Progress! Did you ever reflect that that word is almost a new one? No word comes more often or more naturally to the lips of modern man, as if the thing it stands for were almost synonymous with life itself, and yet men through many thousand years never talked or thought of progress. They thought in the other direction. Their stories of heroisms and glory were tales of the past. . . . Now all that has altered. We think of the future, not the past, as the more glorious time in comparison with which the present is nothing.”

So said Woodrow Wilson, the political theorist and political actor who did as much as anyone to make the idea of progress the central driving force and trope of American politics. In contemporary American political rhetoric, few words are as common, or as effective, as “change.” Skepticism of progress—most often manifested as a reverence for things past—seems as anachronistic to us as a typewriter or rotary phone.

But it was not always so. Abraham Lincoln devoted much of his political rhetoric and action to attempting to slow or reverse the effects that “the silent artillery of time” invariably has on the “mystic chords” of political memory. He tried to reinvigorate in Americans an understanding of and respect for their constitutional past.

According to Matthew W. Slaboch, it is a propitious moment to reconsider the idea of progress, insofar as confidence in the future, in both America and Europe, seems shaken. Slaboch has written an elegant and important book on the political, philosophical, and cultural meaning and limits of the idea of progress, as understood by major nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers. He offers a cross-cultural analysis of the thought of modern historical pessimists—critics of the idea of progress—including the likes of Schopenhauer, Tolstoy, Henry and Brooks Adams, Spengler, and Solzhenitsyn. He encourages us to rethink with a more discerning eye our own predisposition to embrace progress, by eruditely reminding us of its complexities—and costs.

Beginning with nineteenth-century Germany, Slaboch notes that Schopenhauer denies that reliable progress is to be found, particularly in the growth of the nation-state. In his vigorous rejection of German idealism, he cut decisively against the spirit of his age. The one and only force of the universe according to Schopenhauer is will, but it is ultimately without direction or purpose.

Unlike the leading German thinkers before him, Schopenhauer rejects both historical optimism and the universality of rational will. Whatever satisfaction individuals can carve out through the exertion of will, they cannot find meaning or wholeness in the state, or in anything beyond the act of willing. Neither liberal nor totalitarian, Schopenhauer instructs us that human
greatness exists beyond optimism and pessimism, stasis and change, liberal and conservative politics.

Moving to nineteenth-century Russia, Slaboch examines the grounds and implications of Tolstoy’s opposition to the idea of progress, rooted in a pessimistic fatalism not unlike that of Schopenhauer, who confirmed in Tolstoy a conclusion he had arrived at independently: if there is to be any perfectibility in human things, it is, in Tolstoy’s words, “written in the soul of each man, and is transferred to history only through error.” Embracing neither Russian traditionalism nor Westernism, Tolstoy stands apart with his own philosophy of history that cautions against seeking salvation in the sphere of public activity.

Slaboch examines the idea of progress in the American context by juxtaposing Henry and Brooks Adams with what he claims is a broad faith in progress that has been cemented in the American mind at least since the founding era. Henry Adams rejects such optimism—not to mention the thought of the prominent progressive historians who were his contemporaries, including George Bancroft, Herbert Baxter Adams, and Frederick Jackson Turner. He denies democratic progress is necessary or even likely, or that it can be rooted in romanticism, science, or national character. Democracy, for Adams, is associated with decline. As Slaboch puts it, “if Adams ever sounded a positive note in his projections for American political development, he was playing off-key in an otherwise melancholy requiem” (74). His first novel, Democracy, is a tale of decadence and decay. “Democracy, rightly understood, is the government of the people, by the people, for the benefit of Senators,” as Adams archly puts it (76). Science, especially the fashionable sciences of his day, cannot help. As he quips in The Education of Henry Adams, “the progress of evolution from President Washington to President Grant, was alone evidence enough to upset Darwin” (81). Change is ineluctable, but it moves in a reliably negative direction. The only refuge, for Henry, is to be found in a stoic withdrawal from politics, to the sanctum of the self. Slaboch says “he chose flight over fight … cultivating relationships with people he deemed worthy of his affections” (88). By contrast, Brooks, who takes a more cyclical view of decline, suggests that political energy can still be exerted in the end times to stave off the inevitable—and perhaps to serve as a precursor to a new dawn.

One might think twentieth-century critics of progress would find apolitical escape to be impossible, given the horrors of the age, but this has not proved to be universally true, according to Slaboch. Spengler, like his intellectual predecessors, is profoundly pessimistic, but he did not abandon the political. He came out strongly for Prussian socialism over British liberalism, on the basis that the latter reduces to individual selfishness at the expense of community. He thus offers a peculiar blend of Schopenhauerian pessimism and Hegelian statism. In the West’s final phase, there is a prominent place for a Germany that produces not a Goethe but a Caesar—“a gardener of the people.” Like Brooks Adams, a cyclical thinker such as Spengler sees a place for a grand
political project, compared to thinkers who see progress as a more or less linear road to nowhere.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn also sees spiritual decline throughout the West, but “what was for Spengler a matter-of-fact observation was for Solzhenitsyn a cause for alarm” (97). Like Russian Marxism, Enlightenment liberalism gives itself over to the idea of progress, in the process destroying the spiritual foundations of civilization. But Solzhenitsyn proves far more reluctant than Spengler to embrace political solutions that would inevitably come forth from nation-states that are themselves manifestations of the idea of progress.

Slaboch accomplishes much in barely more than a hundred pages. In addition to the thinkers mentioned, he deals with many others, including Hegel, Fichte, Burckhardt, Nietzsche, and Dostoevsky. His writing is good enough, and his thesis compact enough, that he offers genuine insights into each of them, though sometimes his main points become cluttered. Only occasionally does his reach exceed his grasp, as when he is too quick to identify American political thought with an all-encompassing embrace of progress, rather than fixity and natural law. In showing “most critics of the idea of progress to be leery of substantial political endeavors” (89), he reminds us, perhaps unintentionally, of an important truth. The realm of the private can be expanded at least as much by cultural pessimism as Enlightenment liberalism. Contemporary American cultural pessimists of vaguely conservative sensibility have recently taken to promoting options for withdrawal from what they see as a decadent and corrupt polity. But by so doing they help create the very res idiotica they decry.

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