

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE IDEA OF PROGRESS*

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The idea of progress seems one of theoretical presuppositions of modernity. One can even regard it, not without reason, as the real “religion of Western civilization.” Historically, this idea was formulated earlier than it is generally thought, around 1680, during the quarrel of Ancients and the Moderns, in which Terrasson, Charles Perrault, the Abbé of Saint-Pierre, and Fontenelle participated. It was then developed on the initiative of a second generation, including principally Turgot, Condorcet, and Louis Sebastien Mercier.

Progress can be defined as a cumulative process in which the most recent stage is always considered preferable and better, i.e., qualitatively superior, to what preceded it. This definition contains a descriptive element (change takes place in a given direction) and an axiological element (this progression is interpreted as an improvement). Thus it refers to change that is oriented (toward the best), necessary (one does not stop progress), and irreversible (no overall return to the past is possible). Improvement being inescapable, it follows that tomorrow will be always better than today.

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The theorists of progress differ on the direction of progress, the rate and the nature of the changes that accompany it, even its principal agents. Nevertheless, all adhere to three key ideas: (1) a linear conception of time and the idea that history has a meaning, oriented towards the future; (2)

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the idea of the fundamental unity of humanity, all called to evolve in the same direction together; and (3) the idea that the world can and must be transformed, which implies that the man affirms himself as sovereign master of nature.

These three ideas originated from Christianity. But with the rise of science and technology in the seventeenth century, they were reformulated in secular terms.

For the Greeks, eternity alone is real. Authentic being is immutable: circular motion, which ensures the eternal return of same in a series of successive cycles, is the most perfect expression of the divine. If there are rises and falls, progress and decline, it is within a cycle inevitably followed by another (Hesiod's theory of the succession of the ages, Virgil's return of the golden age). In addition, the major determining factor comes from the past, not the future: the term *arche* refers above all to an origin ("archaic") as an authority ("*archonte*," "monarch").

With the Bible, history becomes an objectively knowable phenomenon, a dynamic of progress that aims, from the Messianic point of view, toward the advent of a better world. Genesis assigns man the mission of "dominating the Earth." Temporality is the vector in terms of which the better must progressively reveal itself in the world. As a result, a historical event can have a saving role: God appears historically. Temporality, moreover, is directed towards the future, from Creation to the Second Coming, the Garden of Eden to the Last Judgment. The golden age no longer lies in the past, but at the end of times: history will end, and it will end well, at least for the chosen ones.

This linear temporality excludes any eternal return, any cyclic conception of history based on the succession of ages and seasons. Since Adam and Eve, the history of salvation proceeds according to a necessity fixed for all eternity, commencing with the old Covenant and, in Christianity, culminating in an Incarnation that cannot be repeated. Saint Augustine was the first to derive from this conception a philosophy of universal history applicable to all humanity, which is called to progress from age to age towards the better.

The theory of progress secularizes this linear conception of history, from which all modern historicisms arise. The major difference is that the hereafter is reconceived as the future, and happiness replaces salvation. Indeed, in Christianity,

progress remains more eschatological than historical in the proper sense. Man must seek salvation here below, but with a view to the other world. For he has no control over the divine. Christianity also condemns insatiable desire and, like Stoicism, holds that moral wisdom lies more in the limitation than the multiplication of desires. Only the millennialist current in Christianity, inspired by the Apocalypse, envisages a terrestrial reign of a thousand years preceding the Last Judgment. Secularizing Augustine's vision, millennialism inspired Joachim of Flora and his spiritual descendants. But the theory of progress needed additional elements to arrive at its modern form. These elements first appeared in the Renaissance and came to fruition in the seventeenth century.

The rise of science and technology, as well as the discovery of the New World, nourished optimism while appearing to open a field for infinite possible improvement. Francis Bacon, who was the first to use the word "*progress*" in a temporal rather than a spatial sense, affirmed that man's role is to control nature by knowing its laws. René Descartes, in similar fashion, proposed that man make himself master and possessor of nature. Nature, conceived in the "mathematical language" of Galileo, then becomes mute and inanimate. The cosmos no longer has any meaning in itself. It is nothing more than a machine that must be disassembled to be known and manipulated. The world becomes a pure object to the human subject. Thanks to his reason, man feels that he can rely on himself alone.

The cosmos of the Ancients thus gives way to a new world: geometrical, homogeneous, and (probably) infinite, governed by laws of cause and effect. The model of this world is the machine, specifically the clock. Time itself becomes homogeneous, measurable: "merchant time" replaces "peasant time" (Jacques Le Goff). The technological mentality emerges from this new scientific spirit. The principal purpose of technology is maximizing utility, i.e., helping to produce useful things.

There was an obvious convergence between this scientific optimism and the aspirations of a bourgeois class taking command of national markets, which were created in tandem with territorial kingdoms. The bourgeois mentality tends to regard only calculable quantities, i.e., commercial values, as valuable, indeed as real. Georges Sorel later saw the theory of progress as a "bourgeois doctrine."

In the eighteenth century, the classical economists (Adam Smith, Bernard Mandeville, David Hume) rehabilitated insatiable desire: According to them, man's needs can always be increased. Thus by his very nature, man always wants more and acts accordingly, constantly seeking to maximize his best interest. Along with the regnant optimism, this line of argument tends to relativize or efface the theme of original sin.

The cumulative character of scientific knowledge was stressed with particular insistence. Progress, it was concluded, is necessary: one will always know more, thus everything will always get better. Given that a good mind is "formed by all that precedes it," the Moderns are obviously superior: "We are dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants," said Fontenelle, quoting Bernard of Clairvaux. Thus the Ancients are divested of authority. Tradition, in fact, is seen as inherently an obstacle in reason's path. The comparison of present and past—always to the former's advantage—also allows one to glimpse the course of the future. Comparison thus becomes prediction: progress, initially posited as the effect of evolution, is henceforth taken as its cause.

A related conception, already formulated by Saint Augustine, is of humanity as a unitary organism that gradually leaves the childhood of the "first ages" to enter "adulthood." Thus according to Turgot, "mankind, considered from its inception . . . appears to the eyes of the philosopher as an immense whole that has, like every individual, a childhood and a development." The mechanical metaphor yields here to an organic one, but this organicism is paradoxical, since it envisages neither old age nor death. This idea of a collective organism becoming perpetually "more adult" gave rise to the contemporary idea of "development" understood as indefinite growth. In the eighteenth century, a certain contempt for childhood took hold, which went hand in hand with contempt for origins and beginnings, which are always regarded as inferior.

The concept of progress implies an idolatry of the *novum*: every innovation is *a priori* better simply because it is new. This thirst for novelty—systematically equated with the better—quickly became one of modernity's obsessions. In art, it led to the concept of the "*avant-garde*" (which also has its counterparts in politics).

From then on, the theory of progress possessed all its com-

ponents. Turgot, in 1750, then Condorcet, formulated it simply, as the conviction that: "Mankind as a whole is always becoming more perfect." Thus the history of humanity was seen as definitively unitary. This preserved the Christian idea of a future perfection of humanity and the certitude that humanity is moving towards a single end. But Providence was abandoned and replaced by human reason. From then on, universalism was based on reason conceived as "one and entire in each individual," regardless of context and particularity.

Man was likewise conceived not just as a being of unceasingly renewed desires and needs, but also as an infinitely perfectible being. A new anthropology makes man a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate at birth, or allots him an abstract "nature" entirely dissociated from his concrete existence. Human diversity, whether individual or collective, is regarded as contingent and completely malleable by education and "environment." The concept of artifice becomes central to and synonymous with refined culture. Man realizes his humanity—"civilizes" himself—only by opposing nature and freeing himself from it.

Thus humanity has to be freed from everything that can block the irresistible forward march of progress: "prejudices," "superstitions," the "weight of the past." This touches, indirectly, on the justification of the Terror during the French Revolution: if progress is humanity's necessary aim, whoever opposes progress can justifiably be killed; whoever is opposed to humanity's progress can justifiably be placed outside humanity and declared an "enemy of mankind" (hence the difficulty in reconciling the two Kantian assertions of equal dignity and human progress). Modern totalitarianisms (Soviet Communism, National Socialism) generalized this idea that there are "excess men" whose very existence prevents the advent of a better world.

This rejection of "nature" and the "past" is frequently represented as synonymous with liberation from all determinism. But in fact, determination by the past is replaced by determination by the future: it is the "point of history."¹

The optimism inherent in the theory of progress is promptly extended to all domains: to society and to man. The reign

¹ I have translated "*sens*" here as "point" to preserve what appears to be a felicitous ambiguity of the French: "*Sens*" may be translated both as "direction" and as "meaning." "Point" can have both senses as well (e.g., "end point," "the point of the story").—GJ.

of reason is supposed to lead to a society that is both transparent and peaceful. Supposedly advantageous for all parties, Montesquieu's "gentle commerce" is supposed gradually to eliminate the "irrational" causes of conflict and replace it with commercial exchange. Hence the abbot of Saint-Pierre announced, well before Kant, a "project of perpetual peace," which Rousseau criticized harshly. Condorcet proposed to rationally improve language and spelling. Morality itself was supposed to display the characteristics of a science. Education aimed at accustoming children to rid themselves of "prejudices," the source of all social evil, and use their own reason.

Thus humanity's march towards happiness was interpreted as the culmination of moral happiness. The men of the Enlightenment believed that, since man in the future will act in an always more "enlightened" manner, reason will continually improve, and humanity will become morally better. Thus progress, far from affecting only the external framework of existence, will transform man himself. Progress in one domain is necessarily reflected in all others. Material progress leads to moral progress.

On the political plane, the theory of progress was very quickly associated with an anti-political animus. Nevertheless, the theorists of progress have an ambiguous view of the state. On the one hand, the state limits the autonomy of the economy, regarded as the sphere of "freedom" and rational action *par excellence*: William Godwin says that governments by their nature create obstacles to the natural propensity of man to go forward. On the other hand, in the contractarian tradition inaugurated by Hobbes, the state allows man to escape the constraints specific to the "state of nature." Thus the state is simultaneously an obstacle and an engine of progress.

The most common view is that politics itself must become rational. Political action must cease being an art, governed by the principle of prudence, and become a science, governed by the principle of reason. As with the universe, society can be viewed as a machine, in which individuals are the cogs. Hence it must be managed rationally, according to principles as regular as those observed in physics. The sovereign must be a mechanic overseeing the evolution of "social physics" towards "the greatest public utility." This conception inspired

technocracy and the administrative and managerial conception of politics of a Saint-Simon or a Comte.

A particularly important question is whether progress is indefinite or leads to a final stage. This terminus would either be an absolute innovation or a more "perfect" restitution of an original or former state: Hegelian synthesis, the restoration of primitive Communism by classless society (Marx), the end of history (Francis Fukuyama), etc. One must also ask if the final goal—assuming there is only one—can be known in advance. To what end does progress lead, insofar as it leads to something other than itself?

Liberals tend to believe in an indefinite progress, an unending improvement of the human condition, whereas socialists assign man a well-defined happy end. The latter attitude mixes progressivism and utopianism: perpetual change leads to a stationary state; historical movement is posited only as a means to envisage its end. The liberal attitude is not, however, more realistic. For, on the one hand, if man is moving towards perfection, then, to the extent that he achieves it, he must stop perfecting himself. If, on the other hand, there is no recognizable goal of progress, how can one speak of progress at all? Only by recognizing a given goal can we say that a new state represents an advance over an earlier one.

Another equally important question: Is progress an uncontrolled force that acts on its own, or must men intervene to accelerate it or remove impediments? Is progress, moreover, regular and continuous, or does it imply abrupt qualitative jumps and ruptures? Can one accelerate progress while intervening in its course, or, in doing so, does one risk delaying its completion? Here again liberals, believing in the "invisible hand" and "*laissez-faire*," differ from socialists, who are more voluntarist, if not revolutionary.

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In the nineteenth century, the theory of progress reached its apogee in the West. It was, however, reformulated in a different climate, marked by industrial modernization, scientific positivism, evolutionism, and the appearance of the great historicist theories.

The stress was henceforth put more on science than on reason, in the philosophical sense of the term. The hope for a

“scientific” organization of humanity and the scientific control of all social phenomena became widespread. This theme was tirelessly revisited by Fourier, with his Phalanstery; by Saint-Simon, with his technocratic principles; by Auguste Comte, with his *Positivist Catechism* and his “religion of progress.”

At the same time, the terms “progress” and “civilization” tended to become synonymous. The idea of progress was used to legitimate colonization, supposedly to spread the benefits of “civilization” everywhere in the world

The concept of progress was also reformulated in light of Darwinian evolutionism. The evolution of life itself was reinterpreted in terms of progress, particularly by Herbert Spencer, who defined progress as the evolution from simple to complex, homogeneous to heterogeneous. Indeed, the character of progress appreciably changed. Henceforth, the Enlightenment’s mechanical model was combined with a biological organicism, as its vaunted pacifism gave way to a defense of the “struggle for life.” Progress resulted from the selection of the “fittest” (“the best”), in a generalized vision of competition. This reinterpretation reinforced Western imperialism: because it was “most evolved,” the civilization of the West was also necessarily the best.

Thus Western civilization was the high point of social evolution. The history of humanity was divided into successive “stages,” marking the various steps of its “progress.” The dispersion of various cultures in space was transposed into time: “primitive” societies gave Westerners an image of their own past (they were “contemporary ancestors”), while the West would give them an image of their future. Condorcet had already claimed humanity had passed through ten successive stages. Hegel, Comte, Marx, Freud, etc., proposed analogous schemes, going from “superstitious faith” to “science,” the “theological” era to the “scientific” one, the “primitive” or “magical” mentality to the “civilized” mentality and the universal reign of reason.

Combined with scientific positivism, which completely pervaded anthropology and nourished the illusion that one can measure the value of cultures with precision, this theory gave rise to racism, which perceived traditional civilizations as either permanently inferior to or temporarily behind the West (the “civilizing mission” of the colonial powers consisted in making them catch up), and postulated a universal criterion,

an overarching paradigm, that made it possible to rank cultures and peoples in a hierarchy. Racism was thus directly linked to the universalism of progress, which already concealed an unconscious or masked ethnocentrism.

I will not deal here with the criticism of the idea of progress, which, in modern times, begins with Rousseau, or with the innumerable theories of decline or decadence that one could oppose to it. I shall note only that the latter often (but not always) represent the negative double, the mirror image, of the theory of progress. The idea of a necessary movement of history is preserved, but from the reversed point of view: history is interpreted not as constant progression but as inevitable regression (specific or generalized). In fact, a tendency towards decline or decadence appears as unverifiable as one towards progress.

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For at least twenty years, books on the disillusionments of progress have proliferated. Certain authors have gone so far as to say progress is nothing more than a "dead idea" (William Pfaff). Reality is undoubtedly more nuanced. The theory of progress is seriously questioned today, but there is no doubt that it lives on in various forms.

The totalitarianisms of the twentieth century and the two World Wars have obviously sapped the optimism of the two previous centuries. The very disillusionments that dashed revolutionary hopes have fostered the idea that contemporary society—spiritually poor and meaningless though it may be—is nonetheless the only one possible: social life is increasingly infused with fatalism. The future, which now seems unforeseeable, inspires more fears than hopes. A deepening crisis seems more likely than a "better tomorrow."

The idea of unitary progress is battered and broken. No one believes any longer that material progress makes man better, or that progress registered in one domain is automatically reflected in the rest. In the "risk society" (Ulrich Beck), material progress itself seems ambivalent. It is granted that, along with its advantages, there are costs. It is quite evident that unplanned urbanization multiplies social pathologies and that industrial modernization results in an unprecedented degradation of the natural framework of life. The massive de-

struction of the environment gave rise to ecological movements, which were among the first to denounce the “illusions of progress.” The development of technoscience also forcefully raises the question of purpose. The development of science is no longer perceived as necessarily contributing to the happiness of humanity: knowledge itself, as one sees in the debate on biotechnologies, is regarded as potentially threatening. Increasingly large sections of the population now understand that “more” is not synonymous with “better.” We distinguish between having and being, material happiness and happiness in general.

The theme of progress nevertheless remains pregnant, if only as a symbol. The political class continues to muster the “forces of progress” against the “men of the past” and to thunder against “medieval obscurantism” (or the “manners of another age”). In public discourse, the word “progress” still retains a largely positive resonance.

The orientation towards the future also remains dominant. Even if one admits that the future is filled with menacing uncertainties, we still expect that, logically, things should improve overall. Swept along by the rise of cutting edge technologies and media manipulated fashions, the cult of novelty remains stronger than ever. People also continue to believe that man’s “freedom” increases to the extent that he is uprooted from organic ties and inherited traditions. The reigning individualism, along with a Western ethnocentrism—which legitimates itself with the ideology of human rights—destroys the family, dissolves social bonds, and discredits traditional Third World societies, where economy is still embedded in society and where individuals and communities are still interdependent.

But above all, the theory of progress persists in its productivist version. It nourishes the idea that indefinite growth is both normal and desirable, and that a better future depends upon an ever-increasing volume of produced goods, an idea that favors the globalization of trade. This idea also inspires the ideology of “development,” which still views Third World societies as (economically) lagging behind the West and exalts the Western model of production and consumption the destiny of all humanity. This ideology of development was formulated perfectly in 1960 by Walt Rostow, who enumerated the “stages” that every society on the planet must traverse

to reach the age of consumerism and commercial capitalism. As Serge Latouche, Gilbert Rist, and others show, the theory of development is ultimately just a faith. As long as this faith persists, so too will the ideology of progress.