

DRAFT  
NOT FOR QUOTATION

ON PROGRESS:  
ITS REALITY, DESIRABILITY,  
AND DESTINY

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# Preface

*The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.*  
Steven Weinberg

Americans deplore their disquiet; pessimism haunts the land; an uncertain future troubles. Western Europeans voice similar discontent. Poll after poll reports the populace hungers for change, yet yearns for an idyllic but mythical past. The public complains to the pollsters that the country is on the wrong track, but few agree on a new “yellow brick road.” Many contend that mankind is ruining the environment, that crime is out of control, that the nuclear family is extinct, and that the economy will no longer bring improved living standards for their children. The nineteenth century’s faith in progress has died.

Several factors contribute to this widespread melancholia. A world with instant communications fosters the public’s malaise. The masses today can view in resplendent color earthquakes in Indonesia, typhoons in the Philippines, starvation in Somalia, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, firebombings in Berlin, and random violence in Los Angeles. These tragedies, natural catastrophes and wanton cruelties have been with us always, but the advent of live television makes them vivid, immediate, emotional — CNN details them to the world in real time. In addition, the modern media unintentionally encourage violence and mayhem as extremists terrorize the innocent to broadcast their message to the globe. Television pundits, newspaper columnists, and “objective” documentaries have helped persuade a superficially informed public that civilization and the world are retrogressing, decaying, and in peril. Disaster, tragedy, and doom sell; good news does not.

These negative views find echo and enhancement in books, articles, and television programs proclaiming that Western civilization has lost its creative spirit and is despoiling the planet. In 1992 public television ran a major series labeled, *Race to Save the Planet*, and the soon-to-be vice-president, Albert Gore, wrote a book titled *Earth in the Balance*, which preaches that the globe is in mortal danger. In the prior year, Senate majority leader George Mitchell authored *World on Fire: Saving an Endangered Earth*. Earlier books, such as *The Population Bomb* by Paul Ehrlich, *The Limits to Growth* by the Club of Rome, Robert Heilbroner’s *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect*, and Ezra Mishan’s *The Costs of Economic Growth*, depict a world that has reached its limits of growth and progress.

In his book, *In the Absence of the Sacred*, Jerry Mander pontificated (382) that “following the inherent drives of a commodity-oriented technological society, we are doomed to fail. ... Still worse than the failure of this society would be its success.” He goes on to allege (383):

Growth economics, the profit motive, and the market economy, all counterproductive to a sustainable future, must be regarded as short experiments that have failed miserably, and must be abandoned as such; there is no more room for them on Earth. (Simultaneously, world population needs drastic steady reduction, even among Western industrial nations.)

In the nineteenth century, few Americans criticized the United States or American society. Voters and commentators regularly called politicians into question, but virtually everyone considered greatness the destiny of the country. Even as late as the 1940s, only a handful of critics were censorious of American institutions. Beginning with at least the Vietnam War, a growing group of academics, media personalities, and literary figures have impugned the ethical foundations and justice not only of the American system but that of all Western civilization. The latter has been portrayed as exploitive, imperialistic, and evil. For example, in an interview with the *Washington Post*, Kirkpatrick Sale, author of the viciously anti-Columbus book, *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy*, moralized (Achenbach 1991: F1):

I regard it as a desperately sick and inwardly miserable society that doesn't realize that it is suffering from the terminal disease I would call affluenza ... [I]t is founded on a set of ideas that are fundamentally pernicious, and they have to do with rationalism and humanism and materialism and science and progress. These are, to my mind, just pernicious concepts.

Sale's book is an excellent example of the efforts in recent years to portray the West as malevolent. The title of the work reflects the content accurately. Ignoring the Aztecs' history of warfare and human sacrifice, he depicts the indigenous American population as peaceful, guileless, and living in harmony with nature. His view of the West (81-82) is of a society with "a record of deforestation, erosion, siltation, exhaustion, pollution, extermination, cruelty, destruction, and despoliation, all done either in the name of utility and improvement for the betterment of society or, as often, in ignorance of natural systems and the human connection to them."

*The Conquest of Paradise* portrays science and technology as essentially dehumanizing. Capitalism is worst of all — evil. He quotes (91) with obvious approval from William Woodruff's book, *Impact of Western Man*:

No civilization prior to the European had occasion to believe in the systematic material progress of the whole human race; no civilization placed such stress upon the quantity rather than the quality of life; no civilization drove itself so relentlessly to an ever-receding goal; no civilization was so passion-charged to replace what is with what could be; no civilization had striven as the West has done to direct the world according to its will; no civilization has known so few moments of peace and tranquillity.

Noam Chomsky, a renowned professor of linguistics at MIT, depicts American society as despicable and democracy as a fake. For example, he quotes approvingly from an African who writes of (1988: 3):

“white hordes” who, “fortified in aggressive spirit by an arrogant, messianic Christianity” and “motivated by the lure of enriching plunder,...sallied forth from their western European homelands to explore, assault, loot, occupy, rule and exploit the rest of the world” during the six centuries when “western Europe and its Diaspora have been disturbing the peace of the world.”

Chomsky also contends (1988: 1) that the “US. international and security policy ... has as its primary goal ... the freedom to rob, to exploit and to dominate, to undertake any course of action to ensure that existing privilege is protected and advanced.”

Not only have environmentalists and academics questioned Western civilization but so have spokesmen for various minority groups. One student at prestigious Stanford University wrote in the campus newspaper, *The Stanford Daily*, “To a good many citizens, American culture has come to represent enslavement, genocide and annexation under the epithet of Manifest Destiny.”\*

These are extreme examples of “hate Western Society,” but it is easy to find other, more moderate, allegations that Western civilization is sick. Joel Jay Kasslola, for example, in *The Death of Industrial Civilization: the Limits to Economic Growth and the Repoliticization of Advanced Industrial Society*, charges that unlimited economic growth and materialism have caused “the contemporary ecological crisis.” In *Earth in the Balance*, Vice President Al Gore prescribes major alterations in society and in our life style to save the planet.

The attack on the West has slammed one of the most successful components of European advancement: the development of science. In a recent conference volume, *The End of Science*, Sandra Harding, director of women’s studies at the University of Delaware, contends that science has often been sexist, racist, imperialist, and bourgeois. She advocates constraining science with morals and politics, so that it cannot be used to “move resources away from the underprivileged and toward the already overprivileged.”

Western society is, of course, flawed, as are all of man’s activities, but it is scarcely as vicious as these critics claim. Why are these diatribes proliferating? In part rejection of Western society stems from the failure of increased affluence to bring with it more happiness. A large number of studies described in later chapters confirm that the goods and services found in such profusion in modern industrial societies have failed to raise the level of contentment with life. Virtually no one believes that people are happier today than they were a hundred years ago.

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\* Robert Axelrod, “History prevents blacks, whites from sharing an American culture,” letter to the editor, 10/23/92, p. 4.

This loss of faith in progress and in Western culture demands correction. Although the social and economic systems of the West are far from perfect and political problems persist, modern society is undoubtedly the best by virtually any standard — people live longer healthier lives, are better educated and freer, and more of them enjoy the blessings of democratic governments. This book then constitutes my attempt to answer those critics of contemporary civilization who insist that the twentieth century world is a terrible place and that only a return to a “simpler” life can save the planet and mankind.

My intellectual debt in writing this book is extensive. My love of freedom and its importance emanates from the University of Chicago where I had the privilege of studying or associating with some of the greatest minds of the twentieth century: George J. Stigler, Milton Friedman, Gary Becker, and Ronald Coase. They are, of course, not responsible for my views or my errors. My colleagues at the Hoover Institution have been most supportive, and I am very grateful to the Institution itself for providing me with the time and environment necessary to complete this work.

On the title page I list my wife as having assisted in this book. That is an understatement. She was invaluable; she read every word many times. I would have listed her as a co-author, but that would imply that she accepts each and every argument. While we failed to see eye to eye on all interpretations — I believe we agreed on most— Cassandra made valuable suggestions, contributed important insights, and added substantially to the content. As an editor, she corrected my English and caught the spelling errors that the spell-checker ignored. She pointed out inconsistencies and passages where I was vague or repetitious. Without her this book might never have been completed or, if finished, would be of poorer quality and less accessible. On the other hand, Cassandra should not be held responsible for errors of fact or interpretation.

My thanks go as well to my daughter, Antonia Moore, a writer and editor, who read large sections of the manuscript and raised good points, clarified my writing, and focused my thinking. In addition, I am deeply grateful to Martin Anderson, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Larry Diamond, Williamson M. Evers, Robert Hessen, Alex Inkeles, Arlene Holen, Lewis Gann, John Bunzel, Angelo Codevilla, Dennis Bark, Fred Smith, Annelise Anderson and Guy Sorman who have read all or major portions of the work and whose comments have contributed greatly. They are of course not responsible for the view points set forth in this book. I would like to blame them for any factual errors, but I couldn't get away with it.

# Introduction

*A thousand things advance; nine hundred and ninety-nine retreat: that is progress.*

Henri Frédéric Amiel

*Nothing is permanent but change.*

Heraclitus

Is history simply a chaotic sequence without aim or reason? Do changes occur in a meaningful progression? Is progress a functional concept? Does a teleological principle govern change in the universe? This work explores those questions. My conclusions will be controversial; they will, I hope, stimulate debate and analysis. Many of my claims may seem arbitrary, but I hope to convince the reader by the end of the book on their validity.

The following chapters probe the nature of progress: how to measure it; whether it is desirable and, if it is, how to foster it. They examine the progress mankind has made and the prospects for its continuation. In *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama has addressed the issue in part but from a different perspective. Fukuyama contends that liberal democracy is the only viable form of government. I explore the larger subject of progress, within which liberal democracy constitutes a modest gain for mankind. In measuring progress and considering its future, I focus on long periods of time. Years, even decades are too short; the briefest relevant period for evaluating progress is at least one hundred years. Shorter periods involve too much fluctuation and too many variations to be meaningful.

What is progress? How people have viewed or do consider progress varies as much as opinions on abortion, the role of the state, and religious beliefs. Almost all eighteenth and nineteenth century philosophers regarded progress as moving towards a God-given end. Today many believe that progress should entail an improvement in civilization — a more honest, safer, more moral existence. Some deem progress as meaning strengthening the state, expanding government authority, or improving the “race.” The difficulty with such views of progress is that one can find little agreement on their content and relevance. For example, orthodox Jews and Moslems believe that eating pork is immoral and a good society should ban this meat. Christians and Orientals relish ham, bacon and pork loin. Religions differ significantly often contradictorily on their prescriptions for a “good” society. No consensus exists throughout the world or even in the United States on the details of a moral civilization. A majority of the American public would no doubt condemn prostitution, marijuana, and illegitimacy but would approve of easy divorce,



gambling perhaps, drinking alcohol, and mini-skirts. An Arab would probably agree on the first three but would also condemn gambling, drinking, and brief costumes for women. The Roman Catholic Church prohibits divorce, contraception, and abortions although a majority of Westerners including those that revere the Pope countenance them.

This work avoids such specific prescriptions of progress and tries to find those factors on which virtually all people everywhere would agree. I examine the least controversial measures of gain for mankind first, considering later indicators of progress that may still command widespread approval but which others may find threatening or misguided. Many of those who consider that progress means advancing something called a civilized society will find this methodology unsatisfactory. But how can we decide whether a civilized society should authorize the smoking of peyote which some groups consider as basic to their religious beliefs, the drinking of wine which is fundamental to Christianity and prohibited by Islam, the eating of meat which is forbidden by Hindus, or the practice of polygamy which is approved by Moslems? Does a civilized society permit divorce or require that an unhappy couple remain together? In earlier centuries the strain from such an arrangement was alleviated through taking a lover. Would widespread adultery be considered civilized today? Sweden licenses live sex acts and has no ban on pornography; most of Western Europe take a much more relaxed view of sex and nudity than do people in the United States. Are we more civilized and better because of our prohibitions? We certainly cannot achieve any widespread agreement within North America much less Western Europe on these topics. I, therefore, shun these criteria for measuring progress but look for standards that can command near universal agreement.

At its most basic level, progress must mean advancement in the well-being of *Homo Sapiens* or perhaps, to be less anthropocentric, the spread of consciousness and intelligence in the universe. I believe that virtually everyone can agree that reduced infant mortality, improved health, extended life spans, and greater literacy and education are cornerstones of human progress. The introduction of constitutional republics is but one element in the advancement of mankind and not necessarily the most important. As Winston Churchill avowed: "... Democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."\* Human freedom, which democracy helps to ensure, is more essential. Friedrich Hayek (1960: 106) maintained:

However strong the general case for democracy, it is not an ultimate or absolute value and must be judged by what it will achieve. It is probably the best method of achieving certain ends, but not an end in itself.

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\* Speech, House of Commons, November 1947.

A few simple measures, however, cannot define progress. If and when infant mortality has been reduced to the absolute limit — perhaps to zero — and the duration of life has reached its natural extent, whatever that age may be, progress can and probably will continue. Many innovations could further improve the human condition. From the time of classical Greece, philosophers have held that advancement of knowledge constitutes progress. In the present world, an extension of the rule of law to many Third World countries and to the successor states of the former Soviet Union will enhance the lot of much of mankind. A reduction in oppression, arbitrary rule, and torture, wherever it may occur, reflects progress. An expansion of equality of opportunity will not only improve the well-being of individuals who take advantage of their new freedoms, but enhances the rest of mankind through their improved productivity. In the future, other changes, unimaginable today, will allow men and women to lead better lives and to flourish. As I will argue at greater length in Chapters 1 and 6, progress includes advances in the material well-being of people that reduce drudgery and poverty, improve comfort and health, and furnish protection from the vicissitudes of life.

Chapter 1, which explores the concept of progress, stresses that to define progress in terms of human happiness would unduly narrow the concept; it would make it unworkable. Studies of happiness and satisfaction indicate that people adjust to their conditions and can sustain peaks of happiness only for brief periods. On the other hand, innovations that produce greater happiness or satisfaction with life, however transitory, surely constitute progress.

People of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries believed progress would take the form of improving human nature. Attempts to perfect mankind, such as the disastrous communist experiments in the Soviet Union, Cambodia and elsewhere, have failed utterly. Progress, consequently, should not be confused with the concept of the perfectibility of mankind. Given variations in nature and nurture, economic situations and opportunities, many people will be noble, public spirited, and altruistic; others will be concerned mainly with themselves; still others will be mean-spirited and selfish cheats, criminals, murderers, rapists, sadists, and greedy exploiters of the weak. Without major genetic engineering, which would raise troubling ethical problems, such people will always exist and no amount of social restructuring will lead to perfection.

Despite these limitations, this is arguably “the best of all possible worlds.” Although it may also be the worst of all possible worlds; it is, in all probability the only possible world. Conceptually only two paths could have led to a better world: nature could have provided a more hospitable planet for mankind or evolution could have produced a “better” human being. The first possibility appears unlikely, albeit to an observer who has never seen another world. This globe is extraordinarily fertile and gloriously beautiful, with a mostly hospitable climate that offers considerable natural variety. Perhaps if evolution had avoided the cockroach, the world would have been better. I also have difficulty envisioning any modification in human genes (on average)

that would have improved mankind. We would all prefer, of course, to have escaped inherited afflictions, but their absence would require that nature had crafted a reproductive mechanism that never made mistakes. Such a system would have precluded mutations leading to evolution of new species. Life would have been confined to the first simple one-cell structures and could never have evolved. As Jared Diamond (1992: 128) affirmed: “Natural selection tends to mold each trait ... that maximizes the survival and reproductive success of the whole animal, given the animal’s basic design.”

Genetic variation guarantees that a few people will always be born handicapped, or with limited intelligence, or with little drive or ambition. In the absence of DNA engineering, the heritage of humans limits mankind. Everyone cannot be above average! Some will always be less fortunate. The poor, at least in a relative sense, will always be with us. Problems will continue to plague society. Individuals will always have sorrows; and heaven on earth will never arrive, nor can paradise be defined or imagined. Perfection is both impossible and undesirable. It would be deadly dull — as all who has read Dante's *Paradiso* will attest!

Consider whether we would enjoy better lives if evolution produced a totally monogamous human race. Men and women would remain married for life to their first partners. We would have a completely different world. On the positive side, it would eliminate jealousy, lovers’ quarrels, most rapes, perhaps incest, and much family violence — the great majority of murders are the result of sexual jealousy.

On the other hand, much of the world’s greatest literature would never have been written. Without jealousy, Shakespeare could not have created *Othello*; the Old Testament would lose many of its sublime chronicles; and the *Tale of Genji* would be an emaciated tale of a dutifully if boringly faithful couple.

More fundamentally, how would a modification in DNA work to control human actions and produce monogamy? At a minimum the world would be much less interesting. Since diversity would be likely to result in producing additional partners that might compete in attractiveness with the original, all men and all women would probably have to be much more alike. The evolution of a totally monogamous society may require that humans become almost identical. I for one would find such a world far less attractive than the current one, despite its shortcomings.

One could argue that if evolution had produced a species in which both sexes were the same average size and developed equal physical strength, rather than a species characterized by dimorphism, women would be subject to much less discrimination, mistreatment and even slavery. On the surface this argument appears valid, yet there may be benefits to mankind from dimorphism that we have yet to understand. I would be reluctant, therefore, to claim that evolution could have produced a physically better species.

Many will contend that if mankind were less aggressive, wars would be less frequent, murders fewer, and rape less common. On the other hand, were mankind more passive, would we ever have left the hunter-gatherer stage? In fact, we might never have become hunters, since hunting or scavenging requires aggression (Blumenshine and Cavallo 1992). Instead of hunting, humans might have been gatherers solely, and they might have remained that way, lacking the aggression to develop technology that could change their way of life.

Setting aside the question of hypothetical improvements that would have created “the best of all possible worlds,” everyone must acknowledge that this existence is the only one we have. After defining *progress* as an improvement in the well-being of human beings in Chapter 1, I explore in subsequent chapters whether, given our universe and human nature, we have improved the lot of mankind, whether we will continue to do so, and how we can foster more benefits. Chapter 2 examines world history and variations in the well-being of ordinary people. Progress is far from linear. History demonstrates periods of regression as well as advancement. On the whole, however, mankind’s record shows a steady rise from living on the edge of subsistence to a state of ease and plenty.

Chapter 3 takes up progress in the modern world, that is over the last few centuries. Although most observers would accept that mankind’s condition has improved over the last millennium, many hold that people’s well-being has deteriorated in recent decades. After documenting the clear gains for mankind in terms of life expectancy, infant mortality, and the elimination of common deadly diseases, this chapter explores environmental trends, the decline of the family, education, crime, drug use, and racism. Even though the data points to disturbing tendencies, most of the malignancies of the modern world are either exaggerated, curable, or on the mend. Nevertheless, major ills do inflict the modern world and need correction.

The next three chapters examine the role of freedom, economic growth and democracy in progress. Not everyone agrees that liberty is desirable and many are concerned with what they deem licentious behavior. People often strive to narrow their choices and constrain themselves. Many individuals fear freedom, not only in the hands of others, but also for themselves. Although, no society has been totally free, most advanced industrial states offer their publics considerable political rights, some social freedom, and more or less economic liberty. Wealthy advanced states usually guarantee such political freedoms as free speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, and the right to vote and campaign openly for change. Constraints on social options, however, such as prohibitions on drugs, life styles, or sexual practices, are commonplace. Only a handful of economies, such as Hong Kong, bestow on their citizens almost unlimited economic liberty; that is the right to buy and sell freely without government limits.

Nevertheless, liberty to some degree is essential for free markets and economic growth. Countries with liberal institutions grow faster and become more prosperous than more regimented

societies. Freedom, however, has a cost: although state terrorism poses less of a problem in relatively free than in non-free states, an open society encounters more difficulty constraining crime. In addition, many find radical views troubling and decry such forms of social behavior as pornography or conspicuous consumption.

To be effective, a democracy requires at least a modicum of political rights. A liberal democracy must limit government in order to keep the majority from enslaving a minority and to protect the freedom of those who profess unpopular views or actions. To quote again from Hayek (1960: 117), “There is little reason to expect that any people will succeed in successfully operating or preserving a democratic machinery of government unless they have first become familiar with the traditions of a government of law.” A liberal democratic state must also be largely secular: a particular religion cannot dominate the government without impinging on both freedom and democracy.

Chapter 7 focuses on conditions that foster income growth. The economic research on this topic has found that education is a prime factor in fostering material growth. Countries that foster trade with the world do better than those that attempt to be self-sufficient. Given a literate work force and an open society, countries can import the technology necessary to make rapid gains.

The subsequent two chapters take up factors that can either slow or stop growth and progress. Economic regulation, and state ownership of the means of production can sharply curtail or even in the extreme stop progress. Governments can best promote economic growth by providing strong property rights, an honest judiciary, sound commercial law, low taxes, and minimum of intervention in the market. Excessive regulation or taxation or a plethora of government enterprises will slow economic growth and retard progress. Many economies, however, have performed moderately well with a limited amount of such controls. A few relatively highly regulated societies have even enjoyed substantial prosperity. Apparently, however, their growth rates slow over time. Moreover, it seems likely that these economies would have been more prosperous without such government intervention.

Chapter 9 takes up factors that might bring progress to a halt. Various individuals and groups have claimed that growth would exhaust the world’s resources, pollute the planet, and bring disaster to mankind. I dispute these contentions and demonstrate that such forecasts are inconsistent with the historical record. The chapter also looks at whether war could end human advancement. Finally the chapter analyzes the disturbing tendency for governments in the modern world to grow almost without limit and in the process choke off avenues for advancement.

The last chapter deals with the necessity of progress, and the great likelihood that it will continue. It also discusses a number of fundamental issues confronting society. Is there a limit to progress? If knowledge is finite — that is, if everything that can be known becomes known — progress may end. Do increases in goods and services ultimately imply progress? As Fukuyama

notes (312): “Is [a life of physical security and material plenty] what the human story has been ‘all about’ these past few millennia?” Although we appear to be far from that point currently, man could become satiated with material well-being.

Is there an alternative to progress? Can mankind endure, maintain an adequate standard of living, and procreate in a world without progress? Change is the only constant, and if change brings no progress, it may lead to stagnation, regression, and the eventual collapse of human civilization. Could a society with a fixed technology, political system, population, and customs persist for long? If progress is necessary for survival, how can we foster it, and what might be the obstacles to changes for the better?

Some have insisted, as Chapter 9 recounts, that a finite earth entails limited resources and a cap on material abundance, but a finite planet need not imply boundaries on man’s conquest of matter. Unless the totality of human knowledge has fixed bounds, people will be able to find new ways of satisfying humanity’s wants. Industry, for example, can recycle existing supplies of raw materials and use them repeatedly in innovative ways; researchers and entrepreneurs can develop totally new substances or creative ways of satisfying old desires. Moreover, as knowledge grows and technology improves, space travel becomes more likely: man has been to the moon and will probably travel to Mars in the first half of the twenty–first century. Within the solar system, almost unlimited resources await mankind. As technology advances, exploration and colonization outside the solar system will be within mankind’s grasp.

The evolution of the universe, of life, and of mankind point toward a cosmos which intelligent beings understand and control. One view of modern quantum mechanics holds that the state of fundamental particles of matter depends on and requires an observer. Without a conscious presence, the state of matter is uncertain. Hence the existence of intelligence may be necessary for the universe. Progress can be viewed as the increasing complexity of the universe over time as it has moved from a single unified force at creation to the almost infinitely intricate world necessary for life and intelligence to flourish.

*Homo Sapiens* seem destined for greatness. In *Genesis*, God instructs man and woman to have “dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.” Certainly mankind has achieved dominion over the earth; if the human race can achieve dominion over the universe, progress can be limitless.