This chapter argues that the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773 and the Enlightenment discourse of Jewish emancipation in the 1780s resulted from the combination of the Enlightenment discourse of human emancipation and the state-making process in 18th-century Europe. At that time, the political authorities of many European countries adopted the Enlightenment struggle for the emancipation of man, and they adjusted it to their purposes, while many supporters of emancipation saw the state as the entity that could best put their theories into practice. The combination of these two factors led to the shaping of the modern state as an all-encompassing, panoptical, superpersonal entity, one that could not tolerate opinions and lifestyles divergent from the models of self-realization and social inclusion that it attempted to impose. In that scenario, the Society of Jesus, commonly perceived as a “state within the state,” was first expelled from many Catholic countries and then suppressed, while the Jews, generally regarded as a “nation within a nation,” were required to renounce their communal lifestyle and assimilate into surrounding society.

Far from originating merely in a quarrel between the autocratic prime minister of Portugal, Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo, Marquis of Pombal, and the Catholic church, the suppression of the Jesuits was one of the most emblematic episodes in the making of the modern state. In fact, the suppression of the Society of Jesus was caused by political as well as economic conflicts and by the assertion of state independence against the Catholic church.
The very reason the Society of Jesus was established in 1540 made it dangerous to a model of the state that aimed at controlling all aspects of social, economic, and cultural life. As explained in the later version of the Jesuit Formula Instituti, a Jesuit had “to strive especially for the defense and propagation of the faith and for the progress of souls in Christian life and doctrine.” The Jesuits pursued their goals mainly through cultural means, namely by establishing educational institutions throughout Europe, evangelizing the peoples who had not yet been reached by the Christian message, and preventing the spread of Protestantism. Briefly, the Jesuits were often perceived as the vanguard of the Counter-Reformation church, and the knowledge and intellectual skills they were required to acquire were the Catholic answer not only to the Protestant insistence on biblical erudition but also to centuries of moral corruption and cultural decline within the church.  

The Jesuits’ attempts to revive the Catholic spirit and restore the church to its ideological power took place in a time when the state authorities asserted their supremacy in any field of social life, including religious matters, in compliance with the principle cuius regio eius religio. In Catholic countries the Society of Jesus initially managed to coexist with the state institutions. But the Jesuits’ activities were perceived as a threat to state sovereignty when the ruling elites started paying attention to the philosophes’ pleas to play a proactive role in shaping civil society, with the purpose of leading mankind to self-realization. When the Enlightenment state undertook the mission to “emancipate” mankind, the bell tolled for the Society of Jesus.

In the Enlightenment discourse of emancipation, reason was regarded as the highest state of human existence. Therefore, the political authorities of the growingly centralized states of Enlightenment Europe, inspired and supported by their organic intellectuals, pursued the rationalization of human life through the improvement of social, economic, and legal agencies gradually developed and employed since the age of religious wars. However, this rationalization process was mostly pursued in accordance with a concept of reason that 20th-century philosopher Max Horkheimer defined as “instrumental,” namely a kind of pseudo-rationality.

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