

Is All Change Progress? Progressives Think So.

There seems to be a pervasive sentiment in society today that paints progress as an intellectual process which perpetually increases human fulfillment, success, and joy. All change is progress, and all progress is good, so goes the idea. This idea provides the basis for progressivism and encourages development, new ideas, and a rejection of tradition at an almost breakneck pace.

Surprisingly, there is an equally powerful dialogue in our current culture that paints society today as backwards, hostile, and rife with conflict. This idea asserts that we are now more combative, less tolerant, and more unhappy than our predecessors. While these ideas are seemingly at odds with one another, they are actually related, and one begets the other.

Whig history is a pejorative term used to describe history that erroneously emphasizes progress and modernization in history while rewriting individuals and ideas to more closely align with modern values. Whig historians often portray the past as a continual march away from despotism and toward rationality, pitting science against superstition and reason against dogma.

A good example of Whig history is the Galileo affair. In his 1841 book [*Martyrs of Science*](#), David Brewster paints a picture of Galileo Galilei as a self-sacrificing individual who suffered tremendously at the hands of dogmatic Christians, all for the sake of advancing modernity and rationality. “And it yet moves” is a famous quote attributed to Galileo during his trial for heresy in which he rebukes the church and insists that the Earth revolves around the Sun.

In reality, Galileo was a deeply spiritual man whose works

were supported, [if not outright funded](#), by the Catholic Church for most of his life. His quote “and yet it moves” is a [fabrication](#) meant only to promote a modern narrative. Unfortunately, Brewster’s revisionist history, and the mantra of progress over tradition, continues today.

The ever-crushing chant of progress continues to ring through social media, politics, and culture. Modern progressivism promises many things—emancipation from oppressive cultural norms, equality for women and minorities, better mental health care, and greater autonomy. It promises the advancement of science, the abandonment of religion, and a more just society for all. But if we take lessons from the revisionist history mentioned above, a second look at the idea of progress as a necessary and unstoppable advancement is justified. It begs the question—is today’s “inevitable progress” making humans happier and more fulfilled, or is this simply a Whig fantasy?

What Has Progressivism Done?

To start, we need only look at children. Suicides increased [29 percent](#) among adolescents ages 15 to 19 over the last decade. Adolescent suicides increased from 8.4 per 100,000 in 2012 to 2014 to 10.8 deaths per 100,000 in 2018 to 2020. This increased even further during COVID lockdowns. [Up to 5 percent](#) of teen girls may have bulimia nervosa, and 0.48 percent of girls ages 15 to 19 have anorexia. [A 2016 study](#) in the UK found that the prescription of ADHD medication increased by 800 percent between 2000 and 2015, the most dramatic increase being in boys who are 10–14 years old.

For adult women, the results are shocking. [A 2020 poll](#) by Pew Research Center found that 56.3 percent of liberal white women aged 18–29 had a mental health diagnosis, roughly double the 28.4 percent of moderate white women or 27.3 percent of conservative white women, both in the same age category. White women aged 45 and over represent [58 percent of adults](#) who have

used antidepressants for five years or more. [Forty million](#) adult Americans suffer from anxiety disorders, and depending on the disorder, women are typically at least twice as likely to have an anxiety disorder than men. For all the talk of uplifting women, progressives appear to lack positive results.

For men, there are equally depressing statistics. In 2020, the suicide rate for men was [four times](#) that of women. In fact, the World Health Organization [reports](#) that suicide accounts for half of all violent male deaths globally.

Societally speaking, there are other causes for concern. The number of marriages in the U.S. is at its [lowest point ever](#) since the country started keeping marriage records in 1867. Charitable giving [has declined](#). Friendships across the political divide [are rare](#). And most telling is the [increase](#) in the number of people who are simply unhappy. In 1990, that number was 8 percent. In 2018, it was 13 percent, an over 50 percent increase.

Change vs Progress

Some may be concerned that I am cherry-picking things that I personally dislike about modern society. However, I must make clear that the intent of providing these statistics is not to highlight unfortunate facts but rather to show that these negatives are increasing in tandem with progressivism instead of decreasing.

This is also not to say that progress as a whole is bad—if it were, why not return to the Stone Age? Progress, as a high-level concept, has given us many crucial advancements: medicine, transport, the abolition of slavery, and the free exchange of ideas. These have all radically transformed the globe and led to [longer life expectancies](#) and more resilient societies.

The purpose of this article is rather to dispel the notion

that progress, in and of itself, is always good. Today, the word *progress* is nothing more than a fancy window dressing for another word: *change*.

Change provides neither good nor bad. Change, hidden underneath the word progress, does not inexorably provide more fulfillment, happiness, or stability. History does not show a guaranteed march toward reason, rationality, or fulfillment, and it does not vindicate this false notion of a timeless, gladiatorial fight between science and superstition.

Ancient Rome is widely regarded as the most prosperous and influential society of its time. Its unique system of governance still influences politics and culture today. However, these machinations certainly put Whig history to the test. While Rome was backward in many ways by today's standards, it was extremely progressive for its time (notably in trade, government, and law).

Despite Rome's incredible advancements, it did not march inevitably towards reason, rationality, or stability. In fact, Rome marched toward decay. Rome's ill-fated choices ended up destroying the republic that had made it so prosperous, and this destruction plunged Europe into over 1,500 years of darkness and death.

Europe did not achieve the same standard of living after Rome's collapse until the Industrial Revolution, according to historian Ian Morris in his book [*Why the West Rules—For Now*](#). In other words, Rome's change—or what it saw as progress—left Europe worse off for hundreds of years. Simply put, it is possible that our children will have a lower standard of living than we have today. The concept of progress as an inevitable change for good is not a promise.

Therefore, we should treat the word *progress* with skepticism in its modern usage. We must always remember that this word really means *change*, and change promises us nothing that

modern progressivism promises. No amount of revisionist history and chants of progress can cover up the fact that our society today is exhibiting quantifiably worrying trends. The increase of progressivist ideals ignores real history and smothers modern dialogue in an elementary (and false) notion that change is always, and has always been, good for society.

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