

**Left
Is
Not**

Woke

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Progress and Doom

It's not accidental that most of those who would have called themselves leftists a generation ago now call themselves progressives. Fear is a factor. In a world where residues of the Cold War have yet to be examined, much less discarded, 'leftist' sounds too close to 'socialist,' and 'socialist' too close to the state socialism of Eastern Europe for comfort. Fear notwithstanding, the shift to the word 'progressive' makes more sense than naming your political standpoint after the accidental seating arrangements of the 1789 French parliament. For there's no deeper difference between left and right than the idea that progress is possible. It wasn't an idea found in traditional conservative thought, which viewed history, at best, as static or circular, and, at worst, as a sad slow decline from a mythic golden age. On this view, limited improvement may be achievable, but a truly better world could only be found in the afterlife.

What's in question is not technological progress, or what Arendt called "the relentless process of more and more, of bigger and bigger."¹ To stand on the left is to stand behind the idea that people can work together to make significant improvements in the real conditions of their own and others' lives. It's an idea that's often caricatured as the idea that progress is inevitable. Many passages of Hegel and Marx do make that claim, and history has not exactly confirmed it. But to deny that progress is assured is not to deny that it's possible, if possibility depends on the free actions of human beings working together. If progress in this sense is possible, so is regress, and history has seen both. Give up the prospect of progress, and politics becomes nothing but a struggle for power.

So how did Michel Foucault become the godfather of the woke left? His style was certainly radical, but his message was as reactionary as anything Edmund Burke or Joseph de Maistre ever wrote. Indeed, Foucault's vision was gloomier than theirs. Earlier conservative thinkers were content to warn that all hell would break loose should

revolutionaries contest the traditions that carry societies along, for better and worse. Here Schmitt was exemplary and explicit: since the state lost the Lord and the sovereign in the seventeenth century, history fell into permanent decline. Foucault's warnings were more insidious. You think we make progress toward practices that are kinder, more liberating, more respectful of human dignity: all goals of the left? Take a look at the history of an institution or two. What looked like steps toward progress turn out to be more sinister forms of repression. All of them are ways in which the state extends its domination over our lives. Once you've seen how every step forward becomes a more subtle and powerful step toward total subjection, you're likely to conclude that progress is illusory. How far Foucault believed this himself is an open question, but it's certainly the view most have drawn from his work.

If you want to take down hopes for progress, it's a stroke of genius to target one of the Enlightenment's first and most successful demands: the abolition of torture. Like most progressive demands, it was never fully realized. George W. Bush brought torture back to Guantanamo, and it is used more or less openly in much of the world today. If progress through the joint efforts of committed people is possible, so is regress. Still, standard practices like drawing-and-quartering, breaking on the rack, and *autos-da-fé* have been banned as barbaric. To appreciate how revolutionary that ban was you must know that though Voltaire and Diderot were outraged by many features of their judicial system, it took them time to get angry over torture. It was such a fixed feature of crime and punishment that they needed slow convincing. A world where radical reformers like Diderot and Voltaire were not sure whether it was legitimate to break a man on a rack in a public square is not the world we live in. Executions in the U.S. are rarely contested for the reasons one might rightly contest the death penalty, but on the grounds that the prevailing method of execution by injection may cause too much pain.

Clifford Geertz called *Discipline and Punish* Foucault's most forceful work; it's certainly the one most often taught to undergraduates. It begins with a horrific description of the slow death by torture of one Robert Damiens, executed in 1757 for attempting to kill King Louis XV. The account goes on for pages, and it remains in memory when the

convoluted argument that follows is forgotten. As Améry wrote, Foucault doesn't argue; he hypnotizes. And as ancient Greek writers noted, it's easy to feel mesmerized by spectacles of violence that also repel us. Argument or not, by the time we've finished reading *Discipline and Punish*, we can easily be convinced that modern forms of incarceration are worse than a system in which six horses and an executioner's sword publicly dismember a living human body.

Worse? If it were only that simple. Foucault wasn't the first to fudge the distinction between normative and descriptive claims, but he helped to make it common practice among legions of theorists who call themselves critical. In one of his last essays, "What is Enlightenment?" Foucault describes the demand to make normative judgments as "the blackmail of the Enlightenment," the idea

... that one has to be 'for' or 'against' the Enlightenment. It even means precisely that one has to refuse everything that might present itself in the form of a simplistic and authoritarian alternative: you either accept the Enlightenment and remain within the tradition of its rationalism (this is considered a positive term by some and used by others, on the contrary, as a reproach); or else you criticize the Enlightenment and then try to break from its principles of rationality (which may be seen once again as good or bad). And we do not break free of this blackmail by introducing 'dialectical' nuances while seeking to determine what good and bad elements there may have been in the Enlightenment.²

So what, precisely, are we meant to do? The scornful scare-quotes around the words 'for' and 'against' suggest we should be ashamed to raise such a vulgar concern. You may look for an argument; what you'll find is contempt. Foucault makes us feel that judging something as better or worse is intellectually crude. Only simple minds ask banal questions; sophisticated thinkers gave them up long ago. So, Foucault never actually claims that bringing back drawing-and-quartering would be *better*, though he does say that the object of eighteenth-century prison reform was not to punish less but to punish better. "From being an art of unbearable sensations punishment has become an economy of suspended rights." What conclusion should the reader draw?

Nor does he hint toward any proposal that might make the lives of murderers, or people with severe mental illness, better in any way. When pushed for a solution, Foucauldians reply that their business is archaeology, a form of history, a field notoriously averse to making normative claims. Yet his vision of history is full of normative implications. Unlike those of conservatives, Foucault's histories do not begin with a golden age from which we steadily decline. There are simply brutal forms of subjugation which are replaced by more refined ones.

Humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare; humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and those proceed from domination to domination.³

After reading even a little of this, it's hard to avoid concluding that any attempt to improve things will only make them worse. Common-sense questions such as *would Robert Damiens have preferred incarceration in Bentham's Panopticon?* have no more room in Foucault's thought than normative ones. Jean Améry, whose own torture at the hands of the Gestapo was considerably less gruesome than Damiens', knew what he would have chosen.

Reviewing *Discipline and Punish*, he wrote:

Only a fool would deny that prison improvements of the 18th and 19th century were *also* an expression of bourgeois capitalist striving for profit, as if the powers that were didn't *also* consider that a halfway humanely treated prisoner has better working potential than one who is starving. But it is an aberration to describe things as if this humanization were *only* the result of profit and production.⁴

Améry reflects the sort of everyday wisdom we expect grownups to have. Whether you're thinking of reasons or causes, most events have more than one. It's particularly true in cases of progress. Consider another: American segregation was outlawed in the 1960s because many Americans, not least members of the Kennedy administration, were morally outraged by the sight of white policemen attacking black

children with dogs and firehoses. When beginning the reforms later cemented by the Johnson administration, the Kennedys also knew the Soviet Union was watching the same television, and using it to attack American claims to serve as a beacon of freedom. Without the prodding provided by the Cold War, segregation would likely have lasted even longer. Knowing this may temper our admiration for the Kennedy brothers' moral outrage, but it shouldn't undermine it entirely. There is enough historical evidence to show it was real. And even were it not: how much does it matter what moved them to act? A world where all citizens have equal rights to eat, ride, and study where they want to is better than a world where they do not, and no amount of dialectical sophistication will convince a black Southerner who lived through segregation to deny it. Are you angry that those rights today are often merely formal, thwarted by roadblocks erected to prevent citizens of color from realizing them? So am I. But a world where formal rights to equal treatment exist is better than a world where we have to start legislating those rights from scratch.

Foucault doesn't care for questions of intention: if the subject itself is on the verge of disappearing, there's no need to worry about agency. Nor is he concerned with causes. Did those, like Voltaire, who fought to abolish torture really care about human suffering and human dignity and simply fail to notice they were embarking on a venture that would undermine them? Or was the move from torture to incarceration a more conscious attempt to establish more enduring control? Foucault leaves both possibilities open because he doesn't think it matters. Whether they were naive or cynical, all reformers wound up contributing to less brutal but more effective systems of power. Prison, for Foucault, is just the tip of the iceberg: "The prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons."⁵ All of them are ways in which, through structures that usually remain invisible, we internalize mechanisms of domination and control more subtle and sinister than anything the world before Enlightenment had to offer.

Those inclined to give Foucault the benefit of the doubt will argue that his work exposes the methods of power in order to prepare the ground for changing them. Since the reforms of the Enlightenment, power has

become more subtle and anonymous, hence harder to recognize. It's easy to rebel against observable tyrants, far more difficult to deny vast anonymous structures in which we participate. As the history of censorship shows, this argument has merit: where information is clearly censored, bold people will go to great lengths to get it. Where people believe they live in societies that give them full access to information, they're more likely to drown sleepily in its excesses.

This generous reading of Foucault would bring him close to Rousseau, who also criticized early Enlightenment accounts of progress. The self-taught provincial burst on the Paris scene in 1750 with a prize-winning essay, "Discourse on the Arts and Sciences," which savaged standard liberal views of the time. Against those who assumed that arts and science paved a smooth road to progress, Rousseau argued that they often simply feed authors' vanity while disguising oppressive power structures. The arts and sciences, he wrote, "weave garlands of flowers around the chains that bind us." It's a powerful critique that Foucault might have welcomed. Unlike Foucault, however, Rousseau spent the rest of his life trying to answer the problems he raised in that first essay: *how to break those chains?* Knowing how hard the problem is, Rousseau tried several solutions. In *The Social Contract* he proposed law for "men as they are and laws as they should be"; in *Emile* he proposed education for a man as he should be under laws as they are. Nowhere did he explain how to bring the two together to create free citizens in a world without domination. But it may be the hardest question to answer, in politics or in theory: *how can the chains be broken without doing more damage than the chains themselves?* At least Rousseau tried.

This gives Rousseau's deconstruction of standard accounts of progress an entirely different tone than Foucault's. Foucault preferred (rhetorical?) questions to assertions, and was happier to suggest than to stake out a claim. His books are likelier to leave the reader with a mood than a position. To quote Améry once more:

It's very hard to speak common sense with men like Michel Foucault. One always gets the worst of it – if only because his structural visions are more *aesthetically* alluring than those of critical rationalism. But to completely deny progress and to shrug your shoulders over all reforms is misguided and – I weigh my words – in the end reactionary.⁶

Of course, Foucault was disinterested in anything so common as common sense. He was one of the thinkers for whom Améry recommended a banality cure. (The other was Adorno.) Yet the reactionary kernel Améry recognized in his thought came to fruition after Améry's own death, when Foucault examined the neoliberalism that would underpin the prevailing global order. Unlike political liberalism, neoliberalism is liberalism without humanism:

It offered a compelling terrain upon which his practical aspiration for freedom might merge with his theoretical conviction that power is constitutive of all human relationships.⁷

The philosopher Alexander Nehamas wrote: “He was always able – indeed eager – to see the dark side of every step toward the light, to grasp the price at which every advance had to be bought.” Light and shadow go together; each makes the other perceptible. That's a very old trope and, though it doesn't provide a theodicy, it works as an art form. If what's at issue is a question of what's more aesthetically alluring, you might say Foucault was drawn to darkness and leave it at that. But here aesthetics have consequences. At a roundtable discussion with Foucault, several eminent historians pointed out that *Discipline and Punish* paralyzes those who wanted to work for reforms:

If one works with prison educators, one notes that the arrival of your book had an absolutely sterilizing or rather anesthetizing effect on them, in the sense that your logic had an implacability they could not get out of.⁸

One can only pity the poor reformer who wants to better the lives of the incarcerated. Any number of improvements would do so: more space, decent food, educational opportunities, access to books and computers, improved contact with the world outside prison, not to mention an end to the corruption that places prisoners at the mercy of guards' arbitrary

will. For anyone in prison, any of these could be life-changing, but Foucault explicitly scorned simple advances like the flush toilets or longer visiting hours that French prisoners demanded.⁹ Thus it's hard to imagine a prison administrator making an effort to improve those conditions after reading Foucault. Didn't he just learn that improvements made in the name of human rights only lead to more sinister forms of subjection? If the book has another message, only the initiated can understand it.

Adorno and Horkheimer's influential *Dialectic of Enlightenment* takes a similarly grim view of progress. The modern world, which they date back to Homer, seeks to liberate people from the chains of tradition, but soon leads us to bind ourselves like Odysseus at the mast. I've discussed their argument at length elsewhere¹⁰ and mention it here just to acknowledge that *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* defenders make similar claims as did those who wanted to defend *Discipline and Punish*. Both, they argue, are not wholesale attacks on the Enlightenment. Like Foucault, Adorno and Horkheimer wished to reveal its unintended effects; after these were uncovered, the ground could be cleared for a new Enlightenment without the defects. There are passages in both books which gesture in that direction, but make no effort to point a way forward. It would be foolish to demand that philosophy provide answers to all the questions it poses. But if it doesn't provide a taste of what Kant called orientation in thinking, what good does it do?

Though Rousseau's critique of thoughtless modern assumptions about progress is fairly well known, it's common to think that other Enlightenment thinkers were blithely optimistic about the future. (Indeed, Rousseau's critique of optimism is one reason many scholars don't associate him with the Enlightenment at all – in contrast to Rousseau's most famous admirer, Immanuel Kant.) You needn't read Kant's own rather gloomy musings on the subject to be convinced that the Enlightenment was hardly as sunny as generally supposed. *Candide*, the short novel written by Rousseau's arch-rival Voltaire, will serve even better. The novel's subtitle is *On Optimism*, and its goal is to show you that optimism is ridiculous. The view is held by the foolish Dr. Pangloss, who has taught his pupil Candide that all's for the best in this best of all possible worlds. Candide clings to the view as he journeys

through a category of mid-eighteenth-century horrors, all of which actually happened: the brutal and senseless Seven Years' War, the Lisbon earthquake and the auto-da-fé which followed it, the multiple rapes of women, the execution of officers who lost battles. A voyage to the New World brings no respite from the Old, for it lays bare the evils of slavery and colonialism. Education is humbug, and none of the other engines of progress works: wealth and high culture end in boredom and gloom. This is *Candide's* message, and if its naive hero has learned anything by the end of the story, it's to renounce his early optimism.

The belief that the Enlightenment thought progress inevitable has about the same basis as the belief that the Enlightenment was fundamentally Eurocentric, namely: none. More exactly, with few exceptions, Enlightenment thinkers' views of progress were the very opposite of the views ascribed to them today. Over and over they proclaim that progress is (just barely) *possible*; their passionate engagement with the evils of their day precludes any belief that progress is assured. Still they never stopped working toward it.

What explains the persistence of the caricature? Straw men are easy to vanquish, and those who would convince us that progress is impossible often argue as if the only alternative is the view that progress is inexorable. If the only choice is between nihilism and absurdity, most of us will reject the absurd. But I think the caricatures have deeper grounds. For all his attention to the savagery the world can offer, Voltaire didn't think human nature was fundamentally corrupt. "Man is not born evil; he becomes evil, as he becomes sick," he wrote in the *Philosophical Dictionary*. Those who say we're inherently ill are sick physicians hiding the fact that they can't cure anything themselves. Voltaire's sick physicians are priests, since his goal was not to defend a utopian view that we are all naturally good, but to attack a Christian view that we are all naturally evil. Without understanding the religious context of Enlightenment views of human nature, we cannot understand them at all. They lived in a world whose institutions were grounded on the doctrine of original sin. Church views about sin varied in severity. For Calvinists, our sin is so great and God's power so vast that He can condemn any of us to eternal damnation before we've done anything to suggest we deserve it. Catholics could be saved by rituals of

penance, often accompanied by bribes to those dispensing absolution. But whether redemption was ultimately possible or not, it could only come in the arms of the church, as change could only come through the hand of God. The effects of such a worldview cannot be underestimated. One didn't need to wait for the gates of hell to be assured of it: "Abandon all hope" described much life on earth.

Moral progress is only possible if human nature is better than the church taught. By urging that it wasn't, and that social conditions were natural facts, church and state sent the message that progress is impossible. It's a good way to discourage people from attempting to make any. Thus it was crucial that the Enlightenment attack Christian views of original sin. They did not do so naively. Voltaire once quipped that it was the only theological doctrine supported by evidence. Rousseau enraged his contemporaries by claiming they were much worse than they imagined. He is generally believed to have argued that human beings are fundamentally good, but he did no such thing. He thought rather that we, like other animals, are born with two inclinations: a desire for freedom and compassion for others' pain. Both inclinations can be destroyed by the wrong kind of education and social structures. Given the right conditions, they form the basis of decent behavior.

His hopes for the possibility of progress rested on a fundamental insight: "*We do not know* what our nature permits us to be."¹¹ In order to say that where you stand is better than where you stood you must be able to determine the latter. It would be easy to say (or deny) that human beings can make moral progress if we could trace human nature back to an original state that would allow us to measure whether we were declining or improving. That's why so many philosophers, anthropologists and biologists have speculated so often about the state of nature. Rousseau recognized early what critics of evolutionary psychology lately argue: we have no access to humankind's earliest states. Archaeology and palaeontology give us clues Rousseau never had, but they will never be enough to dismiss his deepest insight: in questions concerning the nature of human nature, we are hopelessly partisan. All the data are filtered through our own hopes and fears. Rousseau's vision of the state of nature makes warfare seem perverse;

that of Hobbes makes it seem normal. If you want to establish a dictatorship, your best chance is to convince your fellows that humankind is naturally brutal and needs a strong leader to prevent it from tearing itself to bits. If you want to establish a social democracy, you will magnify every instance of natural cooperation you can find. Even while journeying to the Amazon in the hope of finding tribes who resembled the inhabitants of Rousseau's state of nature, Claude Lévi-Strauss, the most sophisticated anthropologist who tried to test the philosopher's theses, knew that empirical methods wouldn't decide them.

This is not to say or to suggest that human nature is entirely constructed; it is to doubt that any method could determine which parts are constructed and which are not. In his typically brazen prose, Rousseau declared: "Let us begin by setting aside the facts, for they do not affect the matter at hand."¹² Since the facts are not accessible, he proposed radical honesty. Instead of making up stories designed to serve a particular worldview as the truth about human nature, why not lay your cards on the table? Not certainty but plausibility should be the test for accepting a story, if it supports a view you have other grounds to defend. We can never know what the state of nature was really like, and we ought to stop trying. Rather, the idea of the state of nature is a tool that can be used to think about the most fruitful ways of going forward.

As Kant extended the argument, we cannot act morally without hope.¹³ To be clear: hope is not optimism. Optimism (and pessimism) make predictions about a distant future and an inaccessible past. Hope makes no forecasts at all. Optimism is a refusal to face facts. Hope aims to change them. When the world is really in peril, optimism is obscene. Yet one thing can be predicted with absolute certainty: if we succumb to the seduction of pessimism, the world as we know it is lost. In an era when the threats to that world seem overwhelming, pessimism is alluring, for it assures us there's nothing to be done. Once we know it is futile, we can all stop struggling. For solace, or at least distraction, there's always self-care or consumption or mind-altering substances.

Whether you see the proverbial glass as half-full or half-empty is more than a matter of temperament. If you cannot see it as half-full, you'll

eventually stop trying to fill it. Maybe there was a crack at the bottom making all your efforts in vain. Following Rousseau, Kant, and Noam Chomsky, I've suggested that hope is not an epistemological but a moral standpoint. Many philosophers have taken the opposite view. The Stoics advised us to limit hope and desire if we want true contentment. In a more dramatic key, Nietzsche wrote that hope was the worst of all the evils in Pandora's box, for it ensures we will be eternally tormented. If all you seek is your own peace of mind they are probably right. And if that's the case, no philosopher can convince you otherwise. To care about the fate of the world you must love at least a piece of it. One person, perhaps even a landscape, might be enough.

Progressive would be the right name for those who lean left today, if they didn't embrace philosophies that undermine hope for progress. The man who thought original sin the basis of any sound political theory may have seen salvation in the church – at least for his friends. Schmitt's categories of political history are not only childish, as Adorno noted. Viewing politics through the lens of the friend/enemy distinction takes us back to prehistory. For Foucault, every attempt to make progress entangles us in a web that subverts it. And in convincing us that all our actions reflect our primitive ancestors' attempts to reproduce themselves, evolutionary psychology assures us that we will never really escape from the Stone Age. Most who take evolutionary psychology for granted today know nothing of the political controversies that once surrounded it: they weren't even born when Wilson, Gould, Lewontin and others were slugging it out in Harvard Yard and the pages of the *New York Review of Books*. But despite all the criticism, evolutionary psychology has metastasized to be treated as canonical science, regardless of political leanings.

You may argue that theory is secondary: of course woke activists seek solidarity, justice, and progress. Their struggles against discrimination are animated by those ideas. But they fail to see that the theories they embrace subvert their own goals. Without universalism there *is* no argument against racism, merely a bunch of tribes jockeying for power. And if that's what political history comes to, there's no way to maintain a robust idea of justice. But without commitments to increasing universal justice, we cannot coherently strive for progress.

Most woke activists reject universalism, and stand by discourses of power, but they're unlikely to deny they seek progress. It would be easier to believe them if they were willing to acknowledge what some forms of progress had achieved in the past. Showing how each previous step forward led to two twisted steps back can be intellectually dazzling. There are enough instances of injustice to unmask so that several lifetimes won't suffice to do it. But without hope for putting something else in its place, such unmasking becomes an empty exercise in showing your savvy. You won't get fooled again.

I have spent time debunking standard contemporary readings of Enlightenment philosophers in the hope of convincing today's progressives to reconsider them, for they provide much stronger conceptions of progress, justice, and solidarity than those which are dominant today. If we continue to misconstrue the Enlightenment, we can hardly appeal to its resources. Were I asked to attend to the principles of a racist, sexist movement that believed in inevitable progress, I'd surely change the channel. Overturning false cliches clears the ground for reviewing Enlightenment ideas and, with some revisions, putting them to work.

Yet one young journalist who was kind enough to read this book in manuscript raised a question that may occur to others. You've convinced me, she wrote, to give the Enlightenment a chance, and it's interesting to learn that Diderot wrote texts that sound like Fanon. But if Fanon is Diderot without the baggage, why can't we just read Fanon? There are many answers to the question, the first being that Fanon, who died at thirty-six, didn't have the time to expand the work he created. That work is as important as it is limited in scope. Reading Enlightenment thinkers is one way to broaden thoughts of Fanon and others to questions of first principles. Fanon was a universalist who sought justice and believed in the possibility of progress, all necessary conditions of belonging to the left. But it's important not only to apply those principles but to show how they're related and grounded, and to defend them against others which appear to have the same ends in mind.

A more general answer to the question was given by C.S. Lewis, who insisted that we should always read, at a minimum, one old book for

every three new ones. Here is his argument:

Nothing strikes me more when I read the controversies of past ages than the fact that both sides were usually assuming without question a good deal which we should now absolutely deny ... The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books. Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now, they made as many mistakes as we. But not the same mistakes. Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction. To be sure, the books of the future would be just as good a corrective, but unfortunately we cannot get at them.¹⁴

The concept of progress is normatively tinged, one reason why those uneasy with the normative are suspicious of progress in the first place. Here Philip Kitcher's pragmatic conception of progress is helpful. It's a matter of changing direction: rather than thinking of progress as directed *to* a particular goal it can be useful to think of progress *from* a problematic situation to one that is less constrained. Progress toward universalism is as vague as it is daunting. Progress from all the conditions that stand in the way of that goal, moving from chattel slavery to segregation to systemic racism, for example, holds out more promise.¹⁵

But this, after all, is philosophers' talk. There's a perfectly simple reason to question the possibility of even enough progress to save the world as we know it. While I sit at a desk with a lovely view, I know the planet is alternately flooding and burning. Anyone with even a glancing interest in the news can watch disaster unrolling, and those who might prevent it sit on their hands. Political violence is soaring, and none of the traditional mechanisms that once restrained it seem to work. The lies that stood behind institutions we once trusted now stand exposed. New plagues emerge before the old ones subside. The four horsemen of the apocalypse haunt even atheist nightmares. Who could hope for progress at a moment like this?

I have argued that hope for progress is never a matter of evidence. Nothing would be easier than to join the pessimist chorus if I thought the question could be settled empirically. It cannot. But sometimes evidence helps sustain our hope in moments when it threatens to falter. Let's return to the abolition of public torture. Banning it required not just changing opinion but changing sensibilities. You may shudder to read Foucault's description of Damiens' death (though it will likely be the passage that remains in memory long after reading). Had you been a parent in 1757, you'd have thought no more of taking your children to watch it than you'd think of taking them to the circus today. Had you been able to afford it, you'd have paid money for good seats. Versions of torture as entertainment have a long history; the Roman Colosseum was built to display them. It's a sign of deep and visceral progress that we shudder at the thought of offering live torture to children as a treat.

That some forms of torture persist in places like prisons, where they're largely hidden, is a scandal that must be addressed, along with the scandal that so many innocent people, in the U.S. as in China, are incarcerated at all. But those scandals could not even be addressed were we still in a world where leftists like Diderot and Voltaire were on the fence about whether torture should be abolished at all. (Please don't suggest that this means they weren't really leftist. People can't be situated politically without reference to their place in time.) As for Foucault's charge that the aim of penal reforms was not to punish less but punish better: is there really any doubt about which form of punishment Damiens would have chosen?

The fact that racism persists into the twenty-first century is a disgrace that few who witnessed the Civil Rights Movement half a century ago would have imagined. What we also didn't imagine: a black family gracing the White House for eight years in our lifetime. There hadn't yet been a black cabinet member. Those who hoped that racism would retreat with the election of Barack Obama underestimated the depth of racism. Bernard Lafayette, a colleague of Dr. King's during the Civil Rights Movement, called Obama's presidency the second Reconstruction, so he was not surprised when it was followed by a second reaction in the person of Donald Trump.¹⁶ Progress creates resistance in the form of backlash. As devastating, and often deadly, as

the backlash to Reconstruction was, the Civil Rights Movement that eventually overturned it did not have to start by abolishing slavery. However appalling lynching and convict leasing were, there was no prospect of ending either as long as men and women could be bought and sold at auction. And, while many forms of racism remain to be dismantled today, we do not have to start by ending laws that kept black and white people from eating at the same lunch counters. Banal truths can be important as complex ones.

When I was a child, black and white children were not only forbidden to attend the same schools; we could not swim in the same lakes. When I was just a bit older, I hung a photo of Sidney Poitier in my bedroom. At the time I was a member of a theater group; the photo, however, was less a statement about my professional aspirations than my political sentiments, a radical one in that time (1968) and place (Atlanta, Georgia). Many years later I stepped into my son's room and had a minor epiphany about progress: every poster he'd plastered on the walls showed photos of black men, but he wasn't making any statement at all. He just liked basketball.

What I want to underline is not only the fact of progress, but of visceral progress. The progress in undermining racism involved changes that may have begun with intellectual insight, cemented by law, but they pervade emotional perception: how white and black bodies interact with each other, from swimming pools to childhood idols to the interracial marriages which were illegal in many parts of America at the time when Obama's parents contracted one. A generation raised on "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air" has no memory of a world in which "Leave it to Beaver" provided the major model of an American family. The superstardom of Beyoncé has eclipsed the sense of triumph when the Supremes became nationally successful; Motown was considered "race music" to be played on black stations. Seek your own cultural examples. Here I won't address the disparity between cultural and political power; life for Will Smith or Beyoncé is nothing like the lives of black teenagers in South Los Angeles. But to suggest that racism has hardly changed in a century dishonors the memory of those who struggled to change it.

As the right responds to the power of black culture, a similar reaction to women's achievements is also underway. The recent American restrictions on abortion are only the most blatant examples. Had I somehow failed to notice the persistence of the patriarchy, my daughters would regularly remind me. But the many ways in which sexism persists – and in parts of the world they are lethal – don't diminish the ways women's lives have been transformed in a generation. You need not look to Afghanistan to remind yourself of the difference. Most any mainstream film made a few decades ago contains enough sexist scenes to make you cringe. Sexual harassment was once so pervasive a part of the world that we didn't have a name for it. Women of my generation viewed it like the weather: we hoped for supervisors who didn't sexualize us as we hoped for sunny days, but were resigned to the squalls we could not prevent. Sexual harassment hasn't disappeared, of course, and the continuing presence of sexism in the workplace is well documented. I encounter it in softer forms in the refined realms of science and culture. Still behavior that once raised no eyebrows is increasingly condemned, and often actionable.

Women have always worked, more often in low-wage positions than in leading professions. But the number of women in positions of authority is incomparably greater than it was a generation ago and, while the wage gap still exists, it has lessened dramatically. Only a generation has passed since women who combined serious careers with families were a rarity, and men who supported them derided as wimps. These changes, like the others, were not just changes of mind. They touch our deepest private spheres, altering our most intimate assumptions about the ways men and women structure their relations. What changed in all these cases was not a particular piece of knowledge, but whole frameworks that embedded our lives. These are too deep to be overthrown in a generation, but it's hard to go further in challenging those frameworks without knowing how far we have come.

Here's another kind of progress that's been widely forgotten. During America's war on Vietnam it was common knowledge that the easiest way to avoid the draft was to pretend to be gay. This was no secret, for not until Obama's presidency could gays and lesbians openly serve in the military. I knew men against the war who moved to Canada, served

jailtime, or even went to Vietnam. Not one was willing to feign being gay, even for the few minutes it took to face a draft board. All you had to do was walk in with a caricature of a gesture, avowing you couldn't wait to serve alongside those good-looking cadets, and you had a lifetime deferment. Though jokes about it were made during many a smoke-filled evening, no one wanted to face an inevitable rumor that the gay pose wasn't merely pretence. Today same-sex weddings are celebrated in conservative countries like Spain, Ireland, and the USA. Do vestiges of homophobia continue? How could they not? They've been alive for centuries. But there is a vast distance between the demands at Stonewall and a culture where no one blinks on hearing the phrase "his husband." Like other forms of diversity, the acceptance of same-sex relationships has a darker side, allowing corporations to advertise LGBT-friendly workplaces as a form of public relations while promoting the neoliberal policies that drive economic inequality. Nevertheless, equal rights for gays and lesbians is a major step forward that was unthinkable a generation ago.

A final instance of progress is even newer – so new, indeed, that it's stumbling like a toddler. Consider historical reckoning. Writing national histories and, even more, teaching them, was always central to constructing national identity. The recipe used to be simple: pick the pieces of the past you are proud of, tie them together into a narrative of progress, and view anything that doesn't belong to it as an unfortunate but minor detour. Students finish school with the feeling of belonging to the exceptional American project, or the glorious British nation, or the grand republic of France, or the eternal Russian motherland. Where history left wounds that cannot be ignored, the heroic narrative is exchanged for a narrative of victimhood. (Poles and Israelis excel at combining them.) National narratives oscillate: most countries seek heroic moments to magnify, though some will dwell on their losses. Till the late twentieth century, the one thing no national narrative emphasized was a nation's history of crime. Who could make an identity out of that?

The Germans. Starting several decades after World War II, West German activists, intellectuals, artists and church groups began to demand that Germany recognize its role as perpetrator of Nazi crimes.

Outside Germany, the demand may look as superfluous as an insistence on recognizing that water is wet, but in the first decades after the war, most inside West Germany sounded like devotees of the Confederate Lost Cause. Few foreigners know how fondly they nursed a litany of grievance and suffering. Carl Schmitt was one of the few who said it openly, but he spoke for most of the Federal Republic: Germany was the very worst victim of the war. It took forty years for a West German president to declare that while Germans had suffered during and after the war, other peoples had suffered more, and their suffering was Germany's fault. (East Germany's self-image was very different.)¹⁷ In the decades that followed, the idea that Nazi crimes are fundamental to German identity has solidified. Some Germans even refer to their country as "the perpetrator-nation."

No country before ever changed its self-image from hero to victim to perpetrator. Some will say no other country needed to do so: Nazi Germany's crimes were worse than any in human history. There is no scale that allows us to weigh and compare evils. But even those who argue that the Holocaust stands alone in atrocity now admit that the plunder and murder of slavery and colonialism were evils as well.

In 2019 I published *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil*. It argued that other nations could learn from German efforts to face up to the history no native wants to see. Nothing about the German historical reckoning was exemplary except the fact that no other country had ever done it: it was incomplete and imperfect, and only time will tell if the mistakes it made along the way can be corrected. It nevertheless opened a direction toward truth. It also showed that telling the truth about a nation's foul history need not lead to national disintegration.

When that book was published, the monument to Robert E. Lee still stood in Charlottesville, and the Confederate flag was emblazoned on the state flag of Mississippi. On two different British television programs, interviewers asked what the devil this had to do with Britain: after all, "the Germans wanted world domination." I had just time to remind them that the sun never set on the British empire before the next guest came on set. Disconsolate readers who approved the message asked if America or Britain had the conditions for historical

reckoning that had been present in Germany, a nation occupied by armies that defeated it. The last time any part of the U.S. was occupied by victorious armies was when Federal troops ended Reconstruction by leaving the South in 1877; the last time England was occupied was 1066.

This objection supposes that German historical reckoning was forced, or at least facilitated, by the occupying armies. It was not. Germans viewed Allied denazification programs with contemptuous humor, part of a package of what they called victors' justice. No less savvy political observers than Albert Einstein and Hannah Arendt had no hope that Germany would ever acknowledge its guilt. Knowing how hard it was to win that acknowledgment, I hoped that America, perhaps even Britain, might be willing to face the parts of their pasts they would rather forget. Eventually. I hardly expected the tidal wave of reckoning that Black Lives Matter jump-started in the wake of George Floyd's murder in 2020.

I welcomed that wave, and still believe it's a sign of progress. Repression of national trauma is like a repression of any other trauma: it allows deep wounds to fester till they infect the rest of the body, or the body politic, contaminating the present with unexamined pasts. The fact that America is confronting slavery, and Britain colonialism, is a step forward toward healthier nations. Fierce backlash to those attempts should not surprise us. Fifty years after World War II, German efforts to reckon with Wehrmacht crimes were met with violent resistance, including mass demonstrations and firebombings.¹⁸

For like other forms of progress, historical reckoning doesn't proceed in straight lines. In addition to right-wing backlash, the past few years have seen some reckoning gone awry. Former British Museum director Neil MacGregor wrote that "The British use their history to comfort themselves. The Germans use their history to think about the future."¹⁹ It's a fine form of praise but, as German reckoning becomes ossified, it's increasingly less true. An excess of focus on the past can make it difficult to see the present, much less the future. In Germany's case, fixture on one piece of the past, German antisemitism, has become so zealous that it blocks the view of the present. In particular, it diverts

attention from racism toward other minorities, particularly Muslims, though some of that racism has been lethal.

There are signs that American focus on its historical crimes is moving in similar directions. By focusing too much on one sort of crime we risk losing sight of others. America is in the middle of a racial reckoning, but there's been little in the way of a broader political reckoning. One black artist I met on a panel discussion said it had never occurred to him that people could be persecuted for their politics. Many who can reel off sites of once-forgotten racial crimes have no idea how deeply most American historical narratives suppressed the memory of the political terror which, from 1946 to 1959 and beyond, destroyed a vibrant, interracial, socialist movement in the name of anticommunism.²⁰ W.E.B. Dubois is remembered as the great black intellectual he was; but, as in the case of his friend Albert Einstein, the great socialist intellectual has been quietly quarantined. Those who have internalized the view that communism and fascism are identical cannot countenance the thought of tarnishing their heroes. Yet we cannot understand America or Britain's place in the world, or their possibilities for the future, until we examine not just our racial but our political histories.

In addition to warning that racial reckoning is not all there is to historical reckoning, I'm concerned about the ways in which history has become treated solely as the history of crimes and misfortunes. The burgeoning academic discipline called "Memory Studies" is almost entirely dedicated to bad memories. While we earlier neglected to honor history's victims, we are now in danger of forgetting her heroes. Yet nations need heroes. This is the only truth embedded in the ferocious backlash that has led American school boards to claim that national unity will be threatened if students read Martin Luther King or Toni Morrison.

Now every American should be proud to belong to a nation that brought forth King and Morrison, so they surely belong in any heroic pantheon. It's the general point that's important: no nation can thrive on a diet of bad memories. Most nations are born in blood, and do what they can to cover their tracks. It's hard to find one that never went sour, and violent, in the search for treasure and glory. Yet in every nation, brave people stood up against injustice, often at great cost. The U.S. is

only exceptional because it was born in blood and paradox. Unlike nations founded when one tribe stopped wandering and decided to settle on some piece of ground, the U.S. came to life in a fanfare of ideals it betrayed in the moment of its founding. But if American history is rooted in conquest and bondage, it's also rooted in resistance to conquest and bondage. That resistance should never be forgotten. Heroes remind us that the ideals we cherish were actually lived by brave human beings. By showing us justice embodied, they show us that ideals of justice are not empty phrases, and inspire us to act on them ourselves. For the history wars are not about heritage but about values. They are not arguments about who we were but who we want to be. Current debates over monuments focus attention on the question of whose statue should fall, but we need to think about the question of who should replace them.

Those debates should continue with nuance and care. I welcomed the demise of monuments to Confederate generals and the generic Johnny Rebs which adorn the central squares of Southern towns. I shuddered as some called for the demise of monuments to Abraham Lincoln. Unlike those who were calling, Lincoln gave his *life* to defend African American civil rights. (Like most Southerners, John Wilkes Booth hated Lincoln, but it was Lincoln's support for black voting rights that led him to murder.) Was Lincoln antiracist in our sense? How could he have been? Like all of us, it took time for him to free himself from the prejudice into which he was born. Were we less suspicious of progress, we could celebrate the fact that we've come further than Lincoln, while being grateful that he made such a start.

While researching *Learning from the Germans* I spent half a year in the Deep South studying early attempts at American racial reckoning. I was privileged to interview Bryan Stevenson, who was then in the process of completing the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Alabama, informally known as the Lynching Memorial. One of his thoughts struck me hardest:

There were white Southerners who argued in the 1850s that slavery was wrong. There were white Southerners in the 1920s who tried to stop lynchings, and you don't know their names. The fact that we don't know their names says everything we need to know.²¹

If those names were known and commemorated, he continued, the country could turn from shame to pride.

We can actually claim a heritage rooted in courage, and defiance of doing what is easy, and preferring what is right. We can make that the norm we want to celebrate as our Southern history and heritage and culture. (ibid.)

Heroes close the gap between what ought to be and what is. They show that it's not only possible to use our freedom to stand against injustice, but that some people actually did so.

Along with celebrating those heroes we should be wary of claims that racism is part of American's DNA. It is surely a larger part of American history than many once acknowledged, but the biological metaphor has consequences. Something that's part of your DNA is something you were born with, like the color of your eyes or the size of your nose. How could you help being racist if it's in your DNA? The metaphor recalls Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, a best-selling book that tried to explain the Holocaust by claiming that German culture was always antisemitic. In the 1990s, the book was successful in Germany, largely because it served as a form of exoneration. If Germans had always been antisemitic, how could any individual German be accountable for it? Racists are not born, they are nurtured, as Touré Reed has argued. When well-meaning liberals claim that racism is not a historically contingent fact but an inborn flaw, they can shift the blame to individuals – usually poor white “deplorables” – rather than political systems.²²

You need not study philosophical debates about the relations between theory and practice to know at least this: what you think is possible determines the framework in which you act. If you think it's impossible to distinguish truth from narrative, you won't bother to try. If you think it's impossible to act on anything other than self-interest, whether

genetic, individual or tribal, you'll have no qualms about doing the same.

There are many things philosophy is good for; one is uncovering the assumptions behind your most cherished views and expanding your sense of possibility. "Be realistic" sounds like common sense, but hidden behind it is a metaphysics that underlies many a political position, a whole set of assumptions about what's real and what's not, what's doable and what's imaginable. You can translate the advice to be realistic quite simply: lower your expectations. When you take such advice, what assumptions are you making about reality?

For millions of people, reality changed the moment chattel slavery was abolished, women allowed to vote, gay couples accorded the rights of other citizens. If you want a glimpse of reality in places where those changes are yet to come, take a look at chattel slavery in Mauritania or India, the rights of women in Saudi Arabia or Afghanistan, the criminalizing of same-sex relations in Iran or Uganda. Ideas overturned reality for people of color, women, and members of LGBTQ communities lucky enough to live in lands where other ideas resound.

I have argued that the ideas that created those new realities were born in the Enlightenment. The world changes whenever certain ideas are established as norms. To deny the reality of progress is to deny reality – as foolish when thinking of progress as when we think of the ways we reject it. For anyone who suspects I am blind to the latter: I've written more than one book about evil. There are days when I struggle with despair.

Perhaps the problem with recognizing progress lies in the concept of progress itself. By definition, progress is not whatever we have now. It isn't something that has already been attained, but something that should be attained in the future – preferably tomorrow morning. It's hard to acknowledge the previous generation's achievements as progress, precisely because the previous generation strove to make those achievements look as normal as they always should have been. A generation that grew up without racial segregation will hardly be inclined to find its absence an achievement. They're more likely to be astonished that it ever existed. And this was the goal of those who

fought to overturn it: that their children should find the idea of segregation so barbaric and ludicrous that they wonder how anyone ever accepted it. Abolishing it now seems as trivial as drawing and quartering. Can't we focus on today's problems?

For the next generation, progress must mean going further to extinguish subtler forms of injustice. That's how progress works, and anger over the slow speed of progress is probably necessary to keep us fighting for it. Looking down occasionally at the shoulders we stand on is a way of gathering strength, for if we fail to acknowledge that real progress has been made in the past, we will never sustain the hope of making more in the future. But knowing how far we remain from a just society, the progress attained in the past will never be enough to sustain us. There are, however, many people struggling for justice today who receive far less attention than the latest authoritarian demagogues. Remembering women in Iran, landless workers in Brazil, democracy activists in Congo or Myanmar, all grappling with conditions few of us can imagine, is one source of sustenance. "They don't give up hope," says Noam Chomsky, "So we certainly can't."²³

In an insightful passage, Mary Midgley wrote: "Moral changes are, perhaps above all, changes in the kind of thing people are ashamed of."²⁴ She was writing of moral changes for the better, otherwise known as progress. The simplest examples are easy to find: whatever they may say in private, few are willing to make the racist and sexist excuses for jokes in public that drew laughs until recently. The internet can serve as a cesspool only because it permits anonymous attacks. Shame has its uses: if you'd be ashamed to say in person what you've said behind your Twitter handle, so much the better for hypocrisy.

But if shame can prevent our worst impulses, embarrassment can stifle our better ones. There's more than one reason why, given two unprovable explanations of human behavior and possibility, contemporary thinkers are inclined to assume "we are a bad lot," as Steven Pinker cheerfully put it. I've surveyed several views that contribute to contemporary enthusiasm for doctrines of original sin, but I want to close with one reason that's received little attention. I suspect that our fear of emphasizing the good news stems from a

primitive fear: of being mocked as naive. Economist Robert Frank described this trend throughout the behavioral sciences:

The flint-eyed researcher fears no greater humiliation than to have called some action altruistic, only to have a more sophisticated colleague later demonstrate that it was self-serving. This fear surely helps account for the extraordinary volume of ink behavioral scientists have spent trying to unearth selfish motives for seemingly self-sacrificing acts.

But the fear of embarrassment should itself be embarrassing, the sort of thing that haunted your adolescence but ought to be left behind. How often do we behave like the emperor's subjects, too spineless to point out his naked frame?

Notes

- [1.](#) Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Oxford: Harcourt, 1970), p. 82.
- [2.](#) Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in P. Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984).
- [3.](#) Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," op cit., p. 151.
- [4.](#) Jean Améry, *Werke VI*, p. 214.
- [5.](#) Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 2020).
- [6.](#) Jean Améry, "Michel Foucault's Vision des Kerker-Universums" in *Merkur* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta), April 1977.
- [7.](#) Michael C. Behrent, *Liberalism without Humanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- [8.](#) Quoted in Raymond Tallis, *Enemies of Hope: A Critique of Contemporary Pessimism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. 67.
- [9.](#) Michel Foucault, *Language, Countermemory and Practice*, op. cit., p. 227.

- [10.](#) In Neiman, *Moral Clarity* and Neiman, *Heroism in an Age of Victims*.
- [11.](#) Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or: On Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).
- [12.](#) Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality* in Gourevitch, ed., op. cit.
- [13.](#) Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- [14.](#) C.S. Lewis, "Introduction" in Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Kentucky: GLH Publishing, 2018).
- [15.](#) Philip Kitcher, *Moral Progress* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).
- [16.](#) Neiman, *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).
- [17.](#) Neiman, *ibid.*, ch. 2.
- [18.](#) See Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung (HG), *Eine Ausstellung und Ihre Folgen* (Hamburger Edition, 1999).
- [19.](#) Neil MacGregor, *Guardian*.
- [20.](#) For a recent exception see Reed, op. cit.
- [21.](#) Bryan Stevenson, interview in Neiman, *Learning from the Germans*, op. cit., ch. 8.
- [22.](#) Touré, op. cit.
- [23.](#) Noam Chomsky, interview with David Barsamian, in *The Nation*, October 11, 2022.
- [24.](#) Midgley, op. cit., p. 170.