

Introduction

Belief in progress long fell into disrepute. After reaching its high point in the nineteenth century, the new century quickly demonstrated humankind's ability to put its achievements to devastating ends. The word increasingly appeared in sardonic scare quotes, studies on the history of the idea abounded, and progress's critics were lauded as frequently as earlier generations had celebrated its prophets. A quarter way into the twenty-first century, there is no sign that progress is set to regain its former renown. Optimists prosper in certain circles, but pessimism is in vogue, crisis talk more pervasive than progress talk. There now seems a widespread attitude that our current day may not be the newest phase in the movement towards a better future.

Progress may have lost its lustre, but we remain in the grip of its logic and family resemblances. In its entourage are notions of development, evolution, change, order, process, advance, not to mention thorny questions of chronology, linearity, teleology and periodisation. Critical of progress as I am in the pages that follow, I must still describe this work as in some way concerned with how progress has evolved as an idea, with plotting its development through time, and I have of course thought carefully about the order in which the ideas follow from one another. I also trust that readers will make good progress through the text, which is not merely to expect that they will read from one page to the next, but that their understanding of the idea of progress will improve with every passing page. If there is one thing that progress is supposed to offer us, it is an improvement on what came before.

The promise for improvement perhaps explains the enormous political authority that progress continues to command. Under the slogan 'dare more progress', German chancellor and social democrat Olaf Scholz entered office in 2021 vowing to lead a 'progress coalition' for a German people, in his words, 'united by our belief in progress'.¹ The political appeal of progress stems largely from its *progressive* agenda, items that may today include renewable energy targets, affordable housing, legalisation of cannabis, relaxation of citizenship laws and a lowering of the voting age. It is a curious feature of contemporary political culture that one may support such goals, describe oneself as politically progressive and at the same time scoff at the idea of progress, as if it were possible to like spicy food but not spice, fashionable clothes but not fashion. By contrast, the small handful of self-titled 'progress parties' associated with the political right appear more at ease with the noun naming their vision of a better future.

The reason why left-liberal progressives have been uncomfortable with the idea of progress derives in part from its association with dubious laws of nature and the insertion of humankind into that equation. The progressive outlook has

¹ Stiglitz, 'If Olaf Scholz is Serious about Progress'.

endorsed change and agency while dispensing with the view that a fairer world will come into existence automatically as the end result of an ineluctable historical process. A second reason is that it is easy to point to gains that have resulted in losses in other areas. The damaging effects on the environment of fossil-fuelled industrial progress are an obvious example. A less clear-cut example is the social pressure reported by some women to meet a greater variety of expectations in the wake of the gains made in gender equality. Historians armed with their battery of counterexamples drawn from history tend to be the least inclined to subscribe to progress. A substantial proportion of them embrace relativism, holding that we can only evaluate progressive changes relative to other changes, not progress, period. With respect to examples such as the abolition of slavery, the expansion of opportunities for women and the recognition of loving relationships among members of the same sex, the pragmatic philosopher Philip Kitcher believes ‘it would be grotesque’ to judge the losses as being anywhere near on par with the huge advances made.²

Apart from the few attempts at a comprehensive treatment, the more common approach to studying the idea of progress has been to confine it to a time and place, movement or figure. Then there are the numerous studies made possible by the addition of a qualifier, so that a book on moral progress occupies a library shelf some distance away from its counterpart on scientific progress. Nor does one find gathered together the studies exploring progress in different fields of knowledge. Something akin to ‘progress studies’ would be needed before progress in art, progress in economics, progress in medicine and progress in philosophy constituted a common research category.³

If, as it has been said, all Western philosophy is but a footnote to Plato, then in the history of ideas, all discussion of progress has had to contend with J. B. Bury’s century-old and hugely influential account. According to Bury, belief in progress emerged as a modern and secular substitute for the earlier religious belief in Providence. Only with the weakening of religious belief could progress come of age as a new secular faith. This new faith, Bury wrote, involved ‘a synthesis of the past and a prophesy of the future’. To believe in progress was to be sure that society has moved, is moving and will continue to move in a desirable direction, and further, that this movement is the result of human activity, not an external will, godly or otherwise.⁴ These were Bury’s conditions for belief in progress.

Bury’s secular-modern thesis was largely accepted but attracted criticism on two main fronts. First, his definition excluded from the outset the swathes of

² Kitcher, *Moral Progress*, 23.

³ Such a call has been made for ‘Progress Studies’. See Collison and Cowen, ‘We Need a New Science of Progress’. I reflect on their proposal in the Epilogue.

⁴ Bury, *Idea of Progress*, 2–5.

humanity who have attributed change to forces beyond purposefully acting historical agents. Seven decades after the publication of Bury's classic, Robert Nisbet was still at pains to argue that progress understood as 'unfolding cumulative advancement' (what we will call *developmental improvement* rather than progress) commanded greater influence in ancient thought than the doctrines of cycles and degeneration.⁵ Similar arguments could be made for the prosperous premodern societies in which a commercial spirit flourished.

The second criticism concerned the alleged teleology of Bury's future-oriented definition, according to which progress is movement towards a desired goal. At least as far back as Herbert Butterfield's 1931 *Whig Interpretation of History*, historians have been conscious of the pitfalls of viewing the past as leading comfortably to the present-day status quo. In writings on the idea of progress that were to be part of his unfinished *Arcades Project*, the German philosopher and eclectic cultural theorist Walter Benjamin accused historians of producing history that was in fact 'fore-history', moments in the course of history that become moments of the present and 'change in their character according to whether the present is defined as a catastrophe or a triumph'.⁶ To salvage its credibility, some sought to purge progress of all notion of movement and direction. A mid-twentieth-century critic viewed the relevance of the past not in the way that it manifested the direction of history, but rather in the way that it demonstrated the 'flexibility and malleability of human affairs' and furnished the 'subject matter of present decisions'.⁷ On this model, progress was the sum result of solving individual problems, an approach we encounter later in the context of postwar liberals fearful of the totalitarian implications of claiming to know the direction of history.

Translated into the language of present-day historical theory, Bury's conceptual framework is not so outworn as it may seem. In the wake of the so-called temporal turn in history and the humanities and social sciences in general, it is in fact remarkably congenial to a study of the present-day meanings and implications of the idea of progress. 'How the past, present and future fit together', as Lucian Hölscher confirms, 'is today one of the principal concerns of historical theory', and when it comes to the relations between the past, present and future, François Hartog has gathered followers in asserting in the style of Martin Heidegger and Reinhart Koselleck, the German patron of conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*), that the fundamental characteristic is 'the predominance of the category of the future'. In this 'regime of historicity', the 'future is the *telos*. It is the source of light illuminating the past. Time is no longer a simple classificatory principle, but rather an agent, the operator of a historical *process* –

⁵ Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, xiii; Edelstein, *Idea of Progress in Classical Antiquity*.

⁶ Smith, *Benjamin*, 65. ⁷ Krieger, 'Idea of Progress', 486.

the other name, or rather the true name, for *progress*.' The new temporal sensibility that Christopher Clark believes rivals in magnitude the linguistic turns of the late twentieth century reopens and revitalises questions of future orientation and historical agency that set the initial standard for examining the idea of progress.⁸

Historians are sensing time more than ever, and the perception of movement that to Bury defined the idea of progress might now be described as perceiving oneself somewhere between the 'field of experience' and 'horizon of expectation'. Koselleck argued that until the French Revolution, experience and expectation were united in a way that made the past a reliable guide to the present (*historia magistra vitae*). What changed afterwards was that expectations of the future became detached from all that past experience could inform. 'The future', now, 'would be different from the past, and better, to boot'. In keeping with the view of progress as a secular faith, Koselleck made the crucial point that 'progress was directed towards an active transformation of this world, not the Hereafter, no matter how diverse the actual relationship between Christian expectation of the future and progress might be when registered by intellectual history'.⁹ Progress came with an entire philosophy of history in tow, one that recast temporal coordinates in a way that allowed human beings to delight in the activities they believed brought them closer to an unknown though undoubtedly better future on this earth.

In addition to the focus on 'futures past', the temporal turn has also expanded the *scale* on which historians study the past. 'Big history' and 'deep history' are reactions against a perceived temporal shallowness of traditional historiography, and new approaches to world history and global history signify attempts to surpass traditional spatial demarcations. With the aid of twenty-first-century big data technologies, a hope is that we might now be able to write the kind of 'universal history' its earlier practitioners could only have speculated upon. David Armitage has declared that 'big is back'. After 'decades of aversion and neglect', across the discipline of history, 'the telescope rather than the microscope is increasingly the preferred instrument of examination', affording views of the past that make the Braudelian *longue durée* appear not so *longue* after all.¹⁰

The expansion of time is also the expansion of space, but scale can mean more. In the study of a particular concept, the English historian, archaeologist

⁸ Hölscher, 'Mysteries of Historical Order', 134; Hartog, 'Modern *Régime* of Historicity in the Face of Two World Wars', 124; Clark, *Time and Power*, 4.

⁹ Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 266.

¹⁰ Armitage, 'What's the Big Idea?' 493. For an account of the alleged short termism of twentieth-century historical practice, see Guldi and Armitage, *History Manifesto*. For a response, see Cohen and Mandler, 'History Manifesto: A Critique'. I take up their arguments in Section 5.

and philosopher of history R. G. Collingwood referred to a ‘scale of forms’, the members of which are so related that they embody the ‘generic essence’ of the concept, much as Koselleck viewed ‘collective singulars’ as aggregating disparate elements into basic, universalising concepts. To Ann McGrath, the deep history advocate and champion of Australian aboriginal history, the term scale ‘can denote climbing up or over and separating things into layers’. What Marnie Hughes-Warrington calls ‘scale switching’ is to her primarily a question of ethics, ‘when history makers slip seamlessly from talking about individuals to groups and back again or use little histories like blocks to build up big accounts of how the world ought to be understood’.¹¹ In all these senses, scale serves as a supple and multidimensional analytic category for navigating the many sides of progress.

Above all else, scale denotes a relation to distance, and in the new expanded view of the past some have asked whether we can still make out the purposefully acting agent of humanistically oriented historiography. At stake are the philological principles of a discipline founded in source criticism. This tension will be central to our account. The question behind this Element sprang from a concern that the new expanded scale of history is one through which it might be difficult to observe the human agents who, by Giambattista Vico’s famous and discipline-making formulation, made history with their own hands (*verum factum*). Here I am committed to the principle that progress, if it is to be distinguished from neighbouring concepts, is the result of *purposeful human action*. Progress is change that human beings value and bring about as a consequence of the purposes they have in mind. What counts as progress is what human beings have determined to be desirable, and in that respect progress has been at the centre of history conceived as inquiry into the changing nature of human hopes, beliefs and desires. In the current climate of historical theory and practice, the question worth exploring is how history conceived on different scales both illuminates and obscures purposeful human agents living in the tension of freedom and necessity. The Element examines the idea of progress within different conceptions of history as well as how they reflect human action alongside the deep structures of society and environment.

Of course, the fact that progress involves an ascription of value raises questions over who decides what is valuable and on what terms. An attention

¹¹ Collingwood, *Essay on Philosophical Method*, 54–91; Koselleck, ‘Introduction and Prefaces to the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*’, 13; McGrath in Aslanian et al., ‘AHR Conversation How Size Matters’, 1435; Hughes-Warrington, *Big and Little Histories*, 7.

to scale helps with this dimension too. It enables us to examine both the *timescales* from which we draw our historical knowledge and the *standards of valuation* according to which we *weigh* and *apportion value* to different aspects of the past. It allows us to track back and forth along a shifting scale of past, present and future relations, between conceptions of progress and the philosophies of history in which they are enmeshed.

The Element is organised into five sections that illuminate the conceptions of history, viewed on different scales, in which beliefs about progress have been expressed. I offer not another history of the idea of progress, nor an account of the idea as expressed by this or that thinker, movement or event, but rather a mapping of its conceptual architecture. Sections 1 to 3 lay the conceptual groundwork. *No Progress* is about a time when time itself was seen to destroy things rather than improve things. Viewed on an appropriately large scale, present trends tended downwards and towards catastrophe. I distinguish belief in progress from belief in developmental improvement, meaning available vertically from meaning to be gained across a horizontal temporal plane, and point to the overall preference in ancient societies for spatial rather than temporal metaphors, prioritising stability, harmony and integration over future striving towards something better.

Absolute Progress is the forward movement of humanity visible on the scale of universal history, the lens through which clear patterns could be discerned, grand systems laid out, and progress declared a law of nature. Construing history as a series of stages, Europeans could travel to distant lands and experience themselves as witnesses to earlier stages of history, setting in train pernicious justifications for the subjugation of peoples seen to be located at inferior stages. Progress came of age when the future shifted from being viewed as predetermined and beyond the reach of human intervention to something capable of being actively constructed by purposeful action in the present.

Relative Progress deals with the repercussions of the universalistic construction of absolute progress and, in particular, with the problem of there being no agreed standards for evaluating its unevenly distributed effects. In the Darwinian world of conflict and competition, the weighing scale tilted as progress for some meant decline for others. Among the examples casting light on the unevenness and incommensurability of progress, I bring particular attention to the leadership role Japan played in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to marginalised groups worldwide – African Americans, Australian aboriginals, early nationalists in India. I also consider the notion of progress as revivalist traditionalism and, in the example of the iconoclastic Chinese May Fourth Movement, examine more closely the links between progress and tradition, a theme that re-emerges later in the context of postwar reconstruction.

Everybody's Progress is an exercise in scale switching between groups and individuals, from progress achieved by collective planning to progress generated by the spontaneous order of the so-called free marketplace. For the historian-politician Jawaharlal Nehru, history was a point of reference that shifted in meaning as he went about instilling a collective sense of historical purpose and directionality. As for the individualistic market alternative, I highlight the conception or rather non-conception of history at the heart of neoliberalism. To achieve progress required the destruction of all constructions of historical directionality. By the final quarter of the twentieth century, the craving for economic growth had reached such proportions as to make statistics the prime means for charting a nation's progressive movement from past to present and setting benchmarks for future expectations.

Anti-Progress embodies the ethos of a modern-day society seemingly weary of the idea of progress. Within the discipline of history, an influential accusation is that history suffers from a crisis of short termism, and a proposed remedy is that history re-engage with present-day society by harnessing the possibilities of enlarged scales of analysis. In question is the fundamental idea that history is the story of what human beings have made with their own hands. Human beings have become viewed as geological agents and makers of all-pervasive technologies that their actions now serve. On the other hand, histories attentive to the fine grain of historical context continue to foreground human action as the site where history is made. Some of the most convincing studies subverting the idea of progress have come from historicists working on the small scale of institutional, economic and political context, those who reveal progress *as* history, as belonging to a past constellation of conditions that we should not expect to be repeated.

Readers in search of quick and easy condemnations will be hard pressed to find them. This is no repudiation of an idea that is ultimately about leaving the world a better place than we found it. Criticisms, nevertheless, are in no short supply. From the theories that saw Europeans regard non-Europeans as inhabiting earlier and less advanced stages of history to the more recent economic growth paradigm that has served as the measure of progress, it would seem that the idea of progress has much to answer for. The content provides ample opportunity to reassess our relationship with a concept that has shaped perceptions of others and set the standard for evaluating what is meaningful and worth striving towards.

1 No Progress

'The ancients had no conception of progress; they did not so much as reject the idea; they did not even entertain the idea.' These words betray a priggish self-satisfaction characteristic of the Victorian Age and what Asa Briggs described

as its ‘national mood of prosperity, when Britain was the world’s workshop, the world’s shipbuilder, the world’s carrier, the world’s banker, and the world’s clearing-house’. The writer was Walter Bagehot, the English economist, journalist and political analyst who in 1872 applied theories of social evolution to the question of why European nations alone had possessed the ingenuity to free themselves from the ‘cake of custom’. ‘Oriental nations are just the same now’, he went on; ‘they hardly seem to have the basis on which to build, much less the material to put up anything worth having. Only a few nations, and those of European origin, advance.’¹²

Bagehot’s words pique modern ears and yet his thesis, at least concerning the idea of progress in antiquity, has stood the test of further examination. J. B. Bury provided the classic account in the early twentieth century by denying the Greeks the conditions he believed were necessary to the concept (see the Introduction). The Greeks’ limited recorded history supplied no evidence of a continuous series of discoveries that had led to a growth of knowledge or transformation of human life. Lacking this picture of the past, they could not expect that any such trend would continue in the future. And although Bury offered no insight into the Greek conception of human agency, it is clear from his account of cycles and degeneration that they provided a narrative structure no amount of human action could ultimately undo.

Two strategies were employed against Bury in the attempt to show otherwise. Ludwig Edelstein accepted his conditions while maintaining that, beginning with Xenophanes and other Presocratics, the Greek language conveyed them through other metaphorical expressions, namely *epidosis*, a term E. R. Dodds considered too general to qualify as progress, meaning ‘increase’, whether of good or evil and whether by human action or otherwise.¹³ Edelstein attempted to demonstrate that there appeared in fifth-century Greek literature a distinction between ‘antiquity’ and ‘modernity’ typically identified with the emergence of a belief in the superiority of the present over the past in the seventeenth-century *querelle des anciens et des modernes*, that is, with what is often taken to mark the emergence of a strictly modern idea of progress. He also argued that science and technology had developed to such an extent as to furnish confidence in further advances in the future. This scientific optimism was also key to Robert Nisbet’s attempt to illuminate the vision of unfolding cumulative advancement he observed long before the coming of modernity. The other strategy employed against Bury simply denied the plausibility of his definition. Sue Blundell argued that it is possible to speak meaningfully of the idea of progress even if

¹² Bagehot, *Physics and Politics*, 41–2; Briggs, *Victorian People*, 2.

¹³ Edelstein, *Idea of Progress in Classical Antiquity*; Dodds, *Ancient Concept of Progress*.

Progress and the Scale of History

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it did not involve a consideration of the future, and even if divine powers were not excluded from the factors that explained human development.¹⁴

There is compelling evidence to consider the case for progress in at least two periods of optimism and prosperity in the ancient world. The first is Athens in the years preceding the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War in 431 BCE. The words Thucydides had Pericles speak at his funeral oration express an ardent cultural optimism as well as a belief that the Athenians considered their time and culture better than any previous. ‘I doubt if the world can produce a man’, extolled Pericles the statesman, general and first citizen of Athens, ‘who where he has only himself to depend upon, is equal to so many emergencies, and graced by so happy a versatility as the Athenian’. These Athenians no longer needed the alluring fantasies of their poets; their power was real, demonstrated by ‘mighty proofs’ and left in ‘imperishable monuments’ that assured them ‘the admiration of the present and succeeding ages’.¹⁵ They were among the generations who had lived through a fifth-century enlightenment that saw culture developing in a positive direction and they attributed this movement to human reason and inventiveness. Xenophanes had expressed their self-satisfaction at the turn of the sixth and fifth centuries. ‘Yet the gods have not revealed all things to men from the beginning’, uttered the Ionian poet-philosopher, ‘but by seeking men find out better in time’.¹⁶

Aeschylus put this pride in human achievement in the mouth of Prometheus and in so doing spawned a literary tradition of interpreting progress in either one of two ways, religiously as a manifestation of divine providence, or humanistically as an outcome of human purpose. Plato appears to have belonged to the second camp when he had Protagoras claim that even the absolute worst citizen of modern Athens was preferable to any savage.¹⁷ What the modern citizen had that the latter did not was the ability to cultivate virtue by education. When this combined with a new importance attached to the concept of *technē* – the systematic application of intelligence to any field of human endeavour – the humanistic interpretation of progress was set to flourish. Thucydides had his Corinthian envoy warn the conservative Spartans that in politics, as in any *technē*, the latest inventions held the advantage. Plato’s Hippias agreed with Socrates that the old artisans paled in comparison with those of their day. The medical writers went a step further by unlocking the future potential of the past fruits of *technē*. Hippocrates rejoiced that the discoveries made over a long

¹⁴ Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*; Blundell, *Origins of Civilization in Greek and Roman Thought*.

¹⁵ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.41.1, 4.

¹⁶ Xenophanes, frag. 188 (Kirk et al., *Presocratic Philosophers*, 179).

¹⁷ Plato, *Protagoras*, 327 c–d.

period were ‘many and excellent’ and that total discovery would follow ‘if the inquirer be competent, conduct his researches with knowledge of the discoveries already made, and make them his starting-point’.¹⁸

Similar statements issued from the scientists of the Hellenistic Age and early Roman Empire, the second of the periods that could be said to have held to a notion of progress. Archimedes believed that by employing his method his contemporaries and successors would be able to discover additional theorems that had not yet occurred to him. Polybius noted contemporary advances in technology, expected future improvements and hoped that his historical work would have the practical value of allowing future generations to make a final judgement on Roman rule. Seneca had Posidonius the polymath praise the growth of the various manual occupations such as house building, milling and weaving while postulating the emergence of wise philosophers as ‘fresh from the hands of the gods’. Seneca himself believed science to be still in its infancy. ‘The day will come’, he was confident, ‘when time and longer study will bring to light truths at present hidden’.¹⁹ Time would illuminate the full extent of the present generation’s ignorance. Such conviction reverberated down through the first two centuries of the new millennium. Architects and astronomers recorded the rise of their respective sciences from crude beginnings while rejoicing in a new-found capacity for learning that had removed previous difficulties.

All this seems weighty testimony. And yet to regard these fragments as the exhibitions of thought of an age that believed in progress would be to exaggerate what was in fact the outlook of a thin selection of technical specialists. Juha Sihvola has characterised the attempt to rally them as evidence of an ancient belief in progress as ‘a very bold interpretation of scarce fragments’. Dodds is happy to grant that the scientists spoke with a different voice from that of the philosophers, but submits that the philosophers rather than the scientists came closer to capturing the mindset of the general populace.²⁰ It seems reasonable to note the existence of a belief in *developmental improvement* defined as the output of a cumulative science, where the findings from previous inquiry serve as the starting point for subsequent inquiry. But we are far from a doctrine holding that time automatically brings improvements to the human condition.

As for the historians, they tended to emphasise the limitations imposed on progress by the human condition. Herodotus wrote as one who knew the

¹⁸ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.71.3; Plato, *Hippias Major*, 281d; Hippocrates, *De Prisca Medicina*, 2.

¹⁹ Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*, XC, 43; Seneca, *Natural Questions*, 7.25. See further Dodds, *Ancient Concept of Progress*, 18–23.

²⁰ Sihvola, *Decay, Progress, the Good Life?* 69; Dodds, *Ancient Concept of Progress*, 18.