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America's Progressive Identity in the Mind of Enlightenment Ideologues

America's progressive identity is both homegrown and imported. Some scholars point to progressivism an alien idea brought to America largely in the mid to late nineteenth century and largely from Germany. There is a great deal of truth to this reading of the origins of progressivism. Just look at where so many of the reformers earned graduate degrees. Look at what they read. Look at the statist models for political, economic, and social transformation they consciously imitated.

But if we focus too much on this part of the story, we are likely to miss two things: first, that America's experiment with progressivism predates the nineteenth century and, secondly, that America produced its own version of progressive ideology domestically. To change metaphors, the historical record doesn't allow us to say that progressivism is simply a foreign pathogen introduced into the otherwise healthy American body. Progressivism is also in our genes. It is both a bug we came down with and a genetic disorder we grew up with. In other words, we can't blame everybody but ourselves for the problems of big government and the habit of foreign and domestic interventionism.

Acknowledging this larger framework, I want to look briefly this morning not at the genetic disorder we were born with but at a somewhat overlooked aspect of the "foreign contagion," if you will. In the last third of the eighteenth century, in the midst of revolution and constitution-making, America found itself the object of flattering attention by some celebrity European intellectuals. They told America it would be a great nation, a spectacle to the world, a model of human emancipation, and the precursor of the inevitable transformation that the Enlightenment would soon bring to Europe. They featured America in the starring role as the world's most progressive nation decades before anybody at home had heard of Manifest Destiny or making the world safe for democracy or ridding the world of evil.

I will limit myself to just three prominent figures: the French *philosophes* Turgot and Condorcet, and the English dissenting cleric, Richard Price. These thinkers enable us to see ourselves through the eyes of some of the most prominent ideologues of the late eighteenth century. They flattered us. We noticed. We marveled at their sagacity and perceptiveness. They saw the future in America . . . and it worked. America was their chosen nation. But they constructed an ideal identity beyond the ability of any real nation to fulfill. They dreamed up an impossible America with an impossible mission certain to disappoint them.

This is a story, then, of *dream* and *disappointment*, *illusion* and *disillusionment*. To be sure, not every European intellectual expected America to be the world's redeemer. Some wrote famously about the physical and moral degeneracy inevitable in America. The Abbe Raynal complained in 1770 that "America has not yet produced one good poet, one able mathematician, one man of genius in a single art or a single science." (And yet a

decade later, in the midst of the War for Independence, he conceded that Ben Franklin's experiments with electricity gave him hope for more good things to come, including in the arts and letters.)

Turgot served briefly but to great acclaim as Louis XVI's comptroller general from 1774 to 1776. He was also known as a prophet of human progress and a keen observer of events in America. Two years into the American war, at the time of the French alliance, Turgot had available to him in translation several of the state constitutions, the essays of a number of American statesmen, documents from the Continental Congress, articles from American newspapers, and even a draft of the proposed Articles of Confederation.

In a letter to Richard Price in 1778 (later translated and published by Price), Turgot thought an American victory assured. "The fate of America is already decided," he wrote. "Behold her independence beyond recovery." The only question remaining was what the states would do with their hard-won liberty. "But will she be free and happy?" he asked Price. "Can this new people so advantageously placed for giving an example to the world of a constitution under which man may enjoy his rights, freely exercise all his faculties, and be governed only by nature, reason and justice—can they form such a constitution?" These were no rhetorical questions. Turgot seemed to have genuine doubts about the outcome. Nevertheless, he pictured America as poised on the edge of glorious potentiality.

Here is one part of a key paragraph from that letter. Note how he mixes what *is* with what *may be*:

They are the hope of the world. They may become a model to it. They may prove by fact that men can be free yet tranquil and that it is in their power to rescue themselves from the chains which tyrants and knaves of all description have presumed to bind them under the pretence of the public good. They may exhibit an example of political liberty, of religious liberty, of commercial liberty, and of industry. The asylum they open to the oppressed of all nations should console the earth.

These few sentences contained already in 1778 a remarkable number of what have since become stock elements of the American narrative. Turgot thrust upon America a calling as the "hope of the world," the "asylum," the consolation of the earth, and perhaps a "model" and "example" of human emancipation.

But Turgot seemed to sense that there might be a difference between the American revolution he hoped for and the one he got. Experience tempered his enthusiasm. In a later letter to Price, he worried that America would not be able to found a properly enlightened regime. "I confess," he complained, "that I am not satisfied with the constitutions which have hitherto been formed by the different states of America." These state constitutions that included religious tests for office irked Turgot. The sort of tests found in Pennsylvania's constitution dated back to William Penn's original law code in the 1680s. And despite its reputation for radical democracy, the Keystone State retained two levels of religious tests for voters and representatives. But Pennsylvania was not unique, and Turgot knew this. "There are much worse tests in the other states," he continued, "and there is one (I believe the Jerseys) which requires a declaration of faith in the *divinity* of Jesus Christ." Turgot here actually recalled what he had read in Delaware's constitution, but his point stood: measured by Enlightenment standards of civil and religious liberty, America was forming illiberal governments.

Further confirmation of his fears came in the former colonies' affection for the separation of powers and checks and balances. Quite simply, the unreflective Americans were still too habituated to English ways of thinking. "I observe," he regretted, again referring to the state constitutions, "that by most of them the customs of England are imitated, without any particular motive. Instead of collecting all authority into one center, that of the nation, they have established different bodies, a body of representatives, a council, and a governor, because there is in England a House of Commons, a House of Lords, and a King. They endeavor to balance these different powers, as if this equilibrium, which in England may be a necessary check to the enormous influence of royalty, could be of any use in republics founded upon the equality of all the citizens, and as if establishing different orders of men was not a source of divisions and disputes."

Turgot's movement from hope to disillusionment didn't take long. America got stuck half way on the road to emancipation. Inexplicably to the rationalist mind, its states retained religious tests for officeholders and voters, tried to duplicate the antiquated superstructure of complex government, and obstructed free trade by regulating commerce. America failed to understand itself as a unitary nation-state in need of a simple government. Its revolution remained unfinished, its promise unfilled.

Turning from Turgot to his friends Condorcet and Price, we find a similar pattern of hope and disappointment. In 1783, the year the Treaty of Paris recognized American independence, Condorcet wrote an essay for a contest sponsored by the Abbe Raynal. The question was, "Has the discovery of America been beneficial or harmful to the human race?" Condorcet never submitted his long essay, burned much of it, and published the surviving part in 1786 as a narrower essay entitled, "The Influence of the American Revolution on Europe."

Condorcet admitted to being a dreamer. And the America he dreamed about, and believed he then witnessed coming into reality, embodied everything the Enlightenment promised mankind. America presented the world with the *example* (a word Condorcet used dozens of times) of a nation governed wholly by reason instead of prejudice. Any flaw in the American political, economic, or social system was merely the "vestige" or "remnant" of the world that was passing away. Condorcet, despite his brilliance as a mathematician and economist, mentally inhabited a very simple world with a simple template that brought clarity to modern history. It was a world in which the solution to every human problem was a matter of "not yet." Earthly redemption might take hundreds of years, progress might be slower in some places than others, but success was guaranteed once all the artificial impediments to freedom were removed. Guided by the Enlightenment, the modern world would gradually but inexorably leave behind medievalism, barbarism, ignorance, prejudice, oppression, and suffering.

America stood at the front in humanity's march of progress. Freed from England, it assumed that empire's once-venerable place as the world's model of political, economic, and religious freedom. England slid into imperial decadence in the eighteenth century. Independent America now recognized natural rights, equality, universalism, tolerance, the power of reason alone to emancipate mankind, the promise of scientific advancement, the prosperity of free trade, and the prospect of perpetual peace. And if these things were not yet fully realized in 1783, they soon would be. In fact, the growth of human progress accelerated in the greenhouse environment of America. And more than America would be blessed. Europe itself would be transformed by the pressure such a refuge for the

world's oppressed placed upon monarchies and aristocratic regimes and by such a potent example of the success of Enlightenment principles in practice.

And yet already, amid all this enthusiasm, frustration surfaced. The complaint sounded like Turgot's: America was still too English. And he faulted the state constitutions: "If one traces the history of American government since the Declaration of Independence, one does not find that the constitutions of all the states have been equally well written. There is none without some faults, and [not] all the laws written since the Declaration of Independence have . . . been equally just and wise." He didn't think any of these lingering injustices fatal, but the states' fondness for trade restrictions troubled him deeply. The persistence of mercantilism in the United States, he wrote, "reveals a constant battle between the antiquated prejudices of Europe and the principles of justice and liberty so dear to this admirable nation. And often it is the prejudices which have won out."

This was not Condorcet's last word on America. In the 1790s, at the end of his life, he wrote his eccentric masterpiece, *Sketch for an Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*. As a philosopher of history, Condorcet offered a ten-stage scheme for plotting humanity's ascent from barbarism to civilization. In the 1790s, the world stood perched on the verge of history's tenth and final stage. His unbounded optimism is all the more remarkable given the fact that he had ended up on the wrong side of the French Terror and died in prison under mysterious circumstances. The significance for the United States and for the idea of progress was that his native France had replaced America in his affections. America held an honored place in the historical process that helped carried the world over from stage nine to ten. In America's victory over England, the world had witnessed "for the first time, the example of a great people throwing off at once every species of chains. . . ." But his thoughts turned immediately once again to the American states and the vestiges of error remaining there. "The simplicity of these constitutions," he complained, "is disfigured by the systems of balance of powers" and by "identity of interests rather than an equality of rights." He made this point twice.

America had fought successfully for the "natural rights of mankind" and that example had crossed the Atlantic and infiltrated Europe. The revolutionary principles it had nearly fulfilled struck most deeply in France. There the revolution was, he wrote, "more complete, more entire than that of America" because in France more of the medieval order had to be undone. The comprehensive "French revolution," he added, ". . . had to embrace the whole economy of society, to change every social relation, to penetrate to the smallest link of the political chain. . . ." Looking beyond the revolution itself to the task of constitution-making, he found the contrast with America still more significant: "It would be easy to show how much more pure, accurate, and profound, are the principles upon which the constitution and laws of France have been formed, than those which directed the Americans, and how much more completely the authors have withdrawn themselves from the influence of a variety of prejudices. . . ." In short, France had completed the work of emancipation that America had left unfinished.

At the time of the American Revolution, Dr. Richard Price was known in the colonies and in Britain for befriending America in three important pamphlets that went through multiple printings and editions. Already in 1778, Price called for an end to all state-imposed barriers to economic, religious, intellectual, and political liberty. Liberty was natural, restraints artificial. Left alone, the economy would flourish, truth would

vanquish all error, virtue would shame hypocrisy and vice, and science would reverse the Fall and return man to an earthly Eden. America would play a critical role in this story. There, he wrote, “a new era in future annals and a new opening in human affairs [is] beginning over an immense continent without bishops, without nobles, and without kings.” “*O the depth of the riches of the wisdom of God!*” he exclaimed, quoting Romans 11:33. “*How unsearchable are his judgments!*”

In 1784, a year after Britain had formally recognized American independence, Price penned what still stands as one of the most extravagant claims ever made about the American identity. “Perhaps I do not go too far when I say that, next to the introduction of Christianity among mankind, the American Revolution may prove the most important step in the progressive course of human development.” Radiating out from America, humanity’s liberation from “superstition and tyranny” would likely spread. Mixing together prophecies from Daniel and Isaiah and from his own fruitful imagination, Price envisioned a world transformed: “Happy will the world be when these truths shall be everywhere acknowledged and practiced upon. Religious bigotry, that cruel demon, will be then laid asleep. Slavish governments and slavish hierarchies will then sink and the old prophecies be verified, ‘that the last universal empire upon earth shall be the empire of reason and virtue, under which the gospel of peace (better understood) *shall have free course and be glorified, many will run to and fro and knowledge be increased, the wolf will dwell with the lamb and the leopard with the kid, and the nation no more lift up a sword against nation.*’ In this dream world, American independence marked nothing less than a Providential step in the progressive realization of God’s millennial kingdom on earth. If Americans did not neglect their divine calling, then what was said of the Jews would be said of the new chosen people: “*in them all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*”

But America let him down. Like Turgot and Condorcet, he, too, pointed to religious tests in Pennsylvania. He also heard troubling rumors that American Episcopalians were about to ask for a bishop from England. He worried over the persistence of chattel slavery and the gulf between rich and poor. In all of these ways, the real America failed almost immediately to match his ideal.

Price, like Condorcet, turned to the French Revolution as his new hope for humanity. In 1789, he delivered his famous *Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, the sermon that called for England to have its own revolution and provoked Edmund Burke to respond with his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

What can these three Enlightenment intellectuals teach us about the construction of America’s progressive identity?

Turgot, Condorcet, and Price point to one obvious reason why their contemporaries Burke and Friedrich Gentz, and in our own time Russell Kirk, tried to drive a deep wedge between the American and French Revolutions. To be sure, the American Revolution may have been more radical than conservatives today might wish had been the case. But it was also more moderate than the Enlightenment radicals approved of. The question is not which ideals were *present* in the American Revolution, but which ideals *characterized* it. As Gentz wrote, we had our Paines and our Washingtons. But which one typified the American cause? Was that cause best understood as a fight to preserve an existing constitutional order? Or was it best understood as part of a grand redemptive narrative of human emancipation? Did the

Revolution end once victory was secured at Yorktown in 1781? Or did the Revolution need to go on and on until every last vestige of the inherited past was gone?

Ideologues wanted America to be a perpetually revolutionary regime. If the Enlightenment progressives got it right about the meaning and purpose of America, then there was and is no logical check to endless interventionism at home and abroad in the name of progress. If America really was meant to be the secular Christ among nations, then the Progressives' agenda to remake America and the world is inescapable. When President Obama, or any president of any party, offers a facile justification for war by saying that America was born in revolution, we need to ask what *kind* of revolution? A revolution to maintain our first principles of government or a revolution to remake the world at the sacrifice of those very principles?