

The Opium of Progress

“An Illusion with a Future” by John Gray, in *Daedalus* (Summer 2004), Norton’s Woods, 136 Irving St., Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

Nothing in the modern outlook seems more indispensable than the idea of progress. Without faith in the advance of humankind, how could we go on? Yet humans long did go on without faith in progress, observes Gray, a professor of European thought at the London School of Economics. “The idea is found in none of the world’s religions and was unknown among the ancient philosophers.” For Aristotle, and for early modern thinkers such as Machiavelli, and even for some Enlightenment philosophers such as David Hume, history is a cycle of growth and decline, a story of recurrent gain and loss, not of continual progress. And those thinkers were right, Gray asserts. “Progress is an illusion—a view of human life and history that answers to the needs of the heart, not reason.”

Whence came this cherished illusion? It “is the offspring of a marriage between seeming rivals—the lingering influence of Christian faith and the growing power of science—in early-19th-century Europe. From the eschatological hopes of Christianity we inherit the belief that meaning and even salvation can be found in the flux of history. From the accelerating advance of scientific knowledge we acquire the belief in a similar advance by humanity itself.”

But in reality, the expansion of knowledge increases only human power, Gray argues. Human needs remain much the same. And as humans use their growing knowledge to satisfy their often-conflicting needs, “they remain as prone to frailty and folly as they have ever been.” This human imperfectibility is expressed in the Christian doctrine of original sin

and the biblical myth of the Fall, as well as in the Hindu and Buddhist assertions of ingrained human delusion.

In contrast, says Gray, is the secular humanist belief that more knowledge somehow makes humans more rational. “From Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill to John Dewey and Bertrand Russell, it has been believed that progress in science would be matched by progress in society.” The mass murders in which the 20th century so outdid all its predecessors give the lie to that belief, as do the most dangerous threats today, Gray argues. “The spread of weapons of mass destruction is a response to intractable political conflicts; but it is also a byproduct of the diffusion of scientific knowledge.”

Yet the illusion of progress “has sometimes been a benign one,” Gray acknowledges. “Would we have seen the abolition of slavery, or the prohibition of torture, without the hope of a better future?” Even so, he believes that the good this faith has done is outweighed by the harm. “Far more than the religions of the past, it clouds our perception of the human condition.” Without it, the world would still have had ethnic and religious conflict in the 20th century, but not mass murder “with the aim of perfecting humanity.”

In time, the religion of progress may disappear, says Gray, but he does not expect modern men and women to willingly give up the faith. “The illusion that through science humans can remake the world is an integral part of the modern condition. Renewing the eschatological hopes of the past, progress is an illusion with a future.”

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

Changing Times

“Clock Synchrony, Time Distribution and Electrical Timekeeping in Britain, 1880–1925” by Hannah Gay, in *Past & Present* (Nov. 2003), Oxford Univ. Press, Great Clarendon St., Oxford, England OX2 6DP.

Throughout history, humans have displayed a “need for a unified time system and for people to coordinate their activities in line with it.”

But despite advances in timekeeping from natural rhythms, such as those of the sun or tides, to the virtual precision of cesium atomic clocks,