

PROGRESS

Prog-ress n. 1.[archaic] official journey, as of a ruler. 2. historical development, in the sense of advance or improvement. 3. forward course of history or civilization, as in horror show or death-trip.

Perhaps no single idea in Western civilization has been as important as the notion of progress. It is also true that, as Robert Nisbet has put it, "Everything now suggests that Western faith in the dogma of progress is waning rapidly in all levels and spheres in this final part of the twentieth century."

In the anti-authoritarian milieu, too, progress has fallen on hard times. There was a time when the syndicalist blockheads, like their close Marxist relatives, could more or less successfully harangue as marginal and insignificant those disinterested in organizing their alienation via unions, councils and the like. Instead of the old respect for productivity and production (the pillars of progress), a Luddite prescription for the factories is ascendant and anti-work a cardinal starting point of radical dialog. We even see certain ageing leopards trying to change their spots: the Industrial Workers of the World, embarrassed by the first word of their name may yet move toward refusing the second (though certainly not as an organization).

The eco-crisis is clearly one factor in the discrediting of progress, but how it remained an article of faith for so many for so long is a vexing question. For what has progress meant, after all? Its promise began to realize itself, in many ways, from history's very beginning. With the emergence of agriculture and civilization commenced, for instance, the progressive destruction of nature; large regions of the Near East, Africa and Greece were rather quickly rendered desert wastelands.

In terms of violence, the transformation from a mainly pacific and egalitarian gatherer-hunter mode to the violence of agriculture/civilization was rapid. "Revenge, feuds, warfare, and battle seem to emerge among, and to be typical of, domesticated peoples," according to Peter Wilson. And violence certainly has

made progress along the way, needless to say, from state weapons of mega-death to the recent rise in outburst murders and serial killers.

Disease itself is very nearly an invention of civilized life; every known degenerative illness is part of the toll of historical betterment. From the wholeness and sensual vitality of pre-history, to the present vista of endemic ill-health and mass psychic misery-more progress.

The pinnacle of progress is today's Information Age. which embodies a progression in division of labor, from an earlier time of the greater possibility of unmediated understanding, to the stage where knowledge becomes merely an instrument of the repressive totality, to the current cybernetic era where data is all that's really left. Progress has put meaning itself to flight.

Science, the model of progress, has imprisoned and interrogated nature, while technology has sentenced it (and humanity) to forced labor. From the original dividing of the self that is civilization, to Descartes' splitting of the mind from the rest of objects (including the body), to our arid, high-tech present-a movement indeed wondrous. Two centuries ago the first inventors of industrial machinery were spat on by the English textile workers subjected to it and thought villainous by just about everyone but their capitalist paymasters. The designers of today's computerized slavery are lionized as cultural heroes, though opposition is beginning to mount.

In the absence of greater resistance, the inner logic of class society's development will culminate in a totally technicized life as its final stage. The equivalence of the progress of society and that of technology is becoming ever more apparent by the fact of their immanent convergence. "Theses on the Philosophy of History", Walter Benjamin's last and best work, contains this lyrically expressed insight: "

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of

events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress."