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Doubts about the legal and moral legitimacy of American interrogation practices in the war on terror first emerged in regard to Afghanistan. In January of 2003, for example, *The Economist* published a remarkable set of articles on torture, detailing some of America’s more dubious practices. Yet as the editors of *The Economist* noted, within the United States itself the discussion of torture was “desultory.”

That all changed in May of 2004, when the CBS television program *60 Minutes* and *The New Yorker* released photographs from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. These pictures provoked worldwide outrage and, even more importantly, sparked a long overdue public debate in the United States about torture and the permissible limits of interrogation in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks.

As one might expect in a legalistic culture such as ours, some of this debate has revolved around the definition of torture itself. Common lay understandings of torture are in fact quite different from those articulated by many American lawyers. One reason is that the U.S. Senate, when ratifying in 1994 the United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, offered what one might call a more ‘interrogator-friendly’ definition of torture than that adopted by the UN negotiators. Thus the Senate, as is its prerogative, stipulated while consenting to the Convention that

> the United States understands that, in order to constitute torture, an act must be *specifically intended* to inflict *severe* physical or mental pain or suffering and that mental pain or suffering refers to *prolonged* mental harm caused by or resulting from: the intentional infliction or threatened infliction of *severe* physical pain or suffering; the administration or application, or threatened administration or application, of mind-altering substances or other procedures calculated to *disrupt profoundly* the senses or personality; the threat of *imminent* death; or the threat that another person will *imminently* be subjected to death, severe physical pain or suffering, or the administration or application of mind-altering substances or other procedures calculated to *disrupt profoundly* the senses or personality. (emphases added)

Each and every term I have italicized here in the 1994 Senate resolution was diligently parsed in the recently disclosed Pentagon “Working Group Report on Detainee Interrogations in the Global War on Terrorism,” submitted in March of 2003 to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Given the Senate’s

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highly qualified endorsement of the UN Convention, it is not at all surprising that the report submitted to Rumsfeld appears to have maximized the scope of authority (and power) allowed American interrogators who wish to operate within the law.

The Pentagon report closely followed an analysis submitted to White House Counsel Alberto Gonzales in 2002 by the Office of Legal Counsel (OLC) within the Justice Department. According to the OLC, “acts must be of an extreme nature to rise to the level of torture …. Physical pain amounting to torture must be equivalent in intensity to the pain accompanying serious physical injury, such as organ failure, impairment of bodily function, or even death.” The infliction of anything less intense than such extreme pain, according to Jay Bybee, then head of the OLC (and now a federal judge on the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals), would not, technically speaking, be torture at all. It would merely be inhuman and degrading treatment, a subject of little apparent concern to the Bush administration’s lawyers.

The current debate has sometimes gone beyond terminological quibbles. In the past few months, some experts have forthrightly defended the propriety of torture, however defined, at least in some very limited situations. Harvard Law professor Alan Dershowitz, who has taken such a position, nonetheless is extremely concerned to minimize the use of torture. He has, therefore, vigorously defended the idea that the executive branch should be forced to go to independent judges in order to obtain “torture warrants,” which could be issued only after careful examination of executive branch arguments as to the ostensible necessity of torture in a given instance.

Still other experts, including Dershowitz’s Harvard colleague Philip Heymann and U.S. federal judge Richard Posner, have disagreed, arguing that such warrants would inevitably prove chimerical as a genuine control and would instead normalize torture as an interrogational tool. Perhaps torture is proper under very restricted circumstances, as Posner in particular agrees, but far better that it be defended ex post (after the fact) through specific claims of necessity or self-defense than ex ante (before the fact) through the issuing of a warrant.

This debate has been informed both by current events and, for some, by the views of the men who drafted the U.S. Constitution. On the one hand, there is a growing sense (articulated by writers like Philip Bobbitt) that war in the future, at least where the United States is concerned, is unlikely to fit the traditional pattern of threats by states, and is far more likely to involve threats from organizations that have no capitals at which traditional retaliation can be directed.¹ Rules and understandings developed to constrain the conduct of wars between states – where, among other things, mutual self-interest dictates limits on what can be done even to one’s enemies – may be inadequate or even, as suggested by White House Counsel Gonzales in a memorandum to the president, “obsolete” in regard to the so-called asymmetric warfare of the twenty-first century. Such new modes of warfare require that we rethink our basic approach to waging war – and also the basic principles of law and morality.

On the other hand, it is equally important to grasp just what the basic princi-

amples of law and morality have been in the United States. As recent work on the origins of the U.S. Constitution has demonstrated, the founding fathers hoped to create a government strong enough to defend the fledgling nation against its many potential enemies, including European powers as well as Indian tribes much closer to home. Among the key provisions of the 1787 Constitution were those authorizing a standing army and effectively unlimited taxing authority to Congress to pay for “the common defense.”

James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, for all their notable differences, seemed to be in agreement on the importance of this point. Thus Madison, in Federalist No. 41, asked if it was “necessary to give [the new government] an indefinite power of raising troops, as well as providing fleets; and of maintaining both in peace as well as in war?” He believed that the answer was “so obvious and conclusive as scarcely to justify” any real discussion of anti-Federalist criticisms of the very idea of a standing army. The United States had to structure its own policies by anticipating the likely actions of other states: “The means of security can only be regulated by the means and the danger of attack. They will, in fact, be ever determined by these rules and by no others.” Hamilton expressed a related conviction in Federalist No. 23: “[I]t must be admitted as a necessary consequence that there can be no limitation of that authority which is to provide for the defense and protection of the community in any matter essential to its efficacy – that is, in any matter essential to the formulation, direction, or support of the national forces” (first emphasis added). Thomas Hobbes could have done no better in defending the absolute authority of the sovereign.

The Constitution may proclaim that sovereignty rests with “We the People.” But the implication of both Madison’s and Hamilton’s arguments is that, practically speaking, at least in times of war, sovereignty really rests with a handful of government officials – not with “the People.”

Now consider the following maxim: “There exists no norm that is applicable to chaos.” It comes not from Madison or Hamilton, but from Carl Schmitt, the leading German philosopher of law during the Nazi period. Schmitt contended that legal norms were only applicable in stable and peaceful situations – and not in times of war, when the state confronted “a mortal enemy, with the threat of violent death at the hands of a hostile group.” It follows that conventional legal norms are no longer applicable in a state of emergency, when war and chaos pose a standing threat to public safety. To adopt the language of American constitutional law, every norm is subject to limitation when a compelling interest is successfully asserted, and it is hard to think of a more compelling interest than the prevention of violent death at the hands of a hostile group.

But what this means is that one can never have confidence that any particular constitutional norm – beyond that of preserving the state itself – will be adhered to. Any attempts within the Constitution to tie the government’s hands with regard to defending the nation, then, may be mere “parchment barriers,” to use Madison’s dismissive term (which he conceived during the period

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when he doubted the wisdom of adding a Bill of Rights to the Constitution). Both Madison and Schmitt suggest, then, the most likely response to such barriers is a “necessary usurpation of power” (as Madison put it in Federalist No. 41; emphasis added).

Schmitt, described by Herbert Marcuse as the most brilliant Nazi theorist, may have much to tell us about the legal world within which we live and, even more certainly, seem to be careening. Although some analysts have suggested that the Bush administration has operated under the guidance of the ideas of German émigré Leo Strauss, it seems far more plausible to suggest that the true éminence grise of the administration, particularly with regard to issues surrounding the possible propriety of torture, is Schmitt.

September 11, it is said, changed everything. What this means, among other things, is that for many the existing world of ‘the normal’ vanished in an instant, to be replaced by the specter of terrorist groups armed with weapons of mass destruction. And what this means is that pre–September 11 norms and expectations are being reconfigured in terms of this new ‘normality’ of endless, frightening threats posed by ‘a mortal enemy.’ Ordinary norms – whether the assumption that anyone arrested by American police will have an opportunity to consult with a lawyer, or the assumption that the United States will be faithful to its public pronouncements denouncing torture (as well as to its commitment under the UN Convention absolutely to refrain from torture whatever the circumstances) – are now up for grabs. “Sovereign is he,” wrote Schmitt, “who decides on the state of the exception,” or, much the same, who is allowed to redescribe what is ‘normal.’

Administration lawyers whose memoranda have only recently been disclosed seem completely willing to view George W. Bush as the de facto sovereign. Their documents display what can only be called contempt not only for international law, but also for the very idea that any other institution of the American government, whether Congress or the Judiciary, has any role to play. Thus both the Working Group Report submitted to Secretary Rumsfeld and the memorandum prepared earlier by the OLC argued that the Constitution’s designation of the president as commander in chief means that “the President enjoys complete discretion …in conducting operations against hostile forces” (emphasis added). Complete discretion, of course, is a power enjoyed only by sovereigns. Non-sovereigns, by definition, are subject to the constraint of some overriding authority. The president, according to administration lawyers, has no authority to which he must answer. Prohibitions of international and domestic law regarding the absolute impropriety of torture simply do not apply to him. “In order to respect the President’s inherent constitutional authority to manage a military campaign, [federal laws against torture] must be construed as inapplicable to interrogations undertaken pursuant to his Commander-in-Chief authority,” the OLC advised. “Congress lacks authority . . . to set the terms and conditions under which the President may exercise his authority as Commander-in-Chief to control the conduct of operations during a war.”

It is impossible to predict whether these quite astonishing arguments (which seem to authorize the president and designated subordinates simply to make disappear those they deem adversaries, as happened in Chile and Argentina in what the Argentines aptly labeled their “dirty war”) would prevail before a court of law. We shall know more after
the Supreme Court rules in several cases it heard in the spring of 2004 regarding the detention in Guantanamo of foreign combatants and at least one American citizen (Jose Padilla, who has been accorded almost no legal rights since his 2002 arrest at O’Hare International Airport).

Far more important, however, is the articulation, on behalf of the Bush administration, of a view of presidential authority that is all too close to the power that Schmitt was willing to accord his own Führer.

One temptation is to stop right here, especially if one shares my own doubts about both George W. Bush and the war in Iraq. But that would be too easy, for a number of reasons. One is that there are mortal enemies of the United States who do threaten violent death. No political leader could suggest that it is not a compelling interest to prevent future replications of September 11. Moreover, as already indicated, one can cite not only the egregious (though brilliant) Schmitt, but also such American icons as Madison and Hamilton for views that are not really so completely different from those enunciated by the Bush administration.

And so we already have many well-credentialed lawyers, several of them distinguished legal academics, who are quick to defend everything that is being done (or proposed) by the Bush administration as passing constitutional muster. They have enlisted in defending a war on terror that is almost certainly of infinite duration. They appear recklessly indifferent to the fact that their arguments, if accepted, would transform the United States into at least a soft version of 1984, where our own version of Big Brother will declare to us who is our enemy du jour and assert his own version of a “triumph of the will” to do everything and anything – including torture – in order to prevail.

A final quotation from Carl Schmitt is illuminating: “A normal situation has to be created, and sovereign is he who definitively decides whether this normal state actually obtains. All law is ‘situation law.’ The sovereign creates and guarantees the situation as a whole in its totality. He has the monopoly on this ultimate decision.” This is precisely the argument being made by lawyers within the Bush administration.

The debate about torture is only one relatively small part of a far more profound debate that we should be having during this most important of election years. Do “We the People,” the ostensible sovereigns within the American system of government, accept the vision of the American president articulated by the Bush administration? And if we do, what, then, is left of the vaunted vision of the rule of law that the United States ostensibly exemplifies?

– June 21, 2004
Questioning the idea of progress at the start of the twenty-first century is a bit like casting doubt on the existence of the Deity in Victorian times. The stock reaction is one of incredulity, followed by anger, then moral panic. It is not so much that belief in progress is unshakable as that we are terrified of losing it.

The idea of progress embodies the faith – for it is a faith, not the result of any kind of empirical inquiry – that the advance that has occurred in science can be replicated in ethics and politics. The line of reasoning proceeds as follows: Science is a cumulative activity. Today we know more than any previous generation, and there is no obvious limit to what we may come to know in the future. Just as human knowledge continues to increase beyond anything dreamt of in earlier times, the human condition can be better in the future than it has ever been in the past.

This is a very recent creed. Nothing like it existed before it emerged in Europe around two centuries ago. Yet today it seems to have become indispensable. No one imagines progress to be inevitable, but to deny that it is possible seems tantamount to snuffing out all hope. In terms of mass killing of humans by humans, the twentieth century was the worst in history; but surely – it will be objected – we must believe that such horrors can be avoided in the future. How else can we go on?

To reject the very idea of progress must appear extreme, if not willfully perverse. Yet the idea is found in none of the world’s religions and was unknown among the ancient philosophers. For Aristotle, history was a series of processes of growth and decline no more meaningful than those we observe in the lives of plants and animals. Early modern thinkers such as Machiavelli and some thinkers of the Enlightenment shared this view. David Hume believed that history is cyclical, with periods of peace and freedom being regularly followed by war and tyranny. For the great Scottish skeptic, the oscillation between civiliza-
tion and barbarism was coeval with human history; in ethical and political terms the future was bound to be much like the past. The same view is found in Hobbes, and even Voltaire was at times inclined to it.

These thinkers never doubted that some periods of history are better than others. None of them was tempted to deny the fact of improvement, where it existed; but they never imagined it could be continuous. They knew there would be times of peace and freedom in the future, as there had been in the past; but they believed that what was gained in one generation would surely be lost in another. They believed that in ethics and politics there is no progress, only recurring gain and loss.

This seems to me to be the lesson of any view of the human prospect that is not befogged by groundless hopes. Progress is an illusion – a view of human life and history that answers to the needs of the heart, not reason. In his book *The Future of an Illusion*, published in 1927, Freud argued that religion is an illusion. Illusions need not be all false; they may contain grains of truth. Even so, they are believed not because of any truth they may contain, but because they answer to the human need for meaning and consolation.

Believers in progress have identified a fundamental truth about modern life – its continuous transformation by science; but they have invested this undoubted fact with hopes and values inherited from religion. They seek in the idea of progress what theists found in the idea of providence – an assurance that history need not be meaningless. Those who hold to the possibility of progress insist that they do because history supports it. They cling to it because it allows them to believe that history can be more than a tale told by an idiot.

If today life without the possibility of progress seems insupportable, it is worth asking how this state of affairs has come about. Most human beings who have ever lived lacked any such hope, and yet a great many of them had happy lives. Why are we so different?

The answer lies in our history. The modern faith in progress is the offspring of a marriage between seeming rivals – the lingering influence of Christian faith and the growing power of science – in early-nineteenth-century Europe. From the eschatological hopes of Christianity we inherit the belief that meaning and even salvation can be found in the flux of history. From the accelerating advance of scientific knowledge we acquire the belief in a similar advance by humanity itself.

From one angle, the idea of progress is a secular version of Christian eschatology. In Christianity, history cannot be senseless: it is a moral drama, beginning with a rebellion against God and ending with the Last Judgment. Christians therefore think of salvation as a historical event. For Hindus and Buddhists, on the other hand, it means liberation from time. It meant the same in Mithraism – a mystery cult that for a time among the Romans rivaled Christianity. Thus the mystical vision of liberation from time entered deeply into European philosophy, with Plato affirming that only eternal things can be fully real. History was a realm of illusions, a dream or a nightmare from which the wise seek to awaken.

Before the coming of Christianity it was taken for granted that history is without meaning. True, the belief that God reveals himself in history can be found in the Old Testament, but it is a reading of the history of the Jewish people, not of that of the species. It was only after Saint Paul turned the teaching of
Jesus into a universal religion that the Old Testament was interpreted as an account of history as a whole. This move to universalism is commonly seen as a major advance, but I am unconvinced. The political religions that wrought such havoc in the twentieth century were secular versions of the Christian promise of universal salvation. A world without such transcendent political hopes would still have suffered from ethnic and religious violence; but mass murder would not have been committed with the aim of perfecting humanity.

The role of eschatological beliefs in modern political movements has not been much studied. Amongst analytical philosophers, ignorance of religion is a point of professional honor, while social science continues to be dominated by theories of secularization that were falsified generations ago. Yet the connection between Christian eschatology and modern revolutionary movements has not gone entirely unnoticed. It is the central theme of Norman Cohn’s book, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*. First published in 1957, Cohn’s masterly study is indispensable to understanding twentieth-century politics.

The late medieval movements Cohn describes owed to a radical version of the Christian eschatology: the old world was coming to an end, and a new one was coming into being without any of the flaws that had disfigured human society throughout history. The same view of history and the human future was reproduced in modern radical ideologies. Cohn’s mystical anarchists believed that God would bring about this transformation in human affairs. Bakunin and Marx believed – even more incredibly – that humankind could do so unaided. A similar fantasy animated Fukuyama’s absurd announcement of the end of history.

It is no accident that Europe is the birthplace of Marxism, and America of neoliberalism. Neither could have arisen, or even be fully understood, outside a culture pervaded by the belief that salvation is an event in history. Modern projects of universal emancipation are earthly renditions of the Christian promise of salvation.

In contrast, the pagan world was remarkable for the extreme modesty of its hopes. For Marcus Aurelius and Epicurus, the good life would always remain the privilege of a few. The notion that the mass of humanity could be saved – or was worth saving – was unknown. Only with Christianity did the notion enter European antiquity that all humankind – or all of it that accepted the Christian message – could be saved. In holding out the prospect of an improvement in the human condition, secular humanists are renewing the vast hopes kindled by Christianity in the ancient world.

Although – unlike Bakunin, Marx, and Fukuyama – they don’t proclaim an end of history, most of our secular humanists do look forward to a better world than any that history records. The catastrophes of the twentieth century may have taught them social progress is a matter of inching along rather than of great leaps forward, but they continue to believe that human action can remake the world. The method may be piecemeal social engineering rather than – as in Marx or Bakunin – revolutionary transformation; but the aim is the same.

The current conception of progress is a secular religion, but it has another and no less important source in science. Intermittent throughout most of history, the growth of human knowledge is now continuous and accelerating. Short of a
catastrophe greater than any that can be realistically imagined, the advance of science is unstoppable. This fact is the second source of the modern faith in progress.

The reality of scientific progress is demonstrated by increasing human power. There are more humans alive today than ever. The face of Earth is being transformed by human expansion. Unnumbered species of flora and fauna are being driven into extinction, and the global climate is changing. The root of this increase in human power is the growth of human knowledge. Philosophers may dispute the validity of scientific knowledge; cultural anthropologists may represent science as one belief system among others—yet, faced with the fact of growing human power, skepticism about the validity of scientific knowledge is pointless.

Still, there is loss as well as gain in the advance of science. There is no built-in harmony between human well-being and the growth of knowledge. The most predictable by-product of scientific progress, for instance, is an increase in the intensity of war. The long-term impact could be to make Earth uninhabitable to humans. Even so, it is frivolous to deny scientific progress— as some postmodernist thinkers seem to want to do. The error in the dominant modern worldview is not that it affirms progress in science to be a reality when it is not. Rather, its mistake is to imagine that the progress that has occurred in science can be replicated in other areas of human life. Human knowledge changes, but human needs stay much the same. Humans use their growing knowledge to satisfy their conflicting needs. As they do, they remain as prone to frailty and folly as they have ever been.

To question the idea of progress is not to cast doubt on the improvements that have actually occurred. Nor does it entail rejecting the reality of universal human values. There are postmodernist thinkers who maintain that we cannot pass moral judgments on other cultures and epochs: there are only different forms of life, each with its own ideals and standards. If this were so, it would make no sense to evaluate history in terms of progress—or decline. Ethics would be like art, in which judgments can be made regarding progress and decline within particular traditions, but not between traditions whose styles vary widely. Lacking universal standards, there would be no way to judge that one culture or period in history was an improvement on any other.

There are affinities between art and ethics. The notion that one way of life could be best for everybody is like saying that one style of art could be better than every other. That is obviously absurd, but it does not mean we cannot judge different cultures and eras. No way of life is best for everybody, but some are bad for everyone.

For humans as for other animals there are species-wide goods and evils. Drawing up a list is not easy, but fortunately that is not necessary. As soon as we find a value that looks universal, we see that it clashes with other, equally universal values. Justice clashes with mercy, equality with excellence, personal autonomy with social cohesion. Freedom from arbitrary power is a great good—but so is the avoidance of anarchy. Moreover, goods may rest on evils: peace on conquest, high cultural achievement on gross inequalities. There is no natural harmony among the goods of human life.

Conflicts among basic human values do not arise only in extreme situations. In good times they may be masked, but they flow from the endemic conflicts of human needs, and they are permanent.
Ethics and politics are practical skills that humans have devised to cope with these conflicts. Unlike scientific knowledge, the skills of ethics and politics are not easily transmitted. They have to be learnt afresh with each new generation, and they are easily lost.

Humans are intensely curious, but they fear the truth; they long for peace, but they are excited by violence; they dream of a world of harmony, but they are at war with themselves. Despite tireless efforts to show that their values cohere in a single vision of the good, they do not and never will. Each value expresses an enduring human need but clashes with other human needs, equally urgent and no less permanent.

The perception that humans are somehow radically defective appears in the myths of cultures separated by long stretches of time and space. Formulated in the doctrine of Original Sin, human imperfectability is expressed most powerfully in the biblical myth of the Fall. In the form of an assertion of ingrained human delusion, it is also found in Hinduism and Buddhism. It forms part of what may be called a human orthodoxy, which recognizes that the human animal is incorrigibly flawed.

In contrast, secular humanists believe that the growth of knowledge can somehow make humans more rational. From Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill to John Dewey and Bertrand Russell, it has been believed that progress in science would be matched by progress in society. These thinkers accepted that if intellectual progress were to falter or stop, progress in society would cease too. Yet none of them ever imagined that while the growth of knowledge continued to accelerate, ethical and political life could regress. Yet that was the reality during most of the last century, and there is no reason to think the present reality will be any different.

The most dangerous threats confronting us today are the results of the interaction of expanding human knowledge with unchanging human needs. The spread of weapons of mass destruction is a response to intractable political conflicts; but it is also a by-product of the diffusion of scientific knowledge. Science has enabled living standards to be raised in advanced industrial societies; but worldwide industrialization is triggering a struggle for the control of scarce natural resources. It is the practical application of science that has made the present size of the human population possible; but the mix of population growth with advancing industrialization is the human cause of climate change. Science brings knowledge, but knowledge is not an unmixed good. It can be as much a curse as a blessing.

This is a thought that goes very much against the grain of Western philosophy, which, after all, was founded in the faith that knowledge and virtue go together. Socrates was able to affirm that the unexamined life is not worth living because – in Plato’s account, at any rate – he did not doubt that the true and the good are one and the same; that beyond the shifting realm of the senses there is another world in which all goods are reconciled in perfect harmony; that by knowing this other realm we can be free. This mystical faith pervades Western philosophy and underpins the modern creed of progress, in which growing knowledge is seen as the pathway to human emancipation.

The myth of Genesis has a different message. In the biblical story, the Fall of Man follows his eating from the fruit of the tree of knowledge. The result is an intoxicating sense of power, accompa-
ned by all the ills that come when flawed creatures use knowledge to pursue their conflicting ends. Greek myth teaches the same lesson when it tells of Prometheus chained to a rock for stealing fire from the gods. Knowledge is one thing, the good life another.

The power of these myths comes from the insight that humanity cannot go back. Contrary to the proclamations of Rousseau and some Green thinkers today, we cannot revert to a simple life. Once we have eaten from the tree of knowledge we must somehow cope with the consequences.

The core of the idea of progress is the illusion that knowledge enhances human freedom. The reality is that it merely increases human power. Science cannot end history; it can only add another, extremely potent ingredient to history’s continuing conflicts. This is the truth intimated in the biblical myth and demonstrated in the history of the twentieth century.

Despite the evidence of experience, progress has had many evangelists over the past two hundred years. In their different ways, Hegel and Marx, Bakunin and Mill, Popper and Hayek, Habermas and Fukuyama all preach the same faith: knowledge is liberating; science can be used to create a world better than any history has known. But the most successful propagandists for the idea of progress were the French positivists Henri de Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte, who in the first half of the nineteenth century developed a cult—the Religion of Humanity, as they called it—that offered salvation through science.

Positivism is a complex body of ideas, but the tenet of the positivist creed that is relevant to my present theme is the belief that the growth of scientific knowledge enables the intractable conflicts of history to be left behind. Saint-Simon and Comte believed that with the advance of knowledge, ethics and politics could become sciences. Once the debris of metaphysics and religion had been cleared away, science would be the source of our view of the world. A new terrestrial morality—a scheme of values having the authority of science—would be formulated. Applying this new morality, science could bring into being a global civilization without poverty or war, in which the conflicts of the past would be only memories.

Unlike many who were influenced by their ideas, the positivists did not think that religion would disappear in the new world. They recognized that it answered to enduring human needs, and they set about devising a new faith: a bizarre but, for a time, hugely successful cult, with its own priesthood and liturgy, daily observances based on the ‘science’ of phrenology, and even a special sort of costume fashioned—with buttons sewn up the back so that dressing and undressing could only be done with the help of others—to promote social cooperation.

The Religion of Humanity is a ridiculous confection, but the central ideas of the positivists have had an enormous influence. J. S. Mill, Karl Marx, and Herbert Spencer are only a few of the nineteenth-century thinkers who absorbed the positivist belief that science would enable the abolition of poverty and war. Lenin’s project of a stateless socialist society was an echo of Marx’s formula that when communism is achieved the government of men will be replaced by the administration of things—a formula Marx owed (via the French utopian socialist Louis Blanc) to Saint-Simon. At the end of the twentieth century, the positivist belief that the diffusion of science and technology would engender a universal civilization resurfaced in the neoliberal cult of the global free market.
Now, as in the past, the Enlightenment ideal of a universal civilization has triggered a violent backlash. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, romantic and Counter-Enlightenment thinkers such as J. G. Herder and Joseph de Maistre proclaimed the value of faith and the singularity of cultures. In the twentieth century, the Nazis exalted race and instinct. Today religious fundamentalists seek to resist the advance of science by returning to a prelapsarian condition of doubt-free innocence. Such movements claim to reject the modern world and the faith in progress that drives it, but a little examination shows this to be self-deception.

The Nazis certainly rejected Enlightenment values of human equality, personal liberty, and toleration; but they affirmed the Enlightenment idea that a new humanity without the flaws of the old could be created. Comte’s project of a science of sociology based on physiology was taken up by Cesare Lombroso, the founder of criminal anthropology, and later became an element in Nazi scientific racism. The Nazi conception of progress condemned much of humanity to slavery or extermination; it was not by accident that it produced the worst genocide in history. Even so, the Nazis shared with the positivists the goal of using science to develop a new humanity—a peculiarly modern project. With Nietzsche they shared the modern faith that human life can be transformed by an act of will.

A similar belief is evident in radical Islam. From its inception as a body of thought in the mid-twentieth century, radical Islam has seen itself—and been seen by others—as a profoundly anti-Western movement. But in fact many of its themes have been borrowed from radical Western thought. The idea that the world can be regenerated by spectacular acts of violence echoes the orthodoxy of French Jacobinism, nineteenth-century European and Russian anarchism, and Lenin’s Bolshevism. Movements such as Nazism and radical Islam do not offer an alternative to the modern faith in progress but an exacerbation of it.

Like older faiths, progress and the Religion of Humanity are illusions. But whereas the illusions of older faiths embody enduring human realities, the faith in progress depends on suppressing them. It represses the conflicts of human needs and denies the unalterable moral ambiguity of human knowledge.

Nothing is more commonplace than the insistence that what we do with scientific knowledge is up to us. But we—enlightened thinkers, friends of reason and humanity—are few and feeble, and no doubt as deluded as the rest of the species, if not more so. The hopes to which believers in progress cling are only the values of their time and place, shifting eddies in the shallow current of conventional opinion. Today bien-pensant economists are adamant that human prosperity can only be secured by a universal regime of free markets; a generation ago they believed only managed markets could do the trick. A generation before that, many were missionaries for central planning. Current beliefs about free markets and globalization are just the latest in a series of intellectual fashions, each convinced of its finality, every one of them superseded by events. Only those who are blessed with short memories can believe that the history of ideas is a tale of progress.

Still, giving up the idea of progress is a drastic step. It may be an illusion, but it has sometimes been a benign one. Would we have seen the abolition of slavery, or the prohibition of torture,
without the hope of a better future? Instead of giving up the idea of progress, why not suitably revise it?

There are alternative visions of progress more attractive than the discredited dogmas of the last twenty years. Like the Marxists of a couple of generations ago, neoliberals believe one economic system is best everywhere. But the free market is not the terminus of history; different countries with varying histories and present circumstances may need different economic arrangements. Again, neoliberals follow Marxists in thinking of economic development in terms of increasing human power over the natural environment; but – as the former Soviet Union demonstrated all too clearly – the end result of that approach is ecological devastation. Neoliberals will insist (they always insist) that free markets can deal with natural scarcity; but Western political leaders appear not to share their confidence. The last major war of the twentieth century – the Gulf War – was a conflict over the control of oil. The present century looks as if it will contain more conflicts of this kind – mainly over energy supplies, but also fresh water. Rather than leave Earth’s depleting natural resources to the vagaries of the price mechanism punctuated by resource wars, would it not be better to seek to moderate the human impact on the planet, and thereby foster a more sustainable kind of development?

I am sure it would be better if we had a vision of progress that respected the limits of Earth. In other writings, I have tried to sketch some such view. Yet I have come to doubt that such theoretical constructions can ever prevail against the power of human passions. When vital necessities appear threatened, humans will act as they have always done: They will try to secure them now – even if the result is war, and the ruin of all. Belief in progress is harmful because it obscures these realities. Far more than the religions of the past, it clouds our perception of the human condition.

In his great poem “Aubade,” Philip Larkin wrote of religious faith as “that vast moth-eaten musical brocade” – a system of falsehoods contrived to shield humans from their fear of death. His description may once have contained some truth, but it is better applied nowadays to the secular faith in progress. Whatever their faults, traditional religions are less fantastical. They may promise a better world beyond the grave, but they do not imagine that science can deliver humanity from itself.

Can modern men and women do without the moth-eaten musical brocade of progressive hope? I think not. Faith in the liberating power of knowledge is encrypted into modern life. Drawing on some of Europe’s most ancient traditions, and daily reinforced by the quickening advance of science, it cannot be given up by an act of will. The interaction of quickening scientific advance with unchanging human needs is a fate that we may perhaps temper, but cannot overcome.

In time, no doubt, the religion of progress will disappear, as the way of life it animates fades from the world. Other faiths will appear, more or less remote from human realities, but equally irrational. Who now remembers Mithraism, or the curious faith of the Gnostics? These religions sustained and consoled millions of people over many centuries, only to vanish almost without trace. Yet those who hold to the possibility of progress need not fear. The illusion that through science humans can remake the world is an integral part of the modern condition. Renewing the eschatological hopes of the past, progress is an illusion with a future.
In recent years there have been enormous changes in our technology, our economy, and our society. But has there been progress?

From most economists the first reaction to this question is: Of course there must have been progress! After all, the growth of new technologies expands opportunity sets, what we can do, the amount of output per unit input. We can choose either to have more output, more goods and services, or to work less. However we make the choice, surely we are better off.

But what, then, about the sweeping changes we associate with the phenomenon of globalization? For several years I have been actively involved in debates around the world about the costs and benefits of this phenomenon. As a result of globalization, the countries of the world are more closely integrated. Goods and services move more freely from one country to another. This is the result of the lowering of transportation and communication costs through changes in technology, and of the elimination or reduction of many man-made barriers such as tariffs. The countries that have been most successful at both increasing incomes and reducing poverty – the countries of East Asia – have grown largely because of globalization. They took advantage of global markets for their goods; they recognized that what separates developed from less developed countries is a disparity not only in resources but also in knowledge; they tapped into the pool of global knowledge to close that gap; and most even opened themselves up to the flow of international capital.

But in the countries that have been less successful, globalization is often viewed with suspicion. As I have argued elsewhere, there is a great deal of validity to the complaints of those who are discontent. In much of the world, there has been in recent years a slowing of growth, an increase in poverty, a degradation of the environment, and a deterioration of national cultures and of a sense of cultural identity. Globalization proves that
change does not invariably produce progress.

In America we have also seen change, and seemingly at an ever faster pace— but here, too, it is not clear if most Americans are better off. Recent numbers suggest that productivity growth is increasing at the impressive speed of over 4 percent per annum. Americans who work are working longer hours, while more and more Americans are not working: some are openly unemployed; some are so discouraged by the lack of jobs that they have stopped looking (and therefore are no longer included in the unemployment statistics); and some have even applied for, and have begun to receive, disability payments that they would not have sought had there been a job available. Recent decades have seen a concomitant change in values. Forty years ago, the best graduating students sought jobs in which they could work to ensure the civil rights of all Americans, to fight the war on poverty both within the United States and abroad, or to pursue the advance of knowledge; in the 1990s, the best students wanted jobs on Wall Street or with the big law firms. No doubt this shift was brought about in large part by the disproportionate salaries of that decade; these seemed to say, in effect, how much more society valued the work of corporate executives over that of the researchers whose high-tech, biotech, and Internet innovations helped fuel the boom.

Many are concerned, moreover, by the seeming erosion of moral values, exhibited so strikingly in the corporate scandals that rocked the country in the last few years, from Enron to Arthur Andersen, from WorldCom to the New York Stock Exchange—scandals that involved virtually all our major accounting firms, most of our major banks, many of our mutual funds, and a large proportion of our major corporations.

Of course, every society has its rotten apples. But when such apples are so pervasive, one has to look for systemic problems. This seeming erosion of moral values is just one change (the increasing bleakness of the suburban landscape in which so many Americans live is another) that does not seem to indicate progress.

How can this happen? How can improvements in technology, which seemingly increase opportunities, and therefore should also increase societal well-being, so often have adverse consequences, bringing about change that is not progress? In the way that I have posed the question, I have implicitly defined what I mean as progress: an improvement in well-being, or at least in the perception of well-being. But that begs part of the question: whose well-being, and in whose perception?

An economy is a complicated system. The price of steel, for instance, depends on wages, interest rates, and the price of iron ore, coke, and limestone. Each of these in turn depends on the prices of other goods and services, in one vast, complicated, and interrelated system. The marvel of the market is that, somehow, it has solved this system of simultaneous equations—solved it before there were any computers that could even approach a problem of such mathematical complexity.

A disturbance to any one part of the system causes ripples throughout it. While improvements in technology improve opportunity sets and in principle could make everyone better off, in

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practice they often do not. A change in technology that enables a machine to replace an unskilled worker reduces the demand for unskilled workers, thereby lowering their wages and increasing income inequality. Poverty may also increase. Of course, the gains of those who are better off may be greater than the losses of those who are worse off; if so, the government may tax the new gains and redistribute the proceeds to those who lose, in such a way as to make everyone better off. Making everyone better off is what I mean by progress.

But ideology and interests may preclude that. Conservative philosophers will say that it is the right of each individual to keep the produce of his own efforts. But this is a misleading argument, because the notion of individual labor and effort is not well defined. The tools and technology that an individual uses, for instance, are probably not the result of his own labor. They may well be the result instead of public expenditures, of the kind of government investments in research and technology that created the Internet. And, in the first place, government-financed advances in biomedical research may have resulted in the individual even being alive and able to produce anything at all.

Interests buttress ideologies. While some conservatives may resort to philosophical arguments for why there should not be redistribution, those at the top of the income distribution – who have seen their incomes rise much in recent years – have a self-interest in arguing against progressivity. They are unlikely to approach the question from any of the perspectives from which the issue of social justice has been posed – such as that of Rawls, who asks, in effect, what would be a fair tax system, were we to have to decide such a question from behind a veil of ignorance, before we knew whether we were to end up rich or poor, skilled or unskilled? But, of course, people know how the dice has been rolled, so they argue for what is right from the perspective of their current advantage.

Economists have traditionally been loath to talk about morals. Indeed, traditional economists have tried to argue that individuals pursuing their self-interest necessarily advance the interests of society. This is Adam Smith’s fundamental insight, summed up in his famous analogy of the invisible hand: Markets lead individuals, in the pursuit of their own self-interest, as if by an invisible hand, to the pursuit of the general interest. Selfishness is elevated to a moral virtue.

Much of the research of the two centuries following Smith’s original insight has been devoted to understanding the sense in which, and the conditions under which, he was right. His insight grew into, among other things, the idea that the pursuit of self-interested profit-maximizing activity leads to an economic efficiency in which no one can be made better off without making someone else better off. (This concept is called Pareto efficiency, after the great Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto.) It took a long time before the assumptions underlying the theory – perfect competition, perfect markets, perfect information, etc. – were fully understood.

By focusing on the consequences of imperfect information, my own research (with Bruce Greenwald of Columbia University) has challenged the Smithian conclusion.\(^2\) We have showed that when information is imperfect, and especially

when there are asymmetries of information (that is, different individuals knowing different things), then the economy is essentially never Pareto efficient. Sometimes, in other words, the invisible hand is not visible simply because it is simply not there. Markets do not lead to efficient outcomes, let alone outcomes that comport with social justice. As a result, there is often good reason for government intervention to improve the efficiency of the market.  

Just as the Great Depression should have made it evident that the market often does not work as well as its advocates claim, our recent Roaring Nineties should have made it self-evident that the pursuit of self-interest does not necessarily lead to overall economic efficiency. The executives of Enron, Arthur Andersen, WorldCom, etc. were rewarded with stock options, and they did everything they could to pump up the price of their shares and maximize their own returns; and many of them managed to sell while the prices remained pumped up. But those who were not privy to this kind of inside information held on to their shares, and when the stock prices collapsed, their wealth was wiped out. At Enron, workers lost not only their jobs but their pensions. It is hard to see how the pursuit of self-interest – the corporate greed that seemed so unbridled – advanced the general interest.

Advances in the economics of information (especially in that branch that deals with the problem that is, interestingly, referred to as ‘moral hazard’) help explain the seeming contradiction. Problems of information mean that decisions inevitably have to be delegated. The shareholders have to delegate responsibility for making decisions, but their lack of information makes it virtually impossible for them to ensure that the managers to whom they have entrusted their wealth and the care of the company will act in their best interests. The manager has a fiduciary responsibility. He is supposed to act on behalf of others. It is his moral obligation. But standard economic theory says that he should act in his own interests. There is, accordingly, a conflict of interest.

In the 1990s, as I have argued elsewhere, such conflicts became rampant. Accounting firms that made more money in providing consulting services than in providing good accounts no longer took as seriously their responsibility to provide accurate accounts. Analysts made more money by touting stocks they knew were far overvalued than by providing accurate information to their unwary customers who depended on them.

Consciences may be salved by the doctrine that the pursuit of self-interest will in fact make everyone better off. But the pursuit of self-interest does not in general lead to economic well-being, and societies in which there are high levels of trust, loyalty, and honesty actually perform better economically than those in which these virtues are absent. Economists are just beginning to discover how non-economic values, or ‘good norms,’ actually enhance economic performance.

But some economic changes may corrode these values, for several reasons. We have already drawn attention to two: Such changes may produce new conflicts of interest and new contexts in which

3 Of course, it should have been obvious that something was wrong with Smith’s conclusions. The Great Depression, during which a very large fraction of the country’s resources were left idle, at great social cost, seemed to demonstrate that sometimes the market economy did not work well. Nevertheless, supporters of free markets claimed that the Great Depression was caused not by the failure of markets, but of government.
the pursuit of self-interest clashes with societal well-being. When people see others benefiting from such conditions, a new norm of greed emerges. CEOs defend their rapacious salaries by referring to what others are getting; some even argue that such salaries are required to provide them the appropriate incentives for making ‘the hard decisions.’

There is a third way in which economic change may undermine norms, particularly in developing countries. To be maintained, norms have to be enforced; there have to be consequences for violating them. Greater mobility typically weakens social mechanisms for the enforcement of norms. Even when there is not greater mobility, greater societal change and uncertainty results in putting less weight on the future, more weight on the short-run benefits from violating a norm than on the long-run costs. In many Western societies this shift, with its increased emphasis on the individual, has undermined many social norms, along with the sense of community.

Changes in technology, in laws, and in norms may all exacerbate conflicts of interest, and, in doing so, may actually impair the overall efficiency of the economy. The notion that change is necessarily welfare enhancing is typically supported by the same simplistic notions, sometimes referred to as market fundamentalism, that assert that markets necessarily lead to efficient outcomes. If the economy is always efficient, then any change that increases the output per unit input must enhance welfare. But if the economy is not necessarily efficient, then there can be changes that exacerbate the inefficiencies. For instance, the presence of competition is one of the requirements for market efficiency; if changes in technology result in one firm’s dominating the market, competition is reduced, and with it, welfare.

More generally, there is no theorem that ensures the efficiency of the economy in the production of innovations. The theorems concerning the efficiency of the economy are all predicated on the assumption that there is no change in technology, or at least no change in technology that is the result of deliberate actions on the part of firms or individuals. In short, standard economic theory is of little relevance in discussions about the efficiency of markets in the production of knowledge. This itself should come as no surprise, for knowledge can be viewed as a special form of information, and the general result referred to earlier about the lack of efficiency of markets with imperfect information extends to this case.

To take another example, there have been notable innovations in financial markets. These have some important advantages. For instance, they enable risks to be shifted from those less able to bear them to those more able to do so. But some financial innovations have made it more difficult to monitor what a firm and its managers are doing, thus worsening the information problem. Many of these innovations were the result of a corporate desire to minimize tax burdens; companies did not want to bear their fair share, so they devised ways of hiding, legally, income from the tax authorities. One of the big intellectual breakthroughs of the 1990s was the realization that these same techniques could be used to provide distorted information to investors; costs could be hidden, and revenues increased. With reported profits thereby enhanced, share prices also increased. But because share prices were based on distorted information, resources were misallocated. And
when the bubble to which this misinformation contributed broke, the resulting downturn was greater than it otherwise would have been.

Curiously, stock options, which underlay many of these problems, were at one time viewed as an innovation; they were heralded as providing better incentives for managers to align their interests with those of the shareholders. This argument was more than a little disingenuous: in fact, the typical stock-option package, especially as it was put into practice, did not provide better incentives. While pay went up when stock prices went up, much of the increase in the stock price had nothing to do with the managers’ performance; it just reflected overall movements in the market. It would have been better to base pay on relative performance. Moreover, when, as in 2000 and 2001, share prices fell, management pay did not fall. It simply took on other forms. This is another example of an innovation that was not, in any real sense, progress.

Now consider some examples of putative reforms. Especially in the area of economic policy, a combination of misguided economic analysis, ideology, and special interests often results in reforms that are not, in fact, welfare enhancing—even though they are billed as progress. For instance, in Mexico tax revenues as a share of GDP are so small that the public sector cannot perform many of its essential functions; there is underinvestment in science and technology, education, health, and infrastructure. Among the reforms the Fox government has advocated are tax changes that would increase revenues—but whether society as a whole would benefit depends in part on how the tax revenues are increased. Conservatives have long advocated the VAT (a uniform tax, common in Europe, that is levied at each stage of production), but within the Clinton administration it was summarily dismissed because it is not a progressive tax, a matter of particular concern in a country like Mexico with such a high level of inequality. There were alternative proposals for raising taxes—such as on the profits of the oligopolies and monopolies—that would have been more efficient and equitable.

Elsewhere, policies sold as ‘reform’—opening up markets to destabilizing speculative short-term capital flows—have exposed countries to huge risks. The East Asian crisis of 1997, the global financial crisis of 1998, the Latin American crises of recent years—all are at least partly attributable to these short-term flows. Just as there is no general theorem assuring us that changes in technology produced by the economy are welfare enhancing, so too there is no general theorem assuring us that the policy reforms that emerge out of the political process—whether at the national or international level—are welfare enhancing. There are, in fact, numerous analyses that suggest quite the opposite.

In economics, the dominant strand of thinking has evolved out of physics. And so economies are analyzed in terms of equilibrium. The consequence of change is to move an economy from one equilibrium to another. Much of what I have said so far can be summarized as follows: Once we recognize that the equilibrium that naturally emerges in an economy may not be efficient, then a change that moves us from one equilibrium to a new equilibrium may not be welfare enhancing.

Another strand of thought in economics owes its origins to a misunderstanding of evolutionary biology. Darwin’s notion of natural selection was not teleological, but some of those who extend-

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ed Darwinian ideas to the social context argued as if it were. If only the fittest survived, then society, reasoned such social Darwinists, must also be increasingly fit. This misunderstanding of Darwin became central to the Spencerian doctrines of social Darwinism. Darwin himself was far more subtle. He realized that one could not define ‘fit’ in isolation of the elements of the ecological system; that different species occupy different niches; that there are, in effect, multiple equilibria. He realized that the species that survive on one of the Galapagos Islands are not necessarily better or worse in any sense than those that survive on other islands.4

Indeed, there is again no theorem that assures us that evolutionary processes are, in any sense, welfare enhancing. They may, in fact, be highly myopic. A species that might do well in the long run may not borrow against its future prosperity, and hence may be edged out in the competition for survival by a species that is better suited for the environment of the moment.5

Precisely this kind of myopia was evidenced in the competitive struggles of the 1990s. Those investment banks whose analysts provided distorted information to their customers did best. Repeatedly, the investment banks explained that they had no choice but to engage in such tactics if they were to survive. While the most egregious corporations and accountants – the Enrons, Arthur Andersens, Tycos, and WorldComs – had their comeuppances, others survived, even prospered. And many continue to defend their practices and tactics, opposing fair disclosure of information and accounting procedures that would allow ordinary shareholders to ascertain both the levels of executive compensation and the extent of the dilution of share value through stock options.

The connection between technology and the evolution of society has long been recognized. The innovations that led to the assembly line increased productivity, but almost surely reduced individual autonomy. The movement from an agrarian, rural economy to an urban, industrial economy caused enormous societal change. While this Great Transformation is often viewed as progress, it did not leave everyone better off;6 so too with the transformations that the New Economy and globalization are bringing about in the societies of the advanced industrial countries and, even more so, of the developing world. While some of these changes open up the possibility of greater individual autonomy, others simultaneously pre- sage a weakening of the sense of community. Even the community of the workplace may be weakened.

Still, I do not believe in either economic or technological determinism. The adverse consequences of some of the changes that I have noted are not inevitable. We have followed one evolutionary path; there are others. Much of the political and social struggle going on today is an attempt to change that path. Those in positions of political power in


5 These ideas are discussed briefly in Joseph E. Stiglitz, Whither Socialism? (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994).

fact play an important role in shaping the evolution both of society and technology—for instance, by creating within the tax system rewards and incentives for certain business practices.

At the global level, America’s status as the sole superpower has allowed it to stymie progress to greater democracy within the international arena. Globalization has entailed the closer economic integration of the countries of the world, and with that closer integration there is a need for more collective action, as global public goods and externalities have taken on increasing importance. But political globalization has not kept pace with economic globalization. Rather than engaging in democratic processes of decision making, America has repeatedly attempted to impose its views on the rest of the world unilaterally.

In this essay, I have challenged the thesis that improvements in, say, technology necessarily result in an enhancement of well-being. Increases in income can enrich individual lives. They can enable individuals access to more knowledge. They can reduce the corrosive anxieties associated with insecurities about well-being—one of the problems repeatedly noted in surveys attempting to ascertain the dimensions of poverty. In doing all this, improvements in technology can help free individuals from the bonds of materialism.

But unfortunately, all that goes under the name of progress does not truly represent progress, even in the narrow economic sense of the term. I have emphasized that there are innovations, changes in technology, that, while they represent increases in efficiency, lower economic well-being, at least for a significant fraction of the population.

In the end, every change ought to be evaluated in terms of its consequences. Neither economic theory nor historical experience assures us that the changes that get adopted during the natural evolution of society and of the economy necessarily constitute progress. Moreover, neither political theory nor historical experience can assure us that attempts to redirect development will necessarily guarantee better outcomes. A recognition of this, in my mind, itself progress, and lays the foundation for attempts to structure economic and political processes in ways that make it more likely that the changes we face will in fact constitute meaningful progress.