

High on Progress

What will be left when we finally come down?

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WHY HAVE WE come to assume that “progress” is always good? The Nazis’ treatment of Jews progressed toward their final solution. And many individual Jews followed a line of progress: get an ID card, move to a ghetto, get on a cattle car, arrive at a camp, work at the camp, go to a gas chamber, get put in an oven, rise as smoke, fall as ashes.

A stalker can progress from one stage to another, beginning with e-mails, then phone calls, then moving to the victim’s community, then haunting places the victim might go, then showing up at the victim’s home. Cancer can and usually does progress. Addictions, including cultural addictions, can and often do progress.

That’s not to say that progress can’t be good. A friendship or romantic relationship can progress as surely as can an abusive relationship—the affection you feel growing with time, leading to a deep familiarity and comfort as the relationship matures.

In a lot of cases, progress is good for some and bad for others. For the perpetrators of the Nazi Holocaust, the technological progress that made possible more efficient ways to kill large numbers of human beings was “good,” or “useful,” or “helpful.” From the perspective of the victims, not so good. For the perpetrators of the United States Holocaust, the development of railroads to move men and machines was “good” and “useful” and “helpful.” From the perspective of the

Dakota, Navajo, Hopi, Modoc, Squamish, and others, not so good. From the perspective of bison, prairie dogs, timber wolves, redwoods, Douglas firs, and others, not so good.

In 1970 Lewis Mumford wrote, "The chief premise common to both technology and science is the notion that there are no desirable limits to the increase of knowledge, of material goods, of environmental control; that quantitative productivity is an end in itself, and that every means should be used to further expansion." Mumford asked the same question that so many of us ask, which is, Why on earth would a culture do so many crazy, stupid, destructive things? His answer cuts through the typical cornucopian garbage: "The desired reward of this magic is not just abundance but absolute control." Mumford knew—as we all do—that there was no hope in proceeding "on the terms imposed by technocratic society." He didn't think change would be easy, saying that it might take "an all-out fatal shock treatment, close to catastrophe, to break the hold of civilized man's chronic psychosis." He was not optimistic: "Even such a belated awakening would be a miracle."

Most people today have not awakened from the Cult of Progress. Even with the world being dismembered before their eyes, nearly all public figures continue to be members of this cult. The same is true for many nonpublic figures—for most of us—as we seem unquestioningly to presume that tomorrow's progress will bring more good things to life, and will simultaneously solve the problems created by yesterday's and today's progress (without then creating yet more problems, as "progress" always seems to do).

For those who benefit from it, progress is about improving their material lifestyle at the expense of those they enslave, steal from, or otherwise exploit. For everyone else, it is about loss.

Progress. In vast stretches of the Pacific Ocean, there is forty-eight times as much plastic as phytoplankton.

Progress. One million migratory songbirds die every day because of skyscrapers, cell-phone towers, domesticated cats, and other trappings of modern civilized life.

Progress. A half million human children die every year as a direct result of so-called debt repayment from so-called third-world countries (the colonies) to so-called first-world countries (the nations that have undergone progress).

Progress is polar bears swimming hundreds of miles to ice floes that have melted away, till finally they can swim no more. Progress is nuclear weapons, depleted uranium, and "drones" piloted from an office in Florida to kill people in Pakistan. Progress is the ability of fewer and fewer people to control more and more people, and to destroy more and more of the world. Progress is a god. Progress is God. Progress is killing the world.

The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins said that science's claim to truth is based on its "spectacular ability to make matter and energy jump through hoops on command."

Anthropologist Leslie White stated that "the primary function of culture" is to "harness and control energy." Quite simply, this culture is about enslaving everyone and everything its members can get their hands (or machines) on. What is another word for making someone jump through hoops?

Enslavement. In this culture, progress is measured by the ability to enslave, to control, and to do so with ever-increasing efficiency. The ultimate goal is to control everyone and everything.

I know, I know, I can hear the cry of the cult members now: "If progress is so bad, why does everyone want it?" Well, they don't. Nonhumans certainly don't. But they don't count.

They're only there for you to use. Many humans don't want

progress, either. Or at least they didn't, when they still had intact social structures. That's why so many indigenous peoples have taken up arms in defense of their ways of life. I often think of a line by Samuel Huntington: "The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion (to which few members of other civilizations were converted) but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence. Westerners often forget this fact, non-Westerners never do."

Part of the problem is that progress can be not merely seductive, but addictive. My compact *OED* defines the verb *addict* as "to bind, devote, or attach oneself as a servant, disciple, or adherent." In Roman law, an addiction was "a formal giving over or delivery by sentence of court. Hence, a surrender, or dedication, of any one to a master." To be addicted is to be a slave. To be a slave is to be addicted. The heroin ceases to serve the addict, and the addict begins to serve the heroin. We can say the same for progress: it does not serve us, but rather we serve it.

Every addiction has its allure. I recently had some extended conversations with people who'd used a lot of crack. Their descriptions of the drug's effects were consistent with what I'd heard from students when I taught at a supermaximum-security prison. The people who've used crack uniformly say that crack makes them feel extremely good, and powerful, and invincible. Their descriptions of the high make crack seem pretty damn appealing. Unfortunately the high doesn't last all that long, and when you come down you not only feel wretched, but you immediately start looking for another hit.

Severe addicts may give up everything else for their addiction. My students had lost their freedom, in some cases for the rest of their lives. Their addictions had cost many of them their families. Yet even after that, a fair number said that if you put that rock in front of them, they'd still find a way to smoke it. This culture's addiction to progress runs far deeper than any

individual's chemical addiction. It is more powerful than many people's desire for a living planet.

Progress is hot showers (which require mining, manufacturing, and energy infrastructures). Progress is computers (which require mining, manufacturing, and energy infrastructures, and are used far more effectively by those in power than by us). Progress is the internet, which allows for instantaneous communication with distant loved ones (and which requires mining, manufacturing, and energy infrastructures, and is used far more effectively by those in power than by us).

Progress is supermarkets, which require industrial food production (which in turn requires mining, manufacturing, and agricultural, chemical, and energy infrastructures, and is controlled by ever fewer giant corporations).

All other things being equal, I'd rather have a nice space heater to keep my toes toasty warm. But all other things aren't equal, and I'd rather have a living planet.