

Midnight in the Century

Notes against Progress

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*“... memory needs to reestablish the thread of time to recover the central point of view from which the road forward may be discovered. From that point begins the reconquest of the capacity for critical judgment that will be based on verifiable facts, that will be able to respond to the degradation of life, and that will precipitate the split in society, the preliminary moment for a revolution, proposing the historical question par excellence, that is, the **question of progress**.”*

“History of Ten Years”, *Encyclopédie des Nuisances*, No. 2

Made famous by the Enlightenment, in its origins the idea of Progress was almost subversive. The Church imposed the dogmas of creation and permanence that established the immutability of living beings, created by the divinity just as they were, which is why there are very few lines in the Encyclopedia under the caption of “Progress”, which is simply defined as “forward movement”. On the other hand, Diderot and the other Encyclopedists did not consider civilized society to be superior to the society of the savages—quite the contrary—which is why their position with regard to progress was sceptical or reserved, to say the least. For one reason or another, the idea was imposed in Europe during the Industrial Revolution. As Mumford said, “*progress was the equivalent in history of mechanical motion through space*”. It was the interpretation of the fact of change as something that only went in one direction, in which going backwards, or decline or regression, were explicitly excluded. Enlightenment thought interpreted industrial production as the herald of a world free of religious prejudices and ruled by Reason, where happiness would be within the reach of everyone. The reality often contradicted this interpretation, but the contradiction was resolved by supposing that backwards movement formed part of the advance; for example, it was assumed that the ugliness of industrialized society was pregnant with a future in which material abundance would be the rule and freedom its result. And to top it all off, science would solve all problems, the economy would grow and the democratic state would offer equality before the law in the realm of distribution. Every coin has an obverse side, however, and under the blows of science, statism and productivity, progress has led us to the verge of disaster: science and technology have transformed the means of production into increasingly more powerful means of destruction; economic development has engendered inequality, social injustice and poverty everywhere, and in the process has devastated the natural environment; the state

has become a many-tentacled bureaucratic monster that devours the life of its subjects. Social and ecological disasters have become common currency and dissatisfaction, like the crisis, has become generalized. Individuals, crushed by production and politics, are incapable of mastering their fates. Within them resides a void that has been accumulating for more than two centuries that renders them utterly incapable of formulating and communicating their dissatisfaction, although for the first time ever the belief in a better future is generally collapsing. Confronted by the real possibility that the world is now plunging into even greater difficulties that augur its doom in the not-too-distant future, the idea of the future has lost all its relevance. In view of these regressions on such a vast scale, the sufferings of past generations seem to have been in vain. This is significant because all emancipatory ideas from the French Revolution up to May 1968 were justified in the name of scientific reason and progress.

For the progressivists, science revealed inexorable economic and social laws whose historical necessity was not questioned, since, inscribed in the nature of things, they were beyond all human designs: in order to be equitable and just we have to acknowledge and obey them. The founding principle was the one that postulated the continuous and unlimited perfectibility of the human being, by virtue, according to Godwin, the first to refer to anarchy, of the empire of scientific Reason. Fourier said that it was the desire of nature that barbarism would tend by stages to reach civilization. Proudhon even claimed that the idea of Progress replaced the ideal of the Absolute in philosophy. Marx designated the working class as its main historical agent, as the “greatest productive force”. The historical process, according to Hegel, as it moved forward left the Idea (progress) in its wake. His disciple Marx taught us that this process was nothing but a natural unfolding of economic stages in obedience to laws against which the human will was powerless; the human will was, furthermore, determined by these same laws. It was the historical process associated with the scientific and technical development of production that lay at the heart of the Marxist doctrine that was so effectively criticized by Bakunin, a doctrine in which it was implicit that the scientific knowledge of its laws would enlighten a class of leaders who, organized in the party, would guide the masses in a revolution that aimed at the best possible destiny in a classless society. There were some powerful blows directed at metaphysics and religion, but they did not overthrow them; to the contrary, they reinforced them with a new superstition: scientific superstition.

Scientific fetishism is the substance of the idea of Progress. For the progressivists of every school science appears as the remedy for every evil. All thought must adopt its methods and accept its conclusions. Reflections on truth, justice or equality that are not framed in the context of science are defined as metaphysical disquisitions. Whereas religion was a thing of the past, science belonged to the highly developed future, to progress. The two were less incompatible than was believed, however. In progressivism, science shows itself to be not just knowledge, but faith. Saint-Simon, one of the first socialist reformers, considered his followers to be “engineer evangelists” and “apostles of the new religion of industry”. For his schismatic student Comte, science elevated man to the status of “*supreme head of the economy of nature ... at the head of the living hierarchy*”, awakening in him “*the noble desire of honorable incorporation with the supreme existence*”, and, as a result, leading him to a “*perfect unity*” with the “*Great-Being*”, the definitive form of existence. The most widely-read book of the 19th century, *Looking Backward*, a technoscientific utopia written by Edward Bellamy, described the process of becoming conscious of the inhumanity of social relations in religious terms: “*The sunburst, after so long and dark a night, must needs have had a dazzling effect. (...) It is evident that nothing was able to stand against the*

enthusiasm which the new faith inspired. (...) For the first time since the creation every man stood up straight before God. (...) the way stretches far before us, but the end is lost in light. For twofold is the return of man to God..." "The divinity had implanted the idea of Progress in the hearts of men, judged by which our past attainments seem always insignificant, and the goal never nearer." The roots that had only recently been torn from the ground of religion now grew in a similar soil thanks to the fascination inspired by scientific magic. Divine authority had only just been overthrown, and now the new faith promised to make men into mortal gods inhabiting a techno-scientific Olympia. But because the economy was based on the separation of individuals from one another, on the separation between them and the product of their activity, and on the separation of the latter from nature, its development based on science generated a surplus value of irrationality. Soon a new kind of leader appeared, inspired by scientific assumptions, dubious traits that with the passage of time became predominant, both in the capitalist and socialist camp; the tendency to justify the means by the end, the present by the future, or the real by the ideal, for example; the ruling class appealed to the urgent imperatives of the situation of the moment in order to destroy the poetry of the liberating revolution, postponing *sine die* an ever less substantial justice and liberty. Thus, the social life propagated first by the bourgeoisie, and later by the bureaucratic class born from the revolution, tended to regulate itself in accordance with pragmatic criteria, renouncing the dictates of objective reason; the latter were reduced to their utilitarian, subjective and formalistic dimension. As a result, while moral conduct dissolved into mean-spirited egoism, economic and political order were secured. Comte, whose political slogan was "Order and Progress", had already specified that, "in all cases, considerations relating to progress are subordinated to those relating to order". And going even further back in history, an enlightened precursor like Fontanelle maintained that the truth, the principal determination of Reason, had to be subordinated to criteria of utility, and even sacrificed altogether if social conventions so required. The same thing can be said of all the other determinations. The bourgeois class, and behind it the bureaucracy, in order to liquidate Reason, invented a new pseudo-rationalist metaphysics that was manifested as blind faith in scientific discoveries, technical innovations and economic development, a faith designated as "materialism", which was destined to lead to a perpetual present of irrationality and barbarism. Stalinism, for example, demonstrated that not even history had progressed enough and that historical progress had been nothing but an ideology at the service of a new ruling class, the party bureaucracy, which was used to disguise oppression on a colossal scale. After a certain level of this revered progress had been attained, which led to the first world war and the rise of Nazism, its negative effects have so far surpassed its positive effects that it constitutes a threat to the survival of the human species: in the subsequent stage of development the ultimate end of progress was then revealed to be the end of humanity, first materialized in nuclear weapons, and then in the police state and the industrialization of life, and finally in pollution and global warming. If history continues along the course laid out by progressivist *hubris* in all its variants, the endpoint will be desolation, not the Eden of the happy consumer or the communist paradise.

The idea of Progress establishes an ascendant trajectory from the societies labeled as primitive to today's modern civilization. In practice, it means incessant transformation of the social environment and constant renewal of the economic conditions that determine that environment. The present is nothing but a passing stage on the road to a better future. This idea, however, considers contemporary society to be superior to all preceding epochs and above all contemplates the evolution of society as the fulfillment of its own evolution. The future is nothing but the

apotheosis of the present. In reality, the future vanishes in ideology, leaving nothing of progressivism but a vulgar apology for what exists. This is why the entire ruling class, in politics and the economy, proclaims progress as a symbol of its identity because, to the degree that it dominates the present, it re-inscribes the past, of which it feels it is the heir, and conjures up the specter of the future over which it never relinquishes control. Progress is “its” progress. Leaders make progress, despite their redundancy, thanks to the progress of ignorance and control, leading to ever more gigantic institutional structures. Just think of the possibilities of rule that are opened up by the technological systems of surveillance or mass culture, not to speak of the extension of the state educational model in which the first progressivists placed their hopes, which has created a functional form of ignorance that the virtual space has generalized. This explains why individuals, however far science has progressed, are less capable now than ever before of being the masters of their fates. What they call Progress these days does not lead to the enlightenment of the mind or to personal autonomy because the only thing it aims at is economic growth and the consumerist way of life associated with the latter. The separate power to which it lays claim requires egotistical and fearful, or better yet, mechanized beings. It does not want beings who think for themselves and are capable of orienting their moral conduct in accordance with objective knowledge, but people who are unreflective and standardized, absorbed by the accessory and the instantaneous, and gripped by fear—people programmed to bow before the messages received from the apparatus of domination. The standardization and commodification of all human activities produces the characteristic irrationality which our leaders consecrate with the name of progress; meanwhile, genetic engineering is constructing its biotechnological foundations. The culture of truth and justice does not flourish in such progress, but its image serves as an alibi for slavery and oppression. Alleged social advances are always accompanied by unconsciousness, dehumanization and anomie, in such a manner that this Progress eliminates its most important postulate: the idea of the emancipated, free man.

Let us recapitulate. At first, the modern concept of Progress was the offspring of the defeat of religion by Reason. The victory of Reason, however, was only apparent, that is, it was not the victory of humanization. We have already spoken of the degradation of Reason to an instrument of power. Now we shall speak of the consequences of this degeneration for nature. By imposing a rational conception of the world that supplanted the religious worldview, nature was desacralized and the world disenchanting. It lost all its meaning and was subsequently viewed with indifference as an inert object and a raw material; basically, as a warehouse of resources. This antagonism between a nature that had been stripped of meaning and a pillaging civilization was embodied in a series of ambiguous concepts like success, welfare, development, and ... progress. Human activity ceased to celebrate its mysterious relation to nature and proceeded, not to consider it rationally by trying to understand its truth in order to be able to orient itself accordingly, but to dominate it. Then, by converting it into an object subject to endless exploitation, what was really achieved was the forced adaptation of individuals to the coercive social environment that was engendered during this process. The price of progress was the subjection of life to the pragmatic rationalization imposed by the commodity and the state in which means are confounded with ends: life obeyed progress, rather than the reverse. Life enslaved to progress was the crucible where objective reason was forged and all the concepts that constituted its core evaporated: truth, justice, happiness, equality, solidarity, tolerance, freedom.... As Horkheimer concluded: “*Domination of nature involves domination of man*”. The tyranny exercised over nature entailed as a consequence the simultaneous submission and brutalization of the human being. The evacuation

of the conscience was deduced from the mechanistic conception of man. The most extreme of all the materialist philosophers, La Mettrie, already conceived of the human being as a machine that winds its own springs, and considered thought to be a byproduct of mechanical activity of lesser importance. Such an unprecedented idea, formulated in the middle of the 17th century during the intellectual struggle against metaphysical systems and religions, provided a scientific foundation for the manipulability of the human species, something that the ruling classes of later times took very seriously. By an irony of history, religion had nothing to lose in this battle. One hundred years later, Boolean algebra, which made possible the mechanical simulation of human thought, reduced the latter to a simple mathematical representation, in pursuit of nothing less than “revelation from the mind of God”. If we ascend by the road of binary mathematics, there is no room for doubt that digital computers are bringing us closer to the divinity, which is no longer in the heavens, but in virtual space.

Once the obscurantist side of science had been revealed, as extreme specialization divided knowledge into stagnant compartments, and its inability to provide a holistic, unitary and coherent conception of the world that would constitute individuals and reinforce their connections with nature became manifest, technology stood alone as the last fetishism to denounce. In the latest phases of capitalist domination, progress is equivalent to technical progress, since the experts who work on behalf of the latter attribute to technology the prospect of ultimate salvation, which has been transformed by employers, politicians and fanatical disinformers into an almost millenarian orthodoxy. With technology, the evils of development will be cured with more development. As a result, technology has created an artificial and hierarchical environment that is alien to social needs, an environment within which all of everyday life transpires, a second nature that completely determines the social order. Individuals have escaped from the constraints of natural conditioning only to be enslaved by machines. Machines intervene in relations between humans and now mediate between humans and nature, preventing any direct relation. Man, climbing aboard the wagon of progress, is definitively isolated from his own kind and cut off from the cosmos, which he does not view as something that is alive, nor does he consider that he is part of it. The British biologist and crystallographer John Bernal celebrates this emancipation from natural servitude in his book, *The World, the Flesh and the Devil*: “*The cardinal tendency of progress is the replacement of an indifferent chance environment by a deliberately created one. As time goes on, the acceptance, the appreciation, even the understanding of nature, will be less and less needed.*” The human mind capitulates before the mechanistic concept and worships technology. Automation collaborates in this process. The individual considers himself free to the extent that he allows himself to be led by machines, which now comprise his environment; machines do all the work and even spare him the labor of reflection. But freedom of a mechanistic order excludes the right to not use machines. Everyone depends on them and no one can live on the margins, that is, no one can live in opposition to Progress.

In a quantitative world, technical reason values reflex reactions above intelligence, efficiency above meaning, and calculation above truth, in such a way that when you hear someone speak of “artificial intelligence”, it is not because artifacts have become capable of thought, but because human thought has become mechanical. For the visionaries of total dehumanization, *machina sapiens* is nothing more than the transfer of our mental legacy to a mechanical progeny, since man, immersed in a technological universe, functions like a machine and the machine functions like a human automaton. His destiny, as the current conditions of existence indicate, is “to pass the torch of life and intelligence to the computer”. The conclusion that is drawn from this cir-

cumstance, however, is not the rejection of technology, but the rejection of the role that it plays in the current historical period of capitalist rule, beginning with its redemptive religious function that is so widely shared by the masses. Technology, insofar as it facilitates the metabolism between humans and nature, is necessary. The tool was created for man. But when it becomes the discourse of power, i.e., technology, it becomes a threat to the survival of the species. Technology follows a road that begins with basic human needs and ends by creating its own world. That is the moment of its autonomy, the moment when it takes over. Everyday life is powerless against an invasive technology that constantly alters society as it introduces an endless series of innovations. If we were to make an inventory today of what it has contributed to and what it has taken from society, the result could not be more negative. On the one side of the ledger, the implantation of *homo oeconomicus*, the man who is motivated solely by self-interest, in one part of the world, and an increase in the level of superfluous consumption. On the other side of the ledger, the pauperization and exploitation of the other part of the world, the depletion of resources, the accumulation of armaments and the destruction of the planet. One may thus confirm that the biggest social problem is not the lack of development, but development itself. It is not the lack of technology, but the absence of human goals.

Unlike “primitive” cultures, materialist civilization is indifferent to its dependence on the environment and for that reason has never attempted to preserve any kind of equilibrium with its natural surroundings. Its need for growth, disguised as progress, led it to contaminate the soil, corrupt the air, adulterate the food, and poison the water, and to exacerbate social differences and endanger the health of the population. The accelerated destruction of the natural and social environment that we are now experiencing cannot be avoided but will get even worse: it is the fruit of the dynamic of the system itself, which needs to grow as much as possible. Acts of aggression against the land have become habitual and the problem is not so much their immediate impacts as their cumulative effects, which assume the form of the energy crisis, nuclear disasters and global warming. The new environmental consciousness of our leaders emerges on the scene in order to make destruction itself profitable, which is inevitable, since it is inscribed in the dominant mode of production and consumption. Today, progress colors itself green in order to turn its imperfections into business opportunities; actually, it does not have any other disguise to wear: its constant demands compel it to engage in the over-exploitation of the land. In the kingdom of the commodity, everything has a price, from the air that we breathe to the rural districts we visit; from now on, however, this price must be determined by environmental considerations. The leaders who have been converted to environmentalism must incorporate the cost of certain instances of collateral damage of the ongoing disaster into the final price-tag if they want the foundations of industrial society to continue to exist without transformation. Should they be transformed, for them this would be the end of Progress; for us, however, Progress is the end.

The critique of the idea of Progress leads us along dangerous roads that skirt the edges of ideological abysses. From the philosophical point of view, the demolition of progressivist materialism does not imply a return to the duality of matter and spirit, nor is it a rickety bridge to nihilism. Nor does the rejection of a teleological history necessarily signify the rejection of history. The denial of a scientific ethic does not lead to the impugning of science as such any more than the inanity of the current educational system excludes the idea of education. Simply stated, the assertion that history does not have a plan, and that it does not conceal a purpose, that historical laws are not laws since the history of humanity is a process of becoming rather than one of consummation; that scientific knowledge is not itself the social beacon and that the trans-

mission of experience from one generation to another does not function by way of educational institutions. We have claimed that social contradictions are ultimately derived from the contradictions between society and nature that have been revealed by history. But we are the offspring of enlightenment Reason, not of the Bhagavad-Gita or the Early Paleolithic era, which is why we think that these contradictions will not be resolved by elevating nature to the rank of supreme principle, nor will their disappearance be magically effected with the help of Heaven or the holy scriptures, or by encouraging a return to natural religion or to the past. Good intentions of that kind mitigate neither the crisis of rational thought nor that of the world, but instead nourish irrational ideologies and fundamentalist movements that only make these crises more acute. The critique of the idea of Progress is neither a revolt against Reason nor against intellectual training and knowledge, much less against civilization in general; it is a critique of its degradation and its decline. It does not appeal to Transcendence, a New Science or Tradition, but to thought that is free of chains, thought that, subverting the ideological foundations of the system, leads human beings to a rational unity and harmony with nature.

Not only are we the offspring of the Enlightenment; we are also the offspring of Romanticism, of its will for truth, beauty and action, and of its search for spirituality and mystery. We rebel in the name of Reason and logic, yes, but also in the name of emotion, passion and desire. While the man who wants to be free does not want to exchange old myths for new but to go to the root of things, he does not renounce the “re-enchantment” of the world in absolute variance with the ruling class, either. This re-enchantment is a way of becoming conscious that is linked to the revolutionary efforts to forestall the deplorable process of capitalist progress, which quantifies, mechanizes and destroys life. It is the reunion of the rational and that which the surrealists called the marvelous. In the revolution and poetry, which are becoming the same thing, it is the road to an alternative civilization. It is the only way that humanity has to grow and become what it potentially is. The new starting point is not to be found in a bureaucratization of nature comparable to that which has been imposed on society, but in a de-bureaucratized reconciliation between nature and society. Right from the start, this reconciliation challenges the current conditions that are opposed to it, like industrialization, statism, economic development and progress. Its program must therefore be de-urbanizing, anti-industrial, anti-political and anti-progress; it must promote new values, new ways of life, new methods of social action.... Nature and society must find their equilibrium, but to do so they have to be saved from the bureaucrats, the experts, the investors and the ideologists of salvation. The only way to achieve harmony between nature and society is by not surrendering, neither in theory nor in practice, to the logic of domination. Only a society that is the conscious master of its own history will be able to manumit a nature that has been enslaved to progress. This is not an eternally possible proposition, however: thanks to technocracy, domination is manufacturing a literally uninhabitable world, and as Walter Benjamin points out in *One Way Street*: “If the abolition of the bourgeoisie is not completed by an almost calculable moment in economic and technical development (a moment signaled by inflation and poison-gas warfare), all is lost. Before the spark reaches the dynamite, the lighted fuse must be cut”. The necessary revolution will not break out from a mere contradiction between the masses of consumers and the financing of consumption, but from the determined reaction against a kind of progress that irremediably leads to catastrophe.

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