

PROGRESS AND GOLDEN AGE

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“PROGRESS is the law of life,” wrote Robert Browning in one of his poems which are so representative of his age. Not to stand for progress is tantamount to being immoral; unprogressive people are regarded either as egotistic drones of society, or as too indolent to care for more than to-day’s pleasures. This widespread opinion has even moved a political party to combine the words progressive and conservative in its name, although a progressive conservative party is something like a square circle or a female bull. For to be conservative means being in favor of preservation, while to be progressive means being in favor of change.

Most people would be surprised to learn that the notion of progress had been unknown to mankind until, early in the 18th century, it was formulated by the French priest Saint-Pierre. And it still remains practically unintelligible to many, often highly civilized, nations outside the pale of what is called Western Civilization, for instance, to the Chinese. But even in some European countries the word progress has so little general appeal that the English title of Christopher Dawson’s *Progress and Religion* had to be completely changed when it was translated into German, for otherwise, as the Austrian publisher of the book remarked, it would not have sold in Central Europe!

This striking, or rather shocking, observation should make us curious to ask what we really mean by progress. As is the case with almost all commonplace ideas, its connotation is somewhat confused. However it seems safe to say that progress implies the change of existing conditions, political, cultural, economic and social; moreover, change for the better. That things do change is no discovery of modern knowledge; already the ancient philosopher Heracleitus maintained that “Everything is in flux, and nothing is permanent.” However, other ages and cultures did not, and partly still do not, attach any particular value to this fact. On the contrary, most of their writers are of the opinion that changes, especially social changes as such, are undesirable, unless made necessary by a gross aberration of society from sacred customs and standards. To make this clearer: to the Greeks, for instance, it seemed unreasonable to suppose that men would do better if they opposed or tried to overthrow an established moral order. “Social changes were either departures from, or returns to, reasonable proportions

in human relationships.”¹ Obviously, in this and similar cases, a desirable change of social conditions would not be called Progress, but Restoration.

Of course, these people were not just “reactionaries” who wished to preserve the powers that be. Many of them were as much concerned with improvement of mankind as our most progressive reformers. But strange as it may seem, they believed that the perfect state of society had already once been in existence, and that man had departed from it through immorality or ignorance. We must not imagine that the people of other ages were perfectly satisfied with what they had, but they projected their inmost longing for a happier life into the past rather than into the future.

The Bible seems to suggest that we actually are bound to take much the same stand: for Paradise is said to have been lost through sin, and our hope is to return to it through suffering and penance. The same story of *Paradise Lost* recurs in a great number of religious traditions, not only in the Mediterranean region and the Middle East, all of which are closely related to that of the Jews, but for instance in Buddhism and among primitive peoples. The Greeks and later the Romans knew it as the myth of the Golden Age which, about the year 800 B.C., was described by Hesiod as a time when men “lived like gods without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief”. “They dwelt in ease and *peace* upon their lands with many good things . . . and were loved by the blessed gods.” In the last century before the birth of Christ, Ovid recast the same myth in his famous lines:

*Aurea prima sata est aetas quae vindice nulli²
Sponte sua sine lege fidem rectumque colebat.*

However, even more enlightened centuries still clung to the idea that originally man lived in a happy state, free from guilt and sin and external obligation, and that only civilization corrupted his simple, pure nature and moral freedom through the invention of property, through luxury, violence and oppression. This notion still lingers in current conceptions such as those according to which “natural” impulses and instincts, above all

1. G. P. Adams, *Knowledge and Society*, 1938, p. 337.—This concept might be compared with the following quotation from a 19th-century French author: “Would you realize what Revolution is, call it Progress; and would you realize what Progress is, call it tomorrow.”

2. At first came the Golden Age when, of their own free will, men observed faith and right without judge or law.

sex, are implicitly good, and "natural" life the remedy for all ills of society.

A closer inspection of Ovid's description reveals a striking similarity between his Golden Age, which stood at the beginning of creation, and what our most progressive social reformers are promising us as the goal of their endeavors. It is the stateless society where all shall live in peace and plenty, without the necessity of any government, laws or punishment. It is the perfect freedom of which Anarchists are dreaming, and at the same time that perfect order and harmony which Communists are trying to achieve. We are here not concerned with the fact that, whenever an attempt is made to realize such progress in practice, the last vestiges of freedom seem to yield to a maximum of compulsion, or complete disruption of social life supersedes whatever harmony less perfect systems may be able to boast. For these, we are told, are but the inevitable birth-pangs of a better world to be created through progress. What interests us at the present moment is the question how people of all ages and cultures have come to conceive this image of perfect social order, freedom and peace.

Now, ethnologists and sociologists tell us that there exist as a matter of fact stages or rather forms of social relations which come very close to the ideal depicted as the Golden Age, whether past or future. They speak of the "primary group" which is distinguished by a "fusion of individualities in a common whole, so that one's very self . . . is the common life and purpose of the group" . . . by "mutual identification and sympathy", by a "feeling of the whole as expressed by 'we'." E. Faris holds that in a pure primary group even punishment is absent, and social control is exercised by direct, emotional and intimate influences, rather than by laws and other social institutions. The model primary group is the ((non-patriarchal)) original family, but primitive cultures, tribal or village communities frequently show similar traits.³

The German ideal of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, which the Nazis only inherited and adapted from the 19th century Romantic School, is apparently an attempt to reduce the complex social unit of a modern nation to the status of a primary group. The unreflective and instinctive participation of every individual

3. E. Faris, *The Nature of Human Nature, and other Essays in Social Psychology* 1937, p. 36 ff.

of the "group mind",⁴ the intimacy of social interaction among all its members, the self-understood co-operation and complete community of purpose that is characteristic of a primary group, is being claimed for the totality of the *Volk*. However, the same concept underlies other collectivistic ideologies of modern times which have such a strong appeal to progressive people. Marxism regards class struggle and dictatorship of the proletariat as but transitory stages to the ultimate ideal when mankind will form one society of equals all of whom will be enlightened enough to live together peacefully, in complete co-operation and in a spirit of voluntary altruism, without law or coercion. Here, again, we find the traits immanent in a primary group extended to a larger unit, in fact to the largest social unit which is conceivable. Thus our ideal of society projected into the future, and extended to large social groups, seems to have derived mainly from past childhood experiences when man lived happily in the bosom of the family. The dogma of progress appears as a magnificently enlarged revival of the myth of the Golden Age; a myth which answers to and corresponds with a basic disposition of human nature.

However, progress as we understand it is not simply aimed at such a perfect state of social harmony. It also implies a connotation which, on this continent at least, has assumed the homely appearance of bigger and better, or rather—bigger, more, and *therefore* better. We do not think of the Golden Age to come as of something definite, complete in itself, static, but as of a continuous dynamic advance, a sequence of changes to ever better conditions, to ever more happiness, satisfaction, perfection.

Now, for quite a while it had been an accepted doctrine that this kind of progress was not an Utopia, or—as Oscar Wilde says,—“the realization of Utopias”, but a reality of biological as well as cultural evolution. Spencer taught that social progress was a necessity, a social law, and Charles Darwin wrote the famous words: “As natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress toward perfection.” Unfortunately, more recent experiences fail to provide a convincing verification of Spencer’s creed. Under the impact of current events we have grown less optimistic, less sure, whether man-

4. Cf. L. Levy-Bruhl, *Primitive Mentality*, 1923.

kind is really progressing by necessity, becoming more and more perfect, in the sense of a natural law. Moreover, Darwin's law of natural selection implies the weeding-out, the gradual extermination and "liquidation" of the weak, the undesirable. When he bluntly states that nature always works for the good of every being, we have a right to doubt whether the underprivileged who, according to its law, are doomed, will really feel the course of nature as such a great boon for themselves. Here the biologist has obviously overstepped his legitimate domain, and indulged in judgments of value about which one can be of a very different opinion. This has led scholars to reconsider the whole meaning of history, and many have come to the same conclusions as E. Faris who writes: "It is possible to prove that the world has become more complex. It is hardly possible to prove that it has become better, and quite impossible to prove that it will continue to do so." In fact, the idea of progress is just as much a dogma as that of Paradise, and while the latter at least may claim revelation as a crown witness, the former contains—like every relativist doctrine—the seed of its own destruction. "Will not," asks Bury in the conclusion of a thorough study of the idea of progress⁵, "that process of change, for which progress is the optimistic name, compel 'progress' to fall from the commanding position in which it is now . . . enthroned?"

Nevertheless, the conception of progress, as much as the closely related story of the Golden Age, seems to be based on a profoundly human desire, namely the desire not only to attain happiness, but to make it last. Our daily experience teaches us that the mere repetition of an agreeable experience does not necessarily increase our sensation of pleasure. If we are hungry, the first bite of a piece of bread will cause us intense satisfaction, the second less so, and if we continue indefinitely, we will become painfully sick. Neither will a man who has a craze for oysters become happier by continuing to feed on them for a year. In economics, this experience has found its formulation in the law of diminishing marginal utility, whereby marginal utility of any quantity of commodity means "the increase in total utility which results from a unit increase in consumption". It runs as follows:⁶ "As a consumer increases the consumption of any one commodity, keeping constant the consumption of all other com-

5. J.B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into its Origin and Growth*. (American Edition) 1932, p. 352.

6. Cf. K. E. Bolding, *Economic Analysis*, 1941, p. 639.

modities, the marginal utility of the variable commodity must eventually decline." Rockefeller can hardly become happier by adding another 100, 1000 or even 10,000 dollars to his fortune.

Physiologists have found that an increase of physical stimuli upon our senses does not cause the same increase of our sensations, and Fechner formulated a law according to which a stimulus must be increased in a geometrical ratio in order to increase a corresponding sensation in an arithmetical ratio. Moreover, it is equally well known that there is a limit to the capacity of our senses to perceive and even to endure stimuli. Although warmth is a very pleasant stimulus, heat may cause intense pain, and if further increased, lead to a complete collapse of consciousness, even to annihilation. It is, of course, impossible to apply such psycho-physical equations directly to the very complex phenomena of non-sensual pleasures, for instance, beauty or knowledge. But it is exactly here our quantitative concept of progress fails completely. Our modern educational system is largely built upon the assumption that an increase in knowledge will necessarily make people wiser, happier, better. When it was put into practice, nothing of the sort happened. This failure of modern pedagogy should suggest to us that there is a natural capacity even for the amount of knowledge which can be digested by human beings, that there is a limit beyond which even learning becomes a source of ignorance, sorrow and depravity.

What we can gather, however, from psychology is the following: Satisfaction is dependent not on a fixed amount of goods, economic or cultural, but an expression of our natural desire for happiness. Moreover, in order to maintain the same satisfaction, progress must take place in a geometrical or some similar ratio as long as our soul or mind, or whatever we may call that thing which is able to be happy, is linked up with our physical body. However, since our capacity for new experiences is limited, there cannot be an infinite progress. The wise men of all times have recognized this fact by counselling moderation in the enjoyment even of the higher values, apparently in order to assure men of the benefit of progress without reaching too soon its upper limit, by advancing by the smallest steps possible which still guarantee satisfaction. Dissatisfaction and pain seem to belong to the household of human nature as much as happiness and pleasure, and after progress has run its full course, there always must be a collapse and new beginning to secure

again progress and happiness. This may explain the observation we often have to make, that people who are free from want and misfortunes of any description, who have all the money they need, are healthy, well educated and so on, eventually tend to invent, as it were, some sort of unhappiness, cause themselves some trouble, for instance, by developing some marital complications or neuroses, which are purely imaginary.

Both the idea of Progress and that of the Golden Age are but an expression of man's natural and indefatigable search for happiness, the one viewing the dynamic process of achieving the aim, the other viewing the static object of our desire, perfection. As human nature is constructed, perfect happiness seems to be unattainable by human effort alone, and the best which modern man, if he has lost faith in Revelation and Heaven, can hope for is to find happiness in the search for happiness, to find satisfaction in being dissatisfied. Seneca said, two thousand years ago: *Magna pars est profectus velle proficere.*⁷

7. The great part of progress consists in the desire to progress.