

The Mythology of Progress, Anti-Progress and a Mythology for the 21st Century

By Charles Hugh Smith

“Neither revolution nor reformation can ultimately change a society, rather you must tell a new powerful tale, one so persuasive that it sweeps away the old myths and becomes the preferred story, one so inclusive that it gathers all the bits of our past and our present into a coherent whole, one that even shines some light into the future so that we can take the next step. If you want to change a society, then you have to tell an alternative story.” Ivan Illich

Introduction

I approach Progress as an observer, and that’s problematic.

Why? It’s human nature to consider ourselves objective, but we harbor beliefs about the world that generate strong emotions when they’re challenged.

These emotions make it difficult to be objective. It’s human nature to prefer simplicity to complexity, confidence to uncertainty, clarity to ambiguity, optimism to pessimism, and hope to doubt, and so modifying our beliefs is difficult. We take any critique of our beliefs personally, as if the challenge is directed at us rather than to a specific claim about how the world works.

Approaching Progress as an observer is problematic for three reasons: one, the observer must be alert to their own emotions and seek to filter them out, and two, those whose beliefs are being challenged may lash out, creating a powerful temptation to respond in kind.

The cliché is that politics and religion are topics to avoid for these reasons. (Perhaps we should add money to the list.) The third reason Progress is problematic is that it’s a uniquely emotionally laden subject, for it is the bedrock of modernity: *Progress is humanity’s destiny*.

Progress lights up profound emotions because it gives us confidence that the future will be better than the present, hope that difficulties will be overcome and an optimistic trajectory of human history.

Given the power of these beliefs, it’s no wonder that questioning Progress ignites a firestorm.

The ferocity of the firestorm is illustrated by the reaction of the highly educated audience at Stanford University when author Jerry Mander questioned technology as the innately-positive driver of Progress, a fury described by his widow Koohan Paik-Mander in Mander’s 2023 obituary:

“Mander’s scorn for technology was a lone voice during the heady genesis of the Bay Area tech industry. He maintained that the deceptive term ‘communications technology’ was not at all about accommodating communications, but rather, about centralizing control. He was viewed at the time as nothing less than heretical.

Jerry’s pariah status was summed up perfectly at a lecture he gave in 1995, hosted by Stanford University. After having warned the packed auditorium that a culture based on computers would kill

both the Earth and democracy, the audience became outraged. To utter such words was tantamount to telling them there was no God.

After Jerry's lecture, the room of computer-science nerds quickly jostled into a queue to roundly insult him for close to an hour. One after the other, they seemed to burst at the seams in rage, fists in the air, spraying epithets at him like buckshot: 'You're a dinosaur!' 'You'll be left in the dust!' 'Go back under your rock, old man!' while Jerry, bemused, bespectacled and definitely blindsided by the onslaught, sat on stage with his arms clutched protectively around himself like a straitjacket."

This is an extraordinary example of the intensity of emotions aroused by skepticism of Progress and its primary engine, technology. The well-educated audience, steeped in the principles of scientific objectivity, immediately jettisoned their rationality in favor of much baser emotions, of the sort that had once led to burning heretics at the stake.

These emotions are an obstacle to skeptical inquiry of the sort that science welcomes, at least in principle. Skeptics face an unappetizing choice: burned at the stake, or fleeing for one's life one step ahead of an incensed mob.

I am predisposed to skepticism on two counts. Majoring in Philosophy at university taught me to examine the assumptions underlying any claim about the nature of reality, and my experience as a builder taught me to brush aside vague assurances and ask: yes, but *exactly how does this work?* Under what conditions does it fail? What are the consequences of its failure? Generalities are not substitutes for the mechanisms of cause and effect we need to understand a system well enough to repair it.

Given the example of the emotions generated when Progress is questioned (I capitalize *Progress* to identify it as *Technology-Driven Progress*), it will come as no surprise that my observations fall straight into the heresy bucket.

My observation is that Progress is viewed as a *Force of Nature*, an unstoppable expansion driven by inherently positive technology. Progress is limitless because ingenuity, growth and technology are limitless.

We come now to the *burned at the stake or flee for your life* moment, for it turns out that Progress isn't a *Force of Nature*; it is a modern *mythology*, a radically simplified story of how the world works that doesn't actually map the real world.

We may think that mythologies are templates like the *Hero-Heroine's Journey* or supernatural tales of gods, but as we'll see in Chapter Four, mythologies are fundamentally *stories*—*narratives* in today's lexicon—that explain the world in simple, emotionally appealing ways. Progress is the penultimate mythology of the modern era.

Though we see mythology as the dusty remnants of a bygone era of ignorance, we've created a secular mythology that we don't even recognize, a *Progress* mythology of beliefs that are not science, though we cloak them in the raiment of science.

We haven't abandoned mythology, we've simply created a modern mythology of eternal growth and technological advance.

In effect, *Technology-Driven Progress* fills the vacuum left by older mythologies with a rapturous story of limitless growth driven by wondrous technologies

This mythology of eternal growth and the inherent goodness of technology arose in a specific era, the 19th century, in a particular socio-economic setting, and it served us well as the foundation of global industrialization. But now that the footprint of our technology is global, this *mythology of Progress* has not just ceased to serve us well, it has disrupted natural systems we depend on but do not fully understand.

Once we tease Progress apart, we find that in many cases that what's presented as an advance is actually *Anti-Progress*, the opposite of actual progress. As a result, this modern mythology has failed us on both the human and planetary scale.

This is the *Paradox of Progress*: now that we've reached so many milestones of Progress—technological wonders and material abundance-- we find the opposite of what we expected: *Anti-Progress*.

Why does this story of limitless growth generate *Anti-Progress* rather than actual progress? Four dynamics drive the paradox: 1) we seek to maximize gains today by shifting costs and consequences to the planet's biosphere (humanity's *Commons*) or the future: for example, highly processed foods (HPFs) generate profits today, while the diseases generated by consuming HPFs manifest years or decades later; 2) The optimal profit-maximizing organization is a monopoly or cartel which eliminates competition and transparency, leaving no alternative to *Anti-Progress*; 3) growth is presented as the solution to all problems even as it expands *Anti-Progress*, and 4) To optimize private gains, profitable *Anti-Progress* is presented as *Progress*.

This disconnect between the Progress mythology's story and the real world cripples our ability to make informed decisions, as it opens an unbridgeable gap between what we experience—*Anti-Progress*--and what we're told is both magical and real: Progress.

Highly Processed Foods are *Progress* until 74% of adult Americans are overweight or obese and at risk of metabolic disorders.

As global plastic production rose from 2 million tons a year to 450 million tons annually today, *plastic is Progress* until there's a floating mass of waste plastic in the Pacific Ocean the size of Texas: *the Great Pacific Garbage Gyre*, a topic we'll address later.

Under what bewitchment do we declare *the Great Pacific Garbage Gyre* Progress?

Our defensive response when presented with *Anti-Progress* reflects our profound attachment to the enchantments of the *Progress* mythology. Perhaps we fear what might happen should Progress be revealed as a *belief structure* rather than the unbreakable arc of history, for what is the foundation of our hope and confidence in a better future without the unstoppable advance of technological Progress?

As Koohan Paik-Mander noted, to say that Progress is a mythology is tantamount to saying the gods of technology are dead. And so bristling with indignation, we respond with rationalizations for the

collateral damage of Progress and denounce anyone questioning our faith that technology will solve every problem if we just unleash our ingenuity and give it our all: a new Steve Jobs will emerge to solve every manifestation of *Anti-Progress* with a new technology—just wait and see!

The over-reaction of the technologist audience to Mander's critique reflects a profound insecurity about both the immutability of Progress and their role as beneficiaries of Progress; those secure in their faith would have brushed aside the criticism.

This unease has another source. Every civilization is a dynamic mix of 1) imaginary constructs of beliefs and values; 2) socio-economic systems and institutions, and 3) technology. Like all of life, human civilization must adapt to changing conditions or face extinction. Humans adapt by learning. Change can occur in any of the three realms, or none of the three. If the civilization is incapable of learning and adapting, it will be swept into the dustbin of history.

The mythology of Progress implicitly promises us that the unstoppable advance of technology will provide all the learning and adaption our civilization needs to thrive. Our belief structure—our mythology of Progress—and our institutions do not need to change.

But this reliance on technology has troubling consequences. Our belief structures and systems have remained unchanged and are now maladaptive. Technology is generating *Anti-Progress*, consequences that are beyond our understanding or control.

Technological change isn't enough. Our beliefs and values, encapsulated in the mythology of Progress, also have to adapt, as do our systems and institutions. Our civilization has to learn and adapt in all three realms to thrive, not just in the narrow mechanical world of technology. For technology lacks the moral compass and wisdom all civilizations need to avoid foundering on greed and hubris. Our technological hubris has raised Nemesis, *Anti-Progress*.

We're blind to the resulting narrowness of our imagination. We think only of technological solutions, and when these don't actually address the problem, we think only of adding more technology: the solution is always a new technique, app or gadget.

That these may be fanciful or impractical is ignored, for the mythology holds that there are no limits on technology if we just go full speed ahead.

Faced with *Anti-Progress*, we respond by clinging even tighter to an imaginary belief construct that we claim is fact: technology can fix everything.

There is something deeply human in our childlike desire to believe in something that guarantees a better future, and this renders us vulnerable to self-serving manipulation.

Those benefiting from this mythology promote it as Progress even as it delivers the opposite of progress because *Anti-Progress* is extremely profitable, a dynamic we'll discuss in *The Carrot and the Snack*.

The problem is that our mythology of Progress disconnects our pursuit of limitless growth from the consequences of our pursuit. Progress generates *Anti-Progress* because the mythology only has eyes for benefits in the present and ignores future consequences.

Just as we're blind to the narrowness of our imagination, we're blind to our own blindness: that we think an imaginary belief structure is fact is not just extraordinary, it's extraordinarily maladaptive.

Placing our faith in a story about how the world works that ignores consequences is an extraordinarily poor evolutionary strategy, for the real world does not respond to stories, it responds to our actions.

The exponential expansion of *Anti-Progress* is evidence that the story of limitless technological Progress is an evolutionary dead end. Rather than accept that our story is maladaptive, we double-down on our childlike faith in the god-like powers of technology, a recipe for accelerating *Anti-Progress* to the point of evolutionary failure.

Anti-Progress hurts our pride, for we consider it self-evident that Progress is limitless and so we have no need for mythology. Or so we imagine.

But the need for the simplicity and clarity of mythological narratives remains embedded within us, and we would be wise to recognize the need for a new mythology of progress. We cannot dispense with mythology, but we can substitute a new mythology better suited to the realities of the 21st century.

The goal of this book is to outline a new mythology of progress that advances human well-being and global sustainability by reconnecting our actions to their consequences. Rather than cling to the belief that growth and technology will magically solve all our problems, we will be better served by advancing well-being without regard for growth or technology; in many cases, consuming less will advance well-being—*true progress*—far more effectively than obsessively seeking to consume more.

To save the world, we need a mythology that redefines progress to drive learning and adaptation beyond the narrow realm of technology. Without a substitute mythology, we will cling to our 19th century mythology of limitless consumption even as it pulls us over the event horizon into the black hole of *Anti-Progress* oblivion.

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