

Our new bisannual cycle focused on the notion of

'Progress'

In current parlance, the notion of progress commonly refers to 'Advancement to a further or higher stage, or to further or higher stages successively; growth; development, usually to a better state or condition; improvement' (OED). This understanding of the notion of progress is matched in the French language where the term is defined as the 'evolution of humanity towards an ideal goal' (CNRTL). Yet a quick glance in any dictionary will reveal the rich polysemy of the term, suggesting that 'progress' is an intricate, subtle, and sometimes even contradictory notion, which cannot be reduced to a single definition. The idea of progress was complex from the start: as the term came into more frequent usage in the English language in the early modern era, evolving from its simple etymology of 'going forward', it took on various nuances.

In his *Dictionary of the French and English Tongues* (1611) Randle Cotgrave defined progress as 'Progrez: A progression, going forward, passing on, a proceeding, or continuing in a course begun'. This definition posits the idea of motion forward as the first and most immediate meaning of the word 'progress'; construed as physical onward movement, the term had long been used to refer either to military progress, when an army marched on to claim new land, or to the official tours of monarchs and dignitaries, when they journeyed through kingdoms. A more figurative understanding of the term then emerged, as in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, written in 1675, or later in William Hogarth's portrayal of *The Rake's Progress* (1733-1735).

In both its literal and metaphorical senses, progress as motion forward could be construed as a straight, forward-facing trajectory, or as a more meandering affair which, although it continued to move on towards its end, allowed room for hesitation and the exploration of by-ways, or even for moments of regression. For thinkers such as Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke, history consisted of cycles, in which events and people were subject to perpetual revolutions, and civilisation and prosperity were the forerunners of corruption and decay, opening the way for a new cycle.

The idea of continuity was suggested in Cotgrave's translation of the French 'Progrez' as 'a proceeding' and 'a continuing in a course begun', which presented progress as a cumulative product of past endeavours. Progress, in that sense, could not exist without the heritage of the past, and it was viewed as an on-going process of continuity. The temporality of such a proceeding or continuing could be slow and smoothly extended over time, but it could equally take the shape of short, sharp bursts. The term 'passing on', however, is open to further interpretation: although it, too, can refer to the passing on of accrued knowledge from generation to generation, it can also evoke a movement of rupture with former times when, decidedly facing forward, progress turns its back upon a past which is then dismissed as obsolete.

This invites reflexion upon the nature of progress: from the late nineteenth century onwards, the dominant perception of the notion of progress has made it synonymous with a gradual movement towards general happiness, as a result of the process of civilisation and cumulative advancement. As David Spadafora has noted, J. B. Bury's seminal *The Idea of Progress* (1920) was the mouthpiece for 'An interpretation of history which regards men as slowly advancing ... in a definite and desirable direction and [it] infers that this progress will

continue indefinitely.’ (Spadafora, 4) This teleological view of progress, seen as an inexorable march towards improvement, is highly representative of a Whig school of thought which would come to mark the historiography of early modern progress?). Yet it should not remain unquestioned.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the notion of progress remained much more neutral, as can be seen in Bailey’s 1763 Dictionary. The ameliorative connotation which the term ‘progress’ conjures up today remained noticeably absent from its definitions until later in the long eighteenth century. In the third edition of Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1768), one additional interpretation is given as ‘intellectual improvement; advancement in knowledge’. Increasingly, progress was to be seen as a continuous process of improvement towards a better, ideal state. Yet the synonymy between ‘progress’ and improvement was questioned from the outset. Although intellectual improvement or advancement in knowledge constituted progress, their concrete applications in terms of technological, economic or societal changes divided public opinion: as some thinkers hailed what they saw as a new era of improvement, others bemoaned those changes as negative developments. There was ‘progress’, in the sense of ‘evolution’ of society, but that evolution was not necessarily for the better—rather, to some, the opposite. In the same manner as a disease could be said to progress, the novelties of the era were viewed as bound to doom humankind to perdition.

Despite the enquiries of thinkers such as Francis Bacon (1561 - 1626) or the members of the new Royal Society ‘For the improving of natural knowledge’, founded in 1660, the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries remained marked by the theory of decline and decay. Many critics of progress denounced the vices inherent to mercantilism, urbanisation, and economic developments. Yet the pessimistic ‘gloom of Tory satirists’ (Spadafora, 16) began to wane in the 1730s; by the 1760s, it had lost most of its power in favour of the idea of progress, which flourished in a relatively stable, confident social climate. Philosophical reflection was transformed by thinkers such as John Locke (1632 - 1704), David Hume (1711 - 1776), Thomas Paine (1737 - 1809) and Edmund Burke (1729 - 1797), who in turn influenced developments in political and economic theory, alongside Jeremy Bentham (1748 - 1832) or Adam Smith (1723 - 1790). In the wake of Isaac Newton’s new insights into mechanics (1642-1727), considerable scientific and technological advances were made in agriculture, machinery, and transport.

The idea of progress was divisive, and affected all facets of life, including new developments in literary genres. Authors both harked back to an idealized past, which they attempted to emulate and imitate, and responded to evolving social, cultural and artistic contexts, contributing to – and reacting to – the increased popularity of certain forms (such as diary writing or travel accounts), the decline of others (the epic) and the emergence of new genres (the novel). The subsequent tensions are typically characterized by the rivalry between authors such as Swift and Defoe, but their implications are more subtle and far-reaching than that. In a context profoundly affected by the ‘battle of the books’, the dispute of the Ancients and Moderns which followed the publication of William Temple’s *An Essay upon the Ancient and Modern Learning* (1690), the ameliorative connotations of the term progress, as it relates to literature, were, in fact, far more frequently mentioned and hotly debated than they are today. Authors like Jonathan Swift hankered after a lost golden age and lamented the decadence of the modern world, whilst others openly dared to move forward to something new, which they construed as an improvement (Levine, 1). Although the battle of Ancients v Moderns subsided in the 1730s with no obvious victor, a paradox emerged: when seeking to

recover not only the texts but the genius of the age, Renaissance humanists invented many of the 'techniques and methods of modern philology'. When they 'elevated the classics to a timeless status', humanists actually made them modern. At the same time, their studies began to perceive some flaws in the Ancients, and to set them at a distance, opening the way for new genres. (Levine, 2)

Sociological and historical studies suggest that modern societies, as opposed to traditional ones, are 'information-rich societies', characterized by calculation, measurements, understanding and control, as well as a conviction that progress, material and moral, is to be encouraged. Such a society was partly in the making in the early modern era, which saw the future as full of promise and began to operate a gradual detachment from the Ancients, and as interest in scientific and technological innovation grew. The era saw a new emphasis upon the virtues of diligence and industry, and an increasing appetite for inventions and discoveries, as well as philosophical enquiry, which would culminate in France with the Enlightenment, although never without its detractors. First written for a British audience, Bernard Mandeville's vitriolic satire, *The Fable of the Bees* (1714) ignited a debate about abundance and luxury, and raised questions about the morality of excessive wealth, the pursuit of profit, and their compatibility with public happiness and the welfare of society. (Slack, 3)

In studying the notion of progress, the prominence of Enlightenment thought has weighed heavily upon the historiography of the field, which mostly deals with France and its Lumières, to the detriment of British thinkers. J. B. Bury devoted seven chapters of his monograph to the idea of progress in the French context prior to the Revolution, but only one to the English and Scottish contexts. Such bias raises various questions. Was the early modern idea of progress merely an import from France, as Bury argued? Was the notion of little importance in Britain? Paul Slack argued, on the contrary, for 'a powerful and coherent narrative about the country's betterment' (Slack, 3) in which the seventeenth century laid the foundations both of a political system and of technological advances which later led to an era of 'Victorian optimism'. He claimed that 'By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the quest for improvement distinguished England from other countries. It had become part of the collective mentality, and it made England distinctive.' (Slack, 1) Likewise, in literary studies, a school of thought developed in the wake of the publication of Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*, suggesting that eighteenth century English society has provided a unique and fertile soil for the advent and development of new writing genres like the novel.[1] Identifying Defoe, Richardson and Fielding as founding fathers of the genre, Watt argued that the novel's realism, its interest in the subjectivity of characters were positive developments and advances in the field of literature that would be adopted later in France, once the cultural influence of the Court and of Classical literature had diminished. In his view, the novel was an essentially British genre, fostered by the rise of the middle classes, the relative democratisation of reading and new improvements in printing technologies.

Was there, then, something quintessentially British about the notion of progress in the early modern era? If so, this would imply that there is not one single model of progress, but many, and that those varied models are not necessarily transferable. For instance, although Filippo Mazzei echoed Jefferson, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, by praising the new American institutions as an embodiment of Enlightenment thought and as more advanced than those of Europe, he doubted that this American model of progress could be transposed to Europe. The notion of progress can be viewed as kaleidoscopic and even, perhaps, as illusory.

Does progress really exist, or is it merely a construct, which may not be absolute, and may, once its usefulness spent, become irrelevant outside the context in which it emerged? Post-modern interpretations would see a juxtaposition or succession of changes, to be envisaged in themselves, where thinkers once saw a teleological ideal of 'progress'. While in socio-historic terms the latter meaning is perhaps relevant when assessing events, current literary analysis cannot really be based upon the notion that change over time is necessarily positive advancement. Literary developments are, from a current perspective, simply developments, gradual changes and evolution in the conception, production and reception of texts and other forms. The notion of literary progress is also central to the study of the afterlives of texts from this period, many of which have given rise to translations, adaptations, rewritings and other modes of appropriation. The onward movement of literary production can be viewed, over the centuries, as a dual one, based on a gradual forwards process that nonetheless remains firmly connected to the past. While progress appears linear, literary progress can only be apprehended in terms of cycles and networks: each step forward may also be a retracing of a previous step.

Over t2018-2020, our seminar hoped to contribute to the study of the multi-faceted notion of progress, focussing specifically its early modern interpretations in the British Isles and North America. It questioned the linearity of progress, its teleological construction, and its positivist interpretations. It highlighted its nuanced effects upon the evolution of social developments, starting, in 2018-2019, with its impact on language.

[1] Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*. Chatto and Windus, 1957, London: The Hogarth Press (Seventh impression) 1995.