



The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into its Origin and Growth

J.B. Bury

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We may believe in the doctrine of Progress or we may not, but in either case it is a matter of interest to examine the origins and trace the history of what is now, even should it ultimately prove to be no more than an idolum saeculi, the animating and controlling idea of western civilisation. For the earthly Progress of humanity is the general test to which social aims and theories are submitted as a matter of course. The phrase CIVILISATION AND PROGRESS has become stereotyped, and illustrates how we have come to judge a civilisation good or bad according as it is or is not progressive. The ideals of liberty and democracy, which have their own ancient and independent justifications, have sought a new strength by attaching themselves to Progress. The conjunctions of "liberty and progress," "democracy and progress," meet us at every turn. Socialism, at an early stage of its modern development, sought the same aid. The friends of Mars, who cannot bear the prospect of perpetual peace, maintain that war is an indispensable instrument of Progress. It is in the name of Progress that the doctrinaires who established the present reign of terror in Russia profess to act. All this shows the prevalent feeling that a social or political theory or programme is hardly tenable if it cannot claim that it harmonises with this controlling idea...

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