"THE IDEA OF PROGRESS": A MODEL COURSE

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Course Description

Progress can be defined as the idea that the human condition is being steadily improved by his own effort. This course investigates the development of this idea in Western thought, from the ancient world up to the present.

The course begins by examining the cyclical view of time that characterized Greek philosophy and the eschatological alternatives offered by Jewish and Christian sources. It then focuses on the development of theories of progress in the Enlightenment, which saw science rather than faith as the vehicle of human salvation. The third unit considers the linkage between progress and freedom in the 19th century, with particular attention to the idea of evolution. Finally, it concludes with the idea of progress in American culture and politics.

In addition to its historical dimensions, this course considers a series of philosophical questions, including:

- What is the *cause* of progress? To what extent does improvement have its roots in religion, science, politics, social and economic structure?
- What are the *measures* of progress as understood in its spiritual, intellectual, material, and political dimensions? Can we be certain that progress is occurring, or is this a matter of hope or faith?
- What is the *goal* of progress? In other words, what kind of world would progress lead us to—and will we ever get there?

Recommended Audience

This course is appropriate for advanced undergraduates and graduate students. Prerequisites might include introductions to the history of philosophy or electives in modern social thought.

Recommended Assignments

Readings total approximately 150 pages per week (about 50 pages per session).

Writing assignment include one 2000-word essay for each unit (for undergraduates) or an 8000-word term paper (for graduate students).

Schedule

The schedule is designed for a fourteen-week semester with three meetings per week. In order to accommodate holidays and vacations, it includes one "dummy week" with no meetings. The course consists of the following thematic units, weekly themes, and daily reading assignments:

* I wish to thank my research assistant, Seth Harrison, for his assistance in preparing these course materials.

UNIT 1: ATHENS AND JERUSALEM

Week 1: *Nature and Creation*

- Session 1.1: Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 11.106–11.201; Plato, *Republic* 369a–374a, 543a–569c; Polybius, *Histories*, Book VI, Chs. 2, 8 sec. 57.
- Session 1.2: Xenophanes, Fragment 16; Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.1–1.23; Aristotle, *Politics*, I.2, II.8; Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, Bk. 5 D-E.
- Session 1.3: Genesis 1–4, 6–9:17, 12:1–9, 17:1–14, 18; Deuteronomy 5–6; 1 Samuel 8.

Week 2: *Prophecy, Providence, and the Kingdom of God*

- Session 2.1: Psalms 40, 42; Isaiah 25, 40, 42, 51, 65; Jeremiah 29:1–21, 31; Ezekiel 36–7; Daniel 7; Micah 7.
- Session 2.2: Matthew 1–7, 13, 24–25; Mark 4; Romans 8; 1; Corinthians 15; Hebrews 11–12; Revelation 21.
- Session 2.3: Augustine, *City of God* IV.33–34; V.11; XIV.26–28; XV.1, 4–5; XVII.1–2; XX.1, 9, 16–17; XXII.22, 30.

Week 3: *The Unity of Mankind*

- Session 3.1: J. Bossuet, *Discourse on Universal History*, "General Plan of the Work"; Part One, 11th Epoch, 12th Epoch; Part 2 Chs. 1, 27, 31; Part 3, Chs. 1–2, 6–8.
- Session 3.2: G. Vico, *The New Science*, "Idea of the Work," Axioms #64-96; Book IV Introduction, Sec. 8, Sec. 9 Chs. 1, 3; Book V. Ch. 3; "Conclusion of the Work."
- Session 3.3: G.E. Lessing, "The Education of the Human Race," M. Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Late Middle Ages*, section I.

UNIT 2: THE QUARREL BETWEEN THE ANCIENTS AND THE MODERNS

Week 4: *Progress and the Enlightenment*

- Session 4.1: F. Bacon, *The Great Instauration*, Preface and Plan of the Work; R. Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, parts 1–3.
- Session 4.2: J. Swift, "The Battle of the Books," F.M. Voltaire, "That Modern Europe Is Better than Ancient Europe."
- Session 4.3: A. R. J. Turgot, "A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind" and *Discourses on Universal History*, "Idea of the Introduction," "Plan of the First Discourse."

Week 5: *Progress and the Enlightenment, Continued*

- Session 5.1: J.J.-Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (skip dedication, preface, and all notes *except* #9 and #15).
- Session 5.2: A.N. de Condorcet, *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind*, 9th and 10th Epochs.
- Session 5.3: I. Kant, "Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent," "Is the Human

Race Constantly Improving?"

Week 6: DUMMY WEEK

Week 7: *Progress and Freedom*

- Session 7.1: G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, Sections 1–3.
- Session 7.2: G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, Sections 4–6.
- Session 7.3: G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §341–360.

UNIT 3: NATURALIZING PROGRESS

Week 9: *Progress and the Economy*

- Session 9.1: A. Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, I.1–2; III.1, 4.
- Session 9.2: T. Malthus, "An Essay on the Principle of Population," Chs. 1–5, 8–9.
- Session 9.3: J.S. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, III.6–7.

Week 8: *Progress and the State*

- Session 8.1: J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*, Chs. 1–3.
- Session 8.2: J.S. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, IV.1, 11 §1–7.
- Session 8.3: K. Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, Critique of the Gotha Program, Section IV.

Week 10: *Progress and Evolution*

- Session 10:1 C. Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, Ch. 3–4 (up to "Of the Intercrossing of Individuals").
- Session 10.2: H. Spencer, "Progress: Its Law and Cause," "The Proper Sphere of Government," Letters I, VI, VII.
- Session 10.3: H.G. Wells, *Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress on Human Life*, Chs. III, V, IX.

UNIT 4: PROGRESS AND AMERICA

Week 11: *Progress and the American Republic*

- Session 11.1: J. Adams, "Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law"; The Declaration of Independence; The Federalist #9.
- Session 11.2: F. Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the 4th of July?"; A. Lincoln, Cooper Union Address, the Gettysburg Address.
- Session 11.3: R.W. Emerson, "The Progress of Culture," W. Whitman, excerpts from *Democratic Vistas*.

Week 12: *Progressivism and Social Reform*

- Session 12.1: T. Roosevelt, "The New Nationalism"; W. Wilson, "What is Progress?"; H. Croly, "Nationality and Centralization" (from *The Progress of American Life*).
- Session 12:2: F. D. Roosevelt, "Commonwealth Club Address," 1944 State of the Union; J. Dewey, "The Future of Liberalism."
- Session 12.3: L.B. Johnson, "University of Michigan Commencement Address"; J. K. Galbraith, "Conventional Wisdom" and "The Case for Social Balance" from *The Affluent Society*.

Week 13: *The Crisis of Progress*

- Session 13.1: The Port Huron Statement of Students for a Democratic Society; H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 1–18, 48–55.
- Session 13.2: A. Solzhenitsyn, "Harvard Commencement Address"; J. Carter, "Crisis of Confidence."
- Session 13.3: R. Rorty, "American National Pride" and "A Cultural Left" from *Achieving Our Country*.

Week 14: *The Future of Progress*

- Session 14.1: F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, "By Way of an Introduction."
- Session 14.2: J. Gray, "An Illusion with a Future."
- Session 14.3: S. Johnson, *Future Perfect*, Introduction, Ch. 1, Ch. 2 pp. 151–198, Conclusion.

"THE IDEA OF PROGRESS": COMMENTARY

INTRODUCTION

The belief that the human condition is subject to progress, that people's current situation is better than that of their ancestors, and that future generations will enjoy yet better lives, is deeply rooted in the Western tradition. Inspired by material and intellectual improvements, it has encouraged movements of moral, social, and political reform, and provided consolation when those movements have fallen short of their goals. In 1921, the Cambridge historian J.B. Bury described progress as "a synthesis of the past and a prophecy of the future."[1] Bury's phrase is illuminating: the idea of progress justifies all that the human race has suffered as a contribution to the wellbeing it may yet enjoy.

Yet the date of Bury's remark indicates how tenuous this synthesis can be. Born in 1860, Bury lived to see the Victorian dream of a peaceful, prosperous, technologically advanced Europe buried in the trenches of the Western Front. For Bury, the horrors of World War I reopened questions that the Victorians believed to be settled. What if things are not getting better, but rather worse? What if progress is a comforting illusion that conceals man's fundamental misery?

These questions were made more urgent by the crises and wars of the 1930s and 1940s. The First World War could be mourned as a tragic mistake. The next war was the product of such malevolent cruelty that it called into question the value of humanity. In 1949, Theodor Adorno declared, "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."[2] How much more savage would it be to speak of progress?

But the idea of progress was not extinguished by Europe's nightmare. In the United States, which was spared the worst horrors of the 20th century, it has provided both the name for a political movement and a justification for transformations of state and society. In 2007, artist Shepard Fairey created an original poster based on this theme for presidential candidate Barack Obama. The poster featured a social-realist style image of Obama over the legend PROGRESS, evoking both the storied past of the American Left and hopes for its future success.[3]

Even in the United States, however, progress seems increasingly unbelievable. After more than a decade of war and years of economic stagnation, Americans now express unprecedented doubts about their country's prospects. According to a poll conducted after President Obama's 2014 State of the Union speech, more than six in ten Americans believe that the country is headed in the wrong direction.[4] Another survey found that 46 percent of likely voters believe the country's best days lie behind it.[5]

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[1] J.B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth* (London: Macmillan, 1921), 5.
[2] Theodor Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 34.
[3] In deference to a request from the Obama campaign, Fairey changed the legend to HOPE. The campaign's request reflects the ambiguity and controversy that attend the idea of progress in American life.
[4] http://nbcpolitics.nbcnews.com/_news/2014/01/27/22471530-nbc-news-poll-pessimism-defines-the-state-of-the-union?lite
[5] http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/mood_of_america/america_s_best_days

These data provide an occasion for philosophical and historical reflection as well as political debate. If we hope, as citizens, to assess the prospects and extent of progress in our own time, we must, as scholars, articulate the idea both in its conceptual dimensions and historical development. That is the purpose of this course. By investigating ideas of progress from ancient Greece and Palestine to the Christian era and American modernity, this course will equip students with the sources, vocabulary, and arguments they need to carry the debate about progress into the future. The focus is on the idea of progress in political and social thought.

SECONDARY LITERATURE

The literature on progress is enormous. In addition to countless articles and books that touch on some aspect of the idea, there are literally dozens of thematic studies. The following list of references is not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, it provides an introduction to the secondary literature for instructors and students who wish to pursue the topic more deeply and focuses on works that influenced the discussions below. More specific recommendations are included for each unit.

- Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1963).
- Carl Becker, *Progress and Power* (New York: Knopf, 1936).
- J.B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth* (London: Macmillan, 1921).
- Margaret Meek Lange, "Progress", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/progress/>.
- Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: Norton, 1991).
- Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).
- Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).
- Sidney Pollard, *The Idea of Progress: History and Society* (New York: Pelican, 1971).
- F. J. Teggart, *The Idea of Progress: A Collection of Readings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949).
- Charles Van Doren, *The Idea of Progress* (New York: Praeger, 1967).
- Ronald Wright, *Short History of Progress* (New York: Carrol & Graf, 2005).

UNIT I: ATHENS AND JERUSALEM

The idea of progress draws on two great sources of Western culture: the distinct traditions of monotheistic faith and rational inquiry. The political philosopher Leo Strauss characterized these origins as "Jerusalem and Athens," respectively. From Jerusalem, the idea of progress derives the conviction that man's striving and suffering are not merely random, but move toward a determinate goal. From Athens, it derives the confidence that this goal can be discerned by, and perhaps determined, by human reason. In the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel writes that world history is "a progress that we must come to know in its necessity."[6] He does so as a self-conscious heir of both the Jews and Greeks.

Yet Hegel's understanding of progress cannot be found in either of his sources by itself. The Jewish prophets and their Christian successors hoped for divine intervention, radically altering the conditions of their existence. Greek philosophers expected that human ingenuity would lead to improvements in the future, but doubted the possibility of fundamental change. Neither tradition offers the idea of history as a rationally articulated, if not quite linear, movement found in Hegel.

For this reason, many historians of ideas have denied that the idea of progress has any legitimate connection to classical or Biblical sources.[7] They contend that it is either a distinctly modern idea rooted in opposition to classical thought, or a secularization of theological concepts. In *Meaning and History*, Karl Löwith argues that the idea of progress is based on a secularization of Christian eschatology., He states that when severed from its original theological purpose the idea of progress distorts our conception of time and raises false hopes regarding man's potential to control his destiny.[8]

Löwith's interpretation of the sources of progress is not simply an historical argument; it is bound up in a critique of modernity. Like many other intellectuals who reached intellectual maturity in the Weimar Republic, Löwith believed that expectations of progress had encouraged the development of totalitarian movements that claimed to have the key to history. In his view, progress was a dangerous illusion to be rejected in favor of a return to the original sources of Western culture.[9]

Löwith's assessment indicates one of the major fault lines in the historiography of progress. Speaking broadly, critics of progress tend to consider that the concept of progress cannot be found in the religious and philosophical sources of Western civilization. Instead, they argue, it is a modern development and therefore it is responsible for at least some of the defects of modernity. In addition to Löwith, Strauss and Hannah Arendt offer versions of this argument. Not coincidentally, all were steeped in the declinist literature associated with Oswald Spengler, as well as Martin Heidegger's critiques of post-Platonic metaphysics and modern technology.

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[6] G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 22.
[7] On the issue of "legitimacy," see Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert Wallace (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985).
[8] Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).
[9] See Leo Strauss, "Progress or Return?" in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997) and Hannah Arendt, "The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern" in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer offer a partial exception to the generalization that critics of progress see it as distinctively modern. In their view, the idea of progress *is* deeply embedded in Western civilization. At the same time, they use this conclusion to justify a broader critique of that civilization as caught in a destructive "dialectic of enlightenment."[10] For Adorno and Horkheimer and many of their 'postmodern' epigones, scientific reason itself is an expression of the human desire to dominate and control. The struggle to perceive an objective, intelligible reality thus implies a concomitant effort to negate or subjugate anything that resists rational calculation. Adorno and Horkheimer's colleague Walter Benjamin formulated a related thought in terms of culture with the phrase, "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."[11]

More recently, criticisms of progress as an alibi for the deployment of power have played a role in the development of postcolonial studies. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said famously argued that the concept of progress has historically been used to construct the East as backward and lacking agency, and thus the legitimate object of Western exploitation.[12]

Defenders of the idea of progress tend to agree that it can be traced back to the wellsprings of Western civilization. But usually this is a point in favor of Western culture, rather than its characteristic defect. In addition to exponents of the Whig interpretation of history such as G.M. Trevelyan, this group includes some Marxists, who have aimed to show that Marx's vision of human liberation within history was deeply rooted in philosophical and cultural tradition. These writers include M.I. Finley (cited above) and, using a less conventional approach, Ernst Bloch.[13]

The divisions in the historiography of progress are disciplinary as well as political. In general, academic historians are skeptical of claims that concepts can be traced coherently over long periods of time, while writers in political science, philosophy, and to some extent literary studies are more open to this approach. Although it is pervasive in contemporary academia, hostility to the history of ideas was not always so widespread. Pioneering early studies of the idea of progress were written by historians, most notably A.O. Lovejoy.

As the syllabus indicates, this course assumes that the development and transformations that the idea of progress has undergone *can* be followed across time. But that is not the same as claiming that there is just one such idea—or that all of history led up to its discovery. Löwith and his allies are correct that the distinctive German idealist vision of progress cannot be found in premodern sources, but it does not mean that ideas of improvement or historical change are absent from those sources. It is to those ideas that this unit is dedicated.

The Myth of the Golden Age

The Pentateuch and the archaic poets both describe increases in man's technical mastery and intellectual accomplishment. Yet they also suggest that man's point of *origin* was a moment of moral and in certain respects material superiority. In the Hebrew Bible the superiority of the past is reflected both in material creation--all of which is good as it leaves God's hand--and by the

[10] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007).
[11] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," trans. Harry Zohn *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 2007), 256.
[12] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 206.
[13] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), three volumes.

state of innocence in which man dwells before he learned to distinguish between good and evil.[14] The archaic poets observe a decline from blessed beginnings in the myth of the "golden race" that populated the earth before its present inhabitants. As Hesiod writes in the *Works and Days*,

> … they lived like gods without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief: miserable age rested not on them; but with legs and arms never failing they made merry with feasting beyond the reach of all evils. When they died, it was as though they were overcome with sleep, and they had all good things; for the fruitful earth unforced bare them fruit abundantly and without stint. They dwelt in ease and peace upon their lands with many good things, rich in flocks and loved by the blessed gods.[15]

What caused man to leave this blessed estate? In the Book of Genesis, man is expelled from heaven on account of his own sin. First Eve, then Adam, eats of the forbidden tree. As punishment they are driven out from the Garden of Eden, and compelled to earn their living by laboring in now recalcitrant soil. In the Bible, sin and man's responsibility for his fate go together. By acquiring knowledge that God had not provided, man takes upon himself the burden of supplying his own needs through labor.

The Greeks agree with Genesis that the golden age was characterized by innocence and abundance rather than knowledge. As Xenophanes puts it: "In the beginning the gods did not at all reveal all things clearly to mortals, but by searching men in the course of time find them out better."[16] But *knowing* better does not necessarily mean *being* better. The growth of knowledge makes it possible for man to do evil he could not previously even conceive. Even the Epicurean Lucretius, who in most respects is an optimist about human development, accepts that suffering attends advancements of knowledge. Writing of the early ages of man, Lucretius observes that at that time "never were many thousands of men led beneath the standards and done to death in a single day, nor did the stormy waters of ocean dash ships and men upon the rocks."[17] The same intellectual and cultural progress that allows man to forge metals and ventured upon the sea makes possible the horrors of war and shipwreck.

The Hebrew Bible highlights the link between the extension of skill acquisition, knowledge and moral corruption. Cain founds the first city after being driven from Eden in punishment for the murder of his brother. In the Bible, the progress of civilization—literally the establishment of cities—and the arts of farming and building necessary to it are consequences of a crime. They do not so much supplement God's creation as provide an alternative to the given favor that the pastoralist Abel enjoyed.

An essentially urban people, the Greeks might be expected to be more favorable to civilization. In the *Republic*, however, Socrates roots the growth of cities in excessive desire. A simple community, Socrates argues, might arise to satisfy man's needs for food, shelter, and clothing. But the satisfaction of natural needs encourages the development of artificial ones. Once their physical requirements were met, Socrates suggests, the citizens of this first city would seek more delicious foods and comfortable clothing than a simple division of labor could supply.

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[14] *Genesis* 1–3.
[15] Hesiod, *Works and Days*, II.110–120.
[16] Xenophanes, Frag. 16.
[17] Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* D.

The city grows in technological prowess and population to the same extent that it becomes a luxurious "city of pigs."[18]

Yet it would be a mistake to dismiss Hebrew and Greek criticisms of urban civilization and the refinements of the arts and science as "primitivism," to use Lovejoy's term.[19] The suggestion, rather, is that as man grows in power and mastery, he gains responsibility for his own fate. In the early phases of abundance, man is childlike and dependent on God or gods. As he continues to develop, man assumes control of his own environment—for good or for ill.

One of the striking features of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, is that he attributes no role to gods. It may not be coincidental that Thucydides begins by tracing the development of Greek civilization from its mythical origins to the achievements of the Classical Age. On one level, Thucydides rejects Hesiod's suggestion that the men of the past were better than those of the present: he argues that Greek thought and manners have become more refined in recent generations. On the other hand, it is precisely the Greeks of his own time who cast themselves, after extensive and eloquent deliberation, into fratricidal war.

Aristotle illustrates the association between progress and maturity by comparing social development to organic growth. According to Aristotle, "what each thing is when fully developed, we call its nature, whether we are speaking of a man, a horse, or a family."[20] Since the fully developed or natural man is the citizen who exercises his reason in public conversation about the just and unjust, expedient and inexpedient, it follows that the mature form of human society is a deliberative political community. In Book I of the *Politics*, Aristotle shows how this kind of community might develop out the primordial reproductive unit.

Greek 'Conservatism' and the Cycle of Regimes

Aristotle sees the self-governing city-state, which had been known in Greece since the 7th Century BC, as the final destination of political development, not a point of departure. In Book II of the *Politics*, he therefore distinguishes between politics, in which innovations should be treated with suspicion, and the other arts and sciences, which are susceptible of infinite improvement. Although he acknowledges that beneficial changes in laws and social institutions have occurred, Aristotle concludes that the analogy between political science and a progressive art like medicine is false. He remarks: "a change in a law is a very different thing from a change in an art. For the law has no power to command obedience except that of habit, which can only be given by time …"[21]

The implicit conservatism of Greek political philosophy was expressed in a different way by Plato. Socrates suggests in the *Republic* that political society is subject to a natural cycle, in which the defects of every form of government lead to the establishment of a new and less satisfactory constitutional form. Change is typically for the worse. The compelling political task is to preserve from corruption the good laws long ago established by a wise founder.

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[18] Plato, *Republic* 369b–372e.
[19] Arthur O. Lovejoy, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).
[20] Aristotle, *Politics* 1252b33–5.
[21] Aristotle, *Politics* 1269a19–21.

In his history of Rome, Polybius modifies Socrates' argument by proposing that the earliest government was a virtuous monarchy rather than an aristocracy. Unfortunately, the temptations of power are too great for any king to maintain his virtue. Monarchy thus degenerates into tyranny, which arouses the opposition of the best citizens, who rise up and establish an aristocracy. Their greed, however, renders the rule of the best merely the rule of a wealthy few. At this point, the common people assert themselves against exploitation by the rich and powerful, establishing a democracy. But "in due course the license and lawlessness of this form of government produces mob-rule to complete the series."[22] While Polybius acknowledges the possibility of improvement then, he does not see human development as linear. On the contrary, Polybius describes an oscillation between virtue and vice, with a generally downward trajectory.

This thought is sometimes described as a cyclical view of history, but that is not entirely accurate. Rather than incessant rotation among a fixed number of constitutional forms, Polybius suggests that the sequence of political revolutions is periodically interrupted by telluric cataclysms that wipe away civilization and force mankind to start the process all over again. For Polybius, the problem is not simply that political improvements are only temporary. Like Plato, he suggests that all human achievements are subject to inevitable destruction.

Providence and Redemption

The Hebrew Bible approaches the limits to human development in a different way. Rather than a natural process, it shows God sitting in judgment on the cities of men. First, he destroys humanity itself, with the exception of Noah and his family. Later, he punishes the cities of the plain despite Abraham's pleas for mercy. In both cases, God's justice puts an end to the unguided development of civilization, which tends toward corruption.

At the same time, God holds out to the Israelites hopes for a brilliant, if improbable future. In Genesis, God promises Abraham:

> I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.[23]

The Lord goes on to promise Abraham that his offspring will be as numerous as stars, and that they will inhabit a bounteous land of their own—provided that they remain obedient to the Lord, their God.

Much of the rest of the Old Testament is concerned with Hebrews' failure to fulfill their end of the bargain. In a pattern repeated throughout the books, the Hebrews' periods of adherence to the law, in which they prosper, are followed by periods of deviation, in which their fortunes take a turn for the worse. This process of spiritual and political declines begins with the Hebrews' demand for a king so as to be "like all the nations."[24] It reaches a nadir in the conquest of the kingdom of Judah by the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

[22] Polybius, *The Histories*, VI.9.
[23] *Genesis* 12:1–3.
[24] 1 *Samuel* 8:5.

In this sense, the Hebrew Bible hardly seems to be a likely source of ideas about progress. But the prophets introduce a distinctive element of it, in response to the deserved miseries of an unfaithful people: the possibility of redemption. After rehearsing the sins of Judah that brought upon defeat, Isaiah describes the destruction of Israel's oppressors and her restoration to God's favor:

> Zion shall be redeemed with justice, and her penitents with righteousness. The destruction of transgressors and of sinners *shall be* together, And those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed … The strong shall be as tinder, And the work of it as a spark; Both will burn together, And no one shall quench *them.*[25]

This prophetic vision imposes on history a different shape than the cycle sketched by Polybius and Plato. The destructions and tribulations that man suffers are steps toward his ultimate judgment and the reward of the faithful. In Isaiah, history becomes a guided movement toward a divine purpose.

The Jews apparently expected this redemption to take the form of restored political sovereignty. Jesus challenged this expectation by proclaiming himself the promised redeemer, while insisting that his kingdom is not of the familiar kind. At the same time, Jesus renews the prophetic vision of punishment for the wicked and redemption for the righteous. He explains in the Gospel of Mark:

> When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit up upon the throne of his glory: and before him shall be gathered all nations, and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats. And he shall set the sheep on his right hand … Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, "Come ye, blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."[26]

There are two points to be noted in this passage, which make it a source for future ideas of progress. First, it presents divine judgment as a matter for all nations, not just the Jews. While the Biblical prophets had spoken of the redemption of Israel, Jesus describes the redemption of the whole human race. Second, Jesus presents the kingdom of God as ordained from all time. It is not arbitrary interruption of human activities. It is the predetermined goal of human existence.

For those reasons, Jesus' promise of the kingdom of God challenges any vision of time as extending infinitely forward. For Jesus, time has a definite beginning and end. And his early followers expected that end to come soon. The Book of Revelation offers a vivid account of the establishment of the kingdom of God—including punishments of the wicked that recall the Old Testament prophets.

Jesus' failure to return imminently led to a reinterpretation of the kingdom of God. Increasingly, Christ's kingdom was interpreted as an escape from this world rather than a transformation of it. At the same time, the foreshortened arc of history was extended, with the promised redemption extended into the (possibly distant) future rather than expected at any moment. Augustine of Hippo was the great expositor of this change. In Book XX of *The City of*

[25] *Isaiah* 1:27–31.
[26] *Matthew* 25:31–34.

God, he articulates for the first time a truly *universal* history in which Jerusalem and Athens, Greeks and Jews contribute to the salvation of the whole human race at some point in the future.

The question of progress was revived in early modernity as Christian thinkers sought to reconcile Augustine's sacred history with increasingly obvious distinctions between the ancients and the moderns. While Augustine wrote when the Roman empire slowly disintegrated, Bossuet and Vico lived in a newly confident and productive Europe marshaling powers of invention and production that rivaled those of antiquity. For these modern Christian writers, the history of all the nations point toward new achievements and new horizons.

Whereas Bossuet and Vico focus on political development, Lessing reflects on intellectual concerns. In "The Education of the Human Race," he borrows Aristotle's association of phylogeny and ontogeny, but omits the limit implied by Aristotle's teleological conception of nature. Unlike Aristotelian development toward an objective standard of completion, Lessing treats "education" as an endless process. The education of the human race is not growth to the point of maturity followed by natural decay, but rather an open-ended movement toward greater understanding.

Lessing links his vision to Christian "enthusiasts" of the 13th and 14th century such as Joachim of Fiore, who offered a startling interpretation of John's revelation, according to which a "third age" of history succeeding the ages governed by the New and Old Testaments would be defined by a relationship of love between man and God. Unlike Joachim, however, Lessing emphasizes the role of reason. For Lessing, it would be defined by *enlightenment*.

Supplemental Materials for Unit 1

Note on Translations

There are many reliable translations of the works discussed in Unit 1. For the Bible, students should be encouraged to read the King James Version (KJV). Although its scholarship has been improved upon and language modified by subsequent editions, the KJV includes the renderings that have become proverbial in English literature and are most likely to be encountered in other sources.

I have cited the Greek and Latin works by standard divisions to make it easier for instructors to consult their own editions. For assignment to students, the following editions are among the cheapest and most widely available:

- Hesiod, *Works and Days*, trans. M.L. West (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- Xenophanes in *The First Philosophers: The Presocratics and the Sophists*, trans. Robin Waterfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- Aristotle, *The Politics and the Constitution of Athens*, ed. Stephen Everson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides*, ed. Robert B. Strassler (New York: Touchstone, 1996).
- Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. Martin Ferguson Smith (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001).

There are several English editions of the early modern materials. The following are the most widely available:

- Bossuet, *Discourse on Universal History*, trans. Elborg Forster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).
- Vico, *The New Science*, trans. David Marsh (New York: Penguin, 1999).
- Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, trans. H.S. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Suggested Questions for Discussion

- What aspects of human life are subject to "improvement"? In what ways? Is this improvement the same as "progress"?
- What are the differences between the presentations of time/history in the Bible and in the pagan sources? In which respects is each linear? In what respects is it cyclical?
- In what respects do the Bible and the Greek writers see the past as superior? In what respects do they see the present or future as superior? Be specific and contrast examples.
- What is "golden" about the "golden race" in Hesiod? How does this compare to Plato's presentation of that myth in the *Republic*?
- What causes of decline or degeneration do Polybius and Plato, respectively identify? Do they suggest any way in which this process can be resisted?
- What events or changes characterize redemption in the prophets? To what extent do they represent "improvements" over current conditions? Can man do anything to hasten redemption? Or does it depend entirely on God's will? Be specific and contrast examples.
- What does Jesus offer to believers? Would satisfaction of this promise represent a break in the course of history?
- In what ways do Augustine and Bossuet broaden the scope of the prophetic narrative? To whom do they believe the prophecies apply?
- Contrast the writers' assessments of monarchy as a political form. Do they see monarchy as a goal toward which we should aspire?
- What does Augustine mean by "providence"? By what means does providence determine events?
- In what ways does Vico believe that modern Europe will repeat the history of the Roman Empire? In what ways will it break the mold?
- How does Lessing modify Joachim of Fiore's idea of the "third age"? How does this relate to his interpretation of revelation?

Suggested Writing Assignments

- Compare the presentations of time that you find in the Old Testament and the Greek sources. In what respects are they similar? In what respects are they different? How does this affect the hopes for the future that you find in each set of sources? Pay particular attention to the distinctions between progress and decline, linearity and cyclicality.
- Do the Greek writers see any role for the divine—gods or God—in their accounts of human development? How does this compare to God's role in the Hebrew Bible?

- In what ways do Bossuet, Vico, and Lessing each develop the idea of universal history? In what respects do they think that members of the human race are the same? In what respects are they different? How does this presentation compare to the sacred history developed by Augustine? Pay particular attention to the role of the Jews, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Roman Empire.

Further Reading

Students interested in the Greek sources of the idea of progress should consult Ludwig Edelstein, *The Idea of Progress in Classical Antiquity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967). Edelstein contends that the idea of progress was more central to Greek culture than previous scholars realized, a point reiterated by M.I. Finley in *The World of Odysseus* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1982). Leon Kass pursues the contrast between Greek and Biblical intuitions about the human condition in *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York: Free Press, 2003). Augustine's attempt to synthesize Athens and Jerusalem is the subject of a vast literature. A good start is Rüdiger Bittner's essay on "Augustine's Philosophy of History" in *The Augustinian Tradition*, ed. Gareth B. Matthews (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), which includes helpful references to much of the current literature. Reeves remains the most classic source on medieval apocalypticism. Students and instructors may also wish to consult Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). On Vico, see Mark Lilla, *G.B. Vico: The Making of an Anti-Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). The best introductory source on Lessing, particularly with regard to his religious view, is Henry E. Allison, *Lessing and the Enlightenment* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966).

UNIT II: THE QUARREL OF THE ANCIENTS AND THE MODERNS

Both the Greek hopes for improvement and the Christian attempt at salvation differ in important ways from modern conceptions of progress. In the former, improvement rests on piecemeal developments in the arts and sciences and, to some extent, politics. It does not reflect an overall plan or purpose and lacks a discernible direction. Christian sacred history involves a planned movement toward a specific destination. But the plan is God's rather than man's, and depends on His will rather than human effort.

The understanding of time that influences these views also distinguishes them from modern theories of progress as a linear movement. Greek thinkers developed cyclical conceptions of time that excluded continuous development. Although they recognized and praised the tendency toward improvements within a given epoch, they also believed in periodic catastrophes that would return the human race to its origins. On this view, progress has a Sisyphean aspect, in that whatever advances mankind may enjoy are subject to inevitable reversals.

Christian theologians, particularly after Augustine, regarded time as a movement away from the Garden of Eden. Reinterpreting biblical prophecies of redemption and divine wrath,

they pushed the apocalypse into the future in response to Jesus' failure to return during the early years of the Church. Even so, Augustinian thought orients human history toward the End of Time, when God himself will reassert control of human affairs. Its temporal horizon is effectively closed.

The influence of these tendencies helps explain the relative absence of ideas of improvement or progress from medieval thought. With some prominent exceptions—such as Joachim of Fiore, who argued that the Golden Age of mankind is yet to come—medieval Christians rejected the idea of indefinite improvement as an affront to the plan of salvation laid out by the Church Fathers. As Ernst Kantorowicz shows, the idea that time is continuous and indefinite was associated with rationalistic challenges to Augustinianism inspired by Averroes.[27] Another counterweight against ideas of progress was a sense of inferiority to classic authorities. In a classic image attributed to John of Salisbury, medieval thinkers saw themselves as dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of giants. If the successors are to maintain their vision, it is only by remaining firmly planted on the foundation of ancient wisdom.

Bacon, Descartes, and the Invention of the Method

Francis Bacon rejects the finite conception of time and deference to antiquity that characterized medieval thought. As he puts in "The Great Instauration":

> Men seem to me to have a poor knowledge both of their resources and of their strengths, but in fact to overate the one and underrate the other, with the result that they either put a senselessly high value on the arts they already possess, and do not seek to enlarge them, or else unfairly disparage themselves and spend their powers on trivial things, making no attempt at those things that bear on the heart of the matter. These [failing] are like pillars of fate in the path of the sciences …[28]

For Bacon, the task of reason is essentially critical—to remove the stumbling blocks in the path of inquiry. He goes on to explain that the purpose of sciences is not so much knowledge as it is the power to overcome nature to the relief of man's estate. Power is to be developed through the systematic accumulation of knowledge through time.

Bacon is sometimes characterized as the source for modern concepts of progress. This is somewhat of an exaggeration. Bacon argues that man is the master of his own fate, that time is continuous, and that the authority of the ancients must be rejected if improvements in knowledge and power are to be realized. But he does not articulate a *theory* of progress that identifies its causes, measures, and goals. In this respect, Bacon may be seen as an enabler but not the author of the more elaborate ideas of progress that emerged in the 18th century.

The enabling aspects of Bacon's thought are most evident in his critique of the "idols" that inhibit learning. According to Bacon, assumptions derived from habit, personal sentiment, surrounding culture, and intellectual authority all prevent men from pursuing the road to understanding—and through understanding, control. Bacon described these prejudices as Idols of the Tribe, Idols of the Cave, Idols of the Marketplace, and Idols of the Theatre, respectively.

[27] Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), Ch. VI, Sec. 1.
[28] Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* (Chicago: Open Court, 1994), 7.

Without openly attacking religion, Bacon makes it clear that he regards bad theology as one of the prejudices that interfere with the development of the sciences. As "idols," the prejudices are false gods, worship of which is inconsistent with the acquisition of the truth. For Bacon, whose inclinations are more scholastic than some commentators acknowledge, the truth is indeed divine. The search for truth or science therefore culminates in authentic piety and Christian love.

How is man to advance in knowledge once the obstacles to learning are removed? Bacon answers: by means of a *method*. Previous improvements in the sciences were haphazard and easily forgotten. In order to make consistent progress, they have to be grounded in a common procedure and rigorous recording. On the one hand, the Baconian method reduces the obstacles to discovery since it relieves the scientist of the need to develop his own procedures for inquiry. On the other hand, the method makes it easier to build upon previous achievements, rooting the progress of knowledge on the accumulation of evidence rather than the personal stature of the giants of antiquity.

While Bacon provided inspiration for the method, no thinker played a greater role in its actual deployment than Descartes. Bacon believed that we could rely on the data of perception in constructing scientific conclusions. Descartes insisted that even the senses were dubious, and demanded rigorous interrogation before they could be admitted to science. In the *Discourse on the Method*, which Condorcet would describe as literally epochal, Descartes argues that the initial acquisition and continuous accumulation of knowledge requires observation of four rules:

1. Never to accept anything as true that cannot be known evidently to be so.
2. To divide any difficulty or question into its logical constituents.
3. To reason from the simplest matter to the more complex.
4. To record every step of the reasoning process to prevent oversight and ensure critical review after the fact.

These rules were supposed to serve as a how-to guide for the progress of knowledge that could be applied by any reasonably intelligent reader. This progress would be grounded on the firm foundations of clear and distinct ideas rather than the stabilizing grip of ancient masters. Descartes compares the foundation of the traditional authorities to sand and mud.

Despite his hopes for rapid intellectual progress, Descartes claimed to be a moral and religious conservative. He rejected classical ethics but promised "to obey the laws and customs of my country, holding constantly to the religion in which by God's grace I had been instructed from my childhood, and governing myself in every other thing according to the most moderate opinions … which were commonly accepted in practice by the most sensible of those with whom I would have to live."[29] For Descartes, "provisional morality" both moderates the subversive implications of intellectual progress and holds out the possibility that human behavior too can eventually be placed on a truly scientific basis. Such a development, Descartes suggests would reflect the fundamental superiority of the moderns to the ancients.

[29] Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, Part III, Sec. 2.

The Battle of the Books and the Defense of Modernity

In the age of Bacon and Descartes, the suggestion that the moderns could render themselves superior to the ancients by establishing a new foundation for knowledge could be dangerous. The great martyr of modern science, Galileo, suffered considerably for his devotion to the new methods. By the end of the 17th century, however, possibility of progress was an item of open debate. Partisans of the moderns argued that knowledge had at last found a sound footing in method. Partisans of the ancients contended that Europeans were still dwarves elevated on the shoulders of giants. The so-called "Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns" concerned literary taste as well as science. The "Ancients" contended for the superiority of classic forms and languages, the Moderns defended the heroic couplet in the vernacular.

Jonathan Swift satirizes this conflict in "The Battle of the Books." His brilliant humor presents the books themselves as engaged in an epic struggle for domination of the library. As Secretary to Sir William Temple, a leading "Ancient" who popularized John of Salisbury's ancients/dwarfs image, Swift gives due consideration to the merits of antiquity. Nevertheless, he left the outcome of the battle undetermined—inviting readers to decide for themselves which side was stronger.

In France, the greatest names in early 18th century intellectual life declared their allegiance to the moderns. In Voltaire's view, human history since the fall of Rome was straightforward progression from "barbarous rusticity" to the baroque court of Louis XIV. In fact, Voltaire contended, it was better to live in Paris than in the Garden of Eden.[30] Voltaire's hostility to the biblical tradition was reflected in his critique of Bossuet, who had claimed to write a universal history, which centered on the Jews and their successor, the Church. A *truly* universal history, in Voltaire's opinion, would reveal that the Jews were a savage people whose barbarous ideas retarded the development of the human race. For Voltaire, progress required the elimination of Jerusalem from the cultural matrix of Western civilization.[31]

Turgot and the Three-Stage Theory

Voltaire's writings on progress were occasional, but related ideas were being developed systematically around the same time. In 1750, Turgot, then a student at the Sorbonne, prepared a set of texts dealing with the issue of progress. Taken together, these may be described as the first *theory* of progress.

For Voltaire, the course of history was essentially accidental. It had worked out well, but could have taken a different course at any time. As a result, the intellectual, artistic, and political achievements of modernity were fragile. Turgot believed that this was too pessimistic. Rather than being contingent, Turgot sees progress as the result of the continuous operation of general causes.

Turgot's argument resembles that of Bossuet, whom Turgot admired more than Voltaire did. Yet it contains a crucial difference. For Bossuet (like Augustine), history was focused on God's chosen peoples, the Jews and the Church, and guided by divine providence. Although

[30] Voltaire, "That Modern Europe Is Better than Ancient Europe" in *Political Writings*, trans. David Williams (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 130–4.
[31] See Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, 99–100.

Turgot formally acknowledges the influence of Providence, his account is almost entirely naturalistic. Progress is driven by the interactions of human psychology and the physical environment.

On the other hand, while Turgot treasures the advances in science made possible by Bacon and Descartes, he does not think that progress was achieved methodically. Rather, progress is fortuitous—the most progressive discoveries and developments are often unforeseen by their very creators. In this respect, Turgot prefigures Hegel's account of the "cunning of Reason."

In addition to placing progress on the foundation of general causes rather than chance or individual initiative, Turgot offers two observations about the tendency of progress that encouraged its transformation from a mere idea into a central concept of social thought.

To begin with, Turgot contends that progress is constantly *accelerating*. As it gathers speed, the fruits of social development accumulate faster and faster. For Turgot, this explains the enormous gains since the 17th century after so many centuries of medieval darkness.

Second, Turgot discerns general stages of progress that repeat themselves in every society, and include parallel economic, social, and religious developments. At first, society is nomadic and based on hunting and gathering. This stage corresponds to the ignorance of natural causes—leading men to tell fabulous stories about the gods to explain their experiences. Next, the domestication of animals leads to a pastoral stage. At this point, religion is subject to partial rationalization, as the multiplicity of spirits and deities are consolidated into an orderly pantheon. Finally, the development of agriculture enables urban life. In the city, philosophers begin to challenge myths in the name of reason—implicitly prefiguring enlightened critiques of revealed religion in modern times.

Turgot's "three stage" theory of progress has a counterpart in the work of Adam Ferguson, among others. For these thinkers, progress is not only linear, but subject to a pattern that can be discerned by a rational observer. But what would follow the achievement of modern civilization? Although they are more optimistic than the Greeks about the possibility of sustaining progress, Turgot and Ferguson do not envision a radically different future. In their view, the improved world to be expected will be much like the present, if stripped of some of its more objectionable features.

Condorcet, Kant, and the French Revolution

In the wake of the French Revolution, Condorcet offers a more transformative vision. Following Voltaire's critique of religion, Condorcet argues that in the future, the nations of the earth might be governed on relations of perfect equality by reason alone. While Turgot offers a gesture toward Augustine, Condorcet dismisses revealed religion as prejudice and superstition. For Turgot, the Middle Ages were merely a fallow period of human culture. For Condorcet, they were dark ages, altogether unilluminated by the torch of reason.

Condorcet places more emphasis on the political aspects of progress than Turgot did. For Condorcet, both the American and French Revolutions were reflections of the general progress of the human race. The latter, however, was far greater and more important than the former:

> The revolution in France was more far-reaching than that in America, and therefore more violent: for the Americans … were content with the civil and criminal code that they had received from England … In France, on the contrary, the revolution was to embrace the entire economy of society, change every social relations and find its way down to the furthest links of the political chain …[32]

Condorcet thus justifies violence as a progressive act. Condorcet was not only committed to the principle that society can be transformed—by force if necessary— but he also believed that man could perfect himself in ways that are as yet difficult for us to imagine.

Condorcet borrows the concept of perfectibility from Rousseau but blunts its critical edge. When Rousseau describes man's faculty of perfectibility in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, he does not mean that mankind is continually or inevitably getting better. Rather, he argues that human nature is open to endless revision as man constructs social relations and then molds himself to those constraints. In Rousseau's view, the results of this process have on the whole been bad. Although the modern man enjoys remarkable achievements in the arts and sciences, his morals and politics are *worse* than those of savages.

Rousseau appears, then, to be one of the great critics of progress—particularly as the French Enlightenment understood it. Immanuel Kant believed that Rousseau's moral and political insight could be salvaged from his pessimism. According to Kant, just as "Newton was the first to discern order and regularity in combination with great simplicity … Rousseau was the first who discovered underneath the manifoldness of the forms assumed by man his deeply hidden nature and the concealed law."[33]

This concealed law, in Kant's view, is a moral law: the set of rules that could be applied without exception or contradiction to every rational being. The moral law is autonomously determined by reason itself—and thus lay within every human being. The challenge is *realizing* the moral law—that is, putting it into practice on earth We cannot wait for a messiah to establish the kingdom of heaven; man has to bring about the reign of justice through *his own* action.

Kant places his hopes for this realization on the faculty of "unsocial sociability."[34] Modifying Rousseau's analysis of corruption, Kant argues that the pursuit of selfish ends actually makes human beings better. As they learn from painful experience the necessity of rightful order, they can be expected to make incremental progress toward that goal. Like Turgot, Kant does not see progress as the result of an intentional project: social relations will be brought increasingly into line with reason as a result of the pursuit of utility, not morality.

This indirect mode of progression underlies Kant's ambiguous evaluation of the French Revolution. While Condorcet justifies revolutionary violence as progressive, Kant denies that revolution as such can ever be morally justified. At the same time, Kant contends that we can learn from the French Revolution the necessity of peaceful reform. The lesson is that it is preferable to adapt political institutions so that they better meet the requirements of reason than it is to fight for social transformation.

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[32] Condorcet, *Sketch of the Historical Progress of the Human Mind* (New York: Hyperion, 1979), 146.
[33] Quoted in John Silber, *Kant's Ethics: The Good, Freedom, and the Will* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2012), 221.
[34] Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 44.

For Kant, the arena of reform is as much intellectual as it is political. He places his hopes on "popular enlightenment": the simultaneous education of the people in their rights and of rulers in their duty. If only enlightenment were allowed to proceed naturally, Kant argues in "The Contest of the Faculties," progress would be virtually inevitable.

Hegel and the Philosophy of History

Hegel learned much from his predecessors but he rejected what he saw as the abstraction of Enlightenment theories of progress, particularly Kant's. In Hegel's view, progress cannot simply be an "idea," at least if that means a vague goal that we cannot hope to reach ourselves. Rather, it must be conceived as an historical accomplishment that we encounter in our lives. For previous thinkers, reflection on progress produced an orientation toward the future: a confident hope, if not a certainty, of the good things to come. For Hegel, the idea of progress leads us to focus our attention on *the past*, as we seek to understand how we got to where we are—and why we should be grateful for it.

This retrospective orientation gives Hegel's account of progress its character as a "theodicy." In Hegel's view, we can justify the horrors of history if we see them as necessary to achieve the conditions under which we now live. The task of the philosophy of history, in Hegel's conception, is to articulate this necessity. As he puts it in a famous passage:

> But as we contemplate history as this slaughter-bench, upon which the happiness of nations, the wisdom of states, and the virtues of individuals were sacrificed, the question necessarily comes to mind: What was the ultimate goal for which these monstrous sacrifices were made? … in this [philosophical] perspective the events that present such a grim picture for our troubled feeling and thoughtful reflection have to be seen as the *means* for what we claim is the substantial definition, the absolute end-goal or, equally, the true result of world history (Hegel, 24).

Hegel does not leave God out of the picture. Taken in retrospect, history follows a plan of rational necessity. But this necessity is not a constraint on the deity. Instead, it is the highest expression of the divine nature as it actualizes itself through human interactions. According to Hegel:

> The insight to which philosophy ought to lead, therefore … is that the real world is as it ought to be, that the truly good, the universal divine Reason is also the power capable of actualizing itself. This good, this Reason, in its most concrete representation, is God. God governs the world: the content of His governance, the fulfillment of His plan, is world history. Philosophy seeks to understand this plan: for only what is fulfilled according to that plan has reality … In the pure light of this divine Idea (which is no mere ideal) the illusion that the world is a mad or foolish happening disappears (Hegel, 39).

Hegel's association of progress with divine governance recalls Augustine and Bossuet's invocations of providence. But Hegel's God or "Spirit" is not a transcendent creator who stands apart from the world and human reality, and to whom we have access only through revelation. Rather, his God is in and around us, and can be known by means of philosophy. It is in this sense that Hegel sees himself, with considerable justification, as the first thinker to synthesize Athens and Jerusalem, ancient and modern thought.

Yet Hegel's reading of God's justice in history chafes with another theoretical commitment inherited from Kant: human freedom. Like Kant and Rousseau, he believes that actions are morally significant only when they are freely chosen: the behavior of an animal or robot may be salutary or dangerous, but not right or wrong. At the same time that Hegel interprets history as subject to rational necessity, he must explain how this necessity can be reconciled with human freedom.

Hegel solves the riddle with the so-called "cunning of reason." Like Kant and Turgot, he denies that progress is achieved through the intentional pursuit of progressive goals. Rather, it emerges as the accidental byproduct of voluntary interactions among self-interested individuals. In particular, Hegel argues that human beings learn gradually that they cannot meet their needs or satisfy their wants unless they participate in a civil society subject to stable laws and institutions. The divine course of progress thus becomes a history of political development:

> There are two elements that enter our topic: the first is the Idea [of reason in history], the other is human passion; the first is the warp, the other the woof of the great tapestry of world history that is spread out before us. The concrete meeting point and union of the two is in ethical freedom in the state. … a state is well constituted and internally strong if the private interest of the citizen is united with the universal goal of the state so that each finds its fulfillment and realization in the other … (Hegel, 26–7).

Hegel contends that this unity of private interests and universal goals is realized specifically in the modern state. The despotic regimes of antiquity acknowledged that only the ruler was free and the classical republics empowered a small elite of citizens against an enslaved mass. Only the modern state presumes that its citizens have the right to pursue their personal interest in a manner consistent with the interest of the whole.

As recent scholarship has emphasized, Hegel was an eclectic synthesizer rather than a wholly original thinker. His theory of progress thus contains elements drawn from nearly all his predecessors. He remains decidedly modern, however, in his commitment to the principle that the present is better than the past, that man knows more of God's ways than he used to, and that improvements achieved by human struggle are *permanent* rather than subject to reversal. Yet Hegel's commitment to progress as an idea encourages doubts as to whether his theory is more speculation than science. His successors attempted to resolve such doubts by focusing on natural laws of progress.

Supplemental Materials for Unit 2

Note on Translations

The following are the most accessible editions of the works in translation for Unit 2 (in order of appearance on the syllabus):

- Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998).
- Voltaire, *Political Writings*, trans. David Williams (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 130–4.

- Turgot, *On Progress, Sociology, and Economics*, trans. Ronald Meek (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973).
- Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2011).
- Condorcet, *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (public domain, available at oll.libertyfund.com)
- Kant, *Political Writings*, ed. H.S. Reiss (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Leo Rauch (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988).

Suggested Questions for Discussion

- What are Bacon's "idols"? How do they inhibit the progress of knowledge?
- What causes does Swift indicate for the "Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns"? Does he indicate a preference for either party?
- What aspects of experience or society does Descartes subject to systematic doubt? Which does he rule off limits?
- Why does Voltaire believe that modern Europe is superior to ancient Europe? What role does religion play in this judgment?
- How does Turgot believe that unintentional actions encourage progress? What sort of progress does each action or behavior encourage?
- What role does the status of women play in Turgot's distinctions between the various stages of progress?
- What is at stake in the giants/dwarves metaphor? How is it used by the various writers?
- What does Kant mean by "unsocial sociability"? How does it promote progress or improvement?
- What does Hegel mean when he speaks of the "spirit of the age" [*Zeitgeist*]? How do we know what this spirit is?
- What is the relation between reason and God in Hegel's account of progress? What are the implications for Hegel's view of the respective roles of philosophy and religion?

Suggested Writing Assignments

- Compare the role of religion in Turgot and Condorcet? How do they characterize the relation between religion and progress? Does progress require the rejection of religion, in their view? Or can religion be modified/reformed in a manner consistent with progress?
- In what respects does Rousseau understand human nature to be perfectible? If it is perfectible, why does he think improvement in the arts and sciences led to moral decline? How does Condorcet challenge this assessment?
- What kind of society does Condorcet envision in the future (the "10^{th} Epoch")? How do the lessons of the French and American Revolutions contribute to this society? What about Kant?
- In what way does Hegel see the state as the culmination of progress? What is distinctive about the modern state—consider its political, ethical, and religious dimensions? How does Hegel's vision of the state compare with Condorcet's?

- What is the role of the world-historical individual in Hegel's theory of progress? How does the "passion" of such individual promote progressive goals?

Further Reading

Bacon and Descartes are both the subjects of enormous specialist literatures. For Bacon, see Stephen Gaukroger, *Francis Bacon and the Transformation of Early-Modern Philosophy*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). On Descartes, consider Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). The *Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth Century Political Thought*, ed. Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006) provides context and analysis of several of the figures discussed here, particularly Condorcet and Turgot. Jonathan Israel's vast series on the philosophy and political thought in the Enlightenment around Europe may also be helpful. On the German side, Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) is the undisputed classic. For a general introduction to Hegel, see Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Beiser's *Hegel* (London: Routledge, 2005) includes a useful comparison of interpretive strategies.

Unit III: Naturalizing Progress

One feature distinguishing Enlightenment theories of progress from the observations about patterns of improvement that characterized ancient sources is the idea of a goal. For the theorists of the Enlightenment, progress did not simply mean that life was getting better in certain respects. It meant that the human condition was moving toward a specific destination that could be discerned by reason.

The idea that progress has a determinable goal has distinctly religious roots. In particular, it draws on the Christian idea of a future kingdom of God. Aware of these origins, many Enlightenment theorists of progress invoked divine providence even as they distanced themselves from traditional theology. Hegel's elaborate conception of *Geist* is the dramatic version of this complicated rhetoric of secularization.

Are religious ideas and language necessary to identify the historical trajectory of the human race? Can progress be attributed to nature alone, without reference either to an intentional creator or immanent reason in history? The texts for this unit answer these questions in the affirmative. Taking economic arguments about unintentional improvement as their starting point, they ground theories of progress in the physical world rather than the domain of providence or capital-R reason. In this way, they aim to establish a *natural science* of progress.

Precedents for this naturalistic approach can be found in Turgot, among others. In his view, progress emerged unintentionally, from the free interactions and unintentional discoveries of individuals. In this sense, Turgot's theory of progress is naturalistic.

Yet the conception of nature that characterizes the thought of the 19th century is different to the one familiar to Turgot and his contemporaries. At least since Newton, the orbits of the

planets had been seen as the paradigm of law-governed physical interaction. As such, the natural science of progress was seen as a kind of astronomy, in which the future position of society or technology could be precisely forecast from its current location. In the "Tenth Epoch" of the *Outline*, Condorcet made this analogy explicit with the following rhetorical question:

> If man can predict, almost with certainty, those appearances of which he understands the laws; if, even when the laws are unknown to him, experience or the past enables him to foresee, with considerable probability, future appearances; why should we suppose it a chimerical undertaking to delineate, with some degree of truth, the picture of the future destiny of mankind from the results of its history?

In the 19th century, by contrast, progress was increasingly seen as aprocess comparable to the development of animate bodies. This change partly reflects the popularity of "organic" theories of society developed by German Romantics in the late 18th century and rapidly popularized around the continent. It was also inspired by the new approaches to the understanding of reproduction and demographics pioneered by Thomas Malthus and elevated to canonical status by Charles Darwin.

In some ways, the organic turn in theories of progress represents a revival of Aristotelian ideas about growth. Yet there is a key difference, which reflects the continuing influence of the ballistic physics of the Enlightenment. For Aristotle, growth was oriented toward a final cause. The process of development thus has a natural peak, which would inevitably be followed by decline. The critiques of Bacon and Descartes, however, permanently discredited the invocation of final causes in nature. Due partly to their influence, the modern science of growth could not be oriented toward any predetermined goal. Instead, 19th century naturalists understood progress as open-ended. In this respect, they are closer to Rousseau's suggestion that human nature is infinitely variable than to Condorcet's pseudo-mathematical calculations.

That does not mean the 19th century theorists of progress refused to say anything about the character of a future society. As H.G. Well's predictions indicate, they did so at great length and with considerable imagination. To preserve the indeterminacy of future development, they could not commit themselves to the kind of specific vision of the state or civil society found in Hegel. Rather than a particular social form, they saw the society of the future as a framework with unforeseeable developments.

Progress and Political Economy

In addition to broad speculations about the character of human society, these ideas have roots in classical political economy, particularly in Adam Smith's works. While Turgot, among others, had earlier suggested that economic improvements depended on the division of labor, Smith was the first to make this insight the key of a naturalistic social science. According to Smith, breaking down the labor process into specific activities does not only enhance productivity, but also encourages innovation, as focused attention to specific tasks reveals new and more efficient ways to perform them.

For Smith, therefore, the procession of economic stages described in prior theories of progress does not correspond to the increasingly broad intelligence or growing technical mastery of specific persons. He did not believe that the individual member of a commercial society was more developed than his forefathers. Rather, progress involves the distinction and breakdown of

labor tasks across the whole of society, increasing the sophistication of the whole while relying on minimal capacity from each part. The pastoralist is required to be more knowledgeable and capable than the factory worker: he has to know how to execute an enormous number of important tasks; while the factory worker may only be able to play a small role in the productive process. Yet the factory worker is possible only in a highly developed society characterized by a rigorous division of labor and rapid technological improvement, while the pastoralist belongs to a slow-moving and impoverished age.

Despite the narrowing of capabilities involved in specialization, Smith believed that economic progress benefitted all members of society. Borrowing from John Locke, he contended that the poorest worker in a commercial and industrial society was materially better off than a king among savages. No idea better encapsulates the residual theodicy embedded in Smith's account of progress: the abundance of modern society justifies a high degree of inequality.

Smith's optimistic prediction assumes that the increases in production enabled by the division of labor will match population growth—in other words, that the supply of goods will meet demand, at least if trade is free. Thomas Malthus challenged this assumption, at least when it came to the most important good of all: food. According to Malthus, population increases geometrically while agricultural production increases arithmetically. As such, shortages of basic necessities will actually increase, even under the most rigorous division of labor. Malthus thus concludes that progress is a chimera:

> This natural inequality of the two powers of population and of production in the earth, and that great law of our nature which must constantly keep their effects equal, form the great difficulty that to me appears insurmountable in the way to the perfectibility of society. All other arguments are of slight and subordinate consideration in comparison of this. I see no way by which man can escape from the weight of this law which pervades all animated nature. … Consequently, if the premises are just, the argument is conclusive against the perfectibility of the mass of mankind.[35]

The problem, as Malthus saw it, was particularly acute for the lower classes. Because the abundance of modern society encouraged them to believe that there was an unlimited supply of goods, Malthus predicted that they would reproduce above the rate of replacement—increasing the demand for food while doing little to enlarge the supply. As a result, the price of food would rise, placing it beyond the means of much of the growing population, whose members' competition for work would ultimately lower wages. Rather than enriching the common people, then, progress would impoverish them.

The Malthusian problematic established the framework for 19th century thought on progress in the English-speaking world. Thinkers such as John Stuart Mill wondered how technological improvements unleashed by the division of labor could be prevented from eroding progress While Malthus did not believe that any effectual check could be applied, Mill placed his confidence in man's growing capacity for mastering nature—in this case, birth control. If the population could be prevented from increasing as rapidly as the supply of food and other essential goods, workers would be in a position to bid for a larger share of society's production.

In the *Principles of Political Economy*, Mill argued that the combination of industrial development and birth control would usher in a new "stationary state" of human history. Low

[35] http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/malthus-an-essay-on-the-principle-of-population-1798-1st-ed

population growth would give workers the leverage to demand higher wages and better working conditions. In this way, the promise that the division of labor would raise the standard of living could be realized for the first time.

Yet the term "stationary" is misleading. According to Mill, the coming age of abundance would be far from a period of stagnation. On the contrary, properly compensated workers would for the first time be able to devote themselves to the cultivation of their individual capabilities, rather than struggling for survival. In this respect, the stationary state would be an age of enormous progress, as the benefits of culture were spread from a lucky few to the rest of the population.

The Character of Progressive Government

Mill argues that these conditions demand a distinctive kind of state for their support. Rather than attempting to secure positive goals or specific forms of order, government should leave individuals to organize their own lives to the greatest possible extent. In *On Liberty*, Mill makes explicit the connection between his philosophies of history, economics, and politics. Rejecting appeals to natural rights, Mill grounds limited government in "utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of a man as a progressive being." (page or webpage?) Despite his utilitarianism, Mill retains commitments to liberal institutions of representative government and the rule of law. Mill's liberal progressivism is not utopianism—although he expects that individuals will develop themselves in new and unforeseeable ways, he does not believe that they will become politically or morally perfect. Since egoism and conflict will remain features of human nature, government remains essential.

Marx attributes both more and less importance to the state than Mill. In the first place, Marx regards the control of the state by the working class—the dictatorship of the proletariat—as a necessary step toward socialism. For Marx, the state is merely the instrument of the current ruling class. Just as the rise of the bourgeoisie required the commercial classes to seize political dominance from the aristocracy, the rise of the proletariat requires the workers to take control of the means of production. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx describes the policy of the workers' state as one of "despotic inroads on the rights of property, and on the conditions of bourgeois production …" This goes far beyond anything that a liberal like Mill could accept.

Marx's argument for the inevitability of revolution and dictatorship is famously adapted from Hegel. Departing from the Hegelian notion that truth is derived from contradiction, Marx argues that history itself is a kind of dialectic. In it, the successive stages of society emerge from the conflict between elements of the previous society. For Hegel, the dialectic functioned principally on the level of ideas. Marx represented the naturalizing trend of the 19th century by arguing that the contending forces were material and economic. Specifically, Marx maintained that the increasing productive and technological mastery unleashed by the division of labor and its consequent overproduction threatened the existence of the bourgeoisie, which led to commercial crises and thus the immiseration of the labor force. The dialectical response was not to restrict the population through birth control. Rather, it was for the proletariat to seize control of the means of production, turning them to their own purposes.

Although Marx's understanding of the contradictions of capitalism were inspired by Malthus, it is important to recognize the ways in which Marx was much more optimistic. First,

he believed that there were no inherent limits on man's productive capabilities. While Malthus saw limits to the rate of growth, Marx believed that the supply of food and other goods could be extended infinitely to match the increasing population. In simple terms, Marx retained an extraordinary faith in the ability of technology to improve man's material condition. This faith is something new; even Condorcet saw progress primarily as improvement of the human mind.

Second, Marx believed that human behavior would necessarily offer a favorable response to this abundance. In a society in which everyone enjoyed a sufficiency of basic goods, what motive could there be for unrest or crime? Marx does not assume that men are angels but he claims that our actions are determined primarily by our circumstances. A radically different society would generate a radically different behavior.

That goes for rulers as well. Marx assumes that since everyone in a socialist society would contribute as much as he could and receive everything he would need, there would be no temptation for proletarian dictators to overstay their welcome by transforming themselves into a new ruling class. Thus, Marx can promise what Mill does not—the eventual elimination or "withering away" of the state. It is this aspect of Marx's thought, more than any other, that has encouraged accusations that he secularizes the old hope for the kingdom of heaven, replaces God with the proletariat and substitutes paradise with socialism.

The Science of Transformation

In the 19th century, the belief in the malleability of human nature was more than theological speculation. It appeared to be supported by Darwin's research. According to the greatest scientific innovator of age, living things have no fixed nature, but develop in ways that allow them to survive in challenging environments and attract mates. Naturalism, in this perspective, is not a doctrine of essences, but rather of historical change.

The idea of "evolution" was not unique to Darwin. His innovation was the identification of *mechanisms* of biological change. *Natural selection* involves characteristics that allow organisms to capture a larger share of the food supply, or other resources. *Sexual selection* involves characteristics that allow organisms to attract mates or otherwise reproduce. According to Darwin, the organisms that are best able to feed themselves and produce offspring are the most likely to survive, while those that are weaker or less fecund are most likely to perish. In this way, the "struggle for survival" produces over time distinct species with characteristics especially well-suited for their environments.

Darwin did not initially use the term "survival of the fittest." Nor did he suggest that the species that emerged from the struggle for survival were "better" than those that died out. These ideas were promoted by Herbert Spencer, the father of what is sometimes described as "social Darwinism." According to Spencer "evolution" is not simply change over time in response to environmental changes. It is a form of *progress* toward increasingly complex and adaptable forms.

Spencer bases this argument on a close analogy between society and what he saw as the hierarchy of natural organisms. Just as a highest product of biological evolution, man, is more complicated and adaptable than lower species, a more developed society will be one characterized by a more elaborate division of labor and social roles than a society at a lower stage of development.

This synthesis of biological evolution with social progress had two consequences that are more provocative today than they were at the time. The first, famously, is a strong commitment to laissez-faire. In Spencer's view, most restrictions on competition or attempts to help losers were counterproductive. Although well-intentioned, they only prolonged the misery of those unable to adapt to changing conditions. This rather harsh understanding of progress goes back to Malthus, who also rejected social welfare provision for the poor as a cruel temptation to excessive reproduction.

A second consequence of Spencer's arguments was an implicit racialism. For Spencer, non-industrial societies were not simply less economically developed. Their members were actually less biologically developed—a fact that he attempted to demonstrate using the then-fashionable measure of cranial capacity. Despite his sympathy for scientific racism, Spencer rejected colonialism as a violation of the liberty of the colonized and an unjustified departure from the principle of laissez-faire. In this respect, he not only compares favorably with both Mill and Marx, who combined libertarian visions of the future of industrial societies with an approval for the use of coercion to bring barbarians up to a higher level of development, but also represents an exception to Said's generalizations about the role of progress in justifying colonial empires.

H.G. Wells accepts several aspects of this popularized Darwinism. Yet he disagreed with Spencer about the role of competition. In Well's view, like in Marx's, unrestrained competition had once been necessary to unleash new productive forces but as individuals and firms devoted their energies to destructive price wars that threatened both profits *and* wages, it had become counterproductive. Class war could be avoided, Wells believed, if production were subjected to rational planning. Managerial socialism was thus the next stage of progress.

In a series of works, including the excerpts included here, Wells tries to imagine what life in such a society would really be like. Of great interest are his ideas about the transformation of the family. In Well's view, formations such as the nuclear family are competitive adaptations to specific social circumstances. In the society of the future, they will become unnecessary—and are perhaps so already. Wells thus forecasts a society in which the economy is subject to a high degree of managerial control, but personal behavior (e.g., sex and marriage) is subject to few social or legal restraints—liberalism for private life, socialism for public affairs.

This approach coordinating private liberty with public purposes may seem paradoxical. Yet it would become characteristic of the progressive movement in the United States, which was developing at about the same time that Wells published his speculations. One obstacle to achieving progress so conceived was the subsisting 18th century institutions, which were based on an older understanding of natural rights. Could they be reformed for progressive purposes?

Note on Editions

The texts for this unit are available online in various public domain editions. In addition to Google Books, students should check libertyfund.org and marxists.org. (Quotes in this section are from the Liberty Fund online editions [please provide links as you refer to the various texts]).

Suggested Questions for Discussion

- In what respects does Smith expect the division of labor to promote progress? Can such progress be planned? Or is it better left to fortune?
- Why does Malthus believe that the theorists of progress are mistaken? What tensions or contradictions in human tendencies have they neglected?
- How does Mill propose to overcome the tendency to over-reproduction? Is this proposal consistent with his defense of individual liberty?
- What is the relation between intellectual and social progress in Mill's theory?
- What is the dictatorship of the proletariat for Marx? Why is it necessary?
- What aspects of Hegel's philosophy of history do you detect in Marx? What aspects of Hegel's philosophy has Marx modified?
- In Marx's view, can communism be achieved without violence? Why or why not? Be sure to consider possible differences between *The Communist Manifesto* and the *Critique of the Gotha Program*.
- Darwin does not use the terms "evolution" or "progress" in *The Origin of Species*. What relation might these ideas have to "natural selection"—Darwin's preferred description of the process through which species are altered?
- What are the normative implications, if any, of the phrase "survival of the fittest"?
- Does Spencer make appropriate use of ideas from Darwin, in your view? Is it helpful or misleading to speak of "social Darwinism"?
- How does Spencer's understanding of progress influence his arguments about limited government?

Suggested Writing Assignments

- Compare Marx and Mill on the possibility of achieving progress by means of electoral politics. Why does Mill believe this to be possible? Why does Marx deny its possibility?
- Why does Wells disagree with Spencer that a progressive government must be limited? What aspects of life does he regard as eligible for regulation or management? What sort of human beings does Wells expect to undertake this task—and where would they come from?
- Why do Malthus and Marx believe that technological improvement leads to social immiseration? What do they think Smith got wrong?
- How, in Mill's view, does limited government promote progress? What role, if any, do individual rights play in his argument?

Further Reading

There has been a recent renaissance of scholarship on the moral and philosophical foundations of classical liberalism. A good place to start is Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). Recently reprinted, A.O. Hirschman's *The Passions and the Interests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013) remains a helpful resource. Students remain likely to find Robert Heilbronner's *The Worldly Philosophers* (New York: Touchstone, 1999) an accessible

introduction to political economy. The literature on Malthus gets an update in Robert J. Mayhew, *Malthus* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2014). Gertrude Himmelfarb emphasizes the theme of progress in various essays on Mill, beginning with *Victorian Minds: A Study of Intellectuals in Crisis and Ideologies in Transition* (New York: Ivan R. Dee, 1995). Alan Ryan offers less moralistic interpretations of the same material in Part 3 of *The Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). The classic study of Marx's conception of history is G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). In *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth Century Life* (New York: Norton, 2013), Jonathan Sperber attempts to restore Marx to his Victorian milieu. Mark Francis credits Herbert Spencer with much more enduring contributions than generally believed in *Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007). Mike Hawkins provides a broader account of the reception of Darwinism into social thought in *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860–1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

UNIT IV: PROGRESS AND THE UNITED STATES

In the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel describes the United States as the "land of the future."[36] Unlike Europe, the United States in the early 19th century was still in a condition of economic and social transformation. It had inherited European institutions and populations, but was not yet fully matured according to its growth principles. For this reason, Hegel concludes, America transcends philosophy—which is limited, on Hegel's view, to the understanding of what actually exists. The American horizon was thus open for new possibilities of human development.

Hegel did not invent the view of America as the land of the future. Similar ideas can be found in sources of the American political tradition. In the "Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law" (1765), a young John Adams describes the settlement of America as a break with the spiritual and civil despotism that characterized most of European history. In the old world, the canon law—in other words, the Roman Catholic Church—kept tight control over expression and worship, if not conscience itself. At the same time, feudal constitutions limited government of oneself and the community to an hereditary elite. According to Adams, the flight of the Puritans to the New World represented nothing less than a new beginning for the human race, which now had the opportunity to combine the civil freedom of the ancients with the religious freedom afforded by true (Protestant) Christianity.

The product of a committee including Adams, Franklin, and Jefferson, the Declaration of Independence implies a similar view. According to the Declaration, "the course of human events" includes periods when it is necessary for people to separate themselves from each other, in order to protect the rights they are granted by God. The political forms that may be established to secure these rights are not predetermined by tradition, law, or even God. Rather, they are the products of human artifice—men acting to secure a divine purpose. In establishing governments to do so, however, men actually pursue their own ends. As has often been noted, the phrase "life,

[36] Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, 90.

liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" does not include any definition of happiness or purpose, apparently leaving the individual to choose for himself what goods he wants to pursue.

American Liberty and the New Science of Politics

Which political forms might allow these aspirations to be coordinated, preventing the degeneration into tyranny or anarchy that the ancient theorists of the political cycle had predicted? According to Alexander Hamilton, writing as Publius in "Federalist # 9," classical political science could provide no satisfactory answer. It was based on a fixed set of regime types, in which a republic was understood to involve direct rule by the people. If this were the only form of popular government that could be conceived, Hamilton admits, "the enlightened friends to liberty would have been obliged to abandon the cause of that species of government as indefensible." Fortunately, "The science of politics … like most other sciences, has received great improvement." Representative government and the separation of powers made possible the construction of a system in which all governmental powers are derived from the people, but not wielded by them directly.

On the other hand, Hamilton does not claim that the American republic represents a complete break with the past. Although the Framers of the Constitution introduced significant innovations, they relied on the political experience of the past and well as the idea of transhistorical natural rights. The political progress made possible by American independence, then, is therefore historically continuous rather than disruptive.

Yet the foundations of civil liberty in the United States were incomplete. As was pointed out by many opponents of the revolution, most Americans did not understand the principles of the Declaration to apply to women and non-whites. For slaves and free blacks, the American republic did not have the progressive character that seemed obvious to white citizens. Thus, Frederick Douglass asked "What to the slave is the Fourth of July?" His answer: nothing worthy of celebration—at least so long as the principles of the Declaration are not applied universally.

Douglass does more than point out the inconsistency between slavery and the Declaration's statements on equality. He argues that the peculiar institution "fetters your progress; it is the enemy of improvement …" According to Douglass, slavery is not merely immoral but an anachronism, out of step with the spirit of the age. Deploying the rhetoric of the Enlightenment, he concludes that "No abuse, no outrage whether in taste, sport or avarice, can now hide itself from the all-pervading light." Appealing to his audience's pride in modern achievements, Douglass attacks slavery as irredeemably old-fashioned.

Douglass' almost dialectical appeal to the old principles of the Declaration and the Constitution as well as the modern spirit of improvement are paralleled by Lincoln. In the Cooper Union address of 1860, Lincoln claims the mantle of conservatism and progressivism for his anti-slavery politics. For Lincoln, opposition to the spread of slavery is conservative because it can be justified by reference to the original understanding of the American Founding—or at least the understanding of many of its influential participants. On the other hand, it is progressive insofar as it applies those principles in light of current experience. On slavery, Lincoln attempts to steer a course between black-letter legalism and disruptive rejection of historical precedent and authority. Only in this way could the Union be preserved—and be worth preserving.

Lincoln's view deepened and darkened over the course of the Civil War. In a series of speeches and statements, he suggested that the goal of the war was not simply the survival of the Union, but rather its purification through suffering. The process that Lincoln's envisions is less one of linear progress than one of renewal by means of catastrophe. In the Gettysburg Address, his most famous statement on this theme, Lincoln's identifies the purpose of the war as the hope that "this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom." For Lincoln, the 18th century founding was essential but insufficient. Its spirit had to be renewed and promoted by struggle.

Democracy, Nationalism, and the Progressive Imagination

In the years after the Civil War, Lincoln's hope for a new birth of freedom was taken more seriously by intellectuals than by politicians, many of whom shied away from grand projects in favor of peaceful consensus. Emerson and Whitman offer statements of this optimism about the prospects for a new kind of society, drawing on tradition but purged of ignorance and injustice.

Of the two, Emerson's account of the "progress of culture" is the more restrained. Although he hails the unique opportunities available for the development of arts, sciences, and moral character in post-war America, Emerson insists on a "certain equivalence in the ages." According to Emerson, the modern world has yet to produce works or personalities that equal the ancients in excellence. The important thing is that it has the *capacity* to do so, but only if the moderns are willing to embrace the best aspects of their time. The obstacle to progressive achievement does not lie in cultural, technological, or social change itself but in the fear of standing out from the crowd—a feature, which Emerson believed characterized a democratic age, as well as the vulgarization of sentiment that attends a commercial society.

Whitman's vision of progress is more democratic. Unlike Emerson, Whitman argues that a democratic people is a *collective* agent for improvement. The task for the individual who wishes to accomplish something is not to push against the mass of society. Rather, it is to immerse himself in it, to learn its ways and to speak its language. By doing so, Whitman contends, men of talent can establish the distinctive forms of culture that will justify democracy as a *superior* to earlier social forms. Unlike Emerson, Whitman recognizes no "equivalence in the ages."

Whitman was not blind to the flaws of 19th century America. Like Emerson, he criticizes the greed and conventionalism of his contemporaries. The solution to these defects of the heart, however, is not political in the institutional or juridical sense. Rather, it is affective and imaginative: in a word, aesthetic. What the United States needs, Whitman argues, is a democratic aesthetics that glorifies its differences from other societies and reminds its citizens of the open horizon before them: "America demands a poetry that is bold, modern, and all-surrounding and kosmical, as she is herself. It must in no respect ignore science or the modern, but inspire itself with science and the modern. It must bend its vision toward the future, more than the past."

While agreeing with Whitman that the United States must "bend its vision toward the future," American writers in the early 20th century tended to emphasize the political aspects of progressive development. In particular, they argued that the institutions of representation and the separation of powers that Hamilton claimed had solved the conundrums of popular government were actually an obstacle to its fulfillment. As Herbert Croly put it in *The Promise of American*

Life (1909), "the national advance of the American democracy does demand an increasing amount of centralized action and responsibility."

Lincoln is the hero of *The Promise of American Life*. According to Croly, Lincoln's immortal service was to insist against obstinate conservatism "that a democratic nation could not make local and individual rights an excuse for national irresponsibility." Yet Croly's vision of national responsibility also owes much to European sources. Like Hegel, Croly contends that the United States cannot reach the next stage of its development until it has established a *state*—understood as a centralized bureaucracy pursuing policies of general interest. This view, which echoes Hegel, was an important inspiration for the "new nationalism" that Theodore Roosevelt advanced in his 1912 presidential campaign as a Progressive candidate.

Woodrow Wilson agreed with his opponent that the American political tradition required thorough revision. In his view, the Declaration of Independence is "of no consequence to us unless we can translate its general terms into examples of the present day and substitute them in some vital way for the examples it itself gives, so concrete, so intimately involved in the circumstances of the day in which it was conceived and written." Rather than a commitment to specific institutions, Wilson argues that the Declaration and other documents of the American Founding should be interpreted in terms of broad concepts that could be instantiated in different ways at different historical eras. For example, "tyranny" referred in the 18th century to monarchical government of the colonies. But in the 20th century it could correctly be applied to the influence of trusts and corporations.

Wilson adds to his historico-philosophical argument a pseudo-scientific justification. Adopting the organicism that dominated 19th century thought, Wilson compares the nation to a living being, striving not only to achieve the form determined by its own internal laws, but also to exist in a merciless struggle for survival. According to Wilson, "All that progressives ask or desire is permission—in an era when 'development,' 'evolution,' is the scientific word—to interpret the Constitution according to the Darwinian principle; all they ask is recognition of the fact that a nation is a living thing and not a machine."[37] In Wilson's view, this meant granting the national government new powers of economic regulation.

The Redefinition of Liberalism

Progressives did not only argue for the renovation of the Declaration and the Constitution. As inheritors of the political philosophy of Mill and Locke, they also argued that liberalism itself had to be redefined. In a lecture delivered in 1934, one of the worst years of the Great Depression, John Dewey argued that sincere commitment to the central liberal goal—the expansion of freedom—demanded the rejection of classical liberal principles, particularly the principle of limited government.

According to Dewey, limited government had been an appropriate response to the threat of political despotism as it existed in the 18th and early 19th centuries. In the 20th century, however, it degenerated into the "spurious … pseudo-liberalism" that held the government powerless to reorganize the economy to meet public ends. Emphasizing the historical relativity of concepts, Dewey contended that

[37] http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/what-is-progress/

> Even when words remain the same, they mean something very different when they are uttered by a minority struggling against repressive measures, and when expressed by a group that has attained power and then uses ideas that were once weapons of emancipation as instruments for keeping the power and wealth they have obtained. Ideas that at one time are means of producing social change have not the same meaning when they are used as means of preventing social change.[38]

Dewey was especially critical of the ideas of unalienable rights and natural laws that he attributes to 18th century Whiggery and 19th century liberalism, respectively. Rather than pursuing fixed truths about human nature or government, Dewey contends that liberals should adopt an "experimental method" in which policies and institutions are tried or rejected on the basis of their chance of promoting the common good. A potential problem is that Dewey does not explain how the common good is to be determined. Rather than a method in the Cartesian sense, his experimental liberalism has therefore been criticized as rudderless pragmatism.

A skilled politician who realized the appeal of a concrete platform, Franklin D. Roosevelt attempted to codify the new liberalism by fusing the old idea of individual rights with a new understanding of their substance. In Roosevelt's view, the achievement of progress required the supplementing, if not the replacement, of the negative rights associated with the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights with a set of positive, economic rights guaranteeing to individuals the material means of exercising their freedom. This "economic constitutional order" or "second bill of rights" became the major theme of Roosevelt's presidency.

Despite (or because) they did not go as far as Roosevelt or some of his allies wanted, the expansions of the regulatory and administrative state during the Depression and Second World War achieved considerable success. After the war, Americans enjoyed an extraordinary prosperity. On the intellectual level, this prosperity was reflected by the so-called consensus school of political analysis, which John Kenneth Galbraith mocked as promoting merely "conventional wisdom." According to the consensus view, the basic goals of the progressives, if not all of their specific arguments, had been vindicated. There was no longer serious debate about the necessity of centralized economic and social management.

Challenges to Progress in Postwar America

These achievements were not without their discontents. Many Americans remained glaringly deprived in what was proudly described as the richest country on earth. The material prosperity of the postwar era did not translate into the kind of cultural efflorescence that Emerson and Whitman had dreamed. Quite the contrary, the new popular culture seemed more commercial and vulgar than ever.

Such observations produced critical reactions. One response was that the administrative and regulatory state established in the 1930s had to be further expanded, to ensure that all Americans benefitted. Such was the basic motive for the suite of programs that President Lyndon B. Johnson described as the Great Society. Among other features, the Great Society was intended to redress the racial inequities built into the New Deal as a condition of support by Southern

[38] http://www.heritage.org/initiatives/first-principles/primary-sources/john-dewey-on-liberalisms-future

members of Congress. Since the sufficiency of the nation's resources were not in doubt, Johnson argued that

> The challenge of the next half century is whether we have the wisdom to use that wealth to enrich and elevate our national life, and to advance the quality of our American civilization. Your imagination and your initiative, and your indignation will determine whether we build a society where progress is the servant of our needs, or a society where old values and new visions are buried under unbridled growth.[39]

The burgeoning New Left challenged Johnson's confidence in Americans' wisdom, imagination, and initiative. The Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) offers a powerful argument that postwar prosperity and consensus politics were unable to satisfy the moral aspirations of many Americans, particularly the young. Rather than contentment, the Statement claims that the dominant mood was one of anxiety: "It has been said that our liberal and socialist predecessors were plagued by vision without program, while our own generation is plagued by program without vision."

SDS' analysis was partly rooted in the critique of mass culture developed by the Frankfurt School—the group of German émigré intellectuals also known as the Horkheimer's Circle. In *One-Dimensional Man*, Hebert Marcuse deployed the School's characteristic synthesis of Freud and Marx in order to understand the ways in which the material wealth and civil liberty of modern America might undermine the possibilities for both individual self-direction and revolutionary political movements. According to Marcuse, American freedom was really a gaudy form of unfreedom. By understanding choice as the selection between predetermined alternatives—Coke or Pepsi, Democrat or Republican—consumer society and liberal democratic politics reduced human experience to just one "dimension."

Another aspect of Marcuse's analysis that was used in the Port Huron Statement was the concept of the welfare-warfare state. Marcuse pointed out that the bureaucratic methods characteristic of the progressive administrative state had their origins in military planning. After World War II, Marcuse continued, the U.S. success in improving living standards had been claimed as an ideological justification to oppose the Soviet Union. For Marcuse and SDS, there was little meaningful distinction between the centralized management of a mixed economy, and the wars, both cold and hot, in which its bounty was deployed.

The optimism of the Great Society won out in the short-run. By the 1970s, however, criticism of the progressive movement had penetrated deeply into American intellectual and political life. Speaking from his experiences as a political prisoner in the Soviet Union, Alexander Solzhenitsyn argued that Americans had lost their sense of purpose and direction. He attributed this to the success rather than the failure of the welfare state:

> When the modern Western states were being formed, it was proclaimed as a principle that governments are meant to serve man and that man lives in order to be free and pursue happiness. (See, for example, the American Declaration of Independence.) Now at last during past decades technical and social progress has permitted the realization of such aspirations: the welfare state.[40]

[39] http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/lbj-michigan/
[40] http:// harvardmagazine.com/sites/default/files/1978_Alexander_Solzhenitsyn.pdf

Having realized their individual freedom to pursue happiness, Americans could not imagine any higher purpose. In this respect, Solzhenitsyn argued, they compared unfavorably to Russians, who had preserved in their suffering the understanding that a life worth living had to be devoted to a spiritual goal. Lacking the necessary moral courage, Solzhenitsyn feared, the United States would find itself at a disadvantage in the Cold War, despite its technological and economic superiority.

Jimmy Carter expressed a similar idea in "Crisis of Confidence"—the so-called "malaise speech" that he delivered on national television in 1979. Speaking with extraordinary candor, Carter observed that "We've always believed in something called progress. We've always had a faith that the days of our children would be better than our own." But now, Carter observed, "Our people are losing that faith, not only in government itself but in the ability as citizens to serve as the ultimate rulers and shapers of our democracy." Although the oil embargo and rampant inflation provided the immediate occasion for Carter's remarks, he attributed the crisis of confidence to a much longer series of events that had taken place since the 1960s, including the assassination of popular political leaders, urban unrest, and the defeat in Vietnam.

Carter concluded with an appeal to renewed faith in progress and the American future. But the speech is widely remembered as a statement of liberal pessimism. Whatever Carter's personal views, a mood of disappointment and withdrawal did come to define the American left in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in academic and intellectual circles.

In the 1990s, Richard Rorty developed a polemic against this tendency. A man of the left himself, Rorty urged his compatriots to return to Emerson, Whitman, Croly, and Dewey, in the hope of reviving the progressive project. Without minimizing America's failures and crimes, Rorty contended that social and political improvements were impossible unless they were rooted in national pride. According to Rorty, the Left should appeal to Americans' justified pride in the principles of the Declaration, rather than seeking comprehensive and implausible revolution.

Part of Rorty's argument is a critique of Hegel. In Rorty's view, Hegel distorted the idea of historical development by linking it too closely to philosophy or science, as if the final goal of progress could be determined in advance. As an alternative, Rorty endorses Dewey's suggestion that progress should be pursued through open-ended experimentation.

The Uncertain Future of Progress

Francis Fukuyama, by contrast, argues in *The End of History and the Last Man* that Hegel was fundamentally correct. For all his flights of speculative fancy, Hegel had contended that the destination of human history was a political form based on recognition of the equal dignity and freedom of every human being. In Fukuyama's view, this condition was realized by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although non-liberal regimes continue to exist, Fukuyama argued that there was no longer any serious *theoretical* challenge to liberal democracy, particularly when combined with the broad recognition of minority rights that followed the new social movements of the 1960s.

In a challenge to what he regards as Fukuyama's triumphalism, John Gray revives the interpretation of progress as a secularized version of Christian eschatology, a secular religion based on faith in things unseen rather than a sober analysis of the historical record. The core of Gray's critique is an uncoupling of scientific improvement from desirable social change, a key

assumption of Enlightenment theories of progress and their descendants. Gray acknowledges that the development of science and technology enhance human power—just as Bacon hoped—but he concludes that this power is always open to use for good or evil—an insight that he attributes to the Hebrew Bible and Greek culture.

Gray's critique of progress is compatible with, and in some measure inspired by, environmentalist arguments that the idea of progress involves the reduction of nature to raw material for human self-assertion.[41] This argument has roots in Heidegger's description of technology as based on "enframing" in which the given aspects of experience are constructed or 'gathered together' as existing only for purposes of use.[42] The implication is not simply that people should be wise stewards of the natural resources at their disposal, but rather that they should avoid interfering with their existence independent of human needs and purposes. The idea that we should "let nature be" in its own way and for its own sake recurs in some rhetoric of the deep ecology movement.

There is a conviction that the progressive power of technology is deeply rooted in Western culture. In *Future Perfect,* Steven Johnson applies that argument to recent technological developments, arguing that social networking technologies make it possible to break down traditional distinctions between state and society, and individual and collective action. Does the Internet provide new possibilities for progress? Is it a tool in the hand of an imperfect master or, as radical critics of progress might suggest, a technology that generates its own logic of domination and control?

No syllabus can answer these questions. But it can place them in historical context, and provide students with sources and styles of argument that could be used to answer them. That is the purpose of this course, as the debate on progress continues.

Note on Editions
With the exception of Marcuse, Fukuyama, Rorty, and Johnson, all the texts for this unit are available online in public domain editions or versions that are authorized for open access.

Suggested Questions for Discussion

- In what respects does Adams regard American society as superior to its European predecessors?
- What aspects of political science does Hamilton believe have been improved since ancient times? Which, if any, remain constant?
- In which respects do Douglass and Lincoln agree about the moral status of the Declaration and the Constitution? In which respects do they disagree?
- What would be the distinctive features of democratic art, in Whitman's view? How does this vision compare to Emerson's? Can you think of any examples of contemporary "democratic art"?
- What aspects of the Constitution does Croly believe need to be updated? Why?
- What political point is Wilson trying to make when he contrasts Newtonian and

[41] See also John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007).
[42] Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" in *Basic Writings,* ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

Darwinian science? How does this contrast influence his interpretation of the Constitution?

- What, according to Dewey, is unsatisfactory about 18th- and 19th century liberalism? Based on your readings for this course (the Declaration of Independence, Smith, Mill, Spencer), how accurate do you consider his criticism to be?
- Why does Roosevelt believe that a second bill of rights is necessary? Does the second set of rights supplant or supplement the first?
- Why do Marcuse and the SDS regard the post-New Deal welfare state as threatening to freedom?
- What does Marcuse mean by the "welfare and warfare state"? How are welfare and warfare functions connected?
- What defects does Solzhenitsyn identify in the Declaration of Independence? How or what does he propose that Americans should do to remedy them?
- What is at stake in Gray's description of progress as an "illusion"? To what other "illusions" is progress comparable?
- Do the social movements and new freedoms achieved since the 1960s represent progress? In what sense? Be sure to consider Fukuyama and Hegel in developing your answer.

Suggested Writing Assignments

- In what ways has the Declaration of Independence served as a touchstone for American ideas about progress? What about the Constitution? Do you agree that they are "progressive" documents or do they hold back necessary improvements? Be sure to discuss Croly, Wilson, and Rorty.
- How should the collapse of the Soviet Union affect our understanding of progress? Does it suggest that progress is a useful idea or that is should be discarded? Be sure to discuss Marx, Fukuyama, and Gray.
- Based on your reading for this course, what is the connection, if any, between technological and social improvement? Be sure to discuss Bacon, Malthus, Marx, and Johnson.

Further Reading

Although explicit references to progress were rare in the Revolutionary and Founding Eras, Americans did make extensive use of theological concepts to make sense of their historical trajectory. The best overview is Nicholas Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607–1876* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). For the antebellum period, see Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). There is growing scholarly interest in the role of the idea of progress in American history, particularly among conservative scholars. A good starting point for this literature is *The Progressive Revolution in Politics and Political Science,* eds. John Marini and Ken Masugi (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005). It should be compared with the explicitly left-wing perspective defended by Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism* (New York: Free Press, 1977). Both evaluations of the progressive movement contrast sharply with more traditional interpretations, such as those found in Richard Hofstader, *The Age of Reform*

(New York: Vintage, 1960); Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Robert H. Wiebe *The Search for Order* (Boston: Hill and Wang, 1966). Alan Ryan's *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* is a good introduction to philosophical debates in this period (New York: Norton, 1995). An alternative: Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993). On the politics of the New Deal, see Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*. Alan Brinkley traces the development of the postwar "consensus" in *The End of Reform* (New York: Vintage, 1996). Rick Perlstein discusses the challenges from the Right in *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Nation Books, 2009). SDS and the rise of the New Left are detailed in James Miller, *Democracy Is In the Streets* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). The essential background study of the Frankfurt School is Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). Jay's account concludes in the 1950s. Thomas Wheatland picks it up from there in *The Frankfurt School in Exile* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), including a discussion of the tensions between the Frankfurt School and Dewey's disciples. Students will find a sympathetic reading of Solzhenitsyn in Daniel J. Mahoney, *The Other Solzhenitsyn*. Kevin Mattson provides an entertaining account of the origins of the "malaise speech" in *What the Heck Are You Up To, Mr. President?* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2010).