The Myth of Progress

Author(s): Theodore L. Shay


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By

Theodore L. Shay

George Sorel gave the great impetus to the study of social and political myths. Myths became data deserving conscientious, scientific consideration. Political scientists have naturally been most interested in analyzing the political implications of certain myths, and in examining the relation between myth or belief systems and the determinants of political behavior. It is the purpose of this article to describe briefly some of the problems involved in the study of a myth, and by a case-example to suggest that a wide and fruitful area of investigation might be opened in India by the study of myth systems peculiar to the Indian civilization and their relation to political behavior.

One of the greatest myths of Western civilization is the myth of progress. For approximately 250 years Western society has generally believed that progress has taken place, that we are experiencing the results of past progress, and that there is a strong possibility if not inevitability that progress will continue in the future. In other words, people tend to make an evaluation of their present status in terms of progress achieved and to project an expectation of progress to be achieved. Usually there is an element of conscious planning in the myth-expectation aspect of the belief. Progress is a dynamic myth, it is motivational and directional. As a myth it is commonly defined or conceived of as the acquisition of “more of the good”.

In order to examine critically this myth a greater refinement of its content must be made. What does progress mean. It does not mean simple change. Simple change involves movement but it is not necessarily movement in a coherent or continuing direction, nor is it movement upon which the evaluation “good” may be placed. Nor is progress simple evolution, even though evolution may at times be defined as coherent, continuous, directional change. Evolution is not necessarily evaluated as good, and evolution is generally considered a process of nature; and only to a limited degree is man consciously capable of planning, directing, and consummating evolutionary change. Nor is progress a part of a dialectical process such as conceived by Hegel and Marx. The Hegelian and the Marxian dialectics construe history into a directional pattern; but the movement, the direction, and the fulfilment are all inevitable and only to a minor and, at that, preordained, degree consciously aided by human effort. But more than this, the dialectical system is a closed
system. At some point in history the final synthesis is achieved and there is no further progression. The myth of progress does not envisage such a closed system. This is one of its chief characteristics, distinguishing it from various forms of millenialism.

If progress is not simple change, evolution, nor dialectics, what is it? Historically, the idea-myth of progress came into general intellectual acceptance at about the beginning of the eighteenth century. As an idea its development took several hundred years; but as a popularized idea, as a motivational part of the belief system of Western civilization, it is relatively new. Condorcet and the leaders of the Enlightenment conceived of an optimistic force of progress carrying mankind forward toward perfectability. Less optimistic advocates of the idea of progress merely envisaged a continuing moral betterment of mankind. But virtually all agreed that man, through the manipulation and control of his environment, could be morally improved and society made to more closely approximate the ideal of the good (if not the perfect) association of the humanitarian idealists.

Most eighteenth and nineteenth century proponents of the idea of progress urged social schemes that would hasten the growth of the more perfect society and the more moral individual. These schemes involved everything from increased feminine education to universal manhood suffrage, from reforms of voting constituencies to repeal of tariff acts, from the spread of self-determination of all national groups to the organization of a multinational federation of states. The schemes proposed in the name of progress were as varied as the proposals articulate social and political leaders could make. Not all schemes, of course, were accepted, but the myth grew in intensity throughout this period. It was generally held that the judicious selection of well conceived schemes would bring about those expectations of the myth for which society was willing to work and sacrifice. There was a great social and political dedication to the constructive manipulation of the environment for this ideal.

Nearly a hundred years ago Herbert Spencer endeavored to demonstrate that progress was more than an optimistic ideal, rather that it was an inevitable law; and he was aided in this thesis by the Darwinian concept of evolution. Society might now be assured that progress was a reality and that the movement toward moral betterment was not only aided by the process of history and evolution but also that it was an inevitable part of the evolutionary creation. But almost immediately Spencer was attacked. Many scholars objected that history did not demonstrate a linear progression from inferior to superior, from the less good to the better. Moreover, they said, if there is an inevitable law of progress, then conscious human endeavor to implement progress becomes virtually superfluous. The Spencerian
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The concept was not acceptable because of the drastic nature of its alteration of the plan and expectation of the myth. A reformulation of the idea of progress was necessary. Evolution, rather than being an inevitable linear development, was conceived of as providing man with the means of adaptation in given directions, and that man could consciously choose to pursue those directions which afforded him the best opportunity for moral betterment. Inevitable evolution is change. The myth of progress requires a value judgment as to the improvement resulting from that change.

Discerning social theorists now found that they had created another problem. If progress is not inevitable, what evidence is there that progress has occurred, and, equally important, what reason is there to presuppose that progress will continue? The myth continued to provide society with an optimistic expectation projection, but it was increasingly felt that belief in progress must be given some scientifically verifiable basis. By the beginning of the twentieth century, a concerted effort was made to discover such a basis. As. J. O. Hertzler wrote, "All ideological criteria (of progress) have little practical value. We need tests more tangible and comprehensive which embody concrete social values." (Social Progress, p. 86). To put the need simply, we cannot conceive of human progress without some technique of measurement. We must have reference to a yardstick. Tests must be devised by which to gauge the progress man has made, and by which to plot the course of future progress.

A number of tests or yardsticks of progress were provided. Various authors suggested that progress could be seen in (a) the increase in population, (b) the increase in life expectancy, (c) the decrease in infant mortality, (d) the increase in literacy, (e) the increase of goods and services, (f) the decrease in crime, (g) the increase in personal security, (h) the spread of scientific curiosity, (i) the refinement of social processes, and, someone wrote in the spring of 1914, (j) the end of wars.

After two world wars, a world depression, and over a dozen smaller wars and violent revolutions, the efforts to establish a practical test of progress were abandoned. The mitigating characteristic of all the proposed tests was that none of them demonstrated moral betterment of the individual or of society. Moreover, some of the tests simply did not accord with objective fact. Certainly, some of these tests were based on change which is generally evaluated as beneficial. But the testers neglected the concomitant disabilities that many of these advances brought with them. Decrease in infant mortality and increase in life expectancy both contribute to the increase in population, and this brings with it the disability of a lowering standard of living, increased hardship, and an aggravated struggle to allow the increased population simply to continue living. Personal security has not necessarily increased, especially
when one considers the potential of modern total warfare. There has not been a decrease in crime. It is open to question if the social processes have been especially refined. The increase in literacy is important, but it is abundantly clear that the mere ability to read does not necessarily bring about the desire to read worthwhile literature. Nor does merely the accumulation of facts and knowledge lead to wisdom. Obviously, increased scientific curiosity has brought both wonders and horrors, has provided tools for the betterment of living conditions and also for the destruction of life. Tools are neither moral nor immoral, they may be used morally or immorally. There has been a great increase of goods and services, and in many parts of the world the individual is provided with creature comforts unknown to his grandparents. However, does the possession and use of these creature comforts make the individual morally better? Does the existence of scientifically perfected tools bring about the moral discretion necessary to the moral use of those tools? Does a longer life expectancy and an access to the printed word, per se, make wiser or morally improve (or aid sometimes to intellectually enslave) the individual? In fine, has the wholly conscious, planned, guided manipulation of the human environment for 250 years especially elevated the moral stature of mankind? If it cannot be objectively demonstrated that mankind as a whole is morally better because of this process, then it cannot be objectively demonstrated that progress has taken place. If it cannot be objectively demonstrated that progress has taken place, then there is no reason to assume that the present or continued manipulation of the environment will bring about progress. This is the present appraisal of the idea of progress by many contemporary social observers.

Certainly change has taken place. No one would deny that for many people life is longer, healthier, more pleasant, and more comfortable. No one would deny that the conscious manipulation of our environment has caused many men to be better educated, housed, dressed, fed, transported, and entertained. All of this has been brought about at a price. No special purpose would be served by here cataloging the many problems and disabilities that people face in 1957. The price we have paid is apparent to anyone who chooses to reflect on the status of our present situation. But for the sake of argument, let us assume that the price has not been exhorbitant, that overall, mankind has gained in well being, health, comfort, etc. Progress is still not self-evident because none of these gains necessarily demonstrates that man is morally improved. We may be “better off”, but are we “better”? The myth of progress has taught people to believe that we would become “better”, not just “better off”. The purpose and goal of the great undertaking in the name of progress has been, and has only been, moral betterment.

This brief case examination of an important myth hopefully will indicate many more questions than provide answers. If the social and political
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Theorists of today are ever brought to the conclusion that the expectations of the myth of progress — the moral betterment of mankind — are untenable, then we may look for a general disillusionment in the whole myth of progress on a social basis. If this should happen, the impact of the displacement of this myth would be revolutionary. It is one of the tasks of the theoretician in the social sciences to endeavor to gauge the possibility of this occurrence and then to be prepared to suggest either remedies to preclude its happening or suggestions to indicate new directions for mankind's historical search for the better life.