

ProgBlog 26

2014

Why I became a neo-progressionist

By Michael Lee

The other day, I realised that years of systematic study of the future had turned me into what can only be defined as a neo-progressionist.

Firstly, it's time to move beyond twentieth century post-modernism with its deconstructionist scepticism about reason, progress, science and the future. Post-modernism was negatively inspired to start a cultural counter-revolution by the carnage and absurdity of the two World Wars. Beforehand, there was a broad-based progressive movement arising from the Enlightenment which propelled human advancement through the application of scientific knowledge and market development. Now, a synthesis is possible which leaves behind the intellectual, existential and social *cul-de-sac* of post-modernism and simultaneously seeks a way out of the menacing chaos of an ideologically divided world unsure of its future. It's a world still suffering a Cold War hangover after capitalism and communism slugged it out in an immense global battle which probably would have annihilated civilisation if the conflict had turned nuclear. Re-embracing a new approach to scientific progress, rinsed free of the corrupting power of public ideology, can stop the madness of mass-bombing countries and peoples back into the stone age and turning strategically disputed regions of the world into zones of semi-permanent conflict amid endless skirmishes between political empires and wannabe empires.

The only empire rational human beings should ever build is called civilisation. And its essence is a constructive, never-ending creative process called progression. Its instrument is design, not destruction; its aim is peace, not war.

And, secondly, there is a need to draw a line in the sand for future progression which rejects the fundamental assumption of the Singularity implying some supposedly inevitable loss by humanity of control over the tools of science and the use of human and machine intelligence. The humanism which gave rise to the Enlightenment and to the ideals of modern progress must enjoy priority over transhumanism if neo-progressionism is to be successful in re-energising global human progress in a way which will benefit all of humanity, instead of deepening social fractures between haves and have-nots. There should never be an abdication of human responsibility in the fair, ethical and socially progressive use of science, however much we come to rely upon computer power and machine intelligence. Accordingly, a neo-progressionist cannot allow a loss of control by humans over technology. Humans *use* technology to improve their social conditions – they don't *become* technology.

Before outlining the core tenets of neo-progressionism, some definitions would be in order. I much prefer the action-based word *progression*, as a continuous process of social improvement, over the concept, or ideal, of *progress*. Progress is an abstract noun which has often been used in the past to justify ideological and imperialistic conflict and racism. It has become a tainted word. In addition, “progressive” has come to be associated with a left-leaning political standpoint. Since I have come to the conclusion that ideology is the biggest single killer of human beings in history, I must distance myself going forward from any association with ideology in public discourse. Ideologies of the left and right should all come with public health warnings and be confined to private life if we want to end war in this world. So, to me, “progression” is much stronger alternative to the term “progress”.

The New Oxford Dictionary of English defines progression as “movement or development towards a destination or a more advanced state, especially gradually or in stages”. The dictionary explains that a progressionist is an advocate of, or believer in, political or social progress. In biology, the term refers to a supporter of the view that all life forms gradually evolve to a higher form. *The Collins English Dictionary* defines progression as advancement, an act of progressing, derived from the Latin *progredi*, meaning going forwards, from *pro*, in favour of, and *gradi*, a step.

Since I love the word “progression”, I feel very comfortable calling myself a neo-progressionist, despite the fact that *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* categorises the word “progressionist” as “chiefly historical”!

I would say that in its proper historical context, neo-progressionist could be seen as a twenty-first century offshoot of Enlightenment progressiveness shorn of all its ideological baggage. *Wikipedia* describes progressivism as follows: “Progressivism is a broad political philosophy based on the Idea of Progress, which asserts that advances in science, technology, economic development, and social organization can improve the human condition. Progressivism became highly significant during the Age of Enlightenment in Europe, out of the belief that Europe was demonstrating that societies could progress in civility from barbaric conditions to civilization through strengthening the basis of empirical knowledge as the foundation of society.” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Progressivism>)

However, ideology as a cognitive and philosophical framework for guiding society died in the killing fields of mass industrialised destruction and techno-barbarism in the last century. That is why it seems necessary to speak of *neo*-progressionism. An ideology-neutral dedication to common human progress is required.

Neo-progressionist is also a term which rises from the ashes of post-modernist deconstruction, with its aimless uncertainty and deep human cynicism.

At the same time, I believe the term should be set aside to resist the suicidal slide of civilisation into some runaway future of the Singularity.

Finally, by way of introduction of this powerful new phrase, it needs to reflect the diverse global world we have become, a world dreaming of living free of empire, a world whose face is slowly changing according to its underlying, demographic patterns, a world shifting towards a greater United Nations.

The chief tenets of a neo-progressionist like me would, then, be:

- progression is continuous advancement to a higher state for all systems
- order, based on universal laws of nature, including human nature, is a higher state than chaos
- rationality is the highest form of human thinking
- science has the best methods for gaining and using knowledge
- ideology, having failed in human governance, should be replaced by science as the framework for all public discourse
- Behaving ethically and reverentially is the essence of being civilised
- the future enjoys a far greater priority than the past
- short-term thinking is a retardation, a threat to progression, and should be replaced by long-term thinking bound to the ethos of sustainability and efficiency
- world politics should be approached in a globalised, non-imperialistic way, with acknowledgement of cultural diversity and sovereignty and evolution towards a greater United Nations
- Technology is humanity's servant, never its master

In short, a neo-progressionist would be future-orientated, ethical in conduct, pro-civilisation in vision, global in scope of thinking, rationalistic and a supporter of the power of scientific knowledge and methods to solve common human and social problems free from ideological prejudice.

That seems like a sensible and good viewpoint for which I could live and work as a futurist.