



On the Ambiguity of Progress

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It may not be unfitting for this occasion on which we celebrate the memory of Albert Schweitzer, to take note of the fact that Schweitzer in many circles today, and unfortunately .increasingly, not only tends to be less and less remembered but also more and more calumniated,, and his thought distorted. He is accused of having been a ‘reactionary,’ a ‘colonialist,’ of having had contempt for the Africans.

What could be more absurd, and absurd even taking into account his patriarchalistic attitude, in which he was a son of his time?

Yet this accusation, absurd as it is, needs to be understood. One might say that one reason lies in the fact that Schweitzer’s teaching of the reverence for life is too much of a challenge and hence arouses resistance and anger in a society in which less and less reverence for life, and even less and less respect for life is to be found, but rather a spirit of destructiveness, attraction to dead, unalive, mechanical. I do not need to give examples, anybody can find them by reading the newspapers or by looking around.

But I think there is still another reason for the distortion of Schweitzer’s ideas, namely his skepticism toward what is called *progress*, meaning happiness for the greatest number by maximal production and by maximal consumption, concept of progress which has existed for the last hundred and fifty years more or less. And in order to understand not only the {02} protests against Schweitzer but also the true significance of his message for our time, we must understand his attitude toward progress, and that is why I want to make some remarks on „Schweitzer and the ambiguity of progress.”

First, some remarks as an introduction to this topic. Two political philosophies which have separated the minds are arrayed against each other; on the one hand the liberals, progressives, „leftists“, who believe in „progress“ in the liberal bourgeois sense. The other front are the conservatives and reactionaries, who fight against „progress“, who accuse progress of destroying the human substance through its emphasis on material satisfaction and ethical relativism.

There is a third attitude, however, that of the „radical humanists.” They see the process of dehumanization brought about by contemporary industrial capitalist and state capitalist systems. But instead of looking backwards, they demand a radical cultural and social change in a forward direction. They are not easily understood because they do not fall into the two main categories, and because they do not belong to the two fronts



which fight each other; perhaps also because understanding their ideas and their attitude requires some more complicated, subtle, dialectical thinking.

Who were these paradoxical, „*anti-progress progressives?*“

Let me just mention some outstanding figures, different as they are among each other: *Karl Marx*, although most of his critique of bourgeois {03} spirit and of liberal progress was forgotten in the later development of socialism and communism. (Schweitzer could have said what Marx has been saying: „Contemporary society produces many useful things and many useless people. „) *Thoreau, Emerson, Gandhi*; but I believe that there is no one who expressed himself with such clarity as *Schweitzer*.

What were Schweitzer's views about the ambiguity of progress?

He expressed them very clearly in his writings up to 1923 and later on. He made the distinction between *grotesque* versus *normal* progress, (grotesker in Gegensatz zum normalen Fortschritt). Of this „grotesque progress“ he speaks as a superficial faith in progress (die oberflächliche Fortschrittsgläubigkeit). What was the result of this grotesque progress? Schweitzer characterized its product, modern man, as *unfree*, unconcentrated, *incomplete*, one who is in the process of losing his humanity, for whom absolute passivity is a psychic need. I want to emphasize this point, which nobody has seen as clearly as Schweitzer, speaking about the busy modern man who seems to be so active, as a man who is driven by the desire for absolute *passivity*; and yet how true this is! Schweitzer describes modern man as one who is *pathologically receptive* to public opinion, and who has lost faith in truth. Schweitzer said that we live in a new Middle Ages of unfreedom from which to liberate ourselves is more difficult than it was for man to liberate himself from the Middle Ages which ended a few centuries ago. It is more difficult because *then* man had to liberate himself from outward authorities, from outer force against which he could {04} fight, while *now* he has to liberate himself from, as Schweitzer says, self-created mental and intellectual dependency. Indeed, this is a picture which since then has been repeated by some others, but by no-one more clearly and more profoundly than by Schweitzer.

Schweitzer certainly does not seek solutions in going back, in breaking up the industrial system. He demands a new Renaissance, a human Renaissance which he defines in terms of „*ethical demands prevailing over material interests*, „ as a society which would be built upon the primacy of humanity; on devotion, on solidarity, on justice, on reverence for life. Yet he recognized that man has deteriorated „because of the *circumstances* in which he has been put. „ And he makes it clear that he is not for poverty, not for abolishment of material welfare, but „for a modest yet constant material well-being for everybody“ and that degrees in somewhat greater or lesser material welfare are quite secondary. He says - and I quote - „The grotesque progress can develop into normal progress only when a mental attitude (*Gesinnung*) gains ascendancy, an attitude which is capable of bringing order to chaos.“ And *chaos* it is to which he refers, when he speaks of the society in which we live.

He has shown the same attitude in his personal life; in his saving old organs, which were superior to the machine-made ones with more gadgets. Or in his work in Lambarene, which was functional and not dictated by the interest in progress as being equated to high buildings with glass and steel. {05}

I believe that the significance of Schweitzer's message can be seen even more clearly



and that his message is even more important today than it has been at any time, because „the pathology of normalcy“ has still been growing, and growing in leaps and bounds since the years when he saw it and voiced his concern. People have become *more* helpless, *more* hopeless, *more* passive, *more* suggestible to public opinion, *more* incapable of independent thought, and indeed we are threatened, as experts know very well, perhaps by total catastrophe in a few decades, be it by nuclear armament against which Schweitzer has protested so vehemently in the fifties, or by such catastrophes as are the result of our uncontrolled and unreasonable and greedy exploitation of nature.

There is danger that the two fronts that I was speaking about harden more and more; that the so-called progressives go ahead with their dream of more production and more material goods and more „happiness“ (in quotes) and end up with a neo-fascist technocratic society, and that those who care for certain traditional values, who are not impressed by the glamour and glitter of the neon-light society, are appealed to by reactionary and even by old-fashioned fascist ideologies. I believe that it is an urgent need today to understand the ambiguity of progress as Schweitzer has recognized it, to create a new synthesis between genuine progress and radical humanism, to see that we must subordinate the machine to man, material well-being to, total human well-being. {06}

Schweitzer suggests a new synthesis which unites all those in both camps who are genuine humanists, who put man above things, being above having, life above deadness and the purely mechanical, and independence over the fictitious freedom of the administered man in the bureaucracy. In spite of all kinds of differences in religious and political thought, Schweitzer is a guide for these humanists to unite in their fight against the Golem of an economic and technical system which runs wild and will destroy mankind if man does not take charge in the name of life and in the name of reason.

Today the problem is to create new forms of social living in which the attempt is made to create a synthesis between an optimum of industrial machine production and a maximum of human activity and independence. To do this is extremely difficult. It cannot be the result of the thinking of one man or two; it requires vast studies of many scientists; it is a task perhaps as difficult to achieve as to create the technical possibilities for a trip to the moon. But I believe it is equally soluble if equal efforts are made. But these efforts will only be made if the reverence for life becomes the organizing principle of society.

Today our outstanding problem is *not* any more the development of technique; naturally I am not pleading for the stopping of natural science. But natural science and its application to technique is not the foremost interest of humanity today. The foremost interest is the problem of creating new human forms of social organization; just as the best minds in the last fifty years have applied themselves to problems of the natural {07} sciences and of technique, they must apply themselves *now* imaginatively to new forms of social living. That means experimenting, studying, creating models and scenarios, and to awaken the imagination and the visionary powers of man, by showing that it is possible to live, perhaps not luxuriously, but in a dignified way and at the same time humanly; such endeavors are necessary to bring about the new Renaissance, the necessity of which Schweitzer proclaimed as the alternative to catastrophe.

Schweitzer was an *optimist* in the sense of having unbounded faith in life but *not* in the sense issuing today from the mouths of political leaders, that all is going well and will still go better when a few old-fashioned remedies are applied. He was a realist, a



man, to quote Master Eckhart, „who did not deceive anybody but who also could not be deceived.” He predicted that failure of abolition of atomic arms would lead to ultimate catastrophe, and he would have protested equally or more vehemently had he seen the failure to take even the smallest steps toward arms reduction.

It is in Schweitzer’s spirit if we blend our faith in life with the warning that life is threatened more than ever before in human history. For this reason I think it fitting to conclude with Schweitzer’s warning remarks which he voiced in 1954 in his acceptance speech of the Nobel Prize. He said: „Let us dare to face the situation. Man has become a superman, but the superman with the superman power has not risen to the level of superman reason. To the same degree to which his *power* grows, he becomes more and more a *poor man*. *It must shake up our conscience that we become all the more inhuman the more we grow into supermen.*”