

On Progress

Anne-Robeht-Jacques Turgot

Like his fellow philosophes, Anne-Robert-Jacques, baron de l'Aulne Turgot (1727-1781), a French statesman, economist, and political writer, was preoccupied with the progressive nature of historical development. This excerpt from his December 1750 discourse at the Sorbonne is titled "On the Successive Advances of the Human Mind."

The phenomena of Nature, subjected to constant laws, are confined in a circle of ever the same revolutions. All perishes and all revives; in these successive generations, by which vegetables and animals reproduce themselves, time only gathers back in each case the image of what it had made disappear.

The succession of man, on the contrary, offers from age to age a spectacle ever varied. Reason, the passions, liberty, incessantly produce new events. All the ages are linked together by a sequence of causes and effects which connect the existing state of the world with all that has preceded it. The multiform signs of language and of writing, by giving to men the means of insuring the possession of their ideas and of communicating them to others, have made of all the individual funds of knowledge a common treasure, which one generation transmits to the next, along with an inheritance always increased by the discoveries of each age; thus the human race seen from its origin appears to the eye of a philosopher as one vast whole, which itself, like each individual composing it, has had its infancy and its development.

We see societies establishing themselves, nations forming themselves, which in turn dominate over other nations or become subject to them. Empires rise and fall; laws, forms of government, one succeeding another; the arts, the sciences, are discovered and are cultivated; sometimes retarded and sometimes accelerated in their progress, they pass from one region to another. Self-interest, ambition, vainglory, perpetually change the scene of the world, inundate the earth with blood. Yet in the midst of their ravages manners are gradually softened, the human mind takes enlightenment, separate nations draw nearer to each other, commerce and policy connect at last all parts of the globe, and the total mass of the human race, by the alternations of calm and agitation, of good conditions and of bad, marches always, although slowly, towards still higher perfection....

An art suddenly rises by which are spread, in all directions, the thoughts and the glory of the great men of the past. Until now how slow, in every sense, progress has been! For two thousand years back medals have presented to all

eyes characters impressed on bronze, and, after so many ages, it occurs for the first time to some obscure man that characters might be impressed on paper! As soon as the treasures of antiquity, drawn from the dust, pass into all hands, penetrate into all places, enlightenment is brought to the minds that were losing themselves in ignorance, and then genius is called forth from the depth of its retreat. The time has come.

Emerge, Europe, from the darkness that covered you! Immortal names of the Medicis, of Leo X, of Francis I, may you be consecrated forever, may the patrons of the arts share the glory of those who cultivated them! I salute you, Italy, happy land, for the second time the country of letters and of taste, the source whence their waters are shed to fertilize our regions. Our France, as yet, views your progress, but from a distance. Her language is still infected with some remnant of barbarism....

And now that multiplicity of facts, of experiences, of instruments, of ingenious operations, which the practice of the arts had accumulated during so many ages, has been drawn from obscurity by the work of the printing press, the productions of the two worlds, brought together by an immense commerce, have become the foundation of a natural history and philosophy hitherto unknown, and freed at last from grotesque speculations. On all sides attentive eyes are fixed on Nature. Slight chances turned to profit bring forth discoveries. The son of an artisan in Zeeland, while amusing himself, brings together two convex glasses in a tube, and the limits of our senses are removed. In Italy the eyes of Galileo have discovered a new celestial world. Now Kepler, while seeking in the stars the numbers of Pythagoras, has found the two famous laws of the course of the planets which will become one day, in the hands of Newton, the key to the universe. Bacon had already traced for posterity the road she had to follow.... Great Descartes! if to find truth has not been always given to you, you have at least destroyed tyranny and error [that obscured it].... At last all the clouds are dissipated. What a glorious light is cast on all sides! What a crowd of great men on all paths of knowledge! What perfection of human reason! One man, Newton, has submitted the infinite to the calculus; has unveiled the nature and properties of light, which, while revealing to us everything else, had concealed itself; he has placed in his balance the stars, the earth, and all the forces of Nature.