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A Critique of Progress in the Light of Western Cultural Traditionalism (1920s–1940s)

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The purpose of this article is to examine the traditionalist critique of progress by thinkers of the interwar period. I argue that traditionalism rejected the cult of progress while affirming the historical status of regress. The traditionalist vision of history was based on the contestation of the belief in *progressus ad infinitum* characteristic of the Enlightenment. I contend that the traditionalist historiosophy appealed to Hesiod's intuitions. I propose to introduce the concept of cultural traditionalism into the scholarly literature. Among the cultural traditionalists I include: René Guénon, Julius Evola, Oswald Spengler, Nikolai Berdyaev, and Pitirim Sorokin. I conclude that the traditionalist critique of progress was conditioned by an existential fear of change, of something unknown and new. I examine the traditionalist narrative by referring to the scientific discourse of the philosophy of culture.

Keywords: traditionalism, Enlightenment, progress, regression, civilisation, culture

The perception of progress as a negative phenomenon has been identified as a recurring theme among traditionalist thinkers across various historical periods. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the traditionalist critique of modernity became characterised by a focus on progress as a primary objective. The concept

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 17/10/2026 04:36:33

of progress, understood as infinite and uninterrupted, prevailed during the eighteenth century. Subsequent tragic events, especially in the twentieth century, demonstrated the naivety of believing that such progress existed in the moral sphere. The tragedy of the First World War led traditionalists of the interwar period to argue the need to reduce the cult of progress, which, they contended, had not made humanity better or more valuable.

The critique of progress was not solely attributable to a crisis of faith in Enlightenment ideas. In this article, the argument is put forward that the critique of progress has its existential conditions. Arnold Toynbee advanced the concept of man being characterised by his innate aspiration to archaism, in which the human fear of the unknown is revealed.[1] The notion of progress is often met with reluctance due to the inherent fear of what lies ahead, particularly when that future is ambiguous or unclear. Lord Hugh Cecil advanced the concept of a natural conservatism, which he posited as being inherent to all human beings from the moment of birth. This natural conservatism and traditionalism can be considered a manifestation of the eternal, immutable conservative tendency of the human mind and an aversion to change: „Natural conservatism is a tendency of the human mind. It is a disposition averse from change".[2] The perception of progress among traditionalists was associated with feelings of uncertainty and anxiety.

The purpose of this article is to examine the traditionalist critique of progress. The following brief study will review the views of thinkers of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, that is, selected representatives of integral traditionalism and Russian traditionalism. The following representative thinkers are included in this group: René Guénon, Julius Evola, Oswald Spengler, Nikolai Berdyaev and Pitirim Sorokin. I propose that the listed thinkers be considered collectively as representatives of cultural traditionalism. The present study sets out to demonstrate that cultural traditionalism is characterised, among other things, by a harsh assessment of the idea of an infinite progression of civilisation. Traditionalism criticised civilisation as a material construct that was absolutely alien to a culture dominated by the spirit. This essay will identify the ideological link between thinkers representing the various factions of traditionalism in the interwar period. Following the end of the First World War, traditionalism became more resolute in its assessment of progress. The temporal juncture under consideration is that of the Second

[1] See Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. V (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 383–385.

[2] Hugh Cecil, *Conservatism* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1912), 9.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 17/10/2026 04:36:33

World War. The end of the Second World War is widely regarded as the beginning of a new era in Western philosophy. The time frame under consideration is not constrained by a rigidly defined date. The aforementioned thinkers formed their world views principally during the 1920s and 1930s. In their work, the 1940s represented an ideological continuation of the 1940s.[3]

What does "progress" mean?

Historiosophical research has predominantly concentrated on the evaluative aspect of the concept of progress. It is worthwhile to engage in a reflective exercise on the notion of progress, and to attempt a concise formulation of an answer to the question of its meaning. It can be posited that, within the domain of philosophy, the notion of progress has elicited the most profound interest, elucidating its significance across diverse disciplines, including science, politics, ideology, and popular discourse. The concept of progress has become subject to politicisation. As Reinhart Koselleck asserts, from the 18th century onwards, this notion became a recurring theme in the writings of numerous ideologues.[4] The primary notion concerning the varied conception of progress is first posited by the Greek poet and philosopher Xenophanes of Colophon. In the most general terms, this intuition expressed a belief in the improvement of things, their betterment, some positive qualitative change.[5] The concept of progress can be applied to both the most sublime, transcendent, abstract, and conceptually inarticulable matters, as well as the very concrete, material, and visible forms. The study of progress evokes profound emotional responses and is intricately interwoven with political considerations. As Robert Nisbet has observed, no other concept has exerted as profound

[3] The concerns articulated in this article constitute a continuation of the inquiries that have been presented in my book: Marek Jedliński, *Ku przeszłości! René Guénon, Julius Evola i nurty tradycjonalizmu* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2019).

[4] See Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis. Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988), 127–137.

[5] Many authors point to the primacy of Xenophanes' intuition, although the lively debate about progressivism itself and, more broadly, the temporal consciousness of the Greeks does not cease. Cf. Eric Dodds, *The Ancient Concept of Progress and Other Essays on Greek Literature and Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 4; Ludwig Edelstein, *The Idea of Progress in Classical Antiquity* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1967), 4–19.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 17/10/2026 04:36:33

an influence on the intellectual landscape of the West.[6] It is evident that progressivism serves as an expression of the prevailing intellectual disposition. This attitude is typified by a bold expectation of novelty.[7] The French traditionalist Pierre-Simon Ballanche (1776–1847) theorised that human beings exhibit two contradictory attitudes: a tendency to look back towards the past, and an eagerness for impending change. The concept of progressivism can be understood as the embodiment of such optimistic anticipation.[8] The French writer François-René de Chateaubriand (1768–1848) warned against the degrading effect of progress on man. The naive expectation of change can bring a state of uncertainty and fear.[9]

It is evident that this optimistic anticipation was accompanied by a degree of naivety and a lack of forethought. Traditionalist critics of the idea of progress accused its adherents of paving the way for fanaticism, i.e. the desire to completely remodel the existing world, by their unreflectiveness. Although the idea of progress as the approach to the fulfilment of the Promise is present in many religions, especially the most powerful monotheistic ones, the concept of progress is closely associated with the secular movement and the Enlightenment rebellion of man against the supremacy of a supernatural being. Consequently, the notion of progress as a manifestation of humanity's rebellion against the divine has emerged as a pivotal target of the traditionalist critique.

Regression rather than progress

The Italian traditionalist Julius Evola (1898–1974) believed that, from a historiosophical perspective, a vision of historical regression was more convincing. Evola's perspective on history is characterised by an appreciation for the notion

[6] Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New Brunswick, London: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 4.

[7] Cf. George S. Painter, "The Idea of Progress," *American Journal of Sociology*" 28, no. 3 (1922): 257–258; John B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress. An Inquiry Into Its Origin and Growth* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1920), 7–8; Alfred Stern, *Philosophy of History and the Problem of Values* (Hague: Mouton & Co., 1962), 42–43.

[8] See Pierre-Simon Ballanche, *Essai sur les institutions sociales dans leur rapport avec les idées Nouvelles* (Paris: Fayard, 1991), 22.

[9] See Béla Menczer, *Catholic Political Thought 1789–1848* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962), 104–106.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 17/10/2026 04:36:33

of a majestic past, wherein the echoes of the present and the future can be discerned. The aforementioned regression consequently resulted in a reversion to the original state of affairs. Evola posited that the historiosophical concept of regress was founded by Hesiod.[10] Evola regarded Hesiod's intuition as the earliest and most significant model in this field.[11] The Greek mind was already equipped with the categories of movement and variation that were necessary for the development of philosophical reflection on time and history, suggesting a progressive or regressive outlook.[12]

While Hesiod is most often treated in the humanities as a representative of historiography, it must be remembered that his conception had a philosophical dimension.[13] In the oeuvre of Hesiod one may discern a narrative exemplifying a positive, joyous, and laudable inception, signifying the origin of paramount significance. Departing from this initial point resulted in a gradual development of anti-value throughout history, albeit with notable fluctuations. It can be demonstrated that not every epoch was objectively worse in its totality than the previous one.[14] In his work, Hesiod employed an allegorical approach to illustrate the progression of humanity's spiritual decline, metaphorically represented by the transition through various metals.[15] The work *Works and Days* is imbued with existential significance, for in Hesiod's vision, at the dawn of time, humanity was free from all misery. The initial period was characterised by a period of significant prosperity and advancement: „The race of men that the immortals who dwell on Olympus made first of all was of gold. They were in the time of Kronos, when he was king in heaven; and they lived like gods, with carefree heart, remote of toil and misery."[16] According to Hesiod's description, the subsequent stages of the

[10] See Julius Evola, *Revolt Against the Modern World,* trans. Guido Stucco (Rochester–Vermont: Inner Traditions International, 1995), 177.

[11] Cf. Sidney B. Fay, "The Idea of Progress," *The American Historical Review* 52 no. 2 (1947): 231–246.

[12] Cf. Aleksei F. Losev, *Antichnaia filosofiia istorii* (Moskva: Izdatelstvo Nauka, 1977), 10–18.

[13] See Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, "Hesiod and Historiography," *Hermes* 85, no. 3 (1957): 257–285.

[14] Cf. Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, 13–18.

[15] See John G. Griffiths, "Archaeology and Hesiod's Five Ages," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 17, no. 1 (1956): 109–119; Harold C. Baldry, "Hesiod's Five Ages," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 17, no. 4 (1956): 553–554.

[16] Hesiod, "Works and Days," in Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days*, trans. Martin Litchfield West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 40.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 17/10/2026 04:36:33

world's degradation and regression are delineated. This degradation was, among other factors, the consequence of humanity's hubris and its rebellion against the past and the sacred. The termination of the veneration of immortal deities and the presentation of sacrifices, as described by Hesiod, is, from the perspective of Evola, an illustration of the misappropriation of tradition and time-honoured practices. Hesiod warned of the tragic consequences of a contemptuous and prideful rejection of established precepts, rules, and laws established in the past.

It is noteworthy that the concept of regress has never dominated the main directions of historiosophical inquiry in the history of Western thought. The concept saw a surge in popularity during periods of uncertainty surrounding the principles of progressivism. These moments were characterised by a mounting sense of apprehension, the conclusion of a significant epoch, the approach of a critical juncture, or a growing awareness of an impending solstice, crisis, or decline. This foreboding was often associated with the possibility of a natural or human-induced catastrophe. The sense of impending doom creates an atmosphere that is often difficult to articulate with precision. In this particular context, Ernst Cassirer advanced the argument that the significant success of Oswald Spengler's renowned publication can be attributed to its eloquent articulation of the origin of the pervasive sense of anxiety that was prevalent during that period.[17] For adherents of traditional values, the notion of a "natural" state would be perceived as representing regression rather than progress. The concept of faith in progress was perceived by traditionalists as a manifestation of what they considered to be naïve and potentially scandalous.

The concept of *naiveté* ascribed to advocates of progressivism was initially articulated by René Guénon, a French Catholic traditionalist who has converted to Islam. The traditionalist thinker believed that fanatical supporters of the idea of progress were guilty of naïvety, insofar as they believed that the expansion and domination of progress was an essential element of world history. Guénon advanced the argument that the notion of progress is neither universal nor, moreover, necessary in the historical progression of cultures. It can be argued that the phenomenon in question constitutes an "invention" of a relatively recent nature,

[17] Cf. Ernst Cassirer, "The Technique of Our Modern Political Myths," in *Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer. 1935–1945*, ed. Donald P. Verene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 260.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 17/10/2026 04:36:33

one that is evidently disregarded by a significant proportion of the world's population, as highlighted by a French traditionalist.[18] Guénon's work highlighted an inversion characteristic of certain progressive intellectuals, who perceived paradise as exclusively future-oriented. Guénon's remarks pertain to the thought of Hesiod. Consequently, he deduced that, in accordance with the law of cosmic involution, the golden age had already transpired in antiquity, and that the contemporary era is merely witnessing another phase of decline.[19] Guénon harshly judged the one-sided use of the concept of progress, typical of the "modern" West, as a consequence of the hubris of Europeans and their tendency to totalise their own worldview and arrogantly impose it on the rest of the world. The philosopher regarded this attitude as an example of the life of illusion typical of Westerners. As Guénon asserts, "Complementing this illusion is the belief in 'progress,' considered in a way that is no less promiscuous and identified in its essence with material development [...]."[20] The French traditionalist believed that preserving the integrity of the dogma of progress necessitated the promotion of the thesis of the existence of a supreme "(over) progress," as the ultimate culmination and consequence of diverse forms of minor progress and regress. It is evident that a subsequent justification is provided for the negative effects, with the belief that the project, in its totality, is considered to be both desirable and legitimate. This is the basis upon which the French thinker persuaded his readers of the inherent totalitarian threat posed by progressivism. The secular concept of progress was theorised to encompass the potent resources of a primordial, religious fervour.

The French thinker drew attention to the problem of the apodictic and arrogant nature of the men of science representing the Western world. Guénon asserted that contemporary Western intellectuals almost universally articulate the unobjectionable perspective that the embrace of the notion of progress engenders the right to self-identify as civilised and to be considered part of a superior world.[21] The concept of progress has become so broad and vague as to be devoid of its original meaning. This is a consequence of the proliferation of pluralism, which has resulted in the arbitrary application of the term "progress" to denote a wide range of concepts. Consequently, at a certain point, the term "progress" begins to

[18] See René Guénon, *Orient et Occident* (Paris: Éditions de la Maisne, 1987), 22.

[19] See René Guénon, *Le règne de la quantité et les signes des temps* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 367–368.

[20] Guénon, *Orient et Occident*, 22.

[21] See ibid., 30.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 17/10/2026 04:36:33

be used by everyone to denote whatever is useful to them at a given moment.[22] Guénon's observations highlight the tendency of progressivism to attract both naivety and fanaticism among its adherents, which in turn leaves them vulnerable to criticism from those who remain unconvinced of the purported benefits of these novel solutions.

The traditionalist perspective proffered an alternative to progressivism, one that emphasised the exacerbating regress of the world. This viewpoint was rooted in a primordial sentiment of trepidation concerning the uncertain future and the potential consequences of disruptive change. Regressivism can be defined as a sui generis strategy of radical "retreat" to an unchanging, immovable past, conceptualised by the promise of a return to said past.

The present study sets out to develop Mannheim's intuitions on the matter by arguing that regressivism is a characteristic of cultural traditionalism. In this perspective, progressivism is regarded as a defence of change, while regressivism is seen as a reflection of the aspirations of a population where the introduction of "newness" gives rise to opposition, rebellion and fear. It is therefore possible to regard regressivism as an existential attitude that has its origins in a fear of the unknown. Regressivism is defined as an attitude of searching for some stable point in the past. The past is a permanent and unchangeable entity; it is characterised by stability and immutability. Consequently, it does not evoke a sense of fear due to its perceived chaotic and unpredictable nature.

The phenomenon of civilizational progress

Traditionalist thinkers have historically equated progress with the process of secularisation, understood as the rejection of spirituality. In the context of traditionalism, progress is considered to be a consequence of secularism, a hallmark of material civilization that stands in opposition to spiritual culture. The traditionalist thinkers cited in the introduction to this article uniformly distinguished between culture and civilisation. This issue necessitates further scrutiny. In the context of Western civilisation, traditionalist intellectuals perceived the Enlightenment as a primary source of materialism, which they regarded as profoundly incompatible with spiritual culture. The establishment of the distinction between

[22] See ibid., 35.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 17/10/2026 04:36:33

civilisations is attributed to 18th-century French writing, as documented by Fernand Braudel, among other scholars. From the outset of its semantic evolution, the term "civilisation" has been synonymous with secularism, progress and enlightenment.[23] From the perspective of adherents of traditionalist ideology, culture was regarded as not being synonymous with civilisation, or strictly, as being in direct opposition to civilisation. This perspective reflected the dichotomous division between values and anti-values. Spengler, incidentally, expressed this thought most fully, referring to the concept of Arthur Moeller van den Bruck. For Moeller van den Bruck, progress entailed the infection of culture and its transformation into civilisation.[24] Spengler proceeded along this particular line of enquiry, although, as August Messer noted, he further developed the concept in question and endowed it with what he termed a "spirit."[25]

Berdyaev posited the argument that bourgeois civilisation was morally reprehensible and rife with toxicity, effectively enslaving humankind.[26] In Berdyaev's philosophical perspective, civilisation is regarded as a counterpoint to Edenic life.[27] Life itself lost contact with the eternal rhythm of nature in civilisation: "In the fast, driving pace of civilization there is no past and present, there is no contact with eternity, there is only the future. Civilization is futuristic."[28] As Berdyaev elucidated, civilisation exhibits a disregard for tradition and an affinity for novelty, prioritising the ephemeral moment. The concept of civilisation is predicated on the notion of a finite existence, whereas culture is characterised by an aspiration towards an eternal existence. The former is imbued with a soul, whereas civilisation is characterised by the presence of material tools, conceptual apparatus and methods.[29] The uncontrollable urge of civilisation to destroy, characterised by the

[23] See Fernand Braudel, *A history of civilizations*, trans. Richard Mayne (New York: The Penguin Press, 1994), 3–8.

[24] Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, *Die Zeitgenossen. Die Geister—Die Menschen* (Minden in Westfalen: J.C.C. Bruns, 1906), 6.

[25] Cf. August Messer, *Oswald Spengler als Philosoph* (Stuttgart: Verlag von Strecker und Schröder, 1922), 23–28.

[26] See Nikolai Berdyaev, *O rabstve i svobode cheloveka* (Paris: YMCA–PRESS, 1939), 100–101.

[27] Cf. Nikolai Berdyaev, *O naznachenii czeloveka. Opyt paradoksalnoi etiki* (Parizh: Izdatelstvo "Seovremenniie zapiski," 1931), 315–316.

[28] Nikolai Berdyaev, *Smysl istorii. Opyt filosofii chelovecheskoi sud'by* (Berlin: Obelisk, 1923), 261.

[29] Nikolai Berdyaev, *Filosofiia neraventstva. Pis'ma k nedrugam po sotsialnoi filosofii* (Berlin: Obelisk, 1923), 217–219.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 17/10/2026 04:36:33

demolition of the past and symbolism, has the effect of depriving the present of any point of support. This, in turn, exposes the barrenness of technical civilisation: "We live in a world in which the symbolic culture of the past, having not yet completely lost contact with the earth, is dying. Not only is symbolic culture dying, technical industrial civilization is also tottering in its foundations."[30]

This perspective is further elaborated upon in the work of Guénon. The French thinker posited that the concept of civilisation inherently entailed a violent rupture with the past. The advent of civilisation was purported to signify a paradigm shift in the preceding trajectory of history. The French philosopher posited that all proponents of a culture that venerates a sacral past should expunge the term "civilisation" from their vocabulary, as it is a fundamentally alien and artificial construct, a manifestation of the cult of progress ad infinitum, or secular material and moral progress. Moreover, Guénon judged this moral progress to be absurd in the context of civilisation. The thinker wrote that in the second half of the eighteenth century, the ideas of progress and civilisation were permanently merged, giving rise to a "patent tool" of Western imperialism and proselytism.[31]

Sorokin argued that the proponents of the so-called sensual civilisation had been shaped by the Enlightenment cult of science and were, paradoxically, living in naive ignorance. Sorokin advanced the argument that proponents of sensual civilisation had failed to contemplate the likelihood of an impending crisis, a phenomenon he termed "regression":

> The question arises: In what does the contemporary crisis consist? What are its symptoms? What are the reasons for this crisis, and how did it come about? For many, the very possibility of such a crisis appears improbable. They still think that the truth of the senses incorporated in science is the only system of genuine truth; that, as such, it cannot experience any crisis (except, perhaps, a replacement of one kind of scientific theory by another); that it is destined to progress, because at the present stage of human science and culture no retrogressive movement from science to ignorance, from truth to error, from tested sensory knowledge to untested magical and speculative beliefs, is possible.[32]

[30] Nikolai Berdyaev, *Istina i otkroveniie. Prolegomeny k kritike Otkroveniia* (Sankt-Peterburg: Izdatelstvo Russkogo Khristianskogo gumanitarnogo instituta, 1996), 150–151.

[31] See René Guénon, *Orient et Occident* (Paris: Éditions de la Maisne, 1987), 23–24.

[32] Pitirim Sorokin, *The Crisis of Our Age. The Social and Cultural Outlook* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., New York, 1941), 103.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 17/10/2026 04:36:33

Sorokin thus deconstructed, in a manner characteristic of traditionalist thought, the linear-progressivist "myth." In the context of universal history, individual supersystems of cultures (truths) have been observed to emerge and dissipate cyclically. The thinker posited that the conviction in the perpetual endurance of the epoch of contemporary science and secular advancement was demonstrably naïve. This conviction, he argued, failed to consider the possibility of a violent involution in the course of history.[33] It was anticipated by traditionalists that the energy of the materialist-sensualist ideology of scientism would reach its conclusion. Consequently, traditionalist thinkers anticipated an inversion of this prevailing tendency and a reversion to time-honoured principles of spirituality and wisdom. Consequently, adherents of traditionalism successfully achieved the re-establishment of the law of cyclology.

Spengler's reflections on the place and significance of technology were included in his work *Der Mensch und die Technik* (1931). As John Dewey documented in his newspaper article, that book garnered significant attention due to its incorporation of arch-analyses and "prophecies."[34] Spengler's text elucidates the position of cultural traditionalists, who, it is made evident, were not contesting man's inborn aptitudes; rather, their contention was with the alienation of instruments that were originally designed to serve the species homo sapiens. Consequently, these instruments have ensnared human subjects. The process under discussion was initiated by *homo sapiens*. Spengler designated these adherents of material progress as "devotees." The group under discussion included pseudo-thinkers, poets, semi-intellectuals and Marxists.[35]

Spengler's view posited that the fossilised metropolises of civilisation are inhabited by a formless, infertile, "massified" and unified man who has lost contact with the land of his ancestors. Spengler designated this individual as "a parasite divested of tradition (*traditionslose*)."[36] This kind of man had a naïve belief in progress, yet was unaware of the illusion of progress. The cosmopolitan cities were characterised by a pervasive sense of alienation, typified by a populace devoid of a sense of tradition. This populace was engaged in a state of perpetual conflict with

[33] See Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics,* vol. IV (New York: American Book Company, 1941), 770.

[34] John Dewey, "Instrument or Frankenstein?," *The Saturday Review* 1932, no. 34: 582.

[35] See Oswald Spengler, *Der Mensch und die Technik. Beitrag zu einer Philosophie des Lebens* (München: C.H. Beck, 1931), 3.

[36] Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes. Umrisse einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*, vol. I (München: C.H. Beck, 1922), 44.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 17/10/2026 04:36:33

aristocratic elements, who were perceived as having become disconnected from the nuances of rural life and the wisdom derived from peasant tradition.[37] Evola further posits that this tendency is inherent to the very essence of civilisation.[38]

Berdyaev echoed Spengler's arguments, addressing the spiritual disintegration of civilisation, its emphasis on practical concerns, the cult of the material, the "external"—that is, the quantitative and measurable aspects that are perceptible by the senses—and the concurrent decline of value, genius, symbolism, organicity and hierarchy. Civilisation has promoted view that it is solely the manifestation of pure force and necessity that commands its admiration.[39] This phenomenon is exemplified by its technological advancements (industrialism), economic systems (capitalism and socialism, or economic materialism). And, according to Berdyaev, these phenomenon have been a punishment for exhibiting excessive sin of greed. The prevailing societal structure is characterised by bourgeois and democratic principles.[40] In his final, unfinished work, entitled *Tsarstvo Dukha i trarstvo Kesariia*, Berdyaev concluded with the following assertion: "The aforementioned factors have collectively engendered a profound crisis for humankind and its civilisation."[41] Berdyaev posited the notion to his readership that the advent of machines would not, in fact, result in progress; rather, it would precipitate a weakening of the human condition and a regression to a less advanced state.[42] The author posited that, within a futuristic civilisation characterised by the predominance of quantity, there would be an inherent technical dimension to even the most abstract of human activities, such as thinking, creativity and art. Art in the age of the cult of progress has only kept in touch with the traditional past through a handful of museums.[43]

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[37] See Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes. Umrisse einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*, vol. II (München: C.H. Beck, 1923), 120–121.

[38] See Julius Evola, *The Bow and the Club,* trans. Sergio Knipe (London: Arktos, London 2018), 215.

[39] Cf. Berdyaev, *Istina i otkroveniie*, 150.

[40] Cf. Nikolai Berdyaev, *Smysl tvorchestva. Opyt opravdaniia cheloveka* (Moskva: Izdaniie G. A. Lemana i S. I. Sakharova, 1916), 285–286.

[41] Nikolai Berdyaev, *Tsarstvo Dukha i trarstvo Kesariia* (Parizh: YMCA–PRESS, 1951), 43.

[42] Cf. Nikolai Berdyaev, *Filosofiia svobodnogo dukha. Problematika i apologiia khristianstva* (Moskva: Respublika, 1994), 203–204.

[43] Cf. Berdyaev, *Smysl istorii*, 260–261, 266.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 17/10/2026 04:36:33

The religion of progressivism

In his article *Krizis sovremennoi kultury*, the Russian literary historian Mikhail Gershenzon (1869–1925) reflected on the phenomenon of the Western Enlightenment cult of progress. Gershenzon's position was that the world of Judeo-Christian spirituality had been superseded by what he termed "the religion of progressivism."[44] The rise and expansion of the religion of progressivism exhibited characteristics that are typically associated with religious fanaticism. This would account for the determined fight against it waged by traditionalist thinkers. Nicolas de Condorcet came to embody the violent expansion of thinking about infinite and triumphant progress. The French philosopher is known to have articulated the Enlightenment belief in progress:

> The course of this progress may doubtless be more or less rapid, but it can never be retrograde; at least while the earth retains its situation in the system of the universe, and the laws of this system shall neither effect upon the glebe a general overthrow, nor introduce such changes as would no longer permit the human race to preserve and exercise therein the same faculties, and find the same resources[45].

A number of traditionalist thinkers have proposed an alternative vision of the historical process. Critics of progress have theorised that the historical process need not be evolutionary and linear. From an historical perspective, beneath the superficial veneer of linear progression, there may be latent "memories" that bear testimony to the dynamism of an ancient cyclicity. In the unfolding of history, a perpetual revelation occurs, engendering an illusion of progress. It is not only the case that history may repeat itself; it is also possible for it to proceed involutionarily. In the latter "scenario," cultures may not flourish with the passage of time; rather, they may plunge into chaos, crisis, shrinking, falling into ruin and eventually disappearing. As José Ortega y Gasset explained, the concept of progress is inherently linked to the possibility of sudden involution. The possibility of sudden

[44] Mikhail Gershenzon, "Krizis sovremennnoi kultury," in Mikhail Gershenzon, *Minivshee. Istoricheskii al'manakh*, vol. XI (Moskva, Sankt-Peterburg: Atheneum-Feniks, 1992), 236.

[45] Condorcet M. de, *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (Baltimore: Printed by G. Fryer, for J. Frank, 1802), 9.

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Data: 17/10/2026 04:36:33

regression occurring in history cannot be discounted.[46] The Russian thinker Semyon Frank, a critic of material civilisation, succinctly declared: "Progress does not exist."[47]

The intellectual extravagance of the traditionalists was characterised by their opposition to two forms of progressivism: Christianity and the Enlightenment. Contemporary thinker and traditionalist sympathiser Alain de Benoist has noted that the idea of progressivism gained its optimistic face mainly through Christian doctrine. In the 17th century, the notion of progress and historiosophic optimism was articulated through a discourse of secular hope, anchored in the progression of the scientific realm.[48] The misapplication of Enlightenment principles served to misrepresent the concept of progressivism. Christianity has never sought to justify material or moral progress that transpires in the absence of divine intervention. For instance, traditionalist Catholics had believed in providentialism, a doctrine of which Jacques Bénigne Boussuet was a prominent proponent. The French theologian provided a literal description of history from the moment of creation, adhering to the principle that the history of the world is directed solely by God.[49] The cyclological conception of history was perceived as a scandal in this context. However, both the heterodox traditionalist vision of regress and the Christian and post-Christian vision of progress are uncompromising. As posited by Alain de Benoist, the traditionalist and Christian perspectives on history are unified solely by a distinctive form of determinism: one perspective is oriented towards the past, while the other is oriented towards the future.[50]

Guénon proposed that the concept of regression could potentially stimulate interest and assume a significant role within cultural discourse, attributable to the influence of a distinct, "latent" law of history. This law, according to Guénon, manifests as a recurrent, sinusoidal, alternating surge and decline of waves of optimism and pessimism. The concept of "the rhythm of progress" is imparted not only by the forces and energetic resources inherent in progress itself, but also by the impact of regress, which acts as a necessary complement to the dialectical

[46] See José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1932), 85–86.

[47] Semion L. Frank, *Krusheniie kumirov* (Berlin: YMCA-PRESS, 1924), 48.

[48] See Alain de Benoist, *Une brève histoire de l'idée de progress*, in Alain de Benoist, *Critiques—Théoriques* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 2002), 55.

[49] Jacques Bénigne Boussuet, *Discours sur L'Histoire universelle* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1873), 7–9.

[50] See de Benoist, *Une brève histoire de l'idée de progress*, 58.

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Data: 17/10/2026 04:36:33

game of history.[51] This would serve to demonstrate that progress is not infinite; that there must be periods of culmination in history, marking the onset of extended periods of transition. There is a yearning to experience a respite, even from the most optimistic circumstances, yet concurrently engendering a questioning of the dogma of progress and a scepticism of futuristic utopias.

Evola's arguments bear a striking resemblance to those of Guénon. The Italian thinker posited that by observing events, it becomes evident that the sole historical regularity is not linear progressivism, but rather involution.[52] The absolutisation of the idea of progress must provoke laughter, as Evola wrote.[53] The assertion of a universal regress is both legitimate and convincing. This historical conception remained at odds with the uncritical 'profane progressivism' that emerged in the mature stage of modernism (the Enlightenment) and its Judeo-Christian "prototype."

The collapse of dogma

Guénon prophesised the imminent judgement of modernity, which was to be followed by a new era in history, one that would be close to the world of Sanātana dharma, that is, the world of pure spirituality. This retrospective ideal was antithetical to the falsity of secular progressivism.[54] Guénon and Evola were proponents of the collapse of the dogma of progressivism, which precipitated the disintegration of the prevailing atmosphere of exclusivism, a sense of historical privilege, and arrogant Eurocentrism. Guénon and Evola were steadfast in their opposition to the dictates of the "materialist progressives," who perceived barbarism, savagery, obscurantism and superstition to be confined to non-european regions. Guénon's writing is characterised by a palpable sense of elation in the face of the dissolution of the long-standing dogma of unceasing progress, a phenomenon that has been observed by many Europeans. This collapse has given rise to the decline of the unquestioning belief in the absolute necessity of this dogma.[55]

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[51] Cf. Guénon, *Orient et Occident*, 30.

[52] Cf. Julius Evola, *Heathen Imperialism*, trans. Rowan Berkeley (Kemper: Thompkins & Cariou, 2007), 86.

[53] See Julius Evola, *The Bow and the Club,* trans. Sergio Knipe (London: Arktos, 2018), 215–216.

[54] See René Guénon*, La Crise du Monde moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), 10.

[55] See ibid., 8.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 17/10/2026 04:36:33

A view analogous to that of Guénon was expressed by Berdyaev: „The time is coming fast when everyone will have to ask himself whether 'progress' was 'progress' or whether it was a most vicious 'reaction' a movement away from the meaning of the universe and the authentic foundations of life".[56] In his 1911 publication *Filosofia svobody*, the Russian thinker has expounded on the subject of humanity being hypnotised and poisoned by the idea of progress and the promise of a paradisiacal existence on Earth.[57] In the publication entitled *Novoie srednevekoviie*, the following statement is made: „There is no such thing in the history of mankind as a continual progress upward in a straight line."[58] Evola dismissed the notion of progress as absurd, as did the sense of superiority that characterises modern civilisation. The ideology of progressivism gave rise to the propagation of detrimental myths, which were naively accepted by Europeans. Evola posited that progressivism is a mainstream "plebeian ideology," a notion that was expressed with a palpable sense of disdain.[59]

Spengler also pursued the manifestations of the dogmatic and optimistic progressivism of modern politicians and economists, who evaluated the past from the standpoint of futurist ideology.[60] Spengler expressed regret at the replacement of the old religion and tradition with a superficial concept of human happiness and technical progress.[61] As Berdyaev asserts, the German thinker entirely refuted the notion of progress.[62] This perspective is also echoed by the Russian philosopher:

> We can no longer believe in the theories of progress which deceived the minds of the nineteenth century and made the near future seem always to be better, more beautiful, and more desirable than what had gone before. We are more inclined to think that better things and finer and more lovable are to be found rather in eternity,

[56] Nikolai Berdyaev, *The End of our Time*, trans. Donald Atwater (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1933), 76; Nikolai Berdyaev, *Smysl istorii*, 222–230.

[57] See Nikolai Berdyaev, *Filozofiia svobody* (Moskva: Tovarischchestvo tipografii A. I. Mamontova, 1911), 132.

[58] Berdyaev, *The End of our Time*, 57.

[59] See Evola, *Revolt Against the Modern World …,* XXX.

[60] See Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, vol. I, 37.

[61] See Oswald Spengler, *Der Mensch und die Technik,* 4.

[62] Cf. Nikolai Berdyaev, "Predsmertniie mysli Fausta," in *Osvald Spengler i Zakat Evropy*, ed. Nikolai Berdyaev, Iakov M. Bukshman, Fedor A. Stepun, Semen L. Frank (Moskva: Knigoizdatelstvo Bereg, 1922), 59.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 17/10/2026 04:36:33

> and that these were to be found also in the past in so far as the past touched upon eternity and look its rise therefrom.[63]

Sorokin criticised those who sought a solution to the ills of the modern world in a return to the ideology of progress. Sorokin elucidated that in this manner, the proponents of progress were administering not an antidote, but rather a more potent toxin to the ailing European people.[64] The naïve belief in an earthly paradise was confounded by the realities of war, bloody revolution, and human misery: „From this standpoint, the history of human progress is indeed a history of incurable human stupidity!"[65]

Sorokin, an adversary of the Bolsheviks who was compelled to depart Russia and seek refuge elsewhere, perceived communism as the manifestation of the primitive essence of secular progress. Evola's perspective is worthy of further consideration. According to the Italian thinker, a logical connection existed between democracy and communism. The development of socialism was greatly influenced by the ideological climate fostered by liberalism and democracy, which over time led to the emergence of communism as a radicalised form of socialism.[66] This perspective aligns with that of the Spanish traditionalist Juan Donoso Cortés (1809–1853). Cortés has believed that the notion that socialism presents a false image of man. This is to say, the socialists, and later the communists, in their naïve vision of progress, sought to deny the existence of original sin. However, this denial, through a perverse dialectic, ultimately led them to nihilism.[67] Evola identified a correlation between the conceptions of material progress and communism. The two myths were considered by the thinker to be the most pernicious for humanity.[68] It was widely held by adherents of traditionalist ideology that the philosophical underpinnings of communism, characterised by its godless and fanatical nature, represented a logical outcome of the Enlightenment's unquestioning belief in the potential for "unbridled progress." The sake of this progress was attributed

[63] Berdyaev, *The End of our Time*, 12–13.

[64] See Sorokin, *The Crisis of Our Age,* 16.

[65] Ibid., 326.

[66] See Evola, *Revolt Against the Modern World*, 341–342.

[67] J. Donoso Cortés, *Socialism*, in *Catholic Political Thought 1789–1848*, ed. Bela Menczer (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1962), 179.

[68] See Julius Evola, *Ride the Tiger. A Survival Manual for the Aristocrats of the Soul*, trans. Joscelyn Godwin, Constance Fontana (Rochester–Vermont: Inner Traditions International, 2003), 28.

Pobrane z czasopisma **http://kulturaiwartosci.journals.umcs.pl**
Data: 17/10/2026 04:36:33

not to a divine entity, but rather to humankind, which superseded a supernatural being.

Conclusion

The ideas of the traditionalists examined in this article exemplify a critique of the Enlightenment vision of progress. Traditionalists demonstrated the transient and illusory nature of progress, as well as the naïvety of the West's faith in such advancement. The traditionalist worldview is anachronistic and incompatible with the concept of subjectivity in terms of freedom. Nevertheless, adherents of tradition realised that proponents of progress and advocates of reason had been exposed by successive generations who had experienced historical events. The innumerable number of individuals who have been murdered in the name of progress has served to underscore the ultimate consequences of the embodiment of the "products of reason" that were idealised during the Age of Enlightenment. In view of the aforementioned considerations, the question can be posed: do is exists such thing as progress? This question has frequently been posed by adherents of traditionalist beliefs. The concept of belief in progress can assume an existential dimension. It is in the same time possible the belief in regression. Karl Mannheim has highlighted the paradox of people's tendency to adhere to the familiar and the well-established. This existential traditionalism posits that even those who are regarded as "progressive," irrespective of their "enlightened" political convictions, may exhibit traditionalist behaviours in various spheres of life and circumstances. This is due to a fear of innovation and a reluctance to deviate from established conventions.[69] Progress can be defined as a "journey" into the unknown, an endeavour which is inherently risky. This journey has the potential to be both fascinating and rewarding, yet not all individuals possess the psychological inclination to engage in high-risk endeavours.

[69] Karl Mannheim, *Conservatism. A Contribution to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. David Kettler, Volker Meja (London– New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 73.

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Streszczenie

Krytyka postępu w świetle zachodniego tradycjonalizmu kulturowego (1920–1949)

Celem artykułu jest zbadanie tradycjonalistycznej krytyki postępu myślicieli okresu międzywojennego. Argumentuję, że tradycjonalizm odrzucał kult postępu i jednocześnie pozytywnie waloryzował dziejowy status regresu. Tradycjonalistyczna wizja historii opierała się na kontestacji oświeceniowej wiary w *progressus ad infinitum*. W artykule stawiam tezę, że historiozofia tradycjonalistyczna odwoływała się do intuicji Hezjoda. Proponuję wprowadzenie do literatury naukowej pojęcia tradycjonalizmu kulturowego. Do grona tradycjonalistów kulturowych zaliczam: René Guénona, Juliusa Evolę, Oswalda Spenglera, Mikołaja Bierdiajewa i Pitirima Sorokina. Wnioskuję, że tradycjonalistyczna krytyka postępu była uwarunkowana przez lęk egzystencjalny przed zmianą, czymś nieznanym i nowym. W artykule badam narrację tradycjonalistyczną, odwołując się do dyskursu naukowego filozofii kultury.

Słowa kluczowe: tradycjonalizm, Oświecenie, postęp, regres, cywilizacja, kultura

Zusammenfassung

Kritik am Fortschritt im Lichte des westlichen kulturellen Traditionalismus (1920–1949)

Das Ziel dieses Artikels ist es, die traditionalistische Kritik am Fortschritt durch Denker der Zwischenkriegszeit zu untersuchen. Ich argumentiere, dass der Traditionalismus den Fortschrittskult ablehnte und gleichzeitig den historischen Status des Rückschritts positiv bewertete. Die traditionalistische Sichtweise der Geschichte basierte auf der Ablehnung des aufklärerischen Glaubens an den *progressus ad infinitum*. In diesem Artikel stelle ich die These auf, dass

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Data: 17/10/2026 04:36:33

die traditionalistische Geschichtsphilosophie sich auf die Intuition von Hesiod bezog. Ich schlage vor, den Begriff des kulturellen Traditionalismus in die wissenschaftliche Literatur einzuführen. Zu den kulturellen Traditionalisten zähle ich: René Guénon, Julius Evola, Oswald Spengler, Nikolai Berdjajew und Pitirim Sorokin. Ich komme zu dem Schluss, dass die traditionalistische Kritik am Fortschritt durch die existenzielle Angst vor Veränderung, vor dem Unbekannten und Neuen bedingt war. Im Artikel untersuche ich die traditionalistische Erzählung unter Bezugnahme auf den wissenschaftlichen Diskurs der Kulturphilosophie.

Schlüsselworte: Traditionalismus, Aufklärung, Fortschritt, Rückschritt, Zivilisation, Kultur

Ins Deutsche übersetzt von Anna Pastuszka