

We Need to Stop Assuming Progress Is Always Positive

Franco. Mussolini. Stalin. Hitler. Castro. Mao Ze Dong. Pol Pot.

The 20th century was full of dictatorships which reached new heights of cruelty and butchery never imagined in centuries prior. Unfortunately, this cruelty flies in the face of the American belief that progress is undeniable and a decidedly positive force in human history.

How did we ever come to the assumption that society progresses as it moves along? Why do we view our predecessors and forefathers as morally inferior to ourselves in this supposedly enlightened age?

Lest we think this is a mindset only afflicting today's younger generations, let's take a look at G. K. Chesterton's [*The Everlasting Man*](#). Published in 1925, the book was a rebuttal to H. G. Wells' [*The Outline of History*](#).

Chesterton took issue with Wells' depiction of human development and civilization. Using ancient Egypt as an example, Chesterton dissects the notion that the progress of humanity and civilization is an inevitable march towards greater freedom, happiness, and prosperity.

[I]t is emphatically not true that it [the state] was most despotic in the earliest age and grew more liberal in a later age; the practical process of history is exactly the reverse. It is not true that the tribe began in the extreme of terror of the Old Man and his seat and spear; it is probable, at least in Egypt, that the Old Man was rather a New Man armed to attack new conditions. His spear grew longer and longer and his throne rose higher and higher, as Egypt rose into a

complex and complete civilization. That is what I mean by saying that the history of the Egyptian territory is in this the history of the earth; and directly denies the vulgar assumption that terrorism can only come at the beginning and cannot come at the end.

For Chesterton, the consolidation of power by the state may have benefits, but they come at a cost. Individuals cede their freedom and self-determination to the state in exchange for security and stability. The larger and more complex the state and civilization, the greater the power needed to exercise any degree of control over it.

Chesterton continues:

We do not know what was the very first condition of the more or less feudal amalgam of land owners, peasants and slaves in the little commonwealth beside the Nile; but it may have been a peasantry of an even more popular sort. What we do know is that it was by experience and education that little commonwealths lose their liberty; that absolute sovereignty is something not merely ancient but rather relatively modern; and it is at the end of the path called progress that men return to the king.

Throughout history, the greater emergence of the state required greater amounts of power to control citizens. Much has been promised in the name of the common good, only to end in genocide, famine, and failure. Humanity is not destined to reach a higher moral plane with each successive generation. Each individual human must fight to make that happen, and the paths to figuring out how to do so and what to fight for are not as straightforward as some would have us believe.

We shouldn't look down so much on previous generations of humanity. In many instances, history has proven them to be far more moral and free than those who came after them.

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