

Progress Unchained

Progress Unchained reinterprets the history of the idea of progress using parallels between evolutionary biology and changing views of human history. Early concepts of progress in both areas saw it as the ascent of a linear scale of development towards a final goal. The ‘chain of being’ defined a hierarchy of living things with humans at the head, while social thinkers interpreted history as a development towards a final paradise or utopia. Darwinism reconfigured biological progress as a ‘tree of life’ with multiple lines of advance not necessarily leading to humans, each driven by the rare innovations that generate entirely new functions. Popular writers such as H. G. Wells used a similar model to depict human progress, with competing technological innovations producing ever more rapid changes in society. Bowler shows that, as the idea of progress has become open-ended and unpredictable, a variety of alternative futures have been imagined.

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*Ideas of Evolution, Human History
and the Future*

Peter J. Bowler

Queen's University Belfast



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Preface

This is a book about history in its broadest sense, from the history of life on earth to our ideas about the overall development of human cultures. More specifically it focuses on the role played by the idea of progress and the changing structure of that idea. As a historian of evolutionism I have long been interested in the idea of progress in both its biological and its social applications. I agree with Michael Ruse that there has always been a connection between the two areas: at least until recently, evolution was usually seen as biological progress analogous to and perhaps helping to justify faith in the advancement of humanity. In this book I explore the link between the two areas with a new emphasis, using the models and analogies provided by Darwinism and related theories in the life sciences to help us understand what I believe to be major changes in the way we think about human progress. If my readers think I spend too much time exploring the biological element, I can only plead that to me it seems necessary to explore this area in some detail so we can understand the distinctions I am trying to make.

The incentive to write this book arose from a new area of research which led me to think about how the idea of progress was projected into the future. I realized that there were parallels between the way people began to think about future progress and the insights that biologists were deriving from the latest developments in evolution theory. Here the Darwinism of the previous century was expanded to give a much more open-ended vision of progress, downplaying older models of progress which depicted it as the ascent of a ladder towards a final goal. The title *Progress Unchained* is meant to highlight the demise of a model of progress based on the old system of arranging living forms into a linear hierarchy, the ‘chain of being’.

Given the scope of its topic this is a relatively short book, and this was made possible only by borrowing relentlessly from a host of historians who have helped me deal with areas of which I had no previous experience. Many areas of the book are shorter than they might otherwise have been because I have

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directed the reader to other publications to fill in details. As suggested above, this includes the whole swathe of my own research. I have thus ended up pulling together the whole sweep of my research career while at the same time learning about topics that were new to me, a nice combination at my time of life.