

How We Want to Live

NARRATIVES ON PROGRESS

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gleaming in the political showrooms. What's behind the Contract with America, Proposition 187, Proposition 209, the growing prison industry, the welfare bill, mandatory sentencing, the prohibition against clean needles, and reduction and elimination of services for the elderly and the disabled?

The American Psychological Association was about to honor Raymond B. Cattell until the Anti-Defamation League reminded them of some of his racist writings. Mr. Cattell believes that "poverty and disease are part of the natural selection process that keeps a race healthy. Modern social welfare simply abolishes the checks natural selection imposes on biological systems." Cattell and his friends regard Christianity as "a denial of the urge to evolution, 'encouraging' the increase of the unfit." How do we deal with the unfit? By using "genthanasia," a "phasing out" in which a moribund culture is ended. Immigration, for Cattell, only draws "people of low genetic quality." The American Psychological Association saluted Mr. Cattell for his "lifetime contribution in the public interest." Well, Mr. Cattell, who said in 1994 that Hitler actually shared many values of the average American, may have tapped into the zeitgeist. Charles Murray's book *The Bell Curve*, which includes similar arguments, and was partially financed by the Pioneer Fund, whose Nazi ties have been documented, was favorably received even by the *New York Times Book Review*.

It's hard to disagree with animal photographer Peter Beard, who, while lamenting the vanishing elephant herds, said that humans are the most greedy and selfish animals in the animal kingdom, an animal that began the twentieth century with an ugly circus of carnage called World War I, and toward the end of the century was speculating about how to phase out unwanted groups through genthanasia. To some, that's progress.

KIRKPATRICK SALE

Five Facets of a Myth

I can vividly remember sitting at the dinner table arguing with my father about progress, using on him all the experience and wisdom I had gathered at the age of fifteen. Of course we live in an era of progress, I said, just look at cars—how clumsy and unreliable and slow they were in the old days, how sleek and efficient and speedy they are now.

He raised an eyebrow, just a little. And what has been the result of having all these wonderful new sleek and efficient and speedy cars? he asked. I was taken aback. I searched for a way to answer. He went on.

How many people die each year as a result of these speedy cars? How many are maimed and crippled? What is life like for the people who produce them, on those famous assembly lines, the same routinized job hour after hour, day after day, like in Chaplin's film? How many fields and forests and even towns and villages have been paved over so that these cars can get to all the places they want to get to—and park there? Where does all the gasoline come from, and at what cost, and what happens when we burn it and exhaust it?

Thankfully, before I could stammer out a response, he went on to tell me about an article written on the subject of progress, a concept I had never really thought of, by one of his Cornell colleagues, the

historian Carl Becker, a man I had never heard of, in the *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, a resource I had never come across. Read it, he said.

I'm afraid it was another fifteen years before I did, though in the meantime I came to learn the wisdom of my father's skepticism as the modern world repeatedly threw up other examples of invention and advancement—television, electric carving knife, microwave oven, nuclear power—that showed the same problematic nature of progress, taken in the round and negatives factored in, as did the automobile. When I finally got to Becker's masterful essay, in the course of a wholesale re-examination of modernity, it took no scholarly armament of his to convince me of the peculiar historical provenance of the concept of progress and its status not as an inevitability, a force as given as gravity as my youthful self imagined, but as a cultural construct invented for all practical purposes in the Renaissance, and which advanced the propaganda of capitalism. It was nothing more than a serviceable myth, a deeply held, unexamined construct—like all useful cultural myths—that promoted the idea of regular and eternal improvement of the human condition, largely through the exploitation of nature and the acquisition of material goods.

Of course by now it is no longer such an arcane perception. Many fifteen year olds today, seeing clearly the perils that have accompanied modern technology in its progress, some of which perils threaten the very continuance of the human species, have already worked out for themselves what's wrong with the myth. It is hard to learn that forests are being cut down at the rate of 56 million acres a year, that desertification threatens 8 billion acres of land worldwide, that all of the world's 17 major fisheries are in decline and stand a decade away from virtual exhaustion, that 26 million tons of topsoil is lost to erosion and pollution every year, and believe that the world's economic system, whose functioning exacts this price, is headed in the right direction and that that direction should be labeled "progress."

E. E. Cummings once called progress a "comfortable disease" of modern "manunkind," and so it has been for some. But at any time

since the triumph of capitalism only a minority of the world's population could be said to be really living in comfort, and that comfort, continuously threatened, is achieved at considerable expense.

Today, of the approximately 6 billion people in the world, it is estimated that at least a billion live in abject poverty, their lives cruel, empty, and mercifully short. Another 2 billion eke out life on a bare subsistence level, usually sustained only by one or another starch, the majority without potable water or sanitary toilets. More than 2 billion more live at the bottom edges of the money economy, with incomes less than \$5,000 a year and no property or savings, no net worth to pass on to their children. That leaves less than a billion people who even come close to struggling for lives of comfort, with jobs and salaries of some regularity, and a quite small minority at the top of that scale who could really be said to have achieved comfortable lives. In the world, some 350 people can be considered (U.S. dollar) billionaires (with slightly more than 3 million millionaires), and their total net worth is estimated to exceed that of 45 percent of the world's population.

This is progress? A disease such a small number can catch? And with such inequity, such imbalance?

In the United States, the most materially advanced nation in the world and long the most ardent champion of the notion of progress, some 40 million people live below the official poverty line and another 20 million or so below the line adjusted for real costs; 6 million or so are unemployed, more than 30 million are said to be too discouraged to look for work, and 45 million are in "disposable" jobs, temporary and part-time, without benefits or security. The top 5 percent of the population owns about two-thirds of the total wealth; 60 percent own no tangible assets or are in debt; in terms of income, the top 20 percent earn half the total income, the bottom 20 percent less than 4 percent of it.

All this hardly suggests the sort of material comfort progress is assumed to have provided. Certainly many in the United States and throughout the industrial world live at levels of wealth undreamed of in ages past, able to call forth hundreds of servant-equivalents at the flip of a switch or turn of a key, and probably a third of this "First

World" population could be said to have lives of ease and convenience. Yet it is a statistical fact that it is just this segment that most acutely suffers from the *true* "comfortable disease," what I would call *affluenza*: heart disease, stress, overwork, family dysfunction, alcoholism, insecurity, anomie, psychosis, loneliness, impotence, alienation, consumerism, and coldness of heart.

Leopold Kohr, the Austrian economist whose seminal work *The Breakdown of Nations* is an essential tool for understanding the failures of political progress in the last half-millennium, often used to close his lectures with this analogy.

Suppose we are on a progress-train, he said, running full speed ahead in the approved manner, fueled by rapacious growth and resource depletion and cheered on by highly rewarded economists. What if we then discover that we are headed for a precipitous fall to certain disaster just a few miles ahead when the tracks end at an uncrossable gulf? Do we take the advice of the economists to put more fuel into the engines so that we go at an ever faster rate, presumably hoping that we build up a head of steam so powerful that it can land us safely on the other side of the gulf; or do we reach for the brakes and come to a screeching if somewhat tumble-around halt as quickly as possible?

Progress is the myth that assures us that full speed ahead is never wrong. Ecology is the discipline that teaches us that it is disaster.

Before the altar of progress, attended by its dutiful acolytes of science and technology, modern industrial society has presented an increasing abundance of sacrifices from the natural world, imitating on a much grander and more devastating scale the religious rites of earlier empires built on similar conceits about the domination of nature. Now, it seems, we are prepared to offer up even the very biosphere itself.

No one knows how resilient the biosphere is, how much damage it is able to absorb before it stops functioning—or at least functioning well enough to keep the human species alive. But in recent years some very respectable and authoritative voices have suggested that,

if we continue the relentless rush of progress that is so stressing the earth on which it depends, we will reach that point in the quite near future. The Worldwatch Institute, which issues annual accountings of such things, has warned that there is not one life-support system on which the biosphere depends for its existence—healthy air, water, soil, temperature, and the like—that is not now severely threatened and in fact getting worse decade by decade. Not long ago a gathering of elite environmental scientists and activists in Morelia, Mexico, published a declaration warning of "environmental destruction" and expressing unanimous concern "that life on our planet is in grave danger." And recently the U.S. Union of Concerned Scientists, in a statement endorsed by more than a hundred Noble laureates and 1,600 members of national academies of science all over the world, proclaimed a "World Scientists' Warning to Humanity" stating that the present rates of environmental assault and population increase cannot continue without "vast human misery" and a planet so "irretrievably mutilated" that "it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know."

The high-tech global economy will not listen; cannot listen. It continues apace its expansion and exploitation. Thanks to it, human beings annually use up some 40 percent of all the net photosynthetic energy available to the planet Earth, though we are but a single species of comparatively insignificant numbers. The world economy has grown by more than five times in the last fifty years and is continuing at a dizzying pace to use up the world's resources, create unabating pollution and waste, and increase the enormous inequalities within and between all nations of the world.

Suppose an objective observer were to measure the success of Progress—that is, the capital-P myth that ever since the Enlightenment has nurtured and guided and presided over that happy marriage of science and capitalism that has produced modern industrial civilization.

Has it been, on the whole, better or worse for the human species? Other species? Has it brought humans more happiness than there was before? More justice? More equality? More efficiency? And if its

ends have proven to be more benign than not, what of its means? At what price have its benefits been won? And are they sustainable?

The objective observer would have to conclude that the record is mixed, at best. On the plus side, there is no denying that material prosperity has increased for about a sixth of the world's humans, for some beyond the most avaricious dreams of kings and potentates of the past. The world has developed systems of transportation and communication that allow people, goods, and information to be exchanged on a scale and at a swiftness never before possible. And for maybe a third of these humans longevity has been increased, along with a general improvement in health and sanitation that has allowed the expansion of human numbers about tenfold in the last three centuries.

On the minus side, the costs have been considerable. The impact on the earth's species and systems of providing prosperity for a billion people has been, as we have seen, devastatingly destructive—only one additional measure of which is the fact that it has meant the permanent extinction of perhaps 500,000 species in this century alone. The impact on the remaining five-sixths of the human species has been likewise destructive, as most of them have seen their societies colonized or displaced, their economies wrenched and shattered, and their environments transformed for the worse, driving them into deprivation and misery that are almost certainly worse than those they ever knew, however difficult their times past, before the advent of industrial society.

And even the billion whose living standards use up what is effectively 100 percent of the world's available resources each year, and who might be therefore assumed to be happy as a result, do not in fact seem to be so. No social indices in any advanced society suggest that people are more content than they were a generation ago. Various surveys indicate that the "misery quotient" in most countries has increased, and considerable real-world evidence (such as rising rates of mental illness, drugs, crime, divorce, and depression) argues that the results of material enrichment have not included much individual happiness.

Indeed, on a larger scale, almost all that Progress was supposed

to achieve has failed to come about, despite the immense amount of money and technology devoted to its cause. Virtually all of the dreams that have adorned it over the years, particularly in its most robust stages in the late nineteenth century and in the past twenty years of computerdom, have dissipated as utopian fancies—those that have not, like nuclear power, chemical agriculture, manifest destiny, and the welfare state, turned into nightmares. Progress has not, even in this most progressive nation, eliminated poverty (the number of poor has increased and real income has declined for twenty-five years). It has not eliminated drudgery (hours of employment have increased, as has work within the home, for both sexes). It has not eliminated ignorance (literacy rates have declined for fifty years, and test scores have declined). It has not eliminated disease (hospitalization, illness, and death rates have all increased since 1980).

It seems quite simple; beyond prosperity and longevity, and those limited to a minority, and each with seriously damaging environmental consequences, Progress does not have a great deal going for it. For its adherents, of course, it is probably sufficient that wealth is meritorious and affluence desirable and longer life positive. The terms of the game for them are simple: material betterment for as many as possible, as fast as possible. Nothing else, certainly not considerations of personal morality or social cohesion or spiritual depth or participatory government, seems much to matter.

But the objective observer is not so narrow-minded, and is able to see how deep and deadly are the shortcomings of such a view. The objective observer could only conclude that since the fruits of Progress are so meager, the price by which they have been won is far too high, in social, economic, political, and environmental terms, and that neither the societies nor ecosystems of the world will be able to bear the cost for more than a few decades longer, if they have not already been damaged beyond redemption.

Herbert Read, the British philosopher and critic, once wrote that "only a people serving an apprenticeship to nature can be trusted with machines." It is a profound insight, and he underscored it by

adding that “only such people will so contrive and control those machines that their products are an enhancement of biological needs, and not a denial of them.”

An apprenticeship to nature—now *there's* a myth a stable and durable society could live by.

PORTER SHREVE

Made by You

At the corner of Germantown and Springfield Avenues in the Mount Airy neighborhood of Philadelphia there used to be a four-story, turn-of-the-century federal with a flagstone courtyard and a garden. Though I've never been back, I imagine it's still there.

The best days of my parents' marriage began in the late spring of 1973, when my father received a start-up grant to open an alternative school and took possession of this house. My mother would soon be pregnant with their fourth child. We lived in a cosy fieldstone cottage a few blocks away, with both of my grandmothers, my uncle Jeff, and the remaining three hippies from a small commune Jeff had formed in Colorado.

My father, well liked around the city because he had been the star of the University of Pennsylvania football team during its few winning years, was someone to whom people had always felt generosity. When he was growing up, teachers, coaches, and neighbors had pitched in, sending him to private school and summer camp and college. Something about him—his modesty, his father's early death, the fact that he was a spectacular athlete who sang in the choir and embarrassed easily—brought forth good will. It was appropriate, then, that a near-stranger named Woodward, who owned hundreds of houses in North Philadelphia, including the one we lived in, would on the day my father received his grant hand him a ring of