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THE IDEA OF PROGRESS

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Answering Nila

The idea of progress is the major philosophical legacy left by the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries to the contemporary social sciences. The idea was secular, departing from the medieval mind-set where everything could be explained by God's will, and it offered a powerful and pervasive supra-theory that ordered and interpreted everything within the life of humanity — past, present and future. The core of the concept, and its derivations and the images attached to it, have been overwhelmingly simple and straightforward. With a few temporary deviations, all societies are advancing naturally and consistently 'up', on a route from poverty, barbarism, despotism and ignorance to riches, civilization, democracy and rationality, the highest expression of which is science. This is also an irreversible movement from an endless diversity of particularities, wasteful of human energies and economic resources, to a world unified and simplified into the most rational arrangement. It is therefore a movement from badness to goodness and from mindlessness to knowledge, which gave this message its ethical promise, its optimism and its reformist 'punch'. The nature of the interdependence of the diverse advances — economic, political, cultural and so on — has been the subject of fundamental divisions and debate; for example, is it the growth of rationality or of the forces of production which acts as the prime mover? What was usually left unquestioned was the basic historiography of the necessary sequence and/or stages along the main road of progress as the organizing principle on which all other interpretations rest.
It is important to acknowledge that the idea of progress - its conceptual apparatus as much as the values, images and the emotions it attracted - was not restricted to the philosophers and to the philosophizing community of scholars, but penetrated all strata of contemporary societies to become the popular common sense, and as such resistant to challenge. Consequently even when some actual experience challenged that vision (as it often did), such evidence was usually brushed aside as accidental or transitional while the belief in progress and its implications held firm. The wording changed with fashion: 'progress', 'modernization', 'development', 'growth', and so on. So did the legitimizations: 'civilizing mission', 'economic efficiency', 'friendly advice'. Yet the substantive message proved remarkably resilient.

This power of the idea of progress - as indicated by a popularity and plausibility which survived so well for two centuries - should be considered before turning to its impact on human thought and action. This in part reflected the onset of the so-called 'Industrial Revolution', and the first flush of triumphal belief in the ceaseless production of endlessly proliferating material goods, making humanity happy. But, as significant and yet mostly disregarded, the idea of progress, I would suggest, was generated as an ambiguous and yet, to its authors and consumers, remarkably satisfying solution to two major riddles the Europeans faced at the dawn of what later came to be called 'modernity'.

The first was the rapid growth of evidence concerning the diversity of humanity. The established assumptions as to what is self-evident and 'natural' in human interaction and in the ways societies are arranged, based on the simple device of 'looking at ourselves', crumbled as European travellers and conquerors progressively discovered new lands, new people and new ways. The old conceptual duality of the civilized versus the barbarian (or Christians versus the infidels) was proving wholly inadequate to the volume of everyday experience that challenged it. The endless and growing diversity of human societies that was perceived had to be made sense of, or at least ordered and categorized, in a way acceptable to its discoverers.

The second riddle that historical experience presented to Europe's secular minds concerned the changing perception of time. For most of written history, the dominant model in this sphere was a cyclical one: the biological metaphor of the youth, maturity, old age and death of societies and empires which organized human understanding; the myth of eternal return, present in religion and legend.1 In that model, the end was the beginning; and while humans and societies lived by it, the structure and the essentials of such a world remained intact - Plutarch or Cicero read as true to the eighteenth century European literati as a contemporary. However, in the period which interests us here, the dawn of a new era was increasingly being felt. The old images of time and of the natural repetition of events were out of joint. The end was no longer the beginning, but was something else: a linear perception of time and a shift into an as yet uncharted future reflected what centuries later would be called a 'take-off' period for Europe. It was a time of puzzlement.

The idea of progress was the dramatic resolution of two great riddles by linking them. What produced diversity? The different stages of development of different societies. What was social change? The necessary advance through the different social forms that existed. What is the task of social theory? To provide an understanding of the natural sequence of stages from past to future. What is the duty of an enlightened ruler? To put to use the findings of

Fraud, Luxury and Pride: The Causes of Prosperity

The problem of the relationship between economies and morality was acutely - indeed, explosively - posed by Mandeville at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Bernard de Mandeville, born in the Netherlands, settled in London as a physician. In 1705 he published a sixpenny satire in verse called The Grumbling Hive; Or, Knaves Turn'd Honest. This poem in doggerel verse grew into a book by the addition of Remarks and other pieces in two successive editions (1714, 1723), under the title, The Fables Of The Bees; or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits (Kaye's edition; Mandeville, 1924). The sub-title summarizes the argument of the poem: a hive, presented as a mirror of human society, lives in corruption and prosperity. Harbouring some nostalgia for virtue, it prays to recover it. When the prayer is granted, an extraordinary transformation takes place: with vice gone, activity and prosperity disappear and are replaced by sloth, poverty and boredom in a much reduced population...

Moreover, of the trio of vices, 'Fraud, Luxury and Pride', that are given in the poem as the causes of prosperity and greatness, ("The Moral", 1924, p. 23, vs 7), the first, Fraud, was finally retained only as one of the 'inconveniences' that accompany a brisk trade, like the dirt in the streets of London. Only Luxury and, more fundamentally, Pride, maintain their status as causal factors....

...In Hume, justice owes its origin, on the one hand, to the egoism and limited generosity of men, on the other, to the fact that the nature of relations to things over the relations between men cannot be more forcibly and naïvely expressed. This is the decisive shift that distinguishes modern civilization from all others, in which primacy is given to the economic view in our ideological universe. It is this shift that, whatever his intimate convictions may have been, Mandeville has described, for us, as well as for his contemporaries, in The Fable of the Bees: or Private Vices, Publick Benefits.

scholars and to speed up the necessary 'advance', fighting off regressive forces which try to stop it. The new orientation within the complex world of human endeavours carried the immense promise and optimism of the belief that, once understood, the human world could be reformed scientifically, that is, by taking into account knowledge of the necessary and the objective. What boosted confidence and optimism was that those who first adopted the notion of progress presented their own understanding as the highest achievement of progress to date, and consequently projected the shape of the coming future to the rest of mankind – as an example to all, a natural leader of all. This lent the idea its immense arrogance.

Once it was established as the major means of orientation in a complex human world, the idea of progress developed a life of its own. It interacted powerfully with the 'Industrial Revolution' and urbanization, as much as with the spread of colonialism, giving them for a time an almost metaphysical meaning – an image of the unilinear and the necessary which was also universally right and positive in the unfolding of human history. Knowledge of the world was classified accordingly: some societies as 'developed', others as 'underdeveloped', in need of help, tutelage, and so on. The 'advanced' societies were showing to all the rest their own futures. The argument was about the correct indices and triggers of 'development', not about the significance of existing divisions. This led into the various political visions and, moving with the times, entered the newly created academic disciplines of the social sciences – Sociology, Anthropology, Economics – taking the form of modernization theories, 'strategies of development', and programmes of 'growth'. The Kautskian Marxism of the Second International and the eventual adoption of a version of it as the obligatory ideology of the Soviet Union shows the overriding nature of the idea of progress, whatever the party politics involved.

The only questions that remained to be asked were: Who is the most progressive? Who is to set the example to the others? Which utopia will bring about human bliss?

The impact of the idea of progress (involving, as it did, modernization theory, development strategy, the goal of economic growth, and so on) was threefold: as a general orientation device, as a powerful tool of mobilization, and as an ideology. On the face of it at least, its contribution as an interpretation of social reality – the ordering, classification and comprehension of the complexities of human reality – has stood up to the endless proliferation of information. In many ways it promoted understanding by focusing on interconnections and on the causes of the social changes observed. What is more, it made social planning possible, intellectually respectable and indeed necessary, due to its foundation in objective – that is, established, necessary and repetitive – patterns of history, which scientists and technicians could mathematize and computerize. It became, accordingly, also an immensely 'energizing' tool of policy and counterpolicy, as well as serving to mobilize the devotion and readiness of its followers, who were often prepared to sac-

rifice much – often life itself – to help speed up the inevitable approach of the necessary and glorious future.

The idea of progress, with its many derivations, has also become an important ideology – a blinker on collective cognition. Up to a point, it became the 'normal science' as defined by Kuhn where, once established, a field of knowledge defines its own questions, brushing aside as illegitimate other questions, and evidence, which do not fit its assumptions. That was not all, for service to progress became an important justification employed by both development experts and hardened politicians, enabling them to override whatever did not fit their vision – views and people alike – and to award themselves massive privileges of power, status and well-being, while most people were turned into objects of manipulation (for their own good, of course). There developed a particular expert style: brash, smart, detached. For the majority, the cause of progress took away, for the sake of scientific planning, the right to choose and even to understand why their own experience was increasingly being negated. Endless planning disasters followed, while the planners earned their promotions and moved on.

The most significant 'material' representation and instrument of the idea of progress has been the modern state, with its legitimacy as the representation of the nation, its claims to bureaucratic rationality and to an understanding of the objectively necessary ways humans are managed, and its strategies resting on a notion of progress linked to the power to disburse privileges and to enforce ways and means. While the struggle for power and the choice between alternatives increasingly became a battle between interest groups for the control of the state machinery and its resources of intervention and enforcement, it was usually disguised as debate about the interpretation of the objective laws of progress. 'Progress', 'development', 'growth' and so forth became the main ideological raison d'être for statehood, the governability of people, and the enforcement of privileges. As such, the pre-1991 East–West division was remarkably limited in fact, which partly explains why so little changed with the end of the Cold War. Neither did the spread of multinationals and indirect US dictatorship via the International Monetary Fund over the weaker parts of the global community change substantively the progress-and-statehood ideologies justifying the advantage of the privileged and the major irrationalities perpetrated by the guardians of official rationalism. It is not accidental that the major expressions of widespread anger and defiance, in East and West, North and South, have taken the form of deep, virulent anti-statism. The image of the Great Brother, the brute enforcer and all-invasive presence in human life which makes it unbearable, has never been so pertinent as it is now, even though disillusionment is largely expressed in apathy and counter-manoeuvre rather than in open rebellion.

Thus the idea of progress eventually became a powerful ideology of disenfranchisement, and often generated remarkable acts of cruelty, accepted as
'insignificant in the long term' and therefore permissible — indeed a duty — to the elite of 'those who know'. The remarkable, often fanatical will with which the idea of progress was realized in the high-speed reform programmes bears comparison with the Christianity of the Middle Ages. Its message of mutual love — and we do not doubt its positive significance for European civilization — was turned into absolute truth and universal historiography for the human race. To speed up the Second Coming, crusades carried war and murder through the world, while the Holy Inquisition disposed of doubters and deviants. Life itself was sacrificed for the necessary future. To paraphrase Acton: absolutist theory (and unrestricted zeal) corrupts absolutely (and the remarkable cruelty it engenders is made palatable to its perpetrators and victims).

The limitations of the progressivist became increasingly apparent. This severely limited or delayed knowledge of extensive evidence which did not fit the particular model of progress — be it Islamic revival, 'minorities' (which are majorities in an increasing number of populations), communism which exploits, capitalism which stifles economic development, and so on. Ideas of limitless linear growth blinded us to the complexity of the social world — to the diverse and parallel forms which operate side by side without being transitory; the so-called informal or expolary families of survival within the 'post-industrial' world. Such ideas also delayed our understanding of ecological issues. Real human history, accounting for the complexity of forms rather than their conforming to a pre-defined process of universalization and simplification, was being lost. The blueprint of progress/development/growth offered blank cheques to repressive bureaucracies, both national and international, to act on behalf of science and to present as objective matters which are essentially political, thereby taking choice away from those influenced most by such decisions.

As often happens with overarching conceptualizations in retreat, the ideas of progress have not been replaced at once by a new vision. What has come instead over the last decade is various forms of capitulation on the part of intellectuals: amounting to the view that nothing can any longer be seen as comprehensive. Within the current critique of modernity and its explanations by the postmodernists, with everything turned relative except relativity itself, the idea of progress reaches its peculiar final stage of impact through negation. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of 'progress' will not disappear so long as it serves powerful interest groups. Those who find the unmasked consequences of the idea of progress reprehensible depart for the most part into private lives, while 'the masses' can proceed with life in a consumer society of goods and entertainments, amid fears of incomprehensible global 'markets' and global 'unemployment', while society's centre becomes increasingly empty of human content.

Those who wish to face up to the substantive failure of one total theory that mankind adhered to in the last two centuries, and to do so without surrender, should probably begin where it all began to disintegrate: with the issue of the human content of social structures and entrenched ideologies — that is, matters of choice. We all know the limitations of human choice within contemporary society. We have to comprehend better and learn to put to use the limits of such limitations.

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