

Progress and Revolution

Comparing Attitudes Toward Progress in World Revolutions

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The American Revolution, like many other revolutions in the same period on both sides of the Atlantic, was inspired by Enlightenment values. Ideas like secularism, toleration, equality and social progress. Perhaps in part because the founding document of the nation are so steeped in these values, they remain powerful forces in American culture long after the end of the Enlightenment.

This raises some important questions. If progress is an Enlightenment value, but the Enlightenment is long over, why did this value in particular remain so strong in the American mythos? Was the success of the American Revolution a concrete example of that value, and thus contributed to this persistent myth? Did other revolutionary cultures from the same period also adopt progress as a central theme if their revolutions were successful, or lose faith in that idea if their revolutions were not? Is America unique in this regard? What role did this idea have in encouraging and promoting the revolutionary ethos? Given the status of non-whites in the various revolutions, is there a racial component to the acceptance or rejection of progress as a value? How was the idea of progress used in the revolutionary movements themselves that might have contributed to later attitudes about progress? To what extent was the revolution itself seen as resulting in progress? Progress sometimes implies a goal: toward what goal were the revolutions working? Is that even a valid definition of progress? What role does it play in the analysis because of historians' intellectual biases?

It's not possible for this paper to answer all these questions, but we want to explore the idea of progress, how it plays out in history and society, what philosophers and others have said about it. And then examine the American revolution and others to, if nothing else, determine whether these questions are valid questions to ask or not, and, perhaps, take some steps toward answering one or more of these questions, or at least refining them a bit further for future

exploration. The analysis will make clear that there are some differences between French and other-European ideas about the idea of progress, and so we will examine the way that those ideas may differentiate between the American Revolution and the Haitian Revolution in particular.

This paper will approach this investigation in four steps. Step one will be to define the term progress, explore its origins, its role in the Enlightenment and the theory of history, and set the context for the discussion to follow. Step two will be to examine the American Revolution and the role that these ideas about progress played and how they resonated through time. Step three will be to examine other revolutions, especially the Haitian Revolution, and look at how the idea of progress was employed, and to what extent these events line up with our understanding of progress. The final step will be to provide a general comparison and determine to what extent we can begin to answer some of the questions posed above.

Progress

To better understand what we are talking about, I going to begin by examining the origins of the idea of progress, its definition and controversies. A large number of books have been written to examine the role of progress in history, social theory, and other aspects of human change. Progress as a theory of history is generally in contrast to older theories of history that tend to be cyclical or millennial.¹

In order to better understand what we are talking about when we talk about “progress”, I want to examine some perspectives and definitions proposed by historians who’ve examined the idea in detail. They range the gamut from essentially saying ‘progress just is’ to some thoughtful definitions that will aid the analysis.

In the 'progress just is' end of the spectrum is William Ralph Inge. In 1920, Inge wrote, "The belief in Progress, not as an ideal but as an indisputable fact, not as a task for humanity but as a law of Nature, has been the working faith of the West for about a hundred and fifty years."² Inge is a historian in the school of historians who view history as progressive, and as such a basic idea, this is as close to a definition as he gets. His writings illustrate a focus on the "western" world, and from this text, it's not clear whether he would view the history of other cultures in the same light (as a general pattern of all human history), or if he views western civilization as exceptional in this regard. Later, however, he goes on to praise Spencer and decry the philosophies of Hegel, Comte and Darwin.³ He seems to not only see Progress as a myth but goes on to express essentially a paean for Hope, but his praise for the racist Spencer does suggest a certain cultural imperialism to his view.

Robert Nisbet's treatment of the idea of progress fifty years later (1970) is more thoughtful, and he comes a bit closer to providing a clear definition of progress, along with its history in the Enlightenment, and in the context of the Atlantic Revolutions. He says:

During the period 1750-1900 the idea of progress reached its zenith in the Western mind in popular as well as scholarly circles. From being *one* of the important ideas in the West, it became the dominant idea, even when one takes into account the rising importance of other ideas such as equality, social justice and popular sovereignty—each of which was without question a beacon of light in this period. However, the concept of progress is distinct and pivotal in that it becomes the developmental *context* for these other ideas.⁴

Nisbet is arguing that societies that are more equal have progressed further than other societies. Nations that have more popular sovereignty have progressed further. Those values of

the Enlightenment have become the goals of progress, and the closer a people are to achieving those goals, the more they have progressed. Those that have not achieved those goals, must, therefore, be considered to have progressed less, and since progress is itself a human value, they must be less good in some fundamental sense. It might be argued that this is a form of cultural imperialism, but even if one does not go that far, what it clearly is not is cultural relativism.

Nisbet extends the idea of progress even further to economic and legal domains, citing Adam Smith's arguments to support this position. He further goes on to note that Smith "suppl[ies] the stages of progress, [that] point to four major stages which humanity has passed through."⁵ These stages of progress (applied initially only to cultures) are used in the works of other writers, to justify claims that all other races are inferior to whites, but which itself contradicts the idea that everyone strives to better themselves, which is central to the notion of progress espoused by many of these historians.

Only a few authors attempt a formal definition of progress. We'll examine two of the better ones. J.B. Bury in 1932 describes human progress as "a theory which involves a synthesis of the past and a prophecy of the future. It is based on an interpretation of history which regards men as slowly advancing...in a definite and desirable direction and infers that this progress will continue indefinitely."⁶ He further goes on to note that the idea of progress is a relatively recent invention. As noted previously, classical and some Asian civilizations have a more cyclical view of history.

Perhaps the best and most concise definition of progress is given by van Doren: "Progress, in short, is irreversible meliorative change."⁷ This definition includes two key features of progress. First, that it is "irreversible": when real progress is made, it cannot be undone. And second, that it is "meliorative" or beneficial. Not all change is progress, it must be

both permanent and positive. In our analysis of revolutions in America and Haiti, we will examine events in light of both of these definitions.

Van Doren takes his cue from John Stuart Mill in defining progress. Mill's theory of the improvement of man, as described by Oskar Kurer states: "Progress, at its most simple, is an increase in happiness."⁸ Later, he describes Mill's idea surrounding economic progress, saying, "...economic development is a necessary condition for social progress."⁹ Mill was not interested in the acquisition of luxury goods, but rather improving the bottom of society to permit more freedom and opportunity for advancement. Mill's view is consistent with Nisbet's analysis, that progress is defined, in part, in terms of these other Enlightenment goals and the degree to which society has moved toward those goals.

The theory of history that uses progress as its centrally defining characteristic is not without its detractors. There are two interesting challenges to the idea of progress that we want to examine here. The first of these harkens back to the cyclical history that we've mentioned several times now. Ernest Lee Tuveson, in his book, *Millennium and Utopia*, identifies progress with the idea of redemption.¹⁰ This connects the idea of progress to an explicitly religious idea rather than a secular one as with Enlightenment thinkers. Moreover, since not all religions have the idea of redemption, this points us to an explicitly Christian notion of history.

Ronald Wright takes a different tack to the history of progress in challenging it. "The myth of progress has sometimes served us well—those of seated at the best tables, anyway—and may continue to do so. But I shall argue in this book that it has also become dangerous. Progress has an internal logic that can lead beyond reason to catastrophe. A seductive trail of successes may end in a trap."¹¹ Progress, he claims, is not entirely benign, and cites some historical examples, like advancements in weaponry, that can lead to disaster. By making this

challenge, Wright points out that change is not always positive, and even the appearance of positive progress can result in unexpected backsliding, dead ends or catastrophe.

Charles Frankel examines Enlightenment ideas of progress from multiple perspectives: history, language, science. We can use his analysis to help us summarize and extend the points and counterpoints of progress by looking at Enlightenment writers in France. Frankel describes Pascal's view of progress, writing in opposition to Descartes, "The capacity to progress... distinguishes human intelligence from animal instinct."¹² "Both [Pascal and Fontenelle] had been explicit in stating that there was nothing automatic or unconditional about progress, and that men learn from experience only on condition that they possess and appropriate method."¹³ By this, Pascal meant the scientific method. Rousseau is sometimes seen as having a theory of historical "regress" rather than progress, and it is claimed, rejected the idea of the perfectibility of man. This could be seen as consistent with a Christian worldview that saw the perfectibility of man in the Garden of Eden, and which was set on a path of decline ever since. He also separated the idea of scientific progress from moral or social progress, by observing that science and its analytic methods had not been applied to morality.¹⁴ This view was rejected by Voltaire and D'Alembert.¹⁵ Frankel's analysis lays bare the conflict inherent in the French Enlightenment. In examining the Haitian Revolution, we will look for the seeds of these conflicts in those events.

Before we proceed to the related French and Haitian examples, we will examine the American Revolution in the light of our understanding of historical progress.

American Revolution

The roots of social progress began in the American colonies even before the Revolution. According to Klooster, “The average free male... was not just fiercely independent; he and his family were also well-off. Their standard of living may have been higher than anywhere else in the world up until that time.”¹⁶ Clearly, any threat to that standard of living and independence—both aspects of “meliorative change”—would be seen as a sign of devolution and regress, which were contrary to Enlightenment values. In retrospect, it probably should have been a given that the colonists would fight to preserve those gains, and new and arbitrary taxes were clearly seen as a threat to their prosperity.

Britain had been moving in the direction of greater popular sovereignty for several centuries. Americans claimed they were but extending the idea of equality before the law a bit further, or so Thomas Paine argued in rejecting the rule of the King. Describing Britain’s motives as corrupt and tyrannical, they appealed to Enlightenment values of toleration. Corruption was seen as regressing to the days when subjects were at the mercy of the whims of their government, so throwing off the yoke of the King could only be a progressive development. Revolutionaries like Paine argued for making permanent their independence, which until the Revolution, had only been de facto.

After the war, the former colonies saw an expansion of the franchise, although the extent of this expansion varied from state to state. Moreover, an important sign of progress began to occur in New England, where the abolition of slavery was getting a foothold. The Quakers in 1774 banned their members from owning slaves, and then the Methodists in 1780—they later kicked out members that refused to do so.¹⁷ The Constitution written in 1787 embodied toleration and secularism (no religious test for office, failure to mention the divine), employed

Enlightenment theories of government and balance of powers, and enshrining representative government embodied the ideal of social progress. While progress occurred slowly in some areas, particularly with respect to slavery, women, and the native populations on the frontier, nonetheless, this represented an important step forward. Some scholars debate whether the American revolution was a revolution at all, but there does not seem to be prominent scholars that argue that the American revolution was strongly regressive (unless, perhaps, they are monarchists).¹⁸

A prominent defender of the Enlightenment, a governor of the largest original states, the first Secretary of State, Vice President, and the third President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson throughout his life engaged in dialogue with European Enlightenment thinkers, especially in France. French Enlightenment thinkers were influential, particularly with respect to the developing ideas of progress and race. In particular, Buffon challenged American perceptions of their own progress by claiming that not only were the natives of America inferior to Europeans, but that America was inherently regressive.¹⁹ Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* was a direct response to these claims.²⁰

Nisbet summarizes the role of progress in the American Revolution and subsequent dialogue with mainland Europe between Buffon and Jefferson:

So went the argument of Buffon and others against the idea of real progress....

[T]he Americans quickly demonstrated that America was in every respect youthful and strong, capable of furnishing more resources necessary to the progress of civilization than any European country. Franklin... in 1755 used America's fast-developing population as a principle argument in behalf of his prediction that America would become a great and powerful civilization. As late

as 1785 Jefferson was still replying.... He declared that Americans, including the native Indians, were at least equal and probably superior to European physical types. He did not hesitate to utilize America's victory over the English and other European troops in the Revolutionary War as evidence for the fact that not only were Americans physically superior but that such defeat of the English argued their own degeneration of body and mind.²¹

Jefferson's conception of progress in America did not end there. He was one of the first advocates of what would become known as Manifest Destiny, the idea that America should spread across the continent all the way to the Pacific. The expedition of Lewis and Clarke, which he helped bring about, and which was matched by the Louisiana Purchase, was the culmination of a long-term goal to make that dream a reality. "The affirmations of progress we find in American in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are rarely if ever separable from the profound conviction that American was not only a destined nation, but a redeeming nation...."²²

Jefferson was hardly alone in his assessment of American progress. Franklin's scientific advancements were well-known in Europe. Revolutions spread across the world inspired by America's success. Nisbet notes:

Needless to say, there were abundant assessments of this kind in America. The greatest of the Founding Fathers were emphatic in their conviction of past progress over vast lengths of time for humanity, and of progress, with America in the vanguard, through a long future. ...[T]he stately affirmations of the progress of civilizations which we ... see in Jefferson, John Adams, Franklin, Paine and others of their time,²³

were more important and prominent than occasional forays into other classical theories of history. For Americans, progress became a dominant theme in accounts of their history. It seemed to be a confirmation of the theory of human improvement.

French and Haitian Revolutions

Before talking about the Haitian Revolution, it's necessary to take a brief look at some elements of the French Revolution since it clearly influenced the instigation and outcome of what happened in Haiti.

Condorcet was one of the “movers and shakers” in the French Revolution, and also a prominent French Enlightenment thinker. Frankel notes, “Condorcet’s view of progress as a battle between opposing forces was the immediate result of practical efforts against clerical domination.”²⁴ Furthermore, Condorcet’s view of progress proved to be a lasting one.

Chambliss notes, “The idea that history is the story of man’s progress from superstition and barbarism to reason and enlightenment,” is described in Condorcet’s book, in 1793.²⁵ This move away from superstition is reflected in the strong anticlerical spirit of the French Revolution.

Initially, many of the themes of the American Revolution were shared by the French Revolution: the desire to abolish or greatly reduce class boundaries, as well as some level of suspicion to state religion, although, the French took this much further than in America. The similarities might have been thought to increase after Thomas Paine moved to France to help support the revolution. Paine was sometimes seen as a radical in the American Revolutionary context, but the radicalism of the French soon outstripped his own, to the point that Paine himself was eventually thrown in prison for being perceived as disloyal while the Terror unfolded.²⁶

It's easy to see how the French Revolution could be seen as a kind of progress "trap" as described by Wright. Equality is a fine ideal, but arresting and executing aristocrats in order to achieve that equality could be seen as the kind of extreme exercise of "progress" that actually leads to regress, since certainly such violence cannot be considered civilized. At the same time, equality did not extend to slaves, and so this proved to have a direct impact on the situation in Haiti. One has to consider why equality did not extend to slavery, and it seems clear that the developing arguments about race from the likes of Buffon contributed.

Silvia Sebastiani describes some of the philosophical arguments happening in the latter half of the eighteenth century surrounding race, focusing on the arguments of Buffon, Voltaire and Kames. "Races/species were defined on the basis of common sense, by both immediate and discernible physical characteristics and by equally evident inclinations and temperaments, which gave rise to particular manners and habits. National characters thus became racial characters."²⁷ These views were in direct opposition to some previous anthropological models that simply saw other races as occupying less advanced states of civilization, and through exposure to Western civilization, could be brought up to the more advanced state that Europeans were thought to occupy. In this light, the reaction of the French to the revolt in Haiti makes more sense. It would appear that based on these arguments that the very fact of their slavery proved that they should remain slaves.

When the French Revolution began, Haiti was the wealthiest colony in the world, though that wealth was not evenly distributed. White plantation owners had the most power. Beneath them were free mulattoes and free blacks, and beneath them were the slaves. Initially, the people of color had hopes that they, too, would be granted equality by the French Revolution,²⁸ that this too, would be a measure of progress for them, but after the jailing of leading anti-slavery

Jacobins like Lafayette and Condorcet, it became increasingly clear that no help would be coming from the mainland.²⁹ If anything, the French made it clear over time that they fully intended to reinstitute slavery because they wanted the wealth of the island that seemed only to be achievable through the old system of forced labor.³⁰

Toussaint L'Overture was too much of a man of the Enlightenment himself, despite being a slave, to allow that to happen. Having been recognized as having special skills, he was taught to read both French and Latin, and given the kind of liberties that most slaves only dreamed of.³¹ He proved himself a capable leader after the slaves revolted and soon took control of the revolution. He and his followers were determined not to permit the French to put them back in bondage. The slaves made common cause with the free people of color and turned on the white French. Just as the French Revolution eventually descended into violence for fear of the aristocracy reasserting control over the common people, in Haiti, too, a massacre of white French plantation owners and their families was meant to ensure there would be no regression to a state of servitude.³²

The reactions to Haiti's declaration of independence and defeat of the French was met with mixed reactions. Slaveholders like Jefferson reacted with shock and horror, for they feared slave revolts would spread all over the New World, and that they would meet the same end as the French in Haiti. This may explain Jefferson's resistance to freeing the slaves and their mixing with the white population, and that a just God would surely make them pay for enslaving men.³³ On the other hand, other observers say the Haitian revolution as ultimate symbols of progress. For free blacks, this was certainly the case. Frederick Douglass would tell students in a lecture that: "There are ebbs and flows in the tide of human affairs, and Haiti is no exception to this rule. There have been times in her history when she gave promise of great progress, and others when

she seemed to retrograde.”³⁴ He went on in the same lecture to note that Haitian progress did show to the world that people of color were not docile animals, but that they were men of character, and in his estimation, they had performed that mission well.³⁵

Despite freeing themselves from French rule after a long and bloody battle that brought in both British and Spanish soldiers to try to divide the spoils, Haiti would wait even longer before being recognized as an independent nation. The fear of a slave revolt and loss of the richest colony in the Caribbean, induced not only France, but also other nations to withhold recognition for fear that slave revolts would spread. In the end, the conditions for recognizing independence were so egregious that Haiti continues to struggle with the consequences of the harsh peace even now.³⁶

Synthesis

Among the ironies of the American Revolution is that among the philosophers that inspired the Founding Fathers in their creation of the new American nation was Montesquieu, who rejected the idea of progress. While the French Voltaire wrote about the history of the world in order to illustrate his belief in the progress of civilization, according to Bury.³⁷ Despite French belief in progress, even those who were inclined to accept it, rarely looked that far into the future.³⁸ Maybe this was the lesson of the French Revolution. Bury notes, “The failure of the Revolution to fulfil the visionary hopes which had dazzled France for a brief period—a failure intensified by the horrors that had attended the experiment—was followed by reaction against the philosophical doctrines and tendencies which has inspired its leaders.”³⁹

When we consider the two (or three) revolutions considered here, we see that it is the American Revolution that inspired the dreams of white men to progress, but that for people of

color, including those living in America, the Haiti Revolution held a special place in their hearts because they alone manage to free the slaves in their quest for independence. The French Revolution, while important at the time because they sought to spread their revolutionary ways throughout Europe, nonetheless lost much of its luster after the Terror and eventual return to despotism under Napoleon. The racism of the day prevented Haitian from achieving the promise of their revolution, and so it was left to America, with all of its flaws, to try to live up the lofty words inspired by the Enlightenment, that helped free them from Britain.

In considering the ideas of progress examined earlier, the American Revolution maintained the illusion of forward progress most thoroughly. While women and free blacks who had gained the right to vote lost it, more men of all classes gained it. In terms of sheer bodies, this was a net gain. While slavery and racism persisted in America, this was neither a change for the better nor the worse. Because the elite were all wealthy white men, those that wrote the histories had no difficulty glossing over these failures to progress. The violence that attended both the French and the Haitian revolutions were more difficult to ignore.

We see other differences, too, when we look at other values of the Enlightenment that are tangled up in our ideas about progress. In France, the revolution was strongly anti-clerical, in part, because they participated in the feudal system despised by the common people. The value of secularism made them seize church property, overthrow the calendar, and other radical actions that proved to be sustainable.⁴⁰ In America, secularism took the form of a constitution based not on God, but on the power of the People, and omitted a religious test for federal office. It would be some time before that was extended to the states, there was no national religion, and some of the former colonies were more tolerant of competing religions than others. Haiti took a different path that was much more connected to religion than secularism. The slave revolt was initially

blessed with a voodoo ritual, but after Toussaint took control, his constitution banned all religions except for three mainstream Christian ones, including banning voodoo.⁴¹ I would argue that the French fell into Wright's progress trap. From an Enlightenment standpoint, Haiti may actually have regressed. America's progress was small and slow, but if secularism was a goal, then in retrospect, it would seem to have been a reasonably effective path.

The general trends of progress, though, are only clear at certain levels of detail. If we go beyond the revolutions as far as the Civil War (which from the perspective of the South, might be considered a failed revolution), we see the failure of Reconstruction as regression rather than fulfilling the promise of emancipation. We see this frequently in American history: progressive steps forward are often met by backlash and even regression before it's possible to move forward again.

It would seem that progress, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

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³ *Ibid.*, 9.

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⁵ *Ibid.*, 189.

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