
Bibliographical Essay

The Idea Of Progress

by Robert Nisbet

Confusion Over the Meanings of Progress

The essence of the Western idea of progress can be simply stated: mankind has advanced in the past, is now advancing, and may be expected to continue advancing in the future. But what, it will be asked, does “advance” mean? Here matters necessarily become more complex. Its meanings have ranged from the most sublimely spiritual advance to the absolutely physical or material. In its most common form the idea of progress has referred, ever since the Greeks, to the advance of knowledge, more particularly the kind of practical knowledge contained in the arts and sciences. But the idea has also been made to refer to the achievement of what the early Christians called earthly paradise: a state of such spiritual exaltation that man’s liberation from all tormenting physical compulsions becomes complete. We find the perspective of progress used, especially in the modern world, to give substance to the hope for a future characterized by individual freedom, equality, or justice. But we also find the idea of progress made to serve belief in the desirability and necessity of political absolutism, racial superiority, and the totalitarian state. In sum, there is almost no end to goals and purposes which have been declared the fulfillment or outcome of mankind’s progress.

Progress as an Ancient Idea

In the form I have just described, the idea is peculiarly Western. Other, older civilizations have certainly known the ideals of moral, spiritual, and material improvement; have known the quest for virtue, spirituality, and salvation in one degree or other. But only in Western Civilization, apparently, does the idea exist that all history may be seen as one of humanity improving itself, step by step, stage by stage, through immanent forces, until at some remote time in the future a condition of near-perfection for all will exist—such perfection definable, as I have noted, in a great variety of ways.

There is a widespread misconception of this idea that I must immediately identify. It is commonly believed that the idea of progress is a peculiarly *modern* idea, largely unknown to the ancient Greeks and Romans, wholly unknown to the Christian thinking that governed Europe from the fall of Rome until the late seventeenth century, and first manifest in the currents of rationalism and science. These modern currents, the argument continues, repulsed Christian theology and made possible, for the first time, a philosophy of human progress on this earth. This is the view that governs the contents of the single most widely read book on the history of the idea, J.B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into its Origin and Growth*, published in 1920. The view, or misconception, is not original with Bury. It may be found in most of the philosophical and historical writings in the West from the late eighteenth century on. Of all the ideas which Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers cherished, none was more favored than the idea of progress, so often used to buttress other favored ideas, and with it the fancy that only in the modern world was it possible for so noble an idea to have been born. I venture the guess that in ninety-nine percent of the writing on the idea of progress, the view is commonplace that the idea is inseparable from modernity and that it became possible of formulation only after Western thought had finally been able to throw the shackles of Christian and classical-pagan dogma. The ancients, it is said, were unable to shake off ideas of fate, of degeneration from a golden age, of cycles, and an indemic pessimism. The Christians, although through belief in redemption by Christ possessed of optimism and hope, turned their minds entirely to the supernatural, believing that the things of this world are of no importance, and foresaw an early end to this world and the ascent by the blessed to an unchanging, eternal heaven.

Classical Antiquity and the Idea of Progress

So much for conventional wisdom. Let us turn to the results of still-emerging, specialized modern scholarship on the different episodes in the history of the idea and turn also to the actual texts, from Hesiod to Toynbee, in which faith in progress has been expressed for some 2,500 years.

The thesis that pagan-classical antiquity was bereft of belief in man's material and moral progress has been utterly destroyed by such authoritative works as Ludwig Edelstein, *The Idea of Progress in Antiquity* (the most comprehensive and thorough); W.K.C. Guthrie, especially his *In the Beginning*; E.R. Dodds, *The Ancient Concept of Progress*; and F.J. Teggart, *Theory of History* and his anthology, *The Idea of Progress*. The late Professor Edelstein speaks for them all when he tells us that the ancients "formulated most of the

thoughts and sentiments that later generations down to the nineteenth century were accustomed to associate with the blessed or cursed word *progress*."

Greek Poets, Sophists, and Historians on Progress

We begin with Hesiod (ca. 700 B.C.) and his *Works and Days*, second only to Homer in the impact that it had upon classical thinkers for hundreds of years. We almost inevitably associate Hesiod with belief in a primordial golden age, from which mankind has been steadily degenerating, reaching, in Hesiod's time, an iron age that is deemed the worst of all. Humanity confined its hopes to an early disappearance of this iron age and mankind's return to the first, that golden age when there was no knowledge but, at the same time, no contaminants to moral virtue and universal happiness. Actually, Hesiod doesn't write of ages at all, but of races: gold, silver, bronze, heroes, and iron. Second, far from there being steady degeneration, the fourth, the age of "hero-men" comes very close to the original "golden race" in quality. The careful reader will in fact find many lines in Hesiod's work which testify to his awareness of a great deal of good in the world around him and, more important, to his conviction that genuine reform is possible if only good men will rally to its cause. The eminent classicist at Berkeley, George M. Calhoun, in his *Growth of Criminal Law in Greece*, refers to Hesiod as the first European reformer, and to his book as the beginning of Western "political literature." F.J. Teggart, in an article, "The Argument of Hesiod's *Works and Days*," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, January 1947, writes, after long, meticulous analysis of the text, that Hesiod "set before men the first idea of progress."

What Hesiod began, a long succession of classical thinkers continued. Late in the sixth century B.C. Xenophanes, in a surviving fragment, declared: "The gods did not reveal to men all things in the beginning, but men through their own search find in the course of time that which is better." Not long afterward Protagoras, first and greatest of the Sophists, made emphatic his conviction that man's history is one of escape from primeval ignorance, fear, and barrenness of culture, and of gradual ascent to ever-better conditions of life, the consequence of the steady advancement of knowledge. There is no better place than in Plato's dialogue, *Protagoras*, to acquire first the substance of Protagoras' beliefs, and second the clear sense of Plato's own admiration for this great philosopher—admiration sufficient to lead Plato to put down, as it were, his cherished Socrates, also present at the discussion. There is Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* with its notable passage in which Prometheus bewails the terrible punishment he has received from Zeus for the "crime" of having brought to mankind fire and thus stimulates men to rise intellectually and culturally to emulate the gods

themselves. There is no more moving passage in all literature than that in which Prometheus, consigned to an eternity of punishment, tells how he had found mankind on earth in a pitiful condition—subject to every kind of deprivation, ever-fearful, ignorant, and living like animals in caves. He brought to man the gift of fire, enabling mankind through its own efforts slowly to ascend the scale of culture, learning language, arts and crafts, technology, and how to live amicably in groups and federations. There is nothing whatever in Aeschylus' drama of any descent in time from an original golden age. The same is true of the celebrated passage in Sophocles' *Antigone*, the ode by the chorus to man's achievements on earth: "Many a wonder lives and moves, but the wonder of all is man . . . Wise utterance and wind-swift thought, and city-moulding mind . . . Full of resource, without device he meets no coming time. . . ." Not solely to past, present, but also future achievement does Sophocles point. Thucydides, in his history of the Peloponnesian War, devotes the first few paragraphs to pointing out that in ancient times the Greeks lived just as did contemporary barbarians and savages, but that over a long period of time they had risen to greatness through their own efforts.

Plato is the next contributor to the idea of progress. It is a serious error to categorize Plato's rich and complex thought as directed solely to the perfect, the unchanging, the eternal, or to see (as Karl Popper has in *The Open Society, and Its Enemies*) a reactionary mind interested only in the return of Greece to a remote past. Such a view, widespread though it be, is false. In Plato's philosophy, as F.M. Cornford emphasizes in *Plato's Cosmology*, two orders of reality exist: one directed toward the world of perfect ideas, the other directed toward this life, with all its variety, changes, conflicts, and needs for practical reforms. In *The Statesman* Plato delineates a historical account of the progress of mankind from lowly origins to its present heights. In Book III of *The Laws* Plato presents an even more detailed picture of humanity's progress from a state of nature, step by step, stage by stage, to ever-higher levels of culture, economy, and polity. And as Edelstein observes, "Nowhere does Plato contradict the assertion that the arts and sciences . . . should proceed in their search 'for all future time.'"

Although Aristotle refers to cycles in some of his writings on physics and allied sciences, he had a linear conception of human history, one that began with mankind in the stage of kinship alone, progressed to villages and confederations, and finally reached the political state. Aristotle's *Politics* makes clear his belief that reason and wisdom will lead to continuous progress with a corresponding growth in knowledge. The theme of improvement through individual effort and action that we find in his *Ethics* is clearly set, as Edelstein emphasizes, in a conception of morality that is not static

but dynamic, one to be envisaged in a progress of development.

Despite conventional assessments of Hellenistic Greece as a period of decadence, withdrawal, and retreat from reason, two of Greece's greatest philosophers thrived during this age: Zeno the Stoic and Epicurus. Epicurus especially taught the immutability of natural processes, among these the process of mankind's steady improvement from lowly origins over a vast period of time. There were indeed philosophers of primitivism—Cynics, Peripatetics, and others—who believed that the best of mankind lived in the remote and simple past, and for whom progress was but a myth. But their doctrines did not compare in influence to those of Zeno and Epicurus.

Roman Philosophers on Progress

Perhaps the greatest description (in the sense of a systematic and developed awareness) of human progress to be found in all of ancient thought is the Roman Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things* written in the first century B.C. It is an Epicurean account of complete sciences—astronomy, physics, chemistry, anthropology, psychology. In very modern fashion, Lucretius explains the beginnings of the world through atoms in the void forming clusters which then become tangible matter, and the eventual development of the world with all that grows and lives on it. Book V of this general evolutionary treatise is concerned solely with mankind's social and cultural progress. It commences with primitive man living naked and shelterless, dependent upon his cunning and ability to join forces with other men in order to find safety from larger and more predatory beasts, in constant fear of the elements. To assuage this fear mankind generally formed religions for mental protection, and step by step (*pedetentim progredientes*) advanced to huts, then to houses and ships, diverse languages, the arts and sciences, medicine, navigation, improvements in technology, making for an ever richer existence. And, Lucretius is careful to tell us, despite the grandeur of all that man has achieved on earth through his own efforts, the human race is still in its infancy, and even greater wonders may be expected.

The final philosopher of progress I shall select from classical antiquity is Seneca. A Stoic, an adviser to emperors and others, he was also a scientist in every sense of the word. His *Quaestiones Naturales* presents a remarkable collection of observations and experiments in the natural world and embodies virtually a Darwinian theory of evolution (as there is in Lucretius also), with more than mere hints of the mechanism of natural selection. But Seneca the social scientist, the anthropologist, is best seen in his *Epistulae Morales*. Here is another classical text in human progress. There is passing, uninterested reference to some aboriginal golden age when

virtue was ascendant amid cultural simplicity and to a fall from this primeval state (not different, really, from what Rousseau would write many centuries later on the state of nature and of man's social and cultural ascent from it). But what thoroughly engages Seneca's attention is the means and the stages through which humanity has climbed to its present vast knowledge. He grants philosophy some credit, but it is "man's ingenuity, not his wisdom" that discovered all the really vital things in civilization—farming, metallurgy, navigation, tools and implements of every kind, language, and so on. And, despite Senecan ruminations from time to time about the age and decrepitude of the world, there are other, scintillating passages in which, like Lucretius, he foresees long ages ahead of increase in knowledge. "The time will come," he writes in the *Quaestiones Naturales*, "when mental acumen and prolonged study will bring to light what is now hidden . . . the time will come when our successors will wonder how we could have been ignorant of things so obvious." And in his *Epistulae* Seneca enjoins his contemporaries: "Much remains to do; much will remain; and no one born after thousands of centuries will be deprived of the chance of adding something in addition."

Christianity and the Idea of Progress

Let us now examine the Christian contribution to the idea of progress in the West. It is very large indeed. As I have already noted, the same bent of mind that denies to the Greeks and Romans any real conception of progress is prone (with a few exceptions such as John Baillie, *The Belief in Progress*, which attributes to Christianity what it takes from the pagans) to deny Christianity any vision of mankind's progress. But, as with the Greeks and Romans, a substantial and growing body of scholarship demonstrates quite the opposite. Such impressive studies as Gerhard B. Ladner, *The Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers*; Charles N. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*; Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*; and Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages* make it certain beyond question that a very real philosophy of human progress appears almost from the very beginning in Christian theology, a philosophy stretching from St. Augustine (indeed his predecessors, Eusebius and Tertullian) down through the seventeenth century.

The Augustinian Legacy: Stages of Historical Development

St. Augustine's *The City of God* has been often called the first full-blown philosophy of world history, and it would be hard to refute that statement. Augustine, as even J.B. Bury acknowledges, is the earliest to emphatically insist upon the unity of mankind, the

ecumenical idea. This introduces the conception of a history of mankind that, although predetermined by God in the beginning, has undergone an unfolding, a realization of essence, a struggle toward perfection through forces immanent in humanity. Augustine fused the Greek idea of growth or development with the Jewish idea of a sacred history. As a result Augustine sets forth the history of mankind in terms of both the stages of growth understood by the Greeks and the historical epochs into which the Jews divided their own Old Testament history.

Thus, in a celebrated and influential passage, Augustine writes: "The education of the human race, represented by the people of God, has advanced, like that of an individual, through certain epochs, or, as it were, ages, so that it might gradually rise from earthly to heavenly things, and from the visible to the invisible." The phrase "education of the human race" and the analogy of the development of mankind to growth in the individual would persist in Western thought, and we find it both in philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who would no doubt have been astounded had the actual origin of the phrase and the analogy been revealed to their secular minds. St. Augustine is not completely consistent in his divisions of historical time. In one section, it is twofold: before Christ and after. In another we get what is perhaps the first usage of a three-stage human history, unquestionably the most popular version in the history of progress, with the nineteenth-century Comte setting it forth in his "Law of Three Stages." In still another section, at the end of *The City of God*, Augustine refers to seven stages of earthly history, with the seventh stage (one of happiness and peace on earth) yet to come. Augustine gives it no precise length; it may be short or long. But he is clear that prior to Judgment Day and the final destruction of the earth, mankind, or at least the blessed, will know an earthly paradise, the consequence of inexorable historical development from the primitivism of the Garden.

Of all the contributions to the idea of progress by Christian thought, none is greater than this Augustinian suggestion of a final period on earth, utopian in character, and historically inevitable. When these two ideas, namely, historical necessity and a utopian period that is the culmination of man's progress on earth, become secularized in the late eighteenth century, the way has been cleared for the emergence of such modern secular millenarianisms as those associated with the names of Saint-Simon, Comte, and Marx. The structure of progress created by Augustine was comprehensible to him and subsequent Christian philosophers only by virtue of the omnipotence of God. For Augustine progress entails a premised origin within which potentialities exist for all future development of man; a single, linear order of time; the unity of mankind; a succession of fixed stages of development; the assumption that all

that has happened, and that will happen, is *necessary*; and, not least, the vision of a future condition of beatitude. Much of the later history of the idea of progress amounts to little more than the displacement of God, but with the structure of thought otherwise left intact.

Finally, it must be emphasized that, God- and Spirit-intoxicated though St. Augustine was, his early pagan rearing, during which he read the Greek and Roman thinkers omnivorously, gave him a solid sense of the wonders of material progress in the world. Too few students of Augustine are aware of the striking passages which appear in *The City of God* Section 24 of Book XXII: passages which rival in eloquence anything Protagoras or Aeschylus or Sophocles wrote on the wonders accomplished by mankind, in which Augustine refers to "the genius of man." In this section we have an inspired cataloguing of the great inventions and scientific discoveries by which mankind, slowly, over a long period of time, has conquered the earth; and a cataloguing too of all the sensual delights man has made possible for himself as the result of this same "genius." His appreciation of both the physical and the mental beauties of the human figure is utterly pagan in nature, but it is not the less a signal part of the Augustinian contribution to the Western philosophy of progress.

Space prevents adequate account here of the direct influence and legacy of Augustine: the philosophies of history written by such Christian minds as the fifth century writer Orosius (student of Augustine, who instructed him to write his *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*); Otto of Freising's twelfth century *Two Histories* which built upon both Augustine and Orosius; and, in the seventeenth century, the Bishop Bossuet's immensely influential *Discourse on Universal History*, dedicated in effect to Augustine, a book that Turgot, after his loss of religious faith, took as a model for his own secularized *Universal History*. Additional elements in Augustine's legacy of progress include: the conception of time as linear and divisible into developmental-historical ages; the doctrine of historical necessity that would be, when purged of the divine, the stock in trade of a host of "scientific" historians and social evolutionists; and, to reiterate, the mesmerizing, the seductive conception of an earthly state ahead in which man would know liberation from the toils and torments of prior history and, for the first time, a condition of earthly paradise.

Joachim of Fiore and the Millennialist Legacy of Progress

One medieval figure must be given space here: the extraordinary Joachim of Fiore, who lived and wrote in the second half of the twelfth century. He, encouraged by at least three popes, declared that human history must be seen as an ascent through three stages,

each presided over by a figure of the Trinity. First, the Age of the Father or of Law; second, the Age of the Son, or of the Gospel; and third, still ahead, a thousand-year Age of Spirit when human beings would be liberated from their physical-animal desires and would know a contemplative serenity and happiness of mind scarcely even describable. Joachim was nothing if not radical. Not only will all secular government disappear during this age but even the organization of the Church itself, and all its hierarchy, would no longer be needed. Man would, for a whole millennium prior to ascent to heaven, know absolute peace, tranquillity, freedom, and contentment.

Marjorie Reeves, in her magisterial *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages*, has given us the most authoritative insights into this remarkable prophet, and has shown with meticulous documentation the deep, widespread, and long-lasting influence Joachimite doctrines had upon a great many later minds, not all of them overtly theological or millennialist, by any means. Joachim preached that before the third great Age of the Spirit could come into being, there must be a prelude of destruction and conflict, the death throes of the second age. More than a little of the special kind of terrorism Norman Cohn has written of in his *The Pursuit of the Millennium* was activated and justified by hope that human beings, by commencing the work of destruction themselves, through fire and sword, could hasten the onset of the Joachimite Age of the Spirit.

Melvin Lasky, in his excellent *Utopia and Revolution*, has pointed out how Joachim's teachings became sources of inspiration not only to Renaissance prophets and Reformation rebels but also to at least a few major navigators and explorers. Columbus, as Lasky observes, was buoyed up to a substantial degree in his Atlantic crossings by the expectation that he would find the *Otro Mundo*, the Other World, the terrestrial paradise "where all land and islands end," where the promised *renovatio mundi*, the reborn world, would have its beginning. And, as Reeves, and also the Spanish-Americanist historian, J.H. Elliott have made clear, those Franciscan explorers who were to leave so substantial a heritage in the New World, were also steeped, and had been for centuries, in Joachimite promises.

We associate one of Joachim's influential followers, the Dominican Campanella, usually with but one book, his *The City of the Sun*. This work describes a relatively secular utopia in which all men are governed by reason and science and live in a socialist community of property. He wrote it while in prison, but well before this classic utopia of 1602, Campanella, powerfully influenced by Joachimite doctrines, had written other utopian works, but of a deeply religious character.

Christian, including Joachimite, prophecy also played its part in

the Puritan Revolution of the seventeenth century. In 1615, James Maxwell, with his *Admirable and Notable Prophecies*, declared Joachim to have been "extraordinarily inspired." Ernest Lee Tuveson, in his profoundly important *Millennium and Utopia*, shows how easily secular progress conceived of as the rule of reason and of the sciences could be derived from religious progress conceived of as divine fulfillment. Thus he quotes a passage from Sheltoo a Geveren in which we are told that God shows his affection for mankind by raising up "some Valla, Agricola, Erasmus, Melancthon and others" in order to bring "all sciences and knowledge of the tongues to their purity" . . . and to attain "the perfect knowledge of them all by which almost all Europe is set free from barbarousness." Tuveson's book was one of the very first to point out the crucial importance of *religious* ideas of man's progress on earth—of his destined existence in an earthly paradise for a long period before Judgment Day comes, and of the liberation of men from all want, superstition, ignorance, and tyranny—as the forerunners of those *secular* ideas of progress which flourished in the eighteenth century. The great weakness of so many studies of the idea of progress in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is their serene conviction that between Christian prophecy and the kind of idea of progress we find in, say, Condorcet at the end of the eighteenth century, there is no affinity (in the sense of historical lineage) whatever, only conflict. Not, this erroneous argument goes, until Christianity with its idea of Providence had been routed, was it possible for a perspective of human progress to make its appearance.

A host of contemporary scholars have made clear to us the deep roots which modern science has in Christian theology and prophecy. Copernicus, Kepler, Newton, are major names among literally scores of minds working in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries on the physical universe and its laws, but in perfect confidence that what their scientific labors would demonstrate was the wonder of God and His design. The Isaac Newton of the *Principia* was a deeply religious mind, and he saw no discontinuity whatever between this scientific classic and the overtly religious studies which preoccupied him during most of the years which followed publication of the *Principia*.

Precisely the same holds for the history of the idea of progress. The fundamental structure of the idea, its governing assumptions and premises, its crucial elements—cumulative growth, continuity in time, necessity, the unfolding of potentiality, all of these and others—took shape in the West within the Christian tradition. The secular forms in which we find the idea of progress from the late seventeenth century on in Europe are inconceivable in the historical sense apart from their Christian roots.

The Seventeenth Century Battle of the Books: The Ancients vs. The Moderns

It is generally agreed that the first secular statement of the idea of progress in modern Europe occurred during the so-called Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns in France in the last part of the seventeenth century. R.F. Jones, *Ancients and Moderns* and H. Rigault, *Histoire de la querelle des anciens et des modernes* are the most complete and authoritative studies of this elegant donnybrook. On the one side were those in the seventeenth century who believed that nothing written or otherwise intellectually achieved in modern times equalled the quality of that which had been contributed in classical antiquity. No modern Homer, Aeschylus, Plato, Lucretius, or Seneca is to be found: so declared the Ancients, the most learned and effective of whom was undoubtedly Boileau, the most delightful being Jonathan Swift in his notable *The Battle of the Books*.

The Case For and Against the Moderns and Progress

Quite the contrary, argued the Moderns, foremost among them Fontenelle and Perrault in France. Here Fontenelle's *Digression on the Ancients and Moderns* (1688) will nicely serve as the most eloquent brief in behalf of the superiority of modernity over antiquity. He makes his fundamental premise Descartes's principle, set forth in his *Discourse on Method* a half-century earlier, of the invariability of nature's laws. We may assume, Fontenelle argues, that in light of this invariability, the human mind is as good today, as rich in reason and imagination, as ever it was in the past. There is no evidence whatever to support any view of the degeneration of human reason since the time of the Greeks. And if men today are as well constituted physically and mentally as were the men of antiquity, then it follows that there has been and will continue a definite advancement of both the arts and the sciences, simply because it is possible for each age to build upon what has been bequeathed to it by preceding ages.

Here Fontenelle introduces the analogy we have already found in St. Augustine (it was a common one in the seventeenth century, though it is unlikely that many of those who employed it were aware of its origin in *The City of God*). The history of mankind can be likened, in its constant development through time, to a single individual living through all ages, beginning as an infant, advancing to adolescence, and finally reaching maturity and then old age, always improving himself through education. But there is one signal difference between Fontenelle's and Augustine's use of the analogy. The latter had followed through with the implications of the analogy, declaring mankind to be now in its very old age, with degenera-

tion of faculties to be expected and, eventually, death. But here, Fontenelle makes inconsistency a virtue, a polemical weapon, and although willing to let the metaphor speak for past and present, he drops it so far as the future is concerned. Mankind, he declares, will have no old age or "to drop the metaphor, men will never degenerate."

Georges Sorel, in his *The Illusions of Progress*, would pronounce the conclusion, indeed the whole Fontenellean argument, a shabby piece of bourgeois trickery. The reasoning of the Moderns, Sorel writes, is entirely circular. First, Molière, Racine, and others are pronounced superior to Aeschylus and Sophocles. From this superiority, progress as a principle in human history may be deduced. But how can we be sure that a Molière is the superior to an Aeschylus? Because mankind is always advancing, improving, progressing in its knowledge, and those who come later are the inevitable beneficiaries of those earlier. We, as a human race, know more than did our primitive forerunners: *ergo*, a seventeenth century dramatist is bound to be greater than one of the fifth century B.C.

Circular the reasoning most certainly is, and confused and superficial the conclusion; but this notwithstanding, it was the Moderns who carried the day, won the battle—at least by their and their successors' standard. By the beginning of the eighteenth century this modernist view was supreme among a growing number of intellectuals: that mankind has advanced in culture, is now advancing, and will continue to advance during a long future ahead, and that this advance is the result solely of natural and human causes.

Turgot and the Christian Legacy of Progress

Probably the first full and complete statement of progress is that of Turgot, expressed in his celebrated discourse before an admiring audience at the Sorbonne in December 1750, one entitled "A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind." In this discourse progress is made to cover not simply the arts and sciences but, on their base, the whole of culture—manner, mores, institutions, legal codes, economy, etc. Even more comprehensive is Turgot's "Plan for Two Discourses on Universal History" which he wrote in 1751, just prior to his entry into government service and eventual fame, and final humiliation as minister of finance. (All of Turgot's writings on progress can be found, translated, in Ronald L. Meek, ed., *Turgot on Progress, Society and Economy*.) In Turgot's "Universal History" we are given an account of the progress of mankind which, in comprehensiveness and ordering of materials, would not be equalled until Turgot's ardent admirer, Condorcet wrote his *Outline of an Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* during the French Revolution. Condorcet wrote it in a period of but a few weeks all the while hiding from the Jacobin

police in an attic (a staunch supporter of the Revolution, Condorcet had managed to incur Robespierre's hostility).

Before leaving Turgot, it is important to stress once again the historical importance of Christianity in the formation of the secular modern conception of progress in Western Europe. In the first place, Turgot began his career as a reasonably devout student of theology at the Sorbonne, his aspiration then linked to a future in the Church. Second, just six months before the discourse on "The Successive Advances of the Human Mind" was given in 1750, he had presented another public discourse, this one on the crucial importance of Christianity to the progress of mankind. And third, it was Bossuet's *Universal History*, which I have already referred to, that Turgot acknowledged to be his inspiration for the writing, or the preparation of a plan of his own "Universal History." Bossuet, proud and convinced Christian that he was, constructed his history in terms of a succession of epochs, all designed and given effect by God. Turgot allowed God to disappear (he had lost his faith by 1751 when he wrote his "Universal History") and replaced Bossuet's "epochs" by "stages": stages of social and cultural progress, each emerging from its predecessor through human rather than divine causes. But Turgot's alterations notwithstanding, it is unlikely that his own secular work on progress would have been written apart from the inspiration derived from Bishop Bossuet and other Christian philosophers of history. He is an epitome, in this respect, of the whole history of the modern idea of progress.

The Eighteenth-Century Views of Progress

There are many expressions of belief in mankind's progress to be found in the late eighteenth century—in Germany, England, and elsewhere as well as in France. For reasons of space I must confine attention here to but a few of the principals.

Germany

In Germany there is Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, most famous for his *Nathan the Wise*, and the author of *The Education of the Human Race*, commonly described as incorporating "Enlightenment-born" ideas of human advancement in his otherwise religious structure of thought. But, as is evident from the title, the entire work owes its argument to the Christian, and more specifically, the Augustinian tradition. Much more substantial and systematic is Johann Gottfried Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of History of Man*. Here we are treated to mankind in a ceaseless process of evolution: commencing with the very beginnings of the human race, proceeding stage by stage, with potentiality unfolding into actuality, driven

by an immanent necessity, and reaching the level of civilization which Herder thought to be Germanic at its best, but extending to the rest of the West as well. And, Herder concludes, mankind will go on developing into a very long future—in culture, institutions, government, learning, and in man's own happiness.

The final German I shall mention here is the remarkable Immanuel Kant. He is of course universally known for his *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of Practical Reason*, and the idea of progress cannot be said to figure significantly in either of these. But Kant is also the author of a brilliant and suggestive shorter work, *Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitical Point of View*, one in which the progress of mankind is made central. Some of his propositions drawn from this work are worth citing here:

All capacities implanted in a creature by nature are destined to unfold themselves completely and conformably to their end, in the course of time;

The means which nature employs to bring about the development of all capacities implanted in men, is their mutual antagonism in society, but only so far as this antagonism becomes at length the cause of an order among them that is regulated by law; and

The history of the human race, viewed as a whole, may be regarded as the realization of a hidden plan of nature to bring about a political constitution, internally, and, for this purpose, also externally perfect, as the only state in which all the capacities implanted by her in mankind can be fully developed.

England and Scotland

In England, or rather the United Kingdom, including Scotland, there are several works of first water in advancing the popularity of the idea of progress and also its influence upon public policy. Foremost is Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, the first systematic textbook in economics, if we like, but a work written with the theme of mankind's natural progress as the warp of Smith's classic. Fundamental to this book is Smith's declaration that there is a natural order of the progress of nations and that the reason England, and Western Europe generally, now find themselves economically crippled, threatened with stagnation, is that by unwise edict, law, and custom they have interfered with the processes of the natural progress of wealth, labor, skill, rent, and profits. Smith's "invisible hand" is as much directed toward the mechanics of progress through time as it is the stability of the economic system.

William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* is usually categorized as a plea for absolute anarchism, with removal of all forms of authority and power deemed necessary to man's achievement of true freedom. But it should be understood that Godwin too found it proper to set this plea in the context of a theory of progress. Such has been mankind's development over many thousands of years and such is the rate of present advancement, that we may

confidently anticipate a long future in which human beings will be liberated not only from the torments of environment—hunger, squalor, tyranny, and exploitation—but from the torments too of physical and mental illness. In one enraptured passage Godwin actually foresees a time when humanity will even be removed from the inevitability of death.

It was Godwin's work, as well as Condorcet's (which I shall mention momentarily) that led Malthus, in his *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, to point out that should such conditions ever actually prevail, the earth would suffer such over-population as to make any thought of sustenance fantastical; not that Malthus was indifferent or antagonistic to a belief in progress. Both Gertrude Himmelfarb (in her superlative volume of essays, *Victorian Minds*) and William Petersen in *Malthus for Our Time* have highlighted in exhaustive fashion Malthus's belief that social and moral checks to human fertility were possible, even probable—this belief appears in subsequent editions of Malthus's *Essay*. In addition, Malthus took the progressive view that humanity was destined to very real and fruitful advancement into the distant future.

We must not neglect the Scottish moral philosophers (of whom Adam Smith was of course one). Preeminent, apart only from Smith, is Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*; in this lucid and elegant work, Ferguson lays out in considerable detail the steps and stages through which mankind's arts, sciences, and institutions have undergone almost continuous advancement. This volume has been called the foundation of modern social science, but that is declaring too much. Suffice it to say it is assuredly among the stones of the foundation. There were others of great importance in Scotland at the time, at Glasgow, Edinburgh, chiefly, and they have all been dealt with in masterly fashion by the late Gladys Bryson, *Man and Society: The Scottish Inquiry of the Eighteenth Century*. Also to be recommended is William C. Lehman, *Adam Ferguson and the Beginnings of Modern Sociology*, which covers far more than that title might indicate.

France: Rousseau and Condorcet

Passing to the French (having already mentioned the seminal Turgot) there is Rousseau's *Second Discourse*, the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*. It may come as a surprise to many readers to see this work put under the rubric of progress, for, it will be said, that long essay is in fact a kind of dirge, a lament for mankind's degeneration into social inequality and all the vices which spring from inequality. Such readers have not read closely enough. What Rousseau gives us with extraordinary insight and detail (it is, allowing only for its polemical thrust, a prime beginning of modern evolutionary anthropology) is a panorama which has the state of

nature for its beginning and then traces, stage by stage, the ascent of mankind to ever higher cultural levels, including those of morality, language, kinship, the arts and sciences, and others. It was long ago pointed out by the great Arthur Lovejoy, in an important article titled "On the Supposed Primitivism of Rousseau's *Second Discourse*" (found in Lovejoy's collected essays), that for Rousseau the initial state of nature was *not* man's happiest condition on earth. But we still encounter the widely stated belief that for Rousseau, man has never since known the happiness, the bliss, and contentment he knew when he was in the state of nature. In point of fact, as Lovejoy noted, and as Rousseau plainly states in the *Discourse*, it was a later stage, approximately the fifth, when a great deal of culture and social organization had evolved, including families, villages, nations, and the like, that man enjoyed "the happiest and most stable of all epochs," to use Rousseau's words. Even more absurd is the prevalent conviction that Rousseau "advocated return to the state of nature." On the contrary: what he advocated was the political state, one resting totally upon the general will.

Returning to the *Second Discourse*, it is true that Rousseau emphasizes the harshly negative impact of, first, private property and, second, the discovery of the agricultural and mechanical arts upon what had previously been a felicitous development. Because now it became possible, he tells us, for man to exploit man and thus make impossible any longer the kind of equality men had hitherto known. So it is rise and fall that we see in the *Discourse*. But it doesn't end with that. For in the *Third Discourse on Political Economy* and in the famous *Social Contract*, we are shown in explicit detail just how mankind's degeneration can be halted and progress achieved—through the instituting of the general will and, with this, complete and enveloping social equality. In sum, Rousseau belongs among the philosophers of progress. And this despite his authorship of the *First Discourse*, namely, that on the arts and sciences and their baneful effect upon human morality. Rousseau in that work is pointing out, as Marx would a century later, the iniquities of the present. But, also like Marx, Rousseau sets these in a developmental context, one that when properly aided by human action, will yield a golden future.

The one other French philosopher of progress I want to cite has been mentioned, but without even brief description: Marie Jean Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet (1743–1794). He had been deeply impressed by Turgot's discourses and writings of 1750–1751, and had even written a biography of Turgot before the outbreak of the Revolution. Progress was in Condorcet's very marrow. He hailed the Revolution and never weakened in his support of it, but, as I have already noted, he incurred the hatred of Robespierre who consequently put the Jacobin police on Condorcet's trail. It was while

he was hiding from the police that he wrote his *Outline of a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*. The three stages of progress Turgot and others had premised for human advancement from past to present become nine stages for Condorcet, with a tenth, still ahead, when man would know all joys of freedom, equality, justice, and humanitarianism. Each of the nine stages is given an identity drawn from some signal element of economy or culture; thus the primitive pastoral stage, the agricultural, that of the towns, the handicraft stage, etc., culminating in the kind of civilization that had reached its highest level in Western Europe. For Condorcet there were invariable laws of development, arising from man's own nature, laws which, when finally discovered, as Condorcet believed that he had discovered them, would guide our vision of the future. "If there is to exist a science for anticipating the future progress of the human kind, and for directing and hastening this progress, it must be based primarily on the history of the progress already made."

This progress can be divided, Condorcet suggests, into some nine epochs. The first, an epoch glimpsed only through imagination, is that of mankind living in kinship organization, with the simplest possible economy and material culture and the beginnings of religion ("the most hateful of all despotisms upon the human mind"). The eight succeeding epochs take us through the origins of language, handicraft, pastoralism, villages, towns, commerce, and so on, reaching the first great heights in ancient classical civilization. Next followed the "barbarism" of Christian-medieval society, succeeded by the Renaissance, the rise of modern science, with the ninth epoch culminating in all that Condorcet and his fellow philosophers prized so greatly. "Everything points to the fact that we are verging upon the epoch of one of the great revolutions of the human race . . . The existing state of knowledge guarantees that it will be auspicious." The next, the tenth epoch still in the future, will represent man's achievement at last of full equality, liberty, justice, and abolition of not merely want and hunger but of all remaining restraints upon the human mind.

America

Few places in the eighteenth century displayed a stronger belief in the philosophy of progress than did the American colonies and, then, the new, infant republic. Henry Steele Commager, in his recent *The Empire of Reason*, gives a good deal of stress to this; so does Edward McNall Burns in his *The American Idea of Mission*. Thomas Jefferson, in 1824, two years before his death, marvelling at the progress already to be seen on earth and all that he had seen in his 81 years of life, writes: "And where this progress will stop no one can say. Barbarism has, in the meantime, been receding before

the steady step of amelioration, and will in time, I trust, disappear from the earth." The sometimes dour John Adams, in the Preface to his *Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States*, writes of "the regular course of progressive improvement" in the arts and sciences, and goes so far as to declare that "The institutions now made in America will not wholly wear out for thousands of years." Benjamin Franklin, in a letter to his friend Joseph Priestley in 1780, writes: "It is impossible to imagine the Height to which may be carried, in a thousand years, the Power of Man over Matter." Such sentiments were commonplace in the America of the Founding Fathers.

The Nineteenth Century's View of Progress

In the nineteenth century, on both sides of the Atlantic, the belief in progress attained the status of a popular religion among the middle class, and was widely declared by intellectuals to be a fixed law.

France: Auguste Comte

Auguste Comte's *Positive Philosophy*, published in successive volumes during the 1830s is probably the most systematic and dedicated of all works on progress in the century, and, as Teggart has shown in his *Theory of History*, this work exerted immense influence upon the social and moral thought of the century—upon minds not always willing to acknowledge the influence. The essence of human progress for Comte is intellectual. Mankind's mentality has evolved over the millennia through three stages: the theological, the metaphysical, and, coming now into existence, the positive or scientific. Comte argues that all physical disciplines have reached scientific status—astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology, in that evolutionary order—and the time is now ripe for the creation of a true science of society.

Comte first labelled this new science "social physics" then "sociology." It would be a master-science, with economics, politics, and others sections within sociology. The great object of the science of sociology is demonstration to governments and citizens of the basic laws of human behavior. These, for Comte, fall under two great divisions: Social Statics, the study of social relationships; and Social Dynamics, the essence of which is the study of the principles which underlie human progress. "No real order can be established and still less can it last, if it is not fully compatible with progress; and no great progress can be accomplished if it does not tend to the consolidation of order . . . The misfortune of our present state is that the two ideas [progress and social order] are set up in radical opposition to each other."

Such was Comte's absolute confidence in his own powers of prevision that, working from his claimed laws of progress, he wrote a second major work, *The Positive Polity*, published in the early 1850s, with a subtitle, "Treatise on Sociology," in which he actually described, in abundant detail, the utopia that would exist on earth once human beings, instructed by Comte's science of society, liberated themselves from all existing beliefs, customs, and laws. Although this work did not have the influence upon the developing social sciences that his earlier one did, it played nevertheless a significant role in Western utopianism, resulting in the creation of a Religion of Humanity which had chapters in many parts of both European and American societies. Messianic, Comte may have become the butt of sneers from Marx and his followers, but his was a mind of power, and allow all we will for the shaping influence Saint-Simon had on Comte during his early years, his first major work, *The Positive Philosophy*, is highly original. It is the fusion of a brilliantly creative mind and a vast amount of reading done in his youthful years, which have been fully treated in Henri Gouhier, *La Jeunesse d'Auguste Comte*.

Germany: Hegel and Marx

In Germany, G.W.F. Hegel's *Philosophy of History* (published after Hegel's death in 1831) assumed much of the same influence that Comte's writing held in France. Growth, dialectical in character, plays a strong part conceptually in all of Hegel's work, but it is in his *Philosophy of History* that the importance of the idea of progress is best to be noted. The most striking difference between human history and what is revealed in the study of sub-human species consists in "an impulse of perfectibility" that the human species alone possesses, as the consequence of its powers of reason and also of the cumulative character of its mental experience. For Hegel human history is "the development of spirit in time," and the essence of Hegelian spirit is "freedom." The history of mankind has moved, he tells us, from east to west, and fundamental in this history is the development and enlargement of the sense of freedom. "The east knew and to the present day knows only that *one* is free; The Greek and Roman world that *some* are free; the German world knows that *all* are free." The laws of history have contrived to produce "only in the history of the German nations" the political state, which for Hegel is the acme of historical progress, within which the idea of freedom attains "concrete reality."

By no means all of those who were deeply influenced by Hegel shared Hegel's view of the state as the most perfect of institutions, least of all the Prussian state to which Hegel gave utter devotion during his years of lecturing at the University of Berlin. Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* deals illuminatingly

not only with Hegel's philosophy of political progress but with its impact upon the generation or two following Hegel's death. The important point in this impact is that Hegel's dialectic, his view of history as the war of opposites continuously and cumulatively reaching ever-higher syntheses, in sum, Hegel's perspective of mankind in ceaseless progress, touched a great many minds, in fact helped shape these minds, which were in no way whatever sympathetic to Hegel's veneration of the state.

Among these minds, is of course Karl Marx. In his Preface to the second edition of *Capital* Marx pays his respects to Hegel, declaring himself "the pupil of that mighty thinker" even though Marx felt obliged to separate himself from the "mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands." As far as Marx was concerned, Hegel was the first to clarify in systematic and thorough fashion the process of change in history even if he did, in Marx's opinion, have it "standing on its head." Is there a clear-cut, deterministic belief in mankind's progress in Marx? A generation ago, the affirmative answer was almost universal. Today, however, there are enough followers of the "humanistic" Marx, the Marx of "praxis" to get controversy rather than instant consensus when the question is asked, at least in the Western world. No doubt there are passages in Marx's voluminous writings to make possible both an affirmative and negative reply. But in my judgment Marx cannot possibly be separated from the same basic philosophy of progress that we find in dozens of other influential minds in the nineteenth century.

Marx believed *Capital* to be his greatest and most seminal work; so did Engels and scores of other followers who talked with or corresponded with Marx. And in the Preface to the first edition of *Capital* Marx leaves us in no doubt whatever of a philosophy of history, leading toward capitalism's demise and the rise of socialism, one "working with iron necessity towards inevitable results." Granted that "one nation can and should learn from another," but even when a society has "got on the right track for the discovery of its natural laws of movement . . . it can neither clear by bold leaps nor remove by legal enactments the obstacles offered by the successive phases of its normal development." And in the slightly earlier *Critique of Political Economy*, Marx writes: "In broad outlines we can designate the Asiatic, the ancient, the feudal, and modern bourgeois methods of production as so many epochs in the progress of the economic formation of society."

Who can miss in the most famous and powerful of all Marx's writings, *The Manifesto*, the virtual ode to progress, an ode that allows, even compels, him to hail the wonders of capitalism for its work in preparing the industrial and technological scene for the eventual and, by virtue of the fatal contradictions in capitalism, necessary appearance of socialism when at long last humanity will

“have an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” And, to offer just one more bit of evidence in support of the reality of the “deterministic” Marx, there is the fascinating article Marx wrote, in English, for the *New York Tribune* in 1853 on “The British Rule in India.” The imperialist devastation of traditional Indian society by England may spring from the crassest, most venal and exploitative motives, Marx writes, but: “The question, can mankind fulfill its destiny without a fundamental revolution in Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England, she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution.”

England: J.S. Mill and Spencer

John Stuart Mill wrote an entire book on Comte’s philosophy, which he admired greatly in the form it had taken in the *Positive Philosophy*. Dealing with the proper methods for the social sciences in Book VI of his *Logic*, Mill not only endorses Comte’s ‘law of three stages’ but declares: “By its aid we may hereafter succeed not only in looking far forward into the future history of the human race, but in determining what artificial means may be used . . . to accelerate the natural progress . . .” He also insists that “The progressiveness of the human race is the foundation on which a method of philosophizing in the social science has been of late years erected, far superior to either of the two modes which had previously been prevalent, the chemical or experimental, and the geometrical modes.” In his most famous essay, “On Liberty,” Mill distinguishes between “stationary” and “progressive” societies, and argues that the greatest possible freedom of the individual is the natural outcome of the laws of progress in society.

Very probably the most famous single philosopher of progress in the nineteenth century, famous throughout the world, the Far East included, was Herbert Spencer. For Spencer, as for so many others of the age, the words “development,” “evolution,” and “progress” were synonyms (so are they in Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*). Spencer devoted his life to demonstration of the operation of laws of progress throughout nature and human society. Such demonstration is the declared objective of his vast, ten-volume *Synthetic Philosophy*. But early on, in *Social Statics*, Spencer set forth the guiding principle of his thought. “Progress, therefore, is not an accident, but a necessity. Instead of civilization being artificial, it is a part of nature; all of a piece with the development of the embryo or the unfolding of a flower.” Since Spencer defines all evil as only a maladaptation of an organism to nature, (and as maladaptation must, through evolutionary processes, disappear in time) then “all excess and all deficiency must disappear; that is, all unfitness must disappear; that is, all imperfection must disappear.” Not by an iota does that con-

ception of progress change in any of Spencer's later works. For him the theory of progress was the golden thread making possible a single, unified science, one whose principles would embrace the natural and social worlds alike. It is doubtful if any philosopher has come even close to having the influence upon social thought, lay and scholarly, that Spencer had for nearly a half-century.

America

In nineteenth century America, as David Marcel documents in detail in his *Progress and Pragmatism*, progress became either religion directly or the context of religions. George Bancroft devoted nearly fifty years to the writing of a history of the United States that would prove beyond question the operation of an iron law of progress, leading to ever-widening freedom, in America. In New York City, at the height of the agonizing, bloody Civil War, the philosopher-historian John W. Draper spoke to large audiences to propound his thesis that American history embodies a "social advancement . . . as completely under the control of natural law as is the bodily growth of an individual."

Even Emerson, so often critical of American values, asked, in his "Progress of Culture": "Who would live in the stone age or the bronze or the iron or the lacustrine? Who does not prefer the age of steel, of gold, of coal, petroleum, cotton, steam, electricity, and of the spectroscope?" Such words no doubt strike chill into the hearts of our environmentalists today, but they struck no chill in Emerson's day. And in 1893, the midst of the worst single depression America had yet experienced, Chicago opened the gates to its 600 acres of spectacular exhibits of technological progress, more than 27 million people went through, to marvel and even worship. Much the same had happened in England in 1851 at the great Exhibition of London; its aim, in the words of a writer in the *Edinburgh Review*, "to seize the living scroll of human progress, inscribed with every successive conquest of man's intellect."

Nineteenth Century Skeptics of Progress

There were assuredly skeptics with respect to progress when those words were written, and there would be a continuing line of skeptics from Jacob Burckhardt and Friedrich Nietzsche, through Arthur Schopenhauer, down to Oswald Spengler, W. R. Inge, and Austin Freeman in the early decades of the twentieth century. Only, really, during the last quarter-century have we recognized those who doubted or hated the changes in the natural and cultural landscape, which most people deemed progressive. (Even in the French Enlightenment, as Henry Vyverberg has shown in his *Historical Pessimism in the French Enlightenment*, there were those who looked at past, present and future with but little if any hope.)

No idea, however grand and encompassing, ever captures the loyalties of everyone in an age. But even though we acknowledge the skeptics, there is no doubt whatever that the overwhelming majority of people in the nineteenth and early twentieth century embraced faith in human progress, with economic and technological advancement the necessary *vis creatrix*, and accepted it as a fact of nature and history. "You can't stop progress" had become a universal colloquialism in this country well before the nineteenth century ended, and that theme, variously stated, served our major scholars and intellectuals as well as our politicians and statesmen.

The Dark Side of Progress: Power, Nationalism, and Racism

It would be misleading to imply that the idea of progress has been invariably linked to philosophies of liberalism, democracy, and legal equality. There is a dark side to the idea, manifest in the writings of those, on the one hand, who celebrated political power as the magic key to human salvation on earth and, on the other, who linked progress with some given race, usually "Nordic," "Teutonic," or "Anglo-Saxon," though not seldom "French" and "American" during the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century. The same conception of a principle of mankind advancing necessarily to perfection that we find in the liberal philosophy of a Herbert Spencer is to be found in the absolutist philosophies of those who followed J. G. Fichte and Hegel in dedication to the political state or the racialist philosophies of Arthur de Gobineau, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, and their numerous followers.

From Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation*, through Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, down to the spokesmen, Left and Right, of the twentieth century's totalitarianisms, there has been a continuing philosophy of progress in the West rooted in the transforming, redemptive uses of power. Hegel, in his *Philosophy of Right*, had written: "The march of God in the world, that is what the state is." And that is what the state or nation meant to a great many in the nineteenth century, and continues, in effect, to mean in our own day. It is one thing to declare oneself in favor of an absolute state, however rooted. It is something vastly different and greater in potential effect to say, as Fichte, Hegel, and their followers said, that political absolutism is the necessary and benign outcome of the principle of human progress.

Marx may have been hostile to the state as he knew it in its "bourgeois" form, and have actually believed what he wrote in the *Manifesto*, that the triumph of the proletariat and the ending of class rule would mean the abolition of the political state. But when late in life he wrote his *Criticism of the Gotha Program*, he could

give vent to the following words: "Between capitalist and communist society lies a period of revolutionary transformation from one to the other. There is a corresponding period of transition in the political sphere and in this period the state can only take the form of *a revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*" (italics Marx's). We can do Marx the charity of supposing that in his view this dictatorship would be short-lived and would be literally of the proletariat, not of a small clique; but it is hardly necessary here to point to the ease with which proletariat became party and party became governing committee and governing committee became one man in the history of Marxism from Marx to Stalin. Without the sustaining, sacralizing belief in human progress, and in the uses of state and political power to facilitate this progress, it is unlikely that totalitarianism as we have known it in the twentieth century would have come about.

But we should not rest with the view that progress-as-power is to be seen only among those who are intellectually descended from Hegel, or any of his followers, Left or Right, Marx included. As Carleton Hayes, in his *Essays on Nationalism*, Hans Kohn in his *Idea of Nationalism*, Boyd Shafer in his *The Faces of Nationalism* have all made incontestable, the union between the idea of progress and the idea of the nation with a mission affected the entire Western world. Leonard Krieger, in his *The German Idea of Freedom* and Edward McNall Burns in *The American Idea of Mission* have demonstrated so effectively that no people in the West has been free, in some degree at least, of the view that *national* progress, the advancement of the scope and interests of a nation, is not merely progress but freedom, justice, and goodness too. There is no coincidence whatever in the fact that those at the turn of the century in this country who took the name Progressives for themselves in politics combined belief in manifest destiny with belief that true liberalism meant willingness to use the powers of government in economy, society, and culture as the means of accelerating American progress toward its destined purpose. A great deal of the difference between liberalism as we know it today in the West and the liberalism of Mill and Spencer is explainable in terms of the rhetoric of progress—with the state made crucial in this rhetoric.

The same has to be said of racialism. It is doubtful that the kind of racial obsession we have known in this century, reaching its ugliest peak in German Nazism, would have existed had it not been for the nineteenth century "proofs" by such minds as Gobineau, in his *Essay on the Inequality of the Races*, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, in *Foundation of the Nineteenth Century*, and, in this country, John W. Burgess, in his *Political Science and Comparative Constitutional Law* that behind all genuine progress in civilization is the factor of race. And, more important, behind all modern progress in

the world lies the contribution of a particular race—Teutonic, Nordic, call it what we will. I am not suggesting that belief in racial superiority is inseparable from some kind of belief in progress; of course it is. But with race, as with political power, far more can be done to advance the cause when it is linked with a progressive philosophy of history than when it is put forward alone on its own merits.

To summarize and to reiterate: the idea of progress as we have known it for two and a half millennia in the West is hydraheaded. It may mean, as it meant to the Greeks and Romans, no more than advance of the arts and sciences, with consequent boons to human welfare. It may mean a Christian march to a final perfect millennium on this earth and then eternal bliss in heaven. It may mean the constant increase in knowledge, in free institutions, and in creativity, as it did to the Founding Fathers and their kindred spirits in England and France. But it may also mean the relentless enhancement of the political state, the ever-more intrusive role of the state—and its military and police—into our individual lives, or the equally relentless ascent to domination of the world by a given race.

The Fate of Progress in the Twentieth Century

We have reached the twentieth century in our historical look at the idea of progress. It is often said that this vaunted faith is dead, in the West at least—killed by World War I, by the Great Depression, by World War II, by the spectacle of military despotism, under whatever ideological label, galloping across the earth at rising speed, by belief in the exhaustion of nature and her resources, by malaise compounded of boredom, apathy and disillusionment at one extreme and by consecration to mindless terror at the other, or by some other lethal force. Perhaps it is dead, or at least *in extremis*. Certainly it cannot be said of the idea that it enjoys the favor that it did in the nineteenth century, either as popular dogma or as intellectual creed. But, for reasons I shall come to presently, it is unwise to administer last rites, just yet at any rate.

The Early Twentieth Century's Faith in Progress

One point must be emphasized. The idea of progress entered the twentieth century at flood tide. Among industrialists and small businessmen alike, the idea had all the buoyancy during the first three decades of the century that it ever had in nineteenth century Manchester. Even during the Great Depression when Robert and Helen Lynd revisited *Middletown* (Muncie, Indiana) they found faith in progress as strong as they had ten years earlier when

America was in the throes of prosperity. And, as even casual review of the books and articles written in the 1930s will make clear, there was no significant waning of faith in progress among the economically and politically active. There were those who believed that progress would be best served by a full return to the principles of the free market, with a retreat of government from the economy mandatory. But the most determined opponents of the New Deal were hardly lacking in faith that progress had been a reality and would be again, once natural economic processes became ascendant.

Side by side, a growing number were both convinced of the reality of progress and saw rational governmental planning as the necessary key. Michael Freedman, in his *The New Liberalism*, traces this belief back to the influence of John A. Hobson and Leonard Hobhouse in England at the beginning of the century. It found fertile soil in this country, in the minds of intellectuals at least, commencing with the presidency of Woodrow Wilson. From about 1915 through the 1950s, the New Liberalism was very strong indeed, and it was premised upon faith in progress just as was the Old Liberalism of Spencer and Mill. William E. Akin, in his valuable *Technocracy and the American Dream*, has recently reminded us of the breadth and seriousness of the technocratic movement during the early decades of this century, reaching its height in the Depression. Belief in progress, or the possibility of progress once control of government was placed in the hands of scientists and technologists, was as strong in technocratic minds as belief had been among St. Simonians, Comteans, and Fourierists in the nineteenth century. Nor is such belief dead even yet.

Nor can we forget radical progressive flowerings during the early decades of the century. Whether native radicalism of the kind we associate with Thorstein Veblen, Henry George, and Edward Bellamy, or imported, chiefly Marxist, radicalism, there was profound conviction that the future would be bright. This radical progressive faith prophesied that all present barriers to abundance and happiness would necessarily be removed by the forces of history, and that the day was impending when equality, justice, and reason would govern our lives. And as far as Communism is concerned, we find all the old faith in humanity's golden future still intact in official pronouncements of the Russians and the Chinese. It was the Chinese Liu Shao-chi only a few years ago who declared for the world's benefit that Communism (Maoist in thrust) "is the road that all humanity must inevitably take, in accordance with the laws of the development of history." Maoism does not currently reign in China, but we may take for granted that belief in progress through Marxist Communism does.

There are other evidences of the persistence of belief in progress. The philosophy of "social evolution" has never really disappeared

from the social sciences, though there was something of a lull for a number of years. And right now this philosophy is undergoing a veritable efflorescence. In my *Social Change and History*, I have argued that the doctrine of social evolution has nothing to do, either historically or logically, with biological evolution. The panoramas of social evolution propounded today by Talcott Parsons and his followers (not to mention those of the increasing number of anthropologists who take Leslie White as their guide) all descend from the panoramas of progress which Comte, Marx, Spencer, E.B. Tylor, and so many others put before us in the last century. Exactly what would be the response from any one of our present-day social evolutionists if asked whether the future of mankind will be as rosy as that foreseen by a Spencer, we cannot be sure. But the methodology, the structure, of current theories of social evolution is almost precisely that generated by the Western idea of progress, with its built-in assumption of slow, gradual, continuous change—cumulative, purposive, and self-driven.

Current Skepticism on the Idea of Progress

But if the belief in progress, considered eudaemonistically, was still strong during the first half of the twentieth century, it cannot be so declared at the present moment. Without much doubt, it seems to me, the idea has fallen upon hard times in this, the second half of the century. The doubts, skepticisms, and repudiations of the idea of progress during the nineteenth century—those of Alexis de Tocqueville, Burckhardt, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Max Weber—have grown steadily in our own century. W. R. Inge, in his famous lecture-essay, "The Idea of Progress," of 1920; the works of Henry and Brooks Adams, especially the latter's *Law of Civilization and Decay*; Georges Sorel, *The Illusion of Progress*; Austin Freeman, *Social Decay and Regeneration*; Spengler, *Decline of the West*; A.J. Toynbee, to very considerable degree, in his *Study of History*; Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*; Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*—these are but a few of the works which, building in effect upon the doubts and disbeliefs of the nineteenth century figures I have cited, have given the intellectual atmosphere a darker and darker hue. True, there is Teilhard de Chardin, the Roman Catholic scientist-philosopher who, almost alone, has given our century a systematic and complex, if not always intelligible, philosophy of history based entirely upon the principle of ever-perfecting mankind. Not even Spencer outdid Teilhard in expression of long-run optimism. And, as I have noted, most, if not all, of those committed deeply to Marxism, are inextricably committed also to a progressive view of the future. The idea of progress, in short, lives: but precariously, so far as a growing number of people,

intellectual and lay are concerned.

At the heart of late twentieth-century skepticism lie several related convictions, all at odds with the beliefs that held sway during the heyday of progress.

First, a spreading conclusion among intellectuals that we have reached the limits of economic advancement. Fred Hirsch, in his *Social Limits of Growth* and E.J. Mishan, *The Costs of Economic Growth* and *The Economic Growth Debate* represent, intelligently and eruditely, this point of view. In essence, this position holds that industrialism's lavish productivity has by now weakened the desire for further material benefits and has even dampened interest in those already achieved. Both Hirsch and Mishan argue that each new advance in technology and industrialism weakens ever more visibly the social and moral values which we cherish and which, for so long, seemed entirely congruent with economic development. Max Weber, at the very end of his famous *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, predicted that the very ethic which had nurtured the historical rise of capitalism would in time wane, even die, and that capitalism would thence be all superstructure without any vital psychological foundation to hold it up for very long.

Second, a growing conviction that we are rapidly depleting nature and her resources. Fundamental to the idea of progress, as we have seen, from the time of the Greeks to our own century, was the belief in what Descartes called the "invariability of the laws of nature." Implicit in this belief, or certainly deducible from it, was a confidence that nature's resources would never give out; that the only real challenge was man's capacity for exploiting them. Today, whether with genuine foundation or not, a suspicion spreads that our prodigality is rapidly destroying nature's riches, or using them up without regard to the future. Talbot Page, in his recent *Conservation and Economic Efficiency*, expresses this view most soberly and learnedly (even if in my judgment without full justification), but one need only look at the manifestoes of environmentalist movements to see the view in its fullest light. Ernest Beckerman, *In Defense of Economic Growth* presents, by my lights at least, a very convincing refutation of the depletion-argument, but it has had little if any effect upon those who follow that argument.

Third, it is impossible to overlook the still small perhaps but constantly enlarging belief that science has reached the limits of its own capacity to advance. Or, if it be premised that science can still make epochal discoveries, that science has reached the point where further achievements will be adverse rather than beneficial so far as human morality and psychology are concerned. A very perceptible dethronement of knowledge, in all of the sciences, physical and social, is taking place. Thus Gunther Stent, notable molecular biologist, has put forward his view, in *The Coming of the Golden Age: A View of the End of Progress*, that the law of diminishing

returns has set in, that further *significant* advances in science become less and less likely. He candidly adds to this view of science the belief that a widespread revulsion, presaged by the beatniks and hippies, will take place against science, with something resembling the life of pristine South Sea Islanders becoming more and more mesmerizing to people.

I am not suggesting that any such view is at present endemic among scientists; far from it. But it reflects nevertheless a state of mind that shows considerable evidence of hardihood, even within science. And there is a related belief, becoming rapidly widespread, I fear, that science, for all the good it has done mankind, is now at a point where it is more likely to be bureaucratic, oppressive in its prohibitions beginning with tobacco, now extending to so many areas of our recreations and pleasures, and likely to extend even farther in the future, and, not least, to become increasingly mired in its own controversies and contradictions. Nor can we forget here the Tocquevillian law of rising expectations, with disillusionment and disenchantment the inevitable consequences. Scientists, to be sure, have contributed to the operation of this law by their own extravagant promises, nowhere more evident than with respect to cancer a few years ago. Disillusionment with science and technology is very much a part of the intellectual landscape, and it would be a rash soul indeed who declared it a purely peripheral and transitory thing.

Fourth, boredom is spreading in Western society: boredom with the very goods, material and psychic, which modernity has heretofore largely blessed. In his profoundly absorbing *Inventing the Future*, scientist Dennis Gabor has suggested that "work is the only occupation yet invented which mankind has been able to endure in any but the smallest possible doses." But, through technology and the fast-developing cult of leisure, we are pushing work into a constantly diminishing place in Western society. The work-ethic wanes and the leisure-ethic grows. But all present evidence is that few if any human beings can endure leisure without becoming bored, succumbing to alcohol and drugs, or other modes of escape, or turning to violence and terrorism in mounting degree. Nothing in the bio- and psychological evolution of mankind has prepared it in slightest degree for the leisure that, by criteria drawn from even the recent historical past, envelops us all in considerable, and rising, degree. Technology has permitted us to make a virtual fetish of leisure, but even while seeking it in constantly expanding dimensions, we are at bottom unable to tolerate it—that is, without recourse to narcotic, psychological, religious, sexual, and violence-saturated releases from the tensions leisure generates. The spread of subjectivism, of what Tom Wolfe has called "Me-ness," proceeds apace with leisure, inviting a view of the future in which the bond of humanity, of community, and mutual awareness will have disappeared altogether.

The Prospects for Progress

What is likely to be the future of the idea of progress? Only the most tenuous speculation is possible. It may disappear altogether in Western thought and life, victim of the forces I have just described, or of some thermonuclear war so vast and encompassing and prolonged as to destroy almost everything, intellectual as well as material. But it may not. And if it doesn't disappear, my own prediction is that its survival will be nurtured, not by rationalist-secular confidence, once so great in Western society, now fast-diminishing but, rather, by a renaissance of religion, a renaissance that may have already begun, most evident in fundamentalist and pentecostal spheres. As I have shown, the Western idea of progress was born of Greek imagery, religious in foundation; the imagery of growth. It attained its fullness within Christianity, starting with the Church Fathers, especially Augustine. Central to any genuinely Christian form of religion is the Pauline emphasis upon *hope*: hope to be given gratification in this world as well as the next. Basically, the Christian creed, its concept of Original Sin notwithstanding, is inseparable from a philosophy of history that is overwhelmingly optimistic about man's estate in this world and the next, provided only that due deference and commitment to God are given. To the degree that we may properly expect the future spread of the now-burgeoning millennialism, I would assume that we may also expect religion to fill the vacuum brought on by those elements of modernity I have described—disillusionment with science, boredom, etc.—and with this, a shoring-up of the idea of progress from past to future. But that, obviously, is speculative in highest degree. Notwithstanding the futurologists to the contrary, it is not possible, and never will be possible, to predict the future. We are left with surmise, intuition, hunch, and hope! ☐

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