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We live in dark, disturbing times: we are witnesses to proliferating wars, perpetual genocide, predatory global capitalism, rampant militarism, unparalleled government surveillance and repression, a phony “war on terrorism” that fronts for attacks on dissent and liberties, the ever-present threat of financial collapse and global depression, the sixth great extinction crisis in the earth’s history, climate change and systemic planetary meltdown. Scientists warn that we are at a tipping point of global ecological collapse, and report the shocking speed of catastrophic changes such as which turn icecaps into water and forests into savannas.

Welcome to the fruits of “progress”. The modernist ideology *par excellence*, progress has been defined as the expansion of the human empire over animals and nature; as bringing other species and the natural world under human command; and as overcoming the “primitive”, “savage” and “barbaric” stages of premodern human existence itself. Progress is measured in terms of domination over other species and the natural environment, as well as transcending “undeveloped” premodern cultures for full-blown technoscientific, mechanistic, and market-dominated societies. The inherent fallacies and disastrous consequences of the long lineage of dominator cultures that peaked in modern European societies led to a volatile contradiction between the social and natural worlds. The question is not if this incompatibility of fast-growing market societies and slow-changing, sustainable-oriented ecological systems will be resolved, as it will...
be one way or the other. The question, rather, is: will humans consciously and voluntarily change and adapt to nature, or will nature drastically reduce human numbers and impact through prolonged and painful means such as famine and disease?

This is a difficult moment to argue for the notion of progress. Indeed, who thinks that tomorrow will be better than today? That their children will inherit a brighter future? That jobs, wages and retirement plans will be secure? That homes, health care and education will be affordable? That the plight of the poor and the needy will be overcome by waging war on poverty rather than people? That the ecosystems which sustain life will convalesce, and not collapse? Didn’t the dream of the Enlightenment – that the spread of reason, science, technology and “free markets” would bring autonomy, peace and prosperity to all – die on the slaughterbensch of the twentieth century? On that macabre centennial scarred by world wars, fascism, totalitarianism, genocide, the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the threat of nuclear annihilation, and by growing corporate hegemony, and accelerating environmental breakdown? Barely out of the starting gates, the twenty-first century opened with attacks on the World Trade Center, the deployment of an endless “war on terror” masking a permanent war on democracy, the unparalleled rise of surveillance and security states, escalating wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, increasingly aggressive neoliberalism and globalization, ever-widening gaps between the world’s rich and poor, a global market crash, hastening species extinction and catastrophic climate change.

Toward the end of the 1960s, a new wave of counter-enlightenment thinkers, or postmodernists, rose to prominence with denunciations of civilization, modernity and the notion of progress. They were influenced by Max Weber’s critique of the “iron cage of bureaucracy”, Martin Heidegger’s critique of technological domination, and Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s dissection of the failure of the Enlightenment project and revolutionary Marxism. Whereas eighteenth century theorists saw the spread of reason promoting autonomy, freedom, prosperity and peace, Horkheimer and Adorno described the perverse irony in which rationality instead produced technical domination, totalitarianism, fascism, irrationality and mass conformity through sophisticated systems of propaganda, disinformation and cultural control. Whereas Enlightenment, “aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters”, Horkheimer and Adorno witnessed a “wholly enlightened earth... radiant with triumphant calamity”.

Similarly, Michel Foucault rejected the Enlightenment equation that happiness and freedom advance in lockstep with the spread of reason,
science and technology. He resolved the “unity of Western history” into
discrete eras devoid of developmental logic or coherence. Rather than
producing an endless and undeviating road to human perfection, Foucault
saw history as shifting power constellations that “progressed”, if anything,
toward increasing regulation and control of bodies, populations and minds.4
Jean-Francois Lyotard diagnosed the fin-de-siècle “postmodern condition”
as a jaded cynicism toward any “metanarrative” (e.g., Hegelian, Marxist, or
capitalist) of history as the development of freedom and progress.5 Against
the totalizing critiques of postmodernists, Jürgen Habermas championed
the Enlightenment as an “unfinished project” that harbored not only the
instrumental rationality of technical and bureaucratic domination, but also
the “communicative rationality” underlying critical thinking, reasoned
debate, and the dialogic skills vital for freedom and democracy.6

Progress is the preeminent myth of modernity, a potent ideology and,
indeed, a pervasive and near-unwavering secular faith. It has promoted
a fetishism of growth, control and money. It functioned as an alibi for
greed, exploitation and genocide, along with the crushing of peoples,
animals, biodiversity and nature under the burgeoning corporate-military
juggernaut. The discourse of progress helped to create and legitimate
Eurocentrism, colonialism, industrialism, capitalism, imperialism,
consumerism and the systematic eradication of organic life and inorganic
environments. According to Enlightenment thinkers, progress involved
emancipation from the domination of nature and the tyranny of ignorance,
and advanced in proportion to the evolution of European modernity
beyond the “savage”, “primitive”, “stagnant” and “barbarian” cultures of the
past. In particular, they believed, progress evolved to the degree secular
nation-states overcame the bondage of the medieval “Dark Ages”, snapped
the straightjacket of Christian dogma and irrationality, and moved boldly
into the “Age of Reason”.

But the new postmodern concept cannot correct our perilous course
and inspire true moral and institutional progress without a posthuman
foundation that repudiates the deep-rooted ignorance, arrogance and
errors of anthropocentrism and speciesism in favor of humility, respect,
connectedness and a radical broadening of ethics and community to include
all sentient beings and ultimately the earth itself. This demands overcoming
entrenched dogmas, discrimination, bias, prejudice and hierarchical
institutions of all kinds, not only the domination of human over human,
but also the elevation of humans over other animals and the natural world
as a whole.
I. A Brief Genealogy of “Progress”

“Progress knows nothing of fixity. It cannot be pressed into a definite mould. It cannot bow to the dictum, ‘I have ruled,’ ‘I am the regulating finger of God.’ Progress is ever renewing, ever becoming, ever changing - never is it within the law.”

Emma Goldman

The notion of progress – which states that history advances in a definite, desirable and irreversible direction of constant improvement – has become so entrenched in modern thinking, it is easy to forget that it is a relatively recent invention. Certainly not all cultures were as dynamic as European modernity, few embraced change with such vigor (many resisted technological “advance” in favor of social stability), and none identified rapid and uprooting transformations as progress.

The progressivist narrative covers a historical sweep of ten thousand years, and in many accounts begins with the revolutionary shift from nomadic hunting and gathering (or “foraging”) lifeways to settled agricultural society rooted in farming and herding. Progressivists view the domestication of plants and animals as the “great leap forward” from “savagery” to “civilization”. The champions of progress assume that more is good, bigger is better, and modernity is the apex of history, a kind of “maturity” over a “childlike” past. While one can plausibly interpret the shift from dispersed hunting-gathering cultures to expansionist agricultural empires as the most decisive revolution in history, many progressivists (taking the opposite view of contemporary “primitivists”) tendentiously ignore or malign the many positive qualities of primal lifeways that for 5-7 million years well-served humans and their ancestors in many ways (such as providing better health, less work, more autonomy and lack of hierarchical systems such as patriarchy). At the same time, of course, progressivists also exaggerate the benefits of farming, herding, population growth and city life. The flip side of this fallacy involves discounting the regressive effects of domesticking plants and animals in societies that were large, labor-intensive, expansionist, warlike and increasingly stratified according to gender, class, and other dimensions. Nor do progressivists grasp how the domination of humans over animals, nature, and one another spawned the violent pathologies, unsustainable cultures and debilitating systems of hierarchical domination that imperil us today in the form of severe crises in society, animal communities and biodiversity, and the planet as a whole.

“Progress” represented a radical departure from premodern and non-Western ways of thinking. Modern thinkers broke with the pessimistic, cyclical model of the ancient world that saw time as repetitive rather than innovative, as an eternal recurrence rather than an evolving process.
According to the ancient outlook, history played out in the rise and fall of civilizations, in endlessly repeating cycles of chaos and order and birth and destruction, driven by monotonous dynamics that seemed to yield societies devoid of purpose, goals, meaning, or direction. As evident in Plato’s metaphysics, many ancient philosophers and historians equated the passage of time with corruption and decay; they denigrated the empirical world as mere appearance and falsehood, while seeking truth in timeless essences. The Greco-Roman worldview was fatalistic, determinist, and cyclical rather than optimistic, open-ended, and linear. From Homer to the Roman Stoics, the ancients believed in Moira, an inflexible law of the universe to which human beings must acquiesce. Their cosmology did not allow, let alone inspire, people to conceive of gradual improvement in human affairs and to look forward to a future ever-better than the present and past.

Unlike the theological Providential vision of history, secular-oriented Progressivist accounts demand a positive view of change, a rejection of an inalterable universe hostile to human purposes, a renunciation of a fixed human nature, an affirmation of human ingenuity, and an optimistic belief that humans can gradually improve their lives over time. Modernists thus typically operated with stage theories of history and linear narratives depicting inexorable improvements in life, advancing from generation to generation.7 Key roots of Western progressivism, nevertheless, lie in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The enigmatic belief that history had meaning – human beings struggling to realize God’s purpose and plan – and the view that time involved a steady advance from sin to salvation (for an elite few) was a radical departure from the pessimistic, cyclical model of the ancients.

Yet, the ascendance of progressivist history required not only a linear narrative and stage model of ameliorative change, but also brilliant discoveries spawning dramatic advances in science, technology, medicine, the arts, and culture. Cumulatively, these innovations inspired the optimistic mindset associated with many Enlightenment and modernist thinkers. From the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, the preconditions necessary for a full-fledged progressivist discourse took shape, such as prepared by the Renaissance, modern science, the Enlightenment, the French and American Revolutions, capitalism, and the industrial revolution. Beginning in the eighteenth century, Enlightenment visionaries praised what they viewed as unheralded advances in learning, reason, criticism, liberty, individuality, and happiness. Progress would emerge, they thought, through the unstoppable achievements of science and rational modes of government. Despite skeptics, the growing consensus was that laws of history could be discerned; that reason, freedom and markets could spread
peace and prosperity worldwide; and even that human nature and society were “perfectible”.

Modern thinkers embraced the progressivist form of the Christian narrative, while nonetheless giving the Providential vision a secular coding. Modern science did not break with the anthropocentric and speciesist ideology of orthodox Christianity (and earlier cultures), but rather bolstered the project of dominating nature and exploiting animals by seizing full advantage of innovations in science, technology, and markets. Thus, in the transition from Providential to Progressivist history, from the “dark ages” to the “era of Enlightenment”, people usurp the throne of God; Humanism becomes the new Gospel; Science and Technology pave the road to Salvation; and Profit and Competition become indubitable truths and sacred values.

As evident by the unshakeable confidence of Condorcet, who was jailed and executed by functionaries of the French Revolution he rapturously praised, the Enlightenment’s faith in Progress was often as dogmatic as the Christian conviction in Providence. Although modernists de-deified the historical process, they formed a new God in “Man”, and built a new “Church of Reason” (August Comte). Consequently, many Enlightenment figures espoused a secularized Providential and Salvationist narrative that traced the development of humanity from ignorance to knowledge, from slavery to freedom, and from coarse animality to spiritual perfection. In many ways, humanism is less a philosophy than a repackaged theology in which people deify themselves as Lords of the Earth, and claim the right to commandeer its teeming life forms and fecund resources for their own purposes and benefits.

Despite the “Renaissance” in knowledge and arts, and the awakening of autonomy and critical reason in the Enlightenment, modern European cultures perpetuated regnant dogmas and ignorance; replicated anthropocentrism and speciesism; perpetuated cruelties, torture, pogroms, and conquests; replaced monarchical domination with the oligarchic tyranny of capital; and intensified hierarchies while disseminating oppressive power systems. Orthodox Christian ideologies combined with humanism and the emerging technosciences, reinforced the ontological and moral chasm dividing human and nonhuman animals, and promoted unprecedented pathologies of power that targeted global peoples, “brute beasts” and hostile “wilderness”.

Dramatic advances in science and technology; the emancipation of rational inquiry from Church strictures; the hegemony of instrumental over communicative reason; a grow-or-die market society organized
around profit, commodification and accumulation imperatives; and exponential population growth – all these factors and more produced a massive, expanding, intensive, and unprecedented system of power and animal slavery. The modern, “civilized” and “enlightened” world proved itself more barbarous than any past culture, as it reduced animals to nonsentient machines and tortured them mercilessly without anesthetic in the dungeons of vivisection laboratories. Subsequent developments in technological and scientific domination led to the industrialization of animals through factory farms and slaughterhouses. And these horrifying and increasingly global systems of intensive confinement, barbaric torture and unconscionable slaughter (whereby currently every year some seven billion people slaughter sixty billion land animals and tens of billions more sea animals for food consumption alone), as well as to genetic engineering and cloning based on the most invasive control and manipulation of animal bodies possible, manipulating their genomes and cloning them in mass homogenous batches.10

With strong roots in political economy and the capitalist theory of *Homo economicus*, the progressivist vision assumes that humans are rational, self-interested beings who seek constant change, technological advances, greater comfort and more wealth. According to this ideology, each generation will live better than its predecessors, and the generations to come will tap the resources of even greater technical advances, comforts, and markets of possibility. Since the seventeenth century, progress has been measured in strictly quantitative terms, such as growing powers of technical control over nature, constantly expanding markets and wealth creation, and spreading “peace and prosperity” throughout the globe.

Modernist measures of progress rely on indices such as production quotas, employment rates, profit margins, housing sales, consumer confidence levels, and the Gross National Product. Aside from ignoring the catastrophic impact of growth on exploited peoples, animals, and the environment, the quantitative model cannot measure intangibles such as meaning, satisfaction, and happiness. Thus, in crucial ways, it cannot address the question of whether Western industrial capitalism is a “better” social system than premodern forms. Indeed, the evidence points decisively in the other direction, showing that in myriad ways modernity regresses behind or eliminates many advantages of primal and non-hierarchical societies.

As there is no direct connection between changes in the objective and subjective worlds, between wealth and well-being, and between the quantity of goods and the quality of life, and as happiness and satisfaction
cannot be measured mathematically, there must be a qualitative measure of progress one can use in critical contrast to the dominant model. Indeed, a dramatic indicator that modern Western societies are not progressing in crucial areas like health and happiness is the phenomenon that psychological, social, and physical afflictions climb in proportion to the rate of modernization. It is a well-known fact that the more “advanced” a society, the higher its rates of alcoholism, drug abuse, suicide, mental illness, depression, job dissatisfaction, crime, murder, divorce, and so on. Given the inverse relation between social and technological development and human fulfillment, and between economic growth and ecological balance, we clearly need new and varied means of measuring progress.

But advances in “progress” were determined not only according to a narrow range of material indictors that charted growth and innovation in realms such as science, technology, medicine and economic profits. Independent of this error, analysts tracked gains enjoyed only by privileged elites, and ignored the catastrophic consequences of industrialism and capitalist exploitation on the working classes, the homeless and desperately poor, and the oppressed and marginalized subaltern groups. In direct contrast, in novels such as *David Copperfield* (1850) Charles Dickens vividly exposed the misery, squalor and desperation of the majority of unfortunates living and working under the rule of Victorian capitalism. Similarly, in his 1906 masterpiece, *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair shocked the American nation with his poignant descriptions of oppressed immigrants working in the meatpacking plants of the Chicago stockyards (although his descriptions of the horrors and filth of industrial animal slaughter far overshadowed his intended focus on the miserable lives of immigrant proletarians).

A few theorists such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Marquis de Condorcet and Karl Marx assailed a core fallacy in modernist ideology, which led them to reject any concept of progress that enriched a small minority of elites by exploiting and impoverishing the vast majority of people whose lives dramatically worsened in the factories and slums of capitalist society. For socialists, Marxists, anarchists, feminists and reformers, one could only speak meaningfully of “social progress” when the immense potential of modern knowledge and industry benefited all people more or less equally, rather exploiting the many to benefit the few. Only upon the basis of workers’ democracy and egalitarianism, radicals and progressives argued, could the vast potential of industrial capitalism be realized. And this, radicals insisted, could come about only with the abolition of capitalism and class hierarchies, in a socialist, communist, or anarchist society in which workers and citizens collectively owned, democratically managed,
and equally shared the benefits of advanced science, technology, and industry. True progress and social advance could come about only when all were emancipated from need and created conditions for the universal flourishing of humankind.

II. THE LIMITATIONS OF HUMANISM

“Slavery is the first step toward civilization. In order to develop it is necessary that things should be much better for some and much worse for others, then those who are better off can develop at the expense of others.”
Alexander Herzen

Modernity is a huge subterfuge constructed as a zero-sum game, a situation in which one group gains if and only if another group or other groups lose, with the consequence of distributing resources such as money, status, and influence in increasingly asymmetrical patterns, and thereby creating or exacerbating hierarchical domination. Thus, capitalists are rich only because workers are poor, and workers are poor because capitalists exploit their labor power and appropriate surplus value as profit. Powerful states and empires amass wealth and power by stealing resources and enslaving people from vanquished states. The world’s “developed” nations become rich and powerful by siphoning resources and wealth from “undeveloped” nations, which in fact were intentionally underdeveloped and suffered poverty and lack brought on by colonization. The cities and palaces of Europe could not have been erected without reducing African cities to rubble and its peoples to slaves.

But the obscenity involving what one human group or class does to another to advance its own interests in the name of “progress” is exponentially greater if we consider the worst case of this injustice, which involves what humans do to other animals. The entire human species gains at the expense of millions of nonhuman animal species and countless billion of animal individuals that are enslaved, exploited and slaughtered to grow human populations, wealth, comfort, while operating under the illusions that their technoworld exists autonomously from the natural world and that this holocaust does not have the most severe consequences for nature, biodiversity and society in direct ways. In the greatest zero-sum game of all, human advances exist in inverse relation to the massive losses of freedom and life suffered by other animals. Thus, the more humans gain, the more animals lose; the greater the human comfort, the more suffering and death for animals, and rises in human population numbers bring extinction to other animals and reduce biodiversity. While helping humanity in highly uneven ways (as determined by class, political power, and systems of hierarchy,
discrimination, control, and violence), modern technoscience intensified the misery and slaughter of animals, and exacerbated the destruction of the earth. This is evident in the growing horrors of vivisection, factory farming, slaughterhouses, fur farming, and sundry systems of exploitation, as humans brought about the sixth great extinction crisis in the history of the planet, polluted and poisoned all aspects of their physical surroundings, and provoked catastrophic climate change.

From the animal and ecological standpoints, therefore, “progress” is regress, humanism is barbarism, the “light” of Reason brings darkness and madness, and science sanctifies sadism. And since injury and damage to nonhuman animals and ecosystems inevitably undermines human existence itself, the “gains” resulting from modern innovations are short-term and partial at best. The bill for the true social and ecological costs of industrial capitalism is now due, and will be shouldered most by underdeveloped nations who contributed least to conditions of crisis, while future human and animal generations will incur the heaviest costs and greatest suffering, as already climate change is taking a huge toll on humans and other animal species.

Against the metanarrative that links the first step in social advance with the rise of agricultural society, Jared Diamond identifies the shift from foraging to farming cultures as “the worst mistake in the history of the human race”. Agriculture brought infectious diseases, malnutrition, a shorter life span, and more work; it worsened the position of women, introduced economic and political stratification, and overall it “inextricably combines causes of our rise and our fall”. Thus, the agricultural revolution came at a huge cost, and brought numerous regressive developments, especially for nonhuman animals. The creation of surplus food and building of ever-larger towns and cities enabled the rapid expansion of the human population, which encouraged ever more intensive exploitation of animals. Gradually, humans commandeered animal bodies for food, clothing, labor, transportation, and warfare. From chance and haphazard experimentation to increasingly sophisticated forms of knowledge and control, humans learned how to shape virtually every facet of animal existence to their own advantage. They discerned, for instance, how to manipulate the reproductive lives of animals by castration (to make males more docile) and, more generally through artificial selection. Over time, humans dominated other animals through hobbling, confinement, whips, prods, chains, and branding to auction them as commodities and brand them as private property. Today, domination and manipulation extends to the cellular and genetic levels of animal bodies through genetic manipulation and cloning in order to breed
and mass produce “farmed animals” such as cattle, pigs, and chickens to grow as fast and as large as possible for maximum profit.

To call modernization processes and the current state of the world “progress” is madness. The dominator societies that have spread across the globe over the last ten thousand years have been a calamitous error. The narratives, values, and identities of anthropocentrism, speciesism, human supremacy that brought us to this evolutionary dead-end cannot possibly provide the solutions to the problems dominator cultures created. The fallacious and disastrous consequences of separating humans from other animals and from the earth as a whole, the hubristic and ignorant efforts to “dominate” and “control” nature and bend it to the human will, and the arrogant dismissal of limits to growth in favor of the fantasy of unending abundance, is evident in the ecological crisis reverberating through the world.

No coherent, consistent, or defensible definition of progress would sanction the exploitation of the majority of humans for the benefit of a minority of subjugated people whose lives dramatically worsened so that the ruling elite could prosper. For the same reason, no viable notion of progress is possible that focuses on the “advantages” humans gain – however democratic, universal, and justly distributed the benefits might be – at the incredible expense of animal suffering and lives and the ecological integrity of the planet – could not possibly be upheld as serious, viable, or credible. Progress cannot be defined in reference to the human community alone, for however many millions or billions of beneficiaries, the exploitation of staggering numbers of other species and individuals cannot be justified. Only a pathologically violent, disconnected, ignorant, and egoistic species – Homo sapiens – is capable of calling this legacy of madness and murder “progress”. The fatally flawed nature of, and contradictions inherent in, humanism grows ever clearer and more malignant each day. Contrariwise, while much of humanity has proven itself incapable of learning the most basic lessons of ecology, such as to appreciate the limits to nature and the need to live in harmony with rather than in opposition to its vital surroundings. Others, however, have clung to the knowledge of contemporary holistic and ecological science (the essence of which formed the wisdom of ancient cultures and primal peoples) that as long as humans butcher animals and plunder nature, they decimate and destroy their own lives. For a viable human world is impossible without humility, respect, and connectedness, and recognition that what they do to the animals they do to themselves, that animals play vital ecological roles in sustaining and perpetuating ecological systems, and that society depends on a flourishing
natural world with integral ecological systems and rich biodiversity.

We assuredly need new, multidimensional ways of measuring progress that gauge the quality of life (e.g., meaningful work and leisure time) rather than fetishizing the quantity of innovation, growth, and wealth. But the new paradigms proposed by reformists such as Edward Burch (who advanced a more diverse but still limited “General Progress Index”), sundry apolitical visionaries, or revolutionaries of any leftist stripe are fatally flawed and deeply inadequate. The new concepts of humanity and society, the new models of progress, the new blueprints and moral compasses of life, must be more far-reaching than most dare to or can imagine. Human identity, philosophy, social theory, and ethics must transcend the limits of humanism – however democratically conceived – in order to bring animal liberation and ecological ethics into the forefront of a postmodern consciousness that deconstructs and reconstructs the concept of progress. This involves abandoning the illusions of zero-sum logic in favor of the truth of mutual aid, a profound understand of holistic interrelationships, interdependencies, and shared fates. It requires refashioning the social world so that humanity can live in harmony with, rather than in contradiction to, the flourishing of biodiversity and integrity of the natural world. And it recognizes the ancient wisdom, the basis for overcoming hubris and fantasies of dominance and control, which is that humanity belongs to the earth, and the earth does not belong to humanity.

III. The Task of Reconstruction

“Not least among the tasks now confronting thought is that of placing all the reactionary arguments against Western Culture in the service of progressive enlightenment.”

Theodor Adorno

In the current era of the sixth great species extinction crisis, rainforest destruction, global warming, and runaway human population growth, we must recognize that the Emperor has no clothes, and it is time to call Western civilization for what it is – a metastasizing system of domination, war, slavery, slaughter, omnicide, exterminism, and ecological devastation.

The fallacious and disastrous consequences of separating human animals from nonhuman animals and the natural environment, attempting to dominate and subjugate complex beings and physical systems of which we have no grasp, while fantasizing that the earth is an inexhaustible cornucopia of resources, able to satisfy innumerable billions of people for an endless span of time, is dramatically evident in the ecological crisis
reverberating through the world sending even conservative scientists into alarmist messengers on high-alert status.\textsuperscript{15}

The earth itself is refuting the dualistic, speciesist, anthropocentric, and hierarchical philosophies that informed Western thought from Aristotle and Aquinas to Descartes and Bacon to Marx and beyond into the present day, and indeed define the entire trajectory of “civilization”, of the farming and herding societies that at least ten thousand years ago began to supplant ancient foraging cultures. But rather than merely deconstruct progress and strand ourselves in a nihilistic wasteland without a moral compass, we can reconstruct the concept to effect a rupture with the past and to chart a radically new way forward that can potentially stave off social chaos, unimaginable suffering and loss of human and animal life, and ecological collapse on an unimaginable scale.

Only through reference to some notion of progress can we assess whether our lives and societies are moving in a positive direction. We can gauge whether a new job, school, or community is better than a prior one; whether one’s health, relationships, or finances are improving or deteriorating, and how one’s life is proceeding overall. Unlike traditional peoples, modern Westerners live in dynamic societies and expect their lives to “improve” over time, as parents expect – or once did – that their children will lead better lives and have more opportunities than what they inherited. Of course, since the quality of individual lives is directly bound up with the state of their societies, people need rational and diverse criteria to assess whether their society is moving in a positive or negative direction, as they need also the capacities to evaluate whether the natural environment is regenerating or degenerating.

One can easily recognize the need for better policies – for progress – in critical areas such as education, health care, and jobs, as well as ameliorating social inequality, poverty, and homelessness. Similarly, one can imagine striking improvement in human attitudes and practices toward other animals (to be measured by ever-widening abolitionist measures banning circuses, rodeos, zoos, vivisection, the fur industry, cat and dog breeders, factory farms, and meat, dairy, and egg production and consumption), in addition to restoring the integrity of the forests, waterways, and air. “Progress” entails two distinct conditions: (1) change (from one state or situation to another), and (2) improvement (the new state or situation is an “advance” over the prior one). Whereas the second condition entails the first, the first in no way demands the second, as change can bring about worse rather than better conditions for individuals, society, humankind, animals, and the earth as a whole. Positive assurances to the contrary, the implementation of
the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, for instance, considerably worsened environmental and labor conditions in Canada, the U.S., and Mexico while greatly benefiting multinational corporations, exactly as was intended and misrepresented. Since the 1980s, paralleling developments globally, U.S. corporate profits have risen, CEO salaries have skyrocketed (now over 400 times the wages of the average worker), and the gap between rich and poor has grown steadily wider.

In a world predicated on rapid, chaotic, directionless flux for its own sake (or rather, for the sake of destroying traditions that conflict with market growth and the production of new “needs”), “progress” is an indispensable critical and normative concept that can be used to advance democracy, freedom, autonomy, ecology and animal liberation, and thereby help guide society in a healthy, humane, and sane direction rather than barreling down the same dysfunctional and destructive path embarked on for ten thousand years. The concept of progress is a means of guiding and directing change in the direction of greater democracy, freedom, ecological balance, and respect for nonhuman animal life and the earth as a whole.

“Progress” is an indispensable critical and normative concept that can help advance democracy, freedom, autonomy, community, animal liberation, and ecology, and thereby to move society in a healthy and sane rather than dysfunctional and suicidal direction. Even anarcho-primitivists like John Zerzan - who rejects the totality of civilization and longs for a mode of existence prior to the emergence of speech and symbolic thought – imply some notion of progress by assuming that things would or could greatly improve with the collapse of “civilization” and return to Paleolithic lifeways.

Today it is patently obvious that no viable concept of progress can be dominionist, anthropocentrist, and speciesist, or can ignore the evolutionary and ecological unity and coherence of the human, animal, and natural worlds. A definition of progress that violently elevates humans over all other animals; that enslaves every being from which it can draw blood, labor, and profit; that fetishizes growth and mandates plunder; and that is bound up with addiction to fossil fuels, growth, and unsustainable levels of consumption, implodes under the weight of its massive contradictions. A sound concept of progress, in contrast, would be holistic in outlook, and grasp the interrelations and evolutionary continuity among the natural, animal, and human worlds. In reconstructed postmodern and posthumanist form, a viable notion of progress abandons hackneyed hierarchies, pseudo-separations, and indefensible prejudices of all kinds, as it views nonhuman animals as sentient subjects of a life with their own inviolable purposes and
value, and are respected as equals sharing with us similar needs and interests. It grasps that the requisite moral and psychological revolutions humanity must rapidly undertake to overcome their formidable evolutionary impasse are impossible without equally profound transformations of all society institutions.

A postmodern, posthumanist concept of progress repudiates the zero-sum game of winners and losers. The only meaningful definition of progress refers to *improvements in life and conditions for all* – not just “all” humans but rather all species, and all the staggeringly complex and interconnected facets, relations, and systems of planetary ecology. A notion of progress that sanctions the exploitation of the majority for the benefit of a minority is dysfunctional and disastrous. The new concept I have advocated, in contrast, breaks with domineering, hierarchical and dualistic mindsets and institutions that succumb to the hubristic “human first” mentality and define human interests in opposition to other species and nature, rather than understanding humans as inseparably involved with the vast biocommunity and entire earth. The human-democratic principle of equal consideration extends in principle not only to all human interests (and therefore underpins a theory of equality, autonomy and global justice), it also gives equal consideration to the interests of animals and the requirements of ecological systems.

Quite unlike the humanist definition, however broad, “radical”, and “egalitarian”, a new account of progress must incorporate nonhuman animals into the category of “all” who benefit from, or at least are not harmed by, regulations, laws and social policies. We need to advance a *new universalism* unparalleled in scope that transcends the arbitrary and parochial mindset of humanism to respect the inherent value of nonhuman beings and the physical environment, as we cultivate harmonious relationships among humans, animals, and the earth. In contradistinction to postmodern attacks on “totalizing” theories and grand narratives, the problem is not with stories that they are too broad to occlude cultural differences, but rather with frameworks that are not universal and inclusive enough.

Accordingly, it seems prudent to define social progress as occurring whenever values, practices, laws and institutions advance democracy, equality, rights and community in ways that promote, balance and harmonize the needs and interests of humans, animals and nature. On this conception, progress is measured according to the degree that change promotes the well-being and integrity of three overlapping communities and systems. A policy promoting development or resource consumption that advances human interests at the expense of animals and the earth is an anthropocentric and
speciesist approach that gives insufficient consideration to other species and the earth as a whole. This orientation, therefore, is not likely to promote harmonization, sustainability, or “progress” in our new sense. Truthfully, given the metastasization of global capitalism, the rise of authoritarian police states, the growing severity of social and environmental problems, and the inveterate human failure to forestall looming or potential problems with foresight, restraint, and precautionary measures, it is hard to view the ideals of total liberation and balancing human, animal, and ecological requirements as anything but utopian. But utopian visions too are critical and constructive, they can offer progressive guidance however inadequate the results.

IV. Non-Linear History

“History is not ‘just one damn fact after another’, as a cynic put it. There really are broad patterns to history.”

Jared Diamond

History is neither repetitive and random, nor linear and teleological (seeking some preordained goal); it is formed in the complex matrix in which humans shape – and are shaped by – biological, environmental, and social determinants, as they co-evolve with other animals. As we see in the work of thinkers ranging from eighteenth century philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder to Foucault and Manuel de Landa, the singular concept of “history” must be broken up and dispersed into a plurality of histories involving different cultures that develop unevenly and semi-autonomously from one another (but often in parallel evolution as well).17

Yet, despite its non-linear complexity, history is not as random and meaningless as postmodernists like Foucault or Jean Baudrillard suggest.18 Rather, one can find developmental dynamics and patterns comprehensible only through a unifying narrative. History is not a smooth, linear trajectory unperturbed by contingency, chaos, conflict, contradiction, spontaneity, stagnation, regression, and ambiguity. Against a single, uniform, homogeneous and totalizing “metanarrative” that sees history as a grand story of either freedom and progress, or domination and disaster (a “metanarrative in reverse”), social evolution exhibits competing and often contradictory norms, values, policies, institutions, and developmental tendencies. Thus, since “Western culture” is not a monolithic, unbroken, uncontested and seamless advance of anthropocentrism, speciesism, racism, patriarchy, hierarchy and domination, it is important to trace the simultaneous development of two opposing lineages. We therefore need a dual narrative that maps competing dynamics and contradictory values,
traditions and tendencies.

Throughout Western history, in other words, cultures of *complimentarity and hierarchy* have developed dialectically, side-by-side, simultaneously, in opposition and antagonism to one another. In addition to the domineering humanist conceptions of ancient, medieval and modern cultures, there emerged vital alternatives through the *ahimsa* ethic and holistic vegetarian ideals born in ancient Eastern religious cultures and that migrated to influence Western outlooks as well. Thus, Pythagoras, Porphyry, Jesus, Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare, Thomas More, Milton, Alexander Pope, John Calvin, William Paley, Michel de Montaigne, Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Jeremy Bentham, Percy Shelley, William Blake, Caroline Earle White, Leo Tolstoy, Bernard Shaw, Gandhi, Henry Salt, Albert Schweitzer, Albert Einstein, and growing legions of contemporary thinkers and activists from diverse backgrounds have repudiated speciesism, anthropocentrism, human supremacism, dualism, and violent hierarchical lifeways to promote peaceful, compassionate, and egalitarian values that can unite humans, animals, and the earth in one vast community of unity-in-difference and difference-in-unity. Tragically, however, the egalitarian and non-hierarchical traditions remained marginalized, and dominator cultures and their hierarchical mentalities and institutions prevailed, wreaking violence and destruction in a formicating and colonizing spread of *Homo sapiens* throughout the planet. From Aristotle, the Stoics, Paul, Augustine, Aquinas and Martin Luther to Descartes, Bacon, Kant, Marx, humanists, Social Darwinists and the present time, the hierarchical tradition sought to marginalize, repress, and silence the voices of complimentarity and to establish human supremacy as natural and unquestionable.

While history is not pre-determined, law-governed, teleological (striving toward a goal), or linear, nor is it random, chaotic, cyclical flux, repetition of the same, or meaningless change. Rather, among the many possible evolutionary possibilities and narrative interpretations of history, one can trace a broad evolutionary trend, a developmental pattern, a coherent movement, a meaning and a potentiality. Despite the massive failures indelibly etched into the slaughterbench of history, such as played out in an endless stretch of hierarchies, wars, armies, empires, battlefields, states, classes, bureaucracies, genocide, and omnicidal devastation, one can also find – in particular by examining the last few centuries of European and American history – a discernible advance of *moral progress*.

One can define and gauge moral progress as *the broadening of the moral community toward ever-greater degrees of inclusiveness and equality*. From another perspective, and in another (admittedly capitalist and individualist)
language, one can map the dynamic movement of the universalization of rights. The struggles for freedom, rights, justice, autonomy, democracy, inclusiveness, and community, while not unfolding in a linear or inexorable way, provide a kind of coherence to the last few centuries of modern Western history. As vital as sympathies and sentiments are to mutual aid and the ethical life, critical reason is also crucial to broadening the moral community, to developing more expansive and inclusive communities, to advancing concepts of moral worth, and, after the eighteenth century, to fostering ever-larger communities of “subjects-of-a-life” (Regan) with inherent value. The shift from uncritically accepting customs to demanding a logical justification for their assent moves society away from dogma and tradition toward the rational viewpoint crucial for ethics, justice, equality, community, and ecological sustainability.

Over the last two centuries, moreover, the moral and legal discourse of rights has become increasingly expansive (to be sure – not without resistance, reversals, and setbacks), moving from state-backed privileges of white male elites to granting basic rights to ever-broader groups of human beings, and eventually to animals and nature itself. But as the language of the state, and institution that supports and serves corporate power, the discourse of rights is limited, however expansive, and ultimately needs to give way to a new language to protect the inherent value and dignity of human and nonhuman individuals. Of course, this language is not yet a developed reality because the social revolution it requires has not yet appeared, and is nowhere on the horizon save for encouraging but nonetheless reformist and sporadic resistance from Arab nations to Spain to the U.S.

The expansion of the moral community was not a linear development encompassing all humanity in a single, continuous, irreversible and irrevocable trajectory. Affirmations of biological and moral relatedness of species are evident through history and various cultures, and were present throughout Western society, but advances in moral reasoning (always related to democracy-building) were often lost, delayed, or reversed, and still have a long way to go. “Nevertheless”, Peter Singer writes, “it is the direction in which moral thought has been going since ancient times”, a process of increasingly expansive moral values and a movement in which, since the eighteenth century, egalitarian philosophies and moral and legal rights have widened in scope and influence.

Dynamically developing throughout the turbulence of the last two centuries, the notions of value, rights and community were moving moral concern beyond humans, beyond animals, beyond even sentience, into a holistic ecological ethics that enfolded the entire natural world and physical
environment into a new moral paradigm. From Albert Schweitzer and Aldo Leopold to deep ecologists, enlightened thinkers in the twentieth century have broadened the notion of community beyond the human sphere to include other animal species and the earth as a whole. Schweitzer, for instance, advocated a general ethics of “reverence for life” that encompassed the organic and inorganic world. For the authentically ethical person, no person, animal, or element of nature should be harmed, all must be protected, and “life itself is sacred”. Leopold championed a “land ethic” rooted in respect for and awareness of the complex interrelatedness of all matter and life on this planet. The new ecological sensibility and “biocentric” ethics that assigned intrinsic value throughout the world was bolstered considerably by the tradition of deep ecology, which was developed by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in the 1970s and was developed by a wide range of thinkers including George Sessions and Bill Devall.

This entails a new form of enlightenment that overcomes all forms of discrimination, including speciesism, recognizes and respects the basic rights animals have as sentient beings, and treat animals with the same respect it accords members of its own species. We must elaborate a new concept of progress that is ecological, sustainable, humane, holistic and rooted in a new ethics of nature, one that dialectically mediates the needs and interests of humans, animals, and the earth. The new Enlightenment promotes a paradigm shift in the way we think about and relate to the natural world, it widens the boundaries of community to other species and inorganic matter, and it extends basic rights to nonhuman animals by application of the same logic used to grant human rights.

Moral progress should not be conceived in idealist terms as an autonomous development of human ethical capacities. Reason and emotion have played key roles in the development of ethics, but moral evolution also develops in and through political rebellion and social movements for rights, justice and liberation (which themselves depend on passions and rational critique). The best vehicle for continued ethical and social advance today is the politics of total liberation, which views the emancipation of humans, animals, and the earth as one interrelated, comprehensive, unified struggle, such as demands an alliance politics of unprecedented breadth, diversity and inclusiveness.
“To keep from dehumanizing ourselves (and even gravitating toward genocide), we must stop demanding perpetual progress.”  
William Catton

“Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.”  
Antonio Gramsci

The Western concept of progress and the system that spawned it have brought us to an evolutionary crossroads where we now confront profound options and choices. Under the spectral shadow of climate change, resource scarcity, biological meltdown, environmental entropy, nuclear threats, and escalating global conflicts, the future of human evolution is problematic at best and unlikely or doomed at worst. Progress is something human beings still must aspire to and can achieve, but only with revolutionary changes in society, culture, politics, worldviews, values, and human identity. A new moral compass is desperately needed to guide and inform the radical institutional and conceptual changes necessary to stave of catastrophic social and ecological collapse.

After millions of years of prehistory, only two hundred thousand as *Homo sapiens* and just 40,000 years as *Homo sapiens sapiens* (modern, language-speaking humans), we have reached a pivotal point in history, a crossroads for the future, such that we can choose either breakdown or breakthrough. In the language of chaos theory, there have been numerous bifurcation points of social disequilibrium in history when a fundamental system transformation could have occurred, but the new fluctuations did not provoke sufficient change in the fundamental structures and mindsets. New arrangements will arise, however, as the social and ecological crisis deepens, that we must exploit for their transformative potential.

The main drama of our time is: Which road will humanity choose – the road that leads to peace and stability, or the one verging toward greater war and chaos? The one that establishes social justice, or that which exacerbates inequality and poverty? Will we stay on the cul-de-sac of uncontrolled global capitalist growth and neoliberalism, or will we find an alternative route that radicalizes the modern traditions of Enlightenment and democracy and is guided by the vision of a future that is just, egalitarian, participatory, ecological, healthy, happy and sane? Will we move, in David Korten’s words, toward the “Great Unraveling” and plummet deeper into the abyss? Or will we undertake a “Great Turning”, where we finally learn to live in partnership with one another, nonhuman animals, and the earth?

Windows of opportunity are rapidly closing. The actions that humanity now collectively takes – or fails to take – will determine whether our future
– and that of biodiversity itself – is hopeful or bleak. In the aftermath of ten thousand years of incessant growth and war that humanity waged upon itself, other species, and the earth; and in the presence of an unsustainable global capitalism and system of growth that is driving natural systems to an irreversible tipping point, the greatest challenge in the history of our species is staring us right in the face: Can humanity dramatically change its entire mode of existence – from moral and psychological outlooks to their economic and political institutions – in order to forestall planetary catastrophe, or will people remain inert, apathetic, delusional, or fail to mount global and united resistance movements adequate to stop the aggression, nihilism, and death drive of an omnicidal system?

In an era of catastrophe and crisis, the continuation of the human species in a viable or desirable form, is obviously contingent and not a given or a necessary good. Apart from tradition, dogma and hubris, there is no indication that humanity has an inherent goal, destiny, purpose, or fate. Just as this species might never have evolved at all, given the complex contingencies of evolution, so it might never survive another century or two. For, having evolved with numerous other Homo types, and emerging as the sole heir to the hominid family line, the human species has nevertheless embarked on a mad, violent, destructive and unsustainable mode of growth and change. Like Homo habilis, Homo erectus, Homo neanderthalensis, and all other bipedal ancestors, Homo sapiens could easily reach an evolutionary dead-end (we may already have) and succumb to the black hole of extinction.

Never before has humanity faced such a challenge; never has there been a more critical moment in history than now. Human evolution is not a fait accompli – either in the sense that things will increasingly improve with the passage of time (the linear concept of progress), or that our species will continue at all. Thus, the future of human evolution – in a viable and desirable form, rather than in a post-apocalyptic, barren, Social Darwinist Mad Max world – is something that will not come easy, if at all, and demands a struggle on an unprecedented scale.

While the result is horrible to contemplate from the human standpoint, Homo sapiens may not have the will or intelligence to meet this challenge, and might thereby succumb to the same oblivion that engulfed its hominid ancestors, and into which it dispatched countless thousands of other species. Just as ancestral hominids have gone extinct, so have prior civilizations collapsed. As Jared Diamond has shown, numerous civilizations of former times (including Easter Island, classical Mayan civilization and the Greenland Norse) have suffered economic and social collapse due to overpopulation, overfarming, overgrazing, overhunting, deforestation, soil
erosion, and starvation.\textsuperscript{26}

But, considered from the perspective of \textit{animals and the earth}, the demise of human beings in the form they evolved would be the best imaginable event possible, as it would allow the regeneration of a middle-aged earth that could trigger a new Cambrian explosion of speciation and biodiversity. Whereas worms, pollinators, dung beetles and countless other species are vital to a flourishing planet, \textit{Homo sapiens} is the one species – certainly the main species – the earth could well do without.\textsuperscript{27}

It is increasingly obvious that the fates of humans, animals and the earth are inextricably bound. Progress can no longer entail the zero sum game of human “gain” at the expense of animals and the environment. Rather, a deeper concept of progress must emerge that eliminate the opposition between human and animals and society and nature. Most fundamentally, it would understand the profound interrelatedness of all aspects of planetary ecology, and enable us to become good citizens of the biocommunity rather than barbarians, Huns, Vikings, invaders, mercenaries, juntas and death squads bringing down the whole house – \textit{Gaia}.

\textbf{Notes}


5. The writing of “grand narratives” runs counter to recent postmodern critiques of “metanarratives” of history which are simplistic, teleological, and homogenize disparate dynamics and events in a homogenous framework. Whereas metanarratives defined by postmodernists are indeed problematic, we should not lose sight of the narrative aspects of theory and science and the importance of macro-, or “grand”, narratives. The grand narrative of “moral progress” tries to avoid the fallacies of metanarratives, without reducing history to mere randomness. See Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, \textit{Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations} (New York: Guilford Press, 1991).


7. To be sure, some modernists had more complex and dialectical models of progressive change that allowed for regressions and reversals (which nevertheless ultimately triumphed in progressive changes; some thinkers such as Rousseau or Nietzsche were
anti-progressivist, and others such as Diderot were quite pessimistic or skeptical about the possibilities for a rational society and benevolent humanity. See Steven Best, *The Politics of Historical Visions: Marx, Foucault, and Habermas* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995).

8. Revealing the continuities between the old and new narratives, Bacon, the renowned champion of the scientific method, claimed that humanity must “recover its God-given right to command nature”. In works such as *Novum Organum* Bacon eloquently and disturbingly articulated the ethos of domination by commanding us to penetrate nature, to seize her secrets, and to put her on the rack of our inquisition.

9. A sound analysis of Western progressivism needs to mediate two different historical approaches. The first outlook, represented by J. D. Bury and Carl Becker, emphasizes the ancient Judeo-Christian roots of the modern concept of progress and sees modernity as a secularization of the Judeo-Christian narrative [see J. D. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into its Origin and Growth* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2008); and Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964)]. In response, a second school of thought has emerged, represented by Hans Blumenberg and Christopher Lasch, which underscores progress as a purely modern concept predicated on a sharp break from the past. Lasch follows Blumenberg’s critique of the “secularization thesis” which sees the modern secular narrative as different from the Judeo-Christian story in two key ways: it roots change in human dynamics divorced from a Divine plan or purpose, and it valorizes the multiplication of needs (whereas Christian and Roman philosophies rooted moral wisdom and virtue in the limitation of needs) [see Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983); and Christopher Lasch, op. cit., 44 ff.]. While Blumenberg and Lasch correctly identify discontinuities between the ancient and modern, and the Christian and secular frameworks, there are also important continuities they occlude. On my interpretation, there are three key influences on the concept of progress: the Judeo-Christian tradition, seventeenth century science, and the eighteenth century Enlightenment and “liberal” tradition that commonly promoted free markets alongside free thinking.


12. Thus, for example, Edward Burch replaces the narrow Gross National Product Index with the broader General Progress Index (GPI). Incorporating data from the United Nations “Human Freedom Index”, the GPI model employs 22 different criteria to assess human, social, and environment needs (including leisure time, educational attainment, and reduction in global warming emissions) and their levels of attainment. See Edward Burch, “Gross National Happiness”, *Clamor Magazine*, Issue 35.5, January/February 2006, http://www.clamormagazine.org/issues/35-5/content/economics_1.php.

