

Knowledge and Progress

It appears that Progress still has Heritage by the throat. Every other day there is one report or another featuring so-called economists and political commentators pontificating on what could be termed, without exaggeration, a new religion—the worship of Progress. This religion appears to be spreading faster than an avian virus, infecting the command and control structures of most western and westernised societies. The character of the new religion's analysis becomes more and more abstract as its proponents resort to jargon to defend their arguments and to convince the listening masses that the right things are being done.

Disturbingly, apart from the difficulties in deciphering the nonsensical neo-conservative code, the Progress-worshippers come with a full package of entirely predictable views on virtually any topic you may care to mention. Their 'going-forward mentality' means not only that, in an abstract way, they prostrate themselves in the uninspiring—and presumably jerry-built—Temple of Progress but also that they promote an unhealthy disrespect for the past and its physical manifestations, in particular those archaeological sites and objects that stand in the path of Progress and are considered to be of no immediate commercial advantage.

The same mindsets bring us increasing references to the 'knowledge-based society' and the 'knowledge-based economy'. In the rush to condense their argument, an increasing number of commentators, in that dull, soulless and senseless fashion, are currently referring to 'the knowledge society' as the type of society that they want us to be. It's as if, all of a sudden, the priestly gurus of political thought and petty entrepreneurialism have brought us into the light after centuries, if not millennia, of wallowing about in the sticky sludge of ignorance. Only by following this vain vocabulary and parroting it at every opportunity can we truly secure our future and walk solemnly in the light of Progress.

Fair enough! Not everything that we know or that we suppose happened in the past was good or beneficial for mankind. It would be profoundly stupid to romanticise the past or to view it through rose-tinted glasses. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that advancements, both planned and serendipitous, in various aspects of life have brought us to where we are now and that we are surrounded by their legacy. Without doubt one can rest assured that all past societies had their own knowledge that informed their worlds. Their knowledge, their own 'science' and their familiarity with how things functioned allowed them to choose courses of action or to engage in activities that enabled them to improve their situation and thus the knowledge base of the generations that were to follow.

I have no doubt that the current fashion for Progress-worship will pass. If blind obedience of Progress with its voracious appetite for profit dictates the pace then archaeology, history and natural heritage will be significantly diminished, not just physically but also in the minds of men. They say that knowledge is power, but control of ignorance is more dangerous. Destruction of the concept of heritage is no way to build a future.

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