The Idea of Progress

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IDEAS, no matter whether true or false, are often potent factors in social change. Ideas are also apt to reflect the color and pattern of an era. This is notably true of the idea of progress—that "civilization has moved, is moving, and will continue to move in a desirable direction." It depends on subjective value-judgments, which in turn often depend on the individual's emotional inclination toward optimism or pessimism. No one can prove scientifically that birth control, the New Deal, or the atomic bomb denote progress in a desirable direction, because it is impossible to control and measure objectively all the facts involved. Judgments differ sharply. There is hardly any social change that is not called progress by somebody. The concept is logically meaningless. It ought perhaps therefore to be shunned by the historian. But it has an accepted popular usage and has profoundly influenced writers on social science.¹ In the nineteenth century it came to...

* Presidential address delivered at the annual meeting in New York on December 28, 1946. The author is professor emeritus of history in Harvard University.

¹ Interest in it was strong in the nineteenth century and seemed to be growing after 1900, if we may judge from a brief bibliography published in 1932 (Earle E. Eubank, The Concepts of Sociology, pp. 513-18). It listed sixteen titles on progress published prior to 1900, seventeen published in the first decade of this century, thirty-one in the second decade, and fifty-six in the third decade.
be taken for granted as axiomatic. It was assumed as the animating and controlling force in our Western civilization. From it was derived the ethical corollary that we can and ought to provide a progressively improved world for posterity. As Professor Carver wrote in 1905: "The study of sociology . . . can hardly justify its existence unless it furnishes us with a theory of progress which will enable us to shape the policies of society with a view to future improvement." ²

Is the idea of progress, however, really sound? Is it in accord with historical facts? Has there been a steady and inevitable advance? How has the idea been modified, if at all, by the impact of the machine age and by the catastrophic whirlwind of two world wars? Another American sociologist answered last fall: "The rosy doctrine in great favor a generation ago, man's social progress is inevitable because brought about by impersonal forces that are working in his interest, will 'go into the discard.'" ³ And Arnold J. Toynbee, after a magisterial survey of dead and dying civilizations, says that even our own much-lauded Western civilization "may also have passed its zenith for all that we know. . . . We cannot say for certain that our doom is at hand; and yet we have no warrant for assuming that it is not." ⁴

Let us first glance briefly at the origin and growth of the idea. It was brilliantly traced twenty-six years ago by the distinguished historian of Greece and annotator of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*. Professor Bury maintains that the idea of progress is comparatively recent, dating only from the sixteenth century. ⁵ Thucydides, to be sure, traced the social progress of the Greeks

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⁴ "We cannot say for certain that our doom is at hand; and yet we have no warrant for assuming that it is not; for such would be to assume that we are not as other men are; and any such assumption would be at variance with everything that we know about human nature either by looking around us or by introspection. . . . And, inasmuch as it cannot be supposed that God's nature is less constant than Man's, we may and must pray that a reprieve which God has granted to our society once will not be refused if we ask for it again in a contrite spirit and with a broken heart." Arnold J. Toynbee, *The Study of History* (6 vols., London, 1934–39), IV, 122; VI, 320.
⁵ J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth* (London, 1920); new edition (New York, 1932) with introduction by C. A. Beard, but without Bury's appendix of notes. Bury's statement of the history of the "dogma" of progress is by far the best. But he makes no attempt to examine the large literature on social change since about 1880, or to speculate on how theories of progress may be modified by more recent philosophical thought, by the new findings of anthropology, or by the catastrophic events of recent decades. Starting with Greece and Rome, he traces the idea in western Europe, mainly in England and France, gives little attention to other countries, and somewhat overstates the absence of the idea among the Greeks and Romans. Cf. P. A. Sorokin: "The ancient Chinese, Babylonian, Hindu, Greek, Roman and most of the medieval thinkers supporting theories of rhythmical, cyclical or trendless movements of social processes were much nearer to reality than the present proponents of the linear view. It is not true that these ancients were incapable of conceiving of the idea of evolution or
in historical times, and other Greek writers hinted that man had risen by a
gradual ascent. But, generally speaking, the Greeks did not conceive progress
in the modern sense. They had a widespread belief in an earlier “Golden
Age” without toil, war, and disease, which had been followed by man’s
decay and degeneration. Hesiod’s picture of regression from the age of gold
to the age of iron was never forgotten in antiquity. Plato set forth a gradual
deterioration in social organization through the successive stages of arist-
ocracy, timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and despotism. The common Greek
belief in recurring “cycles” of better and worse excluded the possibility of
permanent advance or “progress.” Plato suggests a cycle of 72,000 solar years.
The world is set spinning in the right direction by the Deity and all goes
well during the Golden Age of the first half of the cycle. Then the Deity
loosens his grip of the machine, order is disturbed, and in the second half
of the cycle there is decay and degeneration until chaos threatens. Then the
Deity again seizes control and restores the original conditions, and the whole
cycle begins anew. Nor does Aristotle contemplate progress. He speaks of
“the wickedness of human nature,” thinks “almost everything has been found
out,” and says that changes in the established order are undesirable and
should be as few and cautious as possible. Greek mythology taught that
mortals should not try to rival the gods and so incur their envy and dis-
pleasure. Prometheus was punished for stealing fire from the Olympians and
teaching man the arts of civilization. Icarus perished because of his fool-
hardiness in trying to soar too high. According to the Greek idea of Moira,
or destiny, there is a fixed order in the universe, which mortals must respect
and not attempt to change or conquer. Human striving toward progress is
too proud and perilous a tearing down of the bars which divide the human
from the divine.

The Romans were dominated by Greek thought. Seneca, to be sure, recog-
nized the progress of knowledge, but he did not expect from it any im-
provement in the world, because any advance in the arts and inventions promotes
deterioration by ministering to luxury and vice. Lucretius, in his magnificent
panorama of man’s rise from savagery to civilization, with fire, precious
metals, agriculture, ships, walled towns, roads, laws, and all the pleasures of

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6 Republic, ed. by James Adam (Cambridge, England, 1902), Bk. VIII; Statesman, tr. by
Benjamin Jowett (Dialogues, New York, 1872, III), pp. 269-75.
7 Politics, tr. by B. Jowett (Oxford, 1921), II, 5, 8.
life, actually uses for the first time the word “progress”: “These things practice and the experience of the unresting mind have taught men gradually, as they progressed step by step.” But even Lucretius did not look forward to any continued amelioration in the future, and therefore lacked one of the essential aspects of the modern idea.

Nor were the Middle Ages much more congenial to it than the classical period. According to St. Augustine, who was the dominant influence for a thousand years, original sin and “other-worldliness” were all pervasive.

In Adam’s fall
We sinnèd all.

In Augustine’s philosophy the whole movement of history aimed to secure the happiness of an elect few in another world. He did not postulate a further and indefinite development of mankind on this earth. The Day of Judgment might come at any moment. History is a series of events ordered by divine intervention and revelation, that is, by an active Providence. This view was incompatible with the growth of a doctrine of progress—of the steady amelioration of man either by gradual evolution and adaptation, or by his own conscious efforts.

The Renaissance, which was generally so fruitful in its “discovery of man and the world,” was accompanied by the “revival of learning.” Its exaltation of Greek and Roman antiquity to a position of unattainable superiority emphasized the barbarism and decline of the intervening centuries. There was such a veneration for the classical writers that ancient notions smothered the potential birth of a concept of progress.

In the course of the sixteenth century, however, under the influence of new discoveries, men began, somewhat timidly and tentatively, to rebel against the tyranny of antiquity. Copernicus undermined the authority of Ptolemy. Vesalius dimmed the prestige of Galen. And Aristotle was attacked on many sides by men like Bernardino Telesio, Jerome Cardan, and Giordano Bruno. Petrus Ramus, who lost his life in the massacre of St. Bartholemew, had taken his university degree in 1536 with the thesis: “All that Aristotle taught is false.”

Just thirty years later Bodin published a Latin work with the alluring title, “Method for the Easy Understanding of History.” Bodin rejected the classi-

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9 De Rerum Natura, ed. by H. A. J. Munro (London, 1920), Bk. V, ll. 1452–53:
Usus et impigrae simul experientia mentis
Paulatim docuit pedestemtim progressit.

10 Jean Bodin, Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem (Paris, 1566); issued in thirteen Latin editions between 1566 and 1650; there is an excellent complete English translation by Beatrice Reynolds (New York, 1945).
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The historical doctrine of degeneration with its tradition of a previous Golden Age of virtue and felicity. He argued that the powers of nature have always remained the same; and that it would be illogical to suppose that nature could at one time produce the men and conditions postulated by the Golden Age theory, and not produce them at a later time. He even claimed that his own age was fully equal, and in some respects superior, to the age of classical antiquity. History, he said, depends largely on the will of men, which is always changing; every day new customs, new laws, new institutions come into being, and also new errors, resulting in a series of oscillations. Rise is followed by fall, and fall by rise. But, on the whole, through the series of oscillations, there has been a gradual ascent from the time when men lived like wild beasts to the social order of sixteenth century Europe. His idea of progress was incomplete, however, because he also, like Lucretius, gave little consideration to the future.

Sir Francis Bacon went much farther. The impressive discoveries of gunpowder, printing, the compass, and new lands overseas, he declared, showed how rapidly knowledge was already advancing. “There is therefore much ground for hoping that there are still laid up in the womb of nature many secrets of excellent use... which have not yet been found out.” Scientific experimentation was the key for discovering these secrets which would be of great utility in furthering the happiness of mankind.11

Though Bodin and Bacon had advanced toward the idea of progress, they were both still much bound by respect for the classics and also by the doctrine of an active intervening Providence—the sun could be made to stand still in its course. This was not true of Descartes. In affirming absolutely the invariability of the laws of nature and the supremacy of reason, Descartes dealt devastating blows to respect for authority and tradition and to the doctrine of Providence. He was proud of having forgotten the Greek which he had learned as a boy. He gloried in breaking sharply and completely with the past, and in constructing a system which borrowed nothing from the dead. With magnificent self-confidence he looked forward to an advancement of knowledge in the future on the basis of his own analytical method and his own discoveries. He believed that this would bring far-reaching benefits to mankind. The original title which he had proposed to give to his Discourse on Method had been “The Project of a Universal Science Which Can Elevate Our Nature to Its Highest Perfection.” But precisely because he was pleased to ignore or make light of what had been achieved in the past, he failed to

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develop a complete doctrine of progress. For any such doctrine must consider the past as well as the present and future. However, he prepared the free intellectual atmosphere in which the complete idea was to be unfolded by men imbued with the Cartesian spirit.

In the age of Louis XIV Charles Perrault, and especially Fontenelle, carried forward and popularized the notion of progress in the famous battle between the Ancients and Moderns. Fontenelle took the side of the Moderns to show that man had not degenerated and that the forces of Nature are permanent. If today the lions are as fierce, and the oaks and the beeches as large, as in the days of Pericles, must it not be assumed that Nature is as vigorous today as formerly? And if as vigorous, can and will she not produce men of equal brains and ability? And aside from equal mental capacity, the Moderns enjoy a certain advantage owing to “time.” The Ancients were prior in time to us; therefore they were the authors of the first inventions. For that, they cannot be regarded as our superiors. If we had been in their place we should have been the inventors, like them; if they had been in ours, they would add to those inventions as we do. With “time” comes the accumulation of knowledge, the elimination of false theories, and improvements in the methods of reasoning. Therefore we excel the Ancients, and in the same way we must expect that posterity will excel us. Time is the friend of man, not the enemy, as Horace and the Ancients had asserted. In looking to the future as well as the past, Fontenelle gave a more complete notion of the progress of knowledge.

Born in 1657, Fontenelle lived to be a hundred. During his century great advance was made in the natural sciences—one has only to think of men like Boyle, Newton, Leibnitz. New recognition was being given to science, as compared with theology, by the founding of royal academies of science. The achievements of science, then as ever, did more than anything else to win popular imagination to the general idea of progress. Men like the fertile-minded Abbé de Saint Pierre, Turgot, and the Encyclopedists turned to another aspect of it to which Fontenelle had paid little attention—the art of living together, or social progress. What was the value of progress in science, if the conditions of life itself could not be ameliorated? The triumph of liberty in America and in the French Revolution created such a wave of optimistic enthusiasm, that Condorcet, even in his attic prison, was convinced that “the perfectibility of man is absolutely indefinite.”

In the nineteenth century came the search for the “laws” of progress,

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12 M. de Condorcet, Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind (Philadelphia, 1796), p. 11.
already implicit in Turgot and Condorcet, so that society could be remodeled on scientific principles. Following Fourier and St. Simon, Auguste Comte formulated his famous law of the three stages of intellectual evolution, with his positivist philosophy and new science of sociology. Numerous other writers on the history of “civilization,” French, German, and English, took progress for granted. It was furthered in popular imagination by the hitherto unparalleled scientific discoveries and mechanical inventions which accompanied the spreading Industrial Revolution, overseas expansion, and the prosperous growth of the United States. Steam and the railway age abridged space, economized time, and added in many ways to the material comforts of life. Electricity opened new vistas. Chemistry and biology prepared the way for great advances in medicine. In spite of all this, however, there were some eminent dissenters from the widely accepted idea.

Then in 1859 it received a tremendous impetus from the publication of Darwin’s great work. His doctrine of the evolution of species by adaptation and natural selection was strictly biological. It did not necessarily mean social progress, or, even when applied by analogy to society as an organism, that the movement of man was toward a desirable goal. It was a neutral, scientific conception, compatible with either optimism or pessimism, and has in fact been interpreted in both ways.

Darwin’s evolution in nature, however, was taken up by Herbert Spencer to support evolutionary social views which he had already developed independently a few years earlier. Extending the principle of evolution through “the survival of the fittest” to biology, psychology, sociology, and ethics, Spencer built up in the next decades the gigantic Synthetic Philosophy which was to explain the development of the universe. He gave the idea of progress such a universal, optimistic, and extreme form that it lent itself to ridicule and attack in his own day and ever since. He declared: “The ultimate development of the ideal man is logically certain—as certain as any conclusion in which we place the most implicit faith; for instance that all men will die. . . . Progress, therefore, is not an accident, but a necessity. . . . What we call evil and immorality must disappear. It is certain that man must become perfect.” He made progress identical with evolution and announced: “Evolution can end only in the establishment of the greatest perfection and the most complete happiness.” As Dean Inge remarked just after the First World

13 Herbert Spencer, Social Statics, or the Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified, and the First of Them Developed (London, 1850); and “Progress: Its Law and Cause,” in the Westminster Review, April, 1857; in this he set forth a favorite but doubtful view, borrowed from Baer, that the growth of the individual organism and the growth of civilization follow the same law of progress from homogeneity to heterogeneity of structure.

14 Social Statics, pp. 79–80.

15 First Principles (Boston, 1896), p. 530.
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War, “Herbert Spencer asserts the perfectibility of man with an assurance that makes us gasp.”

Spencer was at once assailed by religious leaders, and gradually criticized by scientific specialists and social reformers. Few denied the fact of progress, but there was sharp divergence of opinion as to how it takes place. Spencer’s deterministic and laissez-faire doctrine that it takes place automatically and inevitably as a result of the competitive struggle for existence met opposition. His absolute rejection of reform legislation as a dangerous interference with the evolutionary process began to be replaced by reformist views. Instead of man being determined by his environment, social reformers asserted that the environment could be changed by man’s purposeful and conscious efforts. Social progress, it was hoped, could be better promoted by collective control and planning than by brutal free competition.

Thus, by 1900, the Spencerian evolutionary concept of slow but steady cosmic progress was being replaced by new trends in social theory and by the optimistic philosophy of pragmatism. Meanwhile the general idea of progress, filtering down from the discussions of intellectual leaders, was seized upon and accepted by the broad masses. It became one of the most fundamental and influential ideas at the turn of the century. Belief in it varied, however, as between different individuals and different countries. It was colored by the material conditions in each country, and, generally speaking, was less widely accepted as one moved from west to east among the Great Powers.

In the United States, as has been so interestingly pointed out by Arthur Ekirch, Richard Hofstadter, Charles Beard, Merle Curti, and many others, the opening up of a vast expanse of land and rich natural resources, political liberty, widespread education, and unlimited opportunity for the common man made the people particularly susceptible to the idea of progress. Americans were confident of their Manifest Destiny. They naturally accepted reformist views which found support in the optimistic pragmatism of William James and the progressive outlook of John Dewey.

In England, in spite of German industrial and commercial competition, the Boer War, and the abandonment of “splendid isolation,” most people still believed with Kipling that they were successfully carrying “the white

man's burden." The Liberals had just won their greatest parliamentary majority. H. G. Wells was beginning his educational campaign for social betterment. Notwithstanding critics of Herbert Spencer, a note of confident optimism was reflected in such new co-operative historical works as Traill's Social England: A Record of the Progress of the People in Religion, Laws, Learning, Arts, Industry, Commerce, Science, Literature, and Manners, and the Cambridge Modern History where Mandell Creighton wrote in the introductory note: "We are bound to assume . . . a progress in human affairs."

In France the Dreyfus Affair weakened militarism and saw the triumph of justice, but left society bitterly divided. Some writers like Huysmans and Rémy de Gourmont toyed with the idea of decadence. Georges Sorel soon wrote a book on "the illusions of progress," but it did not have great influence. Germany stood like a cloud on the eastern horizon. But the Paris Exposition of 1900, like the London Exhibition of 1851, demonstrated the wonderful material progress of the age and seemed to give hope of better international relations. The first Hague Peace Conference had just met. People were hopefully studying new international languages like Esperanto and Volapük. Bergson's Creative Evolution and élan vital soon stimulated the same optimistic attitude as James's pragmatism.

In Germany Maximilian Harden's merciless attacks on the unhealthy atmosphere of Kaiser Wilhelm's court, and Bülow's façade of false optimism, made serious people uncomfortable. In spite of tremendous industrial and commercial expansion, Germans were beginning to feel "encircled." As university attendance increased, quality declined. There was dissatisfaction with secondary education also. Nietzsche had declared: "Never was the world more worldly, never poorer in goodness and love. . . . Men of learning are no longer beacons or sanctuaries in the midst of this turmoil of worldliness. . . . Everything bows before the coming barbarism, art and science included." His pessimism made a deep impression, especially upon the intellectual elite who were losing touch more and more with the German masses, and undermined their faith in the idea of progress.

In Russia there was relatively less belief in the idea. Prince Kropotkin, to be sure, living abroad, preached social progress through mutual aid in-

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19 For pessimism about academic life, see the personal recollections of Hubertus zu Loewenstein in his The Germans in History (New York, 1945), chap. 29. See also F. C. Sell, "Intellectual Liberalism in Germany about 1906," Journal of Modern History, XV (September, 1943) 227-36.
20 Friedrich Nietzsche, Thoughts out of Season, Part II, tr. by Adrian Collins (London, 1909), p. 136. Spengler in the preface to The Decline of the West (New York, 1926), I, xiv, says Goethe and Nietzsche were the two men "to whom I owe practically everything." See also Hans Thomas, "Das Ende des 'Fortschritts'" in Die Tat, XXV (August, 1933), 354-64.
instead of through Spencer's doctrine of competition and survival of the fittest.\textsuperscript{21}

The Slavophiles and the church, placing their faith in Russia's cultural past, denounced it as a dangerous, Western, and atheistic doctrine which ruled out Divine Providence and even immortality. "It addresses itself with infinite optimism to the future and with infinite pessimism to the past," wrote Berdyaev. "It is profoundly hostile to the Christian expectation of resurrection for all mankind, for all the dead, fathers and forefathers. . . . There is no such thing in history as progress from good to perfect . . . in virtue of which some future generation may exalt itself at the expense of all those that have gone before. There is no such thing in history as simple progress in human happiness."\textsuperscript{22} One little Russian group, however, the strict Marxians, many of whom were in prison or exile, looked for progress through the proletarian revolution, but their prospects were slight before 1905, though pregnant for the future.

Optimism about the "progress of civilization" received a rude shock from the war of 1914-18, the uneasy years of unemployment and depression, the failure of the League of Nations, and the frightful horrors and hatreds of World War II and its aftermath. Civilization seemed to be turned back several centuries. There was less inclination to think of progress as a steady, rectilinear, and inevitable advance of man towards a better goal and greater happiness. More attention was focused on the stages where he halted or slipped back. There was more emphasis on the cycle theory that civilizations rise and fall, advance and retreat. There were warnings that even our much-vaunted Western civilization might be at one of the downward turns of the cycle.

Meanwhile great advances in physics, archaeology, and anthropology enormously widened our horizon since the days of Darwin and Spencer. From the disintegration of radioactive substances and from fossil finds it was estimated that life had existed on this planet for half a billion years, and that human beings had been evolving through a million generations. It is not necessary to believe that man branched off from any existing species of apes, or that the prehistoric skulls and bones belong to direct ancestors of historic\textit{Homo sapiens}; they may represent branch lines that died out after evolving from the same common ancestor as\textit{Homo sapiens}. From silt deposits in lakes and from rings of trees chronology can be definitely established in America a thousand years before Columbus landed and in Europe very much earlier.\textsuperscript{23}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Peter Kropotkin, \textit{Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution} (London, 1902).
\item \textsuperscript{22} Nicolas Berdyaev, \textit{The Meaning of History} (London, 1936), pp. 189, 192; based on notes of lectures delivered at Moscow in 1919-20.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Frederick E. Zeuner, \textit{Dating the Past: An Introduction to Geochronology} (London, 1946);
\end{itemize}
With fuller knowledge of some 650 primitive societies and many civilizations, students turned from the abstract progress of mankind as a whole to a detailed analysis and comparison of individual civilizations. This placed our Western civilization in a more modest perspective and toned down egocentric illusions about its unique superiority. To take three examples:

Oswald Spengler selects several distinct civilizations, which in their earlier stages he calls "cultures." With erudite information from wide areas he claims to discover by "perceptive intuition" a "morphology of history." Using unsound analogies, he asserts that these cultures passed through a cycle corresponding to spring, summer, autumn, and winter. He is absolutely sure in his own mind that our Western civilization has declined into the last stage. His dogmatic work had a considerable vogue, especially in Germany, where it fitted in with the pessimistic postwar mood resulting from defeat, the Versailles Treaty, inflation, unemployment, and political instability. It is, however, philosophy, not history, stimulating but not convincing. Arnold J. Toynbee passes over primitive societies, which like rabbits are numerous but small and short-lived, and devotes his attention to civilizations, which like elephants are relatively large and long-lived. Of the twenty-six civilizations whose growth and decay he examines at great length, sixteen are dead and buried. Of the remaining ten, three are cases of arrested development, and six "have marks of already having broken down and gone into disintegration," and "are under threat of annihilation and assimilation by our own civilization of the West." If twenty-five out of twenty-six civilizations are already dead, declining, or arrested, can we assume that Western civilization may not some day suffer a similar fate? Toynbee is rather noncommittal. He does believe, however, in the light of the rhythmic history of other civilizations, that Western civilization entered a stage of decline with the sixteenth century Wars of Religion; that, in accordance with what he calls "the law of Challenge-and-Response," it rallied in the eighteenth century; but that since then, with the demonic forces of nationalism, industrialism, and expansion, it is now threatened with social disintegration. Western man, he says, "has been overtaken by a mistrust of his own élan and an uncertainty about his own future which (to judge by precedents) are ominous symp-
Whether or not one largely accepts Toynbee’s classifications and conclusions, his immense learning and breadth of vision demand that his views be given serious consideration in assessing the idea of progress today.

A. L. Kroeber surveys the configurations of cultural growth of several great civilizations which have flowered and withered. Why is it, he inquires, that there are periods when starry clusters of men of genius or great achievement in science, philosophy, and the creative arts arise, as in Periclean Athens, the Renaissance, Elizabethan England, or early nineteenth century Germany, only to be followed by periods comparatively barren in achievement? Unlike Spengler and Toynbee, he does not find that cultures rise and decline according to any clearly recognizable law or cycle of development. His charts show that sometimes they rise swiftly to a peak, and then fall slowly; sometimes they rise slowly, and then fall off abruptly. They do not necessarily die, but may sometimes be replaced or permeated by other more vigorous cultures and so disappear. They are, however, always going through internal fluctuations through variations in the cultural patterns. When the cultural patterns are in harmony and relatively stable, there is high level of achievement and clusters of geniuses are likely to appear. After this optimum situation has been reached, the successful development seems to bring exhaustion. New variations occur and the old patterns break down until the culture disappears, or until a new reforming of patterns leads to a new harmony and period of achievement. In Western civilization since about 1880, and more strongly since 1900, all the creative arts, he thinks, have shown increasing symptoms of such a breakdown or pattern dissolution: instead of the harmony of Beethoven, jagged rhythms and dissonance in music, free verse in poetry with lines beginning without capitals and ending without rhymes, plotless novels, cubism and surrealism in sculpture and painting. These sensational novelties represent a groping after new patterns. They occur because the established patterns have gone stale, or become mechanical and unproductive through exhaustion. If twentieth century mortals find that they can imitate but not equal Goethe or Beethoven, they try something new. They wreck the old patterns instead of trying to preserve them through futile imitation.

Kroeber’s theory of cultural dissolution since about 1880 acquires increased interest from a parallel process in industrial life described by Elton Mayo. Though the impact of the Industrial Revolution was felt earlier in England, it was not until about 1880 that it began to disintegrate social patterns in the

28 Ibid., III, 133.
29 A. L. Kroeber, Configurations of Culture Growth (Berkeley, 1944).
United States, Germany, and other countries in a subtler way than was generally understood at the time, in spite of the writings of Frédéric Le Play and Durckheim. In the small towns of the earlier nineteenth century, industries were on a relatively small scale and the pattern of life was stable and harmonious. The employer knew personally the twenty-five or fifty men in his business, and they knew one another. They had grown up together, called each other by their first names, and were bound together by social ties of family, church, and community life. They had well-established routines and rituals, knew what was expected of them, talked freely and intimately with one another, and co-operated efficiently and contentedly.

During the twentieth century machine age all this changed. The huge aggregations of factory workers today hardly ever see the stockholders and officials who own and control the works; they know only foremen whom they too often regard with suspicion and dislike. They live at a distance from the factory, isolated in scattered suburbs, without much community social life and without old family friends with whom they can talk over their problems. Instead of spending the evening visiting neighbors or at home in household chores or reading, they seek distraction at the movies or listen to the confusing noise of the radio. Formerly man controlled the machine; now the machine controls the man. Driven to keep up with the moving mass-production line, his work is monotonously repetitious, uninteresting, and nerve-tiring, compared with the old handicrafts or small factory. Forced back upon himself, without the old established routines of social life, he is apt to become a prey to unhappy and obsessive personal preoccupations. He is “agin the boss.” He does not co-operate efficiently even with his fellow workers, and readily listens to incitements to strike. Scientific studies have shown that it is often not so much a question of wages and hours of work as this psychological isolation and breakdown of social routines that underlie industrial unrest, prevent maximum production, and cause restless shifting from one job to another. The patterns of the old established society have broken down, and no satisfactory adaptive adjustment has been made to the new economic conditions. Fortunately, scientific investigations of the facts are now being made and attracting the attention of progressive business managers. If the result is the building up of a new pattern for an “adaptive society,” it will mean social progress.  

The most striking fact about progress during the past fifty or sixty years is that it has been very uneven in different fields of human activity. In man’s

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control over nature the advance has been amazing, particularly during the
war years. Discoveries in physics, chemistry, medicine, and all sorts of tech-
nological skills have accelerated at a faster rate than ever before. As one
physicist has put it:

In my own lifetime has occurred the development of every single thing which
now distinguishes a high from a low standard of living. When I was born the
telephone had been invented but was not in use. Electric power, the internal com-
bustion engine, x-rays, moving pictures, the airplane, radio; even central heating,
good roads, and a continuous supply of fresh food have all come since I was born.
The world into which I was born was more like that of Julius Caesar than like
that of the present day. If politics doesn't interfere I see no reason to doubt that
when my son shall reach my present age he may again say, "Of all we have the
better half has been developed during my lifetime."\(^{31}\)

This tremendous material progress has not been accompanied by any
corresponding advance in other fields. In the creative arts few people would
assert that it has been a period of very high level of achievement. One looks
in vain for outstanding geniuses in music, poetry, painting, or sculpture. In
moral and spiritual matters millions of men, having lost the strength and
guidance which they used to draw from the teachings of the institutional
church, are morally adrift or spiritually indifferent. They have not yet dis-
covered a better way of life than that indicated by the essential principles of
Christianity, but they find these principles intertwined with unacceptable
dogmas. They have not learned how to reinterpret and adapt Christian values
to the social and economic environment of the present, which is entirely
different from the small communities in which Christian experience was first
formulated.\(^{32}\)

Other millions look for a substitute for traditional religion in the gospel
of Marxian Socialism. It is politically important because its ideology makes a
strong appeal to the masses. It claims to be scientific, inevitable, and, in ac-
cordance with economic development. It looks to a practical millennium of
liberty and equality in this world instead of individual blessedness in the next.
It is greater than individual religion because it is a religion of humanity.\(^{33}\)
But Socialists have twice suffered bitter disillusionment: when they failed to


\(^{32}\) *Cf.* Karl Mannheim, *Diagnosis of Our Time* (New York, 1944), chap. vii, "Towards a
New Social Philosophy: A Challenge to Christian Thinkers by a Sociologist; Christian Values
and the Changing Environment."

\(^{33}\) *Cf.* Harold J. Laski, *The Revolution of Our Time* (London, 1943); *Faith, Reason, Civiliza-
1945), pp. 336–90, 469–76, 485–92. Baumgarten hopes that philosophy, which he thinks has
made little progress since Bergson and William James, can be revitalized by a more thorough
study of Marxian thought.
The Idea of Progress

prevent war in 1914, and when they saw their gospel twisted into the totalitarianism of Soviet Russia. Moreover, is there any good reason to believe that a classless society—that humanity in the mass—is more likely to act altruistically than men do as individuals?

In the art of living together—in social relations both as individuals and as nations—the record has been dismal. Natural science has far outstripped social science. Our social skills have not kept pace with our technical skills. The consequences to society of this unbalance have been disastrous. We have discovered how to split the atom but not how to make sure that it will be used for the improvement and not the destruction of civilization. Mayo goes so far as to say that “if our social skills had advanced step by step with our technical skills, there would not have been another European war.” However that may be, it is certain that industrial strikes have become more frequent and more paralyzing. Divorces, automobile casualties, crimes of violence have multiplied. Two world wars, the second more frightful in its conduct and more catastrophic in its consequences, witness to man’s unparalleled capacity for destruction and his slight capacity for reconstruction. In Europe the war legacy of ruin, semistarvation, death, hatred, fear, frustration, and national selfishness seem to make international co-operation and sane reconstruction impossible. In Palestine, India, and the Far East the conflicts are ominous. Diplomacy does not suggest that there has been progress. In 1815 statesmen made a wise and generous peace of equilibrium which averted general war for a century. In 1919 politicians in six months made a settlement which, in spite of its defects and the failure to execute its provisions, embodied a hope in the League of Nations. In 1945, more than twelve months after unconditional surrender, conflicting ideologies brought not peace but sharp recriminations and ominous talk of the possibility of a third world war. The conviction seemed to be growing that the Soviet system and the capitalist system threatened each other’s security, and that each must strengthen its own position instead of doing its utmost to build a world community through strengthening and relying on the United Nations organization. Though there are some brighter sides to this gloomy picture, it is difficult to believe that the past fifty or sixty years have been marked by social progress.

The era might be epitomized in the life of one of its most intelligent representatives, the late H. G. Wells. In the stable days of Victorian contentment his imagination in The Time Machine took the reader far into the future, and in The War of the Worlds he forecast future air-warfare, armored ma-

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Mayo, p. 9.
chines, and destruction which technological progress was soon to make a reality. He optimistically devoted a dozen books to educate public opinion to a reconstruction of society in which there would be liberty and equality for the individual and peace in a world community. He died a sadly disillusioned man, pessimistically observing "the ever swifter whirlpool of disaster in which man is spinning."³⁵

To sum up, one may say that the idea of progress today is acclaimed less confidently than in the optimistic days of a generation or two ago. We can believe that through the ages man has made a slow, haphazard progress that found expression in various civilizations. The majority of these have flowered and withered, sometimes without contributing much to man's permanent heritage. The progress of individual civilizations, and of mankind as a whole, has been by oscillations of advance and retreat, but it is difficult to see any clearly recognizable laws or rhythm governing their rise and fall. Progress is not constant, automatic, and inevitable in accordance with cosmic laws, but is possible and even probable as a result of man's conscious and purposeful efforts.

In conclusion, our Western civilization represents one of the longest and most complete advances, but during the past fifty years in many respects shows signs of halting or slipping back. This, however, is no reason for pessimism or defeatism. If we have been passing through one of the low points in an oscillation, there is no sufficient reason to think that an upswing may not follow. Other civilizations may have declined and died, but Western civilization has shown a peculiar vitality. By its vigor it has expanded throughout the earth and permeated other cultures. Through the invention of printing and other discoveries its accumulated achievements have been so multiplied and distributed that even an atomic war could not obliterate it. The mountain climber must often slip down a decline before he struggles up to new heights. Western civilization, in spite of the developing miracle of science, may in some other respects have reached a depression before beginning a new ascent. Our destiny is in our hands. That is the challenge and opportunity that we mountain climbers face.