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| The Idea of Progress |

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| **"Every age of the world has increased, and still increases, the real wealth, the happiness, the knowledge, and perhaps the virtue of the human race."**--Edward Gibbon, Introduction to *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. |

**Century of Progress?**

     The 1933 Chicago World's Fair billed itself--immodestly and prematurely--as "The Century of Progress."  Looking back from our current perspective, we might just as accurately call it the Century of Disillusionment. Or the century of Genocide.

    For it was also in 1933 that Adolph Hitler was named Chancellor of Germany. In 1933 that Stalin's murderously efficient Gulag system became fully operational. Fanatical militarist and revolutionary movements were on the rise both East (China and Japan) and West (Spain and Italy).  And for the remainder of the century, scenes of violence and atrocity--on a scale previously unimaginable--became routine spectacles all over the globe: from Auschwitz, Dresden, and Hiroshima to Pnomh Penh, Peking, and Sarajevo.

    That the '33 Fair opened during the depths of the Great Depression is testimony to America's tenacious optimism and faith in techniques. For by this time most Europeans had already abandoned their trust in a better future. Americans meanwhile continued--and for the most part still continue--to believe that Eternal Progress based on applied scientific knowledge is the shining destiny of the world.

**The Idea of Progress: A Brief History**

    The Idea of Progress may be defined as the belief that, in general, history proceeds in the direction of improved material conditions and a better (i.e., healthier, happier, more secure, more comfortable) life for more and more people. More simply: *In the long run, most things get better*.   
And while this idea hardly seems brand new or original (it is by now nearly four centuries old and a widely shared commonplace), it is still, when measured on a 10,000-year world historical scale, not much more than a cultural infant newly out of its cradle.

    The idea that civilization "progresses"--that nations or generations get better--was largely foreign  to the ancient world. In fact a majority of ancient authorities took just the opposite view. According to classical legend, for example, the world began in a state of primal perfection--the mythical Golden Age--and things have been running downhill (Silver, Bronze, etc.) ever since. (As late as the early 17th century, the English poet and clergyman John Donne lamented that the "Age is Iron, and Rusty too.") Greek legends spoke of ancient giants and heroes and of the greatness and colossal achievements of bygone civilizations (e.g., the myth of Atlantis). The historian Herodotus stood in awe as he reviewed the peerless accomplishments and almost unimaginable antiquity of Egypt. For him and for the Greeks of the classical age in general, the contemporary world was fallen and dwarfish; grandeur and glory resided in the past.

    Even in the view of Aristotle, who recognized distinct stages in the development of a civilization, history was not progressive, but cyclical. Like plants and animals, cities and empires emerged, grew, ripened, decayed, died. Something like a rising "progress" might occur for a generation or two; but as with the similar movement of the sun across the sky, each zenith was inevitably followed by a westward descent, a final steep and darkening decline. This Aristotelian view of cyclical growth and decay echoes a similar theme in ancient Judaism. "There is nothing new under the sun," declares the author of Ecclesiastes, offering a vision of history as a perpetual replay, a saga of eternal recurrence and return.

    The imperial Romans conceived of their own history as a purposeful development guided by a divine fate or providential destiny. However, this movement was "progressive" only up to the point of the founding of the empire. Once imperial power is established, history becomes essentially static. What follows is merely the endless dominance of Rome, the *urbs aeterna*. (In this respect, the Romans were not unlike their 20th-century admirers, the visionaries of Nazi Germany whose dream of an invincible and totalistic Superstate--a Reich that would last a thousand years--was closely patterned after the imperial model.) After the sack of Rome by Alaric's Goths in 410 AD, St. Augustine effectively demolished the myth of Roman supremacy, along with the whole idea of  worldly progress, in his *City of God*.

    However, while denying the validity of secular triumph (in effect arguing that the only true progress is personal and spiritual), Augustine and other early Christian writers fully accepted the Judeo-Roman idea that history is purposeful and providential. The script of the world had already been written and its ultimate destiny (a godly Millennium, a fiery Armageddon, new Heaven and new Earth) foretold. Remarkably, such a seemingly bleak prospect as universal destruction did not deter  later Christian authors, especially those with a radical Protestant or visionary bent, from advancing their own excited creed of progress and optimism. Among these, most importantly, was the English Lord Verulam, the Viscount St. Albans, better known as [Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626)](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/bacon/).

     The Idea of Progress in its authentic (i.e., science-and-technology-based) modern form is essentially Bacon's own creation. It was he who first formulated and described in detail (in his early science-fiction fantasy *The New Atlantis*) an entire state dedicated to the investigation of nature and the development of new inventions. In many ways Bacon's "Salomon's House" (as the central facility on the mythical island-nation was called) became a model for England's Royal Academy and an effective blueprint for the modern research lab and technical institute.

    As early as 1605, in his treatise on *The Proficience and Advancement of Learning* Bacon argued for a new emphasis on applied knowledge and shared information as a means of achieving a genuine progress in civilization. In his *New Organon* (1620) he enlarged on this vision of a technically innovative and centrally organized society dedicated to the improvement of the human condition and "the relief of man's estate." In each new work he carefully underscored the importance of practical knowledge, especially the kind of useful, empirically-based knowledge typical of the mechanical and industrial arts. In his view it was through such arts and such alone that a truly meaningful cultural progress could be achieved.

    Bacon's vision of a better world through invention, dissemination of information, international collaboration, and centrally managed, applied research began to be realized after the scientific revolution of the 17th century and the widespread acceptance of the Newtonian world-view. The material changes and prosperity brought about by the Industrial Revolution of the early 18th century inspired further confidence in the idea of progress, and before long a great wave of optimism (as typified by the quotation from Gibbon in the epigraph above) was sweeping across Europe and into the New World. The mechanical and engineering triumphs and the new evolutionary theories of the nineteenth century seemed to validate progress as a universal law--a law revered and upheld both in Europe and in the United States. Writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, the historian Henry Adams observed that no one could any longer deny the power of invention as the driving force behind the wheels of progress, though to him "progress" was beginning to seem like another name for *chaos*, a trendy buzzphrase for a civilization speeding out of control.   
 

[UTEL: Sir Francis Bacon Page](http://library.utoronto.ca/utel/authors/baconf.html)

BURY, J.B. *The Idea of Progress*. London: Macmillan, 1920.

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