2

IN PRAISE OF PROGRESS

Max Weber already envisioned the spirit of enlightenment "irretrievably fading" and a world comprised of "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart."[1] But he was bitter about this development, which places him in marked contrast to much of contemporary opinion. The Enlightenment always had its critics. Beginning with the Restoration of 1815 and the new philosophical reaction to the French Revolution, however, they were almost exclusively political—if not necessarily cultural—adherents of the right: intelligent conservatives committed to organic notions of development like Edmund Burke, elitists seeking a return to the sword and the robe like Joseph de Maistre, racists intent on viewing world history as a battle between Aryans and Jews like Houston Stewart Chamberlain, and apocalyptics prophesying doom like Oswald Spengler. Today, however, many on the left forward a critique of the Enlightenment. The criticisms come in various guises: postmodernists consider the enlightenment as "essentialist," radical feminists view it as "male," and postcolonial thinkers disparage it as "Eurocentric." Communitarians condemn its individualism, religious radicals bemoan its skepticism, populists castigate its intellectualism, and the politicians of identity criticize its rejection of experience as the criterion of truth. Dogmatic Marxists dismiss the Enlightenment as "bourgeois," anarchists are repelled by its reliance on the state, and ecologists by its belief in science and technology. Followers of the Frankfurt School still view it as the unwitting source of modern totalitarianism. Left critics of the Enlightenment form a motley crew and, perhaps, this reflects the current disarray of progressive forces. Still there is something that, ultimately, binds all of them: a basic discomfort with the notion of progress.

1. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Schocken, 1958), 182.

Forged amid the scientific revolution, the birth of modern idealism, and the struggle for political liberty, the term "progress" is usually seen as having been coined by Fontenelle. But it is unnecessary to employ the word to believe in its feasibility. Progress is the crucial category for talking about change, autonomy, and even making sense of reality. The current understanding of progress, however, has become impoverished. The category has been flattened out. It is a travesty to reduce "progress" to the disenchantment of the world, the dissolution of myths, and the substitution of "knowledge for fancy."[2] Progress is, above all, an attack on "the illusion of finality":[3] closure, certainty, and utopia.

Enlightenment thinkers believed that they were changing the world by formalizing empirical data under the abstract laws of nature that were open to testing and observation. But these thinkers also knew that normative concerns were intertwined with the quantitative extension of knowledge.[4] They recognized that religion rested on revealed claims and that the aristocracy justified its privileges by invoking a mythical past. Acceptance of such beliefs no less than social evils now became understood less as the result of original sin than ignorance and prejudice or those assumptions and opinions, customs and traditions, preserved from critical reflection.[5] With this change in the causation of misery and the new emphasis on reason came, quite logically, the desire to better the condition of humanity. In the first instance, this meant throwing off the veils of ignorance imposed by centuries of ideological oppression. *The Magic Flute* indeed expressed this fundamental assumption of the Enlightenment that no "dialectic" would ever fully ruin:

2. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), 3
3. J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth* (New York: Dover, 1987), 351.
4. "Perhaps no other century is so completely permeated by the idea of intellectual progress as that of the Enlightenment. But we mistake the essence of this conception, if we understand it merely in a quantitative sense as an extension of knowledge indefinitely. A qualitative determination always accompanies quantitative expansion; and an increasingly pronounced return to the characteristic center of knowledge corresponds to the extension of inquiry beyond the periphery of knowledge. One seeks multiplicity in order to be sure of unity; one accepts the breadth of knowledge in the sure anticipation that this breadth does not impede the intellect, but that, on the contrary, it leads the intellect back to, and concentrates it in, itself." Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* trans. Fritz C.A. Koelln and James P. Pettigrove (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951), 5.
5. Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 141.

The rays of the sun
Drive away the night;
Destroyed is the hypocrite's
Hidden might.

The Enlightenment idea of progress ultimately implied something very simple and very dramatic: transforming the invisible into the visible, the ineffable into the discursive, and the unknown into the known. Hobbes put the matter well when he noted in *De Cive* (1642) that "there is a certain clue of reason whose beginning is in the dark; but by the benefit of whose conduct, we are led, as it were, by the hand into the clearest light." It is secondary whether this meant clarifying the workings of electricity, translating ethical intuitions into discursive statements, the activities of the market into economic laws, or fears about human nature into institutions capable of constraining arbitrary power: Hegel only rendered absolute what had been the guiding impulse, the regulative principle, of the general trend toward "enlightenment" when he based his *Phenomenology of Mind* on the famous assumption that "there is nothing in the essence of object that does not become evident in the series of its appearances." Marx would echo this sentiment and provide it with an even more radical material formulation in the second of the "Eleven Theses on Feuerbach" where he writes:

> The question whether objective (*gegenstaendliche)* truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. In practice man must prove the truth, that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness (*Diesseitigkeit*) of his thinking. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question.

The Enlightenment envisioned progress as the process of bringing what had once been shrouded in darkness into the light. This meant not simply recognizing existing differences among people of different cultures as morally legitimate,[6] but also what is institutionally required in order that people may safely exercise their differences. The crucial issue was, for this reason, never the "subjectivity of the subject." Advocates of the Enlightenment instead sought to foster the moral autonomy of the individual over established

6. Richard Rorty, *Truth and Moral Progress: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 11.

traditions and the critical use of rationality against what Ernst Cassirer termed "mytho-poetical thinking." This enabled them to link progress with the extension of freedom and the exercise of the intellect.

Some may have believed that morality would ultimately flourish in each and every individual. More important was the insistence that conditions allow for debating the moral claims of traditional authorities and religious institutions.[7] The respect accorded "reason" by the Enlightenment was intertwined with a belief in the need to cultivate common decency and a sense of compassion,[8] what Voltaire termed a "softening" of the worst customs, prejudices, and instincts: there is indeed something legitimate about the claim that he and many of his friends were "more inspired by a hatred of cruelty than a love of truth."[9] The attempt to "soften" the vices of humanity, in any event, reaches back to the earliest cultures: Jewish law condemned the torture of animals; the Buddha spoke of "selflessness" and compassion for suffering; Confucius saw himself as part of the human race; Hinduism lauded the journey of life; and Jesus articulated the Golden Rule. Herein is the anthropological grounding for the historical experience of Enlightenment. Without even making specific reference to the West, it thus becomes possible to envision a certain development of "civility" and feeling for "civilization,"[10] which should be considered the substance of progress.

All of this requires respect for the ideals of fairness and reciprocity. These notions underpinning the liberal rule of law make it possible to contest the prejudices and arbitrary privileges incorporated in any number of positive laws. A notion of reason that prizes freedom is therefore implicitly informed by a certain sensibility. Only the more vulgar among the philosophes, in this vein, ignored the role sentiments and passions play in human affairs.

7. "If a serious debate over moral problems, as distinguished from an unquestioning acceptance of views established by tradition or authority, is any test of morality, then the age of the Enlightenment was the most moral of all ages." Alfred Cobban, *In Search of Humanity: The Role of the Enlightenment in Modern History* (New York: George Braziller, 1960), 89.
8. As a very young man, Horkheimer found this emphasis upon compassion philosophically formulated in Schopenhauer and—without considering it part of the anthropological trend of Enlightenment and a fundamental theme among all the great *philosophes*—his interest in this German pessimist remained with him the rest of his life. Note the discussion in Stephen Eric Bronner, *Of Critical Theory and Its Theorists* 2nd Edition (New York: Routledge, 2002), 76ff.
9. Cobban, *In Search of Humanity,* 66.
10. Norbert Elias, *Uber den Prozess der Zivilisation* 2 Bde. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997) 1:149–50.

Voltaire and most of his friends, for example, were sharply critical of the mechanical materialism of Holbach. Crucial for the Enlightenment was not whether sentiments and passions were important, obviously they were, but whether they could be influenced by reason. The philosophes were thus concerned with adapting state and society to the developing wants and faculties of citizens and the given social institutions and relations to the standards of freedom.[11] They employed "progress" to attack the institutions and ideas of a bygone age in the name of the reason, rights, and interests of the individual. It was precisely their contempt for dogma, prejudice, and privilege—their reliance on critique for political purposes—that provoked the most violent opposition. Confronting tradition and questioning authority, indeed, rendered the Enlightenment notion of progress unique and highlights its contemporary salience.

Enlightenment understandings of progress may not have been "dialectical," but they contested both the classical view of change as a circular "revolution"—with its inevitable transitions from monarchy to tyranny to democracy to mob rule to aristocracy to oligarchy and back to monarchy—as well as the religious belief in an increasingly imminent millennium whose realization would fulfill a predestined purpose and, apocalyptically, recreate paradise.[12] Condorcet, Helvetius, Priestly, and a few others may have waxed poetic about the future, but their relation to antiquity and even to the more recent past was not simply negative. Most Enlightenment thinkers, in keeping with the ancients, surrendered belief in the redemption of the past while, in keeping with the western religious tradition, retained some belief in an emancipated future. And so, situated in the world while retaining a certain longing for paradise, its most important representatives acknowledged that progress would never be complete. Leibniz put it well in his *On the Ultimate Origination of Things* when he wrote: "there always remain in the abyss of things slumbering parts which have yet to be awakened, to grow in size and worth, and in a word, to advance to a more perfect state. And hence no end of progress is ever reached."

Something will always be missing: freedom will never become fully manifest in reality. The relation between them is *asymptotic*. Therefore, most

11. Herbert Marcuse and Franz Neumann, "Theories of Social Change" in Herbert Marcuse, *Collected Papers: Technology, War and Fascism* ed. Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 1998) 1:119.
12. Karl Lowith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Millennium and Utopia: A Study in the Background of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Harper, 1964), 6.

philosophes understood progress as a regulative ideal, or as a postulate,[13] rather than as an absolute or the expression of some divine plane or the foundation for a system.[14] Even in scientific terms, progress retained a critical dimension insofar as it implied the need to question established certainties. In this vein, it is misleading simply to equate scientific reason with the domination of man and nature.[15] All the great figures of the scientific revolution —Bacon, Boyle, Newton—were concerned with liberating humanity from what seemed the power of seemingly intractable forces. Swamps were everywhere; roads were few; forests remained to be cleared; illness was rampant; food was scarce; most people would never leave their village. What it implied not to understand the existence of bacteria or the nature of electricity, just to use very simple examples, is today simply inconceivable. Enlightenment figures like Benjamin Franklin, "the complete *philosophe*,"[16] became famous for a reason: they not only freed people from some of their fears but through inventions like the stove and the lightning rod they also raised new possibilities for making people's lives more livable.

Critical theorists and postmodernists miss the point when they view Enlightenment intellectuals in general and scientists in particular as simple apostles of reification. They actually constituted its most consistent enemy. The philosophes may not have grasped the commodity form, but they empowered people by challenging superstitions and dogmas that left them mute and helpless against the whims of nature and the injunctions of tradition. Enlightenment thinkers were justified in understanding knowledge as inherently improving humanity. Infused with a sense of furthering the public good, liberating the individual from the clutches of the invisible and inexplicable, the Enlightenment idea of progress required what the young Marx later termed "the ruthless critique of everything existing."

13. None of the "believers in progress never thought empirical validation likely or even possible when the referent was as abstract and vast as humanity or civilization. The point is that for these believers there was no more necessity for empirical proof of universal progress than there was for a geometrical proposition—or, if one was religious, for a commandment or other injunction in the Bible." Robert Nisbet, *The History of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 7.
14. Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment* 2 vols. (New York: Norton, 1995 edition) 1:132
15. Cf. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 4.
16. Note the wonderful sketch by Henry Steele Commager, *The Empire of Reason: How Europe Imagined and America Realized the Enlightenment* (London: Phoenix, 1978), 21; Richard Wolin, *The Terms of Cultural Criticism: The Frankfurt School, Existentialism, Poststructuralism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 3.

This regulative notion of progress was never inimical to subjectivity. Quite the contrary: progress became meaningful only with reference to real living individuals.

Enlightenment thinking did not mechanically identify progress with the chronological passing of time or, usually, mere technological development. It was instead always seen as entailing a moral commitment to expanding self-awareness and the possibilities for exercising judgment. This was as true for Immanuel Kant, who viewed progress from the standpoint of the species, as for Moses Mendelssohn, who identified it with the increasing capacities for self-reflection by the individual. Both saw the root of progress in the growing possibilities for criticism and the development of human capacities. Progress thus became the rallying cry for attacking the privileges and dogma associated with the status quo. It was undoubtedly what led Diderot to exclaim that freedom would only be realized when the last aristocrat had been strangled with the entrails of the last priest. The outburst was revealing but so were the words of Tom Paine who probably best expressed the general position of the philosophes when he noted in 1795 that "the vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies. Man has no property in man, neither has one generation a property in the generations that are to follow."

To be sure, from the beginning, "progress" was open to perversion. It was capable of being projected back into the past, thereby justifying the exploitation of those considered lower on the evolutionary scale, and it could be identified with an escalator that moves society ever upward. The idea was always in danger of becoming regimented and stripped of its critical character. But it is absurd to doubt the fundamentally liberating vision with which the notion of progress should remain associated. It always projected a world perhaps best described in *The Future of Progress* by Condorcet who so avidly hoped that one day:

> . . . the sun will shine only on free men who know no other master but their reason: when tyrants and slaves, priests and their stupid or hypocritical instruments, will exist only in works of history and on the stage; and when we shall think of them only to pity their victims and their dupes; to maintain ourselves in a state of vigilance by thinking on their excesses; and to learn how to recognize and so to destroy, by force of reason, the first seeds of tyranny and superstition, should they ever dare to reappear amongst us.

Like the notion of Enlightenment itself,[17] of course, progress can be interpreted in two ways. It can be seen as a modern historical phenomenon inspiring the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But progress can also be understood as an anthropological tendency demanding the sacrifice of subjectivity and desire, the domination of inner and outer nature, for the purpose of survival and conquest: Odysseus was its symbol in *Dialectic of Enlightenment.* He surrendered his name and identity in order to survive, he used logic in order to illuminate the unknowable, and his saga is marked by his ever increasing attempt to exert mastery over himself and nature:[18] his fate is thereby seen by Horkheimer and Adorno as emblematic of a process whose liquidation of subjectivity would culminate in the number tattooed on the arm of the concentration camp inmate.[19] The historical and the anthropological notions of progress thereby converged. Critique of the Enlightenment would now require a critique of civilization.

And this is legitimate when considering the way in which people of color, Native Americans, or inhabitants from other premodern cultures, were trotted around the European capitals for analytical inspection and treated like animals in the zoo. François Truffaut provided a moving and representative portrait of this in his movie *The Wild Child* where a waif born outside of "civilization," grown up among wolves and in virtual isolation is captured and "educated" according to the scientific strictures and "civilized" ideals. The film identified progress with a moral escalator leading from the supposedly primitive, emotional, and childlike to the modern, rational, and adult. This view would indeed influence later forms of teleological thinking that paid little mind to those whom Engels derisively called "peoples without history" (*geschichtslosen Voelker*),[20] and who understood progress as an abstract standard to be met and imposed from the outside—through imperialism—

17. Enlightenment comprises both a historically specific scientific "theory of knowledge," which was developed in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in contesting theological dogma, as well as an anthropological struggle with error and supersitition. Max Horkheimer, "Die Aufklarung" in *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1989) 13:571.
18. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 46ff.
19. For an alternative view of the Odyssey, which highlights its critical reflexivity, humanism, and sense of nuance, see the famous opening chapter of Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003 ed.)
20. Note the illuminating study by Roman Rosdolsky, *Friedrich Engels und das Problem der* '*Geschichtslosen Voelker* from the Archiv fuer Sozialgeschichte Bd. 4 (Verlag fuer Literatur und Zeitgeschehen: Hannover, 1964).

rather than fostered and cultivated from within diverse cultures.[21] Even by resisting repressive customs in order to expand the range of individual experience and the existing wealth of knowledge, however, the pre-modern community will be undermined by becoming entangled in a "foreign" debate. To this extent, indeed, the critique of progress will always become intertwined with the critique of modernity.

Rousseau introduced this critique by claiming that "our minds have been corrupted in proportion as the arts and sciences have improved." His *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1749), which won him a prize from the Academy of Dijon and made him famous, challenged the value of progress and reflection in the name of authentic intuition and an unadulterated view of nature. But his essay was not concerned with resurrecting the "noble savage"—a term Rousseau never employed—as his critics like Voltaire would later insist. It also was inspired less by provincial resentment than the hatred of opulence inherited from the Reformation, the critique of courtly manners, leveled by Moliere in *Les precieuses ridicules*, and the egalitarianism cherished by the self-styled "citizen of Geneva." Rousseau knew that there was no going back to some golden age, which was also the case for Horkheimer and Adorno, though—in contrast to them—his critique of "progress" evidenced a a political purpose. Rousseau had little sympathy for what would become the longings of nineteenth-century reactionaries for the heroic, the aristocratic, the hierarchical, or some mythic past with which to challenge the introduction of democracy and the "masses." He never showed any inclination to restore the medieval past or the privileges of a self-selected elite and, until he neared the end of his life, a church protected by dogma.

"Necessity raised thrones," Rousseau wrote, "and the arts and sciences support them." Nature alone, rational in its laws, might provide a standard for criticizing the corruption fostered by civilization. His vision was profoundly critical and populist. Rousseau identified with the "simple souls," the exploited and disenfranchised, and he sought to articulate the sentiments appropriate to a democratic community. His radicalism derived from a willingness to identify progress—or, better, the way it was understood by a foppish court and an increasingly materialist bourgeoisie—with inauthenticity and

21. A critique of those who would identify the Enlightenment with imperialist ideology, and a perspective linking progress with the expression of cultural difference, is provided by Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 4,7.

alienation.[22] These themes would become pillars of romanticism and, long before the young Marx, they appear in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* by Goethe and also in the beautiful lines from Holderlin's *Hyperion*:

> Barbarians from times past grown still more barbaric through effort, and knowledge, and even religion. Profoundly incapable of any sublime feeling, depraved to the core. . . . Manual workers do you see but not human beings (*Menschen*), thinkers but not human beings, masters and servants, youths and propertied persons but no human beings—is this all not like a battlefield in which hands and arms and torn-off limbs lie strewn among one another, their spent life-blood running into the sands?[23]

Amid the disorientation and fragmentation, the products of a burgeoning capitalist division of labor, it became a question for "romantic anticapitalism" (Lukacs) of restoring wholeness to the human being as well as a harmony between human beings and nature that had never existed. The romantic assault on progress was undertaken in terms of a utopian ideal that conservatives denied and genuine reactionaries sought to discover in the mists of the past. Critics from the left would, soon enough rely not merely on Rousseau but also on Hegel, whose work highlighted the "inverted world" of an alienated consciousness, and Marx, who borrowed the term in describing the "commodity form" and its aim of supplanting "use value" with "exchange value, issues of quality with matters of quantity, and the interests of working people with the requirements of capital accumulation. Instrumental reason and the commodity form could thus be seen fusing in a production process—predicated on "alienation" (*Entfremdung*) and "reification" (*Verdinglichung*)[24]—that turned the individual into a tool for the accumulation of capital.

Many on the radical left were thus led to conclude that the "revolution" should no longer be directed merely against capitalism or an authoritarian form of government but rather against an "alienated" totality and a "reified" set of social relations. It was no longer a question of instituting a more humane

22. Marshall Berman, The Politics of Authenticity: Radical Individualism and the Emergence of Modern Society (New York: Atheneum, 1970).
23. Friedrich Holderlin, *Werke und Briefe* 3 Bde. Hrsg. Friedrich Beissner und Jochen Schmidt (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1969) 1:433.
24. Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 83ff.

economic system with a republican regime and new secular modes of thinking. It was instead a matter of turning the historical "revolution into an anthropological apocalypse. The transformative act thereby became burdened with ever more utopian goals ranging from the abolition of money and the division of labor to the elimination of the family and the creation of democratic "soviets" or workers' councils. Such utopian hopes were raised during the "heroic period" of the Russian Revolution from 1918–23. With its passing, however, they were dashed. Exaggerated optimism made way for an equally exaggerated pessimism. Progress seemed invalidated by Auschwitz and Hiroshima, the costs of two world wars, and a failed revolution. It made sense to suggest that: "the curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression."[25]

No longer would the idea of progress be understood from the material standpoint of policies, movements, and institutions. It would instead speak to securing the individuality threatened by mass society and a notion of freedom now seen only in the tension between subjectivity and the system intent upon eliminating it.[26] The point of progress for the new radicals was to foster "resistance" with no purpose other than the existential affirmation of subjectivity in terms of aesthetic experience, metaphysical speculation, or the utopian "longing for the totally other."[27] Increasing the choices available to individuals now meant nothing more than reinforcing a "totally administered society;"[28] insisting upon "tolerance" would produce only a false sense of autonomy; mass education could, by definition, only prove "mass deception;" while greater affluence merely strengthened the "happy consciousness." The positive manifestation of progress thereby became identified with furthering the extension of un-freedom, the practice of exploitation and imperialism, or—more dramatically—what might be understood as the connection between "the sling-shot and the atom bomb."[29]

Critical theory identified genuine progress with resisting the worst evil: it became a matter of plugging holes in a shoddy dike against an ever more violent flood. What should be preserved remained unclear, however, and what should be supported even less so. But this was only logical. The interpretation had become completely contradictory: progress required resistance

25. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*., 36.
26. Theodor W. Adorno, *Zur Lehre von der Geschichte und von der Freiheit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), 27
27. Max Horkheimer, *Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Anderen* (Hamburg: Fischer, 1970), 70.
28. Adorno, Zur Lehre von der Geschichte und von der Freiheit, 22
29. Ibid., 20.

against the existing society yet political action necessarily involved the use of instrumental reason. The only possible move was to turn resistance into a metaphysical or aesthetic stance. In turn, however, this stripped progress of its political rationale, its moral appeal, and its critical character. What remained was a hope more wistful than militant: "Too little of what is good has power in the world for progress to be expressed in a predicative judgment about the world, but there can be no good, not a trace of it, without progress."[30]

The next step was inevitable: the critics of meta-narrative, perhaps the best definition of postmodernism,[31] would create a meta-narrative of their own. Progress would no longer merely be "cursed" with regression but instead become identified with regression *tout court:* modernity with its reliance on scientific reason and "totalizing ideologies" would now be seen as the source of the holocaust.[32] The new subjectivists—fashionable purveyors of a metaphysical version of critical theory, "postcolonial" thinkers, post-structuralists, philosophers of identity—would thus find themselves increasingly incapable of recognizing that modernity "affects man in two ways simultaneously: he becomes more independent, self-reliant, and critical, and he becomes more isolated, alone, and afraid. The understanding of the whole problem of freedom depends upon the very ability to see both sides of the process and not to lose track of one side while following the other."[33]

Hegel and Marx had still viewed the march of alienation in concert with the possibility of its conquest. Their judgment of material development depended on the human resources it liberated. They understood "progress" as the establishment of conditions that would expand the possibilities for critical reflection, or foster the "self-determination" (*Selbsttaetigkeit*) of the proletariat, and they used it to confront the more degrading expressions of intellectual and material oppression. They privileged speculative intelligence and empirical knowledge—as against will and subjectivity—in order to enhance the ability of the individual to deal with nature and society. The communists would later subordinate this understanding of progress to a stultifying determinism and a form of technological ambition run amok. Any

30. Theodor W. Adorno, "Progress," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998),146.
31. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.
32. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 17 and *passim.*
33. Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Holt, 1965 ed.), 124.

historical or political point of reference was thereby lost. This indeed makes it incumbent upon new forms of critical theory to highlight the radical moment of "progress" that was expressed by the philosophes in theory and fought for by their followers in practice.

Again it is a matter of sense and sensibility: Odysseus is not the only, or even necessarily the best, symbol of Enlightenment. There is also Prometheus, who paid dearly for stealing fire from the gods, and Icarus who dared to fly, and crashed to his death when his wings of wax melted in the sun. The Enlightenment identified progress less with some abstract notion of freedom—expressed in the interplay between subjectivity and system—than with fostering the will to know and the fight against prejudice, the insistence upon tolerance and reciprocity, the demand for a democratic public sphere, and the accountability of institutions. Its representatives sought a flowering of freedoms that the individual might actually employ: intellectual freedom and the right to hold views counter to those already established; economic freedom to pursue personal economic advantage beyond the limitations then still determined by birth; and, finally, the political freedom secured in institutions based on the liberal rule of law and popular sovereignty.[34] Not to understand the Enlightenment idea of progress in terms of the struggle for these practical freedoms is not to understand it at all.

The idea of progress was always—anthropologically as well as historically—less about the eradication of subjectivity and the domination of nature than the possibility of personal liberation, popular empowerment, and overcoming the spell of myth and nature. Progress is an inherently rational idea. But it does not call for belief in the omnipotence of reason, the superfluous character of passion, or the existence of an objective solution to every problem.[35] Neither Condorcet nor Kant provided an ontological foundation for progress and even the most rabid believer in progress, an adamant atheist and technological enthusiast, like Holbach could write in his *System de la nature* that "it is not given man to know everything; it is not given him to know his origins; it is not given him to penetrate to the essence of things or to go back to first principles." The issue for the philosophes was not the discovery of absolute truth but the establishment of conditions in which truth might be pursued. Or, to frame the matter in terms of a new critical theory with

34. Leonard Krieger, *The German Idea of Freedom: History of a Political Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 3

35. Gay, *The Enlightenment* 1:141–45.

some sense of the concrete, the extent to which progress manifested itself was the extent to which claims could be treated as provisional.

Reason and knowledge were never the enemies of progress. But their enemies were also the enemies of progress. David Hume, in this vein, liked to say that "ignorance is the mother of devotion." Unreflective passion offers far better support than scientific inquiry for the claims of religion or the injunctions of totalitarian regimes. The scientific method projects not merely the "open society," but also the need to question authority. This was already evidenced in the *Meno* when Socrates showed that he could teach mathematics to a slave and in *The Republic* when, exhibiting the frustration of the anti-intellectual, Thrasymachus insisted that justice is the right of the stronger. On one point, however, the most famous adversary of Socrates was right: his position suggested that whether the moral possibilities of progress are realized is not the province of philosophy but of politics. This would have radical implications. Upsetting the divine structure of things marked the Enlightenment notion of progress. Its advocates privileged over liberty rather than order and the communicable power of discourse over the incommunicable experience of grace. These new values would serve as the points of reference for all other values: order would no longer be employed as an excuse to smother liberty, but rather be understood as the precondition for its pursuit.[36] Order always preceded liberty for the philosophes: it was seen as providing the rules and procedures for "constituting" the liberty enjoyed by citizens through the protection of the state.[37]

Enlightenment thinkers were aware that while nature obeys fixed laws, history is a varied spectacle. But this insight resulted in neither an unyielding commitment to forging a system resulting in what has once again become the fashionable belief that we are at "the end of history, or a some postmodern conviction that all is rupture: [38] In his *Philosophy of History* (1766), Voltaire introduced the term "philosophical history" to contest religious dogmas emphasizing predestination and the like as well as indicate that the struggle for rationality furnishes coherence for the manifold struggles undertaken in the name of freedom.[39] His *Essay on the Manners and*

36. Krieger, *Kings and Philosophers,* 182.
37. Eric R. Boehme, "The Power to Harm: Institutionalized Risk, Political Development, and Citizenship in the United States" (PhD Dissertation, Rutgers University, 2003), 12.
38. Stephen Eric Bronner, "The End of History Revisited," in *Imagining the Possible: Radical Politics for Conservative Times* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 195ff.
39. Voltaire, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Citadel, 1965)

Spirit of Nations (1756), in the same vein, had already articulated a general vision of historical development. It lacked the usual unrelenting emphasis on western experience and "great" individuals because it identified progress with what might be termed a critical reflection on the pursuit of progress. Voltaire made clear that history combines human creation with the interpretation of what has been created and that the latter alone should be identified with progress. The importance of his historical work derives from its insight that the struggle for self-understanding is a human struggle. The communicable character of this understanding or "consciousness" of progress, indeed, turns history into a shared enterprise.

The belief that enlightenment values are somehow intrinsically "western" is surely parochial and most likely racist. Just as money, the division of labor, and class conflict can be found in precapitalist cultures like Egypt, Greece, and Rome, so is it the case that liberal and cosmopolitan values usually identified with western thinking in general and the Enlightenment in particular were expressed in any number of nonwestern societies—including the three great civilizations of India, China, and Islam[40]—by religious figures like Mohammed and the Buddha; political leaders from Cyrus the Great, who allowed each nation to choose its religion and keep its customs, to the sixteenth-century leader Akbar who condemned slavery and the immolation of widows; and philosophers like Plotinus, Avicenna, Averroes, who highlighted the cosmological elements of the classical heritage and generated a tradition that extended from Giordano Bruno over Spinoza and Leibniz to Ernst Bloch. Amid the civil wars and religious conflicts of the premodern world, enough reflective people of compassion, appalled by religious fanaticism and the devastation of war insisted upon fairness and the rule of law, and highlighted the sanctity of the individual conscience and the plight of the lowly and the insulted. In a fine essay,[41] Amartya Sen has made western intellectuals aware of what we should have been more aware of from the beginning: nonwestern and premodern thinkers had also emphasized the "pursuit of reason" rather than "the reliance on tradition." The idea of progress, of making the solutions to conflict more civilized, is not simply a western idea.

This does not mean that all regions and nations embraced the idea of progress—along with its liberal, egalitarian, and cosmopolitan implications—

40. J. M. Roberts, *The History of the World* (Middlesex: Penguin Press, 1976).
41. Amartya Sen, "East and West: The Reach of Reason," in *New York Review of Books* (July 20, 2000), 33–38.

or that all will ever do so to the same degree. This is not the venue in which to examine the complex reasons why capitalism and the modern notion of progress were generated in the West. But it is necessary to emphasize that progress and enlightenment values are not the preserve of a geographic entity.[42] Intellectual tendencies that seek to promote such an understanding of progress have existed within diverse cultures and manifold traditions, and these have something to offer for the vision of a liberated society. It would be the height of arrogance, for example, to suggest that a Chinese tradition harking back three thousand years is somehow invalidated by the philosophical efforts of a small minority of European intellectuals writing between 1650 and 1800 or to deny that Gandhi could justify his vision of a multi-ethnic, democratic order from within his own religious understanding. The belief that achieving a genuine consensus on moral issues calls upon all participants in the discourse to think through arguments in the same way is absurd. The quest for humanitarian values has taken many paths in the past and it will do so, again, in the future.

"Progress" is rooted in the Socratic dictum "know thyself" with its insistence upon critical reflection and those like St. Augustine and Angelus Silesius, seeking to understand what constitutes a genuine revelation, who employed the term "authenticity." Kant or Locke or Rousseau did not conjure such ideas and categories out of thin air. But there is a danger in underestimating their contributions and viewing these thinkers as simply refashioners of classical preoccupations or religious concerns with immortality and grace.[43] Indeed, if the absolute rupture is the only criterion for determining what is new, then nothing will ever be new under the sun: it can always be shown that somebody else got there first.

42. "Of course, it is not being claimed here that all the different ideas relevant to the use of reasoning for social harmony and humanity have flourished equally in all civilizations of the world. That would not only be untrue; it would also be a stupid claim of mechanical uniformity. But once we recognize that many ideas that are taken to be quintessentially Western have also flourished in other civilizations, we also see that these ideas are not as culture-specific as is sometimes claimed. We need not begin with pessimism, at least on this ground, about the prospects of reasoned humanism in the world." Ibid., pg. 36

43. Thus, Carl Becker could suggest in his *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (1932) that the philosophes were really engaged in little more replacing the longing for paradise with a longing for recognition by posterity and reconstructing the "heavenly city" of St. Augustine along secular lines." For a withering critique, see by Peter Gay, "Carl Becker's Heavenly City," in *The Party of Humanity: Essays in the French Enlightenment* (New York: Norton, 1971), 188ff.

The Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries may have relied more on the past than is usually assumed; its advocates may ultimately have rendered self-conscious prior aspirations involving the role of the intellect and the possibilities for its exercise. But the Enlightenment also reflected the radical vision of a rising bourgeoisie that grew out of the feudal system with its capitalist mode of production, its republican goals, and its new secular culture. Even the majority in Europe did not initially embrace its worldview. The "western ideals of the Enlightenment were opposed by all established feudal institutions like the church and premodern classes like the aristocracy and the peasantry, and—following the failure of the Revolutions of 1848—even by the majority of the bourgeoisie. Its representatives soon surrendered the original political radicalism of their class for new commitments to the authoritarian state and imperialism. Thus, while the Enlightenment may have arisen in the West, its initial challenge was to conquer the prejudices of the West.

Various developments facilitated this undertaking. Too often forgotten is the influence of the geographical findings made by great explorers like Captain Cook—the opening of the African interior as well as the encounter with Australia and Siam—no less than the daring anthropological investigations of thinkers like Buffon who extended the age of the earth millions of years into the past.[44] There is indeed a sense in which the Enlightenment reflected what was becoming a far deeper paradigmatic shift in the experience of space and time. A new planetary perspective served as the precondition for the new ideas of "humanity" and universal "rights." It enabled the philosophes to articulate in secular form those universal ideals of freedom for which dissidents, usually inspired by religion, had struggled from time immemorial in different ways and in different cultures.

Enlightenment thinkers could not jump out of their historical skin. Many of them exhibited elitist and racist traits: Africa was given little respect and anti-Semitism was common. But such prejudices were contradicted by the universal principles predicated on reciprocity—and the view of nature—in which the philosophes believed. Eurocentrism did not define

44. "While others enlarged the world of space, Buffon expanded the world of time; he had extended the age of the earth from six thousand to many millions of years, though publicly he was content to claim only eighty thousand. To be sure, the Church persuaded him to make a retraction of even those modest calculations, but it was a tactical withdrawal, and no one took it seriously, for it was taken for granted that Buffon was right." Commager, *The Empire of Reason*, 7

the Enlightenment. Its sensibility was not that of the later imperialists or the conquistadors, supported by the Catholic Church, who slaughtered the Aztecs and the Incas. Its new global vision instead challenged both existing religious beliefs and, ironically, what might now be termed "western" prejudices. Enlightenment thinkers knew that history evidenced a plurality of sophisticated exotic cultures and their ideal presentations of them provided utopian images with which to criticize the status quo: China was idolized during the Enlightenment, its repressive characteristics ignored by Voltaire and his friends, while the image of the Persian and the American Indian and the Tropical Islander—unspoiled by western religion and "civilization"—achieved enormous popularity through the writings of various philosophes. Less revealing indeed is the knowledge of these cultures than the interest they aroused and the good will extended to them by Diderot, Leibniz, Voltaire, and the rest: it was assumed that "simplicity, honesty, generosity, and natural morality seemed to be the general character of all the extra-European and non-Christian peoples."[45]

Just as new geographic explorations and scientific investigations contested the prevalent understanding of space, the new interest awakened in nonwestern cultures transformed the sense of time. The archaeological discoveries concerning classical antiquity by figures like Johann Winckelmann helped place feudalism helped place feudalism in historical perspective. It fostered both a sense of decline regarding the ancient regime and a desire for rebirth—a feeling for progress—that would prove of ideological significance for the European interest in the American Colonies and their War of Independence. The delight in the discovery of diverse cultures helped create a feeling that things could be different and, in turn, this undermined belief in the divine right of kings and a static aristocratic order whose origins were shrouded in the mists of time. That the world can be changed, and that individuals have the right to change it, is the challenge posed by the idea of progress. It is the minimal prerequisite for any attempt by the victims of modernity—women, religious minorities, people of color, and other oppressed groups—to challenge the restrictions placed upon them. This new perspective on transformation, on progress, is an essential part of the Enlightenment heritage.

Innovation and change became words of praise rather than abuse during the Enlightenment.[46] Their advocates freed history from theological presup-

45. Cobban, *In Search of Humanity*), 50.
46. Gay, *The Enlightenment* 2:3, 56

positions, secularized the notion of causation, and opened new territories of inquiry.[47] Partisans of these ideas may not have been able to reconcile the citizen and the bourgeois in their honest attempt to realize "the good life on earth."[48] But their belief in progress enabled the philosophes to view themselves as reformers intent upon furthering education, fostering a cosmopolitan spirit of civility and toleration, and abolishing censorship, the debtor's prison, the galley, the stake, slavery, torture, and the Inquisition. Wealth, gender, race, and birth might continue to play a role in social life. But the Enlightenment provided a new political framework for attacking these expressions of prejudice and privilege. The constitutions introduced in the United States and elsewhere during the age of democratic revolution—whatever their limitations—left room for revision, for reform, for progress. And that was no small achievement. The Enlightenment generated an ideal of social justice and citizenship that already spoke to an international civil society, contested national prejudices, and the political concerns of exploited classes and groups. Its thinkers basically agreed that the "natural" capacities of the individual were capable of realization only in society. Once differences were understood in sociological rather than religious or racial terms, moreover, they believed it possible to better the lot of the most victimized. Thus, Holbach could write in the idiom of his time:

> The savage man and the civilized, the white man, the red man, the black man; Indian and European, Chinaman and Frenchman, Negro and Lapp have the same nature. The differences between them are only modifications of their common nature, produced by climate, government, education, opinions, and the various causes which operate upon them.[49]

This insight concerning the impact of society on individuals was rendered more concrete by Hegel, who noted that the subject is socialized by the particular interaction of institutions like the family, civil society, and the state as well as a culture primarily defined by religion, art, and philosophy. Interrogating the legitimacy of the traditions associated with each of these spheres, which itself requires the exercise of liberty, alone makes further progress possible. Progress will therefore exhibit itself differently in different

47. Ibid., 1:37
48. Robert Anchor, *The Enlightenment Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 10
49. Cited in Gay, *The Enlightenment* 2: 4

realms of theory and practice. Scientific progress, for example, is irreversible: discoveries cannot be retracted and, in the information age, they cannot even remain concealed. Cultural progress or "*civilization*", by contrast, is reversible: barbarism can obviously follow a period of cultural flowering or democratic development. In the realm of aesthetics, moreover, progress need not exist at all: there is no reason to believe, for example, that Shakespeare is "better" than Sophocles. "Progress" in one arena can be accompanied by regression in another. The lack of fit between different spheres of theory and practice is what renders contingency, or the historical expression of freedom, concrete: history thereby resists the imperatives of both functionalism and reductionism. Nevertheless, this same lack of fit between spheres of activity creates a disharmony within society that, when internalized by the individual, can be understood as alienation.

Progress is nonsynchronous.[50] Equating it with harmony, or some all-encompassing category, militates against its concrete character. Hegel was always aware of that. He identified progress with the ability to differentiate between phenomena and the corresponding ability of the mind to provide an increasingly complex set of categories to make sense of an increasingly complex reality. Each moment of the totality was seen as retaining its own unique dynamic (*Eigendynamik*). Hegel also knew better than anyone that the "end of history," which he identified with a form of "multiplicity in unity," would produce neither peace nor fulfillment. War would remain on the horizon as would solitude, illness, and the contradiction between the finality of individual existence and the infinite character of social development. The great philosopher sensed that the harmonious conclusion of history, the unity of subject and object, would never take place: he knew that the dark cloud of alienation would never dissolve into a bright blue sky.

With the division of labor, the lack of fit between different spheres of social life, history could only be understood as working behind the back of individuals: thus the limit of the enlightenment notion of progress is reached. That the actions of individuals are reconfigured by society, that consequences turn against intentions, was already apparent in the medieval idea of the "hidden hand" which, when not applied to the supposedly nefarious activities of the Jews,[51] was seen as providing the unseen harmony underly-

50. Ernst Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 104ff.

51. Stephen Eric Bronner, *A Rumor about the Jews: Anti-Semitism, Conspiracy, and the Protocols of Zion* (New York: Oxford University Press, Paperback Edition, 2003), 33ff.

ing the apparent discord of the world. This view anticipated the famous "invisible hand" of Adam Smith and Mandeville, which seemed to assure market equilibrium between supply and demand, but which actually pointed to the basic moral problem of capitalist society: how can private selfishness be transformed into public virtue?[52] Hegel and Marx provided their own solutions to the problem. Envisioning the proletariat as the subject-object of history, however, was as illusory as pointing to the "cunning of reason" employed by the World Spirit. Harmony will never exist between humanity and its works: the relation between them can only prove asymptotic.

Introducing the "invisible hand" already suggested that the "individual" and unmitigated self-interest, while the starting point for the classical liberal understanding of the market, are insufficient for explaining its actual functioning. The same can be said of "society": introducing social processes, while philosophically excluding the individuals that sustain them, only reinforces alienation from a different perspective. Thus, while romantic thinkers of the counter-enlightenment like Carlyle would focus on the "heroic" individual—who manipulates history through the sheer power of his will—positivists would abolish subjectivity by reducing ideas and lived lives to particular social interests or processes. The will, subjectivity, and particularity thereby squared off against the determinism, objectivity, and universality. In reality, however, they are flip sides of the same coin. Just as rigidly deterministic forms of system building obviate the need for political intervention by real individuals, from the opposite perspective, privileging experiential freedom and the will undermines the importance of thinking about social processes and institutional constraints.

Progress requires situating the individual within a context and fostering the ability to discriminate between those constraints that are necessary and those that are not: the implicit injunction to contest atavistic restraints on personal freedom is precisely what renders progress "political." The question whether judgment and resistance are legitimate helped produce the great divide between the Enlightenment and its critics who bemoaned the hubris of those without cultural "niveau" and the manner in which the organic community and its "fine draperies of life" were being torn asunder. Not the advocates of reason, individualism, and equality, but their critics deserve to be charged with elitism. The philosophes were far less concerned with protecting the cultural inheritance of an aristocratic past than contesting prejudices,

52. Anchor, *The Enlightenment Tradition*, 10.

insisting upon reforms, envisioning new institutions, and sometimes even promulgating revolutions.

Traditionalists have tended to understand progress as a linear development in terms of which humanity advances steadily in a definite and desirable direction.[53] That made it easy for them to then identify the Enlightenment with unbounded optimism, teleological determinism, and a utopian belief in human perfectibility. But this is a caricature. It was generally assumed by the philosophes —for without such an assumption any serious notion of either moral development or democracy is impossible—that individuals can act responsibly and employ both "common sense" and critical reflection. But the Enlightenment did not seek to bring about a change in human nature, only in the judgment of human behavior. Its leading intellectuals refused to sanction any institutional attempts to impose belief by fiat or exercise power in an arbitrary fashion. They were concerned with expanding the realm of freedom, the range of choices available for the individual, and it was in order to mitigate the drudgery of existence that they stressed the liberating affects of technology.[54]

Advocates of the Enlightenment knew that they could not redeem the past, the sacrifices made, and the hopes betrayed. Most greeted talk about teleological redemption with cynicism. In *Faust*, it is Mephistopheles who serves as the agent of progress: the force that always negates, who insists it is just that everything that exists is doomed to perish, and who finds his "authenticity" in destruction. Montesquieu warned that "it is an eternal experience that every man possessing power is tempted to abuse it"; Hume placed his greatest thesis in a locked drawer; Kant maintained that the "crooked timber of humanity" could never be made straight; the author of *Candide* was no naïf; and James Madison drew the most appropriate political implications from this general outlook when he wrote in the famous fifty-first essay of *The Federalist Papers* that:

> If men were angels no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to

53. Bury, *The Idea of Historical Progress*, 5.
54. Henry Pachter, "The Right to Be Lazy," in *Socialism in History: Political Essays of Henry Pachter* ed. Stephen Eric Bronner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984),15.

> control itself. A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions . . . where the constant aim is to divide and arrange the several offices in such a manner as that each may be a check on the other—that the private interest of every individual may be a sentinel over the public rights.

Enlightenment thinkers were not utopians with totalitarian inclinations, but realists who understood the costs of progress. Their optimism was tempered by their pessimism concerning the ability of the powerful to exercise power prudently: this indeed led them to insist upon the separation of powers, checks and balances, institutional accountability, popular sovereignty, and the rule of law. Their concern with furthering human happiness was informed by the difficulty, the intractability, of society with its vested interests. But this very insight enabled them to shift the cause of human misery from the classical notion of fate or the religious notion of original sin to society and the impact of ignorance, prejudice, authoritarianism, and inequality.[55] It also led the most sober among them to reject teleological sophistries and insist upon the need for political actors to offer a plausible connection between means and ends. The Enlightenment was left only with the modest comfort that knowledge of the past—of the way in which power was exercised, the institutions through which it was exercised, and the norms that justified its exercise—would put people in a better position to judge the present. This indeed was what Lord Bolingbroke meant when, anticipating Hegel and Santayana, he wrote that: "history is philosophy teaching by example."

Easy enough to criticize the pretensions of "progress," but without it the prospect for determining any liberating notion of social change vanishes.[56] Walter Benjamin was surely correct when he noted that there is no document of civilization that is not also a document of barbarism. But this only begs the question: what is the degree to which any such document expresses the civilized in contrast to the barbaric and how is it possible to distinguish the one from that of another. Progress enables us to differentiate between ideologies and policies, expose the limits of each, and illuminate the interests they serve. It need not become enmeshed in utopian dogma or condone what

55. Cobban, *In Search of Humanity*, 126ff.
56. Cf. Georges Sorel, *Illusions of Progress* trans. John and Charlotte Stanley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1947), 1–30.

Kierkegaard termed the "teleological suspension of the ethical." But it must reject the romantic yearning for simplicity, the organic, and the traditional. Progress shows its value when confronting the new existential and practical problems that history presents. It receives expression in the refinement of human sentiments: the disgust caused by cruelty to the infirm, to animals, to the weak, and the downtrodden. Progress appears in the growing recognition that there is something wrong about the arbitrary exercise of power and that there is something legitimate about contesting it.

The Enlightenment showed how progress can both foster critique and serve a productive function. That is perhaps its greatest legacy. [57] The Enlightenment idea of progress militated against closure and perfection. It existed as a possibility, never a certainty, and—until Hegel—it lacked ontological foundations. Progress was always coupled with an attack on the refusal to question or judge change in terms of the freedom it might provide. That change is endless and that freedom can never be fully achieved does not invalidate progress. Quite the contrary: it renders the idea more important than ever.

57. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 278.