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Whatever Happened to the Idea of Progress?

The idea of progress – human flourishing in all its dimensions – has permeated Western thinking since ancient times.

It has been defined as the belief that material, political, social, intellectual and moral conditions have continually improved throughout human history and that such an improvement will continue in the foreseeable future.

Belief in progress characterised the writings of the philosophers and classical economists of the 18th century Enlightenment, and nurtured the agricultural and industrial revolutions of that era.

Historians describe the Great Exhibition in London in 1851 as a kind of ode to progress, a celebration of Britain's industrial and engineering accomplishments and the Victorian spirit of optimism.

Progress was seen as solving problems to benefit humanity: building roads and bridges, crossing oceans and continents, advancing scientific knowledge, giving people access to better food and housing, eliminating diseases, spreading freedom and democracy.

Despite wars and depressions, the manifestations of progress have broadened and in many ways accelerated in the last hundred years.

Life expectancy in the industrialised countries has increased from not much more than 30 years in 1750 to around 80 years today.

The average citizen in these countries takes for granted services such as medical and dental treatment that the privileged citizens of earlier times could only dream about.

Just the past 25 years have seen more people lifted out of poverty in countries like China and India than in the whole of previous human history.

There have been revolutions in literacy, equality for women, attitudes towards the environment, the treatment of animals and much more.

The idea of progress is not utopian; it is about improvement. In a public policy context, for example, the relevant issue is not whether a policy change achieves a perfect solution but whether it is a move in the right direction.

There have always been enemies of progress. Critics have typically been of a conservative or pessimistic bent, regarding social changes as for the worse and fearing future catastrophes.

Such biases are not necessarily all bad. Commentators have suggested that the appetite for bad news rather than good news in the media partly reflects people's concern to identify and manage the risks of everyday life, which is essential for human survival.

But anti-progress notions from Malthusian economics to Club of Rome views about limits to growth are dangerous if they give rise to public and political reactions that limit the potential for human flourishing.

Such reactions persist despite abundant evidence of humankind's ability to increase food supplies, improve air and water quality, protect the ozone layer and cope with population growth.

Contemporary reactions take various forms.

Concerns about population growth persist, despite evidence that birth rates systematically decline as societies grow richer. Jonathon Porritt's Optimum Population Trust says "population limitation should ... be seen as the most cost-effective carbon offsetting strategy available to individuals and nations", and Canadian environmentalist David Suzuki actually talks of human "diebacks".

Yet population projections suggest there are no threats to the carrying capacity of the world, and such views overlook the creativity and innovation associated with more and better educated human minds.

Another reaction is the modern notion of sustainability, which invokes fear rather than excitement about the future, and anti-growth attitudes.

Yet growth and development given proper stewardship (for example, of resources such as fisheries) *are* sustainable. The ultimate resource is the human mind. Science advances and with it the potential for ongoing improvements in material living standards.

The fashionable academic preoccupation with happiness can be seen as another reaction to the idea of progress. No sensible person argues that GDP is everything, or denies that many other things like leisure, culture, relationships and community contribute to personal happiness.

But most people prefer to be materially better off than worse off, and the happiness idea leads to proposals for therapeutic interventions by governments which have little prospect of succeeding: “I’m bald, fat and grumpy. What’s the government going to do about it?”

We can also see anti-progress ideas in the so-called ‘precautionary principle’ and the general aversion to risk associated with much modern regulation of health and safety.

Such regulation must always reflect a proper balancing of benefits and costs if society is not to impoverish itself, and the role of individual responsibility must be set against the case for government intervention.

Risk-taking is essential to human progress, and the nanny state becomes a source of risk if it displaces resilience in human behaviour.

The idea of progress is an inspiring one. Most people want a better life for themselves and their children.

Since the Dark Ages, with temporary interruptions, the trend has been for life on earth to get better. Today countries like China and India are riding high on optimism while an excess of pessimistic thinking afflicts societies like our own.

It is time to reclaim the idea of progress.

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