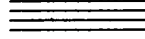


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THE IDEA OF PROGRESS RECONSIDERED

A Secular Religion?

The idea of progress, according to a widely accepted interpretation, represents a secularized version of the Christian belief in providence. The ancient world, we are told, entertained a cyclical view of history, whereas Christianity gave it a clearly defined direction, from the fall of man to his ultimate redemption. "It is no accident," Carl Becker wrote in 1921, "that the belief in Progress and a concern for 'posterity' waxed in proportion as the belief in Providence and a concern for a future life waned. The former belief—illusion if you prefer—is man's compensation for the loss of the latter."

Thanks to its Christian background, the Western world found it easy to imagine history as a "process generally moving upwards by a series of majestic stages," as Ernest Lee Tuveson explained. For twentieth-century historians, skeptical about the value of religion in any form, an un-

derstanding of the Christian origins of progressive ideology reveals the “radical inconsistency” at its core, in Becker’s words, the untenable assumption of historical “finality.” Almost everyone now agrees that progress—in its utopian form at least—is a “superstition” that is “nearly worn out,” as Dean William Ralph Inge put it in 1920; that we can now appreciate its religious roots largely because “the idea has begun to lose its hold on the mind of society,” as Christopher Dawson pointed out a few years later; and that the hope of some final state of earthly perfection, in short, is the “deadest of dead ideas,” as Lewis Mumford wrote in 1932—“the one notion that has been thoroughly blasted by the facts of twentieth-century experience.”

Utopian visions of the future were definitively discredited by their association with the totalitarian movements that came to power in the thirties. Belief in a secular millennium, rooted in the Christian tradition, seemed to have furnished modern barbarism with much of its spiritual energy. “The more carefully one compares the outbreaks of militant social chiasm during the later Middle Ages with modern totalitarian movements,” wrote Norman Cohn, “the more remarkable the similarities appear.” Fascists and communists replaced supernatural explanations of history with secular explanations, but they clung to the apocalyptic fantasy that a final, decisive struggle would establish absolute justice and perfect contentment. “What had once been demanded by ‘the will of God’ was now demanded by ‘the purposes of History.’”

*Belief in Progress as the
Antidote to Despair*

The collapse of utopia made it clear that a belief in progress could be salvaged—and the same calamities that discredited utopian hopes seemed to make it all the more important to salvage some form of hope—only by disavowing its perfectionist overtones.* “The world today believes in

*In his influential book *Ideology and Utopia*, published in 1937, Karl Mannheim gave voice to an uneasiness shared by many others. Would the collapse of the utopian

progress," Sidney Pollard flatly declared in 1986, because "the only possible alternative to the belief in progress would be total despair." Faith in progress could no longer rest on a vision of human perfection, but a more modest conception of progress was not only possible but essential to the "survival" of human society, as E. H. Carr put it in 1963. Since "some such conception" alone could "persuade the present generation to make sacrifices for future generations," Carr proposed a more thoroughly secularized doctrine of "unlimited progress." Without postulating an end to history, he argued, men and women could still look forward to improvements "subject to no limits that we can . . . envisage, towards goals which can be defined only as we advance towards them." Only intellectuals questioned the reality of progress. The condition of the masses had undeniably improved. The "mere accumulation of resources," to be sure, was not enough to justify a belief in progress, unless it brought "increased technical and social knowledge, . . . increased mastery of man's environment." But progress in this broader sense, Carr maintained, could still not be ruled out.

His observations exemplify the dominant view of the matter. If "the belief in progress has exhibited remarkable toughness in twentieth-cen-

illusion deprive men and women of the incentive to plan for the future? Having traced the idea of progress, in the usual fashion, to the millennial tradition of Christianity, which encouraged its heirs to envision the "completion of the past in the future," Mannheim traced the growth of a "skeptical," "prosaic," and "matter-of-fact" mentality that undermined the idea of historical completion and thus brought about a "general subsidence of utopian intensity." Unlike those who welcomed this development, Mannheim wondered whether the modern world could get along without faith in a future utopia. "A removal of the chiliastic element from the midst of culture and politics . . . would leave the world without meaning of life." It would lead to a "decay of the human will." Without "ideals," man would become a "mere creature of impulses." Utopia remained a cultural and psychological necessity even if it no longer appeared to have any solid basis in fact.

More recent defenders of the idea of progress tend to reject Mannheim's assumption that millennial expectations are the only grounds on which to base a belief in progress. As I hope to show, the history of progressive ideology provides a good deal of support for their position. Whether a belief in progress provides the only possible source of "ideals" and hope is quite another matter. A central premise of my own argument is that it does not.

tury America,” as Clarke Chambers noted in 1958, it is because liberals and socialists have divorced it from the “heavenly city of the eighteenth-century philosophers,” tied it to the cause of democracy and abundance, and brought it down to earth. No one claims any more that progress is inevitable or that it will culminate in some state of final perfection. No one denies that moral improvement often fails to keep pace with material improvement. But the general rise in living standards is obviously desirable in itself. The “average length of life has been steadily extended,” Charles Frankel wrote some time ago, illiteracy “progressively eliminated,” work made less back-breaking, leisure time increased, and the “basic conditions of human life,” in short, “changed for the better” and “changed more radically in the last hundred and fifty years than in all history before that time.”* The fact of technological progress simply cannot be denied, according to Barrington Moore, and it is “accompanied by changes in social structure” that provide the “prerequisites of freedom.” Material comfort does not assure a good life, but a good life is impossible without it. Material improvements, moreover, can be taken as evidence of a refusal to tolerate conditions formerly taken for granted—poverty, hunger, epidemic disease, inequality, racial bigotry. “Despite the difficulty of balancing gains and losses,” Morris Ginsberg argued in 1953, humanitarian sentiment “is gaining in strength. . . . In no previous age has so much been done to relieve suffering, and to abolish poverty, disease and ignorance in all parts of the world.” A. J. Ayer likewise sees the “average man” as “more humane, more pacific and more concerned with social justice than he was a century ago.”

Progress is the “working faith of our civilization,” wrote Christopher Dawson in 1929. Later writers agree. “No single idea has been more important in Western civilization,” Robert Nisbet argues. “. . . This idea has done more good over a twenty-five-hundred-year period . . . and given more strength to human hope . . . than any other single idea in Western

*“The vision behind liberalism,” Frankel noted, “is the vision of a world progressively redeemed by human power from its classic ailments of poverty, disease, and ignorance. . . . To hold the liberal view of history [has always] meant to believe in ‘progress.’ ”

history.”* J. H. Plumb joins Nisbet in upholding the idea of progress as a “great human truth.” Warren Wagar condemns the “neo-Augustinian theologians, the obscurantists, and all the pious and aesthetic and mystical refugees” who question man’s ability to prevail. A. J. P. Taylor, along with Wagar and Carr, dismisses cultural pessimism as the vice of disgruntled intellectuals. Talk about the decline of civilization, Taylor says, means “only that university professors used to have domestic servants and now do their own washing-up.”

Against the “Secularization Thesis”

Since the idea of progress, in our time, gains a certain plausibility the more it loses the character of a secular religion, the next step in its rehabilitation might be to deny its religious origins altogether. In *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, published in Germany in 1966 but only recently translated into English, Hans Blumenberg subjects the “secularization thesis,” as he calls it—the notion that progressive ideology represents a secularized version of the Christian millennium—to an all-out assault. According to Blumenberg, the idea of progress originated not in Christian eschatology but in the seventeenth-century revolt against the prestige of classical art and learning and in the scientific revolution, which provided mankind with a new mastery over the conditions of its existence and suggested by its example that the production of knowledge is cumulative and irreversible. Blumenberg admits that nineteenth-century theorists of progress like Hegel, Comte, and Spencer spun out elaborate theories of

*Nisbet finds it alarming that the present age is “almost barren of faith in progress,” obsessed with “limits to growth” and “limits of scientific inquiry.” In fact, however, those who talk about limits on growth and scientific inquiry remain a small minority. Even Barry Commoner, probably the most prominent environmentalist in the United States, rejects the idea that environmentalism depends on “limiting economic development.” The “‘limits of growth’ approach,” Commoner maintains, rests on the “misconception” that the earth is a “closed system, isolated from all outside sources of support and necessarily sustained only by its own limited resources.”

historical stages, later discredited; but that was not because they incorporated elements of the Christian worldview into their systems but because they mistakenly assumed that modern scholarship had to compete with Christianity on its own ground. Attempting to work out theories that rivaled Christian cosmology in their comprehensive scope, nineteenth-century thinkers encumbered the idea of progress with an unnecessary load of world-historical significance. Now that this speculative freight has dropped away, Blumenberg thinks, we can see more clearly what distinguishes the modern conception of history from the Christian conception: the assertion that the principle of historical change comes from within history and not from on high and that man can achieve a better life “by the exertion of his own powers” instead of counting on divine grace.

Just why these considerations should establish the “legitimacy of the modern age” is not clear, but at least they help to distinguish it from earlier ages. The “secularization thesis” has too long obscured differences between the idea of providence and the modern idea of progress. The case for the antiquity of a belief in progress reveals its weakness most clearly just when it is pressed most energetically, as in the work of Nisbet, who claims to find a highly developed theory of progress not only in the Christian fathers but even in classical authors like Seneca and Lucretius. Nisbet assumes that Roman and Christian philosophers shared our high opinion of material comforts. But although they admired the ingenuity that produced those comforts, they believed that moral wisdom lay in the limitation rather than in the multiplication of needs and desires. The modern conception of progress depends on a positive assessment of the proliferation of wants. Ancient authors, however, saw no moral or social value in the transformation of luxuries into necessities. In Augustine’s *City of God*, to be sure, we find in book 22 eloquent praise of fecundity, plenitude, and invention—Nisbet calls it his own “*pièce de résistance*.” But the flavor of the passage is best conveyed by Augustine’s observation that human skill and intelligence reveal themselves even in the “brilliant wit shown by philosophers and heretics in defending their very errors and falsehoods.” Man’s impressive achievements “console” him, Augustine says, for his fallen state—for the “life of misery, [the] kind of hell on earth” described so graphically in the chapter immediately preceding the one Nisbet quotes at length. But these achievements do not assure salvation. Augustine discusses them in a passage that also praises the supera-

bundant generosity of nature and treats man's intelligence and creative capacity as "evidence of the blessings he enjoys," not as evidence of his own godlike powers.

By throwing classical and Christian authors indiscriminately into the progressive camp, Nisbet loses sight even of the one insight that made the "secularization thesis" plausible in the first place—the recognition that Judaism and Christianity encouraged an interest in history in a way that classical and Oriental patterns of thought did not. The Greeks believed that the "eternal or timeless is the sole, ultimate, and complete reality," as A. D. Ritchie points out, while Jews and Christians believed that God reveals himself "through His creation, the material world, and especially through the course of temporal events we call human history." Such is the accepted and no doubt the correct interpretation—to which it is necessary to add, however, that neither the Hebraic nor the Christian attitude, although they rescued history from randomness, implied a belief in progressive improvement, let alone the crude celebrations of racial and national destiny so often associated with progressive ideologies in the modern world. Nor did they necessarily imply a belief in an earthly paradise in the future. Biblical references to the millennium could be interpreted in various ways, and the idea that the end of the world would be preceded by a thousand years of peace and plenty—allegedly the source of the idea of progress—was never the dominant view among Christians. It was not, in any case, a view that encouraged a progressive interpretation of human history. Premillennialists, as they came to be called in the nineteenth century, held that things were deteriorating at a rapid rate. It was precisely the wretched state of the world that portended the return of the Messiah and his imposition of a new order. Insofar as the idea of progress found favor among nineteenth-century Christians, it found favor among so-called postmillennialists—those who took the position that Christ's appearance in the first century already fulfilled the biblical promise of the millennium and provided man with the spiritual resources that would ultimately ensure his triumph over the powers of darkness.

But the heart of Christian hope lay elsewhere—neither in the earthly paradise at the end of time nor in the Christianization of society and the moral improvements it would bring. The essence of hope, for Christians, lay in the "conviction that life is a critical affair," as Richard Niebuhr

once put it, “that nothing in it is abiding, that nothing temporal is able to bear the weight of human faith,” and yet that life is good and that a conviction of its goodness forbids us “to give up any part of human life as beyond hope of redemption.” In the prophetic tradition—the moral center of Christianity, as Niebuhr argued so eloquently—the Kingdom of God was conceived neither as the end of the world nor as an “ideal for future society” but as a community of the faithful living under the judgment inherent in the evanescence of earthly affairs and more particularly in the “doom of threatened societies.”

When the Jews referred to themselves as the chosen people, they meant that they had agreed to submit to a uniquely demanding set of ethical standards, not that they were destined to rule the world or to enjoy special favors from heaven. The seventeenth-century Puritan settlers of New England, much indebted to the Old Testament for their conception of a collective identity, understood their mission in the same way. From this point of view, history mattered because it was under divine judgment, not because it led inevitably to the promised land. Whether the chosen people would prove themselves worthy of the blessings arbitrarily bestowed on them was an open question, not a foregone conclusion; and the prophetic tradition, central to Judaism, to Augustinian Catholicism, and to early Protestantism, served to recall them, again and again, to a painful awareness of their own shortcomings. Prophecy made history much more the record of moral failure than a promise of ultimate triumph. It put less emphasis on the millennium to come than on the present duty to live with faith and hope, in a world that often seemed to give no encouragement to either.

What the Idea of Progress Really Means

Once we recognize the profound differences between the Christian view of history, prophetic or millennialist, and the modern conception of progress, we can understand what was so original about the latter: not the promise of a secular utopia that would bring history to a happy ending but the promise of steady improvement with no foreseeable ending at all. The expectation of indefinite, open-ended improvement, even more than

the insistence that improvement can come only through human effort, provides the solution to the puzzle that is otherwise so baffling—the resilience of progressive ideology in the face of discouraging events that have shattered the illusion of utopia. The idea of progress never rested mainly on the promise of an ideal society—not at least in its Anglo-American version. Historians have exaggerated the utopian component in progressive ideology. The modern conception of history is utopian only in its assumption that modern history has no foreseeable conclusion. We take our cue from science, at once the source of our material achievements and the model of cumulative, self-perpetuating inquiry, which guarantees its continuation precisely by its willingness to submit every advance to the risk of supersession.

That nothing is certain except the imminent obsolescence of all our certainties—our scientific theories, our technology, our artistic styles and schools, our philosophies, our political ideals, our fashions—naturally gives rise to the sense of impermanence that has been celebrated or deplored as the very essence of the modern outlook, the sense that “all that is solid melts into air,” in the often quoted remark by Marx and Engels. What is less often remarked is that impermanence appears to assure a certain continuity in its own right when conceived as an extension of the self-correcting procedures of scientific discovery, which allow the scientific enterprise as a whole to flourish in spite of the constant revision of particular findings. A social order founded on science, with its unnerving but exhilarating expansion of our intellectual horizons, seems to have achieved a kind of immortality undreamed of by earlier civilizations.

Whatever else we can say about the future, it appears that we can safely take for granted its sophisticated contempt for the rudimentary quality of our present ways. We can imagine that our civilization might blow itself up—and the prospect of its suicide has a certain illicit appeal, since at least it satisfies the starved sense of an ending—but we cannot imagine that it might die a natural death, like the great civilizations of the past. That civilizations pass through a life cycle analogous to the biological rhythm of birth, maturity, old age, and death now strikes us as another discredited superstition, like the immortality of the soul. Only science, we suppose, is immortal; and although the unlikelihood of its melting away can be experienced even more intensely, perhaps, as a curse than as a blessing, the apparently irreversible character of its historical develop-

ment defines the modern sense of time and makes it unnecessary to raise the question that haunted our predecessors: how should nations conduct themselves under sentence of death?

Providence and Fortune, Grace and Virtue

The biblical conception of history, after all, had more in common (though not in the way that Nisbet imagines) with the classical conception, as reformulated during the Renaissance, than with the modern gospel of progress. What they had in common was an awareness of the “doom of threatened societies”—an understanding, that is, that the contingent, provisional, and finite quality of temporal things finds its most vivid demonstration not just in the death of individuals but in the rise and fall of nations. There is a good deal to be said for J. H. Plumb’s thesis that the fall of Rome sharpened the historical imagination in the West, posing both for Christians in the fourth century and for neopagans in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries a question that could be answered only through speculation about the course of past events. Why had that splendid empire collapsed? For the Romans themselves, it was the desertion of the pagan gods, after the introduction of Christianity, that led to the barbarian conquest. Augustine wrote *The City of God* in order to refute this belief but also in order to put the fall of Rome in the cosmic perspective of God’s plan for salvation. “As far as I can see, the distinction between victors and vanquished has not the slightest importance for security, for moral standards, or even for human dignity. . . . As far as this mortal life is concerned, which ends after a few days’ course, what does it matter under whose rule a man lives, being so soon to die, provided that the rulers do not force him to impious and wicked acts?” For Machiavelli and his readers—for whom ancient Rome, on the other hand, supplied the “standard by which modern times . . . were measured and found wanting,” in Hanna Pitkin’s words—it was just this indifference to civic affairs, encouraged by Christianity, that fatally weakened Rome. No matter how it was explained, however, the fall of Rome served as a reminder of glory’s fleeting career as well as an incentive to rescue something of permanence from the realm of change. “The world of particular events was ill under-

stood," according to John Pocock; "the temporal flux evaded men's conceptual control," and history unfolded "under the dominion of an inscrutable power, which manifested itself as providence to men of faith and as fortune" to the faithless.

Whatever the conceptual deficiencies in this way of understanding history, at least it did not expose the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the delusion that man can control history for his own purposes or build a new kind of social order that will withstand the corrosive effects of time. Those historians who find the seeds of progressive ideology in the linear conception of time, advanced by Christians in opposition to the cyclical conception of antiquity, overlook what the idea of providence had in common with the idea of fortune. No doubt Karl Löwith went too far in the other direction when he claimed that "in the reality of that agitated sea which we call 'history,' it makes little difference whether man feels himself in the hands of God's inscrutable will or in the hands of chance or fate." It does make a difference, one that was already implicit in the contrast between Augustine's unconcern with political matters and Machiavelli's insistence that it is political life alone that enables men to achieve lasting glory and thus to outwit fortune. But Machiavelli's view of fortune did not lack respect, even a certain reverence. He confessed that he was "partly inclined to share the opinion" that "there is no remedy whatever" against fortune. Only the reflection that "our freedom" would be "altogether extinguished" by such an attitude led him to think that although "fortune is the ruler of half our actions," she "allows the other half or thereabouts to be governed by us." He was not so impressed by the example of Rome or the prospects for its revival that he fell into the equivalent of our modern mistake in exempting our own civilization, seemingly immortal in its wealth and its command of the accumulated fruits of scientific knowledge, from the cycle of growth and decay.

The concept of virtue stood in something of the same relation to fortune, in the civic tradition descending from Machiavelli and ultimately from classical stoicism, that the Christian concept of grace stood in relation to providence. Virtue, like grace, enabled men to live undesperingly with the knowledge of finitude, the poignant contrast between the absolute and the contingent. Virtue imposed form on the disorderly flux of temporal events by underwriting a civic order the moral example of which would outlive its allotted span of time. Since the civic ideal defined

itself in direct opposition to Christianity, accused by republicans of weakening civic loyalty by demanding exclusive loyalty to God, it is easy to miss their underlying affinity. Both encouraged men and women to find order and meaning in submission to a communal standard of conduct. Both associated the good life with a particular form of community and with the memories that constituted it. There was a world of difference, to be sure, between a community of saints and a community of virtuous citizens, but the two concepts, virtue and grace, “found common ground,” in Pocock’s words, “in an ideal of austerity and self-denial.” The belief in progress carried with it a very different ideal of the good life.

Machiavelli’s politicization of virtue, leading to the gradual assimilation of the idea of fortune to the newer idea of civic corruption, made historical processes more intelligible than before but no more amenable to a progressive interpretation. Once the “antithesis of virtue ceased to be *fortuna* [and] became corruption instead,” the succession of temporal events, as Pocock explains, “could be defined not as sheer disorder” but as the product of social forces: specialization, the division of labor, and the growth of “luxury.” The “ancient equation of change with degeneration,” however, still “held fast.” In the eyes of Machiavelli’s successors—Harrington, Montesquieu, Rousseau—the specialization of civic functions, first dramatized by the emergence of mercenary armies, undermined civic virtue by making it possible for citizens to hand over their civic obligations, including the all-important obligation to bear arms, to professionals. According to republican theorists, standing armies not only posed a threat to liberty but contributed indirectly to corruption by enabling citizens to pursue their private advantage at public expense. Specialization generated new standards of comfort and refinement, encouraged the competitive accumulation of private wealth, and relieved citizens of the obligation to serve the commonwealth. It weakened sociability, in short, while the abundance made possible by an increasingly minute division of social labor inflamed men’s imaginations with a taste for pleasure and led them to value evanescent pleasures more highly than durable achievements. Even proponents of commerce like Daniel Defoe spoke of the power of Credit, the personification of instability, in much the same language in which Machiavelli had spoken of fortune, as a jealous mistress whose “despotic” rule over men’s fantasies

testified to the unsettling “power of imagination.” It was left to Rousseau, however, to provide the “first specifically modern theory” of man’s self-enslavement to an ever-escalating cycle of wants and needs, in the words of Michael Ignatieff, and to link the “ancient stoic account of moral corruption” to the “economic conditions of modern capitalist society—inequality, acquisitive envy, and the division of labor.”

Adam Smith’s Rehabilitation of Desire

Now we can see what was so novel about the eighteenth-century idea of progress, the distinctive features of which emerge even more clearly against the background of this republican critique of corruption and civic decline than against the background of Judeo-Christian prophecy. It was not the secularization of the Kingdom of God or even the new stress on processes intrinsic to historical development that chiefly distinguished progressive ideology from earlier views of history. Its original appeal and its continuing plausibility derived from the more specific assumption that insatiable appetites, formerly condemned as a source of social instability and personal unhappiness, could drive the economic machine—just as man’s insatiable curiosity drove the scientific project—and thus ensure a never-ending expansion of productive forces. The moral rehabilitation of desire, even more than a change in the perception of time as such, generated a new sense of possibility, which announced itself most characteristically not in the vague utopianism of the French Enlightenment but in the hardheaded new science of political economy.

For eighteenth-century moralists like Bernard Mandeville, David Hume, and Adam Smith, it was the self-generating character of rising expectations, newly acquired needs and tastes, new standards of personal comfort—the very changes deplored by republican critics of commerce—that broke the old cycle of social growth and decay and gave rise to a form of society capable of indefinite expansion. The decisive break with older ways of thinking came when human needs began to be seen not as natural but as historical, hence insatiable. As the supply of material comforts increased, standards of comfort increased as well, and the category of necessities came to include many goods formerly regarded as luxuries. A

shirt made from the “most ordinary Yorkshire cloth,” according to Mandeville, would have been considered a luxury in earlier times, when man “fed on the fruits of the earth . . . and reposed himself naked like the other animals on the lap of the common parent.” Envy, pride, and ambition made human beings want more than they needed, but these “private vices” became “public virtues” by stimulating industry and invention. Thrift and self-denial, on the other hand, meant economic stagnation.

Hume and Smith rejected Mandeville’s “licentious system of morality,” really an inverted asceticism, as Smith astutely pointed out, in which anything “short of the most ascetic abstinence” became “gross luxury and sensuality, . . . so that there is vice even in the use of a clean shirt.” But they sided with Mandeville in opposing the “received notion,” as Mandeville put it, “that luxury is as destructive to the wealth of the whole body politic, as it is to that of every individual person who is guilty of it.” The “pleasures of luxury and the profit of commerce,” according to Hume, “roused men from their indolence” and led to “further improvements in every branch of domestic as well as foreign trade.” Hume and Smith endorsed the general principle that a growing desire for material comforts, wrongly taken by republicans as a sign of decadence and impending social collapse, generated new employments, new wealth, and a constantly rising level of productivity. They quarreled only with Mandeville’s moral condemnation of “luxury.” If luxury meant a “great refinement in the gratification of the senses,” there was a good deal to be said for it, Hume argued, on moral as well as on economic grounds. “Indulgences are only vices, when they are pursued at the expense of some virtue.”

Smith made the more important point that it was not “luxury,” after all, that fueled the modern productive machine but the more modest expenditures of ordinary consumers. Mandeville did not see beyond the extravagant self-indulgence of the rich, which had the happy though entirely unintended consequence of employing “all sorts of artificers in iron, wood, marble, brass, pewter, copper, wool, flax, and divers other materials.” Smith, on the other hand, insisted that the “uniform, constant, and uninterrupted effort of every man to better his condition”—not the lavish but unproductive spending of kings and nobles—was the “principle from which public and national, as well as private opulence is originally derived.” Unlike Mandeville, who shared the mercantilist prej-

udice in favor of low wages, Smith defended high wages, on the grounds that “a person who can acquire no property can have no other interest but to eat as much, and to labour as little as possible.” The hope of improving his condition, on the other hand, would encourage the working man to spend his income on “things more durable” than the “hospitality” and “festivals” preferred by the wealthy, and the accumulated effect of this kind of expenditure, even though it might reflect a “base and selfish disposition,” maintained a whole nation of industrious workers, not just a few servants and useless retainers.

A positive appraisal of the social effects of self-gratification made it possible for interpreters of the new order to exempt modern society, in effect, from the judgment of time—the judgment previously believed, by Christians and pagans alike, to hang like a sword over all man’s works. Because the new science of political economy appeared to deliver the modern world from the “doom of threatened societies,” in Richard Niebuhr’s wonderfully resonant phrase, it is to Adam Smith and his immediate predecessors, rather than to those second-rate thinkers more conventionally associated with the idea of progress—Fontenelle, Condorcet, Godwin, Comte, Spencer—that we should look for the inner meaning of progressive ideology. Compared to Smith’s incisive analysis of the social implications of desire, vaporous tributes to the power of reason and to the progress of the arts and sciences, speculations about a perfect state of society in the future, and the various schemes of historical stages that traced social development from the simple to the complex contributed very little to a plausible theory of progress. Human ingenuity, as evidenced by the steady improvement of useful arts, had elicited the qualified admiration even of Augustine. The ancient world was fully acquainted with the achievements of reason; nor was the eighteenth-century world so besotted with those achievements that it overlooked reason’s limits. As for the idea of historical stages, equally familiar to the ancients, it led to a theory of progress only when social theorists ceased to model those stages on the biological life cycle, in which growth and maturity led inevitably to senescence and death. Smith’s work, especially *The Wealth of Nations*, implicitly repudiated this biological conception of history and the self-denying morality with which it had been associated. The stoic critique of appetite lost much of its force in the face of Smith’s contention that insatiable appetites led not to corruption

and decay but to the indefinite expansion of the productive machinery necessary to satisfy them.

The case for permanence—for the prospect of a social order capable of withstanding the effects of time—no longer had to rest on divine intervention or the perfectibility of reason. It now rested more securely, if unexpectedly and ironically, on ordinary ambition, vanity, greed, and a morally misplaced respect, as Smith put it, for the “vain and empty distinctions of greatness.” In the “languor of disease and the weariness of old age,” the moral insignificance of worldly goods appeared in its true light, according to Smith, since neither possessions nor even the beauty and utility so universally admired in “any production of art” proved capable, under conditions of adversity, of bringing true happiness. People seldom looked at the matter in this “abstract and philosophical light,” however; and “it is well that nature imposes upon us in this manner,” Smith wrote in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in a passage that alluded for the first time to the “invisible hand” that leads men and women to accumulate wealth and thus inadvertently to serve as social benefactors in their pursuit of deceptively attractive but ultimately empty possessions. “It is this deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind.”

*Smith's Misgivings about
“General Security and Happiness”*

Smith's work is instructive, in the unfamiliar context of the development of progressive ideology, not only because it enables us to see what was really distinctive about that ideology—the exemption of the modern world from the judgment of time—but because it illustrates the persistence of certain reservations that qualified the optimism produced by the modern discovery of abundance. His occasional musings on the vanity of acquisition betrayed a lingering attachment to the “stoical philosophy,” which sought to base “our happiness upon the most solid and secure foundation, a firm confidence in that [divine] wisdom and justice which govern the world.” The only objection to stoicism, Smith noted, was that

it aimed "at a perfection altogether beyond the reach of human nature." He knew very well that the "soft, gentle, the amiable virtues" were better suited to commercial societies than the "virtues of self-denial"; yet he preferred the latter, on the whole.

He admitted that modern moralists offered better instruction in "private and domestic affections" than Zeno and Epictetus, whose "stoical apathy" was "never agreeable" when it attempted to moderate parental affection. But even though his own system unavoidably encouraged men to pursue private interest at the expense of public service, Smith had a republican contempt for such a life. He believed that politics and war, not commerce, served as the "great school of self-command." "Under the boisterous and stormy sky of war and faction, of public tumult and confusion, the sturdy severity of self-command prospers most." A commercial society needed the "gentle virtue of humanity," to be sure; and "justice and humanity" rested, in turn, on a "sacred regard" for life and property, necessarily weakened by the "violence of faction" and the "hardships and hazards of war." Even so, Smith reserved his highest praise, not only in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* but in *The Wealth of Nations* itself, for the soldier's life. He regretted that "the general security and happiness which prevail in ages of civility and politeness, afford little exercise to the contempt of danger, to patience in enduring labor, hunger, and pain." The division of labor made possible an unheard-of expansion of productivity, as he explained at length in *The Wealth of Nations*, but it also dulled the mind and sapped the martial spirit.

His unsparing account of these effects drew on the republican identification of virtue with virility and resourcefulness. "A man, incapable either of defending or of revenging himself, evidently wants one of the most essential parts of the character of a man." Similarly "a man without the proper use of the intellectual faculties of a man is . . . more contemptible than even a coward, and seems to be mutilated and deformed in a still more essential part of the character of human nature." Smith could only hope that a comprehensive program of public education would teach the virtues no longer taught by service in the militia—now recognized as "much inferior to a well-disciplined and well-exercised standing army"—and by active participation in political life.

The harshest critics of modern specialization have added little to the indictment drawn up by its great apologist. But such misgivings were

destined to be confined to a shadowy half-life on the fringes of debate so long as the economic and technological advantages of specialization—the central assumption in the ensuing controversy about industrialism and the industrial division of labor—went uncontested. If one conceded the “irresistible superiority” of a “well-regulated standing army” over a citizens’ militia, the question of whether “justice and humanity” represented a falling-off from self-command, fortitude, contempt of pain, and “independency upon fortune” became entirely academic. One might regret the passing of the “great and awful virtues” appropriate to the “council, the senate, or the field,” but the issue was already decided by the inexorable advance of civilization. “In general, the style of manners which takes place in any nation, may . . . be said to be that which is most suitable to its situation. Hardiness is the character most suitable to the circumstances of a savage, sensibility to those of one who lives in a very civilized society.”

So saying, Smith effectively banished regrets, including his own, to the category of harmless speculation about a hypothetical golden age in the past. No one could argue very long against abundance, increasingly perceived as the distinguishing characteristic of a “very civilized society.” By 1848, when Macaulay published his *History of England*, the party of progress, confident that it had long since carried the day, had mastered the tone of bluff and jocular dismissal, the unapologetically philistine defense of everyday comforts, the pretense of standing out against the prevailing intellectual fashion of sentimental regret, that have remained its trademark down to the present day.

It is now the fashion to place the Golden Age of England in times when noblemen were destitute of comforts the want of which would be intolerable to a modern footman, when farmers and shopkeepers breakfasted on loaves, the very sight of which would raise a riot in a modern workhouse, when to have a clean shirt once a week was a privilege reserved for the higher class of gentry, when men died faster in the purest country air than they now die in the most pestilential lanes of our towns, and when men died faster in the lanes of our towns than they now die on the coast of Guiana. We too, shall, in our turn, be outstripped, and in our turn envied.

Macaulay's complacency was in no way qualified by the conventional reminder that his own age—since the process of accumulation continues without any foreseeable end—would appear to future generations just as primitive in its standard of cleanliness and comfort as earlier ages appeared to him and his contemporaries, hence equally eligible for perversely wistful retrospection.

Desire Domesticated

The more thoughtful among Macaulay's contemporaries, however, could not entirely suppress the disturbing consideration that a social order based on the promise of universal abundance might find it hard to justify even the minimal sacrifices presupposed by Adam Smith's otherwise self-regulating economy. Hume had astutely pointed out, when the philosophy of plenty was still in its infancy, that it might weaken even the residual inclination to defer gratification. Human beings "are always much inclin'd to prefer present interest to distant and remote," he observed; "nor is it easy for them to resist the temptation of any advantage that they may immediately enjoy." As long as "the pleasures of life [were] few," this form of temptation did not pose a great threat to social order. Commercial societies, however, could be expected to intensify the pursuit of "feverish, empty amusements"; and the "avidity . . . of acquiring goods and possessions" was "insatiable, perpetual, universal, and directly destructive of society."

In the nineteenth century, the hope that commerce would make men "easy and sociable," not acquisitive and rapacious, came to rest largely on the institutionalization of deferred gratification supposedly provided by the family—the heart and soul of the middle-class way of life. Nineteenth-century philanthropists, humanitarians, and social reformers argued with one voice that the revolution of rising expectations meant a higher standard of domestic life, not an orgy of self-indulgence activated by fantasies of inordinate personal wealth, of riches painlessly acquired through speculation or fraud, of an abundance of wine and women. That a commercial society fostered such ambitions troubled them no end; and it was to counter this tawdry dream of success, this unbridled urge to

strike it rich, that proponents of a more orderly economic development attached so much importance to the family. The obligation to support a wife and children, in their view, would discipline possessive individualism and transform the potential gambler, speculator, dandy, or confidence man into a conscientious provider. Moral and mental development stimulated material development and tempered it at the same time. An enterprising, intelligent, and self-disciplined population would demand an ever-growing supply of goods and services to satisfy its ever-increasing wants. By tying consumption to the family, the guardians of public order hoped not only to stimulate but to civilize it. Their confidence that new standards of comfort would not only promote economic expansion but level class distinctions, bring nations together, and even abolish war is impossible to understand unless we remember that it rested on the domestication of ambition and desire.

A liberal society that reduced the functions of the state to the protection of private property had little room for the concept of civic virtue. Having abandoned the old republican ideal of citizenship along with the republican indictment of "luxury," liberals lacked any grounds on which to appeal to individuals to subordinate private interest to the public good. But at least they could appeal to the higher selfishness of marriage and parenthood. They could ask, if not for the suspension of self-interest, for its elevation and refinement. Rising expectations would lead men and women to invest their ambitions in their offspring. The one appeal that could not be greeted with cynicism or indifference was the appeal later summarized in the twentieth-century slogan, "our children: the future" (a slogan that made its appearance only when its effectiveness could no longer be taken for granted). Without this appeal to the immediate future, the belief in progress could never have served as a unifying social myth, one that kept alive a lingering sense of social obligation and gave self-improvement, carefully distinguished from self-indulgence, the force of a moral imperative.

In one of the notes made early in the course of his American travels, Alexis de Tocqueville spoke of a "sort of refined and intelligent egoism" as the "pivot on which the whole machine turns"; and he went on to ask himself just "how far . . . the two principles of the good of the individual and the good of the whole really coincide." In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville repeatedly emphasized the importance of religion and family

life as a counterweight to acquisitive individualism. In a commercial society, "men cannot be cured of the love of riches," he observed, but religion might persuade them "to enrich themselves by none but honest means," to value the "natural bonds and legitimate pleasures of home," and thus to discover that an "orderly life is the surest path to happiness." These views were not Tocqueville's alone; they were shared by the prison reformers, educators, and humanitarians on whom Tocqueville relied for many of his impressions of America. In describing himself as a "new kind of liberal," Tocqueville described all those who believed that economic individualism could be safely liberated from mercantilist constraints only if it was disciplined by the inner constraints associated with organized "benevolence" and above all by new modes of "family governance."

Horace Mann, frightened by the Chartist agitation in England and by the possibility that European social extremes were re-creating themselves in America, voiced a pervasive concern when he argued that any system of "political economy . . . which busies itself about capital and labor, supply and demand, interest and rents, favorable and unfavorable balances of trade; but leaves out of account the element of a wide-spread mental development, is nought but stupendous folly." Progress and civilization had "increased temptations a thousand-fold" while doing away with the "fiery penal codes" and the "blind reverence for authority" that had formerly kept them in check. The "race for wealth, luxury, ambition, and pride" had been thrown "open to all" and the most depraved impulses given "full liberty and wide compass." Mann predicted that unless "internal and moral restraints" replaced the "external and arbitrary ones" now ineffective, "the people, instead of being conquerors and sovereigns over their passions," would become "their victims and their slaves."

For liberals like Mann, it was the rapid development of "benevolent" institutions, even more than material improvements, that distinguished progressive societies from backward societies like the American South. In the northern United States, in contrast to the South, progress proclaimed itself, according to Theodore Parker, in the spread of "societies for the reform of prisons, the prevention of crime, pauperism, intemperance, licentiousness and ignorance, . . . educational societies, Bible societies, peace societies, societies for teaching Christianity in foreign and barbarous lands, . . . learned and philosophic societies for the study of science, letters and art." The free states alone, Parker insisted, concerned them-

selves with the "improvement of the humbler and more exposed portions of society, the perishing and dangerous classes thereof." The voluntary associations on which Tocqueville pinned his hopes for democracy served, as Parker's list makes clear, to discipline the acquisitive impulse. In effect, they served as extensions of the family and were often quite explicitly conceived as such, as when Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, founder and superintendent of the Hartford Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb, argued that the school ought to be "intimately connected with [the] family state" and to model itself on "government . . . of the parental kind." A "well organized family state," Gallaudet explained, was the basis of social order, which rested not on the "dread of human laws" but on "religious and moral principle," on "early associations of thought and feeling," on "habits formed in childhood and youth," on the "power of imitation," and on the "commanding influence of example in those who exercised authority over the mind in the early stages of its existence."

There is no need to belabor the familiar point that reverence for maternal "influence" and the domestic virtues stood at the very center of middle-class morality. What has to be emphasized, in the face of the equally familiar claim that the nineteenth-century "cult of domesticity" served only to enforce the patriarchal subordination of women and to subject the lower classes to "social control," is that it had progressive, not reactionary implications, since a well-ordered family life allegedly generated the demand for improvements that assured the unlimited expansion of capitalist production. The "cult of domesticity" was part of the rationale for reforms designed to alleviate poverty, shorten the hours of labor, and raise the working class out of the brutalizing conditions of mere subsistence. A Massachusetts bookbinder, pleading for the eight-hour day in 1870, pointed out that "a multiplication of happy homes around the city, would stimulate all industry, and greatly increase the exchange of products. . . . As people are elevated and improved in body and mind, the wants of body and mind are multiplied. On this simple fact depend all trade, prosperity and wealth."

Theodore Parker's recital of the expanding effects of home consumption can stand as a definitive statement of these "plain principles of political economy," as the bookbinder called them. Elaborating on the contrast between Southern backwardness and Northern improvement, in his famous "Letter on Slavery," Parker pointed out that

in Connecticut, every farmer and day-laborer, in his family or person, is a consumer not only of the productions of his own farm or handiwork, but also of tea, coffee, sugar, rice, molasses, salt, and spices; of cotton, woolen, and silk goods, ribbons and bonnets; of shoes and hats; of beds and other furniture; of hardware, tinware, and cutlery; of crockery and glassware; of clocks and jewelry; of books, paper and the like. His wants stimulate the mechanic and the merchant; they stimulate him in return, all grow up together; each has a market at home, a market continually enlarging and giving vent to superior wares.

Machine production, Parker continued, facilitated the distribution of comforts and conveniences "more widely than ancient benefactors dared to dream. What were luxuries to our fathers, attainable only by the rich, now find their way to the humble home." Class distinctions were further weakened by the progress of "science, letters, religion," while trade broke down national barriers and fostered peace. "The soldier yields to the merchant. . . . The hero of force is falling behind the times; the hero of thought, of love, is felt to deserve the homage of mankind."

Elsewhere Parker endorsed the conventional view that women, "far in advance of man" in their "moral feeling, affectional feeling, religious feeling," were the principal source of the refinements in taste and sensibility associated with the democratization of consumption. Arguing for woman suffrage, Parker attributed to the growing influence of women the recognition that "government is political economy—national house-keeping." It was the influence of women, again, that undermined the old authoritarian ideas about children, which embittered family life and encouraged parents, instead of intelligently providing for their needs, to regard them as little monsters of depravity. No woman, Parker declared, "would ever have preached the damnation of babies new-born." Only "celibate priests," ignorant of paternity, could have "invented these ghastly doctrines." Such statements make it clear the domestic values were an essential component of progressive ideology, not just a sentimental gesture to man's "better half," offered in lieu of real equality and respect.

It is true that the domestic ideal could easily be reduced to the sentimental commonplace that "almost every man of extensive influence," in

the words of a popular manual for young women, “. . . became what he was through maternal influence.” But it does not seem fanciful to conjecture that the doctrine of maternal influence commended itself, to an enterprising and forward-looking people, largely because it served to assure them that moral and material progress went hand in hand. “Woman is the mother of the race,” explained Julia Ward Howe, a prominent feminist. “. . . In all true civilization she wins man out of his natural savagery to share with her the love of offspring, the enjoyment of true and loyal companionship.” Faith in the civilizing power of women made it possible for the nineteenth century to believe that enlightened self-interest would find its characteristic expression not in a ruthless pursuit of the main chance, much less in “luxury” and fashionable dissipation, but in family feeling—in the determination of conscientious parents to provide their children with opportunities unavailable to themselves.

Henry George on Progress and Poverty

In the long run, of course, it was a lost cause, this attempt to build up the family as a counterweight to the acquisitive spirit. The more closely capitalism came to be identified with immediate gratification and planned obsolescence, the more relentlessly it wore away the moral foundations of family life. The rising divorce rate, already a source of alarm in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, seemed to reflect a growing impatience with the constraints imposed by long-term responsibilities and commitments. The passion to get ahead had begun to imply the right to make a fresh start whenever earlier commitments became unduly burdensome. Economic progress also weakened the economic foundations of Gallaudet’s “well ordered family state.” The family business gave way to the corporation, the family farm—more slowly and painfully—to a collectivized agriculture ultimately controlled by the same banking houses that had engineered the consolidation of industry. The agrarian uprising of the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s proved to be the first round in a long, losing struggle to save the family farm, enshrined in American mythology, even today, as the sine qua non of a good society but subjected in practice to a ruinous cycle of mechanization, indebtedness, and overproduction.

The same changes that weakened the family threatened to reverse the

trend toward economic equality, on which believers in progress had counted so heavily. Farmers, artisans, and craftsmen became wage slaves; more than any other development of the nineteenth century, including even the Civil War, the reconstitution of a degraded proletariat in the land of plenty—a permanent class of men and women without property—cast doubt on the agreeable assumption that limitless and irreversible innovation would annul the old cycle of growth and decline. Yet the republican idiom that might have enabled Americans to make sense of these reversals had begun to decay from disuse, and those who tried to revive it found themselves ridiculed as cranks and visionaries. Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*, a curious mixture of republicanism and "scientific" history, reached thousands of readers, both in the United States and in Europe, but remained suspect among the learned.

Even those who were moved by George's moral passion found him something of an eccentric, and this feeling, I believe, derived not only from his lack of academic training in economics and his commitment to the "new Jerusalem" of the single tax, as John Jay Chapman called it, but from his old-fashioned, seemingly naive and unsophisticated way of thinking about historical time. John L. Thomas, a sympathetic historian, deplores the "fascination with catastrophe" that intruded itself into *Progress and Poverty*. Henry George unfortunately shared the "fin de siècle obsession with cataclysm," according to Thomas; his speculations about what he called the law of human progress were "essentially ahistorical."

George's offense, it appears, lay in his insistence that the theory of continuous progress—the "hopeful fatalism" that "now dominates the world of thought"—was contradicted by the "rise and fall of nations," the "growth and decay of civilizations." George did not deny that "we of modern civilization" stood "far above those who . . . preceded us." What he denied was that the achievements of modern civilization could be attributed to improvements now "permanently fixed in mental organization." History, he thought, did not support the "current view" that "improvement tends to go on unceasingly, to a higher and higher civilization." The modern world owed its wealth and power to the transmission of skills and knowledge from one generation to the next; but the delicate mechanism of cultural transmission had broken down many times in the past and could easily break down in the future. The process could not be likened to heredity; for "even if it be admitted that each wave

of progress had made possible a higher wave and each civilization passed the torch to a greater civilization," it was never the old civilization that built in this way on the foundations of its past but a "fresh race coming from a lower level." One advance did not lead smoothly and continuously to the next. "Over and over again, art has declined, learning sunk, power waned, population become sparse, until the people who had built great temples and mighty cities, turned rivers and pierced mountains, cultivated the earth like a garden and introduced the utmost refinement into the minute affairs of life . . . lost even the memory of what their ancestors had done, and regarded the surviving fragments of their grandeur as the work of . . . the mighty race before the flood."

When civilizations died, much "hard won progress" died with them; only a small part of it was transmitted to their conquerors. The earth was "the tomb of the dead empires, no less than of dead men." Growth and decay were not merely the general rule but the "*universal rule*." Any theory of history therefore had to account for "retrogression as well as for progression," and George proceeded to argue that specialization and the accumulation of wealth steadily widened the gap between the rulers and the ruled; that advanced civilizations accordingly had to devote more and more of their resources to the maintenance of an idle ruling class; that they finally collapsed, top-heavy, under their own weight; and that inequality and mass poverty, in short—the inevitable accompaniment of civilization, as George maintained in the famous title of his treatise, which called attention to the organic unity of poverty and progress—furnished the key that unlocked the "law" of advance and decline.

Naive and unsophisticated? *Progress and Poverty* was "ahistorical," it seems to me, only in its last-minute assurance that reforms prompted by an understanding of the "law of human progress," available for the first time now that George himself had explained it, would save modern civilization from the fate of its predecessors. In his analysis of the central issue—whether industrial societies would find a way to arrest the growth of inequality—George showed himself far more astute than his critics, who minimized the difficulties in achieving a more equitable distribution of wealth. He did not subscribe either to the right-wing illusion that prosperity would somehow trickle down to the masses or to the left-wing illusion—common to Marxism, to Edward Bellamy's "Nationalism," and to the several varieties of social democratic reformism—that the concen-

tration of economic power had laid the foundations of a new order in which the masses would simply expropriate the collectivized forces of production and use them for the common good. George understood that collectivization is equally disastrous whether it occurs under capitalism or under socialism. Whatever can be said against his own ideal—a world of small proprietors, based on common ownership of land—at least it did not pretend to reconcile democracy and republican institutions with the social conditions that “compel every worker to seek a master.”

George was not alone in his attempt to revive an understanding of the “law of civilization and decay,” as Brooks Adams called it. By 1895, when Adams published his own version of the cyclical view of history, Americans had more reason than ever to worry about the future. As the simple market economy of the early nineteenth century gave way to an industrial economy elaborately organized on an international scale, small producers fell victim to corporate monopolists, farmers were forced off the land, and workers struggled without much success against the brutalizing effects of modern mass production. The Populist movement gave a political direction to many of the same apprehensions that troubled Henry George and Brooks Adams, including the fear that a growing concentration of power in the hands of investment bankers would not only impoverish the masses and reduce democratic institutions to empty forms but choke off the sources of creative energy in American culture, inaugurating a vulgar cult of success. *The Law of Civilization and Decay* might have become part of a searching discussion of the choices still open to America at the end of the nineteenth century. Instead, like the Populist movement itself, it was either brushed aside as a cranky, ineffectual protest against a future the country had no choice except to embrace or selectively absorbed (with considerable assistance from Adams himself) into the new imperialist rhetoric that upheld overseas expansion as a means of reviving the martial spirit.

Even those who admitted that Adams’s “powerful” and “melancholy” book contained a “very ugly element of truth,” as Theodore Roosevelt wrote in a long review, refused to take seriously the possibility that a further development of industrial civilization, along the lines already laid out, might lead in the long run to ruin. Nor could they accept the proposition that industrialism inevitably led to inequality. The idea that yeomen farmers were helpless in the hands of the moneylenders, Roosevelt said, was “really quite unworthy of Mr. Adams, or of anyone above the intel-

lectual level of Mr. Bryan, Mr. Henry George, or Mr. Bellamy.”

Still, the transformation of farmers and craftsmen into proletarians, the accumulation of huge private fortunes, the corporate domination of government, and a growing acceptance of the cynical wisdom that politicians were either criminals or fools indicated that apprehensions about the drift toward “imperatorship and anarchy,” as Henry George referred to it, were not misplaced. The acquisition of territorial possessions overseas offered another sign, not only to radicals and Populists but in this case to a considerable body of eminently respectable opinion, that the republican phase of American history had come to an end. The debate about the Spanish-American War and the annexation of the Philippines was one of the last occasions on which the old language of republicanism figured prominently in public affairs. Opponents of annexation stressed the choice between “republic and empire,” in the words of George S. Boutwell, president of the Anti-Imperialist League. They foresaw a standing army, the age-old “menace and terror of popular government.” They reminded the country of the republican truism that a “standing army means a reduction of wages.” According to Moorfield Storey, imperialism also meant a “great increase of wealth and fresh fields for corruption,” the “spoils system enormously extended,” and the “growth of a class little accustomed to respect the rights of their inferiors.” Acquisition of the Philippines represented a momentous departure from the country’s founding principles, the beginning of an all too familiar decline from republican simplicity into imperial corruption. History was repeating itself, anti-imperialists believed: the American people, like so many people before them, were about to exchange their liberties for the fatal promise of foreign conquest and military grandeur.

*Inconspicuous Consumption,
the “Superlative Machine”*

There were good reasons, then, for the “fin-de-siècle obsession with cataclysm” that has troubled historians. The subsequent development of industrial civilization does not justify the assumption that the modern world is exempt from the “law of civilization and decay.” If the nine-

teenth century's confidence in scientific laws of history now looks quaint and unsophisticated, its apprehensions about the future seem reasonable enough. If we peel away the pseudo-scientific pretensions with the help of which writers like Henry George and Brooks Adams hoped to get a hearing, we find a solid core of historical realism, and the question no longer presents itself as one of puzzling out subjective reasons for an otherwise unaccountable "obsession" with impending doom. The question is not why the new industrial and imperial order inspired premonitory visions of its decline and fall but why those misgivings were so quickly submerged in a renewed celebration of progress.

The reassertion of the old republican myth of historical cycles might have led to a reassertion of republican principles in politics, education, and social thought—a rededication to the ideal of citizenship that had played such an important part in the nation's founding. Instead, the idea of democracy came to be associated more and more closely with the prospect of universal abundance. America came to be seen as a nation not of citizens but of consumers. The association of progress with consumption, however much it compromised a participatory conception of democracy, enabled Americans to rehabilitate progressive ideology and to place it on a new and seemingly solid foundation.

Adam Smith had already pointed the way; and the impulse to return to Smith—his rediscovery by progressive economists and sociologists otherwise critical of laissez-faire economics—sheds a good deal of light on the intentions underlying the progressive movement of the early twentieth century. For the influential sociologist Albion Small, Smith was the founder of modern sociology, a farsighted moralist and social theorist who refused to separate "technical economics" from "social philosophy." If Smith had lived until the end of the nineteenth century, Small thought, his political opinions would have resembled those of a modern social democrat more closely than those of Herbert Spencer. Smith would have welcomed the effect of democracy "in setting free the physical and mental and moral energies of wage-earners," since it increased the demand for goods and led to a general improvement in the standard of living. Smith's followers, especially Spencer, had given liberalism a bad name, and its rehabilitation, accordingly, demanded a return to its eighteenth-century origins.

Small's unexpectedly admiring appraisal of Smith expressed the essence of the progressive strategy: to recapture the democratic potential of

capitalism itself and thus to forestall demands for more radical change. Small insisted that if nineteenth-century liberals had “cultivated the whole philosophy of their teacher, instead of an abstracted section of it”—economic theory lifted from its “necessary moorings” in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*—“much of the occupation of socialistic sectarians would have been gone.” Something of the same reasoning could be applied to the idea of progress, so much more vulnerable to criticism, it appeared, in its nineteenth-century Spencerian form than in the form given it by Smith. When Henry George attacked the “prevailing belief” that “natural selection . . . operates to improve and elevate the powers of man,” it was Spencer’s theory, after all, that he had chiefly in mind—the notion that “the struggle for existence . . . impels men to new efforts and inventions” and that this “capacity for improvement is fixed by hereditary transmission.” But progressive theorists like Small and Simon Patten no longer had to depend on Spencer; they scrapped Spencer’s social Darwinism and revived the theory of progress, in effect, in its original version.

Patten’s widely acclaimed treatise, *The New Basis of Civilization*, argued quite explicitly that the emergence of a “pleasure or surplus economy” effectively nullified the “ancient tragic model” of civilization and decay. “The story of the rise and fall of nations, repeated again and again, seems to justify the familiar conclusion that the decline of a society after an epoch of prosperity is a natural, incontrovertible law.” But “those who would predict to-morrow’s economic states from a study of the economic states of Rome or Venice” overlooked the unprecedented abundance made possible by the modern productive system, which placed civilization on a “new basis.” Their apprehensions belonged to a “vanishing age of deficit.” Thus Henry George and his followers maintained that “good lands and advantageous sites are scarce, and that multitudes are degraded by the pressure forcing them downward to poor locations.” On the contrary, man’s “dominion over nature” put an end to the “reign of want,” according to Patten. “The social surplus is the superlative machine brought forth in the machine age for the quickening of progress.”*

*By the time of the First World War, according to Guy Alchon, it had become a commonplace, especially among those who favored “managed capitalism” as an alter-

Patten's optimism required the corollary assumption, directly opposed to the linkage of poverty and progress insisted on by George and Adams, that the growth of inequality could be reversed. Like Smith (whose work he nowhere acknowledged, probably because he shared the common misperception of Smith as another "philosopher of deficit"), Patten saw inconspicuous consumption—the "broadened consuming power of the poor," not the lavish spending of the privileged classes—as the motor of social improvement. If poverty starved desire, riches led too quickly to satiation. Neither "sumptuary idleness" nor "hunger, disease, and stagnant misery" enlivened the imagination and generated a demand for improvements. The promise of abundance could be realized only by an energetic program of reform designed to reduce social extremes. It was essential, Patten thought, that the "stragglers of industry, the guerrillas of the subsistence line," be "incorporated" into the "steady ranks of disciplined producers." The "extension of civilization downward" demanded the demolition of the "social obstacles which divide men into classes." Workers had to be seen as potential consumers entitled to an "emotional corrective of the barren industrial grind." Consumption would expand their "wants" and create the "possibility of choice"—including the choice of deferred gratification over immediate indulgence. Their "investment in tomorrow's goods" would make it possible for "society to increase its output and to broaden its productive areas."

Both the progressive movement and the New Deal drew heavily on this kind of thinking, which linked progress to the democratization of consumption and held out the promise of a new civilization based on leisure for all. The same machines that admittedly took the meaning out of work would make it possible to "reduce hours of work and days of work to the lowest minimum," in the words of Patten's student and protégé, Rexford Tugwell, a leading theorist of the New Deal. Those who suffered from "historic homesickness," as Tugwell called it, might lament the decline of craftsmanship, but "the gains seem to most people . . . to outbalance the

native both to socialism and to laissez-faire, that the "enormous increase in the productive powers" of capitalism had "called into question the entire range of assumptions made under conditions of scarcity."

losses." Mechanization would enable workers to "find relief from otherwise intolerable conditions in higher wages, more leisure, better recreation." Only a "nostalgic" attachment to the work ethic and other obsolete ideals obscured the "prospect of final release from labor." With Patten, Tugwell believed that the coming age of abundance demanded a "new morality"—in Patten's more colorful formulation, one that challenged the cultural prestige of martyrdom and self-sacrifice, the "philosophy of development through pain," and the moral "art of wretchedness."

The second phase of the New Deal brought the political philosophy of consumerism to its fullest public acceptance. The early New Deal, with its "planned scarcity in agriculture" and its "collusive controls in industry," gave "priority to production over consumption," as Horace Kallen, Tugwell, and other consumerists pointed out. After 1935, however, the Roosevelt administration listened more attentively to Keynes and the Keynesians, made serious efforts to improve mass purchasing power, and even took a few halting steps toward the full-blown consumerist community contemplated by enthusiasts like Kallen. All of capitalism's ills, Kallen thought—the whole problem of social justice—could be reduced to the failure to see the worker as a consumer. The glorification of the producer—economic man—had thwarted the eighteenth-century promise of capitalism. The Declaration of Independence had recognized the primacy of consumption when it upheld the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. So had Adam Smith, who rightly took the position that "consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production," in Kallen's words. But these eighteenth-century insights had been forgotten, Kallen argued. "The farther [economists] are from Adam Smith, the more dominantly is their theme the producer. . . . Marx, the revolutionist, is even more deeply absorbed in him than John [Stuart] Mill, the traditionalist." Under the influence of Marx, Ruskin, and other false prophets, the labor movement adopted as its favorite slogans the "dignity of labor" and the "right to work." "Labor was lifted up from a menial necessity into a free man's dignity" and its "inherent indignities" and "servility" mistakenly attributed to the exploitation of one class by another.

Only when men and women came to see work in its true light, Kallen thought—as a necessarily disagreeable means to the "good life"—would they organize it in such a way as to minimize its importance, to relegate it to the periphery of social life, and to install consumption in its place as

the chief end of social existence. Instead of disparaging the “consummative appetite,” society needed to honor it and to understand that leisure, hitherto confined to the wealthy, could “without conflict be extended to all employees.”

The Keynesian Critique of Thrift

The Keynesian theory of savings and investment provided the intuitions of consumerists like Patten, Tugwell, and Kallen with a fully developed theoretical rationale. Trained by the eminent economist Alfred Marshall, who claimed to have discovered new formulas to explain why capitalist economies were self-regulating, Keynes eventually broke with the neo-classical school and came to side with the “brave army of heretics” led in his own country by liberal publicists like John A. Hobson. As early as 1889, Hobson challenged the orthodox consensus that savings and investment went hand in hand. Too much saving, according to Hobson, led to underconsumption and declining investment. “In appearing to question the virtue of unlimited thrift,” he later wrote, “I had committed the unpardonable sin.” Like Henry George, he found himself ostracized by academic economists. Keynes alone understood that “flair” and “instinct” had led Hobson “toward the right conclusion.” He himself could not be content, however, to rely on instinct. Having been “brought up in the citadel” of orthodox economics, he “recognized its power and might.” He refused to “rest satisfied” until he could identify the “flaw in that part of the orthodox reasoning that leads to the conclusions which seem to me unacceptable.”

The flaw, in effect, lay in the failure to reckon with the economic consequences of inequality, specifically with the “psychological law that when income increases, the gap between income and consumption will increase.” Since the wealthy could spend only a small portion of their vast incomes, their disproportionate share of the national wealth meant that aggregate savings rose disproportionately as national income increased. A higher volume of savings did not generate a higher volume of investment. It led to a decline of aggregate demand, declining investment, and unemployment. A “somewhat comprehensive socialization of invest-

ment," Keynes concluded, would "prove the only means of approximation to full employment." Government spending would put people to work, stimulate consumption, and forestall the need for a more radical attack on the problem of inequality. It would provide an alternative to a redistribution of income, in other words, even if many businessmen still found it difficult to distinguish "novel measures for safeguarding capitalism from what they call Bolshevism."

Orthodox economists had exaggerated the value of thrift, according to Keynes. They thought of the "accumulated wealth of the world as having been painfully built up out of [the] voluntary abstinence of individuals from the immediate enjoyment of consumption," when it should have been "obvious that mere abstinence is not enough by itself to build cities or drain fens." The expectation of profits, not abstinence, was the "engine that drives enterprise." Profits in turn presupposed a rising standard of living in the population as a whole and a general desire for a more abundant existence. Thrift was a miserly virtue, as Keynes saw it, appropriate only to conditions of scarcity. Money was meant to be spent, not hoarded. It had no value in itself. The morality of saving and hard work betrayed a lack of faith in the future, whereas "enterprise" required "animal spirits" and optimism. Keynesian theory elaborated the discovery already proclaimed by the advertising industry in the 1920s, that "prosperity lies in spending, not in saving," in the words of Earnest Elmo Calkins, one of the first advertisers to grasp the principle of "artificial obsolescence."*

*A Keynesian *avant la lettre*, Calkins distinguished between goods "we use" and "those we use up." Whereas Adam Smith had argued that economic expansion would be impelled by a growing demand for "things more durable" than the wasteful pleasures of the wealthy, Calkins interpreted the revolution of rising expectations as a demand for goods designed to be "used up" as quickly as possible. "Artificial obsolescence" meant the continual redesign of products, "entirely apart from any mechanical improvement, to make them markedly new, and encourage new buying, exactly as the fashion designers make skirts longer so you can no longer be happy with your short ones." The taste for "better things," as another advertising executive pointed out, thus demanded an "ideal of beauty . . . which happens to be current." No doubt Keynes had a more exalted ideal of beauty in mind when he welcomed the liberation of aesthetic appreciation from puritanical repression. But it was not always easy to distinguish the

In 1928, seven years before the appearance of his *General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, Keynes predicted, in a lecture on “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren,” that abundance would bring the work ethic into discredit. “We shall be able to rid ourselves of many of the pseudo-moral principles which have hag-ridden us for two hundred years, by which we have exalted some of the most distasteful of human qualities into the position of the highest virtues.” In the future, the acquisitive impulse—“the love of money as a possession, as distinguished from the love of money as a means to the enjoyments and realities of life”—would be recognized as a “somewhat disgusting morbidity, one of those semicriminal, semipathological propensities which one hands over with a shudder to the specialists in mental disease.”

Abundance, Keynes thought, would assure a “decent level of consumption for everyone” and make it possible to devote “our energies” to the “noneconomic interests of our lives.” Automation would eliminate drudgery, reduce the hours of work, and provide men and women with plenty of leisure. The economic virtues would be relegated to a subordinate place in the hierarchy of values; art and learning would come into their own. The idea that the state should confine its attention to “utilitarian and economic” questions would be recognized as the “most dreadful heresy, perhaps, which has ever gained the ear of a civilized people.” Now that the world was no longer haunted by the specter of scarcity, it was possible to appreciate the importance of the state’s patronage of art and education, the role it might play in raising the general level of taste. “The day is not far off,” Keynes wrote in 1924, “when the economic problem will take the back seat where it belongs, and . . . the head and the heart will be occupied . . . by the real problems—the problems of life and human relations, of creation and behavior and religion.”

The “behavioral” problems Keynes had in mind included “birth control and the use of contraceptives, marriage laws, the treatment of sexual

dictum of G. E. Moore, one of Keynes’s early mentors—that the “pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects” represented the highest goods—from the gospel of advertisers who vowed to help people “to enjoy life” and “to make living worthwhile.”

offenses and abnormalities, the economic position of women, the economic position of the family." As a feminist, a bisexual, a Malthusian, and a champion of the sexual revolution, Keynes repeatedly insisted that "the problem of population," as he put it in 1921, was "going to be not merely an economic problem, but in the near future the greatest of all political questions." The "principles of pacifism and population or birth control" represented the "prolegomena to any future scheme of social improvement." War and conquest, like the economic virtues of thrift and deferred gratification, belonged to the age of scarcity. So did the patriarchal oppression of women—the most striking instance of the failure of morals to keep pace with economic change. Under conditions of scarcity, women were valued chiefly as breeders, and the work ethic invaded even the most intimate relations, subjecting sexual pleasure to the duty of procreation. Rigidly defined norms of masculinity and femininity discouraged sexual experimentation. In their private lives, people no longer paid much attention to the old prohibitions, so obviously unsuited to conditions of abundance; but the official morality remained harsh and repressive. "In all these matters the existing state of the law and of orthodoxy is still medieval—altogether out of touch with civilized opinion and civilized practice and with what individuals, educated and uneducated, say to one another in private."

Civilized opinion, as Keynes understood it, demanded an expansion of the range of private choice. The notion of duty was outdated; one's highest duty was to oneself. When Keynes applied for exemption from military service, in 1916, he based his appeal on his right of private judgment. He did not argue the justice or injustice of England's war against Germany or the justice of war in general. He argued simply that conscription represented an intolerable infringement of his personal freedom of choice. He objected, he said, to surrendering his "liberty of judgment on so vital a question as undertaking military service." The British government granted Keynes a deferment, no doubt because he was more useful in the Treasury than in the army, without granting the substance of his argument. A government willing to recognize his "right of decision" as a general principle would not have been able to govern even in peacetime.

Whether Keynes considered the broader implications of his position is unclear; if pressed, he would probably have argued that only a handful of gifted individuals would ever force the issue in this way. His views of

conscription, like his views of everything else, were colored by his sense of himself as a member of a select circle of supremely enlightened, unconventional men and women whose intelligence and sensitivity exempted them from ordinary standards. "He had no egalitarian sentiment," wrote his first biographer, Roy Harrod. "... In morals the first claim upon the national dividend," in his judgment, "was to furnish those few, who were capable of 'passionate perception', with the ingredients of what modern civilization can provide by way of a 'good life.' "

As a student at Cambridge, Keynes found his element in the Apostles, a coterie of "immoralists," as he later described them, who "repudiated entirely customary morals, conventions, and traditional wisdom." The Bloomsbury set, which grew up around this undergraduate nucleus, self-consciously set out "to establish on French lines a society fit for the discerning minority," in the words of another biographer, Charles H. Hession. In a memoir written in the 1940s, Keynes acknowledged Bloomsbury's snobbery and "superficiality, not only of judgment, but also of feeling." He never modified his belief that civilization was a product of the "personality and the will of a very few," but he now took the position, having lived through two world wars and a global economic crisis, that civilization was altogether more "precarious" than he and his companions had been willing to admit in the confident years before World War I. "We were amongst the last of the Utopians, or Meliorists, ... who believe in a continuing moral progress by virtue of which the human race already consists of reliable, rational, decent people, ... who can be safely released from the outward restraints of convention and traditional standards and inflexible rules of conduct."

Keynes's memoir was slightly equivocal. Was the vision of men and women released from outward constraints—the essence of liberalism and the core of the belief in progress—wholly misguided or merely premature? When Keynes questioned the assumption that humanity "already" consisted of individuals who could dispense with convention, he left open the possibility that it might consist of such individuals in the long run. He went on to argue, however, that he and his contemporaries had "completely misunderstood human nature, including our own." Their "irreverence" for "traditional wisdom or the restraints of custom" derived from an excessive confidence in reason. "It did not occur to us to respect the extraordinary accomplishment of our predecessors in the ordering of

life . . . or the elaborate framework which they had devised to protect this order."

Keynes's theory of "abundance through full employment," as Hession notes, gave "new life to the old ideology of progress and national economic growth." At the same time, his belated appreciation of tradition brought to the surface, if only as an afterthought, a persisting undercurrent of uneasiness in progressive ideology. It was as if the idea of progress required as a kind of counterpoint an exaggerated and slightly sentimental "reverence" for the "restraints of custom." Keynes was neither the first nor the last exponent of progress to rediscover the value of "outward restraints" and "traditional standards" that his own work helped to undermine. But no other career exemplified the contradictory implications of progressive ideology quite so clearly: its assault on convention and its retrospective defense of convention; its theoretical commitment to democracy and its emotional aversion to democracy; its eagerness to assure the widest possible distribution of the good things in life and its deep-seated suspicion that most people were incapable of appreciating them. Keynes attacked the old ethic of thrift and saving head-on, by attempting to show that it was objectionable on economic as well as moral grounds. Yet he could not suppress the nagging reservation that an ethic of enjoyment might be incapable of eliciting the "religious" enthusiasm that capitalism required in its struggle with communism.

In *A Short View of Russia* (1925), Keynes spoke of his revulsion from a "creed which . . . exalts the boorish proletariat above the bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia." But the bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia, even though they embodied the "quality of life" and carried the "seeds of all human advancement," lacked the spirit of self-subordination. "Modern capitalism is absolutely irreligious, without internal union, without much public spirit, . . . a mere congeries of possessors and pursuers." Where could it find new sources of spiritual vitality? Keynes had no answer to this question except to say that "if irreligious capitalism is ultimately to defeat religious communism, it is not enough that it should be economically more efficient—it must be many times more efficient." With considerable ingenuity, Keynes proceeded to argue, in his *General Theory*, that capitalism could become "many times more efficient" not by calling on the people for sacrifices, as the communists did, but precisely by rejecting the principle of sacrifice as a drag on "enterprise." The possi-

bility remained, however, that a willingness to make sacrifices on behalf of some higher cause itself served an important human need, one that would be systematically thwarted in the age of abundance.

Optimism or Hope?

The attraction of progressive ideology, at least in its liberal version, thus turns out to be its greatest weakness: its rejection of a heroic conception of life. The concept of progress can be defended against intelligent criticism only by postulating an indefinite expansion of desires, a steady rise in the general standard of comfort, and the incorporation of the masses into the culture of abundance. It is only in this form that the idea of progress has survived the rigors of the twentieth century. More extravagant versions of the progressive faith, premised on the perfectibility of human nature—on the unrealized power of reason or love—collapsed a long time ago; but the liberal version has proved surprisingly resistant to the shocks to easy optimism administered in rapid succession by twentieth-century events.

Liberalism was never utopian, unless the democratization of consumption is itself a utopian ideal. It made no difficult demands on human nature. It presupposed nothing more strenuous in the way of motivation than intelligent self-interest. Horace Kallen spoke for most liberals when he deplored the “stupidity of the lordly men who are moved by self-interest, but not of the enlightened variety,” in whose minds the worker therefore “ceases to figure as a consumer at all.” He could still assume that a combination of governmental coercion and rational persuasion would either bring these unenlightened employers to their senses or lead to their replacement by a more intelligent class of employers. It was obvious to him, just as it had been obvious to Adam Smith, that almost everyone had a stake in increased productivity, higher wages, shorter hours of work, and a more creative use of leisure. Capitalism had “raised the general standard of living, . . . transformed scarcity into abundance, awakening wants where none had been before, multiplying few into many, bringing more and more varied goods to more people at lower prices, so that what had been formerly, if at all, available only to a few

. . . was now in reach of many of those who had produced much and consumed little." It remained only to complete the capitalist revolution by making the "blessings of leisure" available to all. No improvement in mental capacity was required in order for the desirability of this goal to be generally recognized; nor did its realization require altruism and self-sacrifice—only a willingness to subordinate short-term pleasures to long-term peace and prosperity.

But if humanity thrives on peace and prosperity, it also needs an occasional taste of battle. Men and women need to believe that "life is a critical affair," in Richard Niebuhr's words. They cannot be satisfied merely with the opportunity to choose their goals and "life-styles," in the current jargon; they need to believe that their choices carry serious consequences. In the Christian cosmos, the forces of good and evil waged a mighty struggle for man's soul, and every action had to be weighed in the scales of eternity. Communism endowed everyday actions with the same kind of cosmic significance, as Keynes and many others understood. In 1940, George Orwell made the same point about fascism. The Western democracies, he observed, had come to think that "human beings desire nothing beyond ease, security, and avoidance of pain." Whatever else could be said about it, fascism was "psychologically far sounder than any hedonistic conception of life." Hitler knew that men and women wanted more than "comfort, safety, short working-hours, hygiene, birth control." "Whereas socialism, and even capitalism . . . have said to people, 'I offer you a good time,' Hitler has said to them, 'I offer you struggle, danger, and death,' and as a result a whole nation flings itself at his feet."

In the same year, Lewis Mumford offered an analysis of the "sleek progressive mind" that could easily have been written by Orwell himself. Progressives, according to Mumford, believed that human nature is deflected from its natural goodness only by external conditions beyond the individual's control. Having no sense of sin, they discounted inherent obstacles to moral development and therefore could not grasp the need for a "form-giving discipline of the personality." They scorned the discipline gained through manual labor, the endurance of discomfort, and the nurture of the young. They sought to free mankind from all manner of hardship and adversity, from the boredom of domestic drudgery, and from natural processes in general. Societies based on progressive principles, Mumford wrote, renounced every larger goal in favor of the "pri-

vate enjoyment of life." They had created a race of men and women who "deny because of their lack of experience that life has any other meanings or values or possibilities." Such people "eat, drink, marry, bear children and go to their grave in a state that is at best hilarious anesthesia, and at its worst is anxiety, fear, and envy, for lack of the necessary means to achieve the fashionable minimum of sensation."

Confronted with this kind of indictment, progressives usually reply that discipline and adversity are all very well for those who can take a certain level of material security for granted but that impoverished masses can hardly be expected to listen to such appeals. Until everyone enjoys a decent standard of living, material improvement will therefore remain the overriding objective of democratic societies. The trouble with this argument is that political pressure for a more equitable distribution of wealth can come only from movements fired with religious purpose and a lofty conception of life. Without popular initiative, even the limited goal of a democratization of comfort cannot be realized. The favored few cannot be expected to consult the needs of the many, even if their own interests may be served, at least in the long run, by raising the general level of consumption. If the many now enjoy some of the comforts formerly restricted to the few, it is because they have won them through their own political efforts, not because the wealthy have freely surrendered their privileges or because the market automatically assures abundance for all.

Popular initiative, however, has been declining for some time—in part because the democratization of consumption is an insufficiently demanding ideal, which fails to call up the moral energy necessary to sustain popular movements in the face of adversity. The history of popular movements, including the civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties—the last such uprising in American history—shows that only an arduous, even a tragic, understanding of life can justify the sacrifices imposed on those who seek to challenge the status quo.

The idea of progress alone, we are told, can move men and women to sacrifice immediate pleasures to some larger purpose. On the contrary, progressive ideology weakens the spirit of sacrifice. Nor does it give us an effective antidote to despair, even though it owes much of its residual appeal to the fear that its collapse would leave us utterly without hope. Hope does not demand a belief in progress. It demands a belief in justice:

a conviction that the wicked will suffer, that wrongs will be made right, that the underlying order of things is not flouted with impunity.* Hope implies a deep-seated trust in life that appears absurd to those who lack it. It rests on confidence not so much in the future as in the past. It derives from early memories—no doubt distorted, overlaid with later memories, and thus not wholly reliable as a guide to any factual reconstruction of past events—in which the experience of order and contentment was so intense that subsequent disillusionments cannot dislodge it. Such experience leaves as its residue the unshakable conviction, not that the past was better than the present, but that trust is never completely misplaced, even though it is never completely justified either and therefore destined inevitably to disappointments.

If we distinguish hopefulness from the more conventional attitude known today as optimism—if we think of it as a character trait, a temperamental predisposition rather than an estimate of the direction of historical change—we can see why it serves us better, in steering troubled waters ahead, than a belief in progress. Not that it prevents us from expecting the worst. The worst is always what the hopeful are prepared for. Their trust in life would not be worth much if it had not survived disappointments in the past, while the knowledge that the future holds further disappointments demonstrates the continuing need for hope. Believers in progress, on the other hand, though they like to think of themselves as the party of hope, actually have little need of hope, since they have history on their side. But their lack of it incapacitates them for intelligent action. Improvidence, a blind faith that things will somehow work out for the best, furnishes a poor substitute for the disposition to see things through even when they don't.

*Some such conviction kept alive the hope of emancipation among slaves in the antebellum South, as Eugene D. Genovese and other scholars have made clear. It would be absurd to attribute to the slaves a belief in progress, on the grounds that they hoped for the promised land of freedom. It was Christianity, Genovese argues, that "gave them a firm yardstick with which to measure the behavior of their masters, to judge them," and to articulate a "promise of deliverance as a people in this world as well as the next."

ated by modern science and modern production—into question. The promise of universal abundance has always contained egalitarian implications without which it would have carried very little moral authority. Those implications were open to conflicting interpretations. Some people argued that it was enough to increase the general pool of goods and services, in the expectation that everyone's standard of living would rise as a result. Others demanded more radical measures designed not merely to increase the total wealth but to distribute it more equitably. But no one who believed in progress conceived of a limit on productive capacity as a whole. No one envisioned a return to a more frugal existence; such views fell outside the progressive consensus.

The belated discovery that the earth's ecology will no longer sustain an indefinite expansion of productive forces deals the final blow to the belief in progress. A more equitable distribution of wealth, it is now clear, requires at the same time a drastic reduction in the standard of living enjoyed by the rich nations and the privileged classes. Western nations can no longer hold up their standard of living and the enlightened, critical, and progressive culture that is entangled with it as an example for the rest of the world. Nor can the privileged classes within the West—and these include the professional class as well as the very rich—except to solve the problem of poverty by taking everyone into their own ranks. Even if this were a morally desirable solution, it is no longer feasible, since the resources required to sustain a new-class style of life, hitherto imagined to be inexhaustible, are already approaching their outer limit. Under these conditions, the universalistic pretensions of the new class cannot be taken seriously. Indeed they are deeply offensive, not only because they embody a very narrow ideal of the good life but because the material prerequisites for this particular form of the good life cannot be made universally available.

Populism against Progress

The same developments that make it impossible for those who believe in progress to speak with confidence and moral authority compel us to give a more attentive hearing to those who rejected it all along. If progressive

ideologies have dwindled down to a wistful hope against hope that things will somehow work out for the best, we need to recover a more vigorous form of hope, which trusts life without denying its tragic character or attempting to explain away tragedy as “cultural lag.” We can fully appreciate this kind of hope only now that the other kind, better described as optimism, has fully revealed itself as a higher form of wishful thinking. Progressive optimism rests, at bottom, on a denial of the natural limits on human power and freedom, and it cannot survive for very long in a world in which an awareness of those limits has become inescapable. The disposition properly described as hope, trust, or wonder, on the other hand—three names for the same state of heart and mind—asserts the goodness of life in the face of its limits. It cannot be defeated by adversity. In the troubled times to come, we will need it even more than we needed it in the past.

Limits and hope: these words sum up the two lines of argument I have tried to weave together. One line of argument seeks to distinguish between hope and optimism and to explore the implications of that distinction. The other explores some of the political and ideological expressions of the sense of limits. It is their recognition of limits alone that justifies consideration of such a great variety of political movements and schools of thought as in any sense part of a single tradition or sensibility. This sensibility—call it populist or petty-bourgeois, for lack of a better term—was defined, in the first place, by deep reservations about the progressive scheme of history. The idea that history, like science, records a cumulative unfolding of human capacities and that modern civilization is heir to all the achievements of the past ran counter to common sense—that is, to the experience of loss and defeat that makes up so much of the texture of daily life. “Are there no calamities in history?” Orestes Brownson demanded. “Nothing tragic?” Brownson and other opponents of “improvement” found little evidence of cumulative enlightenment. Officially discredited concepts like nemesis, fate, fortune, or providence seemed to speak more directly to human experience, in their view, than the concept of progress.

Their political sensibility, in the second place, was formed by a more modest assessment of the economic aspirations appropriate to human beings than the progressive assessment. Those who believed in progress were impressed by the technological conquest of scarcity and the collec-

tive control over nature that seemed to be inherent in the productive machinery of modern societies. Abundance, they believed, would eventually give everyone access to leisure, cultivation, refinement—advantages formerly restricted to the wealthy. Luxury for all: such was the noble dream of progress. Populists, on the other hand, regarded a competence, as they would have called it—a piece of earth, a small shop, a useful calling—as a more reasonable as well as a more worthy ambition. “Competence” had rich moral overtones; it referred to the livelihood conferred by property but also to the skills required to maintain it. The ideal of universal proprietorship embodied a humbler set of expectations than the ideal of universal consumption, universal access to a proliferating supply of goods. At the same time, it embodied a more strenuous and morally demanding definition of the good life. The progressive conception of history implied a society of supremely cultivated consumers; the populist conception, a whole world of heroes.

By progressive standards, the ideal of a society composed of small producers was narrow, provincial, and reactionary. It bore the stigma of its petty-bourgeois origins—a refusal to face the future. Contempt for petty-bourgeois backwardness, respectability, and religiosity became the hallmark of the progressive mind. The enlightened caricature of lower-middle-class culture contained undeniable elements of truth; otherwise it would have been unrecognizable even as a caricature. As time went on and large-scale enterprise crowded out small producers, petty-bourgeois movements became increasingly defensive and allied themselves with some of the worst impulses in modern life—anti-intellectualism, xenophobia, racism. But the same tradition of plebeian radicalism gave rise to the only serious attempt to answer the great question of twentieth-century politics: what was to replace proprietorship as the material foundation of civic virtue?

It also gave rise to the most impressive attempts to organize a mode of political action that would overcome resentment and thus break the “endless cycle” of coercion and injustice, as Reinhold Niebuhr called it. If the lower middle class was often attracted to a politics of envy and resentment, for that very reason it grasped the importance of a “spiritual discipline” against it. The progressive tradition, on the other hand, never grappled either with the question of proprietorship and virtue or with the question formulated by Niebuhr in 1932: “If social cohesion is impossi-

ble without coercion, and coercion is impossible without the creation of social injustice, and the destruction of injustice is impossible without the use of further coercion, are we not in an endless cycle of social conflict?"

The exhaustion of the progressive tradition—and this tradition, broadly defined, includes not only the left but the Reaganite right as well, which is no less beguiled by the vision of endless economic expansion—betrays itself in its inability to confront these fundamental questions of modern politics or the equally urgent question of how the living standards of the rich can be extended to the poor, on a global scale, without putting an unbearable burden on the earth's natural resources. The need for a more equitable distribution of wealth ought to be obvious, both on moral and on economic grounds, and it ought to be equally obvious that economic equality cannot be achieved under an advanced system of capitalist production. What is not so obvious is that equality now implies a more modest standard of living for all, not an extension of the lavish standards enjoyed by the favored classes in the industrial nations to the rest of the world. In the twenty-first century, equality implies a recognition of limits, both moral and material, that finds little support in the progressive tradition.

The populist tradition offers no panacea for all the ills that afflict the modern world. It asks the right questions, but it does not provide a ready-made set of answers. It has generated very little in the way of an economic or political theory—its most conspicuous weakness. Its advocates call for small-scale production and political decentralization, but they do not explain how those objectives can be achieved in a modern economy. Lacking a clearly developed theory of production, populists have always fallen easy prey to paper money fads and other nostrums, just as they fall prey to the kind of social resentments exploited so effectively by the new right. A populism for the twenty-first century would bear little resemblance to the new right or to populist movements in the past, for that matter. But it would find much of its moral inspiration in the popular radicalism of the past and more generally in the wide-ranging critique of progress, enlightenment, and unlimited ambition that was drawn up by moralists whose perceptions were shaped by the producers' view of the world. The problem of "unearned increment" gave rise both to a distinctive kind of politics and to a distinctive tradition of moral speculation drawn from everyday experience (as well as from the heightened experience of spiritual fervor) and unlikely, therefore, to go out of fashion.