

Progress, not!

I recently had a long conversation with some friends over a few glasses of wine (the lubricant most guaranteed to enhance any conversation).

The topic was human progress. The lack of it or the fact of it. Progress meaning the betterment of the human condition and that of the world. I was mentioning to one person who was a retired female teacher from England (we are all youthfully middle-aged and hope to stay that way) that had she lived in Victoria prior to the 1970's, she would have been required, by law, to resign from her job when she became a married woman. This was a government requirement and teachers were classified as public servants. She was surprised and told me that in England, after WW2, they had a similar law. Its purpose was to provide employment to the hundreds of thousands of returning soldiers whose jobs of all kinds had been taken by women during the fighting. It made sense and the law was ultimately revoked in the late 1950's. I do not know if a similar justification applied here but our law which discriminated against women, lingered into the 1970's. The point I was making, was that some of what we take to be progress, is of very recent vintage – a generation old, maybe less. It could change back. 'Look at the world at present' I said, 'most of it is in a worse mess than it was thirty years ago.'

'Not so' another piped up, correctly pointing out the progress made in medicine, technology, and so on. She believes that the world-spirit (that's us and everything else which is in history – in other words, everything) and tends irrevocably towards the sunny uplands of a warm, fuzzy, loving, nirvana. Let's all hold hands now.

All I can say to that POV is that the world- spirit must have drunk too much spirit and missed the horrors of the modern world. In some parts of the world you might as well say people are living in the darkest of dark ages. And anyway, I pointed out, the ancient Greeks and Romans were a peak of civilisation, then they fell and misery took over until the Renaissance followed by degradation and regression until a brief spark of progress in the early 20th Century, swiftly snuffed out by the horrors of war; and still we have conflict. Even my telephone services are not as good as they were – customer service of all kinds is going to the dogs.

To some, human progress is a trend forward with a few glitches now and then, a stumbling of sorts. But the trend is unmistakably forwards. To others, progress is cyclical and imperfect; we lose much that is good as we make progress. Eventually the horrors return; we regress, until the next cycle appears. I am not convinced either way.

My only caveat is that I have read much history and this has all happened before.