
REVIEW

A Road to Nowhere: The Idea of Progress and its Critics by Matthew W. Slaboch

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Democracy in America is, Tocqueville informs his readers, “a book [that] is not precisely in anyone’s camp; in writing it, I did not mean to serve or to contest any party” (Tocqueville 2000, p. 15). Something of this independent spirit can be gleaned in Matthew Slaboch’s laudable book, *A Road to Nowhere: The Idea of Progress and its Critics*. An estimable spirit to possess in any age, it is especially so in times that are rent by inimical dogmatisms, such as the present. People across the political spectrum stand to profit from the perusal of this work, as it will impel them to reflect on a topic that these days is afforded far too little reflection: the directionality of history.

The general consensus has been that history flows forward or upward or whatever adverbial qualifier one wishes to apply, so long as it is directional and positive. That consensus has been compromised a bit of late, which seems to be, in part, the impetus for Slaboch’s work. Slaboch adduces data that suggest that people on both sides of the proverbial pond think the adverbial qualifier should be negative, not positive. For example, “a 2016 survey showed that more than 60 percent of citizens in the UK, nearly 70 percent of Germans, more than 80 percent of Spaniards, Italians, and Hungarians, and almost 90 percent of Frenchmen felt that their countries were on the wrong track” (p. 3). Meanwhile, a 2015 Bloomberg poll found that “72 percent of Americans think their country isn’t as great as it once was” (p. 111).

Dismaying though such evidence may be, one should guard against inferring from it that faith in progress has been abandoned. As time has shown, it is a faith of astonishing vitality. Having weathered wars, genocides, pandemics, famines, and countless disasters (of both the natural and manmade varieties), one safely can predict that the present unease will not wind up being the straw that broke the progressive camel’s back. On the face of it, it may seem

preposterous that this faith should have survived the previous century with horrors the likes of which had never been witnessed before—at least in degree, if not in kind. But it survived because humanity survived; and not just survived, but flourished. Population increased; prosperity accrued; technology advanced; comfort(s) spread. In the aggregate, the twenty-first century has not been characterized by a recrudescence of barbarism and societal collapse, but by developments never before seen nor, for that matter, imagined.

This merely raises the question, how does one measure or qualify progress? Oddly, this book on progress does little to answer it. Characterizing the term as “protean,” Slaboch declines to define it (p. 116). To be sure, the meaning of progress is protean, but a term’s proteanism need not preclude its definition. In the absence of one, it is not altogether clear what is being disputed. Nor is it clear how Slaboch can bring together a group of discrete thinkers and label them critics of an idea that brooks no definition, however provisional. What idea? Are they critics of the same idea? Is it even *an* idea? Fortunately, earlier investigators of progress were less averse to defining it; for guidance on this score, one could do worse than turn to Arthur C. Lovejoy and George Boas, as Ludwig Edelstein did at the outset of his classic work, *The Idea of Progress in Classical Antiquity*.

[The] general and necessary *law* of progress [is] a tendency inherent in nature or in man to pass through a regular sequence of stages of development in past, present and future, the later stages being—with perhaps occasional retardations and minor retrogressions—superior to the earlier (Boas and Lovejoy 1997, p. 6).

In this politically correct age, when a reckoning of cultures in terms of higher and lower is reflexively and inflexibly frowned upon, the words inferior and superior are apt to raise hackles. It is worth noting that those hackles have no place on a person who believes in progress, for that belief entails necessarily that today's world is better—higher, more advanced, further developed—than yesterday's. Some may pine for the simpler times of the previous generation, but rare is the chap who pines for the simpler times of the centuries, to say nothing of the millennia, of yore. Yet even those who insist, however inconsistently, that judgment be suspended when surveying cultures past and present cannot fail to appreciate why a broad consensus would be reached on the question of progress. In myriad ways—materially, intellectually, ethically—the evidence suggests rather forcefully that we are superior to our antecedents. It is hardly any wonder then that an underlying faith in progress endures—even in times of uncertainty; nor is it any wonder, when all signs point to progress, that, as Slaboch notes, “the canon of political theory... is filled with historical optimists; skeptics, pessimists, and theorists of decline are exceptional” (p. 3).

Slaboch is of the view that the skeptics and their ilk have been done a disservice; or rather, he thinks that by not hearing these thinkers out, we do ourselves a disservice, for there is much to be learned from them. Slaboch's approach is not that of, say, Robert Nisbet in his *History of the Idea of Progress* or Frank and Fritzie Manuel in their monumental *Utopian Thought in the Western World*; he does not array the prominent and not-so-prominent thinkers who have challenged the accepted wisdom on history's movement and give each his or her due. Rather, his approach is comparative—predominately cross-cultural, though, to a lesser extent, cross-centurial as well.

Bookended by an introduction and conclusion, the four chapters of this slim volume (about 200 pages, 60% of which is text proper) are devoted to a number of prominent skeptics from three countries—Germany, Russia, and America—who belonged predominantly to a single century—the nineteenth. The fourth chapter ventures into the twentieth century, though the three thinkers covered in it—Spengler, Solzhenitsyn, and Lasch—not coincidentally (we may presume) hail from the aforementioned countries respectively.

It is a novel approach, one that has a number of virtues, to which Slaboch draws attention. For one, it invites the reader to ponder the degree to which progress and criticisms of it are culturally determined. Is progress universal?

Are there universal grounds for denouncing progress? Or is there a Russian progress and a German progress and an American progress and correspondingly Russian, German and American critiques of progress? Similarly, in what ways are criticisms governed by the social and political arrangements under which those criticisms are leveled? What do the animadversions that emerge from autocratic Russia have in common with those that come from democratic America? Moreover, by focusing on the nineteenth century, one is able to consider arguments that were fashioned during a period of relative stability as opposed to those that were devised in the twentieth century—a time of global upheaval. It is one thing to criticize progress from the Gulag. It is something else to criticize it from a 2,000-plus-acre estate that includes more than 200 souls (i.e., serfs) over which you reign.

Such strengths may inhere in Slaboch's comparative approach, but it is not clear that he ever capitalizes on them. Or perhaps in the end, these strengths are more nominal than veritable. That appears to be the very conclusion Slaboch himself reaches. “One of my aims [in the preceding chapters] was to determine whether political and national context shapes critics' proposals for action” (p. 111). In brief, it does not. It would be going too far to proclaim that political and national context is immaterial, but such context is—based on Slaboch's own findings—of tangential import. This is not to aver that the comparative approach is for naught; by virtue of it, the reader is introduced to a number of interesting figures and learns about the intellectual climates and controversies that permeated these countries in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, one wonders if a different approach to this study would have yielded more and riper fruit. The question might be moot but for the fact that the framework is needlessly limiting and self-defeating, insofar as it prevents Slaboch from giving due attention to thinkers who do not fit his centurial or nationalistic criteria e.g. Rousseau and Tocqueville. But lest I put the steam engine before the horse-drawn cart, let us return to the beginning.

In this work about critics of progress, “pride of place” (p. 7) is given, appropriately enough, to Schopenhauer, that incorrigible pessimist who espied aimlessness and futility in the interminable succession of events that constitutes history, the very succession in which his progressive forbears and contemporaries (from Herder to Hegel) perceived directionality and purpose. (Slaboch, in each of the chapters on the nineteenth century, thoughtfully gauges the swelling currents against which the critics of prog-

ress swam. These intellectual overviews, at once enlightening and engaging, constitute some of the finest parts of his book.) Schopenhauer's progressivist opponents maintained that history signified the flowering of reason and hypostatization of freedom, but, according to Schopenhauer, they failed to espy what really animates history's movement: the Will. *That* is the essence of life—the thing-in-itself that Kant could not fathom—and the Will has no aim. If life fundamentally is aimless, whatever purpose man ascribes to it must be, like man himself, arbitrary and ephemeral.¹

In addition, not only is the Will aimless, it is insatiable. What Hobbes understood to be the “general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power that ceaseth only in death” (Hobbes 1997, p. 70), could be said of Schopenhauer's Will, minus the bit about power, which is precisely what Nietzsche added to Schopenhauer's equation. To contend that we are moving toward a state of happiness or fulfillment or completion is misguided, because man essentially is restless. People have desires that they strive to sate and do in fact sate, but in its nature desire is like the mythological Hydra: indulge one, and two new ones arise in its stead. Thus, while the species has gone on to satisfy so many of its past wants—no age has enjoyed more widespread comfort, security, and privilege—people remain discontent. (Proliferation in the use of anti-depressants, the loneliness epidemic that plagues many developed countries, and the unending grievances of the average millennial all bear testimony to this.) Indeed, the argument could be made that in the midst of unprecedented plenty, people today are less content than their ancestors who were mired in perpetual penury. Progress is an illusion, if not a delusion.

Schopenhauer's influence crossed continents and oceans—one of Slaboch's reasons for giving him pride of place—and there is no question that the other two nineteenth century critics on whom Slaboch focuses were profoundly affected by the Philosopher of Pessimism. (Tolstoy's spartan study included an engraved portrait of Schopenhauer and Henry Adams's understanding of history was decisively shaped by Schopenhauer, as made plain in his *A Letter to American Teachers of History*.) Both Tolstoy and Adams shared Schopenhauer's bleak view of history. To varying degrees, all three were, to borrow from Nietzsche, “suprahistorical men.” For such individuals, “there is no salvation in the [historical] process.” Instead, “the world is complete and reaches its finality at each and every moment” (Nietzsche 1997, p. 66). Mankind does not become more enlightened or ascend to higher stages of development. Or if it

does, life pays no notice. The fundamental needs of man remain unchanging. Responding to critics who charged that *War and Peace* did not sufficiently portray the brutal character of the age (with respect to “the horrors of serfdom, the immuring of wives, the whipping of sons... and so on”), Tolstoy noted that there was nothing particularly brutal about it, at least compared with other ages. The inhabitants of the nineteenth century “loved, envied, sought truth and virtue, and were carried away by passions” (Tolstoy 2010, p. 1309), which is what the inhabitants of every century do more or less.

From a suprahistorical vantage point, there is nothing unique about, say, the twentieth century. If it appears incomparably murderous, it is because the means of execution had been incomparably improved and because there were so many more persons to execute. Human beings did what they always have done. It is folly to suppose that beings whose entire existence has been characterized by strife and struggle are approaching an age that will be devoid of strife and struggle. What could the next century change that the past millennia could not? “This is,” Slaboch writes, “the position of Schopenhauer, who suggests that only a fool would expect something new to emerge in the history of human activity, given that ‘we yet always have before us only the same, identical, unchangeable essence’” (p. 57). Adams might contest the immutability of history, but only so as to yield an understanding that is even more bleak: history as inevitable and irreversible decline.

At the risk of stating the obvious, the suprahistorical view predisposes to detachment and resignation those who harbor it. This is illustrated well by Slaboch and the cast of characters he assembled. For Schopenhauer, salvation—to the extent that there can be any—is attained through “a life of compassion and asceticism” (p. 23). Only by denying the will can one escape the torments of it. Such a life Tolstoy led, particularly in his later years, though Jesus more than Schopenhauer seems to have shown him the way. Wanting to become spiritually rich, Tolstoy renounced his material wealth. The progress of the species may be an illusion, but that of the individual is not. “The law of progress, or perfectibility, is written in the soul of each man, and is transferred to history only through error. As long as it remains personal, this law is fruitful.” The path to moral perfection is paved with the words of Jesus—“about forgiveness, humility, renunciation, and love of all men, of our neighbors and enemies” (p. 60). Adams, who characterized himself as a “conservative, Christian anarchist” (at least two of those labels could be applied to Tolstoy), divorced himself from

what so many of his forefathers ardently devoted themselves to: politics. Convinced that America's decline was ineluctable and Washington's rot ineradicable, Adams preferred to mind his own affairs rather than tend to the affairs of others. He chose, as Slaboch puts it, "flight over fight" (p. 88).

All of this points to one of the central teachings of this work: there is no political panacea for the ills of life. It is an invaluable lesson, one that, if more widely heeded, likely would forestall many calamitous misadventures of the sort that littered the previous century. Indeed, given the unfolding of the twentieth century and the staggering toll that the nostrums peddled by political theorists and actors took, it is surprising and disconcerting that the lesson is not more widely heeded. But invaluable though it is, one closes this volume with the nagging suspicion that critics of progress should have more to offer. If the enduring wisdom of these critics boils down to "cultivate your own garden," is it any wonder that they do not occupy a more prominent place in the canon of political theory? There is a reason why there are no tomes on Epicurus's political philosophy, namely because he did not have one.

It is true that not all the critics covered in this book fit the dissociative mold. Slaboch makes an interesting distinction between critics who view history as being cyclical and those who view it as a "road to nowhere (or worse, to hell)." The latter sort tend to be dismissive and disdainful of politics while the former "are receptive to grand political projects" (p. 111). Interesting though this distinction is, it is virtually irrelevant in the context of this study. Slaboch identifies only three cyclical theorists, that is, critics of progress who have a political teaching or at least who do not counsel a withdrawal from politics, and only one of those—Oswald Spengler—is given sustained consideration in this work. Brooks Adams is overshadowed in this book as in life by his older brother, and Nikolai Danilevsky is afforded two plus pages in an addendum to the third chapter, a sort of afterthought that is not given much thought.

Even when one allows that a book of this length cannot but be limited, this seems a significant shortcoming. The increased awareness of and engagement with critics of progress that this book encourages could do much to meliorate the pestiferous atmosphere that infuses and inflames the political arena today, but if political discourse is to be improved, those who are concerned with their own moral improvement will have to be actively engaged in the effort. There is a danger to disengagement, one that Slaboch briefly acknowledges toward the end of the book. A divorce from politics may conduce to the betterment of one's soul, but it

also—because man is a political animal and not an angel—entails leaving politics to the wolves, whether they be of the left or right. How different the unfolding of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would have been had Lincoln and Churchill, like the Turk in *Candide* and so many of the critics covered in this work, sought an "out" (p. 24).

This shortcoming could have been overcome without greatly expanding the work or altering its nature. It would suffice to assay different characters or give greater weight to ones Slaboch assigns ancillary roles. For example, if not pride of place, there is a case to be made that Nietzsche deserves a more prominent place than his educator, as Nietzsche's impact on the character and one might say destiny of the modern (or postmodern) age is far more profound than Schopenhauer's. If, as Slaboch asserts, the comparative framework he erected is "particularly illustrative because these countries would become synonymous with the twentieth century's three leading ideologies" (p. 6), certainly Nietzsche, whose impress on fascism is conspicuous and indelible, would be the more fruitful critic to consider. What is more, Nietzsche has an overt political teaching. It is elliptical, as are so many of his teachings, but his teaching does not amount to the denial of the will and renunciation of the political. Slaboch is right to note that Nietzsche rejects the very idea of a goal in history (p. 31)—that there is a historical process of the sort Hegel and Marx purported to decry—but what Slaboch overlooks is that for Nietzsche, man is an animal that needs a goal. Before man killed God, he had a goal. In the shadow of God's death, it will be necessary to create one. That is the work of philosophy, but the business of organizing human beings in pursuit of this goal is the work of politics. Yet Nietzsche, like so many thinkers who call progress into question, is no statist. The modern state is, in the words of his godless prophet Zarathustra, "the coldest of all cold monsters" (Nietzsche 1982, p. 160). Does Nietzsche illumine an alternate way forward, a road to somewhere, one distinct from the progressives' path that leads to the end or consummation of history and the way out to which Schopenhauer and his epigones point? Lastly (because space, not reasons, runs out), progress for Nietzsche is not simply an illusion because there is no rhyme or reason to man's existence; rather, what all good progressivists presume to be good—mastering and possessing nature; conquering chance; eradicating suffering; spreading equality—is in fact bad. The more we progress, the worse we become. However baleful one may find Nietzsche's philosophy to be, he still compels a grappling with the gospels of modernity, the gospel of progress not least among them. To ignore or

dismiss him is not to confute him; rather doing so intimates that modern man is much more a creature of faith than he is inclined to concede.

This is a missed opportunity, not to give Nietzsche his due, but to provide a deeper reflection on what is problematic about progress. The comparative approach, while inventive and intriguing, ultimately proves inconsequential, and that it would ought to have been evident from the start. Schopenhauer does not philosophize about the German will, but about the Will simply; the moral perfection that Tolstoy espouses is not within reach for Russian souls, but for all souls; in Adams's understanding, history is entropic not just for Americans, but for all who are swept up—or down—in it. This is not to say that the political and historical circumstances in which these thinkers found themselves have no place in a study of this sort; it is simply to say that they are not determinative. It was for this reason that Solzhenitsyn was critical not just of the regime that had sent him to the Gulag, but of the one that welcomed him in exile. Both regimes, in their relentless pursuits to secure dominion over the earth through technological advances, did more to debase and despoil man than elevate and enrich him. The increase of material wealth, a standard metric used to measure progress, entails—"inevitably?" one wonders—man's spiritual impoverishment. *There* is fundamental criticism of progress, one that unites many critics, and one that merits a deeper exploration. Unfortunately, one will not find it in *A Road to Nowhere*.

While Slaboch's approach is admirably broad in its scope, a principal concern of his appears to be the current state of American politics. This much is suggested by the manner in which his argument is conceived or at least commenced. The hope and change of 2008 devolved into the extensive frustration and discontent that resulted in Trump's election a mere eight years later. Optimism and progress have their limits and at a time of such pandemic disaffection and despair, it might behoove people who are afflicted thus to weigh the words of those who meditated on and cautioned about such limits. In view of this, it is especially lamentable that Slaboch does not include a critic of progress who arguably remains America's most perspicacious observer: Alexis de Tocqueville.

The Frenchman is not altogether absent from this work. He makes a fleeting appearance in the chapter devoted to the Adamses, where he is acknowledged as being an augural critic of democracy and then summarily dismissed for not being critical enough. In the words of Alan Kahan (whom Slaboch quotes), "In *Democracy in America*, [Tocqueville]

is, on the whole, an optimist." (p. 77). The charge is woefully misplaced. (Slaboch qualifies this charge in an endnote, but it still stands in the text.) Suffice it to remark that a book that "was written under the pressure of a sort of religious terror in the author's soul" is not likely to be the work of an optimist (Tocqueville 2000, p. 6). What is particularly unfortunate about the omission of Tocqueville is that he is critical *and* constructive. Furthermore, he addresses many of the social and political dysfunctions that beset America today, an abiding testament to his considerable and occasionally uncanny prescience. Thus, he writes about the loss of connection and meaning in a society wherein individualism and materialism run rampant; the dangers of an aggrandizing state that solicitously manages and micro-manages more and more of the lives of its citizens; the perniciousness of majority tyranny so alarmingly reflected in the inexorable political correctness that holds sway today. But he also proffers antidotes to these problems: the importance of the family, where the mores that redound to the health of civil society are inculcated; religion, which encourages people to devote themselves to something larger than themselves; and America's unique federalist system, which allows people to do the very thing the non-cyclical critics counseled against—engage in politics. Not the disavowal of government, but self-government is the remedy Tocqueville prescribes. By means of it, liberty would be preserved and a bulwark against the mild despotism that menaces peoples in democratic ages would be erected. In sum, for America's current ailments, Tocqueville has much more to offer than Adams.

Notwithstanding these quibbles, which may be too substantial to be characterized thus, this remains a rewarding book—stimulating, lucid, and unmistakably timely. One hopes it secures the wide readership it deserves and that its author returns to the problem of progress in the future, for readers have much to gain and Slaboch—one feels confident after putting down *A Road to Nowhere*—has much more to offer.

NOTES

- 1 This is not to say that when you perform some action, it has no purpose. If you drink a glass of water on a hot summer day, presumably you do so to slake your thirst. But the thirst you consumed the water to slake you did not give yourself. And it would be inane to contend that life gave you thirst so that you may slake it. That is, the desires we purposefully act to fulfill we do not bestow upon ourselves. This has not prevented us from fancying that we are in control. As Schopenhauer wrote, “Spinoza (Epist. 62) says that if a stone projected through the air had consciousness, it would imagine it was flying of its own will. I add merely that the stone would be right” (Schopenhauer 1969, p. 126). And so too with us. We imagine that we are progressing of our own will, but we have not propelled ourselves; like the stone, we too are thrown.

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