

Throwing Stones at Progress

Miguel Amorós

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“What we had set out to do was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.”

(Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*)

These days it is a commonplace for the ruling class and its complacent servants to refer to progress to justify every act of social aggression that ensues from an economic or political-economic operation. To the degree that it favors the increasingly more aggressive interests of the autonomous economy, society is for the latter the offspring of this progress; to the degree, however, that interests that are opposed to this aggression make themselves felt, society, or at least that part of society that is represented by those interests, is contrary to progress, and is implicated in the most grotesque folly, since everyone knows that you cannot stand in the way of progress. We thus behold the paradoxical fact that goals that were previously associated with the idea of progress—such as individual autonomy or the humanization of Nature, for example—now turn out to be viewed as contrary to progress; we are told, with regard to the actions of our leaders, the ongoing destruction of the environment, and the increasing social dependence and control that are characteristic of each stage of progress, that is, concerning every qualitative extension of the interests of the ruling class, that they are the price that has to be paid by society for the alleged benefits that accrue from progress. Progress, therefore, as it is now understood, means nothing but the continuous advance of the processes of the concentration of power of the class that makes the decisions about the economy, the abundance of scientific, technological and economic means that expand the economy, and the generalization of the social activities that, like professional politics, wage labor and the industrial leisure that disseminate and entrench the conformism and submission of individuals to the dictates of the market.

Contrary to Voltaire’s view, the most educated mortals have not proven to be less inhuman. Instead, civilization has revealed itself to be a state of rationalized brutality. Material well being does not favor moral elevation, nor is instrumental knowledge conducive to liberty. An eternal present does not lead to a healthy state of mind; any psychiatrist can confirm the fact that the loss of experience and memory produce disturbances of identity. However much it is said that the future of adaptation will be better than the uncontrolled past—that the obscurantist before is inferior to the rational after—in view of the results it can be said that this kind of progress does not educate, but domesticates; it is not morally uplifting, but rather atrophies the feelings;

it does not make us healthy, but adapts us to the condition of illness. There is no direct relation between civilization and personal realization. Indeed, as the processes of conditioning progress, consciousness recedes, and atomization gains ground. Science is discovered to be a superstition, the faith in technological inventions is revealed to be naive, public education proves to be the institutionalization of ignorance. All of them are instruments in the service of what exists. Society, instead of rising towards a greater humanization, sinks into a barbarism of a new type that is still called progress; it is devolving towards an ideal form of techno-economic rule. Economic growth, which is real progress, has priority over every other consideration, and its rising power corresponds with the disappearance of liberties and the paralysis of all human faculties. Progress is nothing but economic development, subjecting all of society to the laws of the market, to the requirements of technology, and to the ordering of urban planning; progress is destruction of the territory, scientific fetishism, cultural degradation, unlimited growth of the administrative and political bureaucracy, and the rule of economic and financial corporations. The word progress in the sense that it is currently used transcends the division between leaders and led, between oppressors and oppressed, between managers and subordinates, between actors and spectators, which corresponds to the prevailing social relation, in order to conceal the fact that its tendency, proclaimed to be beneficial for all, is not at all beneficial except for the members of the usurping class. The language of science and technology—that of progress—is the language of order. What is defined as modernization, well being and freedom, is nothing but artificialization, consumerism and partocracy [party-ocracy]. Progress is all this and much more. It is that car that you have to climb into to go anywhere. It is the alibi of an unjust order, a password that opens all doors, a slogan of the executives and politicians, a myth of the dominant ideology obtained by degrading a key concept of the bourgeoisie of the revolutionary period that was once used against the religious and traditionalist arguments of the *Ancien Régime*. It is an axiom of the status quo, a cornerstone of the mystifying doctrine of power.

To go back to its origins, the modern idea of progress is derived from the secularization of a Christian concept of history, that of Saint Augustine and Paulus Orosius. For, in effect, it is ecumenism, the idea of linear and divisible time, the concept of the historical necessity of its forward movement and its culmination, in accordance with a pre-established plan, in a final state of beatitude, which comprise the theoretical framework of the idea of progress. In language that was emancipated from religion, Reason replaced divine providence, and earthly happiness took the place of the salvation of souls. History was no longer the stage for the confrontation between Good and Evil, but the scene where the struggle between Reason and Unreason was fought. In any event, the historical function that would be played by the idea of progress and the forces that it would mobilize were very different matters in the Augustinian world than in absolutist Europe. We can therefore say that the advocacy of progress, well-nourished by the Enlightenment, made its debut in the speech of Turgot at the Sorbonne on December 11, 1750, the first formulation of the state of mind of an enlightened oligarchy of Royal functionaries, which, having become the nucleus of a rising class, the bourgeoisie, felt that it was fully prepared to wield power in the name of all of society by sharing that power with the Monarchy, or if the correlation of forces were to permit it, by seizing it from the Monarchy. The most lucid minds of the era saw in the French Revolution an unequivocal sign of progress. The idea of the gradual and steady march of the human species from the lowest levels of animality to a maximum state of humanization, thanks to scientific development (Francis Bacon, William Godwin), and thanks to the wealth of nations (the physiocrats, Adam Smith) and to universal education (Condorcet), then constituted

one of the pillars of modern thought. For the Encyclopedist philosophers or their like-minded contemporaries, humanity advanced by obligatory stages towards a greater perfection. As time passed and liberation from the shackles of myth, custom and religion allowed people to see the world with sober eyes, conditions would get better. Knowledge and power were one and the same. The perfectibility of human reason was infinite (Fontanelle). Each successive generation approached closer to the higher level of replete happiness, as knowledge, industrial means and capital accumulated. Equality and freedom would be a necessary consequence of the progress of Reason and prosperity, of the harmonious or revolutionary passage from darkness to light and from poverty to abundance. The old, testimony to the past, must yield to the new that, pregnant with the future, was fighting to impose itself. Such was the power of its impulse that freedom would come automatically, without hardly any resistance. The past ceased to have a memorable and exemplary character. Some people were even capable of thinking that the history of the human species consisted in the execution of a secret plan laid down by Nature, whose program for implementation was contained in the rights of citizens and whose advance guard was the constitutional struggles of that time, within which one could descry the supreme historical end, the consolatory future in which men (and women) would freely develop all their qualities and would fulfill their destiny, which was progress itself.

History therefore underwent a process in which it came to be conceived as an objective and ineluctable ascent of the human being towards superior goals. By uncovering the *telos* of history, its rational intention, paradise was brought down from heaven in order to inhabit the real world, leaving the other world in the attic. A marked distinction arose between those who came to be called savages and the civilized. The primitive Golden Age was situated in the misty origins of a “lawless” humanity, the kingdom of the arbitrary and the animal, of crude simplicity and coarse backwardness, of “unconscious freedom” (Kant) and of the war of all against all (Hobbes), that would be abolished by a contract that implied submission to a consensual legal power exercised by a modern State. Under the protective umbrella of the latter the civilized engaged in never ending efforts to subjugate Nature by means of study and work. At first the happy and egalitarian society of the savages was used as a weapon of Reason, demonstrating the natural rather than divine origin of society and the State while at the same time shedding light on the contrasts between a society corrupted by privilege and religion and a society governed by natural law. These same arguments, however, were subsequently employed by those who, from a perspective informed by pessimism and mysticism, questioned the blessings of progress, especially by the Romantics, the first critics of bourgeois society, for whom the dreams of Reason had given birth to monsters. In order to refute these challenges, German idealism arose, which embraced ancient and modern, critics and apologists, in a single philosophy of history, as moments of the development of the Spirit in time, and likewise of freedom, which is its essence: “Universal History exhibits the gradation in the development of that principle whose substantial purport is the consciousness of Freedom” (Hegel), the consciousness from which the “peoples without a history” are excluded, that is, the peoples without a State, without modernity, without capitalism. The philosophy of history did have the merit, however, of addressing the bourgeois revolutionary movement and translating it into concepts, only to be expressed in its ultimate conclusion, the consecration of the present. In the words of Nietzsche, the great vanquisher of modern progress: “... for Hegel the highest and final stage of the world-process came together in his own Berlin existence.... he has implanted in a generation leavened throughout by him the worship of the ‘power of History’, that practically turns every moment into a sheer gaping at success, into an idolatry of the

actual.... But the man who has once learnt to crook the knee and bow the head before the power of History, nods 'yes' at last, like a Chinese doll, to every power, whether it be a government or a public opinion or a numerical majority...." It was precisely for the purpose of eliminating the contradiction implied by defining the failure of rationalism (and the post-revolutionary wave of defeat and demoralization) as a moment of its triumph that positivism arose, which laid claim to the leadership of the scientists and "industrialists". Comte, by dividing the history of humanity into three stages (theological, metaphysical and positive or scientific), inaugurated a custom that spread to every aspect of culture, transforming the 19th century into the era of models based on stages. Bachofen, for example (hetaerism, matriarchy, patriarchy); Hegel (despotism, democracy or aristocracy, monarchy); Morgan and Engels (savagery, barbarism, civilization); and Marx (ancient, feudal and capitalist modes of production). Finally, the Theory of Evolution, by taking the concept of progress from history and inscribing it in Nature, provided the solid foundations that the idea had previously lacked, and made it possible for progress to become a popular catchphrase. For Darwin, because man descended from "a lower creature", one without the ability to reason, it is undoubtedly also the case that the intellectual and moral faculties of the civilized must be tremendously more developed than those of "primitives", since the latter had no laws, no leaders and, worst of all, no God. Hegel, Comte and Darwin, each in his own way, supplied rationalist thought with the crucial arguments that propelled the idea of progress at the end of the 19th century to the status of an indisputable dogma of bourgeois society and transformed it into the fetish of a new popular religion based on productivism and the parliamentary forms of bourgeois government. The bourgeoisie celebrated universal expositions and issued a constant stream of proclamations regarding the advent of the age of steel, the age of oil, the age of electricity, the atomic age ... as progressive milestones of its absolute rule.

Embodied in factories, progress not only multiplied the powers of material production but also, by destroying all the rules that had previously held sway over the world of labor, gave rise to unprecedented forms of exploitation and misery, becoming an agent of a revolution that was as much social as industrial. This progress produced not only commodities, but also the workers movement itself. The first manifestations of the proletariat were therefore certainly not in favor of progress, since the incomplete liquidation of the *Ancien Régime* by the industrial and landowning bourgeoisie, by establishing a new system of property and manufacturing production that altered traditional forms of life and generated extreme misery, was fought against with arson, sabotage and the destruction of machines; they were often led by skilled workers, and were repressed with great thoroughness. The exploited classes never willingly accepted the new technical innovations, since they knew that "every development in the means of new productive forces is at the same time a weapon against the workers" (Marx), but when they came to believe that the problem was not caused so much by the machines as by their private ownership, they concluded that the solution depended on a general expropriation of the means of production, in such a way as to use them for the benefit of all. This solution implied an industrial communism in which machines would serve society, rather than the other way around. Today we can say that it is not that easy and that the nature of machinery and production are not neutral, and that the domination of Nature, even if it is carried out collectively, engenders even worse imbalances and miseries. When the first working class socialist and anarchist theories were formulated, however, the project of creating a new world by means of the appropriation and administration of the means of production was the most realistic option. If a mistake was made, it was rather that of believing that the bourgeoisie had become an obstacle to the development of the forces of

production, that is, to progress, which was now represented by the greatest productive force, the proletariat. The workers movement fell under the spell of the ideology of progress, even more than the bourgeoisie, and became largely reformist, as more and more of its members became convinced that, given scientific and technological advances, exploitation might be reduced in intensity and, in the political framework of bourgeois democracy, the workers organizations might be able to establish, gradually and without revolutionary disorders, a socialist order, which would have been nothing but a State-, trade union-, or party-capitalism. The revolutionary option could not have led to any other conclusion.

“Against this enterprise of planned desolation whose explicit program is the production of an unusable world, revolutionaries find themselves in the novel situation of having to fight in defense of the present in order to keep all the other possibilities of changing it open—beginning of course with the very possibility of safeguarding the minimal conditions for the survival of the species—which are the same possibilities that the dominant society is endeavoring to obstruct by means of its attempt to irrevocably reduce history to the extended reproduction of the past and by trying to reduce the future to the management of the wastes of the present.”

(Encyclopédie des Nuisances, “Preliminary Discourse”)

The two world wars, the totalitarian and genocidal regimes, the failure of the Russian and Spanish Revolutions, the arms race, the concentration of power, and the rise of mass culture, by transforming barbarism into a fact of everyday life, shattered the foundations of the theory of progress. Once all the obstacles and disorders had been cleared away, and once the horror caused by the massacres had dissipated, however, one could once again speak of well being and democracy as if they had prevailed all along. Capitalism, thanks to technology, developed the productive forces to inconceivable extremes, corrupting and destroying the workers milieu in the process, since the increase in the capacity for production did not create the conditions for a more just and egalitarian world, but simply augmented the power of the political-economic apparatus and institutionalized the mediations against which the proletarians were literally impotent. The gap between those who make the decisions and those who obey them has multiplied twenty-fold, widening with the expanding pace of global commerce, which is the only ecumene. Reason, by dominating Nature, that is, by serving capital, is transmuted into Unreason, the domain of the owning class. The seeds of the regression that lay dormant from the beginning were manifested everywhere: irrationality ruled the world. History did not reflect any pre-established plan, nor did freedom flourish within it in order to achieve ever greater heights. Nothing that took place, beginning with History itself, was necessary, but merely possible, among many other possible, and most likely better outcomes. History occurred without a subject and, as a corollary, revolutions were no longer unavoidable even when favorable conditions beckoned, and furthermore, compared to the number of disasters, such favorable conditions were few and far between. Reflecting upon the historical process as an accumulation of catastrophes, the past is cut off from the more effectively equipped technological present, but not enough to assure the future, which is becoming increasingly more uncertain with the decrepitude and the horror that lies just around the corner. The present is the wreckage of the past destroyed, and the future is the present that is to be destroyed. Science reaffirmed the prevailing state of affairs and its conformist language was that of the experts and mercenaries in the pay of power. Every new discovery and every new

invention, applied in accordance with the acquisition of private profits and the needs of hierarchical and centralized domination, by no means represented a step towards happiness, but implied a higher degree of submission. The perfectibility of the species was cast into doubt in the face of the calamitous results of the technological invasion of life and the massive spread of instrumentalized teaching; nothing seemed to suggest that the human being was better than before, since instead of possessing a more highly developed moral consciousness, he is still morally degraded, with neither dignity nor memory. He might experience equality with his dehumanized fellow men but only in isolation: his relations, rather than having been liquidated, have been vaporized. The meaning of his activity escaped his understanding, producing what Günther Anders called “a disjunction between man as a being who produces and the man who tries to understand his productive activity”. He lives in an objectively depraved world, which provides him with a kind of excuse, as it were, for not feeling partially responsible for its depravity; he has become so accustomed to it that he has ceased to even notice it and participates in it with indifference, if not with enthusiasm. In this portrait of desolation the lie has become the world, which is why it is no longer necessary to lie because words always express something different from their original meaning. They are no longer bearers of meaning, but pure signs lacking their own meaning that forge empty and repetitive stereotypes. With a handful of such stereotypes—well being, social rights, citizenship, development, sustainability—the idea of progress was rehabilitated.

In the second half of the 20th century so-called progress arrived at the culmination of its destructive career that began with the demolition of individuality and the massacres of the world wars, by destroying the material environment upon which social existence is based. The subjection of needs and desires to capitalist imperatives promoted economic growth—progress—to the role of the main arbiter of State policy and it therefore became the general normative standard for social life. The toxic consequences of developmentalism were only really clearly felt when the principal productive force, the technocracy, by merging with politics and finance, became the principal destructive force. From that point on, the technological domination of Nature, including human nature, was transformed into planned extermination. The destruction of arable land, coastlines, rivers and mountains, the increasing production of solid waste, the wasteful use of energy, social anomie and wars, the population explosion and famines, pollution and the depletion of resources, are making the planet an ever less habitable place, and are revealing progress to be a barbarous tailspin towards annihilation. We are making more progress today than ever before, our leaders tell us, and yet the prospect of the end has never before been so near, or dehumanization so present. Every leap forward is an act of war against the territory and its inhabitants, and all that remains to be seen is how far we are from reaching a point where the catastrophe will be irreversible, the moment when contemporary society will begin to collapse. The rebels against the progressive project of planned destruction find themselves obliged to not only recover the not yet forgotten knowledge of the past, but also to defend what is left of the present that can be used for their benefit, with the goal of guaranteeing from the start certain real possibilities of survival, keeping the door open for the option of change in the direction of a deindustrialized, demotorized and deurbanized society, a society in perfect symbiosis with Nature. We have to finally break with the idea of progress: human beings are neither the central goal of “creation” nor the apex of evolution. We are a form of life that must rediscover our lost harmony with other forms of life, and integrate ourselves totally into their environment. No cultural formation is superior to or less “primitive” than any other. Civilized society was only the product of chance, which might very well not have followed the course that it did, as was the case outside of

Europe, thus allowing traditional society, the kind of society that modern people call barbarous, to offer better conditions for freedom than the conditions inflicted upon us today. We must not, however, renounce the intelligence, the knowledge and the art that have been bequeathed to us by preceding generations, insofar as these products of immense human efforts are also our heritage, which we can use to understand and beautify the world. We are part of a whole that must be preserved, but by using Reason, not the Reason of the markets, but the Reason that comes from an open-hearted Reason that is born within a free and well balanced society, and which transforms the social question into the natural question. We already have enough irrationality and primitivism. History still exists, a history that is nothing but the history of oppression; the history that is to come, when this one comes to an end, if it does come to an end, will be the history of the peoples without history, that is, without class distinctions and without a State.

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