

The Myth of Progress

Dr Simon Perry

This term we continue our theme of myth and mythology, and today we are looking at one of the foundation myths of the modern era. Progress. It is easy to see why people believe in progress. For centuries it seemed to work. Fires burned, liquids heated, engines rumbled and aeroplanes flew. The technological progress of the Victorian era was undeniable, bringing noticeable, measurable results in the world of sanitation, medicine, agriculture, transport, housing. The list could go on, because the progress we celebrated was so widely seen and felt.

The myth of progress: on and on and on and up and up and up. Each generation could say, you've never had it so good. And so our ancestors were stupid cave-dwelling, knuckle-dragging herd animals. But we have the capacity to be rational, independent, free-thinking. Things can only get better.

The entire philosophical framework for this myth is rooted in one brilliant philosopher of the 18th Century, George Frederik Hegel. His philosophy of history, or at least a simplified version of it, has sunk itself right into the modern psyche. So, many of you will have heard the notion of a thesis, contradicted by an antithesis, finally producing a synthesis. Although Hegel himself never really used that language, it is a fair summary of his view of history. One generation brings its thesis. The next, rebels. Antithesis. And the next lives with both – synthesis. So you might say, Thesis: the American Dream. Anti-thesis. The dangerous world out there that is not America. Synthesis: Disneyland: sample the culture and cuisine of 50 different countries.

The trouble is, after three centuries in which progress had been so measurable, question marks began mushrooming. Where has progress dumped us in the twentieth century? Ecologically? Where has progress dumped us? Economically, where has it dumped us? Psychologically, where has progress led us.

Because mythologies tell stories about people groups. Mythologies will always and invariably exclude people. And what we are starting to see in our own age, are more and more signs of people whose lives are not improving. For whom there is no brighter future and no progress to look forward to. But – mythologies take root. And they matter to people. And people want to defend them. So here are some ways in which crumbling mythologies can be defended.

Ecologically, we barely need to spell out the doom and gloom. We simply cannot go on burning oil and coal, and expecting a brighter and better future that includes everyone. Stephen Trudgill, if you could ever draw him on this topic, would say that the only way to cut down on the effects of carbon in our atmosphere, is to burn less carbon. To cut down. Well – hold on. That doesn't sound like progress. That sounds like tree-hugging, regressive, ludditism. And so for the last twenty years, we hear creed after creed, claiming that technology will progress far enough to save us from our own stupidity. We don't need to cut down on carbon emissions. We need to invest more in science.

So, on the topic of investment, are we seeing economic progress – that benefits more and more people? I suppose the first question is whether it is possible to have perpetual economic growth, on a planet with finite resources. To continue down the line of perpetual economic growth – sounds to many people like a Utopia. A conservative Utopia, that both left and right seem to support in their economic policies. For many, economic progress means allowing wealthy investors to plunder more and more of the planet's resources.

And it's not surprising that so many people question just how well our current economic models are serving us. Enter Hans Rosling. Factfulness. Hans Rosling was the master of creative accounting – showing us a series of undeniable Facts, that prove everything in our world is improving for everyone. His critics point out just how selective his facts are. From once-endangered species that flourish, to world poverty levels that are improving, Rosling was carefully selective when it came to the scopes and measures of his analysis. And though many scientists loved him, he was a fierce proponent of myth.

1. Ecological progress. 2. Economic progress. 3. Psychological progress. Are we in a better state mentally than we were in previous generations? Or is there a 'mental health pandemic'? The economic doom and ecological gloom that sit like black clouds on the horizons of our future, are widely regarded as the principle if indirect causes of the mental health pandemic. But – if you want to defend the Myth of Progress – how do you cope with psychological regress of an entire generation? Technology. And one of the finest examples of psychological technology, according to Ron Purser, is the Mindfulness industry. Not to say that meditation isn't a healthy and underrated practice. Or that mindfulness is entirely without merit. But.. rather – that mindfulness is a piece of technology, designed to keep you distracted from the crumbling myths that have caused this pandemic. Has your health insurance refused to pay up and left you disabled and penniless? Don't

worry. Focus on a sultana for several hours. Has your employer wrecked your pension package or dismissed you unfairly? Do not protest against employers or, governments, or corporations. Do not fight for justice. That will just create further stress. No. The problem is not out there. It's your problem. You may have been treated horribly by the world – but it's your problem, and we will help you to deal with it. And so mindfulness is used to make soldiers more efficient killers, to make business tycoons more ruthless wheeler dealers, to make students more efficient at passing tests. In fact, its Goldman Sachs who support this model here at Cambridge. We need more efficient employees. But will mindfulness enable you to reflect on the greater causes of suffering. No – you have to accept those, and learn how to live with it. The myth of progress, well and truly intact.

Economically, Ecologically, and Psychologically – the myth of progress may not have been an exclusive force for good in the modern world. So. Back to Hegel. Thesis, antithesis, synthesis is how he has often been understood. But more important than that for Hegel is a point that is often overlooked by his students. The importance of what he called, Tarrying with the negative. That moment when thesis meets antithesis. The moment when your worldview is undermined. The moment when the myth around which your life is structured, the moment that myth is revealed for what it is. That moment. That confrontation. That terror when your mythology might come crashing down. Tarry with the negative. With that which negates you.

That is where Hegel's brilliance lies. Tarrying with the negative is a practice that requires enormous courage. Especially if you are alone in your peer group. If you are the only one who sees the bandwagon you have boarded, is now falling apart. Tarry with the negative. Facing up to the reality of the myths by which we live. The New Testament has a particular word for this. The idea that your mindset is not fit for purpose, and you need a new mind set. The idea that you are tarrying with the negative. The word is Metanoia, and its been translated into almost its exact opposite in modern English: repentance. For many today, repentance means to say sorry for your misdeeds, and pledge to comply with the mythology in future. Repentance. Compliance with the prevailing morality. No. Metanoia is the courage to face who you are, and where you are in the world. But it is monumentally difficult.

That is why the New Testament also uses the language of death and resurrection. The resurrection mythology is not simply a supernatural Zeus waving a magic wand and making everything that is upsetting, alright again. Resurrection is tarrying with

the negative. It is the capacity to be broken and remade in light of the other. Confronted with a terrifying task, or an unbelievable truth, or a human being you dare not love, to be broken and remade in light of your encounter with the other. It is painful, and traumatic and liberating.

There is no other way that one mythology can be displaced by another.

Intercession

God of stability, we thank you for the seasons, for longer days, for warmer sun, for blossoming tree.

God of surprises, we thank you for the way you bring to us new life in ways that shake us, disturb us and liberate us.

God of stability, we ask you with confidence for justice in the world. Help us to see the world as it really is, in all its beauty and ugliness, in all its glory and its unfairness.

We pray for hungry and thirsty children, who scratch their living from nothing;
For communities torn apart by war and disaster, who spend their days in fear;
For broken and lonely people, who spend their nights awake;

God of surprises, we pray for you to act,
To change these lives,
To change our lives,
To show that here and now, you are at work bringing healing, wholeness and justice.

By your grace, and by your Holy Spirit, may we your people share in this work. May the story of our lives, find their place in the story of how you are active in the world.

God of stability, God of surprises, we thank you that death does not have the last word, and pray that your people become ever more fully evidence that broken lives can be remade.

F13 and K3 -