

Robert Nisbet, "The Idea of Progress: A Bibliographical Essay" 1979

the following are excerpts relating to the idea of Progress during the European Enlightenment

....

Turgot and the Christian Legacy of Progress

Probably the first full and complete statement of progress is that of Turgot, expressed in his celebrated discourse before an admiring audience at the Sorbonne in December 1750, one entitled "A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind." In this discourse progress is made to cover not simply the arts and sciences but, on their base, the whole of culture—manner, mores, institutions, legal codes, economy, etc. Even more comprehensive is Turgot's "Plan for Two Discourses on Universal History" which he wrote in 1751, just prior to his entry into government service and eventual fame, and final humiliation as minister of finance. (All of Turgot's writings on progress can be found, translated, in Ronald L. Meek, ed., *Turgot on Progress, Society and Economy*.) In Turgot's "Universal History" we are given an account of the progress of mankind which, in comprehensiveness and ordering of materials, would not be equalled until Turgot's ardent admirer, Condorcet wrote his *Outline of an Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* during the French Revolution. Condorcet wrote it in a period of but a few weeks all the while hiding from the Jacobin police in an attic (a staunch supporter of the Revolution, Condorcet had managed to incur Robespierre's hostility).

Before leaving Turgot, it is important to stress once again the historical importance of Christianity in the formation of the secular modern conception of progress in Western Europe. In the first place, Turgot began his career as a reasonably devout student of theology at the Sorbonne, his aspiration then linked to a future in the Church. Second, just six months before the discourse on "The Successive Advances of the Human Mind" was given in 1750, he had presented another public discourse, this one on the crucial importance of Christianity to the progress of mankind. And third, it was Bossuet's *Universal History*, which I have already referred to, that Turgot acknowledged to be his inspiration for the writing, or the preparation of a plan of his own "Universal History." Bossuet, proud and convinced Christian that he was, constructed his history in terms of a succession of epochs, all designed and given effect by God. Turgot allowed God to disappear (he had lost his faith by 1751 when he wrote his "Universal History") and replaced Bossuet's "epochs" by "stages": stages of social and cultural progress, each emerging from its predecessor through human rather than divine causes. But Turgot's alterations notwithstanding, it is unlikely that his own secular work on progress would have been written apart from the inspiration derived from Bishop Bossuet and other Christian philosophers of history. He is an epitome, in this respect, of the whole history of the modern idea of progress.

The Eighteenth-Century Views of Progress

In England, or rather the United Kingdom, including Scotland, there are several works of first water in advancing the popularity of the idea of progress and also its influence upon public policy. Foremost is Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, the first systematic textbook in economics, if we like, but a work written with the theme of mankind's natural progress as the warp of Smith's classic. Fundamental to this book is Smith's declaration that there is a natural order of the progress of nations and that the reason England, and Western Europe generally, now find themselves economically crippled, threatened with stagnation, is that by unwise edict, law, and custom they have interfered with the processes of the natural progress of wealth, labor, skill, rent, and profits. Smith's "invisible hand" is as much directed toward the mechanics of progress through time as it is the stability of the economic system.

William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, is usually categorized as a plea for absolute anarchism, with removal of all forms of authority and power deemed necessary to man's achievement of true freedom. But it should be understood that Godwin too found it proper to set this plea in the context of a theory of progress. Such has been mankind's development over many thousands of years and such is the rate of present advancement, that we may confidently anticipate a long future in which human beings will be liberated not only from the torments of environment—hunger, squalor, tyranny, and exploitation—but from the torments too of physical and mental illness. In one enraptured passage Godwin actually foresees a time when humanity will even be removed from the inevitability of death.

It was Godwin's work, as well as Condorcet's (which I shall mention momentarily) that led Malthus, in his *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, to point out that should such conditions ever actually prevail, the earth would suffer such over-population as to make any thought of sustenance fantastical; not that Malthus was indifferent or antagonistic to a belief in progress. Both Gertrude Himmelfarb (in her superlative volume of essays, *Victorian Minds*) and William Petersen in *Malthus for Our Time* have highlighted in exhaustive fashion Malthus's belief that social and moral checks to human fertility were possible, even probable—this belief appears in subsequent editions of Malthus's *Essay*. In addition, Malthus took the progressive view that humanity was destined to very real and fruitful advancement into the distant future.

We must not neglect the Scottish moral philosophers (of whom Adam Smith was of course one). Preeminent, apart only from Smith, is Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*; in this lucid and elegant work, Ferguson lays out in considerable detail the steps and stages through which mankind's arts, sciences, and institutions have undergone almost continuous advancement. This volume has been called the foundation of modern social science, but that is declaring too much. Suffice it to say it is assuredly among the stones of the foundation. There were others of great importance in Scotland at the time, at Glasgow, Edinburgh, chiefly, and they have all been dealt with in masterly fashion by the late Gladys Bryson, *Man and Society: The Scottish Inquiry of the*

Eighteenth Century. Also to be recommended is William C. Lehman, *Adam Ferguson and the Beginnings of Modern Sociology*, which covers far more than that title might indicate.

France: Condorcet

The one other French philosopher of progress I want to cite has been mentioned, but without even brief description: Marie Jean Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet (1743–1794). He had been deeply impressed by Turgot's discourses and writings of 1750–1751, and had even written a biography of Turgot before the outbreak of the Revolution. Progress was in Condorcet's very marrow. He hailed the Revolution and never weakened in his support of it, but, as I have already noted, he incurred the hatred of Robespierre who consequently put the Jacobin police on Condorcet's trail. It was while he was hiding from the police that he wrote his *Outline of a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*. The three stages of progress Turgot and others had premised for human advancement from past to present become nine stages for Condorcet, with a tenth, still ahead, when man would know all joys of freedom, equality, justice, and humanitarianism. Each of the nine stages is given an identity drawn from some signal element of economy or culture; thus the primitive pastoral stage, the agricultural, that of the towns, the handicraft stage, etc., culminating in the kind of civilization that had reached its highest level in Western Europe. For Condorcet there were invariable laws of development, arising from man's own nature, laws which, when finally discovered, as Condorcet believed that he had discovered them, would guide our vision of the future. "If there is to exist a science for anticipating the future progress of the human kind, and for directing and hastening this progress, it must be based primarily on the history of the progress already made."

This progress can be divided, Condorcet suggests, into some nine epochs. The first, an epoch glimpsed only through imagination, is that of mankind living in kinship organization, with the simplest possible economy and material culture and the beginnings of religion ("the most hateful of all despotisms upon the human mind"). The eight succeeding epochs take us through the origins of language, handicraft, pastoralism, villages, towns, commerce, and so on, reaching the first great heights in ancient classical civilization. Next followed the "barbarism" of Christian-medieval society, succeeded by the Renaissance, the rise of modern science, with the ninth epoch culminating in all that Condorcet and his fellow philosophers prized so greatly. "Everything points to the fact that we are verging upon the epoch of one of the great revolutions of the human race . . . The existing state of knowledge guarantees that it will be auspicious." The next, the tenth epoch still in the future, will represent man's achievement at last of full equality, liberty, justice, and abolition of not merely want and hunger but of all remaining restraints upon the human mind.