FOREWORD

What has happened in our day to the idea of progress—the belief in the continuing improvement of the human condition? To contemporary ears it has a hollow ring. Yet for two centuries, from the eighteenth to the early twentieth, the belief in progress was an important credo in the West in both intellectual and popular circles, and it accompanied many of the formidable accomplishments of Western civilization. For many it became a surrogate religion, a secular faith: Progress, spelled upper case, replaced Providence. With the continuing accumulation of theoretical and practical knowledge, there seemed to be no barriers to realizing on this earth the deepest human aspirations. Civilization had advanced from the earliest stages of precivilization, was advancing, and would continue to advance in the foreseeable future. Men and women would move forward to ever-increasing material comfort and happiness. A golden future stretched ahead.

Flexibly interpreted, the idea of continuing progress can be traced back to classical and medieval times and can be said to have a 2,500—not a 250—year-old ancestry. But it is more common, and perhaps more convincing, to conceive of it as a modern idea, born with the rise of modern science in the seventeenth century and with the popularization of science, rationalism, secularism, and scientific thinking in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Nineteenth-century evolutionary ideas reinforced it. In that same century, a number of deterministic philosophies, Marxism being the most influential and lasting, asked us to interpret progress as inevitable, as the result of impersonal historical forces; human intervention could accelerate or slow the process but not prevent it. Others in the same century, like John Stuart Mill, building on the thought of the Enlightenment philosophers, saw progress as contingent upon human intelligence and human will; denying inevitability, they left a large margin for human rationality and choice. To be sure, there were intellectuals throughout these years who questioned the belief in continuing progress and were less optimistic about human destiny, but no one denied its pervasiveness. No matter what the differences among its proponents, this tenaciously held idea meant, in its simplest form, that each generation could look forward to a

richer, happier, fuller, and more peaceful life for itself and its posterity. The very notion reinforced the self-confidence and dynamism of Western civilization as Western influence spread throughout the world.

What then happened to the idea of progress as a popular and intellectual belief so that today it has fallen into disrepute? No contemporary would hold the buoyant view of Tennyson's "Locksley Hall" written in 1842:

For I dipt into the future, far as human eye could see
Saw the vision of the world and all the wonder that would be,
Saw the heavens fill with commerce, argosies of magic sails,
Pilots of the purple twilight, dripping down with costly bales,
Till the war drum throbbed no longer, and the battle flags were furled,
In the Parliament of Man, the Federation of the world.

Today, no contemporary possesses the enthusiasm or optimism of the *New York World* on January 1, 1901, the opening day of the twentieth century: "The *World* is optimistic enough to believe that the twentieth century . . . will meet and overcome all perils and prove to be the best this steadily improving planet has ever seen."

The first powerful shock came in 1914 when the "civilized" nations of Europe—most of them boasting the advances of science and technology, education, and self-government—went to war with one another and quickly brought even non-European nations into the vortex of a global conflict. The world had scarcely recovered from the conflagration when other traumas followed: the Russian Revolution, fought, like the French Revolution, in the name of heroic ideals but demanding from its inception to the present unconscionable human sacrifices; fascism in its Italian and in its generic form; the Great Depression; Nazism, reaching its climax of bestiality in the scientifically organized wartime extermination camps of the Third Reich; the carnage of the Second World War; the war's aftermath of spreading dictatorship and new armed conflicts; and the aborted hopes for democracy and economic advance in the emergent Third World countries. Indeed, the idea of continuing progress received staggering blows in the twentieth century.

To be sure, science and technology continued to move forward with accomplishments exceeding the anticipations of even their boldest prophets. The greatest invention of the nineteenth century, Alfred North Whitehead had once observed, was "the invention of the method of invention" (*Science and the Modern World*, New York, 1925). The harnessing of nuclear energy was one such "invention" in the twentieth century, the Second World War ending with the explosion of the atomic bomb as an awesome portent for the future. In the postwar years the frightening thought spread that for the first time in history

universal planetary destruction was a real possibility. With no adequate international controls and with nuclear proliferation, the atomic clock ticked on. No one in the heyday of the idea of progress had to cope with any such lengthening shadow.

Meanwhile people in the mid-twentieth century also took note, as never before, of the baneful effects of unrestrained technological growth—the pollution of the atmosphere, the spoliation and exhaustion of natural resources, the depersonalization of the workplace. The world economy itself did not seem rational or controllable. The essential element in the idea of progress—belief in improved lives for oneself, one's children, and one's children's children—was incalculably undermined. Faith in the idea of progress plummeted from the heights. Future historians will probably record that from the mid-twentieth century on, it was difficult for anyone to retain faith in the idea of inevitable and continuing progress. People increasingly now use the word in quotation marks or with mocking sarcasm or speak not of progress in civilization but in barbarism. As Western dominance and self-confidence wane, so too does the idea of progress. Is the idea of progress, as we once knew it, to be abandoned completely?

No one can deny continuing scientific advances, spectacular discoveries in biochemistry, genetics, and physics, the knowledge explosion, the growth in informational technology, the achievements of medicine and surgery, space exploration, and increased human longevity. Building on the past, we are still in so many ways moving forward and can continue to progress. But the critical unresolved question is whether we can control human and social affairs—prevent a nuclear holocaust, preserve international peace, provide social and economic justice, master the economy, protect natural resources, cope with global overpopulation, assist in overcoming famine and pestilence, and preserve the quality of life as well as prolong life. We are not so sure.

Much has happened to destroy the pristine appeal of the belief in progress. Yet has it all turned to ashes? Without some faith in the future—in progress—we lose a precious element of our heritage and lose self-confidence itself. We know that we cannot turn back nor lock up atomic or genetic secrets. But we can retain the will to understand the implications of modern science and technology and remain the masters and not the servants of our scientific and technological civilization, now no longer Western but worldwide. If we have abandoned formulas of inevitable and automatic progress or of utopian perfection, we can still, through human will and intelligence, make slow and steady advances and cope with the dangers of which we are aware. Chastened by history, we must cut our hopes and dreams down to size, heeding perhaps the words of John Dewey, who once noted of "progress": "It is not a wholesale matter, but a retail job, to be contracted for and executed in sections" (*Characters and Events*, New York, 1929).

The older belief in progress need not be abandoned but transformed and circumscribed; too much is at stake for us to drop it completely. Robert Nisbet, a recent historian of the idea of progress and often a critic of the idea itself, pointedly reminds us: "If the idea of progress does die in the West, so will a great deal else that we have long cherished in our civilization" (*History of the Idea of Progress*, New York, 1980).

The distinguished contributors to this volume help us in richly diverse ways to see more clearly the transformation of the idea of progress in our day and its contemporary meaning in the present decade of the twentieth century, both in the Western and the much larger non-Western world, in capitalist and in Marxist-oriented societies, in the many fields of knowledge itself, and in intellectual and general belief. No one who reads these pages can fail to appreciate the importance of the idea of progress in history or the need to reexamine its meaning in our own era thoughtfully and critically through the multifaceted prisms that these thinkers provide.

We lament the deaths, within two months of each other in 1979, of two men who were deeply involved in the study of the idea of progress. One was John H. Knowles, physician and humanist, who, in his own field of medicine, lamented the advance of technology—"progress"—as interfering with the true mission of the physician-healer to treat the individual whole person. As president of the Rockefeller Foundation, he encouraged this collaborative project.

The second was Charles Frankel, philosopher-humanist and respected scholar, who presided brilliantly over the newly established National Humanities Center in North Carolina. Concerned professionally with the idea of progress ever since writing his doctoral dissertation, *The Faith of Reason: The Idea of Progress in the French Enlightenment* (New York, 1948), he argued eloquently in *The Case for Modern Man* (New York, 1955) and elsewhere that the idea of progress was not necessarily a hubristic challenge to the gods, a belief insensitive to human imperfection and frailty, or a substitute religion; that belief in predetermined, inevitable, and automatic progress obstructed true progress; and that only through human intelligence, will, and action could we salvage something of the older idea of progress and hope to bequeath to future generations the genuine advances of civilized thought and accomplishments—not least, freedom and the toleration of different viewpoints that make continuing advance possible.

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