

**PROGRESS.** Commentators on the Enlightenment have tended to assign special importance to its belief in progress, and to the historical optimism of the period generally, often identifying it as one of the Enlightenment's core ideas, a cornerstone of the entire movement's intellectual foundation, particularly in France. Since the 1950s, however, historians have given new emphasis to the philosophes' doubts and reservations about the likelihood of progress, and there is no longer consensus on the centrality of progress to the Enlightenment. Despite the numerous doubters, nevertheless, there can be no question that many, perhaps most, members of the eighteenth-century intellectual elite held broadly optimistic views about what had happened in the past or would happen in the future—although they formulated those views in diverse and frequently complicated terms.

### **The Idea of Progress**

The most influential definition of *Progress* remains that of the historian J. B. Bury, writing in 1920: "This idea means that civilisation has moved, is moving, and will move in a desirable direction." Many thinkers, however, consider historical change from perspectives other than that of civilization in its entirety, and only some see the present and the future as following a course that is uniform with that of the past. To be useful for historical generalization and analysis, the idea of progress needs to be treated more broadly. Here it is defined as the belief that there has been or will be change for the better in important aspects of social existence—a definition that has the special virtue of conforming fairly closely to the meanings of *progress* given in later eighteenth-century dictionaries.

Recognition of social change of this kind and magnitude comes most readily from a long-range historical sense. The Judeo-Christian tradition, with its linear view that history was aiming at something (redemption), offered one such intellectual context, while the traditional Greco-Roman notion of a repeating cycle of golden, silver, bronze, and leaden ages offered another. Neither concept was monolithic, of course, and the two coexisted for many centuries after the fall of Rome. From the early Renaissance, humanists envisioned a history in which they themselves appeared as the worthy successors to classical antiquity, following a long period of decay and even darkness. The Protestants of the Reformation echoed this assessment in their criticism of medieval Roman Catholicism and their desire to restore essential elements of the early church. By the sixteenth century, the tripartite division of Western history into ancient, medieval, and modern eras was beginning to emerge.

The development of the idea of progress during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries hinged on two closely related questions. First, did the arrival of the modern age represent the latest phase of a cyclical process or something new? Second, could and should classical antiquity, so revered by the humanists, be exceeded? A notable contribution to the answers came from the exploration of the non-European world and the discoveries of the Scientific Revolution, which called into question many beliefs of the ancients traditionally accepted as simple fact. Philosophers such as Francis Bacon and René Descartes emphasized new methods of intellectual investigation that challenged reliance on the authority of received opinions, including those from classical antiquity, promoting instead a burgeoning belief in the power of human reason, the importance of observation, and the

advancement of knowledge. The doubts raised about the real stature of classical antiquity led to a long “Quarrel” or “battle” of Ancients and Moderns, over the supremacy of their respective achievements in literature, art, and other areas; an underlying question was the possible degeneration of human nature since ancient times. Meanwhile, the growth of commercial activity and urban life encouraged a concentration on quantitative precision which scientific investigation soon strongly reinforced. As they became known and accepted, the discoveries of the Scientific Revolution seemed to belie the theory of degeneration while reinforcing at least some of the claims of the moderns.

At the same time, the sense of uniqueness in history so central to Christianity was heightened by the deep Protestant interest in eschatology (the theology of the Last Things). Many believed that the split with Rome heralded a biblically prophesied strife between good and evil whose outcome would be a millennium of peace and happiness. Toward the end of the seventeenth century, a great Catholic theologian, Bishop Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, reminded the wide audience of his work on universal history that all events since the Creation, profane as well as sacred, could be placed in a succession of epochs subject to a divine plan and to ongoing divine superintendence.

In all these ways, historical linearity, so deeply embedded in Christianity, was becoming ascendant for secular as well as religious reasons. Out of this complex climate emerged the progressivist thinking of the Enlightenment. Several patterns and diverse sources can be discerned among its wide array of forms, but it is important to know that the eighteenth century’s historical optimism was often tempered or reduced by doubts and pessimism, frequently on the part of highly influential thinkers.

### **Varieties and Patterns**

The belief in past or future progress, or both, was widespread among Enlightenment writers and, in all likelihood, their readers. The most common optimistic outlook involved knowledge-based disciplines among the arts and sciences, generally seen as cumulatively progressive in both short and long term, a viewpoint closely connected with the outcome of the quarrel of ancients and moderns.

For more than a century, the partisans of the ancients’ achievements had retained the upper hand. By the 1690s, however, the cause of moderns came into its own, with such compelling supporters as Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, the longtime secretary of the French Académie Royale des Sciences, and William Wotton, an English classicist and clergyman. The scientific discoveries of recent decades, culminating in the path-breaking, synthetic accomplishment of Sir Isaac Newton in natural philosophy, made it much easier for the supporters of the moderns to argue their case. Fontenelle, Wotton, and their eighteenth-century followers contended that in certain fields—above all mathematics, the natural sciences, and philosophy—knowledge was cumulative. This was true, too, of most practical skills and techniques, such as navigation and printing. Given the cumulative achievements of these endeavors, it is hardly surprising that in all these areas the moderns found many supporters. For other disciplines, including literature and the fine arts, the proponents of the moderns acknowledged that final judgments were much less reliable because they usually involved

opinion rather than criteria for analytical comparison. Nevertheless, even here there was a growing tendency to prefer Shakespeare, Racine, and Milton to Homer, Sophocles, and Virgil.

Although the Quarrel abated in intensity as the new century proceeded, it yielded a consistent Enlightenment belief in the tendency of knowledge to build on itself over time (and, thus, often an attitude of superiority toward classical antiquity). The progress of knowledge obviously was subject to discontinuities and even retrogressions from time to time, as the Middle Ages evidenced. Still, it seemed quite clear that the tide was coming in, and increasingly quickly. This view, expressed by both philosophes and their opponents all across Europe, undergirded that central project of the Enlightenment, the *Encyclopédie*, and appeared in key early statements by its editors, Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert. It represented the most fundamental element of the idea of progress at the time.

Several less common eighteenth-century doctrines of progress also played important roles. In Britain and Germany, much more than in France, Christian writers frequently emphasized an improvement in religion itself. Among the English and the Scots, many clergymen saw not only secular but also religious knowledge as advancing cumulatively over time; some also believed that the true faith was spreading to more and more people around the globe, and some even expected a gradual improvement in religious institutions and the religious life of the faithful. Views of this kind appear among conservative and liberal Anglicans, English Dissenters, evangelicals such as John Wesley, and Scottish Presbyterians. They attributed religious progress both to divine providence and to human agency. This same combination underlay Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's celebrated *Education of the Human Race* (1780). In this work, the German philosopher and playwright posited a progressive divine revelation that guided human intellectual development toward the perfection of reason. Some historians have preferred to consider progress a purely secular idea, or at least one derived from providentialism through secularization, but these Protestant views reveal a more complicated story.

The relationship between providence and progress became most complex in the case of eighteenth-century eschatological conceptions, especially apocalypticism and millennialism. These appeared from time to time in France—with the Camisards around 1700, and in the early 1730s with the miracles and the convulsionaries of Saint-Médard in Paris (who included Voltaire's brother). For the most part, however, eschatology was a Protestant concern; in eighteenth-century Britain, many scholarly interpreters of biblical prophecies worked diligently to correlate past events with scriptural predictions, to assess the "signs of the times," and to determine the proximity of the millennium and other last things. Their efforts gave new intellectual impetus to the Christian hopes of thousands of readers and listeners, especially by suggesting that the millennium would begin in the not too distant future and would take place in an earthly setting similar to the present.

Least numerous but most influential in after years were the doctrines of general progress articulated from midcentury on, often by Enlightenment philosophes. These visions of broadly conceived improvement usually employed a long time-frame and were influenced substantially by the achievements of Western history since the later Middle Ages or the Renaissance. Among them were "stadial," four-stage theories that identified a progressive series of economic

systems—hunting and gathering, pastoralism, agriculture, and finally commerce—as evolving over the ages in diverse civilizations. In this model, change in the means of subsistence was the organizing principal for understanding the development of society. In the more fully articulated instances of the stadial theory, each successive economic stage involved specific social, political, and intellectual forms. François Quesnay, the leader of the Physiocrats, Antoine Yves de Goguet, and Claude-Adrien Helvétius, all offered developed stadial theories that varied in complexity and emphasis.

### ***Turgot***

The first proponent of this approach in France was probably Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, writing in the early 1750s, long before he became comptroller general of finances. He saw strong evidence in the record of the past for the inevitability of future advances in science, technology, and moral behavior (though not in poetry or the fine arts). Based on the creative possibilities inherent in human genius and the potentialities for cumulative knowledge built into language, he thought indefinite progress was a central characteristic of life, and he considered the human species capable of perfectibility—not perfection itself, but an ever nearer approach to perfection. Turgot’s outlook on progress, contained in unpublished lectures and an essay, was not widely known during his lifetime.

In England, very similar views appeared in print from the 1740s on. A diverse group of writers, ranging from Dissenters like the polymath Joseph Priestley to the Anglican bishop of Carlisle, Edmund Law, propounded the notion that there had been and would continue indefinitely to be progress on all fronts, from knowledge to happiness. Although they grounded this assessment on past human (and especially European) achievements, its warranty was a Christian vision of providential history. Their beliefs achieved a wide following and, apart from the theological underpinnings, paralleled the conceptions of more secular late-eighteenth-century English thinkers, from the great historian Edward Gibbon to the novelist and radical political writer William Godwin. The feminist author Mary Wollstonecraft, who was briefly Godwin’s wife, held views about perfectibility similar to his; she believed that women eventually would achieve equality with men and begin to realize the power of improvement embodied in their capacity to reason. Influenced by these English views, Thomas Jefferson believed strongly in perfectibility and, like other Americans of the founding generation, felt certain that his own country would contribute much to the realization of the promise of indefinite progress.

### ***Adam Smith***

Meanwhile, Adam Smith constructed his own four-stage theory in Scotland at precisely the same time as Turgot in France, and it became part of both his lectures to university students and the *Wealth of Nations* (1776). Virtually all the leading lights of the Scottish intellectual elite—including the jurist Lord Kames, the philosopher and historian David Hume, the head of the Church of Scotland and Edinburgh University, William Robertson, and the professors Adam Ferguson and John Millar—devised stadial theses of some kind. To be sure, not all these Scots thought of the development of civilization in primarily economic terms. What they had in common

was an understanding of history in which societies advanced from barbarism to refinement, and a conviction that there had been substantial progress in Europe toward a refined civilization, starting with the blossoming commerce of the late Middle Ages. Except for Ferguson, they differed from Turgot and the English in not sharing an ardent confidence about the future. They thought that the progress of recent centuries could continue, but they worried that the opulence of refined commercial life threatened morals. For most of the leading Scots, therefore, indefinite progress was possible but hardly guaranteed, and perfectibility was not a definitive human characteristic.

### ***Condorcet***

The most celebrated eighteenth-century doctrine of progress belonged to a man often called the last of the philosophes, the mathematician and reformer Jean-Antoine-Nicolas Caritat de Condorcet. While in hiding from the Jacobins in 1793–1794, he wrote a *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* that is often considered the epitome of Enlightenment belief in progress. It described ten epochs of history, linked by the advancement of rational intelligence along a path of indefinite progress, despite the great weight of priestcraft and other obstacles. Historical progress had occurred in all domains, had quickened recently, and was capable of further acceleration by knowledgeable human effort. Limitless perfectibility being a principal characteristic of the species, the coming tenth epoch held enormous promise. For example, Condorcet foresaw the end of warfare between nations and the development of international organizations to assure perpetual peace (as had a few others, from the little-known abbé de Saint-Pierre, who may have been the first to write about indefinite social progress, to the great philosopher Immanuel Kant, who thought the pursuit of progress and peace a moral obligation). The achievable goals of the tenth epoch also included equality for women, equality among nations, the spread of moral goodness and its application to politics, the end of disease, and the indefinite postponement of death. For Condorcet, a student of the optimistic views of Turgot and Priestley, progress led to a utopian future.

### **Sources of Optimism**

With some regularity, historians have attributed the idea of progress to the secularization of Christian providentialism, thereby making Condorcet's utopia an earthly heaven. Not even a small set of influences, however, let alone a single factor such as secularization, adequately accounts for the abundance and diversity of beliefs in progress during the Enlightenment. In general, both intellectual and social considerations played important roles in the varied appeal of such notions. Certain intellectual traditions—especially the Christian vision of history, millennialism, themes concerning the advancement of learning, and the quarrel of ancients and moderns—contributed much to the context in which the idea of progress developed in the eighteenth century. At the same time, notable real-world changes also made essential contributions to the nature and appeal of the ideal progress: the emergence of political stability in Britain, the agitation for reform in France, and the earliest stages of the Industrial Revolution. Nor is it possible to ignore the nurturing role played by local and national academies and learned societies in promoting belief in progress. Many of them existed precisely to make certain that improvements in the arts and sciences reached a wide audience, and to contribute to further advances by taking advantage of cooperative endeavor.

Among intellectual factors that were new, sensationalism was of particular significance. The concept that human beings are shaped largely by sensory experience, promulgated by John Locke in the late seventeenth century, soon became the standard view of most of the philosophes and their contemporaries. Works by David Hartley, Helvétius, and Étienne Bonnot de Condillac established a psychology according to which “malleability” or “pliability” was an essential human characteristic, with the implication that individuals, and by extension all of society, could be shaped for good (or ill) by experience. In building his conception of indefinite progress and perfectibility, Turgot relied heavily on this consideration, as did virtually all the British exponents of general progress and such American revolutionaries as Benjamin Rush. Rush emphasized education as the key to effecting improvement. Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarian program to legislate for the greatest happiness of the greatest number rested heavily on similar considerations.

Of almost equal importance to the development of the idea of progress was the eighteenth century’s historiographic revolution, led by such eminent figures as Voltaire, Robertson, Hume, and Gibbon. These and other writers of history broke away from the customary assemblage of facts and political chronology to provide broadly interpretive works in which habits, customs, and cultural and intellectual activities featured prominently. In addition, often under the influence of the *Spirit of the Laws* by Montesquieu, such historians tended to treat society as organically related in its various aspects, and mankind as a social product. Montesquieu’s ideas also stimulated the use of “conjectural” or “natural” history, used by many Scottish thinkers and others. Under this practice, what was known about Arab clans, American tribes, and ancient Mediterranean peoples became the basis for an imaginative reconstruction of the life and mores of early human society, for which documentary evidence did not exist. These innovations in historiography and early anthropology contributed greatly to seeing civilization as a whole and to envisioning its systemic alteration over time—vital elements of many doctrines of general progress. Furthermore, many of the leading historians and practitioners of conjectural history espoused in their own works a belief in progress.

Related to these historiographic changes were substantial adjustments in the perception of time itself. Thanks to contemporary geological and biological discoveries, the duration of existence expanded appreciably for many intellectuals and their readers. The eternal fixity of species came under scrutiny, and a proto-evolutionary point of view, “transformism,” emerged. These developments called into question scriptural accounts and longstanding Christian traditions about the past, and, more important, they brought the idea of historical change to the center of an educated person’s horizon. Likewise, the concept of the century entered the vernacular around 1700, furthering the division of time into quanta that had been initiated by the advent of mechanical clocks. Now it was possible to use specific labels (such as quattroceto) for specific periods, thereby capturing the historical essence of those eras. In general, uniformity and permanence were disappearing in favor of division and change. No wonder the English writer Samuel Johnson thought innovation omnipresent. The Western emphasis on *being* was giving way to ideas of *becoming*, and the belief in progress complemented and benefited from this transition.

Change and reform, including change in the general way of thinking, were central to the Enlightenment, of course. It was natural, therefore, for Bury to argue that, more than anything else,

passionate desire for reform powered the spread of the idea of progress in France. Indeed, there can be no doubt that the quest of the French philosophes for dramatic changes in church and state went hand in hand with the argument made by many of them that progress was built into history. From this perspective, the idea of progress served as a hope, a utopia, or even a form of propaganda. But the experience of some change can readily produce expectations of still more, and this was true particularly for the British. Their achievement of a political system of comparative freedom and reliable functioning, the increasing prosperity associated with agricultural improvement and commercial prosperity, and the coming of an industrial economy all gave the British elite confidence—more confidence than was enjoyed by any other nation of the age. There, the growing sense of human capacity, renewed throughout the West with the Renaissance and propelled forward by Newtonian science, reached new heights. Little wonder that doubts and pessimism are harder to identify in England and even Scotland than elsewhere, until early nineteenth-century criticism of the Industrial Revolution.

### **Doubts and Alternatives**

Throughout the Enlightenment, historical optimism was rarely unalloyed, and pessimism about history found frequent expression even among the greatest of the philosophes. For instance, Voltaire wrote much about progress, and sensationalism gave him a strongly optimistic outlook on the long-term possibilities for improvement through reason, yet grave doubts increasingly overtook him. He saw four high points in history (Periclean Athens, Rome under Caesar and Augustus, the Renaissance, and the age of Louis XIV), but these were like a oases in a historical desert of cruelties, crimes, and follies. In his opinion, fanaticism posed an ongoing threat to the progress of true philosophy, and civilization was permanently, vulnerable to degeneration; indefinite progress and perfectibility therefore seemed implausible. Diderot's views ran parallel; the progress of knowledge, insisted upon by the *Encyclopédie* as a chief characteristic of recent times, would eventually encounter an upper boundary, he thought. Likewise, happiness was limited by human biology and the evil inherent in human nature, while moral progress seemed to have gone almost as far as it could. Further, Diderot believed that decline inevitably followed growth, a theory of flux that also applied to his biological transformism. Montesquieu not only objected to perfectibility but also contended that eventual decadence was inherent in progress, with the spirit of any nation (and therefore its civilization) subject to decline in almost cyclical fashion. Both Montesquieu and Diderot knew about and may have read the work of Giambattista Vico, a Neapolitan professor and philosopher who early in the century had developed a cyclical theory of history. Vico believed that the cycle's continual pattern applied to every society, with each stage involving both gains and losses.

Substantial doubts of various kinds were hardly rare among the philosophes, therefore, and nonlinear alternatives to the idea of progress did exist. For their part, the orthodox Christian opponents of the French philosophes sometimes simply refused to accept progress as part of the divine dispensation and challenged the progressive implications of sensationalist psychology. Such a reaction was much less likely in Protestant countries, although Thomas Malthus's famous *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) constituted a response to the perfectibilism of Condorcet and

Godwin by an Anglican clergyman who refused to accept the possibility of created beings perfecting themselves without divine assistance. Perfectibility elicited other hostile rejoinders, for example from John Adams, who thought it unrealistic, even though he was fundamentally optimistic about history and the future of his new country.

By contrast, the century's most provocative critic of progress, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, acknowledged the existence of a faculty of perfectibility as a unique human characteristic, responsible for the tremendous progress of the arts and sciences across the centuries. Unfortunately, he argued, it was precisely this progress that had ruined human morals; it subjected men and women, through their vanity, to the fulfillment of artificial needs, while suppressing the inborn human compassion for others. This process of degeneration had taken place in an increasingly civilized social setting and must be reversed there, not in a state of nature. Thus, Rousseau urged social, political, and educational reforms that would tap human virtues and promote dutiful citizenship in a moral society. This projected regeneration represented a vision of future progress, but the record of the past, so encouraging to other philosophes, was for Rousseau a history of disaster.

Rousseau marks the late Enlightenment transition to Romanticism, exemplified also by the German philosopher and clergyman Johann Gottfried von Herder, whose work emphasized the diversity of cultures and eras. He denied that there was a single standard by which all history could be judged, because each culture and each age had its own pattern of development. Consequently, it would not do to consider modern European civilization superior to that of the Middle Ages. Rather, the contribution of each nation or century was uniquely valuable; over long periods of time, rising and falling, they contributed to the collective education of humankind and thereby to the increase of true humanity. This was progress, surely, but hardly linear or celebratory of the accomplishments of the Enlightenment.

[See also Ancients and Moderns; Encyclopédie; Millennialism; Revealed Religion; and Sensationalism.]

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