

Progressive Change
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Progressive theories of social change (such as those of Auguste Comte and Ferdinand Toennies) are almost comforting in their descriptions of the development of civilisation towards ever more advanced states. Progress is seen as inevitable; humans cannot help but move gradually from a traditional society in which families tend their own fields and are in awe of religion, to a rational and capitalist world of cities and technology in which individuals are part of a larger production system.

This is not to say the ultimate condition is wholly desirable. For example, while Toennies' *Gesellschaft* is an economically efficient world, it is at the expense of family life. The wisdom of science over religion is enlightened, but it relies on learning which is not available to all. Individuals are free from the restrictions of tradition, but they must abide by the laws of the state. However, with this situation mirroring that of developed countries since the Industrial Revolution, I feel most people would see what is usually the final stage of the progression as both preferable and inevitable. Despite its romantic attractions, few would be willing to give up the benefits of modern life for a return to the Dark Ages, and the development of the western world can easily be seen as a series of logical steps down a path to civilisation. This reliance on our past experience of change is, however, part of the fault with progressive theories for two possible reasons.

Firstly, no matter how far we cast our net looking for histories of social change around the world, will we really have found all possibilities? Are there no other paths humans could have taken apart from that leading to a generically western world view? This thinking is similar to that of anyone who sees evolution as a path leading inevitably to the existence of humans. Relying on past experience to describe a generic phenomenon does not encourage an expansive point of view. Describing the evolutionary path from single cells to human beings as the only path living creatures could take seems ridiculous given the incomprehensibly vast possibilities. However, there may be characteristics which, if not inevitable, are far more likely to occur than pure chance would suggest. For example, almost all creatures are symmetrical, have two eyes, one brain, a mouth at the front of their body. In a similar manner, perhaps there are general features of the societal evolution which are, if not inevitable, much more likely to occur than chance would suggest. In *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, Daniel C. Dennett points out that science and art differ greatly; if Newton hadn't existed to write his *Principia*, someone else would have come to the same conclusions about gravity, whereas if Shakespeare had never lived no one else would have written his plays; "the difference is the difference between discovery and creation." If scientific discoveries, major drivers of social change, are virtually inevitable (a case of "when" rather than "if"), perhaps progressive theories *are* more useful as generic descriptions than their reliance on our past might suggest. This is not to say that the current state of any society is inevitable (just as the evolution of *homo sapiens* is not a forgone conclusion), but there may indeed be broad aspects, particularly those reliant in some way on technological development, which would have occurred sooner or later.

However, progressive theories of change cannot escape so easily from the second possible criticism. The reliance on human experience encourages us to think we are at the end of change, that western societies have reached the end of the path in societal progression. Again, this is similar to viewing evolution as leading ultimately to humans, the error being to assume there is no more change after us. Of course, evolution will continue as long as there are living beings, just as societies will continue to change. We haven't reached the path's destination because there is no destination. For this reason, such descriptions of social

change are like trying to extrapolate a curve on a graph while only looking at a tiny section of it. We can attempt to describe how we got here, but assuming this is the whole picture will lead us to make incorrect assumptions about the future.

These theories are certainly not to be wholly discounted, but in their attempt to describe all of society (and all of societies) with a single progression they overstep themselves. It's certainly possible to look at a single culture and describe it in terms that make progressive theories seem logical, but when that is stretched to cover every culture which exists, and that *could* exist, the idea breaks down. There are certainly elements, such as technology, which depend on the progression of ideas and which we could say have some inevitability to their discovery, but applying this concept to every facet of human culture is making society appear more logical than it really is.

ⁱ Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, Simon & Schuster, 1995, p140.