

THE IDEA OF PROGRESS IN HISTORY

Dr. (Ms.) Anuzsiya .S.

INTRODUCTION

In history different views on the nature and meaning of history have given rise to different theories of history — the theory of providence, theory of historical cycles, the unilinear theory, and the contingency theory. Charles Beard, an American historian says that historians and philosophers had a choice among three views to explain the meaning of history. They are; "History is chaos and every attempt to interpret it otherwise is an illusion. History moves around in a kind of cycle. History moves in a line, straight or spiral, and in some direction."⁰¹ Beard's own act of faith affirmed that history had a direction; it aimed at fulfilling the American dream of a just and democratic society. It was this reaffirmation of Beard that now takes us to another conceptual level viz. the idea of progress towards an "absolute good" – now entirely dependent on human choice. In the case of Beard the "absolute good" is nothing but a just and democratic society – a society of a planned and collectivist nature.⁰² The idea of progress was advanced, long before Beard, by Turgot and Condorcet. Progress is a movement from a less desired to a more desired position, the evolution of the simple into complex by succession differentiation.

There are historians who have conceived history itself as the story of progress and human emancipation. To Lord Acton, history was progress through the transmission of acquired skills from one generation to another. Acton, in the report of 1896 on the project of the Cambridge Modern History, referred to history as a "progressive science", and in the introduction to the first volume of the history project wrote that "we are bound to assume, as the scientific hypothesis on which history is written, a progress in human affairs."⁰³ Lord Acton conceived history – the course of events and the record of those events – as progress towards liberty and the understanding of liberty. These two processes advanced side by side.⁰⁴

Talking about Universal History, a new kind of philosophical history, Hegel conveys a similar idea. According to Hegel, Universal History of mankind is a sort of philosophical history, exhibiting a progress from primitive times to civilization. "The plot of this story is the development of freedom, which is identical with the moral reason of man as exhibited in an external system of social relations"⁰⁵

While an increasing number of people equated the concept of evolution with the interpretation of world history as human progress, Lord Acton, maintaining a safe distance from biologism and positivist empiricism, in 1898 restated superbly the view of universal history based on human progress as follows:

"By Universal History I understand that which is distinct from the combined history of all countries, which is not a rope of sand, but a continuous development, and is not a burden on the memory, but an illumination of the soul. It moves in a succession to which the nations are subsidiary. Their story will be told, not for their own sake, but in reference and subordination

to a higher series, according to the time and degree in which they contribute to the common fortunes of mankind."⁰⁶

From the foregoing statements it becomes clear that there are historians who conceived progress in history as a movement that proceeds in straight line. This is called the linear theory of progress. The idea was first suggested by the Greek historian Thucydides who revealed the inner structure of history. He said that all historical facts are related one to another in some rational and permanent manner and that the study of any one particular fact of history is invariably related to the study of another, thus touching upon the concept of historical relativism. If this were to be true, we have then to accept the linear view of progress that the entire march of history is one continuous whole and it is childish to periodize history into ancient, medieval and modern. What is ancient is also modern and what is modern is medieval and ancient. Those who hold the linear view of history think of it as a straight line from a remote past passing through a contemporary and known present and moving on to an unknown future. According to this view, there is a close continuity and a forward thrust in its movement, making progress as it goes towards a destination. Thus the idea of progress links up the past with the present and future, too, and gives unity to history, making it a solid piece, as if a steel rod. "Past, present and future was once more linked in a development with a common direction. This time not toward a spiritual goal but toward human betterment in this world."⁰⁷

Herbert Spencer (1820 – 1903), the sociologist, identified history with natural evolution. He accomplished the "authoritative" interpretation of the course of human development as evolution.⁰⁸ Spencer made the most ambitious effort to apply evolution as a universal interpretative principle, using it to explain the development of human society as well as of the animal kingdom. "His doctrine of integration followed by differentiation remains highly suggestive to the historian even today," states Allen Nevins.⁰⁹ Though they had an implicit faith in human progress, scholars like Herbert Spencer held the view that there was no uniform ascent from lower to higher. This view was further supported by the anthropologist E. Reclus who said: "The course of progress runs not incessantly onwards in a straight line at a uniform speed. It proceeds in irregular motions and sometimes by curves, by broken or even by spiral lines." Edgar Quinet (1870) in his *La Creation* argued that progress was not affected along a single line and that it was not continuous and did not proceed in the same direction or at the same rate. There were times of relapse, aberration, and decadence, and not every species or generation was an improvement on that which proceeded.

There were also philosophers who enunciated the theory of historical cycles. According to this theory history moves in cycles by which was meant that historical events recur producing the same consequences. Because history repeats itself, they argued, it has relevance to us who live in the present when we are alert to the lessons it offers. After the Renaissance attempts were made to revive this theory and many endeavoured to discover parallels between the ancient Graeco – Roman world and Modern Europe. The almost identical conditions that governed the rise and fall of empires of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome, Spain and France and Great Britain led the analogy – hunters to believe in grand historical cycles. To this group belonged Oswald Spengler and Arnold J. Toynbee.

Those who hold the cyclical view of history think that history moves in a circle. There is a starting point, and then the upward movement until it reaches the peak. Thereafter the downward movement sets in until it touches the lowest point where it disappears. Then the process starts all over again. The cyclical view conforms to the organic view of birth, growth, maturity, decline, downfall and disintegration of civilizations. The rise and fall of all cultures conform to this pattern. The concept of Golden Age and the Dark Age “the oldest and most ubiquitous of all human myths”;¹⁰ also comes under this category.

As explained above the theory of historical cycles makes it clear that no one can ever manage to remain at the state of perfection for ever. When the wheel takes a full turn, those at the top come to the rock bottom and vice versa. In other words the exponents of historical cycles believed that progress was indeed a part of human life, but it was neither inevitable nor permanent. Their firm beliefs were:

“The fate which rules the world wills that everything should pass away. The happiest state of an individual or a nation has its limits. Everything carries within itself a hidden germ of destruction.”¹¹ “Almost all the nations of the world travel this circle they begin with being barbarians; then they become conquerors and well – ordered nations; this order permits them to grow, and they become refined; refinement enfeebles them, and they return the barbarism.”¹²

To the Italian Vico, history was the “modification of the human mind”. The typical course of change is a progress from anarchy to order, from savage to “heroic ages”, to the ages of civilizations. To him, progress is, however, without end or fulfillment. In Vico’s view the cyclical movement is not a mere rotation of fixed phases but a spiral ascent. In this respect Hegel comes very close to Vico. Hegel, though he believed in progress, did not believe in the cyclical theory of history or in history repeating itself. Movements of history, Hegel believed, traveled not in circles but in spirals and hence even the apparent repetitions of events such as wars could always be differentiated by their having acquired something new. Wars reappear from time to time in history, but every new war is in some ways a new kind of war, owing to the lessons learnt by human beings in the last one.¹³

In the case of oriental civilizations the theory of cycles has a different meaning. According to the ancients in countries like India time has no significance or “ontological content” at all. It is without meaning. The Indian tradition posits huge time cycles of millions of years called yugas (aeons) which always come back to the same place. Creation, destruction, and new creation go on endlessly. According to their understanding, there is no progress and no goal, only the endless turning of the wheel of time around and around. Under such conditions history can have no importance. “Indian philosophy and religion – whether Brahman, Buddhist, or Jainist – have often taught people to aim at escaping the wheel of existence by transcending entirely the time – bound human condition, the goal being to attain nirvana, a realm of pure being unbounded by time and space.”¹⁴

The concept of progress involves value – judgment also. But we are not sure of a highly developed sophisticated scale to measure progress. We do not yet have a satisfactory barometer to gauge

progress. Herder, the German philosopher, therefore, rejected the French notion of progress, for it affirmed the superiority of European culture of the 18th century over other cultures and ages. Herder was of the opinion that no period must judge a preceding one according to present – day standards, rather each age, each culture, and voelk carried its justification in itself. Herder emphatically declared. "Each age is different, and each has the center of its happiness within itself. The youth is not happier than the innocent, contented child; nor is the peaceful old man less happy than the vigorous man in the prime of life."¹⁵ To Herder history is a movement towards greater comfort and happiness but a progress toward a special state of civility.¹⁶

What shall we answer then to the question "What is Progress?" Can it be man's mastery over nature? Or can it be moral advance? Is it advancement of learning? Or can it be the greatest happiness? How we are to measure progress is the most baffling question. If man has progressed in one sense, he has retrogressed in yet another sense. If we witness a material abundance, there is also evidence for a poverty of the spirit. If there is an incredible progress in science and technology, there is a deplorable state of spiritual bankruptcy, a schism in the soul. There is an extreme form of civility and culture; there is an extreme form of primitivism and backwardness, too.

At this stage we are confronted with a set of valid questions such as; "What is the purpose of progress?"; "What is mankind heading towards?"; "Is there any destination?"; etc. To these questions several great thinkers, seers and philosophers have given different answers. According to the Christian view of history, the end of all progress and human civilization is the establishment of the Kingdom of God a divine rule ushering in a new era of peace and joy, a new social order (a new heaven and a new earth). To Thomas More, progress is the establishment of an Ideal society, a Utopia; To Plato, the Republic; To Huxley, the New Brave World; To Karl Marx, World Communism; and to Mahatma Gandhi, Sarvodaya which is to him Ramraj. Now what is our answer to the stock question? Our answer should be the same as that of Herder; progress towards greater Humanitaet, a moral development toward a special state of civility, empowering each one of us to develop a concern for others, particularly for the less fortunate, and a love for equal justice for all men. Thus in the final analysis, progress is an ethical idea, having a great moral value and a social relevance particularly in our time of troubles.

References

01. C.A. Beard, "Written History as Act of Faith," *American Historical Review*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 2 (January 1934), pp. 228 – 29.
02. Ernst Breisach, (1977), *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, & Modern*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 330.
03. *Cambridge Modern History : Its Origin, Authorship and Production* (1907), p. 13; *Cambridge Modern History*, I (1902), p. 04; XII (1910), p. 791.
04. E.H. Carr, (1983), *What is History*, Reprint, Middlesex, England, p. 115.
05. R.G. Collingwood, (1970), *The Idea of History*, Reprint, OUP, London, p. 114.
06. Lord Acton, *Essays*, p. 398; Cf. Ernst Breisach, *op. cit.*, p. 320.
07. Ernst Breisach, *op. cit.*, p. 205.