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History of the Idea of Progress

Robert Nisbet

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Robert Nisbet : History of the Idea of Progress before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised History of the Idea of Progress:

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. "Men will die for a dogma who will not even stir for a conclusion." (8)By Clay GarnerNisbet provides a through analysis of the 'idea of progress'. Starts with Greeks philosophy and ends with modern environmentalism. Covers Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Erasmus, Bacon, Decarte, Puritians, Leibniz, Adam Smith, Mill, Saint-Simon, the German idealists, Marx, Comte, Spengler, etc. Many receive numerous pages.Recognizes progress has produced amazing benefits. Nevertheless, Nisbet presents the other side as usual:"The kind of absolute military-political power we find in the 20th century totalitarianisms, left and right, has behind it a philosophy of inexorable progress. So does the kind of racism that flourished in the 19th-century." (8)Trust in progress became trust in regress.Nisbet presents conclusion that loss of faith in progress, which has produced much good, is dying due to the "dramatic erosion of all the fundamental intellectual and spiritual premises upon which the idea of progress is rested throughout its long history." (9)He wonders if civilization as we know can survive without "the supporting faith in progress." Notes "we shall know shortly."After a chapter on the Greeks, he covers the early Christians. He focuses on the Jewish belief in a future earthly paradise. This drove the Christian trust in . . ."the role of historical necessity, and the image of progress as the unfolding through long ages of a design present from the very beginning of man's history. . . Added is the emphasis upon the gradual, cumulative, spiritual perfection of mankind. . . With the returned Christ as ruler." (47)This assumption enabled progress.He explains a pivotal figure in the west is

Augustine. His idea of progress influenced the present. He notes one key difference now: "For Augustine, to be sure, God's will and infinite devotion to man underlay human greatness and beauty. The was not possible without the former." The present change "consists instead of the removal, especially in the modern west, of theistic assumptions which for Augustine were utterly vital to progress and perfection but in a day of looser logic, such as the eighteenth century, could seem expendable, the perspectives themselves self-supporting." Nisbet is not the only scholar who observes 'looser logic' in the present. (56) The Christian hope of the earthly kingdom of God led to modern movements. "We would be hard put to account for the social Utopias of the Saint-Simonians, Comtists, and especially the Marxists were there not a long and powerful tradition of Christian millennialist Utopianism." (68) Religion drives history more than supposed 'scientific' reason. The idea of "necessary" history is compelling. This is belief God is supervising history to accomplish a purpose. The future is contained in the past. This is now accepted in physics in that all the universe now has was contained and ordered in the few minutes after the Big Bang. The present is just Newton's laws controlling matter. Darwin's theory is just the same assumption of 'necessary' progress applied to biology. This is drawn from Augustine and Greek idea of growth. It is not a scientific conclusion, it is a religious dogma. (69) Nisbet presents fundamental ideas that are new to me. One is "plenitude". Explains "it was Plato who transmitted to European philosophy 'the vast assumption' that there is plenitude in the 'World of Becoming', that everything necessary to perfection is either present or exists in potencia. . . For Plato the Absolute would not be what it is 'if it gave rise to anything less than a complete world.' This idea of total potential of everything needed for progress "is one most powerful as well as persisting ideas in all of European thought. We shall see it in Leibniz and Spinoza, in the writings of the eighteenth-century evolutionary biologists, and far from least, albeit in a different statement, in Darwin's Origin of the Species." (91) Various scholars have reached the same conclusion. Darwin was accepted because of the preconceived (although hidden) philosophical assumptions. See Lovejoy, Gilson, Spencer, Cashdollar. Darwinism is philosophy not biology. Nisbet continues: "Darwin was so committed to these principles that in 'the Origin of Species' he not only argues in their behalf on the basis of his field observations but, when the geological evidence fails to attest to either principle, credits this failure to what he calls 'the imperfections of the fossil record.'" (92) Abelard and Thomas Aquinas taught this idea which they derived from Plato's student Aristotle. Francis Bacon was key to the scientific revolution. His proposal for a new culture was "The New Atlantis". His perfect society is "a society governed solely and exclusively by the values of science and its guardians, the scientists. . . Bacon's work makes for chilling reading." (114) We have seen the horror four centuries later from this desire for a total scientific solution. Nisbet presents a compelling view of Descartes. His radical skepticism . . . "renounced all forms of perceived, external reality in the name of his cherished methodological skepticism, along with of course, all known systems of thought or ideas in any shape or size. Not without reason has a recent French commentator referred to the Cartesian method as a form of 'intellectual terror.'" (116) Beliefs from mind alone are certain, beliefs from mind and eyes are uncertain. (Whitehead wrote that science is anti-rational, that is, anti-Cartesian) Descartes' method leads to the conclusion that each individual should find and create his own truth. (117) Nisbet explains that the Puritans led the modern belief in science as leading to paradise. He thinks the seventeenth century should be renamed from the age of reason to the age of faith, religious faith. This trust in a coming earthly paradise brought by God's promise, was transferred to trust in a coming earthly paradise brought by science's promise. "Gradually the role of Providence was transferred to 'natural laws' whereby God was thought to operate. . . Thus it is that 'evolution' and 'stages of advancement' have come to hold for modern man very much the same significance that 'grace' had for his ancestors." (127) Puritans were vital to the new belief in scientific progress. He explains the Puritan difference is they "endowed knowledge - theoretical, practical, above all scientific - with millenarian importance." Only through this research "can the millennium be brought to an early existence on earth." (129) Today many accept this as a dogma, not a conclusion. Nisbet says this change led to the loss of Christian faith. Modern racism is presented as a result of the desire for progress. However, it is derived from a "scientific" theory. This type of science needs a physical basis, hereditary, measurable factors. Also, the return of Greek thought meant the Greek body, as shown in museum sculpture, is the standard and all humans should be judged in comparison. (288) Nisbet concludes with the analysis of the loss of trust in progress. One fascinating presentation is Tocqueville. Tocqueville "warned of the dangers of majority tyranny and democratic obeisance to public opinion. . . an almost unrelieved succession of analyses and prophecies testifying to the destructive effects modern democratic equality could have on modern civilization. He thought philosophy, literature, science, and the arts generally would all in time languish or become seriously crippled. . . ambition and individuality would be erased or reduced to insignificance by processes leading to homogeneity and regimentation; and, he thought, under, or rather from democracy might come the most terrible form of despotism known in history." (318) Hitler was democratically elected. Burckhardt thought "the new tyrannies will be in the hands of military commanders who will call themselves republican." The "enlightenment belief in man's natural goodness would only lead to human evil on a scale never before known." (319) See twentieth century since 1914. Paraphrases G. K. Chesterton who wrote that the result of ceasing to believe in God is not that then one believe nothing; it is that one will believe anything. Modern focus on sadism, pornography, occult, drugs, and the desire for a secular redeemer, the Ceaser, the Napoleon, even the Hitler or Stalin is not evidence of progress. (351) In conclusion Nisbet writes about "Progress at Bay". "Economists interested in

growth for to long paid insufficient to the moral bases of growth and affluence. Truth, trust, acceptance, restraint, obligation - these are among the social virtues grounded in religious belief which have proved indispensable to the capitalist spirit. . . has actually drawn more from and has greater dependence on religious and moral coercions than did the feudal economy. But the long run effect of our celebration of not these vital moral supports but rather the individual and his supposedly enlightened self-interest has been to weaken and at last virtually destroy the necessary moral values." (337) Penetrating analysis. Beliefs matter. Religious beliefs especially matter. Unpopular view. Nisbet finishes up with subheading "The Degradation of Knowledge". No longer trust in real truth, only personal opinion. Science seems to be exchanging roles with religion. (342) The study of ones self is the beginning of wisdom, not the objective world. (347) Erosion of trust in clergy appears to be repeating with scholars and scientists. (348) The book finishes with an "Epilogue". He thinks that the west at present has no culture. . . "Fundamental to this lack is the disappearance of the sacred, always at the heart of any genuine culture. . . For behind the waning faith in economic growth and in the works of reason lies the moribundity of religious conviction, of belief and faith of something greater than the immediately around us." (354) Tocqueville put the matter descriptively and prophetically. "In ages of faith the final aim of life is placed beyond life. The men of these ages, therefore, naturally and almost involuntarily accustom themselves to fix their gaze for many years on some immovable object towards which they are continually tending, and they learn by insensible degrees to repress a multitude of petty, passing desires. . . But in proportion as the light of faith grows dim, the range of mans sight is circumscribed. . . When men have once allowed themselves to think of no more of what is to befall them after life, they lapse readily into that complete and brutal indifference to futurity." (355) Confusion is everywhere. The future is not observable, it is an idea. It cannot be analyzed or proven. Nisbet concludes that only a return of Jewish-Christian faith can save the west. Otherwise, "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." Very detailed. I liked that the quotes are in the text, not as footnotes. Nisbet builds a convincing case for his conclusion. Easy to read. Well organized. I enjoyed it and learned a lot. 3 of 5 people found the following review helpful. History of the Idea of Progress By Debal Deb A classic. After "The Idea of Progress" by Charles Van Doren (1967), the world was waiting for a more updated, authoritative account of the idea. This book appeared to fulfil that historical need. The evolution and application of the concept of progress in economy is still continuing in all parameters of development, and only recently its limitations are becoming evident - the limitations which this book already has recorded and analyzed. Until we overthrow the Eurocentric notion of progress of civilization, and its expression in quantitative economic growth, we will continue to find this book most relevant and useful in our understanding the modern world. 1 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars By David Eberle excellent

The idea of progress from the Enlightenment to postmodernism is still very much with us. In intellectual discourse, journals, popular magazines, and radio and talk shows, the debate between those who are "progressivists" and those who are "declinists" is as spirited as it was in the late seventeenth century. In *History of the Idea of Progress*, Robert Nisbet traces the idea of progress from its origins in Greek, Roman, and medieval civilizations to modern times. It is a masterful frame of reference for understanding the present world. Nisbet asserts there are two fundamental building blocks necessary to Western doctrines of human advancement: the idea of growth, and the idea of necessity. He sees Christianity as a key element in both secular and spiritual evolution, for it conveys all the ingredients of the modern idea of progress: the advancement of the human race in time, a single time frame for all the peoples and epochs of the past and present, the conception of time as linear, and the envisagement of the future as having a Utopian end. In his new introduction, Nisbet shows why the idea of progress remains of critical importance to studies of social evolution and natural history. He provides a contemporary basis for many disciplines, including sociology, economics, philosophy, religion, politics, and science. *History of the Idea of Progress* continues to be a major resource for scholars in all these areas.

About the Author Robert A. Nisbet (1913-1996) was Albert Schweitzer Professor Emeritus of the Humanities at Columbia University. Some of his books include *The Sociological Tradition*, *History of the Idea of Progress*, and *Metaphor and History*.