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A SHORT ARGUMENT FOR BELIEF IN PROGRESS

Saul Smilansky

The notion of social progress is not much in favour in these sophisticated times of scepticism, cynicism, relativism and political correctness; at least in the West. Most people might admit that some indubitable advances have occurred, primarily in terms of this or that useful technological innovation. But any wider claim about 'social progress' is often met by overwhelming doubt and suspicion, if not outright derision. I provide a short argument for belief in progress.

The notion of social progress is not much in favour in these sophisticated times of scepticism, cynicism, relativism and political correctness; at least in the West. Most people might admit that some indubitable advances have occurred, primarily in terms of this or that useful technological innovation. But any wider claim about 'social progress' – whether comparing past societies with contemporary life, or in comparing current societies to one another – is often met by overwhelming doubt and suspicion, if not outright derision. This common attitude seems to me to be dubious. I want to show why. I focus on the daily lives of most people, and omit from consideration marginal groups, extreme conditions such as war, or questions about the future. The claim is not that the future will inevitably be better, nor even that the progress that has been made will remain; challenges to the environment, for one, certainly raise the possibility of a grim future. The claim is, however, that currently, and for some generations, there has been great progress in economically advanced societies, as compared to the human situation throughout nearly all of history. A similar argument

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might serve in comparing the condition of people in economically advanced societies to those in some Third World ones, but I limit my comparison to the past. Although I focus on only one aspect of life, its importance, I claim, is decisive.

What is the worst thing that one can imagine happening in one's life? Logically we can conceive of constant torture, or the return of widespread slavery. But if this question is posed in a modern, advanced society, the predominant reply would probably be 'to lose one's child'. This is the paradigm of personal tragedy. It is common for children to lose their parents at some stage, but it would be unnatural and horrible for a parent to lose his or her child. For most people, losing a child would be the most important and most devastating event in their life; an unthinkable nightmare. We expect that our parents will die before us, but for people with children, the thought of attending the funeral of their child is all but unimaginable.

Yet, reflecting historically, we see how contingent this unimaginability is. In past times, it was very common, it was expected, and indeed it was natural, that some of one's children would die at birth or as very young children, given the inadequate state of knowledge and health care. Despite considerable improvement, this is still true in today's very poor societies. The odds of having a child dying at birth or soon thereafter were quite high, and the only way of assuring that the odds remained dependably in one's favour, so to speak, would have been to remain childless. For example, in the middle of the eighteenth century in many western European countries the fertility rate for married women was 7–8 children and nearly half of all children died before the age of 15. This means that at the time, the average (say) Swedish or French mother lost around 3–4 children (Anderson 1996). Indeed, the knowledge that some of one's children were almost bound to die is a major reason why, in the past, most people had many children. The current widespread practice in economically

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advanced societies of willingly limiting one's family to only one or two children was unthinkable.

But if

(a) we believe that (barring extremities such as constant torture or being a slave) nothing is more momentous than losing a child,
(b) losing a child is extremely unlikely now in a modern advanced society,
(c) but it was normal in past societies, then

we seem to have a clear case for our believing both in progress and in its great importance.

Someone might counter that in the past people didn't expect matters to be otherwise and hence were not as devastated as we moderns are by the death of a child. Thinking about this issue brings out the fact that it is not quite clear what we are asking when we ask about progress. What is it that we really want to know?

As a beginning, we might distinguish between two ways in which one can think about progress. I might ask whether I (more or less *as I am now*) would prefer to have been living at some point in the past rather than now. In the context of the present discussion, surely the reply to this first question is 'no': we would not want to be in a position of almost certainly losing a child or children. Hence I claim that, from our vantage point, we must acknowledge that we have it much better than did earlier generations. Unless we think that something would, for us, be more significant than the health and life of our children, we should admit that we prefer the modern present, for all its faults. In this sense, what people felt (or allowed themselves to feel) in the past about the death of their children is irrelevant.

A second way of thinking about progress is to ask whether representative people at some point in the past were enviably better off than I am. Here I do not imagine myself (as I am now) transported into some past society, but consider *the attractiveness of being them*, of living the lives of those people in the past. Here we would need to

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bracket questions about personal identity, my preferences for remaining myself, and worries about possible worlds. Even in terms of this second, more demanding, interpretation of the 'progress question', it would be difficult to deny that historically there has been progress. Arguing otherwise involves the claim that, even though earlier people regularly anticipated that about half of their children would die very young, those people were better off than we are just because they didn't mind the loss as much as we do. But even if granted, such an argument should indicate to us just how fortunate we moderns are when compared to our ancestors, for their lives were such that they could not emotionally afford to care as much as we do, about something so significant. While we can sometimes see the attraction of some aspects of the past for the people who lived then, when the price of living in that past requires indifference to losing one's children, to the extent that this would be at all possible for most people, the attraction fades.

Admittedly, this point still does not absolutely preclude someone's making contrary claims. Mine is not a logical claim. Perhaps in some historical culture some people's happiness was actually enhanced by the loss of a child (say, because of their belief in the value of some sort of pagan religious sacrifice). But by that stage we have ceased talking about anything that might interest us when we want to consider the issue of progress as a question *that matters to our evaluation of our own lives*. For it is not only that (in terms of the first question) we, as we are now, would not wish to swap places with members of past societies but (to take up the second question) we are not envious of those past people, even as they were in themselves. *We do not want to be ourselves under their living conditions, nor to be those people under their living conditions*. Hence, from our perspective, we must conclude that we are better off.

It might be countered that when people say that the world is getting worse, they do not mean that the world is

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in every way getting worse. They do not mean to deny that in some areas we have made progress. For example, the quality of professional athletics, as judged by results, has got better and better over the last hundred years. Or, the internet allows incomparably quick and widespread communication and knowledge acquisition. Likewise, while one may agree that we have made great progress with regard to one important area of our lives – childhood mortality – and agree that that is an important area, it could be claimed that this does not show that the world is getting better, in general; that we are making progress, period. Yet if one would simply mean to argue that the world has got better in one way, then no one would argue. So either my claim is false, or it is trivial.

Yet this counter-argument does not adequately focus on two crucial features: first, the nature of the claim for progress, which is individual experience and well-being and, second, the importance of the repetitive loss of one's children for parents, which is overwhelming. At the end, we need to consider how – in terms of individual well-being – all those aspects of contemporary life in advanced societies which are perhaps worse compare with the experience of losing one's children, and the constant fear of such loss. Indeed there *are* many other respects in which the present falls short of the past. One might, for example, point out the greater vulgarity in some respects, certain types of heightened tensions within our daily lives, or the pollution of our environment, that accompany modernity. But even if such comparative claims can be sustained, it would nevertheless be hard to see how – at least for individual well-being – the implications of any of those, in themselves or combined, or any other aspects of modern life, could compare with losing one's child. If we acknowledge that *losing a child would be uniquely, overwhelmingly and incomparably bad*, then the reality of progress becomes manifest.[1]

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