

THE IDEA OF PROGRESS
IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

A single powerful idea, that of progress, dominated the nineteenth century and became its main symbol—or so it seemed to Renan when he measured “the enormous strides that the science of man has made during the last one hundred years.”¹ Since the waning of the Middle Ages, intellectual progress had gone hand in hand with the rejection of the appeal to authority. Francis Bacon had assigned to this kind of progress a practical goal, and Descartes had provided it with an effective method. It seemed, therefore, that it was capable of going on, for some time at least, by additions to, and a systematic completion of, already existing knowledge. It is in such terms that Pascal described it in the preface to his *Traité sur le vide*, assimilating the development of mankind to that of “a single individual who lives forever and learns con-

Translated by H. Kaal.

¹ *L'Avenir de la science.*

tinually." This picture, which became common to all later doctrines of progress, did not specify whether the human species would continue to progress indefinitely, as Condorcet said it would, or whether it would reach a state of old age and decrepitude and eventually become extinct, as Fourier imagined it. When reason, in the eighteenth century, ceased to be the gift of providence to the established political authorities, it became the property of all men, and the standard by which their conduct was to be judged. The progress of the intellect was thus socialized. In Turgot's words, "the entire mass of men is on the move to greater perfection, though a period of calm may alternate with one of agitation, and good with evil, and no matter how slow the movement may be."² This move took place against the background of an immovable nature, and as a result of the spread of enlightenment throughout society; and according to Turgot and his contemporaries, it could not be stopped by ancient institutions that stood in its way. The framework of nature was soon to be shaken when, at the turn of the century, the theories of Kant and Laplace divested the Newtonian order of its appearance of eternity, and when advances in geology and, finally, the transmutationist theories which culminated in Lamarck's *Philosophie zoologique* (1809), seemed to show that both inorganic matter and living species were in the process of transformation. In biology, the criterion of progress was an increase in the specialization of the organism. It is this criterion which Saint-Simon wanted to apply to human societies, reminding us with satisfaction of what he owed to the anatomist Vicq d'Azyr. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, embryological discoveries seemed to show that the biological evolution of man was continuous with that of the lower animals. This gave rise to the idea of a continuous progress, and to the conviction that no valid reason could be found why progress should be confined to the present. The perfection of the individual (sketched tentatively by Condorcet) and the perfection of society found in Saint-Simon, and later on in Spencer, their systematic interpreters; and so did the idea that individual and society were to achieve, either spontaneously or by design, a dynamic equilibrium. Pascal's purely

² *Œuvres*, vol. 2.

The Idea of Progress in the 19th Century

speculative picture was thus transformed into an organic theory of social evolution.

The idea of progress in the eighteenth century remained, in spite of its importance, a secular idea: the property of intellectuals and the sign of an optimistic philosophy. In the nineteenth century, it took on the very different character of a popular ideology; it became charged with emotion, divided classes and parties and inspired social and political upheavals. Two great events separated one century from the other: One was the industrial revolution, which was born in England and brought to France some fifty years later; the other was the French Revolution, which destroyed many ancient institutions and disseminated among the masses the ideas of reason, happiness and progress. The former was not just an intellectual phenomenon, of interest only to the cultured few; it came to have new implications for the economy and for morality. Some feared it, others welcomed it. As a result of the industrial revolution, technical progress ceased to be the curiosity of the salons, and became instead the very condition of the existence of advanced nations. At the same time, there appeared a proletariat that was no longer the inevitable result of general poverty, but a by-product of growing wealth. The improvement of its moral and material lot presented a problem which could not be avoided, and which was far removed from the abstractions of the preceding century. The various kinds of progress, in areas as specific and as diverse as science, technology, the economy, the material and the moral life, institutions, education, etc., were thought to constitute a single progress. This general notion of a single progress was surrounded by value judgements, expressed in terms of destiny, and given an absolute and universal sense. The reason for this lay in the universality of the changes that were taking place: Industrial techniques altered the conditions of life in all Western countries, transformed the class structure and disrupted the received customs. At the same time, and not just by coincidence, the people gained access to politics and gave voice to their aspirations. Old institutions changed, new laws emerged, new nations were born. All these complex changes were wrapped in an ideological dress that showed the dominant influence of the French Revolution. This gave them their common intellectual qualities and emotional

tone. The more-ethical-than-rational aspects of these changes culminated in the idea of progress. Dupréel assigned three defining characteristics to this idea. Progress was, according to him, *inevitable, absolute and universal*,³ and he should have added: *irreversible*. "We all believe firmly in Progress," wrote Proudhon, "as we believe in Liberty and Justice. Everybody, whether a theologian or a philosopher, whether engaged in speculation or in practice, whether a proletarian or a rich man, is at bottom agreed on this point."⁴ Proudhon did not cite confirmed theocrats like Joseph de Maistre or de Bonald, and he tried to ignore, in his effort to win disciples, the forces of the aristocracy, the clergy and the ruling dynasties, which still offered a powerful resistance. But he was right inasmuch as faith in progress was common to the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

The appearance of progress as a popular creed neatly divides the nineteenth from the preceding centuries. In a tradition-bound society, the sacred values have their origin in a social order that is fixed and rigidly partitioned and contains all human action. In Western Europe, Christian eschatology had created a purely spiritual order: Between the fall of man and his resurrection, life on earth was but a narrow passage, bounded by the revelations of the past and of the future. It was in this order that an idea of intellectual progress, foreign to all revelation, was to find its place eventually. But the order and its divisions were by their very nature sacred. They thrived on the great myths of the past which placed chaos at the beginning of the world and the golden age at the beginning of mankind. The idea of progress destroyed this dramatic unity of primordial time: Chaos remained in the past; but the golden age was projected into the future, as the goal towards which progress was to lead mankind—and this in spite of wars, catastrophes and misery; for these came to be regarded as vestiges of the original chaos, destined to be absorbed, or to be overcome, by progress. This is how progress acquired its sacred character, in the course of appropriating popular beliefs and becoming, in turn, the object of popular faith. The golden

³ *Deux essais sur le progrès*.

⁴ *De la justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église*. Ninth Study.

The Idea of Progress in the 19th Century

age of the future was the end that all aspirations for spiritual goods and physical well-being had in view. This is what Saint-Simon had in mind when he proclaimed his faith in a better world to come: "The golden age of the human species does not lie behind us, but ahead of us. It consists in the perfection of the social order. Our fathers did not live to see it, but our children will, one day. It is our task to clear the way for them."⁵ However, there was much disagreement among people of different classes and of different political persuasions, as to what constituted progress, especially when the term came to be applied to such social or economic categories as property, industry, the nation, the people, the proletariat, etc., to which were later to be added the ideas of association and the right to work. These came to be the stakes in the political contest; they were the motives behind conflicts and passions; and all of them took on a sacred character, with the ambiguity that is at the bottom of everything sacred. If we combine these categories in different ways, we obtain the great intellectual and political currents that made, at times, for the continuity of the century and, at other times, for the disruptions in its flow. These currents were given a variety of ideological justifications: Some described progress as the victory of reason over superstition, others as the meaning of history, conceived in moral and affective terms, and others still, as the substance behind such ethical abstractions as liberty and justice. Some traced the origin of progress to primitive Christianity, others to the philosophy of the enlightenment, and others to Greek stoicism. Progress had a protean shape and presented contradictory faces. Yet it was thought, by the reformers, to hold the keys to the future.

One cannot even give a succinct account of the ideas of progress in the nineteenth century without mentioning that they were descended, for the most part, from Condorcet, though not without undergoing modifications on certain important points. This descent, as varied as it was contradictory, is perhaps explained by the fact that Condorcet's *Esquisse d'un tableau des progrès de l'esprit humain* was not written in his quiet retreat at Auteuil, but in the turmoil of the Revolution and under the immediate threat of death. These circumstances gave his work an emotional

⁵ *De la réorganisation de la société européenne.*

impact that was not to be had from the text. Progress, according to Condorcet, did not depend on forces outside man, like providence, history or the laws of economics. It was demanded by reason when guided by knowledge of the laws of nature, and it resulted from the battle between the forces of light and of darkness, and the victory of truth over error—though the outcome of the war remained in doubt as long as error persisted alongside truth. This is why Condorcet, at the Convention, spoke in defence of “the freedom to err,” against the dogmatism of Robespierre. History had been a succession of advances and retreats. Achievements in the sciences now made any new retreats impossible, but only if reason governed both virtue and happiness. “The achievements of these latter days have done much for the progress of the human mind, but little for the perfection of the human species, much for the glory of man, a little bit for his freedom, and still almost nothing for his happiness.”⁶ Error might survive because of differences in education, and because of the obstacles put, by the privileged classes, in the way of the destruction of prejudice. This theme was to be exploited by the democrats of the nineteenth century, who accused the liberals of blocking the march of progress when it threatened their interests. Since Condorcet looked upon truth as a process, he proposed in 1793 a truly heraclitean constitution, which was to be revised every twenty years, to take into account the continuity of progress. Its aim was to create an open society, bordering on anarchy, which would assure each individual the means of cultivating his reason and of achieving happiness.

Condorcet regarded unlimited perfectibility as the privilege of the individual, and not of the State or some other collective body. This seemed to him to imply that individual liberty and social equality could only be extended simultaneously to all men. But the liberalists found it easy enough to dissociate the two concepts. The liberal conservatives began with the free play of supply and demand, and wound up by assimilating the effective pursuit of one’s interests to one of the natural rights of man. According to Thiers, the free and unlimited exercise of our faculties had as its basis “the holy, the sacred institution of

⁶ *Esquisse*, Part. 9.

The Idea of Progress in the 19th Century

property," which was an expression of our "obedience to, and respect for, nature herself." Progress demanded inequality of social conditions: "Wealth and poverty go arm in arm, each providing the other with its enjoyments," and they would continue indefinitely in this way because the right to inherit property was sacred. Thiers thought he was strengthening his case when he added that to eradicate misery "would be to spoil God's work by trying to improve it."⁷ The liberal democrats, on the other hand, emphasized the spread of social equality. According to Tocqueville, this was a law of history, and not necessarily bound up with the spread of knowledge. For, as he put it in his *Démocratie en Amérique*, it was a fact that "the sublime and almost divine love of truth" had a better chance of spreading among an idle aristocracy than in a democracy of laborers who showed the spirit of initiative and enjoyed economic freedom. According to him, aristocratic societies conceived only of gradual improvement, not of sudden change. Addressing his European audience, Tocqueville wrote: "If the people of our day could be brought, by sincere reflection, to realize that the gradual and progressive development of equality constitutes, at one and the same time, the past and the future of their history, this discovery alone would give to this development the sacred character that belongs to the will of our sovereign lord. To try to stop democracy would then appear to be to fight against God Himself, and all that a nation could do would be to accommodate itself to the social system that Providence imposed on it." To conclude, the most democratic countries pointed the way to the rest. Marx took up this opinion, but replaced the word "democratic" by "capitalist."

Thiers wrote in apparent ignorance of the industrial reality of his time, and Tocqueville showed in his work no interest in labor problems. They took up the same aloof position as Condorcet, who had made no allusion to the coming of big industry. But if, in the eighteenth century, science and technology went their separate ways, if Watt's inventions preceded the advent of thermodynamics by fifty years, and if the inventions of Hargreaves, Artwright and Crompton had no connection with d'Alembert's mechanics, this was to change in the following

⁷ *De la propriété.*

century. Socialist reformers had always paid their respects to science, in its exalted position as witness to, and creator of, progress; but of technology, they would only recognize the painful effects on the proletariat. In making plans for the organization of labor, they only aimed at a coordination of jobs, and not at an integration of functions, which had already been achieved in the textile industry, but in which they only saw the evils of capitalism, and not the technical achievement that it also was. Liberal writers looked upon the misery of the working classes as a ransom to be paid for progress for the time being, until an even greater technical and economic progress could overcome this misery. Socialist writers vacillated between the profound pessimism of Sismondi and the hopes they put into their schemes for organizing labor. We can follow this vacillation in Louis Blanc, for example, who asks: "Could people be condemned to go around in circles, without pause and in total darkness, like those blind horses who create, by their exertions, a movement whose purpose they ignore?" A few lines further, but still on the same page, after having called his earlier words impious and blasphemous, he concludes: "Let us guard our beliefs, and let us not despair, even when, by the decrees of God, the good cannot, alas, flourish before the bad is utterly exhausted."⁸

The Romantic socialists of the 1830's gained their faith in progress through a religious or mystical revival. The most frequently recurring theme was that the political revolution, the wars of the Empire, and the industrial revolution were stages in a new fall of man. The proletarians, who were treated by the bourgeoisie and even by the followers of Saint-Simon as barbarians, and who were, in fact, barbarians in the Greek sense of the word, since they were excluded from the society of the liberals, would become the new collective Christ and take on the mission of redeeming society. French socialists thus attributed to the proletariat a religious mission (a theme which was to be taken up by Marx, who attributed to the proletariat the historic mission of overpowering and outdistancing the bourgeoisie). Its mission was to revive, by putting into practice the idea of association, the

⁸ *Histoire de dix ans*, Introduction.

The Idea of Progress in the 19th Century

purity and simplicity found in the primitive Christian communities which put an end to Roman corruption.

Among these socialists, Pierre Leroux deserves special attention. Although he influenced writers as different from one another as Vigny, Hugo and Baudelaire, he tends to be forgotten nowadays. Yet to my knowledge, he was the first to raise the question whether a socialist order was compatible with individual liberty. If society as an aggregate of isolated individuals, then the good would be exploited by the bad; and if it was an organic whole, as the followers of Saint-Simon would have it, then despotism and the end of liberty would be the result. Society had, therefore, to be based on a moral solidarity that was perfect "by reason of the freedom of all and each."⁹ But society had to be more than that, namely, a true "mystic body." Man led a double life since he was, on the one hand, an actual free being, and on the other, a potential being—a mere fragment of the ideal, permanent and collective being which was what we called "mankind," and which yielded a real man by a process of actualization and particularization. Since every society had a religion, and since science had put an end to Christianity, our society would be destroyed unless the new religion of Pierre Leroux came to take the place of the old one. Democracy was part of this religion. In fact, if "it is not a religion, every democratic revolution is a crime."¹⁰ Mankind was a "being-in-process," which inhabited what we now call "space-time," and provided a continuous chain between the generations of men. Leroux borrowed the principle of continuity from Leibniz, as well as from Comte who had made use of it in 1822. Progress, for Leroux, was thus assured by less than catastrophic leaps, and it was to take man to the realm ruled by an economic and emotional union which guaranteed justice and equality. Leroux had been a disciple of Saint-Simon, but all he retained from his master was the altruistic element, which he inflated beyond all proportion in order to save the individual by mystical means.

It was also for the sake of saving the individual in the forward

⁹ *Revue encyclopédique*, October 1833.

¹⁰ *Revue encyclopédique*, August 1832.

march of society, that Proudhon looked for an absolute which stood outside the actual movement, but guided it just the same in the direction of what he took to be true progress. Since he was irreligious and, in his own word, "antitheist," his absolute could *not* be mankind, conceived in mystical terms and as the social manifestation of God, but had to be an abstract principle. But if mankind was conceived to be as variable as individual men, it lacked all the sacred qualities, being merely the collective entity derived by abstraction from the nature of the individual. However, the individual had a second nature, which was purely personal.¹¹ Proudhon therefore placed his absolute in the very heart of man—in the sentiment of justice, and in the respect for moral obligations that followed from this sentiment. Progress was not a matter of technological advance: "Do not expect," he wrote, "that the people will idealize your railways which serve to enslave them, your machines which, in replacing them, degrade them, your banks where the products of their sweat gather interests, your buildings which will never house their misery."¹²

Nor was progress a matter of metaphysical or religious principles outside the individual. And freedom was not the consciousness of necessity that Hegel claimed it was, but something that governed knowledge and institutions. There was indeed a general movement known as organic evolution, but, he wrote, "there is reason to believe that there is, in the human species, a deeper movement which embraces and modifies all the others; and this is the movement of Liberty and Justice." And it was this movement, which was essentially moral and private, which constituted true progress. The indispensable instrument of this progress was, in his view, the idea of a revolution in both the economic and the moral sphere. The political changes that were actually taking place did not further true progress, because they kept man in his

¹¹ The doctrine of the two natures of man, an individual and a generic nature, recurred in the writings of the young Marx; cf. *On the Jewish Question*.

¹² *De la justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Eglise*, Ninth Study. This text is open to Baudelaire's sarcastic comments (*Curiosités esthétiques*, Salon of 1855) on the "philosophers of steam and chemical matches."

The Idea of Progress in the 19th Century

role as servant to a society ruled, still, by "wealth, lust and power."

The Romantic socialists, like Proudhon, did not strip progress of its sacred, mystical or moral dress, so that a religious person could still believe in progress, and the just man be convinced of it. Their concern was to save man from being a wheel in a deterministic universe. Saint-Simon and Comte, on the other hand, defined progress by appealing to the scientific determinism of the time. Like Condorcet, they identified all progress with intellectual progress, but unlike him, did not consider religion to be opposed to science: They rationalized religious beliefs by turning them into metaphorical and incomplete answers to the physical and social problems confronting mankind. Science now assumed the sacred character that had belonged to progress, and science dictated progress, giving it its aim and direction. The absolute that governed the movement of the universe and the march of mankind was the Law—the permanent order of inorganic and of living things. Its apprehension by the mind was the source of all progress. History had, therefore, to be studied and explained. A true knowledge of history would become the foundation of a "science of man" which, in its scientific perfection, would dispel the metaphysical clouds and social illusions that befogged the human brain. There was a progressive law of continuity which Saint-Simon expressed as follows: "All the things that have happened, and all the things that will, form one and the same series. The earlier members of this series constitute the past, and its later members the future."¹³ But this linear series left out the manichean conflict between truth and error which the Encyclopedists had imagined. For them, reason had been the product of an invariable nature. For Saint-Simon, it was the process of adaptation to reality, or the process by which mankind adapted itself to its conditions, as shown by the changes in human institutions. Perfectibility was no longer the privilege of the individual, as it had been for Condorcet, but of the social organism. Society had achieved the full dignity of an existing thing. Its principal attribute, at a given time, was the rationalized religion of the time, known as "the most general idea." This idea distinguished the conduct of men in a given period.

¹³ *Mémoire sur la science de l'homme*, First Instalment.

Since Condorcet took reason to be invariable, he could project his own reason into the past in trying to assess past errors. Saint-Simon, too, projected his own reason into the past, forgetting, however, that he was committed to the view that reason was relative to a given time. He conceived all societies in the image of his own industrial system, and described them as if a number of clerical workers had come together to work out in advance the religious principles that were, in their opinion, useful for preserving the social body, or for speeding up its forward march. Since chance and freedom were excluded, every society had its origin in a project formulated in advance, and similar in type to the project that Saint-Simon would have liked to see adopted by nineteenth-century society.

Saint-Simon borrowed from Vicq d'Azyr the notion that biological progress depended on a growing complexity of the organism, and deduced from this that the best criterion of social progress was the growing perfection of institutions. In times of crisis, social conflicts could no longer be contained by existing institutions, and this was the sign that new progress had to be made. It is clear at which point Saint-Simon's dialectic became opposed to Marx's: For Saint-Simon, consciousness preceded existence, or to use Marx's terminology, the superstructure determined the structure. Crises had the purpose of goading on the mind which, in their absence, would lapse into self-satisfaction, and of leading it to create a new period in the life of the social organism. Times of crisis had, then, a positive role, since they allowed the mind to regain consciousness of the need for progress. Before the fifteenth century, progress had been "in itself," but since the beginning of that century, had become, in this sense, "for itself." The advent of the industrial society of the future would, once and for all, put an end to the crises of modern times. But its advent presupposed the development of a particular science, that of man, and the coming of "the most general idea"—in this case, a positivistic philosophy, capable of reorganizing society.

Comte's conception of progress passed through the law of the three stages, which had been suggested to him by Dr. Burdin and Saint-Simon. But in Comte's final analysis, progress reduced to a spontaneous instinct for perfection. Translated into history, this

The Idea of Progress in the 19th Century

instinct appeared as the gradual substitution of reason for imagination, and as the reconciliation of heart and mind, or sentiment and reason. Progress was the means to order, and prepared the way for it. We can see how, in the development of Comte's work and, above all, in his later philosophy, progress ceased to have the sacred value that Saint-Simon attributed to it, and how it became the mere instrument of order, while order rose to the rank of the *summum bonum*. At this point, Comte broke the chain which, through his master, linked him with Condorcet: Order certainly remained a product of reason; but reason was now no more than the servant of a principle superior to it.

The difference between Saint-Simon and Marx lay not only in the inversion of the moving forces of history; it lay also in the different historical roles attributed to social conflict. According to Marx, conflict was the agent of change, and according to Saint-Simon, the sign that called for change. As a result, the element of change resided, for Marx, in society, or more precisely, in its class structure, whereas for Saint-Simon, it resided in those actions of the religious and civil authorities that were prompted by conflict. If there is a notion of progress in Marx's writings which is not expressed by the use of the word "progress," it cannot lie in a more positivistic philosophy or in a more careful organization of society; it must lie in the fact, according to Marx, that the number of existing classes tends to diminish, and the resulting struggles tend to become simpler, before classes, and the struggles they engender, are abolished once and for all.

Saint-Simon was obsessed with the cause-effect relationship—which Comte, later on, disregarded. The fact that monotheism had succeeded polytheism seemed, to Saint-Simon, to imply that progress consisted in the reduction of multiple causes to a single cause. He assimilated the state of modern science to polytheism, and like the Encyclopedists before him, thought he could vaguely discern the single cause towards which progress was moving, in universal gravitation. Since the time of the Pharaohs, he claimed, every society was in part a hierarchy composed of a minority of *thinkers* and a majority of *believers*. Since the two were intellectually out of phase, a religion or a morality was needed, for the use of believers, to ensure "social hygiene." Morality, conceived in this way, was to become Comte's seventh science. For Saint-

Simon, the task for his time was to fill the void left by the demise of Christianity, and to find sacred values that were respected by all. The first of these values was science: "Scientific beliefs," he wrote around 1808, "must in future be dressed up in such a way as to become sacred, and be taught in this form to children of all classes and to the ignorant of all ages."¹⁴ The second value was love or fraternity—which Comte was to change into altruism. In 1825, Saint-Simon founded "the New Christianity"—out of which Comte was to fashion his religion of Humanity. By this time, Saint-Simon had reduced his sacred values to the single principle of solidarity. His new religion was to have the purpose of improving the material and moral lot of the proletariat. But this improvement included neither liberty nor equality. "The vague and metaphysical idea of liberty is opposed to the development of civilization, and to the establishment of a well-ordered system since this requires that all parts be firmly tied to the whole, and dependent on it."¹⁵ The Bible would be prohibited because its study would "incite the people to establish, in society, an equality which is absolutely impracticable."¹⁶ The religion of the positivists reduced thus to a mixture of divine philanthropy and theocratic order.

Saint-Simon compared the individual who was deprived of liberty and unacquainted with equality to the wheel of a clock whose movements were completely determined. Later on, Auguste Comte denied the individual even his freedom of physical motion, when he wrote: "A society can be decomposed into individuals only to the extent that a geometrical plane can be decomposed into lines, or a line into points."¹⁷ The task of guiding progress fell then to the religious authorities alone, and the task of realizing it to the civil authorities. Such progress could no longer modify either the industrial society that had learned to obey science, or the new Christianity which Saint-Simon characterized as "definitive." However, progress still seemed to permit

¹⁴ *Introduction aux travaux scientifiques du XIX^e siècle.*

¹⁵ *Système industriel.*

¹⁶ *Le Nouveau Christianisme.*

¹⁷ *Discours sur l'esprit positif.*

The Idea of Progress in the 19th Century

scientific research, though Comte, in his society, limited research to social or institutional needs. At this stage, the society envisaged by the positivists rejoined and, in the end, absorbed, into an immovable and sacred order, the society envisaged by those theocrats who were the most hostile to all progress. One could also draw a close parallel between Hegel's dialectical progress and the progress of the positivists. Each led to a closed society—closed both in space and in time—and each society monopolized an Idea, pretended that its Idea was absolute or definitive, and came thus naturally to thwart any other idea that could only become effective by being realized in space and time. The individual envisaged by the positivists was what might be called a “functional man”—one who fitted perfectly into the technical hierarchy of an industrial enterprise. The industrial society of the positivists was to produce such men on a large scale, on all levels of “abilities,” and once and for all.

The fabrications of Saint-Simon and his disciples should be contrasted with what Fourier, the arch enemy of the positivists, thought of them: “They have assembled a few antiques, plastered them up, and put them on the stage where they will rouse the rabble; they have added a few rags of atheism and theocracy, and try to pass this off as the art of association.”¹⁸ He found their idea of progress vicious, and accused them of trying to build on the ruins of property “a meretricious theory of sympathy and love, the generalized version of mortmain and the agrarian laws.”¹⁹ The liberals went along with such strictures. But Fourier went further: He reviled the “uncertain” or “rebellious” sciences, that is, the social sciences cherished by the positivists, on the ground that they served to “prolong the social inferno” and to inspire a “truly crablike progress.” He thundered against the positivists: “They have too much at stake to lift the darkness that surrounds the human mind...it lies there, rocked to sleep by the chimera of progress.”²⁰ Fourier was, nevertheless, a partisan of progress: “A

¹⁸ “Les Torpilles du progrès,” *Le Phalanstère*, August 1832.

¹⁹ *Pièges et charlatanisme des deux sectes Saint-Simon et Owen*.

²⁰ “Les torrents de ténèbres et de petitesse chez les hommes,” *Le Phalanstère*, February 1834.

society may go forwards as well as backwards," he wrote, "we need reliable rules to distinguish progress from decline."²¹ He refused to extract these rules from the rationalism of the eighteenth century, because the failure of the Revolution proved such rationalism to be bankrupt, but looked instead to a hylozoism borrowed more or less from Swedenborg, to the revivalist sects, and to Schelling. The principle of association between men was, in his view, worth nothing, unless it was the manifestation, on earth and in society, of a law of attraction which animated the universe, governed all living things, and could be defined as "the unrehearsed concert between creator and creature."²² Fourier applied to life on earth the stoic idea of recurrent cycles. Each cycle was divided into two equal phases, one of progress and one of decline. At the end of the latter, mankind would emigrate to other planets. Progress was defined as the passage from one stage in the first phase to another: When "civilization" became corrupt and too old, it had to give way to a kind of industrial feudalism, and this in turn had to give way to "harmony." Nature took part in progress, by undergoing concomitant changes. The moving force behind human progress was the purging of the passions. Society would gain a new equilibrium only after reason and the passions converged—reason being the consciousness of universal attraction. Passions were always good; only society had become vicious. Starting with this formula, which Helvetius would have endorsed, Fourier combined the passions in such a way as to form the most effective striking force in the battle for the greater perfection of human associations. By means of the passions, Fourier sought to resolve the antinomy between the individual and the social group. To Saint-Simon's integration of the individual in the social hierarchy, Fourier opposed the free participation of the individual; the individual would, in fact, participate because, to do so, would be profitable or "attractive" to him. There was no longer anything sacred in human associations, since Fourier had transferred the sacred to the universe. The individual formed part of the deified universe through his passions, which were

²¹ "Mystification des chantres du progrès." *Le Phalanstère*, September 1833.

²² *Théorie de l'unité universelle*, vol. 2.

The Idea of Progress in the 19th Century

nothing but the absolute and permanent element in the progress of happiness.

In times of transition that are marked by such a significant convergence of all the major changes, one can find ideas and beliefs that reflect the common hope for a more harmonious future. It would be interesting to draw a parallel between the ideas of progress in the nineteenth century and the millenarian movements of the eighteenth century (and the sixteenth). The third age of Joachim de Fiore, in which the Paraclete was to reign, could be compared to Comte's positivistic state, to Leroux's religious state, to Fourier's "harmony," to Marx's communist society, and even to Condorcet's rational world. In each case, the Holy Spirit could be shown to rule in some form or other.

All these conceptions betray, in spite of their diversity, the common hope of creating social harmony out of chaos. Each theorist or prophet attached a different meaning to this harmony; but this was, nevertheless, one of the points at which the beliefs of the time, which had as many emotional as rational implications, made contact. How this harmony was imagined depended, first of all, on how progress was conceived. If progress was only a means, it came in the end to be absorbed by the final order. If it appeared in sacred dress, with strong affective undertones, and demanded sacrifices, it survived the new order, which continued to evolve. Most socialist authors of the period (except, to some extent, Proudhon) believed in the identification of the individual with society, but held that this process was never to be completed. The hope of the individual to overcome his necessary limitations would thus be continually nourished by the elusive prospect of identification with society. This is what those authors had in mind who thought of progress in mystical terms, or else looked to progress for the partial satisfaction of those human passions that were never to become extinct.

We have seen that the idea of a single progress for all of mankind could only arise because of the extraordinary convergence of changes, which marked the beginning of the nineteenth century in Europe. In spite of internal conflicts, and sometimes because of them, progress in science and technology led to improvements in the material lot of the masses, giving thus the lie to Marx's forecasts. It seemed at the time that European civilization

would find no limits to its geographical expansion, and that European ways of thinking and acting would be imposed on the rest of mankind. Thus the dream of primordial unity, which had obsessed the human mind for thousands of years, would finally come true. The political principles, the moral rules and even the utopian expectations of Europe would become the property of the entire world. In Europe itself, the scarcity of wars and their short duration, as well as the slow but irreversible accession of the masses to the political leadership of nations, seemed to usher in the reign of brotherhood. At the same time, the secularization of archaic customs and institutions seemed to prepare the way for the intellectual, moral and sexual emancipation of the individual. This was the legacy of the nineteenth century to ours.

The convergence of trends and their expansion came to a sudden halt in the twentieth century. The reassuring concept of determinism came to be questioned in the course of scientific progress, and scientific explanation left behind the sensible models by which it had remained familiar to most minds. This left a void between real life and the constructions of reason, and gave rise to such disturbing reflections as Cournot's on the opposition between vitalism and rationalism. As Nietzsche had foreseen, technical progress became a much more effective means of destruction than of construction: Progress in the means of destruction went on at a much more rapid rate. Foreign and civil wars not only exceeded in magnitude and duration anything the nineteenth century had known, but brought on a resurgence of inhuman sentiments. These broke through the thin layer of civilization, which would have been unthinkable in the nineteenth century, when progress was taken to go together with the thickening and stabilization of the strata on which civilization rested. The convergence of advances in technology and the spread of liberal institutions, which was a typically European phenomenon, came to an abrupt end. New nations on different continents now borrow the technical methods of old Europe, but introduce them into a completely different economic and political context. Finally, the world is broken up into two types of society. These live in such isolation, and have such different conceptions of human relationships and of the place of the individual, that the obstacles to an objective and disinterested exchange between them appear almost insurmountable. In those

The Idea of Progress in the 19th Century

countries in which society reserves all initiative for itself, and limits the individual to his social function alone, the political and administrative authorities monopolize the truth for their own private use, and in order to preserve society as a whole, leave to the rest of society only a semblance of truth.

There is now no common purpose that could unite all men without governmental interference, and no spontaneous movement towards larger social units. In the absence of such convergence and expansion, we cannot profitably speak of progress in the absolute, inevitable, universal and irreversible sense of the preceding century. The modern world is divided and chaotic and full of unforeseeable possibilities. Our ends have become obscure, while, our means have been greatly developed. Since our ends are problematic, they can hardly elicit systematic ideologies of the kind that, in the nineteenth century, claimed to give a complete interpretation of historical phenomena.