

“the long revolution”: the open-ended, multi-fronted struggle for human emancipation, realization, and dignity.⁸ And, that, presumably, is a politics that we can all agree upon.

NOTES

1. Paul A. Pickering, “Class Without Words: Symbolic Communication in the Chartist Movement,” *Past & Present* no. 112 (1986): 144–62, 157.
2. Montgomery H. Hyde, ed., *The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* (New York: University Books, 1956), 236.
3. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 9.
4. Indeed, this is a fundamental problem for the contemporary left more generally. See, for example, Mark Lilla’s recent—and rather uncharitable—manifesto, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017).
5. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).
6. As this statement suggests, I am not persuaded that the available models (such as Rancière’s tripartite distinction between archipolitics, parapolitics, and metapolitics) are adequate to the task, although they are certainly stimulants to thought. See Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 61–93.
7. Ernst Bloch, “Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics,” trans. Mark Ritter, *New German Critique* no. 11 (1977): 22–38.
8. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961).



Progress

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AS Victorianists, we eagerly reject the ideological commitment to historical progress that ostensibly dominates our culture of study. Although there are political and intellectual reasons to distance ourselves

from the self-congratulatory progress narratives that persist, remarkably, even in the age of Trump, climate change, and runaway capitalism, our rejection of the doctrine of progress has come at the expense of exaggerating its penetration in the Victorian period. In fact, the dominance of progressive or “Whig” history in the nineteenth century has been vastly overstated. It was always already limited, shoehorned in awkwardly among other ideas about history. If we want to reckon with our own critical debts to the liberal intellectual tradition—or if we just want progress that is equitable and just—we need to have a more nuanced understanding of the fleeting and mitigated Victorian theorization of historical progress.

As it does today, the idea of gradual, gentle, and inexorable progress had a certain broad appeal that transcended political difference, despite its association with the Whigs.¹ A two-edged sword, it could provide the impetus for progressive reforms or the complacency of understanding one’s world as advanced and advancing. Despite its diffuse appeal, the idea of progress was independent of and often difficult to reconcile with most actual historical methods. Although progressive history does not imply any specific understanding of the causes of improvement, in terms of historiographical style, it seems in theory most consistent with the kind of systematic dialectical unfolding theorized by Hegel and Marx, which allows limited agency to individual actors—the presumption of inevitable unceasing improvement must necessarily circumscribe any individual’s ability to effect a particular outcome.

However, as Herbert Butterfield observes, Whig history tends paradoxically to overstate rather than understate the agency of individuals, unconvincingly crediting them with changes whose causes were arguably more obscure and complex. In his *System of Logic*, John Stuart Mill attempts to reconcile progress and greatness by suggesting that the presence or absence of great men “determin[es] the celerity of the movement.”² To this end, he takes up a metaphor from Thomas Babington Macaulay, who figures the great man as standing on a mountaintop, seeing the sun’s rays just a few moments earlier than those in the valley below, and thus as a modest harbinger of inevitable change. Mill emphasizes, by contrast, that the great man climbs to the mountaintop, and that if he had not, his innovative ideas might have been profoundly delayed. Mill does not spell it out, but in order to make his adaptation of Macaulay’s metaphor work, he must presume a thick cloud covering just below the summit that allows the great man to see rays of sun that may never be visible from the valley. Butterfield’s critique picks up on Mill’s underlying faith in individual greatness, observing the way that

Luther, for example, is valorized by Whig historians for setting in motion the process of secularization—an outcome he certainly did not intend.

This investment of Whig history in the Protestant Reformation reflects not only its strange reliance on individual agency, but also the cultural and historical limits of this historiographical outlook. In the influential early formulation of Macaulay's 1828 essay, "History," he presents the idea of progressiveness not as a truly universal feature of human experience, but rather as a specific historical claim about the distinction between antiquity and modernity. Although he expresses reservations about what has been lost in the transition, he contrasts modern history writing favorably with even the best ancient writers in that the latter are fundamentally limited by the stasis of their cultures.³ For Macaulay, the "torpor" of antiquity "was broken by . . . the victory of Christianity over Paganism" and the Viking invasion of Europe, which allowed for the establishment of the "second civilization of mankind . . . under circumstances which afforded a strong security that it would never retrograde and never pause."⁴ Macaulay thus suggests only indirectly, by ruling out the possibilities of reversal and stagnation, that modern (white, Protestant) civilization is moving continually forward.

As this vision of progress becomes a more strident feature of philosophy of history later in the century, it retains the strong sense that progress had a historical point of origin at the dawn of modernity, in addition to its narrow cultural limits. In his 1895 inaugural lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, Lord Acton states plainly that "this constancy of progress . . . is the characteristic fact of *modern* history."⁵ Like Macaulay, Acton understands progress as delimited by an untheorized rupture, an "unheralded" transition that took place around 1600 in which the past was "marked off by an evident and intelligible line" from the present.⁶ Acton's argument thus leaves the pre-modern open to a different historiography—at one point, he suggests a trajectory of decline—and does not work particularly hard to understand the sudden paradigm shift that he himself claims is history's most consequential.⁷

If Acton is a high-water mark for the Victorian doctrine of progress, sea levels have since risen. We might contrast Acton's relative restraint with Steven Pinker's celebrated *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (2011), which spends several hundred pages using statistics to support its premise, that violence has consistently declined over the *longue durée*—from the earliest hunter-gatherer civilizations to the present moment, in absolutely every human culture, and on every scale of reference.⁸ Although Pinker's positivist method and his analysis

have been criticized by humanists as well as statisticians, his work is a testament to our tremendous appetite for progress narratives, one that certainly exceeds in quantity and differs in quality from the modest claims of Macaulay or Acton. As we strive to understand historical change that has a more ambivalent direction and as we fight for the future that we want, we need to acknowledge the way that the Victorian theorization of progress went hand-in-hand with its others—regress, cyclicity, stasis, and rupture.

NOTES

1. Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1963), 4; Michael Bentley, “Shape and Pattern in British Historical Writing, 1815–1945,” in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing, 1800–1945*, Vol. 4, ed. Stuart Macintyre, Juan Maiguashca, and Attila Pók (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 208.
2. John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive, Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence and the Methods of Scientific Investigation*, in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), 8: 938 [VI. xi. 3].
3. Thomas Babington Macaulay, “History,” in *Critical, Historical, and Miscellaneous Essays* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1878), 1: 393.
4. Macaulay, “History,” 416, 417.
5. John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton, “The Study of History,” in *Selected Writings of Lord Acton*, ed. J. Rufus Fears (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985): 2: 517 (emphasis added).
6. Dalberg-Acton, “Study,” 507.
7. Dalberg-Acton, “Study,” 508–10.
8. Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011).



Progress

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A belief in progress was so deeply embedded in nineteenth-century Britain that it was one of those beliefs for which there was no