

Nitish Mathur

Dr. Gardner

Modernization and Its Discontent – Honors 3003

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Human Progress: An Attainable Reality or a Deceptive Illusion?

Nineteenth century Europe witnessed immense social turbulence that emerged from radical Enlightenment political theories and would ultimately culminate into the self-destructive wars of the twentieth century. The underlying goal of the Enlightenment was to enhance political efficiency by strengthening the relationship between individuals in society. With the explosion of technological and scientific advancements in the eighteenth century era of imperialism, there was a common misconception that these developments could aid in elevating human morality and achieving social progress. Alexis de Tocqueville's introspective and cautionary text *Democracy in America*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's profound *First Discourse: Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, and Karl Marx's revolutionary yet controversial "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" argue against the optimistic mindset of human progress. Striving towards perfectibility indirectly causes the destruction of human ideals. Tocqueville contends that the rise of equality and justice in human relations actually makes human relations worse, while Rousseau argues that progress eradicates human ideals like integrity and simplicity. In addition to Tocqueville and Rousseau, Marx defends the proletariat workers against the aristocratic class to display the overall imbalance in society. As a whole, although enormous improvements in science and technology have reduced daily labor and increased global connectedness, it has inflated social tensions in the quest of political equality as presented by the

Tocquevillian paradox, degraded morality like Rousseau has observed, and generated mass economic injustice as displayed by the Marxian argument.

Tocqueville predicted the inevitability of the expansion of democratic societies due to the rise of individuals' belief in the equality of conditions, but he warned against its possible consequences. He defined equality of conditions as the belief that circumstances of birth cannot affect social conditions of an individual. He asserted that democracy is ever-expanding and is ceaseless since the idea of freedom pervades the human soul. Furthermore, Tocqueville stated that societies can no longer "prevent the conditions of men from becoming equal," but warned that it is "upon themselves" to see if equality "lead[s] them to servitude or freedom, to knowledge or barbarism, to prosperity or wretchedness" (Tocqueville 212). The degree of success and progress in society is dependent upon the individuals themselves. Even though Tocqueville acknowledged that freedom liberated the soul, he insisted it could also lead to social tensions. Independence tends to isolate individuals, and therefore, causes them to withdraw from society. This demonstrates that the principle of equality in a democratic society ironically weakens social bonds, while the stringent constraints of an aristocratic society help maintain social structure. In essence, due to the rise of equality, "individuals seem less and society more important," which eventually causes the individual to be "lost in the crowd" (198). The so-called omnipotence of the majority could end up becoming tyrannical and deteriorate individual freedom. Tocqueville concludes that modern democracy makes doubt of a cohesive society; rather, it tends to swell personal and social conflicts. He advises that the danger to democracy is democracy itself, and not any of its declared enemy. An individual has the right to his or her freedom unless he or she infringes upon someone else's basic liberty. When a society is "divided between adverse principles," the same democratic ideals can cause "revolution or [the

society's] fall into anarchy" (102). Therefore, Tocqueville portrays that the "principle of equality" can either provoke "men straight to independence" or it "may suddenly drive them into anarchy," which may produce violent consequences (197). All in all, the Tocquevillian paradox cautions against the illusion of democracy as political progress if the members of society are not careful enough.

While Tocqueville explores the pessimistic implications of political progress, Rousseau argues against the impacts of scientific and technological development in his defense of human virtue. Rousseau argues that the "revival of the sciences and the arts" did not contribute in "improving morality" (Rousseau 47). Instead, "sciences, letters, and arts" have "stifle[d] the sense of freedom that people once had" (48). Gaining recognition and excellence in science or arts was considered virtuous in the Enlightenment era. Rousseau argues that the irony of being a scholar is the "appearance of all the virtues without the possession of a single one" (49). He claims that "sciences and arts owe their birth to our vices," and by pursuing these fields, individuals extend the harmful effects of these vices (56). Scientific achievement assists in acquiring personal fame, but it does not necessarily build "sincere friendships" or "deep trust;" rather, it garners "suspicions, resentments, fears, coldness, reserve, hatred, and betrayal" (51). All of these ills are hidden beneath the "perfidious veil of politeness, under that lauded sophistication which we owe to the enlightenment of our century" (51). Finally, he affirms that sciences "are even more dangerous in the effects they produce" since they encourage "idleness," cause "misuse of time," subvert "foundations of our faith," and "annihilate virtue" (62). All in all, Rousseau rejects the notion that scientific development has helped progress. Instead, it is a widely held misconception that has actually produced adverse effects. Striving to achieve individual brilliance has caused individuals to lose their innate morality.

Rousseau offers a resolution to this conflict through the preservation of integrity and simplicity. Leading a simple life, he argues, would aid the individuals and society in becoming “healthier” and “peaceful” respectively (58). He contrasts the materialistic ambitions of modern society through “business and money” to the “morality and virtue” applauded in ancient times (63). It is the “dissolution of morality” and “the necessary consequence of luxury” that causes “corruption of taste” (64). Rousseau concludes that “rewards are showered on clever minds, but virtue receives no honors” (69). He proclaims that societies “no longer have citizens;” instead, they have the sophisticated “physicists, geometers, chemists, and musicians” (70). These simple citizens have been “abandoned” in the “countryside,” where they are left “indigent and shunned” (70). Ambition inflates characteristics like ego and jealousy, and social recognition through individual excellence breeds these ambitions. Jealousy and ego are not necessarily negative characteristics, but if they are not employed properly, they foster immorality. Rousseau stresses that “integrity is even more precious to good people than erudition is to scholars” (47). If individuals focus on being virtuous by living a simple life with honor and integrity, they can elevate ethics and morality. If several people in the society attempt to strive towards virtuosity, societies themselves will progress. Altogether, Rousseau offers a harsh critique against the influence of science, but offers a reprieve if citizens are ready to abandon their complicated lifestyles.

While Rousseau and Tocqueville argue against the optimism of social and political categories, Marx’s diagnosis of imbalance in society derives from the economic injustice the proletariats suffer from the hands of the capitalist bourgeoisies. In order to extract maximum industrial profit, the owners of the industry push their workers to extreme conditions. Although industrial growth provides technological advances and comfort for a select amount of people, it

has adverse effects on the workers. Marx argues that the suffering of the worker class outweighs the benefit gained by the owners in the capitalist economy. He declares that “as production increases in power and range,” the “worker becomes all the poorer” (Marx 71). Marx exhibits this phenomenon with the paradox that “the *increasing value* of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the *devaluation* of the world of men” (71). This accurately displays the economic paradox the society suffers. In order for a capitalistic society to prosper, some individuals benefit at the expense of others. Marx classifies the society into “two classes—the property-*owners* and the propertyless *workers*” (70). His aim was to build a classless society so that certain classes do not suffer in the name of progress. He displays the imbalance in society by contrasting the wealth owned by the property owners with the suffering attained by the workers. While the upper class receives “rich wonderful things,” “beauty,” “machines,” and “intelligence,” it only produces “hovels,” “deformity,” loss of work, “idiocy,” and “cretinism” for the worker (71). This meaningless “external labour” contributes to “the loss of his self” (74). The repetitiveness of the slave-like workday without tangible rewards makes the worker “no longer feel like himself” and transforms his or her life to become animalistic (74). Marx concludes that “*private property* is the product and necessary consequence” “of *alienated labour*” (79). In order to resolve this conflict, he proposed to replace a class-structured capitalist system into a classless socialist society in his *Communist Manifesto*. Overall, Marx stressed that the aim of the upper class to benefit from industrial and business progress undermine the economic and social stature of the lower class.

All in all, Marx’s political revolution, Rousseau’s tirade against scientific development, and Tocqueville’s warning against democracy portray the weakness in the goal of achieving human progress. Progress can only be truly achieved if economic, social, and political growth is

achieved together. As Marx argued, partial economic growth is the foundation of social tension. Similarly, Rousseau expressed that individual success cannot guarantee moral progress. Lastly, Tocqueville warned that political freedom does not necessarily imply a peaceful society. These arguments show that progress cannot be fully achieved if all three of these factors are not fulfilled. Progress is ambiguous. Improvement in a certain area might have a detrimental impact on another area. Maintaining balance is difficult. For example, even though science and technology have helped relief humanitarian problems, eradicated widespread diseases, and increased global communication, it has failed in generating lasting peace or ending political unrests. After the twentieth century wars, Tocqueville's warnings were realized. The irrationality of the expansion of democratic growth against the Marxist inspired communism escalated tensions between the East and the West, resulting in the attritional Cold War. Although the end of the Cold War signaled global economy and peace, recent rise in nationalistic ideals in certain nations seem to have shifted the world back into an isolationistic state. All in all, the warnings and philosophies illuminated by these thinkers two hundred years ago are ever-present in today's social conversations that revolve around the preservation of democracy, morality, and economic security.

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