucracies. As new forms of communication were developed and conflicts of interest became more acute, the volume of information reaching the public expanded rapidly. It was imperative to find methods of assessing its quality and validity. Indeed, for many reflective minds, the lack of such methods was a major political problem. For them, dearth of reliable knowledge was at the root of differences of opinion, which in turn allowed governments and administrators to follow policies that favored a particular clientele. The application of the empirical techniques typical of the natural sciences to the political sphere would provide a new foundation for political action. The true ‘science of politics’ that this paradigm shift would make possible should be grounded in reality, empirical, credible and practical,” explains Martin Schmidt, one of the historians involved in the LMUexcellent project. In post-revolutionary France close ties already existed between political thinkers and the culture of scientific discovery, which was itself becoming increasingly popular. The political theorists hoped that science would help them to stabilize the modern constitutional State. In 1796, the French National Convention set up, in the Institut National des Sciences et des Arts, a department devoted to the ‘analysis of ideas and sentiments.’ During the deliberations the philosopher Destutt de Tracy (1754-1836) proposed that ‘ideas and sentiments’ be replaced by the term ‘ideology.’ He and his fellow intellectuals who backed the idea were henceforth referred to – often in a derogatory sense – as the ‘idéologues.’ The physician Pierre-Jean-
Georges Cabanis (1757-1808) was their leading light. In his tract *Du degré de certitude de la médecine* (1798), he argued that medicine is a science, because it is based on the observation of physical phenomena. For Cabanis, psychology, morals and physiology together constituted a coherent Science of Man. This was a more complex concept than the view that had dominated anthropology during the Age of Enlightenment, which reduced Man to a mass of physical and chemical reactions. Cabanis’ views led his supporters to conclude that political measures should take greater cognizance of the complexity of individuals and strive to give everyone the chance to develop their diverse talents, on the basis of equality of rights for all.

English-speaking historians of Scottish and French Enlightenment figures have already learned to interpret political developments against the background of contemporary scientific advances and methods. “In Germany, on the other hand, research on the 18th century has tended to concentrate rather too much on the course and consequences of the French Revolution,” says Martin Schmidt. Very many studies have focused on tracing the ideological roots of Conservatism, political Catholicism, Liberalism and Socialism. From this vantage point, the fact that political thought was acted upon by scientific and technical innovations, by transformations in religious convictions and by epoch-making discoveries is easily missed. Hence, the LMU researchers chose to utilize both insights from the history of ideas and the history of science. “The political question ‘what form of state organization is the best?’ then became a problem which had to be solved by empirical inquiry into the nature of man and his environment – and this inquiry belonged to the province of the natural scientist,” says Martin Schmidt. This and other related questions were the subject of passionate debate. In Republican and Post-Napoleonic France, but also in Britain, there existed a lively culture of debate that fostered open discussion of political and social issues. In the British Isles between 1815 and 1846, the Corn Laws were one such issue. The Corn Laws were designed to protect domestic agricultural interests by providing for increases in import duties.
on cereals when grain prices fell, but they placed an especially heavy burden on the poor by restricting cheap imports in times of food scarcity. The campaign for repeal of the Corn Laws led to violent agitation throughout the country. Developments came to a head when the failure of the Irish potato crop coincided with particularly poor wheat harvests in England. In the debates that ensued, supporters and opponents of the Corn Laws invoked ideas such as the notion of a 'natural price level' introduced by the economist Thomas Malthus, or the theses on the 'unnatural' character of customs tariffs and the advantages of free trade espoused by David Ricardo in his Essay on Profits (1815). – And new empirical methods and the insights they provided also stirred public controversy beyond Britain’s shores. In his contribution to the LMU project, entitled Modern Despotism and the Transformation of the Enlightenment Sciences of Society, Dr. Iain McDaniel is examining the historiographical, anthropological, and economic discourses that constituted the sciences of politics in the second half of the Enlightenment. As its title suggests, his study is concerned with the interactions between the social sciences and eighteenth-century understandings of the modern world’s tendency towards despotism or dictatorship, with particular reference to the sciences of politics in France, Germany and Britain. Iain McDaniel is analyzing the various critiques of the concept of despotism advanced by, among others, Montesquieu in his De l’Esprit des Lois (1748). Attempts to refine Montesquieu’s model were later published by Johann Gottfried Herder, Antoine Nicolas de Condorcet, Christoph Meiners and Adam Ferguson, and these authors all made use of the latest research on history and anthropology to construct a new Science of Man.

Many other authors followed these leads in trying to apply methods and hypotheses drawn from the exact sciences to social and political phenomena. The individual and his function in society became subjects of rational inquiry, and Nature provided the context within which the knowledge so acquired should be integrated and interpreted. The goal was to improve...
the conception and execution of political action. The extension of education and health care, the formulation of economic and social policies, and changes in political systems should all be designed in accordance with the most advanced views on the nature of Man and Society. This, of course, implied the abandonment of the authoritarian traditions of the past, which could still lay claim to universal validity during the Early Modern Period. The influence of the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle – both based on the existence of an established authority – and indeed that of the Bible, the religious text that had justified the social order for hundreds of years, declined. Governments and administrators would have to find new arguments to establish their legitimacy. What was important now was not the question of whether a political measure was compatible with particular religious beliefs, but rather whether it was appropriate to and useful in the circumstances prevailing. Political expertise should be acquired on the basis of empirical investigation, by studying ‘human nature’ and the ‘social organism.’ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who himself contributed to contemporary science with his *Farbenlehre*, has left us a succinct motto that perfectly captures the character of this turning point in history. In Erfurt in 1808, Goethe had a personal encounter with Napoleon, the figure who, more than any other, embodied the new ideal of the modern politician. Later, according to his amanuensis Johann Peter Eckermann, the poet voiced the opinion that “We moderns had better now say, with Napoleon: politics is fate.” At the time, that view could claim to be supported by empirical, scientific data.

*Translation: Paul Hardy*