

# Concerning Progress

About ten years ago, when I was first formulating the concept of progressive humanism, I found that while "humanism" had been defined fairly clearly by philosophers like Corliss Lamont, the parallel concept of "progress" lacked any precise definition. It meant a lot of things to a lot of people. Often, when I talked about progress, I was attacked on the basis of a purely semantic misunderstanding. For many people, particularly in the younger generation, the term had come to symbolize a rapacious dedication to profits and production quotas, at the expense of both social justice and environmental concerns.

At that time I wrote an essay on progress that began as follows: "Progress is a many-splendored concept. Its content varies in time and space, and from one individual to another. But it is always--by definition-- a directional concept, or should be. Progress is always upward and forward, looking to the future. It implies change for the better. What is better? That is where we can and should begin to disagree."

The rest of the essay tried to define the term but didn't do a very good job. It's time to try again.

Progress occurs when either people or groups respond successfully to a perceived need for change.

There are so many things about our lives that need changing! Who can honestly claim that everything is as it should be, and is completely content? Every individual faces a bewildering array of situations or conditions or relationships that would be better if they could only be improved. This is even more true when you look at relationships involving groups of people. We yearn for simplicity and serenity, but seldom find it. Every solution breeds more

problems; the more rapidly and successfully we resolve them, the more new ones jump up to replace them.

For purposes of illustration, here's a short list of the kinds of situations I'm talking about, ranging from individuals and families to increasingly large groups.

- For individuals and families: growing up; change of job or location; cognitive dissonance; learning; marital and child-rearing problems.

- Within the community: disagreement; rivalry; competition; conflict.

- Within a nation: social justice; managing special interests; immigration.

- Between nations: trade wars; shooting wars; refugees; terrorism; international drug problems.

- Global issues: climate change; deforestation; species extinction; pest infestation; new ways to wage war, new medical discoveries, breakthroughs in transport and communication; genetic engineering.

Each of the above levels has many subsets; I've only suggested a few of them. This problem of defining progress, it seems, involves just about every aspect of the human condition. No wonder it's such a many-splendored concept, and so hard to define precisely! However, it can be said that all the above situations involve some degree of stress or discomfort, and a perception that whatever you or your group was doing before, you need to change your ways in order to function better.

It is also generally true that when more than one individual is involved, alternate ways of achieving progress will be debated. The larger the group and the more complicated the issue, the more protracted and diffuse the debate.

## Levels of Change and the Rules:

The most basic of the above levels are at the personal and family levels. Stresses within the family can be extremely painful, and progress in resolving them may sometimes be impossible or very hard to achieve, but at least people have a huge body of experience in coping with most of the situations that cause the pain and the stress. Incest avoidance, for example, is hard-wired; it goes back to our prehuman ancestors. We now have divorce laws and courts, and similar mechanisms for handling issues like child abuse, adoption, and so forth.

Likewise with community and nation. Within culturally coherent communities, religion and ethical codes mandate that most interpersonal conflicts be handled in specified ways. The actual settlement in a given instance may not please everyone, but it does settle the issue, and that is progress. A similar situation obtains in countries like the USA that embrace various religious and other communities. Here it is the law of the land that settles the issues, according to fairly explicit rules that have been hammered out over the course of time.

The situation is different regarding global issues. Not only are the problems more complicated, and the number of concerned constituencies greater, but the kind of orderly, codified experience that, say, jurists in the USA can draw on when they adjudicate disputes is, for the most part, either in a fragile, embryonic stage, or not yet in place at all. For some activities like fishing on the high seas there are complex rules and widespread willingness to comply, but for many others international jurists are trying to achieve a similar result but are still far from reaching that goal. The United Nations exists and does useful things but no-one would argue that it has yet come even close to providing coherent and enforced guidance on most of the key issues now confronting humanity as a whole.

## Contemporary Global Challenges:

The new global challenges include nuclear war, the environment, population, and distributive justice as between the rich and the poor nations. Humanity as a whole simply has to make substantial progress on all of these fronts, and fairly quickly, or the consequences will engulf us all, to everyone's serious disadvantage if not outright termination.

The first major challenge is to persuade more people to give these global issues the priority they deserve. There are still far too many, including some of the most important leaders in government and industry, who are only concerned with relatively parochial issues. For them, progress consists in winning the next election, or improving the bottom line. As far as global warming or species extinction or the burgeoning global underclass of desperately poor is concerned, well: "That's not my department, said Werner von Braun," ( to quote the immortal sage, Tom Lehrer).

Beyond that immediate challenge, humanity faces the enormously difficult job of thrashing out workable consensus on these issues, that is, generating reasonable and consistent codes of international behavior to deal with them. And then enforcing them. This will be a pretty long and arduous trip--but we can't even get to first base until and unless enough people can be persuaded to get into the fray in the first place.

## Conclusion:

I'm getting impatient with people who tell me progress isn't necessarily a good thing. They're misusing the language and in the process they're walling their thinking off from what all thinking people everywhere should be thinking about--and acting on. There are new fields implicating humanity as a whole in which we need a

lot of progress, and fairly soon. Let's all get in the act and do as much as we can to get policies and projects in place that deal with global issues in a constructive way. That is not only consistent with the true meaning of progress: it is what, in this semi-enlightened era, gives individual human beings meaning, purpose, and direction to an otherwise pointless existence.

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