



To: Neighbourhoods & City Development

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Subject: Essential Evidence on a page: No. 100 The Concept of Progress: Myth or reality?

Top line: Progress is a concept entwined with advances in a science and technology. It has been appropriated by decision makers to help promote a transport system designed for car use and a minority of the population.

The belief in progress has its roots in the 15th century.¹ This was carried forward into the 17th century when the chief theory of the Enlightenment was that the growth of knowledge is the key to human emancipation. Auguste Comte, writing in early nineteenth century France, wrote of the inevitable evolution of human societies,² and the idea of progress advanced during the industrial revolution so as to imply improvement and the idea of advancing civilisation as a 'law of history'.

What Enlightenment and thinkers since did not envisage was that irrationality would continue to flourish alongside rapid advances in a science and technology. In the 19th Century thinkers, such as John Stuart Mill, believed that, as society and the economy became increasingly based on science, so our outlook on the world would become ever more rational. Gray has highlighted, however, that there is no consistent link between the adoption of modern science and technology on the one hand and the progress of reason in human affairs on the other. If anything, new technologies can give a new lease of life to the side of human nature that is not and never will be rational.³ Indeed, the idea of progress was challenged post 1945 due to the level of destruction possible in World War II as a result of technological progress.

During the twentieth century, progress retained its prime sense of improvement, so that the invention of the motor car, something that could travel faster and further than all but trains (and planes) but which was more flexible in its use, fitted the idea of advancing civilisation. The assumption in the UK from post World War II has been that the car should be the dominant and normal mode of travel built on this value. The expectation among the politicians and local authorities was that highway schemes should be built. These were viewed as an essential part of progress and the modernisation process.⁴ Moreover, the burgeoning national motorways and trunk road system was viewed as progress by these experts, who saw few, if any, long term negative environmental, social or political costs. A reflection of this in the 1960s, an era of urban motorway building of mainly dual carriageway standard, was to be found in cities such as Coventry, Birmingham and Liverpool whose politicians enthusiastically sought to implement cities for cars. Leeds was happy to promote itself as the 'Motorway City of Europe'.⁵

A result has been gross inequalities of access and distribution of risk of injury. Children, the elderly, the poor, and women (the majority) have lost out most as the viability of the modes they are most reliant on, walking, cycling and public transport, have been undermined by an increasing resource allocation favouring private motorised transport.

¹ Williams, R. 1976 *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*, London: Fontana.

² Aron, R. 1979 (edition) *Main currents in sociological thought 1*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

³ Grey, J. 2004 *Heresies. Against progress and other illusions*. London: Granta Books.

⁴ Starkie, D. 1982 *The motorway age*, Oxford: Pergamon Press.

⁵ Hamilton, K. and Jenkins, L. 1989 Why women and travel? in Grieco, M., Pickup, and Whipp, R. (eds) *Gender, transport and employment*, Aldershot: Avebury.