

REVIEW: THE MYTH OF PROGRESS

Margaret Macintosh

Yvonne Burgess (1996), **The Myth of Progress**, Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, pb, £8.99, ISBN 0947988777, 214pp.

It would be easy to dismiss this book as the naive longings of a guilt-ridden middle-class liberal because in some respects that is what it is and Ms Burgess disarms us by virtually admitting so at the start (although she might not accept 'naive'). That would be to do both the book and the author a disservice, however, because it offers us a great deal more. It is insightful, thought-provoking and challenging, turning over for our inspection many of the sincerely held beliefs and traditions of the western world - political, economic, social, cultural and theological - and making us think again about the world and our comfortable place in it.

The writer grew up in Fife, daughter of former missionaries to West Africa, and as an adult travelled widely in Europe and the USA as well as spending six years in Africa herself. These experiences, particularly the sojourn in Zimbabwe, have clearly made a deep impression on her. It is hard, perhaps impossible, to do this sort of travelling and remain unchanged, but Ms Burgess has moved beyond the excitement and enthusiasm for the new and strange, beyond the urge to help those 'less privileged' than herself (a concept demolished in the book), beyond the desire to return and encourage political activists with stories and 'case histories'. What she has done is reflect long and carefully on her own experience, the culture which nourished her and the history of which she is part. She has tried and failed to make sense of current

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western attitudes (what she calls the 'Cultural Superiority Syndrome') compared to the lives and life-styles of people she has met and lived with in other parts of the world. And this book is her very serious, very thoughtful, very concerned conclusions: she says, in effect, 'Look, we've got this wrong. This path, this Western path of "Progress", is leading us to spiritual and psychological bankruptcy - and very likely to material bankruptcy as well.'

The Myth of Progress looks at the philosophies and events which have shaped Western thought and behaviour and offers some explanations as to why we are as we are now: a highly industrialised, technologically advanced, affluent group of peoples - with blood on our hands and, all too often, greed and despair in our hearts.

Christian theology, the writer believes, has to take some of the blame for this state of affairs because of its concentration on the extremes of good and evil. Its need for certainty and its failure to accept doubt and ambivalence have contributed to our implication in this dualism 'by persecuting those we judged to be evil, heathen or Other'. This conviction that we are right, and that others are, therefore, not simply different but wrong, has been used to justify Western aggression and greed for centuries and prevents us from examining our concept of 'Progress'. Nor was this concept challenged by Marxism in spite of its opposition to injustice because it too embraced the idea of the upward and onward march of history in material terms.

The myth that is at the heart of this book is the belief that progress is economics-led and that it will eventually lead to a decent standard of living for everyone. The writer argues that this is a delusion.

Our enslavement to the idea of Progress and to our own technological achievements has led us Westerners to put the man-made 'laws' of economics, or 'the market', above our own better judgement, our social morality and our enjoyment of life. We have alienated ourselves from our own deepest needs, and we have called this process of alienation Progress.

Burgess points to the new South Africa as an example of 'the paradox at the heart of Western-style Progress: that economic growth goes hand-in hand with human degradation'. She believes this process of economic development has been responsible for the impoverishment and violence in South African township and 'homeland' life because the urban poverty which has accompanied it has led to the destruction of basic social taboos.

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None of this is new, of course, and the chances are that most of her readers will share these views in whole or in part. But the succinct setting of the context, the analysis of how we got to where we are and the parts played by the various ages and stages of our history encourage us to examine our views carefully and oblige us to consider the ways in which we are implicated in what we mostly deplore. For Scottish readers, too, the writer's Scottish background, to which she makes frequent reference, helps us to relate our own experience to hers. It's familiar, it's real, and it rings true for us. It also keeps us firmly impaled on the hook.

The solid sense of the book, however, is weakened by the failure of the author to recognise some other myths. Idealists - and to call the writer an idealist is by no means to diminish her achievement - find it hard to look for evidence which may contradict their vision. Ms Burgess, for example, has an idealised view of children - 'good, loving, beautiful creatures'. Sure they are, but they can also be wee brats who need to be kept in line if they are not to grow into unpleasant adults. She also seems to be entirely uncritical of the family structure, seeing it only as supportive and inclusive. But families can also be restrictive, oppressive, narrow-minded and exclusive of outsiders.

More seriously, there seems to be an acceptance throughout the book that people in rural communities behave better towards one another than people in cities and that people in Africa are kinder and less cruel than those in the West. I have no experience of living in Africa with which to contradict this but the writings of African novelists suggest that human nature does not actually vary much from one place to another. Certainly there is as much mean spiritedness, cruelty and greed in rural communities in this country as in urban areas, as well as just as much goodness.

This assumption, which I believe is a myth, is a vaguely irritating refrain throughout the book. Ms Burgess seems aware of it herself because there is the occasional effort to redress the balance by offering an example of black corruption or cruelty. But her description, for example, of 'two lily-white old ladies, po-faced under their sunhats' on a tram in New Orleans otherwise occupied by blacks, makes the critical reader raise an eyebrow.

Similarly idealised is her description of work in a rural society as 'not only hard, but also enjoyable, physically and socially. Work commands respect and praise, and it brings people together.' Whereas work for Westerners, she asserts, 'has become reduced to a means of earning money with which to

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live'. Such rosy generalisations are not acceptable and weaken the main thrust of her message which is about something more important.

The book calls on us to re-examine our Western idea that Progress can be defined in economic, industrial, technological terms and to look again at some of the things we are in danger of losing: our sense of community, our understanding of ourselves and our place in the general scheme of things, our self-respect and respect for others. Whether or not we agree with the author's suggestions on ways forward it would probably do most of us good to pause in our endless round of activity, however well-intentioned, and absorb the under-lying message of **The Myth of Progress**. There is an echo here of Christ's words: What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world but lose his own soul? The book is timely and disturbing but also visionary and encouraging and reminds us that there is a more sane way to live.

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