Historical Progress

In historiography and the philosophy of history, progress (from Latin progressus, "an advance") is the idea that the world can become increasingly better in terms of science, technology, modernization, liberty, democracy, quality of life, etc. Although progress is often associated with the Western notion of monotonic change in a straight, linear fashion, alternative conceptions exist, such as the cyclic theory of eternal return, or the "spiral-shaped" dialectic progress of Hegel, Marx, et al.

History

Antiquity

Historian J. B. Bury argued that thought in ancient Greece was dominated by the theory of world-cycles or the doctrine of eternal return, and was steeped in a belief parallel to the Judaic "fall of man," but rather from a preceding "Golden Age" of innocence and simplicity. Time was generally regarded as the enemy of humanity which depreciates the value of the world. He credits the Epicureans with having had a potential for leading to the foundation of a theory of Progress through their materialistic acceptance of the atomism of Democritus as the explanation for a world without an intervening Deity.

“For them, the earliest condition of men resembled that of the beasts, and from this primitive and miserable condition they laboriously reached the existing state of civilisation, not by external guidance or as a consequence of some initial design, but simply by the exercise of human intelligence throughout a long period.”

Robert Nisbet and Gertrude Himmelfarb have attributed a notion of progress to other Greeks. Xenophanes said "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." Plato’s Book III of The Laws depicts humanity's progress from a state of nature to the higher levels of culture, economy, and polity. Plato’s The Statesman also outlines a historical account of the progress of mankind.

Renaissance

During the Medieval period, science was to a large extent based on Scholastic interpretations of the master, Aristotle. The Renaissance of the 15th, 16th and 17th Centuries changed the mindset in Europe towards an empirical view, based on a pantheistic interpretation of Plato. This induced a revolution in curiosity about nature in general and scientific advance, which opened the gates for technical and economic advance. Furthermore, the individual potential was seen as a never-ending quest for being God-like, paving the way for a view of Man based on unlimited perfection and progress.

Enlightenment

The scientific advances of the 16th and 17th centuries provided a basis for the optimistic outlook of Bacon's 'New Atlantis.' In the 17th century Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle argued in favor of progress with respect to arts and the sciences, saying that each age has the advantage of not having to rediscover what was accomplished in preceding ages. The epistemology of John Locke provided further support and was popularized by the Encyclopedists Diderot, Holbach, and Condorcet. Locke had a powerful influence on the American Founding Fathers.
In the Enlightenment, French historian and philosopher Voltaire (1694–1778) was a major proponent of the possibility of progress. At first Voltaire's thought was informed by the Idea of Progress coupled with rationalism. His subsequent notion of the historical idea of progress saw science and reason as the driving forces behind societal advancement. The first complete statement of progress is that of Turgot, in his "A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind" (1750). For Turgot progress covers not simply the arts and sciences but, on their base, the whole of culture—manner, mores, institutions, legal codes, economy, and society.[3]

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), the Great German philosopher, argued that progress is neither automatic nor continuous and does not measure knowledge or wealth, but is a painful and largely inadvertent passage from barbarism through civilization toward enlightened culture and the abolition of war. Kant called for education, with the education of humankind seen as a slow process whereby world history propels mankind toward peace through war, international commerce, and enlightened self-interest.[4]

Scottish theorist Adam Ferguson (1723–1816) defined human progress as the working out of a divine plan. The difficulties and dangers of life provided the necessary stimuli for human development, while the uniquely human ability to evaluate led to ambition and the conscious striving for excellence. But he never adequately analyzed the competitive and aggressive consequences stemming from his emphasis on ambition even though he envisioned man's lot as a perpetual striving with no earthly culmination. Man found his happiness only in effort.[5]

**American Revolution**

The intellectual leaders of the American Revolution, such as Benjamin Franklin, Tom Paine, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, were immersed in Enlightenment thought and believed the idea of progress meant that they could reorganize the political system to the benefit of the human condition; both for Americans and also, as Jefferson put it, for an "Empire of Liberty" that would benefit all mankind. Thus was born the idea of inevitable American future progress.

The most original 'New World' contribution to historical thought was the idea that history is not exhausted but that man may begin again in a new world. Besides rejecting the lessons of the past, the Jeffersonians Americanized the idea of progress by democratizing and vulgarizing it to include the welfare of the common man as a form of republicanism. As Romantics deeply concerned with the past, collecting source materials and founding historical societies, the Founding Fathers were animated by clear principles. They saw man in control of his destiny, saw virtue as a distinguishing characteristic of a republic, and were concerned with happiness, progress, and prosperity. Thomas Paine, combining the spirit of rationalism and romanticism, pictured a time when America's innocence would sound like a romance, and concluded that the fall of America could mark the end of 'the noblest work of human wisdom.'[6]

That human liberty was put on the agenda of fundamental concerns of the modern world was recognized by the revolutionaries as well as by many British commentators. Yet, within two years after the adoption of the Constitution, the American Revolution had to share the spotlight with the French Revolution. The American Revolution was eclipsed, and, in the 20th century, lost its appeal even for subject peoples involved in similar movements for self-determination. Thus, its life as a model for political revolutions was relatively short. The reason for this development lies in the fact that its concerns and preoccupations were overwhelmingly political; economic demands and social unrest remained largely peripheral. After the middle of the 19th century, all political revolutions would ultimately
have to involve themselves with social questions and become revolutions of modernization. But the American Colonies in the 1770s, in contrast to all other colonies, had been modern from the beginning. The American patriots were protecting the modernity and liberty they had already achieved, while later revolutions were fighting to obtain liberty for the first time. However, since so few modern revolutions have evinced much concern for the preservation and extension of human freedom, the American model may still come to provide a lesson for the future.[7]

The notion that America is a highly favorable place for people seeking progress in their own lives comprises the American Dream.[8]

**Types of progress**

**Social progress**

Social progress is the idea that societies can or do improve in terms of their social, political, and economic structures. The concept of social progress was introduced in the early 19th century social theories, especially those of social evolutionists like Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer. It was present in the Enlightenment’s philosophies of history.

The big breakthrough to a new idea in Europe Enlightenment, when social commentators and philosophers began to realize that people *themselves* could change society and change their way of life. Instead of being made completely by gods, there was increasing room for the idea that people themselves *made their own society* - and not only that, as Giambattista Vico argued, *because* people practically made their own society, they could also fully comprehend it. This gave rise to new sciences, or proto-sciences, which claimed to provide new scientific knowledge about what society was like, and how one may change it for the better.[9] In turn, this gave rise to progressive opinion, in contrast with conservative opinion, according to which attempts to radically remake society normally make things worse.

**Scientific progress**

Scientific progress is the idea that science increases its problem solving ability through the application of some scientific method.

Several Philosophers of Science have supported arguments that the progress of science is discontinuous. In that case, progress is not a continuous accumulation, but rather a revolutionary process where brand new ideas are adopted and old ideas become abandoned. Thomas Kuhn was a major proponent of this model of scientific progress, as explained in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

Another model of Scientific Progress, as put forward by Richard Boyd, and others, is *History of Science* as a model of scientific progress. In short, methods in science are produced which are used to produce scientific theories, which then are used to produce more methods, which are then used to produce more theories and so on.

Note that this does not conflict with a continuous or discontinuous model of scientific progress. This model supports realism in that scientists are always working within the same universe; their theories must be referring to real objects, because they create theories that refer to actual objects that are used later in methods to produce new theories.
Philosophical progress

A prominent question in metaphilosophy is whether or not philosophical progress occurs, and more so, whether such progress in philosophy is even possible. It has even been disputed, most notably by Ludwig Wittgenstein, whether genuine philosophical problems actually exist. The opposite has also been claimed, most notably by Karl Popper, who held that such problems do exist, that they are solvable, and that he had actually found definite solutions to some of them.

Some philosophers believe that, unlike scientific or mathematical problems, no philosophical problem is truly solvable in the conventional sense, but rather problems in philosophy are often refined rather than solved. For example Bertrand Russell, in his 1912 book *The Problems of Philosophy* says: "Philosophy is to be studied not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves."[10]

However, this is not universally accepted amongst philosophers. For example Martin Cohen, in his 1999 iconoclastic account of philosophy, *101 Philosophy Problems*, offers as the penultimate problem, the question of whether or not 'The problem with philosophy problems is that they don't have proper solutions'. He goes on to argue that there is a fundamental divide in philosophy between those who think philosophy is about *clarification* and those who think it is about recognising *complexity*.

The Idea of Progress

In historiography, the Idea of Progress is the theory that advances in technology, science, and social organization inevitably produce an improvement in the human condition. That is, people can become happier in terms of quality of life (social progress) through economic development and the application of science and technology (scientific progress). The assumption is that the process will happen once people apply their reason and skills, for it is not divinely foreordained. The role of the expert is to identify hindrances that slow or neutralize progress.

Historian J. B. Bury wrote in 1920:[11]

"To the minds of most people the desirable outcome of human development would be a condition of society in which all the inhabitants of the planet would enjoy a perfectly happy existence. [...] it cannot be proved that the unknown destination towards which man is advancing is desirable. The movement may be Progress, or it may be in an undesirable direction and therefore not Progress. [...] the Progress of humanity belongs to the same order of ideas as Providence or personal immortality. It is true or it is false, and like them it cannot be proved either true or false. Belief in it is an act of faith.

Sociologist Robert Nisbet finds that "No single idea has been more important than...the Idea of Progress in Western civilization for three thousand years."[12], and defines five "crucial premises" of Idea of Progress:

1. value of the past
2. nobility of Western civilization
3. worth of economic/technological growth
4. faith in reason and scientific/scholarly knowledge obtained through reason
5. intrinsic importance and worth of life on earth.
The Idea of Progress emerged primarily in the Enlightenment in the 18th century, although some scholars like Nisbet (1980) have traced it to ancient Christian notions.\[151\] The theory of evolution in the nineteenth century made progress a necessary law of nature and gave the doctrine its first conscious scientific form. The idea was challenged by the 20th century realization that destruction, as in the two world wars, could grow out of technical progress.

The Idea of Progress was promoted by classical liberals in the 19th century, who called for the rapid modernization of the economy and society to remove the traditional hindrances to free markets and free movements of people. John Stuart Mill's (1806–73) ethical and political thought assumed a great faith in the power of ideas and of intellectual education for improving human nature or behavior. For those who do not share this faith the very idea of progress becomes questionable.\[151\]

The influential English philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) in *The Principles of Sociology* (1876) and *The Principles of Ethics* (1879) proclaimed a universal law of socio-political development: societies moved from a military organization to a base in industrial production. As society evolved, he argued, there would be greater individualism, greater altruism, greater co-operation, and a more equal freedom for everyone. The laws of human society would produce the changes, and he said the only role for government was military police, and enforcement of civil contracts in courts. Many libertarians adopted his perspective.\[151\]

References

1. ^ Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller and John Herman Randall (eds.), *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man* (1948)
9. ^ The following annotated reference list appears in J. B. Bury's definitive study: *The Idea of Progress*, published in 1920 and available in full on the web:

The history of the idea of Progress has been treated briefly and partially by various French writers; e.g. Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, vi. 321 sqq.; Buchez, *Introduction a la science de l'histoire*, i. 99 sqq. (ed. 2, 1842); Javary, *De l'idee de progres* (1850); Rigault, *Histoire de la querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* (1856); Bouillier, *Histoire de la philosophie cartesienne* (1854); Caro, *Problemes de la morale sociale* (1876); Brunetiere, "La Formation de l'idee de progres", in *Etudes*
critiques, 5e serie. More recently M. Jules Delvaille has attempted to trace its history fully, down to the end of the eighteenth century. His Histoire de l’idée de progres (1910) is planned on a large scale; he is erudite and has read extensively. But his treatment is lacking in the power of discrimination. He strikes one as anxious to bring within his net, as theoriciens du progres, as many distinguished thinkers as possible; and so, along with a great deal that is useful and relevant, we also find in his book much that is irrelevant. He has not clearly seen that the distinctive idea of Progress was not conceived in antiquity or in the Middle Ages, or even in the Renaissance period; and when he comes to modern times he fails to bring out clearly the decisive steps of its growth. And he does not seem to realize that a man might be "progressive" without believing in, or even thinking about, the doctrine of Progress. Leonardo da Vinci and Berkeley are examples. In my Ancient Greek Historians (1909) I dwelt on the modern origin of the idea (p. 253 sqq.). Recently Mr. R. H. Murray, in a learned appendix to his Erasmus and Luther, has developed the thesis that Progress was not grasped in antiquity (though he makes an exception of Seneca), -- a welcome confirmation.


Further reading


- Burgess, Yvonne. 'The Myth of Progress (1994)


  


• Spadafora, David. *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth Century Britain* (1990),


Based on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Progress_(history)