

THE "LAW OF PROGRESS".

BY F. W. FITZPATRICK.

SOME time ago I prepared for a certain newspaper a series of sketches illustrating parallels in the rise and fall of ancient Republics. The purpose of that paper's editors was, I suppose, to call the attention of its readers to the pitfalls into which those Republics stumbled and to thereupon build editorials warning its constituents that "like conditions beget like results", that "history repeats itself" and that we were surely plunging into the same maelstrom that engulfed nations that were once great. Howbeit, the points brought forth in these notes provoked some discussion in which I read an oft repeated reference to the "law of progress", a term that grates abominably upon my nerves, a rasping misnomer.

Now I would like to leave the question of whether we are on the road to a downfall like that of the Roman Republic or not to some other time and spend a little while glancing over what we know of that alleged "law of progress" that we have heard about and lived with upon more or less intimate terms since our school days.

The gathering of the authorities was a most fascinating pastime, placing their opinions before you is merely to translate and edit that great mass of data into "readable length", therefore is the task an easy one, a light vacation labor, and if I make it readable I am then well repaid for the work.

The best sign of progress is that there is much talk of progress. True, it is an often misapplied term and one used thoughtlessly: few could really define in what progress really consists. Still it is well that the word should be upon every one's lips, it expresses a tendency toward something on the part of every mind. Garrau aptly puts it that "you may be quite certain of the mediocrity of

an artist who is satisfied with his picture, who thinks it finished and does not desire to add to it, the insufficiency of a virtue that does not wish itself more perfect, likewise you may attest that an age when people do not aspire to higher and better things than they have, that age is a retrogressive one and had better be wiped off the records". This striving, this hope, this effort toward progress is at once the blessing and the danger of our time. Some there are who, in the name of Progress, would have us break our necks to reach a certain point; others in the name of that same Progress would convince us that the surest way of advancing is to go backward. Over-zealous as some may be the movement they impart to a period is a benefit. It persists, forms itself from these implications and divergent tendencies and becomes salutary and corrective.

To claim, however, that there is a "law" of progress is forcing a point. There may be such a law, and some of the higher authorities implicitly believe there is, but if there is it certainly has not been made manifest. What are the conditions of progress? Even if these were determined there would still remain the necessity of establishing their relative importance and the precise role each plays in our affairs. What is the object of human development. Is it striving for the happiness of the individual? Or do we each fit in a little cog and by our presence there are turning the great wheel in some one direction, toward some development of purpose that we, alas, are still ignorant of?

From the earliest time man has had a vague consciousness of a faculty of progress which would lead us to believe that it is one of the essential and distinctive characteristics of our species. This has been more or less developed and understood. In China and in India you will find that idea in its lowest developed state, while in Greece and Rome of old it was carried to excess. You will find in the most ancient classics a mass of peculiar notions wherein life, progress, is compared to certain astral revolutions, and periodical evolution of the seasons, the working of a wheel always coming back to the point from which it started. We think our scientists and philosophers have done some wonderfully original thinking, take for instance our theory of evolution; go back to Maximander and you will find that that philosopher claimed that the action of the sun upon the earth when the latter was covered with waters, induced evaporation in the form of pelicules, matrixes containing

minute form of imperfect organisms that, later, developing by degrees, gave birth to all forms of living things; according to him our ancestors were aquatic animals that, living in muddy waters grew accustomed little by little to living upon the land as the latter was formed and were gradually dried out in the sun. If that is not full-fledged evolution, what is? With the Roman poets the idea was well developed. Take Virgil or Horace, how frequently they touch upon the glorious ascension of humanity from savagery to civilization; but they likewise invariably comment upon the decadence of that higher civilization into a posterity more vicious than any of its ancestors.

With the writers of prose, Cicero, Aristotle, Seneca, the idea of progress was something more definite. Seneca, for instance, claimed that nature would always have some new and better secrets to reveal to us but that it would do so gradually and only in the long run of human generations. He deplored that the philosophers of his time thought themselves initiated into the full truths while he could see that they had barely reached the gate of the temple.

The idea of progress was but slowly developed in Pagan times.

With the advent of Christianity the idea germinated into stronger life. All the preceding ages were but a preparation, a gradual upbuilding of thought, for the coming of Christ. After him the world was to go on to the day of final judgment, when the perfect life should at last be reached. The middle ages were not particularly propitious to the high understanding of the term "progress". The authors of that time are interesting, however, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Roger Bacon, Joaquin de Flore, John of Parma, Gerhard Amaury of Chartres voiced the sentiments of the times. The general notion was that time was divided into three epochs; the age of the Old Testament or of the Father, when all was in preparation, when God manifested his omnipotence and governed by law and fear; the age of the New Testament or the kingdom of the Son, when he revealed himself through mysteries and the Sacrament and the third age, or the government of the Holy Ghost, in a time to come when we will see truth face to face without symbol or veil. You will find the same ideas in Campanella, Paracelce and Dante. It was from that form that the notion of progress passed from the Middle Ages to the period of the Renaissance, the 16th century. It was then that great men, Bodin, Bacon, Descartes and Pascal divested it of its mystic character, secularized

it, attempted to determine its elements and follow it in its most diverse applications. That idea has kept on growing in importance until it contaminates all the ideas and speculations of the modern mind. In the 18th century it became known as the "Law of History"; in the 19th century it implied the study of nature and under the name of evolution "it pretends to contain the formula of universal existence."

What will we do with it in the 20th century?

I have before me Marcelli's, Flint's, Rougemont's and Cousin's writings upon "progress"—Garrau calls them the "vestibules to the science of progress." They all endeavor to prove that there is an edifice, yet one may well doubt its existence or feel that it is but an imaginary cathedral that hope has pictured in our minds. How many formulas have been given us and how many systems, and not one that has not been proven erroneous and swept aside by some successor possessing still greater assurance?

Cousin's theory was a most attractive one. His idea was that progress was but the successive appearance upon the stage of history of three ideas that are the very foundation of reasoning; the idea of the infinite, that of the finite and that of the relation between the infinite and the finite. The Orient of long ago was the expression of the first; Graeco-Roman society was the development of the idea of the finite and modern civilization the expression of the relation of both. A theory that would be well enough if man was but reason without heat radiation or activity but there is nothing in it to explain the numberless forces living and complex, instincts, desires, passions and sentiments.

Schelling, Krause, Savigny and Spencer compose another school, and in fact St. Simon, Fourier and Azais may be said to be of the same school though they indulge in more metaphor than do the others who claim for their deductions scientific precision. One group asserts that the different forms of the ascension state are determined by gravitation, by contraction or by expansion—no two of them agree upon which force it really is. Whereas the Spencerian claim that the governing class, the commercial class, the libraries are to the state as the nervo-muscular, circulatory and nutritive systems are to the body of a vertebrate. Garrau rightfully claims that to get down to absolute precision is to ignore the apparent conditions that distinguish physiological phenomena from moral and social phenomena. To pit the latter's theory against

Spencer's theory we must observe that the animal and plant life, properly placed, would increase and multiply to an alarming, if not fatal degree; their development follows but one route, irrevocably outlined and whose final term is simply the realization, in the individual, of the type of the species. Without conscience and without choice does the tree project its branches towards the light; the growth of the human species towards improvement is invariably the result of a voluntary effort and the recompense for something well done. The growth of humanity is not as with animal and vegetable life along set lines, toward a result that cannot but be attained; many directions are possible; there is a capacity for decadence as well as for progress. In animal life different organs are harmoniously developed and upon that harmony depends the life of the individual. Imagine a vertebrate living with a rudimentary heart and a full-grown brain. If we admit, analogically, that nations are but organs of one vast body, humanity, then the case is presented to us of certain organs in their first stage of development, certain others reaching the final heights of evolution and still others retrograding; infancy, adolescence, full virility, middle age, senility, all in the same body—is the animal Garrau presents to us built upon Spencerian lines; a strange animal indeed.

Prejudice is certainly a funny thing. One of the brightest writers of fifty years ago, Conrad Hermann, of Leipzig, followed along the same lines of thought as the others we have just noted, but embellished his theory with more detailed particulars. He is specific. Youth to him is the exuberant energy whose expression is in art; riper age, distinguished by more sober judgment, practical, is the age of industry; and then follows the profound meditations of old age finding expression in the sciences—the highest form of life. He contends that Germany has reached the most exalted point attainable and that it is rank foolishness for any other nation to aspire to reach or supersede her. Haeckel following the same line of thought tells us in all seriousness that the Indo-Germanic race is the one that has gotten the furthest removed from the original form of man—monkey. Fortunately for us who have a little English blood in our veins these high authorities admit the English to a little participation in these Germanic advantages, but the Latin races are absolutely beyond salvation!

Is it not sufficient proof that these deductions are necessarily chimerical and that the attempt to compare the phases of our

individual existence to the phases of the world's existence are futile when we realize that we have absolutely no knowledge of how old the world may be? We have a faint idea of the term of its existence in the past, but how much longer is that existence to continue? Is the earth young or is she old, are we reaching senility, or are we in the first stage of adolescence?

Lasaulx is without doubt the one philosopher who has given most precision to the theory that pretends to find in the life of nations the phases of human life. Naudin agrees with him. Independently of all human intervention many species of animal and plant life have died a natural death. Some have been destroyed through the agency of some external circumstance, but even in the human species certain races are in a process of extinction, not by any violent destruction but by the gradual weakening of the generative faculties and weaker and weaker resistance to the general causes of dissolution. They perish, "as a dying leaf upon the tree drawing no further sustenance from the trunk that has nourished it". Their conclusions are risky, however, when they apply this process to nations. True, each nation has in itself a certain amount of vital force that it expends more or less in the course of its evolution. This outlay of strength and force follows in certain channels, in one it gives life to a language, in another it is religion, the arts, philosophy, a system of government; and all these are organs to the same laws of increase and loss of force as they are to the varied expressions of that force. "Nations that have escaped destruction by external causes seem to be condemned to die of old age. Many have disappeared; Greece and Rome succumbed less to the blows of their enemies than to the crushing weight of their old age. Nor genius nor virtue can reanimate these bodies whose vital force has been sapped away," says Naudin.

A fascinating theory I grant you, but is it a tenable one? The individual by the act of his conception receives the force of a limited life; that life is spent, used up in the cycle of succeeding years, but what are the limits of the vital force of a nation? As a matter of fact we may say that a new nation is born every day. The energy that animates it is being renewed man by man, generation by generation. The generation that passes away leaves behind it good works, a heritage of art, of science and of progress that nourishes the next, which in turn will add to that heritage, an en-

tailed fortune to succeeding generations. Has there ever been a nation that actually perished of old age?

If the existence of an inherent force, a vital energy, in nations is not sufficient to account for progress, how much less reason is there to seek that cause in extraneous impellants! How about the influence made upon our affairs by our rotation about the Sun, magnetic currents, gravitation and the other theories of Hegel, Michellet and of Lasaulx who would have progress, liberty, civilization marching on from the Orient to the Occident? In the name of Heaven, what connection is there between the planetary movement controlled by mechanical forces, and the progress of liberty? Then too, where is the beginning of East and West? For our convenience we have placed it somewhere, but as a matter of fact in such a theory as this what account is taken of the American continent; is it East or West; is it progressive or retrogressive?

My favorite author—Garrau, thinks with many of the later English and Italian writers, that the action of the climate, the production of the soil and the relative altitudes of habitation have a much more direct influence upon humanity than any of the above cited alleged influences. They are certainly less contestable arguments. Montesquieu and Buckle have opened the way to an almost limitless calculation, one might call it along mathematical lines and with some degree of accuracy between these causes and effects. No one can gainsay that these conditions modify life in their vicinity; they exercise a very great influence upon the economic state, politics, society, of a nation. Given the nature, the number, the intensity of these causes to your specialists, metallurgists, chemists, physiologists, ethnologists and political economists can figure out pretty accurately the nature, the tendencies, the life of a people. Who has not observed that in a country where external nature is gigantic, somber, terrible, the inhabitants are paralyzed, superstitious, sensual weaklings, and yet, as Flint says, in India for instance, it is not nature that is too big as much as it is that man is too small. Place men there of another calibre and that very nature that dwarfs the one class will be subjected and made use of by the other.

Heredity?

Bagehot sees in it the essential conditions for the development of nations. One of the strongest inherited traits in man is the belief that might is right and the resorting to that argument upon the

slightest provocation. War is another name for that inherited trait. Some claim that war is progress. Each battle, they say, is a step in civilization. Not so; at first war was but a struggle of barbarians to remain barbarians; later it was used for as unholy ends and with as little benefit to its users. Were not the wars of Napoleon distinctly disadvantageous to Europe and well nigh destructive to France? What about the others, what about our Great World War? Some good may have come from some war, as an incidental auxiliary it may have helped progress in upsetting the barriers that separated people, in mixing races, in eventually propagating new ideas, but war has never been the immediate real cause of one iota of progress.

How can heredity be a part of a "law of progress"? It cannot but make like from like and it is so dependent upon environment, education and other externals that it might as well be eliminated from our consideration. A man may receive from his parents a lively, restless imagination. With it he has an equal chance of becoming a great artist or a superstitious fanatic. What we inherit is as a piece of rough stone, "it may be carved into the semblance of a god or of a beast". Bagehot sees in heredity the principal agent of progress; Edgar Quinet sees in it a reactionary force!

Any influence heredity may have upon the human race would hardly justify its elevation into a prime cause, creative, as it were, of the *law* of progress. Perhaps humanity is still too near infancy, sciences that seem indispensable auxiliaries to history are too young yet that a definite theory of progress may be possible. That theory may be a dream and hope far off, a conquest reserved for the later days of our species.

Herbert, Schopenhauer, Renonvier, Bonillier, Flaxman, Derward, Ford-Smith, have said their little pieces, but remain unconvinced, skeptical, still groping in the darkness for the Law of Progress.

Perhaps we strain at the word "law". The word, I submit, means the constant communication, necessary between two phenomena, of which one is the antecedent of the essential condition of the other. With this acceptance of the word can there be a LAW of progress? No, such a law would impose itself, of absolute necessity, upon all phenomena it governed. Now, necessity excludes liberty; and the facts of history are the product of a free

agency. Either must we set aside the question of the law of progress or cease to speak of liberty.

This question has a religious phase. Quatrefages, Berger, Bunsen and Fancello enlarge upon that aspect of the matter. The notion of God, of religion, is essential and distinctive of the human species, therefore, it alone of all the animals is progressive. This idea man has of God, the primordial and constant force that moves nations, the living breath that inspires humanity towards truth and justice, gives birth perforce to a language, social or political constitutions, civilization. Progress is a fact. That, like all other facts has a law, but that law has nothing in common with the laws that govern astronomical, physical, chemical and vital phenomena. It is a law that does not compel, it escapes the inflexible rigidity of mathematical formulæ. It is for humanity the obligation instinctively felt at first as a necessity, subdued later on as a dignity and duty to feel about in every direction towards an ideal of beauty, of truth, of happiness and of perfection. However, that ideal may be disfigured by ignorance or superstition no individual of the human race is absolutely devoid of it. It is the beacon that lights men on coming into this world; to us belongs the duty to gather, to concentrate and to fortify its rays, ours the task to establish the direction in which these rays shall shine that we may feel developing in us, through their beneficent heat, a stern sense of duty that enables us to accomplish the noble and sacred work of Progress. Neither fatality nor nature can relieve us of that task, for Progress is precisely the triumph of moral reason and liberty over Nature and Fatality.