

THE ALL-PRESENT RELIGION OF MODERNITY

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ABSTRACT

Man is a religious being and Fascism, Communism, National-socialism, the multicultural discourse, Feminism can be viewed through its lens. There is one secular religion that allows today the thought of many people, this is the ideology of progress, which has its roots in Christianity but manifests itself in many anti-Christian forms. This paper presents a comprehensive view of this trans-ideological ideology of progress that can be found almost everywhere.

Keywords: progress, utopia, ideology, emancipation, freedom.

INTRODUCTION

Even though one may think that modernity is a period characterized by a strong secularization and loss of religion, it can be argued that secularization means not getting out of a religious worldview, but getting into a post-Christian time. Christianity does not equal religion, which is a phenomenon that encompasses more than Christianity. The French historian Raymond Aron⁸⁶ has argued that there are such things as secular religions such as Nazism, Communism, or nowadays Feminism and Multiculturalism, etc. It can be argued that even the category of modernity or post-modernity are religious, even though not Christian, but with some roots in Western theology. Another ideology that took the role of a secular religion is the one of progress, which is fundamental for modernity.

The idea of modernity and the concept of progress are sometimes equivalent, modernity being the age of progress and all calls to modernization mean calls toward progress⁸⁷. Modernity is an age that sees itself as superior to all other ages in human history. Becoming modern is an imperative. But modern means most of the time being contemporary, wherein being modern equals the present moment⁸⁸. Modernity can be seen and is seen as the age of History with a H, which means that

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⁸⁶ Pierre-André Taguieff, *Le sens du progrès. Une approche historique et philosophique*, Paris, Flammarion, 2004, p. 119.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 60.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 61.

history is movement, transformation towards a better state. Correlative to this understanding of history and time there is a new understanding of man as a rational being, rationality being the innate capacity of man to know nature, to relate arguments in a demonstration, the power to critically examine all things, and the capacity to organize the collective life of mankind freely⁸⁹.

Another idea that belongs to this chain of thought is the concept of revolution written with upper case, Revolution. Revolution is understood as the historical fulfillment and as the founding moment of political modernity, thought as applied rationality⁹⁰. Modern societies, modern political systems are based on the ideology of progress. This new ideology is based on the positive evaluation of future and on the inversion of the traditional relationship existing between the ancient world and the modern one⁹¹; the ancient world is devalued and is no longer seen as offering models for the modern world.

Liberalism, socialism, communism, national-socialism, anarchism are all children of the afore mentioned ideology. They are based on the axiom of human perfectibility that was transformed into the dogma of indefinite perfecting of humanity, which is supposed to be the natural law of development of human history and also a result of applying human will to it; even nationalism is not to be conceived as without modernization, without the idea of a unitary administration, of equality of the members of a nation, without centralization and industrialization, etc. Even national-socialism is a modern and revolutionary doctrine which envisages the creation of a new and improved kind of man (but applied only locally not to the entire human race), based upon the idea of scientific and technological progress, on Darwinism, too. The same goes for Stalinism, for the dream of creating the new communist man. The concept of secular religion was introduced by Raymond Aron in 1943–1944, and described as a doctrine of collective salvation grounded on sacralization of history, which becomes History with upper case, and with the absolutization of a seemingly good principle, which is the extreme, solidified form of various representations which are flouting in the minds of people in a certain age; this is why the ideology of progress can be treated as a secular religion. To believe in Progress means not only to become ecstatic in the face of the new improvements in the evolution of man, but also to be protected against its empirical refutation or bad events. The belief in Progress protects and brings consolation, because by a sort of dialectical thinking it transforms evil in something that is necessary to the production of a greater good or to the attainment of Progress, the negative element, evil, being secretly positive, and working for the good. The modern religion of progress offers here a new theodicy. Evil is explained away⁹². The celebration of progress cannot be

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 62.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 139.

⁹² *Ibidem*, pp. 129–132.

untied from the celebration of democracy, or socialism and even communism or national-socialism. It is a secular religion because it possesses not only a comprehensive view of things, but also the most legitimating and justificatory force among the modern ideas.

“Croire au Progrès, c’est se mettre en position de croire à la réalisation graduelle, dans l’histoire, des idéaux de liberté, d’égalité ou de justice. De croire aussi à la marche progressive de l’humanité vers la satisfaction de tous ses besoins, condition supposée de l’accès au bonheur”⁹³.

The ideology of progress, the French Revolution and the newly-born utopian thinking have led to a new enchantment of history and of time, to a kind of secular or atheistic mysticism, to the cults of the Freedom, Equality, Reason, etc. The last and final perfection is God stripped of the personal form⁹⁴, or even as the divinisation of man. Through the limitless growth of reason, through the limitless growth of science and technology humankind was bound to create Heaven on Earth, to obtain perpetual peace. On political and social level this was supposed to be reached by following the principle of utility, by producing the maximum of well-being or happiness for the greatest number of people (and this by letting everyone expressing and following his or her own interests). This utopia was supposed to be accomplished through democratization, which now has become a slogan and everything is supposed to be so (this democratization can be thought along the lines of a meritocracy which implies equality of chances or along the line of equality of conditions, which implies equality of aptitudes, abilities. This is the opposition between (neo)liberals and communists). The outcome of this line of thinking can now be seen in the totalitarian demand of being open, open-minded and in the unending and unlimited claims to rights without any claims for duties⁹⁵.

THE IDEOLOGY OF PROGRESS

The origins of this secular religion can be traced in the work of Francis Bacon, who formulated the famous equation between knowledge and power. This is a trans-ideological ideology which permeates the thought and feelings of modern and contemporary human existence. Though the facts have shown that this ideology of betterment of humanity is not to be held, this idea should be examined and given a new form, argues the French author Pierre-André Taguieff. Understanding what the idea of progress means, why it has become a secular religion means knowing and understanding its origins, its basis, the interpretations

⁹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 120–121.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 121.

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 124.

the idea received, evaluating its concrete application and the results thereof, to see if the promises the idea held were achieved or not. It has to be carefully distinguished between what is alive in it and what is dead. The idea of progress is still present and has become the cultural and intellectual legacy of modernity, a trans-ideological conception of the world, which can be understood through the categories of “secular religion” or “religion of collective redemption”⁹⁶. From the beginning of this notion, which is found in the works of Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes, the religious content was present. The forging of the notion of progress is the result of a secular religious process. It is not reduced only to the idea of an amelioration of human existence thanks to technological and scientific development. To its very core belongs an eschatological idea of fulfilling all humans’ needs and desires one day⁹⁷.

The ideology of progress, even if it is still contested, is present under many forms, one of them being what Pierre-Andre Taguieff identified as progressivism or *bougeisme* (*bouger* = to move), and ideology which is also related to the idea of continual revolution. As the French philosopher said, progressivism is the conviction that there is a meaning in history, that history goes in a certain direction, and this direction is a progressive one whereby the things are getting better, even if one wishes or not. Change in itself is good. Progressivism is an organized system of representations and beliefs, based on the conviction that humanity, or the history of humanity are ruled by a law that carries them toward a superior stage of existence, independent of the wishes of humanity⁹⁸.

“Mouvement nécessaire vers le mieux ou marche générale vers la perfection finale”⁹⁹.

Today, the self-evidence of this conviction is no more, but the meaning of progress is not to be limited to this. There are some ideological and political usages of progress that are used in the political arena or in papers, journals, etc. These ideological meanings denote the attitudes and certainties of some people who proclaim that they are supports of social, economic, political spheres. These convictions and the people who hold them are normally situated on the left or far-left of the political spectrum. To be a supporter of progress means to be in favour of transforming the whole society or human existence in the name of an ideal, be it through reform or through violent means, through revolution¹⁰⁰. If someone considers him or herself to be a supporter of progress, then they think they have no enemy on the left.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 18–19.

⁹⁷ Dominique Bourg, *Les origines religieuses de l'idée du progrès*, in Dominique Bourg et al., *Peut-on encore croire au progrès?*, Paris, PUF, 2000, p. 21.

⁹⁸ Pierre-André Taguieff, *op. cit.*

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

The idea of progress is somewhat insulated from empirical evidence that denies it. It is a utopian ideal, regulative for thought and feeling. There are many possibilities that the idea of progress contains, so it is not easy to prove its empirical falsehood. It works just like a mythology or as a kind of myth, though it is oriented toward the future. The ideology of progress has transformed itself and it is present in many forms, but it is more or less pertaining to some particular domains that should be improved. The idea of progress as necessary movement toward happiness, domination of nature, etc. is the expression of a philosophy of History, which entails the belief in the presence of Reason in History, which is made up from two elements. The first one is the axiom of a necessary connection between historical events or between facts, the second axiom expressing the idea that there is a finality of the whole historical process¹⁰¹. Though some thinkers had proclaimed that “progress is dead”, Pierre-André Taguieff affirms the necessity of becoming aware and of identifying the presence of the never-ending progress utopia particularly in its present transformations, which took place under the guise of its apparent death¹⁰².

The concept of progress has been hitherto identified with the History, or with civilisation, with evolution or development. The concept of civilization was connected with the idea of progress, and this connection was expressed in the conviction that history goes in the direction of building up civilisation. Civilization meant in the Enlightenment worldview progress, it implied it, that civilization meant betterment of human existence, or the development and evolution thereof. This evolution implied the multiplication and growth of technical means, also a better or equitable distribution of means and well-being, etc. It means also economical, technical growth and also equality of conditions. Progress implied hence the growth of power of humankind over nature and over society. But the meaning of progress or even civilization does not stop here. The ideology of progress and the trust its supporters put in the process of historical process had led to the development of radical views of human existence which call for the abolition of all limits that are restraining it. Life should become easy; the individuality of each human being should be lived without any restraints¹⁰³.

The idea of progress promises a life based on the transgression and overcoming of all limits and constraints that had defined human existence. Such a view claims a total transparency of communication, the right to have an existence that is eternal celebration, and the right of “jouir sans entraves”. Every need and desire must be satisfied, no limitations are to be accepted. Progress, utopia and hedonism go hand in hand, and, of course, scientism. The radical ideology of

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*, p. 33.

¹⁰² *Ibidem*, p. 31.

¹⁰³ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

Enlightenment can be found alive in the ideology of trans- and post-humanism. In a certain sense, the ideology of progress is an ideology of hope, the best antidote to despair or to *Weltschmerz*. As such the ideology of progress is characterized by a hedonistic point of view¹⁰⁴, that permeates also the modern conceptions of natural right as opposed to the classical views thereof¹⁰⁵. Because modern means better or progress, because it is identified with the present moment, this ideology generates a kind of presentism, of ideology of youth, and of consumption that ignores the future. The love for whatsoever is new – *neophilie* is situated at the core of modern ideology of progress. Good is what is new¹⁰⁶. Modern existence is orientated toward future, the future being the privileged or defining temporal dimension of modernity. Novelty is good in itself, and therefore the present age defines itself as modern and superior to every other age in history. The future becomes automatically something desirable, and it is thought of, at least by the supporters of the ideology, as being knowable, being made so by the advancement of technology and sciences¹⁰⁷. It must be clearly stated that from the inception of the notion of progress in the seventeenth century it encompassed other meanings, which are the idea of continuous growth of knowledge, the continuous growth of human power, the idea of advancement towards happiness and of moral betterment of humankind¹⁰⁸. All of these are interconnected. The Baconian concept of progress of science as growth of power corresponds to the most neutral descriptive model that one can imagine about modern society¹⁰⁹.

The ideology of progress, and therefore every ideology that feeds upon it, belongs to the realm of the mythical, of utopian thought and of secular religion. The basic conviction that undergirds the ideology of progress and thus leftism is the belief that every movement of succession in history is a movement toward betterment – *amélioration*. This conviction is a kind of logical fallacy – *Post hoc, ergo melius hoc*. This is a typical bourgeois and liberal idea. Two ideas are here at work, the first one being that there is a change going on, the second one being that this change is always a betterment. The latter implies the existence of a consciousness that deems the change in itself as being good. Change is supposed to go in the direction of a final state which is the full realization of a transcendent ideal, or the coming into being of a perfect state of human existence. The idea of progress is therefore bound to the arbitrariness of a subjectivity, which also imposes the idea that this movement towards betterment is a linear whereby every kind of contingency is excluded. Also, things that are deemed to be negative are

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 68.

¹⁰⁵ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1950.

¹⁰⁶ Taguieff, *op. cit.*, pp. 67–68

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 76–77.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 99.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibidem*.

seen as temporary obstacles that will be removed through the continuous movement toward the supposed ideal state of affairs. The progress is deemed to be a necessary movement – *nécessitarisme*¹¹⁰. That means the idea of progress is not something that can be derived from empirical observation of historical processes. The idea of progress implies a judgement of value, which can't be confirmed by pure empirical observation. Besides the strong meaning of movement towards betterment, the idea of progress contains some fuzzy meaning that allow it to be flexible in its application (if someone abandons the idea of progress, it means that it forfeits the notion of the necessity of a better future).

The idea of progress is at the core of modern thought and feeling, and at the core of the way people think about humanity or history. Policy-making is also afflicted by this belief. The meaning of human existence is reduced to the ideal of creating a better life for the future generations; basically it is built upon the idea of necessary progress.

“Dans l'idéologie modern, le sens de l'existence humaine était fondé sur l'expression familiale, nationale ou civilisationnelle de la foi progressiste : l'idéal mobilisateur d'une « vie meilleure » pour les descendants était inscrit au cœur de l'espérance collective”¹¹¹.

At least on the surface the idea of a moral and political progress had vanished, though it maintained itself in the scientific and technological realm. The conception of sustainable development is an expression of losing faith in progress as a holist movement of society toward betterment, this concept being ill-defined and without a determinate content. It gives the impression of a determinate ideal, a future with each can agree on, but it is just an impression, a mask for lack of a determinate ideal¹¹².

In its more concrete and usual usage, the concept of progress denotes the results of technological and scientific development, which are judged on the basis of their efficiency and utility. A utility that is ready-at-hand. This is a restrictive meaning of progress, which is defined only in terms of its practicality and utility. The ideals or purposes which were present in the conception of progress as the movement toward a perfect state of humanity are no longer expressed. The idea of progress makes up a grand narrative which belongs to the realm of the philosophy of history. It is a narrative that is future-oriented, a kind of modern myth. It is related to utopian imaginary because it entails systematic representations of a perfect society, of the perfect human being, of the new man, of the methods necessary to accomplish the desired outcome, etc. This narrative is also bound to scientism, to the development of technology, to industry. The cult of Progress

¹¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, pp. 24–25.

¹¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

¹¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 28–29.

produces also a sacralization of history, which becomes History¹¹³, the movement wherein man accomplishes himself or becomes God. Mythological thinking was oriented to the past, the Golden Age was in the past and it was not possible for man to recreate it only through his strenuous efforts. The ideology of progress and utopia are oriented to the future and intimately bound to science and technology, the great supporter and theoreticians of progress making clear that science was to be seen as the engine that drives progress and development. People like F. Bacon, R. Descartes or Condorcet assumed that only scientific thought can achieve progress and that scientific and technological progress is the necessary and sufficient condition not only for producing the needed material goods, but also for improving human life in general, or for moral and political progress; they thought that all desirable values could coexist and that progress in science would produce moral progress, too¹¹⁴.

Francis Bacon had coined the term advancement at the beginning of the seventeenth century, which has its approximate translation in the term of progress, which in French appeared at the end of the sixteenth century and had a spatial meaning: to go forward and also denoted the way of someone who has a purpose to fulfil¹¹⁵. The meaning that Francis Bacon gave to the word progress, that of advancement, the simple action of moving forward in a space becomes in the new ideology a movement toward betterment. Through this semantic innovation was possible to conceive of the development of science as being linear, cumulative and infinite. This idea of human perfection and perfectibility is not to be confounded with the idea of spiritual progress which one can find in Plotinus's works, which is based on purification, ascetic discipline, and the ecstatic union with the ontological principle of being, the One (or the Triune God in Christian mysticism). Of course, one can draw an analogy between the spiritual progress of a philosopher or of an ascetic endeavor and the progress as perfectibility of humanity. There is a common element to these two pursuits. The wise man that seeks to attain Wisdom or the union with the God, knows that this is an infinite process which transforms the one who is engaged in it. The idea of an infinite or undefined process is transferred to the modern religion of progress. The ideology of progress even though is anti-Christian has its roots in Christian theology, too. Not only in the scholastic variant, but in the earlier understanding of what redemption is. Ernst Benz in his paper on the origin of the concept of Overman (*Übermensch*) shows that this concept has pagan and Christian roots. The true understanding of redemption as *theosis* is not reducible to a restauration of man's Edenic state of being, but something more. It is an infinite process of transformation in which the redeemed Christian becomes a

¹¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 97.

new being¹¹⁶. Even if one can imagine the progress in the modern sense of the term in this way, the two processes are not commensurable.

The modern ideology of progress was and is attractive because it bases hope on the power and abilities that man derive from science and technology, also from process and development in which people partake. The ideology of progress is a force-idea, it entails very much affective force and can be seen as the transposition of a social, political, cultural and level of the paradigm of modern rationalist philosophy (entailing both the rationalist and empiricist philosophy). The beginning act of this way of doing philosophy is to doubt every acquired idea, every acquired legacy, norm, representation, hyperbolical doubt which is meant to help to get rid of errors, just like Descartes did in his philosophy. Perfection is a point, maybe an unreachable point in the future, and imperfection is at the beginning, but is shed aside. The progress toward perfection, of eliminating error and acquiring truth, is thought as something that cannot but take place. It is a historical necessity and a stock of reasons for action. The ideology of progress or of Progress is akin to religiousness, being itself a strong belief which has a content that is not demonstrable or defined in clear and precise terms:

“Il s’agit donc là d’une croyance forte, donc le contenu est aussi indémontrable qu’indéfinissable avec précision. Une croyance qui se situe aux fondements de la métaphysique optimiste du Progrès dans l’histoire. Et ce, quelles qu’en soient les formulations, plutôt libérales ou plutôt révolutionnaires”¹¹⁷.

In the nineteenth century, this religion of the future becomes an eschatology which is made possible by the existing scientism, by the idea that the only true and reliable source of knowledge is science, and that science and technology are the true engines of progress, the source of true and reliable hope. The religious components of the modern ideology of progress are the idea of Fate, of Providence and even the idea of an infinite movement towards its purpose, to its *telos*, as can be clearly seen from what the German author Ernst Benz wrote. The idea of linear time which makes it possible has religious roots, too. They are to be found in the Bible - the representation of time moving toward an end. It has also roots in the view of history which Joachim de Flore entertained in the twelfth century, with his division of history in three ages, the last one being the progressive revelation of the Holy Spirit. This last age of history implied the overcoming of Christianity and the abolition of the existing rules, laws and institutions. The anticipation of a better state of being accomplished in history and the longing after it are clear secularization of Christian representations of the end of history. The messianic aspect of Christianity and Judaism became secularized, rationalized, transforming

¹¹⁶ Ernst Benz, *Der Übermensch. Grundprobleme des heutigen Menschenbildes*, in *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, Bd. 14, 1962, pp. 19–35.

¹¹⁷ Taguieff, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

themselves into a progressive and utopian view of history, wherein the infinite progress of the human species is seen as a redemptive process. This process is a long educative one and may end with the building of a utopian society, which would allow for a complete development of man's faculties and qualities. This view of humankind develops also the idea, which is basically gnostic, that science has redemptive function. But this gnosis is not available only for a restricted number of selected people but to everyone. This gnosis can be transmitted and used to build a new man and a new society¹¹⁸. Like every gnosis, this modern one is dualistic. There is the principle of good which is opposed to a principle of evil which is represented by all the obstacles and hindrances that are staying or deemed to hinder progress. Being on the side of progress is being on the right side of history or History. This view is the modern edition of the older and ancient Process philosophy or philosophy of becoming, more a less a Heraclitean conception.

From the beginning, the conception of progress or of Progress was bound with the idea that science/knowledge means power, meaning that knowing the causes the scientists get the means to manipulate nature. Rene Descartes expresses the same idea when he states that the purpose of philosophy, of knowing is to be practical and to make mankind the master of nature¹¹⁹. The best formulation of the motivation of pursuing progress Taguieff finds in the work of Thomas Hobbes. The English philosopher denies the idea that human behavior is guided by the common good or by a transcendent good that imposes some duties on human existence. The motivation or felicity consists in a permanent going forward of human desire, from an object to another and so *ad infinitum*. The inclinations of man make it so that man is not satisfied only with getting one object of desire, but he tries to assure a satisfying life, a steady access to the objects of the desire. The motivation underlying human behavior and progress is the desire of acquiring power after power. It is a process that comes to a still stand only in death¹²⁰.

THE ROOTS OF THE RELIGION OF PROGRESS: LUST FOR POWER

Lust or will for power are the main motivators behind progress and human behavior. Satisfying this unending quest for power is also the only way to attain happiness – *felicity* as Hobbes puts it. This whole process looks very much like an infinite failure. The triad of desire, progress and happiness governs human existence, and is built into the human constitution. This is not an external norm or regulation imposed on human will. Progress seems to be a natural norm of human existence derived from man's inner constitution, the desire being insatiable. This is

¹¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 107–108.

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 38–39.

¹²⁰ Thomas Hobbes quoted in Taguieff, *op.cit.*, p. 39.

also an infinite desire to dominate and to master. This desire, this unrest or restlessness is the condition of possibility of History as Progress (this anxiety is also the main drive of human existence and will in John Locke's philosophical conception). This is the moment when a cult of efficiency and technology is born, which will impose itself in the way humanity conducts its affair. The result is that the spirit of criticism which is supposed to be a characteristic of enlightenment man is being tossed aside¹²¹. The emancipation of man that science and technology promised has led to another form of oppression or tyranny of the practical spirit, to the spirit of dominance over man and nature, or, in Jacques Ellul's terms¹²², to the development of the technological system that hold man prisoner and further alienates him. The twin myths of modernity are Science and History and their knock-offs the myths of Happiness and Progress.

The idea of Progress has been later connected to the notion of Darwinian evolution and applied to society under the name of social Darwinism, a dialectical view of history wherein the negative moments of existence are transformed into necessary element that makes the whole thing to go forward. This ideology makes possible a justification of every kind of bad action, as a necessary element of progress¹²³. The idea of evolution now offers support for justifying everything, every negative aspect of human existence.

Progress, under the guise of social Darwinism, is also a justification for free-trade without limits, for capitalism and globalism. Another result of this ideology is the conviction that is possible for man to collaborate with evolution or even to govern it. This is an idea that Julian Huxley espoused, which can be seen even in authors like Arthur C. Clarke and in Stanley Kubrick's *2001. A space Odyssey*, which does not reflect Arthur C. Clarke's book. Huxley considers that the Darwinian evolution is a proof of the fact that there is also a biological progress at work in nature¹²⁴. Another knock-off of the ideology of progress/evolution is the ideology of eugenics and the idea of getting rid of unhealthy elements of society/humanity. Now it was time to make procreation obedient to utopian projects of constructing a rational existence. The techno-scientific ideology that dominated the twentieth century and the next one was born and justified on the basis on the Darwinian paradigm of evolution¹²⁵.

Another knock-off is the idea of a scientific way of doing politics, a kind of social physics or mathematics. To the will of building a new society, grounded on reason and science, corresponds the will to build a new human being¹²⁶. This too

¹²¹ Taguieff, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

¹²² *Ibidem*, p. 91.

¹²³ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

¹²⁴ Julian Huxley, quoted in Taguieff, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

¹²⁵ Taguieff, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

¹²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 49.

can be seen as a secularization of the biblical conception of a new man, the renewed or recreated man in Jesus Christ, the difference being the conviction that this can be reached through science, technology and utopia. This is the new utopia of mankind, having also a cosmopolitan bend attached to it. For its supporters, this conception has to be normative for mankind. Julian Huxley, the first director of UNESCO, states it clearly in a paper called "UNESCO, its Purpose and its Philosophy" wherein he affirms the necessity of a global government which would make possible the progress of mankind and to avoid war¹²⁷. The ideology of progress amounts to a project of a moral, political and spiritual unification of mankind. A totalitarian and utopian project grounded on scientism.

In this view there is continuity between the biological world and the social one. Therefore, there is continuity between the project of social betterment and the project of biological betterment. These two will part way in the thirties. The connection between them was severed also by the conviction that the real world of man is not the biological world, but the historical one. This world is posited to be the product of man's will. The historical world can be interpreted as a world wanted or willed by man. This is a voluntarist view, which has also theological roots in scholastic theology. This view can be linked to the idea of governing and orienting evolution, though. If man's world is created and willed by man, then he can modify it the way man or some human leaders see it fit. The primacy of will leads to new constructivist utopias. The relation to divinity or even God has been replaced with human will, which can or has led to a dehumanization of mankind, according to Eric Voegelin¹²⁸.

Another feature of progressist ideology is its capacity to instill conformism and lack of responsibility in the people to uphold this view. This is the result of one of the main components of this ideology, namely the conviction that the history of mankind marches toward inevitably a better future. Events are so enchained that there is only the necessity of progress and all the things that might happened to interrupt this movement are only temporary setbacks. As Taguieff puts it, modern man has forgotten that hope is a heroic virtue¹²⁹. The movement of History transports humanity in an age of increased rational organization of humanity and of mastering nature, both external and human nature. It is a mechanical automated progress toward the sovereignty of reason and of man¹³⁰. Even if now there are people that point out that the desired progressive state of humanity and progress is not fulfilled, even though the history of the twentieth century clearly shows that the

¹²⁷ Julian Huxley, quoted in Taguieff, *op. cit.*, pp. 53–54.

¹²⁸ Taguieff, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 59.

¹³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 63.

ideology of human betterment and of progress is false, the progressive convictions still exist and express themselves in other terms. This ideology hides itself behind denouncing of critics of modernity and of some of its trends as reactionaries, enemies of humanity, racist, etc. This very ideology is present in the use of epithets like utility, of uttering the necessity of being useful, etc. Sometimes the better future is imagined as being achievable by mere acts of consciousness, progressivism taking now an individualistic turn, masquerading as such.

In the realm of social representation, the ideology of progress is very much alive, being expressed every time when an advancement of human rights, social policy etc is celebrated. What is lacking in these manifestations of the underlying modern ideology is the rhetoric of heroic invocation of Progress as the victory of the fight against superstition, against the reactionary forces, etc¹³¹. Nevertheless, it is very present and it is the underlying ideology of every discourse that celebrates globalization or the increase and expansion of communication means, of the growing rapidity thereof, the ideology of progress giving rise to a new utopia, which takes the form of globalization, the planetary utopia of redemption through communication, through destroying borders and limits, an utopia built upon another utopia which UNESCO from its very inception embraced, as Julian Huxley espoused, the utopia of the unification of humanity. This new incarnation of utopia of progress is based on the ideology of techno-scientific progress. The new technologies and the technological system, as the French sociologist and theologian Jacques Ellul has put it, are seen as embodying perpetual progress.

The idea of progress is so present in our representation and worldviews that not believing in it anymore means giving up the idea that the future will bring a better state of affairs. From the second half of the eighteenth century the intellectual elites of Europe had become certain that the march of history goes unabated in the direction of a necessary betterment of human existence, and the whole historical process seemed then to back up the conviction that humankind will get a firm grip on destiny, that it will master and wash away the idea of the unavoidable. It seemed certain that a new age was dawning, a new age wherein man can determine what must be, what it wishes to become and what can bring into existence. A new feature of mankind was suddenly visible, the feature of unlimited perfectibility¹³². Progress is the unavoidable result of history, and universal history expresses the ascendancy of man which is necessary. This process is linear and has no limits¹³³ and it is also the process toward the unification of the whole mankind.

¹³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

¹³² *Ibidem*, p. 80.

¹³³ *Ibidem*, p. 85.

UTOPIA AND PROGRESS

The idea of progress does not stand alone. It has been connected with another representation of human existence or what human existence should be, which is utopia. Utopia is connected to the idea of progress, since progress implies a movement toward the necessary betterment of humanity, accumulating knowledge and a wished mastery over reality. True utopia implies the idea of science and technology and, in opposition to real myths, implies an orientation towards future, even if, in its depiction, time and change seem to be abolished from the perfect scientifically planned society. It is no accident that Francis Bacon, one of the authors of the modern idea of progress, had also authored a work called *The New Atlantis*, which describes a utopia centered around an organization made up from wise men, of people practicing experimental method of doing science¹³⁴. This organization is called the House of Solomon whose sole purpose is acquiring knowledge on causes of things and accomplishing all possible things. The promise of knowledge and of relentless growth of power through technological advance is also a promise of happiness. Technocracy replaces philosophy or theology; technology replaces divine grace. The faith in a new kind of Providence enters the stage, a faith in a historical evolution. It was postulated that an infinite process of perfection of humanity was one of God's projects.

“La volonté du progrès est volonté de puissance et de bonheur. On ne saurait mieux dire qu'elle exprime la toute-puissance du désir en même temps qu'elle réalise le désir de toute-puissance”¹³⁵.

This is the grounds whereof will be built the new projects about a new man and a new society, of building from scratch a new social and political order. Everyone who fancied themselves as modern or revolutionary had to adopt this view on things. History as progress ends up by assimilating the conception of a utopian future wherein a new-born regenerated humanity lives. The building of the ideal city is the penultimate step on the road to perfection. This new way of thinking fosters another feature or a new attitude: the unconditional refusal to accept the present-day order of the society wherein the modern thinker lives. Utopia starts to be seen as the principle of every progress¹³⁶. Utopia is a complex phenomenon, which cannot be reduced to a literary genus. It is a way of expressing the social imagination of man, as Borislav Baczkó put it, or a kind of imaginative structure in man. It is a modality to express the wishes, social and political dissatisfaction, a way to exercise a critique of a certain reality, to explore mental possibilities, the longing for a better or perfect existence, etc. It expresses the wish

¹³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

¹³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 112.

¹³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 114.

of man to become master of existence and of history, whereby during the process of elaborating one of many forms of perfect society, the utopian social imagination at work making visible that it is entertaining a double relation with history which can be viewed as contradictory. The social imagination expressing itself in utopia is bound to history and expresses some views, attitudes that are specific to a certain age, but it also evacuates history from the perfect society¹³⁷. The main role of utopian literature is to enable the activity of social imagination, to instill a distance between it and the respective society, toward its norms, values, hierarchies, and to exercise freedom and liberty towards it¹³⁸.

Nevertheless, the exercise of utopian imagination leads to a repetition of its main themes, therefore blocking the imagination. The desire, the wish to push the denial of present reality to the limit, to display an imagination without limits might lead to the paradoxical result of repetition and uniformity¹³⁹. Another feature is that evil must be completely eliminated; the spirit of utopia is not the spirit of reform. In the utopian society there is no evil, because it has been eliminated. Thus, there are no contradictions, no conflicts, no real differences. History has been abolished¹⁴⁰. The connection between the myth of progress can be found in the work of Sébastien Mercier *L'année 2044*, published in 1770¹⁴¹. It was published, then forbidden but very successful. The new thing that this work introduces in utopian literature is the idea of a future that will be automatically and unavoidably better. The perfect society is not discovered through voyage, on an isolated island but is the town of Paris in the future. The changes that led to the perfect society were brought about in time by time himself¹⁴². It learns its reader that time is the essential factor in bringing about the evolution and perfection of human life and existence. Time itself establishes the orientation and purpose of human existence. The time of utopia is the time of progress. Progress is now understood as a unitary force and movement of the whole history oriented towards the future¹⁴³. In Mercier's work the idea of progress becomes entangled or conjoined with the utopia. But the same could be affirmed of progress, that is not thought without utopia, as the work of Condorcet shows (*L'esquisse d'un tableau historique du progrès de l'esprit humain*). It shows how progress results in a perfect city. And the basis for this optimism is the development of science and technology¹⁴⁴. And

¹³⁷ Bronislaw Backzo, *Lumières et Utopie : Problèmes de recherches*, in *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 26e Année, No. 2 (Mar.–Apr., 1971), EHESS pp. 355–386.

¹³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 385.

¹³⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 386.

¹⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 371.

¹⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 372.

¹⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 372.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 373.

the French Revolution fed the progressive and utopian idea that the existing order can actually be changed. Humanity will free itself from its servitudes, men will be virtuous, equality and justice will reign supreme, etc.

The concept of utopia is being enriched by its conjunction with the idea of progress, utopia being introduced in a certain vision of history, though utopia is characterized by the sentiment of rupture, of negating history. Utopia searches for a radical beginning¹⁴⁵. But the idea of progress implies continuity with the past in a form or another; somehow it stays attached to some ideal from the past. Utopia can be seen in opposition to it, by denying the past and its negative consequences.

This new form of the religion of progress, a science-based religion, is made possible by the idea of historical evolution and of the new Darwinian view of things, born in the nineteenth century. The purpose of history or of humanity's existence is no longer redemption, but happiness. Humanity is the collective subject of this process; he enacts it and its sole beneficiary. This modern view of man, which conjoins a promethean or luciferian view of man and an anthropocentric view of the world, is what might be called humanis¹⁴⁶. A new understanding of man becomes defining. The humanity of man is now equated with affirming and extending his powers, be it through rationality in the realm of knowledge or by abolishing prejudices and superstitions, or through mastering and controlling nature and through a rational reconstruction of society (and of man himself)¹⁴⁷.

The humanity of man lies in the power of producing the new, of creating, of breaking free from, of detaching himself from necessities, basically in the human capacity of giving birth and creating what is properly human. Humanity is construction of itself by itself. These ideas and the wish to abolish all limits of human condition have religious roots though and so has the vision of a better future, the end-state of felicity. Even though during the French enlightenment there was a critique of the optimist or providential view of history, this vision of nature came back. This view centers itself on man as subjectivity, in which man had become the sole master of nature, who can organize and exploit it as he sees fit, nature existing only to be at his disposal. This view is basic and made possible the idea of history as a process of self-redemption¹⁴⁸. The concept of progress embeds in itself the dream of human intellect or reason as master and owner of time, and creates the impression that the future, which has always been thought as being unpredictable, is now prone to be mastered through scientific and technological planning¹⁴⁹.

The basic motor of progress is an uneasiness, a lust for power that demands immediate satisfaction. A knock-off thereof is the cult of youthfulness and of

¹⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁶ Taguieff, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 147.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

immediate satisfaction. Good and useful is only what can procure an immediate satisfaction. This is a sign of decay of progressivism that, in this guise, loses the dimension of future, but believing in progress is equal with believing in the unity of the human species and in the unicity of its development¹⁵⁰. This development cannot be cut from the main idea of progress, which gives birth to the idea of happiness, that is accessible to the whole of mankind and ends being identified with consumerism.

The ideology of Progress gives birth to the ideology of happiness which can be achieved in this world. In this process the last remnants of the transcendent are to be found in the future dimension, that is imagined to be the time when the promise of felicity or happiness will be fulfilled. The only true purpose of political action is universal happiness, which entails also the idea of private property. Since happiness and progress are necessary results that involve the participation of mankind, this religious idea of progress took a strong hold of the human mind and feeling. Being unavoidable one must only want and will the progress and the process will take place. The development of technology ensures that progress becomes reality¹⁵¹. Human effort is necessary in order to transform nature and make it compliant to man's wishes.

Sometimes, the imaginary of progress allows a different interpretation of the way it can be brought about. Continuous development or revolution. Therefore, there are tensions to be found in the ideology of progress and in the policies that are constructed upon it. The ideology of progress entails some not so modern representations. These are the old ideas of destiny/fatality and the Judeo-Christian idea of Providence, and also the conviction that History has a meaning and a direction, which is the unavoidable betterment of human condition.

The ideology of progress entails to major components that were thought to belong together. This is the axiom that science is about power, and by increasing power and controlling nature human happiness will come about. One component is focused on domination and the other one on happiness. Happiness is seen as satisfying desires through means of power and control. This is based on a deterministic view on nature and world. The idea of ration planning and prevision of future is contradicted by the law of perverse effects, by the fact that many consequences of one's action take place long after the action was accomplished and many of them cannot be foreseen by the one who acted. And, even though most of modern or Enlightenment thinkers believed that progress in science will produce progress in other domains, or that all values are compatible with each other, there were arguments against progress based on the difference between technical and scientific progress and the moral one¹⁵².

¹⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 88.

¹⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 93.

¹⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 128.

CONCLUSIONS

The world we live in now is still under the dominance of the ideology of progress which expands together with the process of globalization. One of its consequences is the growing isolation of human beings due to radical individualism that creates the illusion of self-sufficiency, destroys the necessary chain that should exist between generations, which nullifies the past and destroys the basis of human culture. It destroys even the reference to common values, and even if it preaches diversity and multiculturalism, it creates social atoms that are very alike without knowing it, while being controlled by their inner drives, and guided only by the desire to consume and to appear in a certain way to their peers or in media. The ideology of progress has created a new kind of dehumanization, of nullifying individuality and whole cultures and this process does not seem to come to a halt.

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