

The idea of progress  
be explained  
philosophy essay



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The idea of progress, even though it emerged approximately 400 years ago, remains a very important concept in our modern-day capitalist societies. It serves as an idea for legitimising the political, economic or scientific advances of our epoch by claiming that whatever happens now is, in any case, better and more desirable than anything that has happened in the past. Therefore, we notice a contradictory aspect of the idea of progress which is its, on the one hand, tendency to legitimise the advancements at various levels of social life and, on the other, its tendency to legitimise a particular type of society which cannot be historically overcome. The aim of this essay is to identify this contradictory aspect of the idea of progress through a closer examination of its emergence. Furthermore this essay's purpose is twofold. It aims, on the one hand, at identifying the particular social, historical and intellectual contingencies that permitted the emergence of progress as an idea and, on the other, aims at examining the rise and decline of the autonomy that the idea of progress aimed at bringing about. The essay is divided into two main parts. The first (A) one's purpose is to examine the emergence of the idea of progress as a result of the discovery of new methods of reasoning which arose in opposition to the theological dogma. The idea of progress was, thus, an attempt to achieve autonomy at the intellectual level. The second part (B) aims at examining the emergence of progress as a social imaginary signification of a particular type of society; to examine it alongside the emergence of the bourgeoisie and the capitalist society. Therefore, the second part shows that the autonomy that the idea of progress, initially, desired to attain could not be attained because it was too closely tied to the particularities of the capitalist society and its categories.

## **PART A**

Few authors, like Nisbet[1], have argued that the idea of progress as a concept has not its origins in the seventeenth century and the emergence of the rationalist and scientific schools. Instead, they claim that its origins can be traced back to the ancient Greeks (e. g. in Plato's thought and Aristotle's linear conception of history in which man progressed from a stage of kinship to the creation of the political state[2]). Nisbet argues that the idea was still present in the Roman philosophers such as Seneca who in his *Epistulae Morales* examined the ascension of man from a primitive state to his own time. Furthermore, Nisbet insists that Christianity, also, importantly, contributed to the idea of progress and especially St. Augustine's thought who reconciled the idea of progress with the Church's dogma and the coming of the Final Judgement since he argued that there is the potential for an earthly paradise before earth is destroyed. St. Augustine was one of the first to hold a three-stage view of history, which later was held by such philosophers of progress as Condorcet, Comte and St. Simon. As Nisbet concludes on Augustine's contribution to the idea of progress: " Augustine's legacy of progress include: the conception of time as linear and divisible into developmental-historical ages; the doctrine of historical necessity;...[and] the seductive conception of an earthly state in which man would know... a condition of earthly paradise"[3].

However, it will be argued here that the idea of progress is, as Bury claims an idea peculiar to modernity and an idea which emerged only after the intellectual innovations of the " last stage of the Renaissance"[4]. Indeed, while it is difficult to exclude any influence of previous views and mentions of

progress in justifying the existence of that concept, what made the majority of the Enlightenment's thinkers adhere to the idea of progress and accept it as a reality was the institutionalisation of new methods of reasoning, such as rationalism and empiricism, which situated the source of truth outside Providence, the Church or God himself. As Bury argues, "the whole spirit of medieval Christianity excluded it [the idea of progress]" because "the conceptions which were entertained of the working of Divine Providence, the belief that the world...might at any moment come to a sudden end...were not reasoned conclusions, but dogmas guaranteed by divine authority." [5] Therefore, the intellectual innovations which led to the acceptance of progress as an undeniable fact need to be seen as an attempt to achieve autonomy (at least intellectually); an attempt to situate the sources of knowledge and truth in man's intellectual faculties rather than in divine law as dictated by the Church's dogma.

As such, the intellectual innovations of the late Renaissance which made possible the emergence of the idea of progress are to be found in Descartes' and Bacon's thought which gave birth to two major philosophical schools, Rationalism and Empiricism (later Positivism) accordingly. Even if these schools used different methodologies to access knowledge and truth, they both aimed at situating their sources away from tradition and dogmas and closer to man's intellectual capability/understanding. More precisely, Descartes asserted that the necessary and sufficient condition for accessing truth was Reason, which is common in all humans. Thanks to the use of Reason, humans can access a priori truths and launch an indefinite process of knowledge/truth acquisition which would lead to the understanding of

Nature's invariable laws and establish mankind as "the masters and possessors of nature"[6].

On the other hand, Bacon initiated the Empiricist methodology which claimed that the knowledge that humans acquire can only be a posteriori since it regarded senses "as the only source of knowledge about the natural world"[7]. This means that only accumulation of objective data can lead to generalisations and assumptions about the external world. This methodology, importantly, characterised the Scientific Revolution and was further supported by Newton when he argued that hypotheses have no place in experimental philosophy and that "particular propositions are inferred from the phenomena and afterwards rendered general by induction"[8]. The empiricist method shows how it is man's senses and his intellectual capability of inductive reasoning that can lead him to the truth. Overall, the importance of Bacon and Descartes in inaugurating these new, seemingly autonomous and value-free, methods of reasoning is stressed by Arblaster: "Bacon and Descartes were regarded by subsequent generations as the two great liberators- the champions who had emancipated philosophy from the cramping confines of scholasticism, Aristotelianism, and theology, and who had inaugurated a new era of intellectual progress." [9]

To put it schematically, it can, arguably, be said that these two schools of thought gave birth to two traditional view of progress, the "dichotomous" and the "evolutionary" model[10], which sometimes converge but whose distinction helps in identifying their Rationalist and Empiricist/Scientific influences. "Within the dichotomous model, progress is identified with the one great transition from societies based upon prejudice and vested interest  
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to societies organised with the use of human reason and in accordance with the true nature of man and society.”[11]This view of progress was, obviously, influenced by the Rationalist School since it claimed that once reason was adopted as a method of thinking and understanding it was possible to understand the a priori truths/laws that governed human nature and society and therefore to establish a “ rational” society according to these particular and invariable laws.

This particular view of progress is expressed, though in different manners, by Adam Smith, Kant and the French Enlightenment philosophes, among others. The French philosophes believed in the good nature of humankind, which, however, was hindered by the preponderance of ignorance and the conformity to tradition over knowledge and reason. As Bury describes the thought of the philosophes: “ The problem for the human race being to reach a state of felicity by its own powers, these thinkers believed that it was soluble by the gradual triumph of reason over prejudice and knowledge over ignorance”[12]. This aspect is also present in Voltaire too when he argues that what had prevented the progression of humanity were wars, religions and the prejudices that they inevitably create[13].

Kant, saw moral progress as an inevitability, since as a Rationalist, he claimed that humans, being the only rational being, had to obey their Reason not only to be free but also in order to set the basis for an ethical and peaceful human community. “ For him morality was an absolute obligation founded in the nature of reason. Such an obligation presupposes an end to be attained, and this end is a reign of reason under which all men obeying the moral law mutually treat each other as ends in themselves. Such an ideal

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state must be regarded as possible, because it is a necessary postulate of reason.”[14]Therefore, moral progress is the result of man being conscious of his Reason (i. e. of his capacity of thinking and acting rationally). In other words, the potentiality for moral progress becomes indefinite from the moment that man becomes aware of his own reason as the men of the 17th century were.

Adam Smith, while focusing on material progress, can be categorised in those thinkers who held a “ dichotomous” view of progress. He, famously, claimed that humans have a natural “ propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another”[15]which leads to a natural division of labour which in turn augments productivity and consequently increases material wealth. Therefore, the rationale behind the nature of society is the conciliation (brought about by the “ invisible hand”) between the self-interest-motivated activities that individuals undertake and the overall well-being of society. To achieve progress, a society needs to understand this “ natural” mechanism and organise itself around this principle, which is expressed in the form of the free market economy. Once the free market institutionalised, there is a prospect for indefinite progress of well-being and wealth. But to achieve it, a nation also needs to overcome the obstacles which prevent it from stabilising itself with the natural market mechanism , such as the mercantilist governments, which “ by unwise edict, law, and custom they[mercantilist governments] have interfered with the processes of the natural progress of wealth, labour, skill, rent, and profits.”[16]

In all of the above approaches, we can identify the influences of the

Scientific Revolution. As Badham explains, “ Influenced by Newton’s view of <https://assignbuster.com/the-idea-of-progress-be-explained-philosophy-essay/>

nature as a mechanical system, the philosophes believed that this new natural form of organisation"- the society organised according to reason-" would automatically become a balanced and stable mechanism...reason could establish a fixed, universal, self-equilibrating social system operating in conformity with natural laws of human conduct." [17] More precisely, the scientific influence on this conception of progress lied in the perception of human as beings with certain recurrent patterns of behaviour and predictable inclinations, as in a physical phenomenon, and who in order to fulfil all their potential needed a stable social environment which would be established according to these " scientific"/natural human inclinations. As Wagar explains the influence of science in the Enlightenment philosophes' view of progress: " At its heart lay the concept of man as a being whose scientifically observed human nature inclined him always to seek the same pleasures and avoid the same pains, and who was everywhere, when not corrupted, a rational being capable of ethical behaviour in accordance with natural law." [18] Another condition for the realisation of human's full potential was, as seen above, the removal of the intellectual (i. e. prejudice, ignorance) and physical/administrative (e. g. corrupting institutions, mercantilist government) barriers to progress.

In the " evolutionary model" of progress, as Badham describes it, " the natural state of mankind is...regarded as one of change and development from infancy to maturity rather than as the achievement of a self-equilibrating system of natural laws. The image of society is organic rather than mechanistic" [19]. In this model, one can distinguish the elements of " inevitability", " necessity" and " causality" that characterise each historical



epoch. As Turgot explains, “ all the ages are bound up with one another by a succession of causes and effects which link the present state of the world with all those that have preceded it.”[20]Therefore, in this model each historical stage is the inevitable result of the accumulation of knowledge, of the intellectual activity of previous societies. As Fontenelle would argue “ there has been and will continue a definite advancement of both the arts and the sciences, simply because it is possible for each age to build upon what has been bequeathed by preceding ages.”[21]

The forerunners of this model were Condorcet and Turgot. Turgot held the very influential view of mankind advancing in history as an autonomous entity whose advancement overcomes all its previous bad experiences, foolishness and suffering since it marches towards the attainment of greater perfection.[22]He also held a three-stage view of historical development (which greatly inspired Comte) in which he described the intellectual movement of mankind. He argued that, in the beginning, men attributed the causes of physical phenomena to divine beings, then men attributed them to some metaphysical concepts such as essence and finally in Turgot’s epoch men-or at least those who had the according knowledge- hypotheses about phenomena were firstly verified by experience and then developed by science.[23]Comte would, later, call these historical epochs the “ theological”, the “ metaphysical” and the “ positive” stage.

For Condorcet, “ the study of the history of civilisation...enables us to establish the fact of Progress, and it should enable us to determine its direction in the future, and thereby to accelerate the rate of

progression.”[24]His influence on the later positivists and theorists of <https://assignbuster.com/the-idea-of-progress-be-explained-philosophy-essay/>

progress lied in his call for a scientific interpretation of progress. Progress should be understood as a scientific law of the historical transformation of societies through the empirical observation of past societies (Condorcet identified 9 historical stages prior to his time according to their intellectual and scientific development). Therefore, for Condorcet, the accumulation of historical data and the observation of the constant movement of mankind towards greatest knowledge could set the basis for predicting the future of civilisation, which would, inevitably, lead to greater perfection.

The peak of the scientific strand of the idea of progress was reached with the writings of Comte and St. Simon who held the idea that “ social development was a continuous and unitary process proceeding through a fixed set of stages.”[25]Therefore, all historical social regimes were coherent, rather than some mistakes made by the ignorance of mankind, because they were the result of the “ underlying process of social evolution and development”[26]and because they obeyed to a specific historical law. For Comte, this law was the “ law of three stages”, which as mentioned above consisted of the passage of mankind from the theological stage to the positive. The latter represents the concrete realisation of progress and can be attained when men realise that every branch of knowledge, including the study of society, is reducible to invariable natural laws.[27]Thus, progress became inevitable to the minds of those who realised that society too was subject to invariable natural laws (i. e. the law of three stages).

In the St. Simonian doctrine the view that social regimes correspond to the underlying process of intellectual and scientific development is confirmed by his view of Medieval Europe as “ a valuable and necessary stage in human

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progress.”[28]For him Medieval Europe provided an example of social organisation where the spiritual and temporal order were coherent, mutually supportive. This is linked to his dialectical law of historical development[29]according to which “ epochs of organisation or construction, and epochs of criticism or revolution succeed each other alternately”[30]. In order for the final stage of historical development to concretise itself, the post-Renaissance revolutionary period needed to give place to a new epoch of organisation and of unification of the temporal and spiritual order under the command of the scientific experts. This new regime would reflect the degree of intellectual development attained by society, namely positivism.

The St. Simonian doctrine of progress clearly influenced the Marxist theory of history (i. e. historical materialism) and his idea of progress. Marx argued, too, that all social forms of organisation cohered, not because they corresponded to the degree of intellectual development of the epoch but rather because they corresponded to the level of development of the productive forces. His conception of historical succession was dialectical too (and influenced by Hegel). Precisely, each historical stage was the result/the synthesis of the contradictions of the previous one. More precisely, when the level of development of the productive forces and the social relations of a given social form were incompatible the result was the passage to another social form. The last historical stage to emerge was communism which would initiate the real history of mankind.

## **PART B**

As it was mentioned in the previous part, for most of the Enlightenment

thinkers progress was understood as the attainment of a historical stage  
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where truth became objectively identifiable (through Reason or acknowledgement of natural laws of society and man) and as a consequence every limit to the improvement of knowledge, culture, morality and material well-being was removed. For the first time in history, men could, through their intellectual faculties, autonomously, understand the meaning and direction of history. In other words, “ the Enlightenment first made possible an objective, empirical approach to historical reality by freeing history from theology and thus making possible the study of history for its own sake.”[31]

However, as it will be attempted to show in this part, the element of autonomy that the idea of progress entails fades away because the, supposedly, objective character of the study of history proposed by the Enlightenment and later thinkers consists, in fact, in an attempt to, consciously or not, justify/legitimise a particular type of society. Thus, the emergence of the idea of progress can, and should, be explained alongside the objective and subjective particularities of a specific and newly emerging type of society (i. e. the capitalist/bourgeois society). In other words, progress is a social imaginary signification to which “ correspond new attitudes, values and norms, a new social definition of reality and of being, of what counts and what does not count.”[32]

A typical manifestation of the influences of the capitalist society on the idea of progress is the spectacular growth of industry witnessed since the Industrial Revolution. Bury stresses how the London Exhibition of 1851, which gathered some of the most important industrial and cultural innovations of the time, provided the material evidence of the progress that philosophers had already identified: “ The great Exhibition of London in 1851  
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was, in one of its aspects, a public recognition of the material progress of the age and the growing power of man over the physical world.”[33]It was the proof that men’s intellectual power had reached the stage where they could infinitely improve their own well-being; men had become the master of his own life since they had dominated even nature.

The growth of industry did not influence, solely, the supporters of the bourgeois regime but had a great impact on its opponents as well. St Simon, Marx and even Sorel (who was one of the most ardent opponents of the illusory idea of progress) all believed that industrialism was an incontestable manifestation of the progress, in terms of productive capacities, of their epoch and that, put simply, in the right hands this material progress could be directed to the benefit of the working masses too.

However, the rapid transformation of the productive forces and constant technological innovation were not characteristics of every historical society; unlike Marx’s claim the development of productive forces has not been the mechanism of history since all pre-capitalist societies have lived on the basis of stable technological conditions (with the Middle Ages being a notable example of a long historical period with no major technological innovation) which “ shows that technology does not necessarily progress in an uninterrupted fashion.”[34]This shows that the idea of progress was inevitably influenced by the industrialism of Western Europe and particularly by the growth dynamic that characterises the capitalist mode of production (unlike any previous mode of production), which de facto implies a constant growth and improvement of its productive capacities since that is required by the competitive environment of capitalism.

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Another aspect of the objective/material conditions which favoured the emergence of the idea of progress is the class structure that characterised Western Europe, and more precisely the appearance of the bourgeoisie in the social realm. The emergence of the idea of progress and the bourgeoisie are not, necessarily, linked causally but, instead, one can notice that the former “ depended upon the bourgeoisie for its continuing popularity.”[35]The reason behind the latter observation lies in the fact that the worldview entailed in the idea of progress greatly corresponds to the one carried by the bourgeoisie. More precisely, the growth of Rationalism and Positivism were influenced by the needs and perceptions of the bourgeoisie. Indeed, the power, wealth and ascension of the latter did not depend on god-given rights but on its own entrepreneurial activities and, thus, as Pollard states, “ it was but concrete results, goods and services, unhampered by mythology which brought them success”[36].

As a consequence, reason as a source of truth and knowledge was more appropriate to the bourgeois mode of thinking than the metaphysical and theological beliefs held by the aristocracy. Additionally, rational thinking was deeply engraved in the bourgeoisie since “ decisions in merchants’ counting houses are made by a rational calculus and the results can be mathematically tested by a profit rate”[37]. Furthermore, Zilsels and Pollard[38]go as far as to argue that early science (i. e. Baconian Science) had its roots in the early forms of capitalist economy, namely the 15th century workshops. Therefore, the Rationalist and Scientific methodologies could emerge and, consequently, become the main components of the idea of progress because they were massively adopted by a whole class (i. e. the

bourgeoisie). Rationalism and Science corresponded and adapted themselves to the worldview, mode of thinking and the needs of the bourgeoisie.

Pollard[39] goes even further and argues that the ideas of progress put forward by the philosophes of the Enlightenment were a mere reflection of the ideal society as conceived by the bourgeoisie; their attacks on theology and absolutism were an attack on the social institutions that prevented the ascension of the bourgeoisie. The idea of progress is, thus, not simply an attempt to free history from the theological bias but to replace it with a bourgeois bias. Indeed, for the idea of progress to be established “ a fixed point of reference, bench mark, must be set up from which to determine whether the movement of history is in a desirable direction”[40]. This implies a purely political/ethical (and thus subjective) element to determine the desirability of history’s movement which eliminates any objective/value-free character that the study of history could have had. Furthermore, the “ fixed point of reference” that (most of) the theorists of progress implied was the bourgeois/capitalist society. Coincidentally it was the ascension of the bourgeoisie that connoted the attainment of the historical stage in which progress had been achieved and from which on the asymptotic (or not) march towards perfection could be onset. The “ coincidence” lies in the fact that it is the last form of society to appear in the historical stage that represents the end of history, the “ fixed system to which all previous development has pointed and which will not change further once it is reached.”[41]

Here, though, lies the most contradictory aspect of the idea of progress which denotes its intention of justifying the emergence of the capitalist society. Indeed, the idea of progress has at the same time a progressive and conservative element. For Bury[42]and Badham[43]the contradiction lies between, on the one hand, the idea of infinite progress (in the political, moral or even economic field) and , on the other, the limits to this advancement put by the scientific aspect of progress since progress is confined within and limited by the boundaries of scientific understanding; it is scientific reasoning that delimits the potential development of progress. More precisely, one could argue that the simultaneously conservative and progressive character of progress lies in the attempt to theoretically conceive a society which is considered as infinite in terms of knowledge accumulation and material wellbeing but whose institutions are stable and cannot be historically overcome since they represent the state to which scientifically discovered laws or Reason itself have pointed to since the creation of society. This implies also a certain degree of political quietism, as Sorel would argue, since the changes brought about by progress are inevitable[44]and the capitalist society is the one demanded by rationally conceived history. In a sense, “ reason here becomes knowledge, technique, and the individual is the object rather than the subject of its exercise.”[45]

Consequently, on the philosophical level, progress emerged as an attempt to provide a total view of history from its beginning to its predictable future. Therefore, progress did not free the study of history from the metaphysical element which was common in the theological doctrine. Just like the Church used the metaphysical concepts such as the coming of the antichrist in order



to install a climate of fear and subordinate people in order to maintain the medieval order, the philosophes used