MAN AS A PROGRESSIVE BEING

THE LIBERAL VIEW OF PROGRESS AND ITS DOWNFALL

I would like to begin by recalling a scene from the time immediately preceding the outbreak of the First World War: a breakfast party given by the philosopher Bertrand Russell in his rooms at Trinity College, Cambridge. The guest list was small, but distinguished: Russell himself, the novelist D.H. Lawrence and the economist John Maynard Keynes, who described the occasion in his autobiographical essay, *My Early Beliefs*.

The party was not a success. The two academics tried to charm Lawrence and impress him. He, however, rejected their approaches with the resentful hostility of a working class Nietzschean towards effete intellectuals. It was not a graceful reaction, though understandable. And yet, as Keynes admits, there was perhaps something right about it:

> There generally was. His reactions were incomplete and unfair, but they were not usually baseless.[1]

What Lawrence was responding to, Keynes suggests, was not any positive feature of his or Russell's views but a *lack*, something defective in the way in which those brilliant and privileged sons of Cambridge saw, felt and thought about their world.

As they saw it, the group of Cambridge and London friends to which Keynes and Russell belonged had liberated themselves from the modes of thought and feeling of their parents' generation. But, though they rejected Victorian moralism, they remained at some fundamental level the prisoners of nineteenth-century modes of thought. It took the trauma of the First World War to make that plain and to bring home to them just what it was that

[1] J.M. Keynes, "My Early Beliefs", in *Essays in Biography* (London: MacMillan, 1972), pp. 433-50, p.434

Lawrence had found missing: a sense of the precariousness of human progress and of the fragility of civilisation. "I have said", Keynes writes in retrospect:

> that we were among the first to escape from Benthamism. But of another eighteenth-century heresy we were the unrepentant heirs and last upholders. We were among the last of the Utopians, or meliorists as they are sometimes called, who believe in a continuing moral progress by virtue of which the human race already consists of reliable, rational, decent people, influenced by truth and objective standards, who can be safely released from the outward restraints of convention and traditional standards and inflexible rules of conduct, and left, from now onwards, to their own sensible devices, pure motives and reliable intuitions of the good... In short, we repudiated all versions of the doctrine of original sin, of there being insane and irrational springs of wickednesss in most men. We were not aware that civilisation was a thin and precarious crust erected by the personality and the will of a very few, and only maintained by rules and conventions skilfully put across and guilefully preserved.[2]

We ourselves, of course, stand on the other side of that great divide marked by the slaughterhouse of the trenches. The sense of security and order, the confidence in the knowability of society and the rationality of its structure which the Victorians could draw on without hesitation have disappeared to the point that they now evoke little more than a bitter smile.

I do not wish to say that we are wrong – the experiences of the twentieth century have been too horrifying to ignore or reverse – but it concerns me that we are now unable to see anything more in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century doctrine of progress than an exercise in willful ignorance and wishful thinking. This is why Keynes and his friends, who both felt

[2] op. cit., p.447.

the force of the classical idea of progress and were brought up against its limitations, are such important witnesses if we are to understand our own situation.

In what follows I shall try to show that there was, nevertheless, more to the idea of progress than the tired cliches of its final years. My interest here is a contemporary one. The progressive view of human nature was a response to a genuine and fundamental problem of political order, one which – though we cannot now accept the classical idea of progress as its solution – remains with us to this day.

I

The world-view of classical liberalism, to which our modern world is heir in so many ways, sought to combine the withdrawal of coercive power from the lives of individuals with the project of human self-development. The progressive view of human nature was the basis for their belief that these two goals could be reconciled.

That liberalism does indeed have an ideal of individual development is not always appreciated. Liberalism is often represented by its critics as a kind of agnosticism: "A liberal is a man", the poet Robert Frost once said, "who will take any side in an argument except his own". The implication is that liberalism goes together with a certain indifference to questions about human nature and what is of value for it.

In our own day, the so-called "communitarian" critics of liberalism argue that, by giving priority to the "right" over the "good", liberalism is trapped within a fundamentally limited and subjectivist view of human nature. According to such contemporary writers as Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor, the reason why liberals give overriding priority to the power of choice in individuals is because for liberals it is only the power of choice – not anything objective in the content of what is chosen – which can give value to people's actions. Thus Michael Walzer writes:

> Liberalism more largely, for all its achievements, or as a kind of necessary constraint on those achievements, has been parasitic not only on older values but also and more importantly on older institutions and communities. And these latter it has progressively undermined. For liberalism is above all a doctrine of liberation. It sets liberals loose from religious and ethnic communities, from guilds, parishes, neighbourhoods. It abolishes all sorts of controls and agencies of control: ecclesiastical courts, cultural censorship, sumptuary laws, restraints on mobility, group pressure, family bonds. It creates free men and women, tied together only by their contracts – and ruled, when contracts fail, by a distant and powerful state. It generates a radical individualism and then a radical competition among self-seeking individuals. What made liberalism endurable for all these years was the fact that the individualism it generated was always imperfect, tempered by older restraints and loyalties, by stable patterns of local, ethnic, religious or class relationships. An untempered liberalism would be unendurable...[3]

Without a standard of its own for the objective determination of ethical values, liberal societies are forced to live on inherited capital – the legitimacy of traditional forms of community and moral life. Once that pre-capitalist inheritance gives out, however, all that remains is blind voluntarism. Although the target of the communitarians' criticism is the revival of liberal political philosophy associated in the Anglo-American world with the name of John Rawls, it is a debate which has implications far beyond the academic seminar. For, if the critics of liberalism are right, then modernity contains within it the seeds of its own destruction: it is the very success of liberalism which will be the source of its own downfall.

Perhaps surprisingly, no author of classical liberal political theory provides more apparent confirmation of this criticism than Kant. Politics, for Kant, concerned the

[3] M. Walzer, *Radical Principles* (Basic Books: New York, 1980), pp. 97-98

coordination of the will in its "external" aspect – abstracting, that is, from its motivation and moral worth. Indeed, Kant believed that the political problem as he posed it could be solved by"a nation of devils (so long as they possess understanding)"[4]. Whether human beings are selfish or altruistic, faithful or dishonest, the institutional scheme they will hold to will, if they are at least capable of rational reflection, be the same.

I say that it is surprising that Kant should hold this view – surprising, that is, from the point of view of what we know about Kant from his moral philosophy: the subjection of each of us in all his actions to the rigorous claims of the Categorical Imperative. But, for Kant, there is a deep gulf between politics and morality. While in our role as individual moral beings we are subject to such stringent requirements, the force which they have is private, not public; it is not for the state to impose them upon us. On the contrary, the state merely establishes a framework in which human beings may be good or bad as the case may be.

The question however is: why does Kant take this position? If the communitarian critics of liberalism are right, it is because liberals are agnostic about the content of human actions, indifferent to the particular kinds of character and personality that citizens might have. In such circumstances the power of choice is their only truly distinctive moral power.

But in fact – this is the central contention of my argument – the reason why Kant and his fellow liberals give overriding priority to the power of choice is not that they have no view about the development of the individual. On the contrary, for the liberals, what recommends the liberal political order is that it is particularly apt to produce the wider goal of the development of the individual. It is because they view man as a "progressive being" that the liberals see unfettered choice on the part of individuals as a contribution, not a threat, to their development.

---

[4] "Perpetual Peace" in H. Reiss (ed.), *Kant's Political Writings* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1970). Kant himself did not originate this idea – it goes back, through Bayle, to the thinkers of the

But what does it mean to call man a "progressive being"? I should like to clarify this idea with reference to the role it plays in the thought of the most influential of all liberal thinkers, John Stuart Mill. In *On Liberty* Mill maintains that "the sole reason" for which society may coerce others when in pursuit of their own ends is "self-protection" – not their own good, the moral virtue of the community, the protection of others from shock or outrage or any other such reason. This, it might seem, is the limit of liberalism: a *laissez-faire* so extreme that nothing matters politically except the coordination of individuals' arbitrary choices and impulses.

But this impression would be false. Compare the following passage from the essay "Representative Government" in which Mill spells out his view of the proper function of government:

> The first element of good government, therefore, being the virtue and intelligence of the human beings composing the community, the most important part of excellence which any government can possess is to promote the virtue and intelligence of the people themselves.[5]

Is there a contradiction? How can one believe *both* that the proper object of government is the moral and intellectual development of the citizenry *and* that there should be no interference in the direction of their lives beyond the minimum necessary to ensure that the choices they make are mutually compatible?

The answer lies in the idea of progress. The basis of his defence of liberty is, Mill says, utilitarian, but with the qualification that this is to be understood to be "utility in the largest sense, *grounded on the permanent interests of a man as a progressive being*"[6]. It is only if man is a "progressive being" that we can understand how, despite the dangers, the

---

Christian Reformation.

[5]. "Representative Government" in *Three Essays* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1975), p.167

choices that individuals make when left to themselves will be those which, overall, make the greatest contribution to their moral and spiritual development.

The idea of man as a "progressive being" is intended to connect the goal of the development of the individual with the practice of liberty. While there was, of course, substantial disagreement between the different thinkers who held this view, three main features are clearly visible.

First, there is a historical view about the developmental conditions for the possibility of a liberal political order. Only once human beings have attained a certain level are they "ripe" for freedom. Second, there is a challenge to the conservative view of the dangers represented by the self-determination of the citizen to the social order. And, finally, there is the emergence of a distinctive view of human self-fulfilment.

II

For the founders of modern political theory, Machiavelli and Hobbes, only the political dangers of individualism were obvious. For Hobbes, for example, the "natural passions" of men, being "contrary to justice", must be overridden by "terrour of some power."[7] Indeed, individuals do not even, in Hobbes's view, have the capacity to make judgements regarding their long-term self-interest:

> For all men are by nature provided of notable multiplying glasses, (that is their passions and Self-love,) through which every little payment appeareth a great grievance; but are destitute of those prospective glasses, (namely Morall and Civil

[6] *On Liberty* in M. Warnock (ed.) *Utilitarianism* (London: Fontana, 1962), p.130
[7] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by C.B. MacPherson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p.224

Science,) to see a farre off the miseries that hang over them, and cannot without such payments be avoided.[8]

From this point of view, we are in an even worse situation than Kant's "nation of devils". Not only are our passions essentially selfish but their force is such as to overwhelm the feeble counterweight of the rational understanding. The passions destroy individuals' ability to make rational choices about the social order; that, in the end, is the reason why men require the disciplines of authoritarian rule.

Hobbes's bleak view of human nature produced two kinds of response in his successors. The first (and more familiar) simply reasserts the guiding power of reason over the passions – "Upon life's ocean boundlessly we sail / Reason's the card, but passion is the gale" as Alexander Pope wrote in his *Essay on Man*. This is, perhaps, the kind of view one might expect to be characteristic of the Enlightenment – the "Age of Reason", as the cliché has it.

But the most distinctive contribution of the eighteenth century was to develop a different (and much more interesting) response to the Hobbesian view of man: one which focused itself not on the conflict between reason and emotion but on a conflict *within* the sphere of emotion itself. The passions were not to be assumed to be an unalterable feature of human nature but were themselves subject to a learning process, a development from the violent and destructive to the calm and orderly. Such a development would lead, it was believed, to an increasing separation between those emotions which were purely anarchic – the passions in the full, modern sense of that which is violent and beyond control – and those which were calm, steady and predictable – the *interests*[9].

[8]. Hobbes, op.cit., p.239
[9] See A. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U.P., 1977)

The idea of a learning process in the sphere of the emotions appears in what is, by common agreement, the most significant early document in the development of the Enlightenment view of progress, Turgot's *Discours sur l'histoire universelle*. For Turgot, the passions play a two-fold role. First, it is the level at which their emotional life is conducted which marks the chief difference between civilised and uncivilised human beings – *les nations polies*, those which are "polished" or "polite", in contrast to the "rude" and primitive.

Second, the passions are themselves the chief agency which produces the change from one emotional level to another:

> Men who are taught by experience become more and more humane; and it would appear that in recent times generosity, the virtues, and the tender affections, which are continually spreading, at any rate in Europe, are diminishing the dominion of vengeance and national hatreds. But before laws had formed manners, these odious passions were still necessary for the defence of individuals and peoples. They were, so to speak, the leading-strings with which nature and its author guided the human race in its infancy.[10]

I know of no evidence that Kant was acquainted with Turgot's discourse, but the striking metaphor of "humanity's leading-strings" finds its echo in Kant, as it does in other writers of the period (for example, Jean-Paul Richter).

This metaphor, we may note, expresses very precisely the structure of Turgot's idea: leading-reins do not guide the child all the way from infancy to maturity, but the point at which the leading-reins are left behind marks an important transition in the maturing process. From being wholly dependent on the dispositions of others, the child now becomes

[10] A. Turgot,"On Universal History", in R.L. Meek (ed.), *Turgot on Progress, Sociology and Economics* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1973), pp.70-71

independently mobile. It has developed to the point at which further development can take place independently and in freedom.

No one expresses the idea of a transition from a barbarous to an "improved" state of humanity more clearly and explicitly than Mill. "It is, perhaps, hardly necessary to say", Mill writes (and the fact that he thinks it "hardly necessary" shows how much we are dealing with a commonplace of the time) "that this doctrine is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties... Those who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others, must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury. For the same reason, we may leave out of consideration those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage."[11]

The point of transition comes when "mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion" – a point which, as he loftily remarks, has "long since" been reached in "all nations with whom we need here concern ourselves"[12]. Until then, "a Charlemagne" is the best that can be hoped for:

> Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end.[13]

III

The second element of the view of man as a progressive being concerns the (presumed) dangers of liberty. Most importantly, the liberals argue, we should not confuse the kind of destructiveness people show when subjected to barbarous or despotic authority with their inherent nature. On the contrary, it may not be that the destructiveness of human beings makes repression necessary so much as that repression causes destructiveness.

[11] Mill, *On Liberty*, pp.135-36
[12] Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 136

In the seventeenth century, this part of the argument was focused on the question of religious tolerance. With the bitter experiences of the Thirty Years War and The English Civil War (not to mention the Massacre of St Bartholomew and other persecutions of the previous century) in front of them, it was hardly surprising that those, such as Hobbes, whose prime concern was with civil peace, should have advocated religious uniformity under a single, strong authority. Religious differences had been the source of too much suffering to allow anything else, they believed.

Yet those who argued for toleration shared Hobbes's main premise: the peace of the community was of overriding importance. But it was not religious diversity which represented the threat to the community, they believed. The conflict arose, rather, from the attempt to impose an unnatural uniformity in a sphere of human life where diversity of opinion is natural and inevitable. Furthermore, the very practice of toleration would be self-supporting. When faced with the need to adapt to diversity, the advocates of religious views would have to learn to compete effectively, by peaceful not violent means, and this, in turn, would serve to moderate the content of their doctrine. For Adam Smith, for example, exactly the same argument against monopoly applies in the domain of religion as it does in the world of commerce:

> The interested and active zeal of religious teachers can be dangerous and troublesome only where there is, either but one sect tolerated in the society, or where the whole of a large society is divided into two or three great sects... But that zeal must be altogether innocent where the society is divided into two or three hundred, or perhaps as many as a thousand small sects, of which no one could be considerable enough to disturb the public tranquillity... The teachers of each little sect, finding themselves almost alone, would be obliged to respect those of of almost every other sect, and the concessions

[13] Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 136

> which they would mutually find it both convenient and agreeable to make to one another, might in time probably reduce the doctrine of the greater part of them to that pure and rational religion, free from every mixture of absurdity, imposture or fanaticism, such as wise men have in all ages of the world wished to see established...[14]

One cannot read passages such as this one without remembering Marx: here, the Marxist will say, is the "market ideology" in its most blatant form – the penetration of the ideas of the market-place to even the most sacred areas of life and meaning. From the Marxist point of view, the ideologists of capitalism, such as Smith, unconsciously give expression to the market relationship in all contexts: they can understand no other form of human relation than the struggle of competitive individuals.

Perhaps so, but it as well to remember that the argument can be taken in the other direction as well. From this point of view, Smith and his disciples must be credited with a higher degree of self-consciousness: they are aware that the competitive struggle of individuals is tolerable, in the narrow sphere of economic life as elsewhere, *only if* that struggle can be shown to have moral benefits beyond the immediate ends of the individuals involved – if the process itself has socialising consequences. The extension of market principles to moral life goes together with a defence of the moral influence of the market, through the socialising force of regulated and peaceful competition.

Kant was a great admirer of Smith's *Theory of the Moral Sentiments* (Marcus Herz, in a letter of 1771, mentions that he has heard that Smith is "*ihr Liebling*") and so it is not perhaps surprising to find that he takes precisely the same view of the social utility of conflict between individuals. Kant writes in the *Idea for a Universal Natural History*:

---

[14] A. Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1976) Vol. II, p.318

> Nature should thus be thanked for fostering social incompatibility, enviously competitive vanity and insatiable desires. Without these desires, all man's excellent natural capacities would never be raised to develop... The natural impulses... the sources of the very unsociableness which cause so many evils, at the same time encourage man towards new exertions of his powers and thus towards a further development of his capacities.[15]

Conflict develops our capacities in a way which neither Smith nor Kant hesitates to see as Providential. The social market-place squares the circle of human nature: it both stimulates and moderates – encouraging exertion, but exertion within a regimented framework which requires those who would succeed to adapt themselves to others.

Here, then, are the first two elements in the progressive view of human nature: first, that human beings have reached a stage at which they can be trusted to develop further along a fundamentally self-directed path; second, that the process of choosing and competing will be self-sustaining – it will inculcate a politics of moderation and self-interest rather than violence and passion.

IV

The value of these first two elements of the view of man as a "progressive being" is prudential: moderation and toleration are beneficial for social cohesion, whatever wider goals individuals may have. But what is most distinctive about the liberal view is the emergence of a novel answer to the question of the good for man. For Mill and his fellow-liberals, diversity is not only less of a threat than the conservatives would have us believe, it has its own fundamental positive value. In making this argument, the liberals set themselves against one of the oldest dogmas of the Western political tradition. Since the time of Plato, political

[15] *Idea for a Universal Natural History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* in Reiss (ed.) p.45

philosophers have taken the view that the good is single: though different individuals may participate in the form of the good to different degrees, the good life is basically the same for all.

Hans Blumenberg has argued that the distinctive intellectual structure of Western modernity has been the idea of "self-assertion", an idea whose roots he traces in the thought of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I do not want to dispute Blumenberg's wider interpretation of history, but I would like to argue that the idea of self-assertion only develops its full force in political philosophy rather later, with the emergence of the modern, post-romantic notion of the self.

Like the romantics, Mill believes that the essence of the self is whatever is most specific, personal and unique about the individual. We are organic beings whose development requires that we each take our own individual shape. "It is the privilege and proper condition of a human being, arrived at the maturity of his faculties, [note the qualification!] to use and interpret experience in his own way."[16] On such a view, self-asertion positively *requires* autonomy. It is not just that the state is an inefficient or dangerous means to further the good of the individual. It is in principle impossible for such a good ever to be realised on behalf of another person. "A person whose desires and impulses are his own – are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture – is said to have a character. One whose desires and impulses are not his own, has no character, no more than a steam-engine has a character".[17] The idea is both egalitarian and anti-authoritarian. If each individual's essence lies in their distinctiveness, no one essence is of inherently greater value than any other. Modern society, Mill believes, needs strong natures. Hobbes was wrong to think that desires must always be bridled. On the contrary. "It is not because men's desires are

[16] Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 186
[17] op. cit., p. 189

strong that they act ill; it is because their consciences are weak. There is no natural connection between strong impulses and a weak conscience. The natural connection is the other way."[18] Strong desires are the condition for individuality; they do not, in Mill's view, threaten the possibility of social order. Like Turgot, Mill admits that things were not always so:

> In some early states of society, these forces might be, and were, too much ahead of the power which society then possessed of disciplining and controlling them. There has been a time when the element of spontaneity and individuality was in excess, and the social principle had a hard struggle with it.[19]

But, fortunately, "society has now fairly got the better of individuality; and the danger which threatens human nature is not the excess, but the deficiency, of personal impulses and preferences."[20] Liberalism must open the way for the expression of desire and personal impulse for the sake of the development of individuality.

This, then, is the reconciliation of the moral ideal of self-development with the practice of *laissez-faire* which lay at the heart of classical liberalism. The ideal of individual self-realisation demands that citizens be left to determine their lives for themselves, while the fact that they have reached the stage of being ruled by interests rather than passions means that to leave them alone will be beneficial, not destructive. To contemplate it today, as I suggested by my quotation from Keynes, is to reconstruct a world which, for most of us, has been irrevocably lost. The progressive view of man is a view which makes itself felt not by its presence but by the consequences of its absence.

V

[18] op. cit., p. 188
[19] op. cit., p. 189

Yet there has been one political movement in the twentieth century which, so far from distancing itself from the idea of progress, has turned it into the most banal cliché of political propaganda. I mean, of course, the Leninist (and, later, Stalinist) tradition of Marxian socialism. Were the Communists not (as they themselves claimed) the true inheritors of the classical idea of progress?

The "dialectical" view of history does indeed go back, through Hegel, to Turgot and Kant's belief in the developmental role of competition and conflict – none of capitalism's apologists has ever painted a more vivid picture of its dynamic and transformative power than Karl Marx, capitalism's greatest critic. But the liberal and the radical ideas of progress are not the same. They are, rather, rival descendants from a single root.

In *Anti-Duehring*, Engels described the advent of socialism as the "end of pre-history", as humanity's leap "from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom". In other words, in the Marxist view, we have not *now* reached that improved state in which conflict and coercion can be dispensed with as means of political action. For classical liberals, the era of rational progress is with us: free and open discussion will enable society to progress consciously and rationally. Where politics is conducted through emotion rather than reason it is to be rejected. Not so, however, for the radical. On the contrary, for the radical the logic of history dictates that conflict and coercion are necessary now in order to bring about peace, harmony and spontaneous coordination at some future time. The ruthless authoritarianism of the Leninists' means and the child-like naivety of their vision of the final end are two sides of the same coin.

What reconciles the two aspects intellectually (and what most decisively separates the Marxists from the liberal tradition) is the radicalisation of the idea of progress to the intellectual sphere. In the early nineteenth century Hegel gave Kant's idea that the reality we

[20] op. cit., p. 190

encounter is in part constituted by the concepts through which we encounter it a historical dimension. It is this, for Hegel, that is the key to human progress:

> [All] development [*Bildung*] reduces itself to a difference in categories. All revolutions, in the sciences, no less than in world history, derive from the fact that *Geist*, for its own understanding and self-awareness, in order to possess itself, has now changed its categories, and grasped itself more deeply, inwardly and unitarily.[21]

Although they deny Hegel's Idealist theory of history, his heirs, the Marxists, include the development of thought itself as a central ingredient in human progress. If it is true, as Marxists believe, that human nature is changeable, not fixed, then we must expect human concepts and powers of understanding to change. So, for Marxists, it is part of the process of historical development – in many ways its most fundamental characteristic – that the comprehension of that development by those who participate in it may itself be limited. Politics is the realm of self-misunderstanding, of ideology.

There is thus, as Georg Lukacs appreciated perhaps more clearly than anyone, a deep epistemological foundation within Marxism for the Leninist doctrine of the vanguard party. The agents of historical progress do not, for the Marxist, fully understand the significance of their own actions. The party must bridge the gap between the agents of history – the proletariat – and the limitations of their historical self-knowledge. The future – indeed, the present – is not immediately intelligible but requires the intervention of an epistemologically privileged agency. The party is the ultimate pedagogue.

The common ancestry of their ideas of progress may help to explain the strange affinity between certain of the heirs of the utilitarian tradition and the Bolshevik regime. The American Progressive journalist, Lincoln Steffens, was one of the earliest of many non-

[21] *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* II, *Werke*, IX, para. 246, *Zusatz*, pp. 20-21.

Marxist visitors to the Soviet Union to return dazzled by its vision of a society reconstructed on purely scientific principles. "I have seen the future", he proclaimed on his return, "and it works".

In the nineteen-thirties those good Benthamites the British Fabian Socialists Sydney and Beatrice Webb used their visit as the basis for a massive work, *The Soviet Union: a New Civilisation?* To judge from it, the Webbs were entirely unaware of the violence and forced collectivisation which had been taking place around them at the time of their visit. Nor do they seem to have taken the slightest step to verify any of the mountain of data enthusiastically supplied to them by their Soviet hosts.

It was not, I think, just naivety and arrogance that explains the Webbs' failure (although they certainly had plenty of both). Through the unbelievable tedium of their tables and statistics there shines the light of religious faith – a need to believe no less intense for being presented in what is, on the face of it, a work of "social science".

If the Great War had contradicted the belief in gradual and inevitable progress, this did not necessarily show that man was not capable of moral improvement. Somewhere, somehow, the improvement must have been blocked. Only now, with a clean sheet, unburdened by the past, would the progressive nature of man show itself in full force.

VI

For the liberal mainstream of European politics – and I take it that this stretches all the way from the social-democratic Left to the free-market Right – the consequence of the demise of the liberal view of progress has been that politics has become an attempt to balance what are, without the progressive view of man, contradictory ideals. On the one hand, modern liberalism retains the fear that any attempt to establish (or, as conservatives believe, re-establish) a code of moral uniformity would stifle the inevitable diversity of a modern society,

with disastrous consequences. But those watching the rampaging destructiveness which is now an accepted part of life in the Western world – racism, drug addiction, crimes of sexual violence and so on – can hardly believe that the uncoerced individual evolves spontaneously into the moderate and responsible citizen. Keynes was surely right to realise that twentieth-century liberalism would become a sadder, more defensive view of the world.

This is not to imply that liberalism has ended – far from it. For one thing, the meliorist confidence in the spontaneous development of the individual was never more than one ingredient – although, as I believe, a crucial one – in liberalism. The fear of the abuse of power by the state when it takes it upon itself to act as an agency of moral control, for example, remains as strong a part of the liberal case now as it was in the days of Locke and Smith. Without the mediating belief in the idea of moral progress, however, the liberal cannot simply assume that there is harmony between the ideal of individual self-direction and the requirements of civic virtue. Important and difficult trade-offs have to be made.

Michael Rosen

Lincoln College, Oxford