

## Towards an Intellectual History of Progress

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I think I should announce that I've with some effort overcome my temptation to dub these remarks my "progress report," which temptation by announcing, I've of course succumbed to. I'd like this evening to take us, only inexpertly, I'm afraid, through the construction of the concept of progress across history, beginning first with the classics, and then moving to Machiavelli, Kant, Hegel, and Condorcet, and ending with a pause on the postmoderns and particularly on Benjamin, whose conceptualization of progress I would like to contrast with the Marquis de Condorcet's. Progress being generally construed, from Condorcet onwards, as the incremental betterment of the human lot across time and thus the imputation of directionality to history, this requires me to venture as well with some trepidation into a second field, that of history itself, in which I am even more spectacularly unqualified to speak than usual. So, in searching for some basis of optimism, I can at least hope that by my setting the initial bar at sufficiently low a height, I can aid subsequent conversation in progressing beyond my own first efforts.

A classic early work in the intellectual history of the concept of progress was J.B. Bury's *Idea of Progress*, published in London in 1920, which gives us what remains the most influential definition of progress: "the idea that civilization has moved, is moving, and will move in a desirable direction." . More recent work includes Robert Nisbet's *History of the Idea of Progress*, 1980, and the more contemporaneous edited volume *History and the Idea of Progress*, put out by Arthur Melzer, Jerry Weinberger, and Richard Zinman in 1995, as well as David Spadafora's *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (I borrow themes here from each of them, and indicate where I do.)

*To begin with the Classics:* the traditional Greco-Roman notion was that of a repeating cycle of golden, silver, bronze, and leaden ages (with Victorian cynics exchanging leaden for Iron). The imputation of a cyclical view of history to the classics can, however, be overdone. Aristotle, in the *Metaphysics*, "Those who are now renowned have taken over as if in a relay race (from hand to hand, relieving one another) from many, many predecessors who no their part progress, and thus have themselves made possible progress." Though individual civilizations may rise and fall, the human race for Aristotle is eternal, and mankind as a whole is advantaged. What else is the *Politics* but a depiction of the development of the political state from the family through the village, and then confederations of villages? It is a progressive spirit in politics that motivates this passage in *Politics*: "If politics is an art, change must be necessary in this as in any other art. The need for improvement is shown by the fact that old customs are exceedingly simple and barbarous... the remains of ancient laws which have come down to us are quite absurd... men in general desire the good, and not merely what their fathers

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had... the primeval inhabitants, whether born of the earth or the survivors of some destruction, may be supposed to have been no better than ordinary foolish people among ourselves... and it would be ridiculous to rest content with their notions. Even when laws have been written down, they ought not always to remain unaltered.”

*So, medievals:* Augustine’s view of history is one of conflict, which dates from the first man and is of course that between the City of Man and the City of God. In the first human being, “there was laid the foundation, not indeed evidently, but in God’s foreknowledge, of ... two cities or societies, so far as regards the human race.” The coexistence of the two is marked by abiding, relentless, and crucial conflict between them, which will continue until the eventual triumph of the City of God. Like all utopians, the condition of the attainment of the perfect Augustinian society is occasioned by a necessary period of suffering, torment, fire, and destruction. This fateful union of necessary destruction on the one hand with the idea of redemption on the other, is found in its core in Book 20, Section 16, “Of the New Heaven and the New Earth.” How can the good, the ideal, be achieved until all that is noxious is exterminated? “And by this universal conflagration, the qualities of the corruptible elements which suited our corruptible bodies shall utterly perish, and our substance shall receive such qualities as shall, by a wonderful transmutation, harmonize with our immortal bodies so that, as the world itself is renewed to some better thing, it is fitly accommodated to men, themselves renewed in their flesh to some better thing.” The idea is no less horrific in Augustine than in any utopian of the last century.

In subsequent medievals, the idea of progress became incremental, in Bernard of Chartres’s phrase “we are dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants.” This is the medieval period which brought forth Robert Grosseteste, Roger Bacon, and Theodoric of Freiburg, motivated by a reconciled faith and human learning which led every major scientist from the thirteenth century up to and including Leibniz and Newton to explain their motivations in religious terms. The invention of invention, the true moment of crisis in mankind’s relationship to the natural environment, can be dated to the thirteenth century and not the sixteenth, along with the awareness of steady, cumulative advancement of culture from remote past to distant future and, with this awareness, belief in a golden age of morality and spirituality ahead, in this future, on this earth. Among other luminaries of the medieval era who may be subsumed under this generalization are the precocious anti-astrologist, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who likewise conciliated religion and philosophy.

Like Comte in the early nineteenth century, Bury denies the classical and medieval worlds any real conception of human progress on earth. He also saw Christianity as the great foe to be routed before the idea of progress could emerge, according to him, in the late seventeenth century. This hypothesisation of the concept of progress as an invention only of the high Enlightenment is only with great difficulty sustainable in the face of contemporary medieval scholarship, as I hope this brief review will at least suggest.

*Condorcet.* The Marquis de Condorcet states what in succeeding expanses of the Enlightenment was taken to be the definitive statement of the modern idea of progress –

systematic, secular, and naturalistic (apart from a few rhetorical flourishes at Providence). In so doing, he drew heavily and overtly from Turbot's 1750 lecture at the Sorbonne, who The engines responsible for the progress of mankind as "self-interest, ambition, vainglory" "and in the midst of their ravages manners are softened, the human mind enlightened, isolated nations brought together; commercial and political ties finally united all parts of the globe; and the total mass of human kind, through alternations of calm and upheaval, good fortune and bad, advances ever, though slowly, towards greater perfection." As Bury characterizes him, "he regards all the race's actual experiences as the indispensable mechanism of Progress, and does not regret its mistakes and calamities." He in turn echoes Montesquieu in describing the progress of mankind through three states- hunting-pastoral, agricultural, and commercial-urban, which he extends to language, mathematics, painting, and so forth. Similar stadial hypotheses are of course advanced by Adam Smith. Condorcet, for his part, expands the number of stages to ten, the tenth reserved for the future the French Revolution was to make possible. The ninth, made possible by the works of the scientists of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, was to make possible intellectual freedom, through liberation from superstition, and thus enabling human movement toward eventual perfection, which he saw as an illimitable process: in his *Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, published posthumously in 1795, "Nature has set no term to the perfection of our human faculties, that the perfectibility of man is truly indefinite, and that the progress of this perfectibility, from now onwards independent of any power that might wish to halt it, has n other limit than the duration of the globe upon which nature has cast us."

*Now, to Doubts, Darknesses, and Reactions:* Darknesses and dissents from this view of progress are less common in Britain than in the continent during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> c., perhaps corresponding to the Revolution and greater clerical presence in France. Voltaire certainly was afflicted with doubt with regard to his otherwise optimistic sensibilities for progress – he saw high points in history in Periclean Athens, Augustus and Julian Rome, the Renaissance, and the age of Louis XIV, but these were oases in a historical desert of cruelties and follies, with civilization permanently teetering vulnerable to degeneration at the hands of fanaticism. Diderot thought the progress of knowledge was finite and asymptotic, and would eventually encounter an upper boundary. Likewise, happiness was limited by human biology and evil inherent in human nature, with moral progress seemingly having gone almost as far as it could. Decline, further, inevitably followed growth for Diderot. Vico early in the 17<sup>th</sup> c had developed a cyclical theory of history, applicable to every society, with gains and losses incurred in every stage.

More passionately, Rousseau marks the late Enlightenment transition to Romanticism exemplified also by Herder – though Rousseau believes in human perfectibility as responsible for the tremendous progress of the arts and sciences across the centuries, it was inseparable from the progress which had ruined human morals, subjected men and women, through their vanity, to the fulfillment of artificial needs, and suppressed inborn compassion for others. This degeneration had taken place inseparably from advanced, increasingly civilized social settings, and must thus be amenable to reversal there, rather than in a state of nature – the Rosseauian program of regeneration consisted of social, political, and educational reforms to tap human virtues and promote dutiful citizenship in

a moral society, but while such a future would qualify for Rousseau as a vision of progress, the record of the past was a history of disaster.

More familiar is the rejection of Smithian historiography we know as the Rankean school of historiography, inspired by the drive to know the past "as it really was," to discover the facts of history with complete certainty, which tended to obscure the wider truth and meaning of history. A general and conceptual understanding was ruled out, except for the scholastically convenient compartments of nations and centuries. Value was ruled out altogether, as did progress as a category of history.

*Backing up now slightly, to Machiavelli*, and the great dissenters: Harvey Mansfield brings forth in our day the claim that Machiavelli invented the idea of progress, overcoming in so doing both the classical conception of history as a cycle, as well as the Christian vision of history leading towards redemption. Compared to the bland successor notions of universal comfort achieved through science, and the moral ideal of universal peace, Machiavellian progress retains in *virtu* something more akin to real daring than anything contemplated by the ancients, while contemplating a way to manipulate and manage the violent and principled clashes of politics, by bold, ambitious actors who believe they and not others should rule. In *Discourses on Livy* and *Florentine Histories*, he introduces the idea of his revolution, irreversible in regard to the cyclical change of sects or civilizations, but not heralding the "perpetual republic," since uprising and change of regime will continue. But this is not, all told, a bad thing: he wants to retain politics, which is the realm of virtue, because any supposed betterment of mankind at the cost of virtue is no bargain.

*Kant*: Kant believes this is monstrous. For Kant, we have the duty to hope moral virtue will be rewarded, and thus, that history represents the progressive though infinite approximation of a universal civic society which administers justice, rewarding virtue, and establishing conditions in which morality and happiness will be united. Yet Kant sets the tone for abiding discomfort with universal, progressive history, because he could not believe progress sacrifices earlier generations' happiness for the sake of later ones, thus affronting the crux of his morality, in the moral autonomy of the individual, which he himself admits. Thus Kant: "It remains strange that earlier generations seem to carry through their toilsome labor only for the sake of the later – and that only the latest of the generations should have the good fortune to dwell in an edifice upon which a long series of their ancestors had laboured without being permitted to partake of the fortune they had prepared." A progressive history is then, for Kant, fundamentally unfair, or in Hannah Arendt's gloss, at odds with human dignity – it either produces *moral* improvement, undermining the radical moral freedom and absolute obligation of every individual to do right, or *physical* improvement, treating those of us born earlier not as ends in ourselves but as mere instruments of the well-being of those to come.

Though riddlesome, Kant finds a progressive history inescapable, and is not as troubled by its contradictions in turning to the political development of mankind: just as the state of savagery eventually forced individuals to enter into a civic condition, so the barbaric freedom of civil states will give way to a law of self-enforcing equilibrium and

political peace through international organization. “before taking this final step (the union of states), thus when it is just past the halfway mark of its formation, human nature endures the hardest evils under the guise of outward welfare...we are *cultivated* to a high degree through art and science, we are *civilized* to the point of excess...but for us to consider ourselves *moralized* much is lacking. For while the idea of morality already belongs to culture, the use of this idea, which only extends to the simulacra of virtue in honor and outward propriety, constitutes mere civilization. So long as states apply all their forces toward vain and violent aims of expansion, unceasingly obstructing the slow effort toward the inner formation of the way of thinking of their citizens—even removing from them all support for this aim—nothing from this way is to be expected. For the former demands a long inner elaboration of each commonwealth for the formation or education of its citizens.” This from *The Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intention*, 1784.

*Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche:* The Hegelian idea of history as a rational process, having an intelligible order, purpose, and completion, is of course pivotal in the history of the concept of progress across time, as is that of Marx, who renders material the causes of dialectical progress while retaining its conflictual, often painful character. For Hegel, though the directionality of history is already ascribed in the progress of consciousness from sense-certainty toward self-consciousness and absolute knowing, the rapidity of its motion is not ineluctable and may be won only through courage and heroism, the latter emerging in the *Phenomenology* as Hegelian virtues. This conflictual character of progress, reliant as it is on human agency, is retained in Marx. In Fukuyama’s late Hegelian view of history, whether ended or not, history is driven by a motor which can be described as the principle of the struggle for recognition of the autonomous rational person, which points the way to the values and institutions of liberal democracy.

With Nietzsche and the Weimar philosopher Oswald Spengler, the end of history is really the advent of the “last man,” for whom peace and physical comfort conspire to hide the most terrible of all realities. Why, asks Werner Dannhauser, is it that at the time of liberalism’s greatest triumph, there is such pervading sadness, uncertainty, and sense of malaise in the West? Perhaps because our triumph brings us face to face with ultimate disappointment – that the real end of progress, the “end of history” in the relevant personal sense, is the death to which each individual is fated with absolute certainty. In light of this awful truth, we are left perhaps either with religious faith, or with virtue – the attempt to live an honourable life and die an honourable death.

But for Nietzsche, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, there is some room for progress. With God dead, everything is possible, and conscious creativity can put unconscious creativity, along with the human constructs of God, nature, and truth itself, to shame. But against this, Nietzsche’s enigmatic vision of the eternal return of the same, in which the will peaks in affirming the world exactly as it is and always has been and always will be, indicates that the time of the superman will vanish, and decline will follow progress, which in the last analysis will turn out, for Nietzsche, to be illusory.

*Rorty* Comes here Rorty, to say that we can now *say* history is over, because we can now recognize and give up the conceit that history ever moved at the behest of the intellectuals' big ideas, such as capitalism, bourgeois culture, and discourse and language, grand totalizing concepts which ring hollow in the present world. At best, says Rorty, we can but cultivate our own gardens to relieve some human misery, with no false assurances that we have a conceptual handle on its causes or remedies in every possible world. Thus Rorty, in his "The End of Leninism and History as Comic Frame": "I would urge that the Plato-Hegel-Marx-Heidegger brand of romance, the romance of world history, is something that intellectual life and leftist politics would now be much better off without – that this romance is a ladder that we should now throw away." And later "we should no longer imagine a great big Incarnate Logos called Humanity whose career is to be interpreted either as heroic struggle or as tragic decline. Instead, we should think of lots of different past human communities, each of which has willed us one or more cautionary anecdotes. Some of these anecdotes may serve the turn of one or more of the different human communities of the present day, depending on their different needs and options." He borrows the image of the comic frame from Kenneth Burke and his 1936 book *Attitudes toward History* – in seeking for a world-historical trend that would help us prognosticate, (I quote) "The 'scientists' of history have brought us unintentionally to the realization that the gauging of the 'right historical moment' is a matter of *taste*." and "The comic frame, in making a man the student of himself, makes it possible for him to 'transcend' occasions when he has been tricked or cheated, since he can readily put such discouragements into his 'assets' column, under the heading of 'experience.'"

*Finally, Adorno, Benjamin and the other postmoderns:* Adorno, after Auschwitz, did not believe in an emancipated, utopian future. He blamed the culture industry in the West for goading the individual to adapt to his life's conditions by promoting a "total angle". He thought that art and philosophy should be self-critical and unmask the familiar, preventing its mindless acceptance.

Benjamin was obsessed with the possibility of writing history at all and the intricate interactions between exclusion (forgetting) and inclusion (remembering). To Benjamin, memory was a series of discontinuous fragments connected by subjectivity (which potentially endowed them with a political agency). Benjamin did not believe in the linearity of history (and, therefore, in the idea of progress, class-related, or not). This rejection of "flow" and "continuum" in favour of "montage" and "fragment" is at the heart of his "Critical Aesthetic". He rejected the forced unification of the objective and the subjective under a scientific universal grammar. This was pretentious, he claimed. Instead, he propagated the idea of "constellation-events" (see above) in pursuit of the "truth". This "truth" is the "authentic" structural elements of an idea as revealed by perusing the sum of all its meaningful combinations with other ideas. This process is at the heart of what Benjamin called the "Science of Origin." Benjamin's great, unfinished "Arcades Project" used 19th century Parisian tropes ("prostitution", "fashion", "gambling", etc.) to reconstruct an history of urban modernity itself. The influential "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" was part of this on-going project. Drafted between 1927 and 1940, *Das Passagen-Werk* saw publication in Germany only in 1982, and in English only in 1999. Arcades are, for Benjamin, "the most important

architecture of the nineteenth century,” a phenomenon of extreme cultural ambivalence. They provide, for him, a metaphor for history – l’histoire est comme Janus, elle a deux visages. Benjamin declares of his own method: “To write history thus means to *cite* history. It belongs to the concept of citation, however, that the historical object in each case is torn from its context.”

Alongside montage as a form of history-writing, we have this arresting image of the *constellation*. If the uncritical, Enlightenment view of progress represents a more or less automatic, linear evolution towards an inevitable goal, towards which one may be “progressive” or “reactionary,” but the inevitability of which may only be forestalled – an image Benjamin compares to the telling of the beads on a rosary, an irreversible and unstoppable linear flow - then an alternative model of history is required for Benjamin, and the straight line of progress may have to be replaced by another image. The constellation links past events among themselves, or else links past to present – its formation stimulates a flash of recognition, a quantum leap in historical understanding. The constellar image marks the transition from “mythology,” or illusion, into an authentic critical understanding of history. The critical historian, argues Benjamin, is to position himself against the ideology of “progress” to “root out every trace of ‘development’ from the image of history and to represent becoming...as a constellation in being.” Benjamin’s last text, the “theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940), systematizes his radically non-linear model of history, grounded not in sequence but in interrelation. A constellation is made up of some stars that are nearer, others further away – it is only from our perspective, that of the here (and now) that they appear to take on a significant configuration. In a constellar model of history, all advance is provisional, and represents a battleground of contending forces.

*Habermas* I would like to return to Benjamin, to contrast further the constellar and montage approach with that of Condorcet and the high Enlightenment. But first, it would be derelict to impugn that all contemporary philosophers had abandoned the cause of the Enlightenment project. I’m referring, of course, to Habermas, whose project consists of the attempt to demonstrate that modernity can be redeemed, with its core postulates of rationality and progress. The *Theory of Communicative Action* represents at core an attempt to demonstrate the profound continuity between human language and the values embedded in the project of modernity, particularly in the search for intersubjective recognition of language’s validity claims to truth, rightness, and sincerity. Rationality is, for Habermas, key not only to domination as to Adorno, but also to emancipation as to Marx. The Habermasian enterprise becomes to strengthen the project of modernity against antimodern irrationalism – in which regard he thinks principally of Foucault, who for Habermas seeks to attack rationality with power.

*Concluding note* Returning now to Benjamin, I would like to close with two tentative thoughts. The first is drawn from pragmatism – even if the high Enlightenment notion of progress, as we see in Condorcet, were to be shown to be incapable of ultimate philosophical grounding, could it still not be one which, critically unpacked, is still worthy of retention, either to characterize certain apparent ineluctabilities which may still be empirically observed in the human narrative (one thinks of incremental, and

apparently non-asymptotic, development in the sciences and technology, and perhaps even the propagation across space of liberal democracy and neoliberal economic systems), or to maintain a language of political contestation which maintains some echoes of optimistic linkage to the betterment of the human condition? More critically, partisans of political change, wherever it occurs, have always characterized change as progress, so long as they were in favour of it. Finally, and it is an idea which I would like to advance without any particular personal attachment to it, one might extend and work within Benjamin's metaphor of constellation to note that anthropomorphic realities dictate that, however theoretically different configurations may appear cross-spatially and temporally, only one set of constellations fits the human condition. Could the concept of progress be somewhat similar – theoretically indeterminate but anthropomorphically appropriate, fitting into the shape of mankind? And with that suggestion for subsequent conversation, I will happily close to permit discussion to progress beyond this very initial, cursory survey.