

The Delusion of Progress

The Delusion of Progress:
A Fallacy of Western Society

Pierre A. Chomat

Translated from the French by
Victoria Dare

Universal Publishers
Boca Raton

The Delusion of Progress: A Fallacy of Western Society

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To the youth
Who will remedy the damage
That Western excess
Has inflicted on the world

And to Monix

The Delusion of Progress

A Fallacy of Western Society

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Foreword

Our industrial society is insatiable. To stay on track it is depleting all valuable natural resources existing on our planet. Nevertheless we still believe that we will always be able to forge ahead. We are convinced that nothing can stop Progress.

As a result, we are on the brink of seriously destabilizing life on Earth. But we prefer to ignore the signs rather than imperil our sacrosanct economy. We have faith in Development.

If out of curiosity we dare to question the health of Western society – rumours imply a possible planetary crisis – we do not allow our thoughts to dwell on it very long and we rapidly deny facts that could suggest a disaster of that magnitude.

Finally, we, “developed people,” seem not to care for the future of humanity. How can we be so blinded by our faith in Progress that we do not even want to know where we are collectively heading?

Pierre Auguste Choizat

*By erasing God we placed ourselves face
to face with reality.*

How will it be when we have erased reality?

Jean Baudrillard¹

PART I

DEVELOPMENT TO EXCESS

1. WHY DEVELOPMENT ?
2. DO WE STILL EXIST ?
3. OUR EGO-SYSTEMS
4. INSATIABLE SOCIETY
5. PAMPERED BEINGS
6. EGO-SYSTEMS COVER THE GLOBE
7. DEVELOPMENT TO EXCESS
8. BEYOND CONSUMERISM
9. DEMOCRACY MADE IN WASHINGTON
10. IMPERIAL ETHIC

Why Development ?

The term fundamentalism is generally understood as the strict observance of fundamental doctrines and rituals of a religion. But it can also have a more general meaning outside the spiritual world. The American Heritage Dictionary extends the notion of fundamentalism to “a belief that does not rest on logical proof or material evidence” and Merriam-Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary to “a movement or attitude stressing strict and literal adherence to a set of basic principles.”

I maintain that in industrialized countries people by and large have become fundamentalists of Progress.

By the middle of the 18th century, Western society was entering what it would later proudly call its Industrial Revolution. Along the way, it acquired the belief that scientific and industrial developments are beneficent because they bring Progress to all of humanity. Every action undertaken by science and technology paves the road of Progress. The two world wars of the last century drew most of their dreadful force and Machiavellian mechanisms from industrial development, but that did not deter people from the idea that, on the whole, industrial development is building the future of humanity. We are certain that we “progress” as surely as we breathe.

Under these conditions, one might think that Western society should have at least taken the precaution of defining the ultimate goals of Progress and then, from time to time, of checking to see if we are on track to achieving them. But it has not. Our goals are in Progress itself. We take for granted that Progress characterizes Man and that it is an unstoppable component of his being. Consequently, we do not, as a rule, check if our developments generate any collateral damage. When we do discover some, it is often after the fact and too late to correct anything.

We have faith in Progress. We do not question its value. Progress “exists” the way God “exists.”

Before I began to immerse myself in technological development, I was lucky enough to discover an excellent professor of philosophy. According to him, “Philosophy was not just the domain of philosophers; science and industry also played a philosophical role in our world and have had an indelible impact on humanity. For more than a century, as industry shaped society, it had a major influence on Western civilization. It had more power over the evolution of our society than the finest discourses of the greatest thinkers.” I had difficulty understanding his message. The thoughts of Auguste Comte or Immanuel Kant impressed me more than learning how engines could influence our way of thinking. Nevertheless, at the time, I assumed that I had grasped the essence of Mr. Cecconi’s teaching, but in reality it was not until many years later that I came to more fully comprehend his sound assertions.

In 1975, I was offered a position in Iran as representative of a French engineering company. In the 1970s, Iran and Brazil were the two “developing” countries with the brightest future. Or, at least this was what the Western world liked to say, enamored as it was with transferring its technology to “less developed” countries. The Shahinshah of Iran, His Imperial Highness Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, wanted to westernize his country, although he also used to his advantage the aura of the great Persian emperors of the distant past. I immediately

accepted the offer as I was eager to participate in the “development” of a country that held the promise of so bright a future.

For three years I was involved with everything that might advance Iran’s industrial development, which was mainly geared towards the exploitation of hydrocarbons. My enthusiasm for industrial development seemed unshakeable when, suddenly, I realized that something was not quite right. I did not understand the deeper significance of the projects that I was promoting. I needed to understand what was really meant by the term “development.” Why “develop?” Why “develop” Iran?

This revelation – for that is what it was – did not really come from within me. It originated in the streets of Tehran in the spring of 1978, when the people began to revolt against the Shah. It was the third time that I had seen a population mobilize to free itself of its Western yoke. As a young student on a summer internship in a phosphate mine in Morocco, I had been held captive for four days in a village besieged by Moroccans rebelling against French colonization. Later, in Algeria, during the long months of my military service, I witnessed a particularly tragic war of independence. Perhaps this was why, when in 1978 I sensed the birth of the revolutionary movement in Iran, I began to see my role in a new light.

At that time, the Shah ruled Iran under an authoritarian regime, forcing the people to adopt a Western mode of “development.” He had effectively subjugated Iran to the West. Suddenly, the Iranian people no longer wanted to obey their monarch. The streets, the bazaar, the university in Tehran were filled with crowds ready to die to obtain their country’s independence. The Iranian people did not want a way of life based on foreign values that were irrelevant to them and which, so far, had brought nothing but corruption from those in power. I saw the determination with which a whole people were prepared to face the fearsome royal army, which had always fired without hesitation on demonstrators in the bazaar when the occasion arose. I realized that the situation was

serious. There was no longer any doubt that our type of society which was being imposed on the Iranians went against the very core of their being.

It was then that I realized that the mode of Progress, which characterizes Western societies and which the Shah wanted to impose on his subjects, was not universal. This created an abstruse doubt in me that I could not ignore. I started to examine what Development and Progress, as understood in “developed countries,” really entailed.

This was the beginning of a long period of reflection. Today, I know that we, in the West, have let ourselves be carried away by our own enthusiasm. We are unable to sustain the civilization in which we have placed such hope. Incapable of curbing our momentum, we have not just exceeded our own development capacities but, far more seriously, we have exceeded the physical capacities of the earth to sustain our Development without disrupting the equilibrium on which we depend.

This book is the expression of that reflection. It takes some difficult paths, and some passages are as steep as the rocky ridges that only seasoned climbers undertake. I make no concession in it to those who, like me, have passionately pursued excessive industrial development. But beyond this reproach, I have tried to understand why, as a general rule in the countries that chose the industrial path, we did not first take the precaution of trying to find out where our actions will ultimately lead.

Why Development? This is really one huge “Why?”

Do We Still Exist ?

I have embraced Development. I can only comprehend Progress from my own Western perspective. It troubles me to know that I have little chance of understanding people who have not adopted the Western way of life. It bothers me even more to know that I cannot perceive where industrial society is heading. I have been shaped by the society I was born into and no matter what I do, I cannot break free from it. So far, the mountains have offered me the best opportunity for escape.

I have a particularly vivid memory of one of my last visits to the French Alps a few years ago. It had been a rather gloomy winter in Paris and a longing to get out of town had led me high in the mountains, where industry had not yet forced its way.

The first morning I hiked beyond the cliffs to the upper plateau that I wanted to reach. At the end of a long rocky path, an exquisite carpet of spring flowers awaited me, as if laid there by the magic of time. Patches of snow still lingered just above, so these beauties could only have emerged from their winter slumber at most a few days before. Wild pansies in various colours spread out in little groups like swarms; some were mauve, others violet, or violet with a dab of yellow. Gentians also filled the scene and some had brazenly penetrated right to

the heart of the most compact groups of pansies to unfurl their deep blue petals. Other flowers too had made their spring *début* and their many heads gleamed in the sunlight; but it was the pansies that impressed me most.

I found them slender and fragile, and both proud and humble at the same time. There was something in their nature that intrigued me, so I bent down to take a closer look. The long, thin grasses of the previous year, matted to the ground over the long winter months under the heavy blanket of snow, were wrapped around them in a carpet of a soothing grey. The leaves of the pansies had not yet had time to form; with no other vegetation to accompany them, the flowers looked as if they had been planted there by Fate. Perhaps because of that I found something abnormal about their situation, something even rather disturbing. I could not understand how they could be so fearless and serene because there were risks all around. I myself represented such a risk, and close by, there must be some little rodent, just out of hibernation, longing to curb its hunger. Should it appear, these flowers would have no chance of escape. They were there now and that was all that mattered. That evening they would lower their heads to the ground and the following morning raise them again to the sky. What a lesson in serenity!

The land was rugged with awe-inspiring slopes. Lower down, across the valley, a small village pressed against the hillside as if hunkered down against the rigors of winter. Rows of narrow terraces, built one above the other in an attempt to grow a few crops, surrounded it. About four hundred years before, Huguenots had sought refuge on this mountain, as it was almost inaccessible to the dragoon corps who were hounding them in the valleys. Swollen with these immigrants, the village must have been forced to build higher terraces on slopes even more difficult to cultivate. My walk along the mountain path gave me plenty of time to appreciate the effort involved in creating these terraces. The result was impressive. The farmers of those days must have labored year after year to build the numerous little walls and to cultivate their tiny plots.

It struck me that the villagers of that time were connected to the soil, just like my little flowers. Both had this in common: they were part of the land on which they depended for their very existence. As I contemplated the terraces, I felt a profound admiration for those who had toiled so hard to work the land.

Having spent my whole adult life traveling from one venture to the next, I could not help but compare my lot in life with that of the old mountain-dwellers. I belong to an itinerant world, to a world that no longer needs to ground itself in order to subsist, a society that can no longer appreciate the nature which forms the very essence of its existence; a society in which people, little by little, have become rootless.

What a difference between men now, trying to surround themselves with a little more technology every day, and men then, who, like the mountain flowers, adapted themselves to nature, despite the often harsh adjustments that it demanded of them. Up there on the little plateau, I soon felt out of place. I even felt somewhat uneasy, almost as if I did not exist. At that moment, I was convinced that we do not truly exist if we do not recognize ourselves in the midst of other beings and all other forms of life, and our relations and responsibilities toward them. We lose all sense of existence when we are totally detached from nature; we simply no longer exist in the real sense of the word.

I knew that after leaving that haven of tranquility, I would go back to the world of the villagers below, down where the road began. After crossing the bridge over the stream, I would come to the first garbage dump that the village had set up just beside the stream. I had discovered it that morning, before taking the mountain path. A man whom I had met near the dump had told me that he came from time to time to set fire to it. He was convinced that what goes up in smoke is gone forever and he seemed to derive from his work the impression of a job well done. He also arranged for the garbage that could not be burned to be washed “out of sight” by the stream during the heavy rains.

As I thought about this first befouling of nature, I felt ashamed to look again at my little flower friends. I knew that I would go back down the path to where I had left my car. Then, comfortably ensconced in my steel box, I would drive back down the winding road leading to the large valley and then, further down, on to the big cities, on big roads, full of cars, full of trucks, loaded with the manufactured products of men. I would push my internal-combustion engine to go at the speed of the valley-dwellers. I would drive into the plumes of smoke rising from the steelworks built alongside the mountain waterfalls; I would inhale the mixture of gases served by the towns for us to breathe; and suddenly, I would have the sensation of being back at factories made of metal, glass and concrete, and vast refineries with gleaming aluminum-colored pipes. My world. The world in which, for years on end, I had gained so much satisfaction as I actively participated in the construction of industrial systems.

On my way down the mountain, I took the opportunity to take another look at the rows of terraced fields, which were almost all abandoned now. When I arrived at the little village, a poster depicting a white minibus, mounted on tracks and gliding across the snow like a magic sleigh, caught my eye. It said that next winter, this new marvel of the slopes would take tourists up to an elevation of 12,000 feet (3,600 meters), to the foot of some of the most magnificent peaks in the Alps.

It was probably going to ride over my mountain flowers. It might even run on fuel from one of the refineries that I had helped build.

Our Ego-Systems

Not everyone on earth gets the chance to go and see the flowers of the mountains or the meadows. Young people born in a megalopolis like Tokyo, Sao Paolo, Bombay, Mexico, New York or Hong Kong often have no inkling about the role of nature in human life. For them, the environment is made up of concrete, steel, asphalt and waste. It is culturally impossible for them to imagine that any other type of environment might exist outside their own world. Of course, from time to time they might see pictures of graceful animals in verdant grasslands, but to them these images of natural life are just a few more advertisements or pictures in a book.

Yet, throughout the history of Man, since hominids first began walking on two feet around five million years ago, more than ninety-nine percent of Man's time on earth has been spent in nature. People did not shut themselves away in cities until much later, a mere ten thousand years ago in the first cities of Mesopotamia. It was still thousands of years more before they would pack themselves together in large cities and only in the last few centuries in megalopolises. Despite the shortness of time spent in towns and suburbs, we have, for the most part, so profoundly adapted to urban life that we often barely see the importance of nature's equilibrium. Unless we actually bother

to think about it, we just assume that the material environment in which we find ourselves today can support life by itself. We have learned to live in dead spaces.

The children of the mega-cities are not the only ones to overlook nature's existence. The industrial world is even more prone to forget it. It has adopted the humanist philosophical concept of the Greek Seneca who, in the first century AD, placed the human being at the center of existence: "Man is something sacred for man." Industrial society is still not ready to admit that ecosystems form the basis of life on earth and that they have to be protected before Man himself.

Ecosystems do not have specific boundaries. Small ecosystems are part of larger ones, which are part of even larger ecosystems, and so on all the way up to the great ecosystem, Planet Earth. At first glance, ecosystems may seem simple, but in reality they are complex and very fragile. They are so intricately interwoven that it would be very difficult to know where one leaves off and the next one begins. Only nature can tell.

An ecosystem is an assemblage of plants, animals and other living organisms living together within their environment, evolving and functioning as a dynamic and complex whole. But this beautiful assemblage is delicate and can easily be shattered. When a chain of actions is broken, the ecosystem must readapt, but it is not always able to do so. Some ruptures are irreversible. If a species disappears, it affects not only the species that had fed on it, but also those on which it fed, those with whom it had lived in symbiosis, those that had recycled its waste...

Within this living dynamic world based on interdependence, harmony and delicacy, industrial society has set up "ego-systems." "Ego-systems," to be sure, are very different from ecosystems. Unlike natural ecosystems, in which everyone finds a place in the circle of life, ego-systems have room for only one dominating species: Man and they are designed to serve only his interests. As for the other species and their habitats, those that get in his way are eliminated; those that offer some advantage are domesticated or consumed.

An ego-system is not designed to operate over generations as farms once were. Instead, it is organized to profit as quickly as possible from the natural resources it exploits with little concern for their depletion or effect on the environment. The “underdeveloped” peoples that are exploited by the “developed” ones can also be counted as natural resources.

The objectives of ego-systems are money and power. Ego-systems control the sectors that they have chosen to exploit. Agro-industry is a good example of an ego-system. The pharmaceutical industry is another. Medicine can effectively cure many diseases but the human body only retains a small portion of most of the drugs it takes in. Most of the pharmaceuticals that we ingest are excreted and end up in rivers, and very likely in the oceans, where they affect other forms of life. National drug administrations control the research and production of medicines in order to protect their country’s citizens, but they very rarely take into consideration the damage that the products cause in nature.

As with ecosystems, the interplay of competition, predation, parasitism and mutualism also exists in ego-systems but in the case of the latter, ego-systems are always directed to benefit Man. They strengthen Man’s superior position.

Our species has long demonstrated its skills, passion and zeal for drawing on the resources of the earth, be they animal, vegetable, or mineral. The arrival of motors that run on fossil fuels was a godsend for us. It allowed us to methodically exploit the riches of our planet far beyond the areas naturally accessible to us. Before large-scale use of energy, our methods of exploiting these resources still had a human dimension: the first whale hunters went to sea rowing their boats; fur-trappers went about on foot. The use of non-human energy allowed Man to transform his activities into industrial exploitation.

An edifying example of overuse of energy for the benefit of Man is the commercial sardine fishing that began at the beginning of the last century in Monterey Bay in California, and which I describe in *Oil Addiction: the World in Peril*.² This fishery might have lasted if it had kept the family-run character