

On Social Progress

Written by Branden Espinoza.

"So what happens now? Now we fight. Now we organize. So they may take every piece of social progress we've made in the last 50 years, from gay marriage back to the civil rights act. So what? We'll take them back."

The words sat there, dark on my back-lit computer screen. They were meant to be the apex of a long impassioned plea, posted online by a man I respect, a brother of sorts, reacting to the election of Donald Trump to the Presidency of the United States. It was a plea driven by anger and fear – mostly fear. He warns of suffering, disease, death, decline, suppression, persecution, harassment, assault, poverty, hunger, and total destabilization. We have never talked politics, although the paths our lives have traveled intersect in the world of applied philosophy. We have never talked economics, or history either. The nature of our occasional intersections, with its peculiar focus on unity and brotherly love and acceptance, preclude such talk, as politics, economics, and history, tend to be divisive. I find this sad because they need not be. Perhaps we should find another intersection, one where such talk is proper, I would like to try to see the virtue in his approach.

His is a perspective that is espoused and defended by nearly all Americans; a vision of a nation where every man, woman, and child is free not just from political oppression, racial bigotry, or religious intolerance, but also free from disease, intimidation, shame, poverty, and catastrophe. It is a noble vision. And frankly, it is a universal vision. The progressives hold no monopoly on that goal, despite their rhetoric. It is a vision made real only by the means of social progress.

Social progress. The true sense of the phrase is ennobling. Make no mistake, if there is to be a leap in human evolution, social progress is the requisite precursor. I long to see an era of broad, lasting social progress.

The means by which progress is made possible is the cipher by which we can decode whether the progress (as laudible as it may be) be social or antisocial.

A black man can walk into any restaurant in Georgia and be seated and served. He can expect the same menu items, treatment, and service as any other patron. Compared to 1940, that seems to be real social progress.

A gay man can rent an apartment from anyone, even foot-washing born-again evangelicals, regardless of his sexuality. He can expect the same treatment from the landlord as a heterosexual, newlywed couple. Compared to 1990, that seems to be real social progress.

A poor mother can walk into a clinic with a child stricken with illness, unashamed of her indigence, and expect her child to be seen and cared for exactly the same as the millionaire's kid next door. Compared to 2000, that seems to be real social progress. But is it? Is it really social progress?

There is an idea that has plagued mankind, possibly forever, but most radically since the dawn of progressivism a century ago. That idea is that society is an institution organized by common conformity to a regulatory framework that delimits acceptable action. The idea is that as the regulatory framework progresses toward that universal vision of the brotherhood of man, so too does society progress.

But society is not an institution. It is not organized by regulatory frameworks. And degree of conformity certainly is not a measure of consent. Society is an aggregate of individuals, each with a personal regulatory framework governing his or her ideas of good and bad, right and wrong, virtue and vice. Society only progresses to the degree that its members progress and the only means a man has to measure his progress is to consider the nature of his internal governance, his conscience. He must consider that which causes him to feel pleasure and that which causes him to feel pain, that which causes him to feel pride and that which causes him to feel guilt, that which causes him joy and that which causes him sadness.

External regulation cannot induce progress.

My friend, lamenting an expected withdrawal of social progress, fails to realize that there was little real social progress to begin with. The ethical construct that leads a progressive to leverage the violence of the state to force progressive-like behavior is the same ethical construct that compels the racist restaurateur, the homophobic landlord, and the heartless clinician. It is an ethic that Montague called kraterocracy. It means "might makes right". It is the idea that those who rule have the right to determine right and wrong, that those in power have the right to establish normative values for all those weaker than they are. My friend, fearing a withdrawal of "pieces of social progress", proclaims "We'll take them back."

But they aren't pieces of social progress. They are expressions of brutality.

The universal vision that progressivism strives for is rooted in virtue. But the laws passed to achieve that vision are selected precisely to create cautionary tales, warnings, and examples; they are constructed raw and violent to push a point. It is how the brutalists proclaim that racism is bad, bigotry is bad, intolerance is bad, poverty is bad, disease is

bad, intimidation is bad, shame is bad, poverty is bad, and catastrophe is bad. They leverage the threat of violence to make an example out of those who act out of line. It is a line of reasoning absent of virtue, regardless of the ends it seeks to achieve.

It is not virtue that advocates such laws, but compulsion, control, and dominion – the very same vices that the laws seek to address are what drive the supporters of such laws. They have abandoned true social progress in favor of a counterfeit. Not only are those laws, as much as the behaviors they seek to inhibit, examples of anti-social progress – they are indicative of regression, not progression. Their existence is evidence not only of the brutal culture and normative mores of society, but of their supporters as well.

What progress is there if the black man can only get a meal because the restaurant owner will have his food and beverage license revoked if he doesn't? In a socially progressive society, the restaurant would have gone out of business long before there was a need for such a law.

What progress is there if the gay man can only rent a room because the landlord will be fined if he doesn't? In a socially progressive society, the landlord would have no tenants.

What progress is there if the sick child is treated only because his mother's insurance company was forced to put her in their book? In a socially progressive society, the clinician's professionalism would be figuratively executed in the public eye, a public that would have had the generosity to cover the child's expenses.

We live in a society of regressive values. Even the means by which good-intentioned men and women seek to achieve that universal vision are evidence of their own social regression. There is not and cannot be any virtue in regulation. The initiation of force, or the threat thereof, is always evil. As George Washington said, "Government is not reason, it is not eloquence,—it is force!" Real social progress isn't found in laws and cannot be inculcated by compulsion. Only individual enlightenment begets lasting social progress, and that is the kind of social progress for which my friend is longing – the kind that isn't threatened because the head of the state is a bozo, or a psychopath, or a misogynist, or racist.

And that should be the focus of our work – individual enlightenment, of ourselves and of others. Let us work toward that end. Let us strive to free individuals from the shackles of culture and history. Let us help men evolve into enlightened souls. Let us give them permission to question dogma. Let us call out as such the elements of every culture, tradition, or belief system that is regressive. Let us live and act and talk in a way that breathes the spirit of confidence into the souls of men and women who have been brutalized and made to be afraid. Let us enliven them with truth, and be examples of hope and charity.

This isn't a battle, it isn't zero sum, it is an adoption, a welcoming of brotherhood, and an invitation to bathe in cool waters. Only virtue can beget virtue, and only in virtue is real social progress possible.

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