

# Progressivism: The Snobbery of Chronology

PETER KREEFT

*Though snobbery was once quite popular and even socially acceptable in Europe, it was never popular in America. But one form of it still is, in both continents: chronological snobbery.*

The only people it is still polite to be snobbish toward is our ancestors, those who can't talk back because they are dead. (Most people are, you know. We are the small and arrogant oligarchy of the lucky-to-be-living.)

A clever debater once accused William F. Buckley of having "one of the finest minds of the thirteenth century." Buckley replied, "I don't deserve that compliment." Buckley was not a progressivist; his debate partner was.

That debater was the kind of person who uses the term "medieval" to mean not only "the millennium between about 500 and 1500 A.D." but also "primitive, superstitious, and unenlightened." Indeed, the very term "Middle Ages" was coined by the progressivists of the so-called "Enlightenment" as a term of insult: the "Middle" Ages were in the middle between the two ages that were enlightened, namely pre-Christian paganism, especially the Greeks and Romans, and the new paganism of the post-Christian "Enlightenment." (Of course, from the Christian point of view, that period was in fact was the great Endarkenment.) One polemicist called the Middle Ages "a thousand years without a bath."

The fallacy of Progressivism is peculiarly modern. In fact, as we have just seen, the typically modern use of that very word "modern" to carry a (positive) value judgment is part of the fallacy. But the fallacy goes back to the Book of Job, who detected it in his three "friends" and repelled it with the famous bit of sarcasm: "No doubt you are the people and wisdom began with you!" It has also been called "the Whig theory of history," "The Idea of Automatic Progress," "Americanism" (by a papal encyclical, no less – see Ch. 12), and "Presentism." The term "chronological snobbery" comes from C.S. Lewis (to my mind the clearest and most useful Christian writer since Thomas Aquinas) in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, where he gives his friend Owen Barfield credit for inventing it.

Lewis defines and refutes it at once as

*the uncritical assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited. You must find out why it went out of date. Was it ever refuted (and if so by whom, where, and how conclusively) or did it merely die away as fashions do? If the latter, this tells us nothing about its truth or falsehood. From seeing this, one passes to the realization that our own age is also 'a period,' and certainly has, like all periods, its own characteristic illusions. They are likeliest to lurk in those widespread assumptions which are so ingrained in the age that no one dares to attack or feels it necessary to defend them (*Surprised by Joy*, pp. 207-208).*

Thus chronological snobbery is the identification, or confusion, of "change" with "progress." "Progress" is a value-laden term: it means not just change but change in a certain direction, change for the better. It is like a graph in geometry that charts the movement of some entity (a business, a body's growth, a football player's "forward progress") not only horizontally, from past to future, but also vertically, from worse to better.

But the very notion of a "better" assumes a "best," a standard, a goal. And that standard has to be unchanging, for if the goal line itself changes, it is impossible to make progress toward it. Imagine a runner on first base trying to make progress toward second base while the second baseman is carrying second base with him into the outfield.

The typically modern mind is 1) skeptical of absolute, unchanging standards and 2) in love with the idea of progress. But this is a logical impossibility, a self-contradiction. Without an unchanging standard, there can be no progress, only change. To such people, "progress" means no more than "change," and therefore "change" means the same as "progress."

Only a people both jaded and bored by the past and the present, and also skeptical of any "vertical dimension," any absolute and unchanging standard, could possibly be so moved by the single word "change" that a presidential candidate could win an election by using that single word as his campaign slogan. Why not instead "Rutabagas"?

The opposite of Progressivism is conservatism or traditionalism. A conservative, by definition, is a happy person, one who is happy with what is. It is only for that reason that he wants to conserve it. A progressivist, on the other hand, is by definition an unhappy person, one who is unhappy with what is. It is only for that reason that he wants to change it. A conservative is someone who thinks happiness consists first of all in enjoying the good things we already have. A progressive is one who sees happiness first of all in hoping to enjoy the things we do not yet have. Adam and Eve were conservatives until the Devil made them into progressives. For the Devil himself was the first progressivist. The other angels were happy with God and His will, but the Devil wanted to progress to something better.

In other words, progressivists try to tell truth with a clock instead of an argument. It is as silly as trying to tell time with a syllogism instead of a clock. Or a calendar, which is only a larger, longer clock. For to say that an idea is no longer believable simply because this is the 21st century, not the 13th, is no different from saying that an idea is no longer believable because it is now 11:00 p.m, not 10:00 a.m.

But even silly superstitions have reasons behind them, and these must be discovered, exposed, defined, stated fairly, and then refuted. And there are at least some seemingly cogent reasons that people adopt Progressivism. False conclusions usually are deduced from at least partially true premises; otherwise they would not have the power to deceive us.

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## How Did We Learn to Think This Way?

One of the causes of chronological snobbery is a reaction to the opposite superstition, which often clouded the judgment of our ancestors: that "new" equals "false" and "true" equals "old." "New" used to be a word of suspicion and "old" a word of affection. Now, it is exactly the opposite. Modern children use the word "old" as an insult ("You old . . .!"). But the ancients used it as a compliment. Things used to be sold by pretending they were older than they are. (And this market for fake antiques still has some cachet for a small minority.) Now, things are sold by pretending they are newer than they are. "New" sells. This is especially true of *ideas*.

Both of these attitudes are prejudices, but the exposure of neither one is a justification of its opposite. Intellectual errors, like moral vices, usually come in pairs.

A second justification for Progressivism is the fact of evolution, which seems to apply to both the growth of the individual and the growth of the human race. As we grow, it seems we get smarter, bigger, stronger, and (in those senses) better, both individually and collectively.

Yes, but we don't get happier, or holier, or wiser. There are more, not fewer suicides (especially among young people) today than in recorded history; and nothing is a more telling index of unhappiness than that. We are not more saintly than our ancestors but more decadent. And we speak of "modern knowledge" but not "modern wisdom." In fact, we still speak of "ancient wisdom." There has been not a single Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, or Aquinas for the last 750 years. Which is more important, wisdom or cleverness? Sanctity or power? Happiness or efficiency?

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A third argument for Progressivism is the fact that there has indeed been progress, in fact obvious, automatic, and spectacular progress, in one field: technology. And since this has both causes and effects in every other field, it seems reasonable to believe in progress there as well.

But it isn't. Cleverness in inventing machinery has no tendency to cause wisdom or virtue in the inventor. If anything, it causes pride, *hubris*, and addiction to the power the new machines give us. And that is regress rather than progress in wisdom and virtue and happiness. If "all power tends to corrupt," the same must be true of intellectual, scientific, and technological power. Why don't we make that inference? Might it be because the addict always lives in denial?

But (so goes a fourth argument) there seems to have been progress not just in the sciences but also in the humanities. *War and Peace* is better than *Beowulf*, and Picasso is better than the Lascaux cave paintings, and Stravinsky is better than Gregorian chant.

The answer to that is very simple: No, they're not. Name one 20th-century Homer, or Dante, or Shakespeare, or Rembrandt, or Beethoven. The humanities are an unmitigated disaster area today. Nine-

tenths of our English departments are infected with Deconstructionists and other radicals, who either reduce great works of art to "power relations" among "race, class, and gender," or else deny that art works have any independent meaning at all. *That* sort of infection does not respond to arguments, only to exorcists.

A fifth argument points to the virtue of hope. This is one of the three greatest things in the world, one of the three "theological virtues," along with faith and love. How can you have hope if you don't believe in progress? The two ideas seem almost identical.

But there are at least four differences. First, progress is faith in yourself, or in humanity, to pull itself up by its own bootstraps; hope is faith in God's grace. Second, the idea of progress means that long-range improvement is guaranteed; but hope, like faith, is a leap, not a guarantee. Third, progress is a collective idea, but hope is an individual virtue. Fourth, progress means something this-worldly, but hope's object is other-worldly. (Paradoxically, hope for heaven does have powerful consequences for this world too: throughout history, those who have contributed the most to the improvement of this world have always been those who had a lively hope for the next.)

### **What's Wrong with Loving Progress, Man?**

Progressivism is a form of snobbery, and has the same terrible moral effects as any other form of snobbery. In fact, it is snobbery masked, and therefore is even more harmful than open snobbery. It is a form of pride, the deadliest of the deadly sins.

If, as Chesterton said, "Tradition is the democracy of the dead," then Progressivism is the elitism of the living – and within that, of a certain educated, well-off subset that enjoys sneering at once at its ancestors and its neighbors. Progressivism stifles the voices of the past, and amplifies the sound of our own speech, the better to help us pretend we have heard all points of view, then do exactly as we wish.

Progressivism also cuts us off from what tradition gives us: a pile of precious intellectual and cultural gifts from our ancestors. And even when we receive the gifts and use them, we are not grateful for them, for Progressivism forbids us the virtue of humility, which is necessary for the acceptance of gifts; and from gratitude, without which there is simply no wisdom or happiness. There is no surer hallmark of holiness, happiness, and health, in individuals or societies, than gratitude, and no surer hallmark of their opposites than ingratitude.

Progressivism stems from logical fallacies and leads, by habit, to the disparagement of reason. The substitution of calendars for arguments not only proceeds from irrationality but also fosters it.

Worst of all, Progressivism clearly contradicts the very idea of a divine revelation. If there is such a revelation, Progressivism corrects it, corrects God Himself, and arrogates to itself the right to edit rather than deliver the divine mail, evaluating it by dating its postmark. Even religions that do not claim a direct divine revelation, like Confucianism, Taoism, or Buddhism, get their teachings from their past, from their founders. Progressivists make it up as they go along.

## The Causes of Chronological Snobbery

It is one thing to point out the arguments people offer to defend Progressivism, and another to identify the reasons – many of them irrational – that they actually stumble into this superstition. The former are typically rationalizations for the latter. The first cause of widespread Progressivism is a society-wide attention-deficit disorder (ADD), boredom with the "same old thing," and addiction to "change," which comes from contempt for the past, not hope for the future – as if progress was defined only by getting father from zero rather than closer to infinity.

Unthinking love of change for the sake of change is also *easier*. It is passive. It puts less mileage on the brain's odometer than the active and critical demand to find out whether the change is for better or for worse. Simple "change" is one-dimensional and automatic. Embracing it means also conflating the easy and comforting idea of irresistible progress with the difficult virtue of hope, which requires a constant active effort of each one of us.

There is also a religious – or rather, anti-religious – reason why our culture promotes Progressivism. Let me lay it out in the form of a syllogism (a very *old* and *traditional* form of reasoning):

- a) Since genuine progress necessarily implies a fixed, unchanging goal that does not change, and
- b) that's what religion claims to give us, therefore
- c) a secular state fears that this connection, however indirect, will pollute politics and thrust us back into the period of religious wars, which was ended by the separation of church and state.

Does this sound exaggerated? Think about how often people who defend traditional values are accused of hearkening back to "the Middle Ages." Ask yourself how long in any argument about the Catholic Church does it take a progressivist to mention the Inquisition? It's worth timing this phenomenon on your watch.

There is also in modern man, despite his protestations of independence, individualism, and autonomy (or perhaps precisely *because* of this) a deep, unacknowledged desire for conformity to the Zeitgeist, "the spirit of the age," "what everybody knows." It is surprisingly difficult to think for yourself, but only those who try to do that, know that.

This is actually a mild form of possession. For those who have become possessed by a demon, an evil spirit, an alien, *another* spirit than their own true self, have lost not only their own identity but even the knowledge that there is a distinction between themselves and their possessing spirit. They are so deeply self-deluded that they sincerely believe that the thoughts emanating from their mind come from within, not from without. This is as true of possession by the Zeitgeist as it is of possession by a demon.

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## What's the Antidote?

To destroy the superstition of Progressivism, we must restore reason to its proper place, as an insight into truth rather than a rationalization of our desires or ideologies. We must correct defective theories of knowledge such as rationalism, empiricism, and idealism – offering answers from the annals of sound philosophical reasoning, e.g., Aristotle and St. Thomas. We should answer honest skeptics such as Freud by critiquing their arguments logically; if he treats (as he does) all reasoning as a rationalization for unconscious desires, we must point out that this applies to his theories, too. We should ignore dishonest skeptics (see Ch. 9, Cynicism) who only want to sneer and enjoy jerking our necks by their chains.

We must think vertically, about timeless truths, before we can think horizontally, about timely, changing things. For without an appeal to some knowledge, however implicit, of a higher, unchanging reality, we cannot judge or improve anything real in this changing world. We must overcome our *aeternophobia*, our fear of eternal things. (There are new mental diseases in the modern world, just as there are new physical ones.)

We must moderate our fear of fanaticism. While we should never behave fanatically, Our Lord calls on us throughout the gospels to adopt a total, fanatical, uncompromising honesty with Truth – no matter what the cost. We must especially devote ourselves to the truth about the two persons we can never escape in time or in eternity: ourselves and God. The finally important question is whether those two persons will spend eternity together, or apart.

We must educate ourselves about our past, our ancestors, our tradition, and our history. (And by "our" I mean the universally human, not only our local subgroup, whether nation, race, class, ideology, religion, or sex.) To generate the indispensable virtue of gratitude, we must know the riches that we should be grateful for.

To judge any change as progressive or regressive, we must eventually ask ourselves the Big Question: what is our final end, goal, purpose, "*summum bonum*" or greatest good. We must ask nothing less than the question of "the meaning of life," however unfashionable that question has become. If we don't have a clear vision of the ultimate finish line, we can't even know whether we're running toward it or away from it.

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But to perform these cures one more thing is necessary. Even if the patient has received the perfect diagnosis, prognosis, and prescription, he will not recover if he will not take his medicine. The *will* is the key that starts the car of the psyche. "The readiness is all." If we do not *will* it, it will not happen. Wishing, dreaming, longing, and thinking, even the clearest and most rational thinking, will not move our feet one inch.

There always comes a time, after thinking and inquiring and writing and reading, to put those things away – not because they are mere toys, or because they are dispensable (they are indispensable!) but because

they are means to a greater end. They are maps, and maps are means for moving, for marching. An army of map collectors will win no battles.

So let us march.

### **Disorientation: How to Go to College Without Losing Your Mind**

Every year, thousands of young Catholics leave their homes for higher education at our nation's colleges and universities. Very few realize, however, that from orientation day onward, they will be indoctrinated with a vision of reality that is very different from the values their families hold dear. Sadly, many of our young people will fall prey to one or more of the dominant ideologies engrained in their college education, ideologies that can lead them away from the Church and, ultimately, their faith in God. Students who are not taught how to think critically or who lack the tools needed to sift through the logic of these positions are easily swayed by the smooth sophistry of the intellectual elite.

For this reason, twelve of the top Catholic writers in America – professors, priests, journalists, philosophers, and theologians – have come together to dissect the trendy ideas that can lead young Catholics away from the Church. Disorientation is intellectual ammunition for every college student and parent, as it breaks down the history, analyzes the appeal, and debunks the empty promises of such wildly popular errors as:

Contributors:

Fr. George Rutler (Cynicism)  
Donna Steichen (Feminism)  
Jimmy Akin (Fundamentalism)  
Fr. John Zuhlsdorf (Modernism)  
Peter Kreeft (Progressivism)  
Robert Spencer (Multiculturalism)  
Mark Shea (Americanism)  
Eric Metaxas (Relativism)  
John Keck (Scientism)  
Elizabeth Scalia (Sentimentalism)  
Eric Brende (Consumerism)  
John Zmirak (Hedonism)

Edited by John Zmirak (author, *The Bad Catholic's Guide to Good Living* and editor of *Choosing the Right College*), this book is guaranteed to get college students thinking hard about what their professors are telling them – and what they should really believe.

Learn more about the "isms" (ideologies) [here](#).

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## The Author

Peter Kreeft, Ph.D., is a professor of philosophy at Boston College. He is the author of many books (over forty and counting) including: *Ask Peter Kreeft: The 100 Most Interesting Questions He's Ever Been Asked*, *Ancient Philosophers*, *Medieval Philosophers*, *Modern Philosophers*, *Contemporary Philosophers*, *Forty Reasons I Am a Catholic*, *Doors in the Walls of the World: Signs of Transcendence in the Human Story*, *Forty Reasons I Am a Catholic*, *You Can Understand the Bible*, *Fundamentals of the Faith*, *The Journey: A Spiritual Roadmap for Modern Pilgrims*, *Prayer: The Great Conversation: Straight Answers to Tough Questions About Prayer*, *Love Is Stronger Than Death*, *Philosophy 101 by Socrates: An Introduction to Philosophy Via Plato's Apology*, *A Pocket Guide to the Meaning of Life*, *Prayer for Beginners*, and *Before I Go: Letters to Our Children About What Really Matters*. Peter Kreeft is on the Advisory Board of the Catholic Education Resource Center.

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