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Progress and Its Critics: A Conservative Critique of the Myth of Progress

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Abstract

The idea of progress constitutes a foundational, self-justifying myth of modernity. This paper explores the conservative critique of this myth, tracing its intellectual history and diagnosing its contemporary consequences. It argues that the progressive narrative is not a scientific fact but a secularized eschatology that has evolved into a form of technocratic rationalism rooted in a materialist metaphysics. The analysis examines the culmination of this worldview in transhumanism and diagnoses it, following Martin Heidegger, as a symptom of the “forgetting of Being” (*Seinsvergessenheit*). In contrast, the paper outlines the conservative alternative, which is not a simple return to the past but a reorientation toward a “vertical” dimension of existence grounded in Tradition, the symbolic cosmos, and a transcendent order. Ultimately, the paper frames the conservative stance as a form of metaphysical guardianship—an existential practice of “remembrance of Being” that keeps open the possibility of transcendence in an age of ontological nihilism.

Keywords: progress; conservatism; modernity; materialism; transcendence

1. Introduction

One of the central, seemingly unquestionable pillars of modernity’s self-understanding is the idea of progress. According to this narrative, history is a linear, continuously ascending arc, moving from a past burdened by ignorance and oppression toward an enlightened, technologically advanced, and free present (and an even freer future). Although the readership and direct intellectual influence of grand, sweeping systems of historical philosophy—be they Spengler’s, Toynbee’s, or Marx’s—have undoubtedly diminished by the 21st century, the interest in the ultimate meaning of history has not disappeared but merely transformed. Today, philosophical inquiries tend to reach a wider audience through the channels of “popular science,”¹ often presenting a deeply ideological worldview under the guise of scientific objectivity. These contemporary narratives translate the myth of progress into the language of the current age, promoting a hidden materialist–utopian agenda in which technological development and global unification become the ultimate goals of history.²

Conservative thought, from its Burkean beginnings, has formulated a deep and systemic critique of this worldview, a critique that stems not from a mere rejection of change—as its critics allege—but from a different metaphysical and anthropological foundation. The term “conservative,” however, requires explanation itself. Many different movements, ideas, and even political philosophies can be interpreted as “conservative” today. Thus, the adjective “conservative,” without refinement and precise approximation, says very little.



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In our view, a conservative is, above all, a person who does not wish to constantly experiment but rather to preserve something; more precisely, to preserve and manifest the unchanging within the changing, in the spirit of an ideological loyalty to that which is the cause, beginning, and origin of all change. So-called conservatism—which we need not define in a “dogmatic” sense—is such an intellectual disposition. It only appeared on the philosophical and political stage when it seemed that the principle of change was annihilating all other principles, that is, at the end of the 18th century. It emerged when the pace of change accelerated to such an extent that forces aiming at disintegration, collapse, and the final unraveling of structures also appeared.

For European conservatives, adherence to social custom, and especially the steadfast attachment to social institutions, were not the result of mere habit, baseless “tradition-keeping,” or “backwardness,” as their enemies have claimed and continue to claim. In most cases, this behavior actually stemmed from the fact that these institutions—at least before modernity—were derived from a complex philosophical-theological background, the great synthesis of the European Middle Ages, which was primarily of Christian and classical origin, and which modernity itself corroded with its critical acids and largely dismantled.

The essence of conservative thought and experience, however, is not tied to any single continent, religion, or tradition: it is an idea that lays claim to universality, found at the heart of every civilization that has ever experienced the transcendent and oriented itself not toward the changing reality of matter and existence, but toward the unchanging being of transcendence. Change is an inevitable concomitant of all that is determined by the conditions of space and time. But what is in space and time certainly does not develop infinitely. All relevant empirical experience also proves that, after a certain stage of development, progress turns into stagnation, then decline and annihilation. If, however, we assert that something eternal exists, the so-called fact of progress is immediately relativized: the two are incompatible. If we cling to that which is eternal, we cannot attribute absolute significance to change, be it progress or decline.

The aim of the present study is to present the intellectual roots of the conservative critique of progress, which draws from multiple sources, with particular attention to the critique of the technocratic rationalism that pervades modernity, a characteristic of almost every thinker within the broader intellectual history of conservative thought to some degree, and to point out its metaphysical foundations in the philosophy of materialism. Our analysis also seeks to answer the question of what can be considered true progress from this critical perspective, and what is merely the material scenery of spiritual and ecological decline, labeled “progress.” In the course of this investigation, we will also examine how those contemporary ideological constructs function which, using the authority of modern natural science, seek to legitimize a vision of the future that aims at the overcoming of human nature and the final elimination, indeed the eradication, of transcendence from the horizon.

We agree with Heidegger that the forgetting of Being—the oblivion of Being as the ultimate horizon of meaning in favor of mere beings (things, facts, data)—is the fundamental dynamic of Western man’s history, which has reached its fulfillment in our age (Heidegger 1962, p. 21). This study also attempts to explore the thesis that the central myth of modernity, the idea of progress, is in fact the primary narrative and symptom of this forgetting of Being.

If we truly wish to understand the spiritual state of our age, we are immediately confronted with the fundamental problem of interpretation, the figure of the hermeneutic circle. How can we objectively examine the medium—modernity—of which we ourselves are a part? No matter how much we identify with it—like the progressives—or feel spiritually alienated from it—like the conservatives—we can never truly be external observers of our

own time. Following Heidegger's line of thought, the solution is not the impossible attempt to break out of the circle, but the "correct way of entering" into it (Csejtei 2023, p. 68). As Dezső Csejtei formulates it in the cited, extraordinarily significant study, man himself, in his fundamental givenness, is nothing other than a hermeneuticum: interpretation is not an external supplement added to him but is consubstantial with him. All our actions, from the simplest to the most complex, are also interpretations of the world referring to the pre-conceptual metaphysical frameworks (*Weltanschauung*) that condition perception (Csejtei 2023, p. 67).

Instead of deluding ourselves with the illusion of neutrality, we must, through a strong existential decision, mark out our own position, the interpretive framework through which we examine phenomena. The present study attempts such a conscious choice of position. Digging deeper than the surface divisions of political (left–right) or geopolitical (globalist–patriot) categories, to understand the spiritual state of the age—similar to Csejtei's starting point cited above—it chooses the concept of "forgetting of Being" (*Seinsvergessenheit*) diagnosed by Heidegger as its starting point, as the true intellectual culmination of the conservative perspective. However, in several of its approaches, and especially in its critique of the Heideggerian interpretation of metaphysics, it wishes to arrive at a somewhat different conclusion regarding the outlining of a way out.

2. The Deconstruction of the Myth of Progress and a Contemporary Example

The progressive view of history, whether it be the classic liberal "Whig narrative"³ or the positivist theory of stages,⁴ starts from the basic assumption that "newer" is synonymous with "better." According to this view, history is a process in which humanity's problems are gradually solved through science, technology, and rationally organized social institutions. The conservative critique—examining any significant representative of conservative thought—attacks this thesis on several points, questioning its historical, philosophical, and theological foundations. The first step in the argument was generally aimed at uncovering the historical and philosophical roots of the concept of progress, showing that it is not a scientific fact but a deeply ideological, faith-based construct. Let us see some well-known examples of this critique.

Edmund Burke, the "father of conservatism," set forth his objections in his critique of the French Revolution (*Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790) (Burke 1790). Burke did not attack the concept of progress in general, but its abstract, rationalist form as it appeared in the French Revolution. The revolutionaries believed that, based on reason and abstract "human rights," they could dismantle the entire existing social order and build a perfect, rational society from scratch. Burke, in contrast, showed that this thinking was deeply ideological and, in fact, religious in nature. He exposed the revolutionary idea of progress as a construct born of intellectual pride, which ignores concrete, historical reality and forces a theoretical model onto human nature. Thus, the belief in progress is not a scientific insight but a dangerous political creed detached from reality.

In the 20th century, Nikolai Berdyaev, the Russian religious philosopher, shed light on the fact that the modern, linear concept of progress is not a product of science or reason at all, but a secularized version of Judeo-Christian eschatology. This linear model actually originates from Christian salvation history, but modern thought abandoned God and the otherworldly goal while retaining the structure itself: the "feudal oppression" or "ignorance" took the place of the Fall, the "revolution" or "scientific enlightenment" took the place of Redemption, and the communist or liberal-democratic utopia took the place of the Kingdom of God.

The German–American philosopher Eric Voegelin, also writing in the 20th century, exposed modern political ideologies as "political religions." With his concept of "imma-

mentizing the eschaton," Voegelin argued that modern progressive ideologies (including positivism, communism, and Nazism) all attempt to pull this transcendent, otherworldly goal down to earth and realize it within history through human action. According to this, the belief in progress is not an objective, scientific program but a "gnostic" type of faith-based movement that expects collective salvation from political action.

Of the three critiques, it is Berdyaev who argues that, in our opinion, grasps the true nature of the idea of "progress" at the deepest and most elementary level. Berdyaev reveals not only the political consequences of the belief in progress but also the theological origin of the intellectual structure itself, exposing its secularized yet still faith-based nature. And if he is right, and the idea of progress is not the product of modern, rational, and "scientific" reason but a secularized theological construct, then modernity cannot in fact be separated from Christianity but can be considered its own "Christian heresy," or rather, a Christian paradigm of salvation history that has turned inside out, into its own negation, and is consuming itself (Berdyaev 1936, pp. 186–87).

The Christian conception, which attributed a unique, unrepeatable significance to historical time, truly transformed European (and through it, global) thought deeply, perhaps more deeply than any previous paradigm, in contrast to the cyclical conception of time in most ancient and non-Christian cultures. The Enlightenment stripped this narrative of its transcendent content: it replaced God with Human Reason, the ignorance of the state of nature with the Fall, and worldly, material, and social perfection with Redemption. Thus, a "religion" was born, which lives captive to a concept of time that has been left without the denied transcendence, and whose adherents—to use Berdyaev's words again—cannot break away from the background view of a religion in which they are no longer able to believe.

In his work *Meaning in History*, Karl Löwith also showed that modern philosophies of history, from liberalism to Marxism, are all secularized versions of Christian eschatology, which have exchanged the promise of otherworldly salvation for an earthly utopia (Löwith 1949, p. 207).

Of course, the modern myth of progress is not just about linear advancement but also about its ever-increasing speed. The modern age, as Dezső Csejtei states, following Heidegger, makes speed the positive measure of the world. Processes gain meaning and value according to the pace at which they unfold. Crash courses, fast-food restaurants, and speed-reading techniques are all symptoms of speed itself becoming a value. This cult of speed, however, inevitably breeds transience and superficiality. According to Heidegger's perceptive observation, which Csejtei also quotes, speed is "blindness to the true moment," a rush that blinds us to the depths of the present and its connections to the eternal, sacrificing the reality of the present and the wisdom of the past on the altar of a utopian faith in the future, because pausing, deepening, contemplation are considered a waste of time, a useless slowness in the logic of progress.

This relentless, forward-rushing momentum necessarily entails a radical devaluation of the past. For what is slow, what is tied to the past, is an obstacle to progress. The progressive paradigm considers the present to be an improved, more advanced state of the past, and it is questionable whether we can judge the quality of life of past ages beyond the material standards of the present. Of course, the standard of living of an age is in fact a complex reality, the judgment of which depends on a system of values; the loss of spiritual and communal dimensions is not in itself justified by technical achievements and increased material consumption. The subjective experience of the person of the past, the lived experience of feudal bonds or the lack of suffrage, is almost impossible to reconstruct from the present, yet the progressive narrative confidently judges with the categories of "oppression" and "ignorance."⁵

The 21st-century, highly successful embodiment of this way of thinking is Yuval Noah Harari, whose work provides a perfect case study of the contemporary functioning of progressive myth-making. Harari's *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* revives the classic topoi of the progress narrative, but in the spirit of the cult of speed: he describes the history of humanity as a linear series of three ever-accelerating revolutions (cognitive, agricultural, scientific), rushing toward a determined endpoint. For him, history is clearly a process of global unification; empires, money, and universal religions are positive developments because they facilitated the elimination of local differences and the formation of a "new global empire."

This perspective necessarily devalues and caricatures the past. It reduces pre-modern man to an animalistic level: "The most important thing to know about prehistoric humans is that they were insignificant animals" (Harari 2014, p. 12). It simplifies the complex social and cultural reality of the past with demagogic, distorting images: "In modern affluent societies it is customary to take a shower and change your clothes every day. Medieval peasants went without washing for months on end, and hardly ever changed their clothes. The very thought of living like that, filthy and reeking to the bone, is abhorrent to us" (Harari 2014, p. 388). This rhetoric in Harari's work clearly serves the purpose of making the achievements of technical civilization seem even more brilliant and of branding any attraction to the past as irrational.

Harari also sacrifices religious reality to the crudest materialist reductionism when he writes: "How exactly did Armand Peugeot, the man, create Peugeot, the company? In much the same way that priests and sorcerers have created gods and demons throughout history, and in which thousands of French curés were still creating Christ's body every Sunday in the parish churches" (Harari 2014, p. 37). This statement perfectly exemplifies the unreflective materialist attitude, which places transcendent reality and an economic entity into the same "fictitious" category, without for a moment reflecting on the constructed and "mental" nature of its own materialist worldview. The analysis of history here becomes a tool for an ideological goal: the justification of the inevitability and desirability of globalization and technological utopia. The Harari phenomenon sheds light on how effectively the fanaticism of progress can spread under the guise of scientific objectivity, while the theses presented as scientific (from the age of the Big Bang to the cognitive revolution) are in fact the unprovable dogmas of the materialist–progressive faith.

3. Technocratic Rationalism and the Transhumanist Utopia

The main engine and embodiment of the modern progress narrative, also characteristic of Harari, is, on the surface, a technocratic rationalism that is unaware of its own post-theological roots. This mode of thought reduces the entirety of reality to measurable, calculable, and utilizable parameters. This perspective is not merely a tool for knowing the world, but a deep metaphysical stance that fundamentally defines our relationship to reality. To understand its devastating consequences, we must go back to the birth of modern reason.

For pre-modern thought, the pinnacle of cognition was *intelligentia* (in Greek, *nous*), which meant not simply understanding, but the intuitive grasping of ideas, the eternal forms and principles behind things.⁶ For Plato, reality was the Ideas, not the matter in which they are merely reflected. The task of *nous* was the contemplation of these essences, a synthesizing capacity that sought the whole and origin of things. In contrast, the modern term *ratio* comes from the Latin word for "counting, calculation," and denotes a discursive, analytical ability that compares pieces of the phenomenal world and draws logical conclusions. The intellectual decline of modernity can be clearly traced in the process by which *ratio* gradually subjugated and then eliminated the legitimacy of *intelligentia*.

This began—following the nominalist thought of late scholasticism⁷—with Francis Bacon and René Descartes.⁸ Bacon replaced the intellect understood in the sense of *nous* with the English term “understanding”—literally “standing under something”—indicating that cognition is no longer directed at the principles *above* phenomena, but at the material mechanisms *under* them. Descartes’ sharp separation of the thinking thing (*res cogitans*) and the extended thing (*res extensa*) stripped matter of all internal, spiritual qualities, reducing it to a mere object, a machine describable by mathematical formulas. When the moderns declared that there is no higher order of cognition than reason (*ratio*), that which is unknowable to rational reason—essence, symbol, transcendence—became practically equivalent to the non-existent.

Following Heidegger, Dezső Csejtei illuminates the fateful choice of Western man with the Greek concepts of *physis*, *logos*, and *technē*. *Physis* is being itself, nature, the reality that unfolds of its own accord but also conceals itself, which should be accorded respect.⁹ *Logos* is human reason, speech, logic, which seeks to uncover, to name *physis*, that is, to snatch it from its concealment. And *technē* is knowledge, craft, technology, which mediates between the two. The tragedy of Western man, according to Csejtei, lies in the decision to align *technē* not in the service of *physis*, but alongside *logos*. Instead of technology becoming the careful steward of nature, it became the violent instrument of calculative reason, with which it could subjugate *physis* (Csejtei 2023, pp. 71–73).

The end result of this process is the modern technical world-civilization, which Heidegger described with the concept of the “Enframing” (*Ge-stell*). The Enframing is a gigantic, all-encompassing framework that “challenges forth” and “orders” the whole of reality as a “standing-reserve.” In this system, everything—the river as a potential for energy production, the forest as timber, the earth as mineral resources, and man as “human resources”—exists from only one point of view: as an available, usable, optimizable stock (*Bestand*) (Heidegger 1977, p. 16). In Csejtei’s analogy, the world becomes a gigantic “grandmother’s pantry,” where everything is lined up on the shelves, ready for consumption.

The political embodiment of this logic, which objectifies and inventories everything, becomes—despite the emphasized, indeed, almost sacred status of “liberal” and “democratic” external forms—a veritable Hobbesian Leviathan in the modern state (Tocqueville 2010, p. 1250). After the modern revolutions destroyed traditional, hierarchical structures, the resulting vacuum was filled, in Max Weber’s term, by “bureaucratic authority.” Modern bureaucracy is the political operating system of the Enframing: a rational, impersonal machine that eliminates all intermediate, organic communities and freedoms in the name of equality and central efficiency. In parallel with the growth of welfare institutions, the power of the state over the individual and his organic communities has grown to an unprecedented extent, bringing every area of life under regulation and administration (Kuehnelt-Leddihn 1952, p. 30).

The logical and final endpoint of technocratic rationalism, however, is the transhumanist utopia, which also appears in Harari’s work. If man is merely a complex biological machine, a “software on the hardware,” and the sole purpose of the world is to maximize efficiency and performance, then there is no principled obstacle to “fixing,” “upgrading,” and ultimately replacing this machine with a more perfect model. Transhumanism promises earthly immortality, the conquest of disease and aging, and the elevation of human abilities to a divine level through machine implants (Harari 2016).

This vision is none other than a profane parody of religious eschatologies: a denial and, at the same time, a distorted materialist imitation of the idea of immortality and eternal life¹⁰. The dark side of this utopia, however, projects a deeply dystopian future: a society where alongside technologically enhanced “superhumans,” a “useless class” of those confined to their biological limits, economically and socially redundant, is created

(Harari 2014, p. 261). Technology, which was originally a tool for making human life easier, here becomes the purpose of existence and the program for overcoming human nature, promising a future in which man, in today's sense, may no longer exist. Here the Enframing turns against itself: man, who has ordered everything into the standing-reserve, finally makes himself the last raw material to be optimized.

It is important to distinguish here between ratio as a pragmatic tool and ratio as a metaphysical worldview. The conservative critique does not necessarily reject the fruits of technical progress—modern medicine, transportation, or everyday conveniences—which undoubtedly alleviate human suffering. The danger arises not when calculative reason is used to solve specific problems, but when it becomes the sole mode of revealing reality.

Consequently, the conservative critique of progress does not advocate for a Luddite rejection of technology or a naive return to pre-modern material conditions. Total isolation from technological reality is not a viable option; as the historical comparison between Tibet and Japan in the 19th century illustrates, a civilization that completely refuses technical modernization risks losing its sovereignty and physical existence against aggressive technocratic powers. The challenge, therefore, is not the destruction of machines, but the preservation of 'inner independence' vis-à-vis the machine. The conservative aim is to utilize the *pragma* of technology for survival and well-being without adopting the *ideology* of technocratic rationalism. In this view, one must master the tool to prevent the tool—and its inherent logic of efficiency and standardization—from mastering the human spirit.

4. The Metaphysical Root of the Crisis: Materialism

Technocratic rationalism is not the triumphant self-realization of neutral reason, but a deeper metaphysical stance that fundamentally defines our relationship to reality, the logical consequence of materialism. To understand the modern crisis, it is not enough to analyze the symptoms, the technological domination, or the myth of progress; we must dig down to the root, to the philosophical foundation that made this way of thinking possible and legitimized it. This foundation is the Heideggerian "forgetting of Being" (*Seinsvergessenheit*), of which we consider materialism to be the purest philosophical expression. The forgetting of Being, that is, the oblivion of Being as the ultimate horizon of meaning in favor of mere "beings" (things, facts, data), creates a state in which we conceive of reality solely as the sum of tangible, measurable, and manipulable things. Materialism—as it is expressed not only as a practical attitude but also as a philosophical worldview—is essentially the ideology of this state, hardened into dogma.

The essence of materialism—be it ideological (Marxism), practical (consumerism), or scientism cloaked in the mantle of science—is in every case the denial of non-material, transcendent reality. It claims that nothing can exist that is eternal, incorruptible, and immortal; only the material world of incessant coming-to-be and passing-away exists. This thesis, however, though treated almost as an axiom in modernity, struggles with serious, insurmountable logical and ontological problems. The most difficult obstacle is the question of the origin of consciousness, which contemporary philosophy of mind calls the "hard problem of consciousness."

The essence of the problem is the inexplicability of *qualia*, that is, the qualitative character of subjective experiences. With scientific tools, we can describe all the physical and chemical processes that take place in the brain during an experience—for example, seeing a red rose or hearing a piece of music. We can know the wavelength of photons, the stimulation of the cones in the retina, the electrical signals running along the neural pathways, and the neural networks activated in the visual cortex. This third-person, objective description, however, can never, in principle, account for what it is *like* to see the color red or to hear the music. Materialism, which by definition recognizes only

the existence of physically measurable, objective facts, is incapable of bridging this gap between physical brain states and the subjective, first-person experience of consciousness. For this very reason, it is impossible to coherently derive the qualitatively entirely different phenomena of complexity, life, and above all, self-awareness and reflexive consciousness from matter presumed to be lifeless and unconscious. The materialist argument at this point simply becomes tautological: since consciousness exists, and only matter can exist, consciousness *must* be a kind of “higher level of organization” of matter. This, however, is not an explanation, but merely a reformulation of the problem, a simple renaming of a mysterious “event” labeled as rational (but in fact irrational and never sufficiently explained) through a self-justifying logical sleight of hand. Similarly, the principle of quantitative changes leaping into qualitative ones is also a philosophical postulate, not an empirical fact, as materialism tries to portray it.

Since materialism is in fact unable to bridge the gap between matter and consciousness by logical means, it turns to an external explanatory principle, which it borrows from the world of natural science but elevates to metaphysical status: the theory of evolution. In vulgar materialist argumentation, evolution is not just a biological theory but a kind of *deus ex machina*, an omniscient, all-creating substitute for a deity that explains everything while itself requiring explanation. This blind, aimless, and meaningless force, according to the materialist myth, is capable of creating increasingly complex and ordered structures, defying the law of entropy observed in the physical world. While complexity theory may explain the emergence of physical patterns from chaos, it does not account for the origin of metaphysical meaning and teleology. The evolution postulated by science (which is also not a fact in the strict sense, but an evolutionary model) thus becomes the miracle of materialism, which justifies the impossible: the spontaneous emergence of order from chaos, and of consciousness from the unconscious.

This way of thinking is the purest form of the scientism also represented by Harari. While Harari is not a systematic philosopher in the academic sense, his work is analyzed here specifically because it serves as the symptomatic articulation of the prevailing zeitgeist and effectively popularizes the underlying metaphysical assumptions of the progressive narrative for a global audience.

Scientism, which uses the authority of science to justify a philosophical position—materialism—and labels all other modes of knowing (philosophy, religion, art) as inferior, superstitious, or meaningless, either directly (like the former “vulgar Marxists”) or through indirect, ironic means (like Harari), is actually not so far from what it seeks to deny. In the words of Stanley Jaki, those enchanted by quantitative methods lose their sense for non-quantitative concepts and thus become incapable of dialog about the deeper features of reality (Bencze n.d.). The propaganda of scientism today regards religion, culture, morality, and ultimately human consciousness itself as mere “fictitious entities,” “imagined orders” (Harari 2016, p. 141), or perhaps “epiphenomena of the brain’s biochemical processes.” Meanwhile, it leaves the constructed, “mental,” and ultimately unprovable, faith-based nature of its own materialist premises unexamined.

Paradoxically, the modern age, while loudly professing to be materialist, is in fact a deeply idealistic era—but, in the words of Dezső Csejtei, it is characterized by “a crude, deluded idealism” (Csejtei 2023, p. 75). This thesis is built on the recognition that the essence of the modern project is not the humble respect for matter, but quite the contrary: the violent imposition of the abstract schemas and ideas of the *logos* (human reason, calculation, abstract models) onto reality, onto *physis*. The technocratic engineer who forces the river into a concrete channel, the economist who tries to tailor society to a mathematical model, or the gender ideologue who overwrites biological reality with an abstract social construct—

all are representatives of this deluded idealism. They do not start from reality, but from an idea, a theory, and they want to adjust reality to this idea.

Heidegger's critique of materialism also points in this direction. For him, materialism is not mistaken because "spirit" exists, but because materialism is the final, most degenerate form of Western "metaphysics."¹¹ The history of "metaphysics," for Heidegger, is the history of the forgetting of Being, where thought, instead of Being, has always sought some supreme being (Idea, God, subject) as the foundation of reality. Materialism takes this very logic to its extreme: it makes matter the ultimate, fundamental being. In doing so, however, it does not step out of "metaphysics"—understood in the specific Heideggerian sense—but fulfills it in its most impoverished form. Matter here is a completely abstract, contentless concept, the principle of pure objectivity and calculability. According to Heidegger, materialism is in fact not objectivism, but precisely the most extreme subjectivism, where the subject posits before itself a "object" (matter) of its own construction, which it can then completely dominate and manipulate with the tools of *logos* and *technē*. This is the point where Csejtei's thesis also comes into play: the modern project is not the triumph of matter over spirit, but the triumph of the abstract, calculative spirit (*ratio*) over living, organic reality (*physis*). This victory, however, is also Pyrrhic because it ultimately leads to the rendering of the universe as meaningless, and to pure nihilism. The myth of progress thus promises an increase in possession over time, whereas the conservative alternative relates the deepening of the quality of existence to a timeless order.

5. The Conservative Alternative: Reason, Transcendence, and the Symbolic Cosmos

In contrast to the materialist belief in progress and the technocratic rationalism's aspiration for world domination, conservative thought offers a radically different alternative. This alternative is not a naive longing for the past, but is based on a metaphysical, anthropological, and historical insight that questions the project of modernity at its foundations. While the progressive mind conceives of reality as a horizontal, temporally advancing, material accumulation, the conservative intellect seeks a vertical dimension: it wishes to connect the transient world to an eternal, transcendent order. For it, true development is therefore not material—though it is not true that it would disdain or reject the so-called "material world"—but is above all spiritual and moral in nature.

The first major, frontal assault of the progress ideology on the plane of history and politics was the French Revolution, and the classic form of conservative thought was born as a response to this historical shock. Edmund Burke, the father of modern conservatism, laid the foundations of the critique in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Burke rejected the revolutionaries' abstract, universalist ideas ("the rights of man"), which derived political legitimacy from a hypothetical, pre-historical state of nature. In contrast, he defended concrete, historically developed rights and freedoms inherited through generations ("the rights of an Englishman"). For him, society is not a machine that can be dismantled and reassembled according to a rational plan, but a living, organic whole, held together by a sacred contract between the generations of the past, the present, and the future. Society is "an unbreakable chain between the living, the dead, and those who are yet to be born." For Burke, true development is not radical rupture, but prudent, cautious reform that respects the wisdom of the ancestors and the experience accumulated in institutions, while adapting to changing circumstances.

While Burke stood on the ground of common sense and historical experience, the counter-revolutionary thinkers of the continent, such as Joseph de Maistre, elevated the critique to a theological plane. For de Maistre, the French Revolution was not a human error but a divine punishment, a consequence of the hubris and godlessness of the "En-

lightenment.” He rejected the Enlightenment’s naive faith in human goodness and the omnipotence of reason, emphasizing instead the doctrine of original sin and the fallibility of human nature. He believed that man’s destructive passions could only be kept in check by the throne and the altar, that is, by absolute political and religious authority. For him, history is not a human project but the inscrutable plan of Providence. True progress, for de Maistre, is conceptually impossible; the modern idea of progress is the most dangerous heresy. The only possible “development” is repentance and a return to God’s order.

This theological–political diagnosis was taken to its extreme in the 19th century by the Spaniard Juan Donoso Cortés. As Cortés writes: “Man, having ceased to gravitate towards his God with his understanding, his will, and his works, constituted himself his centre, and was the ultimate end of his actions, of his will, and of his understanding. The disturbance caused by this prevarication was deep and profound. When man had separated from his God, all his powers separated at once, one from the other, constituting themselves so many divergent centres” (Cortés 2022, p. 172). For Nicolás Gómez Dávila, one of the most important intellectual heirs of Cortés’s work, modern history is also the dialogue of two men: “Modern history is the dialogue between two men: one who believes in God, the other who believes he is a god” (Gómez Dávila 1977, p. 339). Cortés’s famous thesis states that the religious and political “thermometers” are inversely proportional: the greater the internal, religious-moral control in a society, the less external, political-state coercion is needed, and vice versa. Modern liberalism and socialism, by denying God, inevitably lead to a more total political oppression than ever before.

As deeply thinking conservatives increasingly noticed this fact (by the 20th century), the critique of progress took on new forms. Oswald Spengler, one of the most significant conservative philosophers and historians of the 20th century, radically broke with the linear view of history in *The Decline of the West*. According to him, there is no single “history of humanity,” only separate high cultures (e.g., the classical, the Arabian, the “Faustian” Western), each with its own unique soul, which, like the life cycle of a plant, are born, flourish, and then die. The creative, spiritual era of flowering is *Kultur*; the declining, intellectual, materialist, and imperialist phase is *Zivilisation*. The modern Western world, according to Spengler, is in the final stage of *Zivilisation*, characterized by the rule of money, world cities, technocracy, and spiritual barrenness. For Spengler, true development is the unfolding of the internal possibilities of a given culture. In our age, however, development is no longer possible; the task is the heroic and dutiful endurance of the fateful decline.

José Ortega y Gasset—who, according to the “official” classification, is considered more of an “aristocratic liberal” than unequivocally conservative¹²—uncovered the anthropological root of the modern crisis in *The Revolt of the Masses*: the appearance of the “mass man.” The mass man is the average person who takes the achievements of civilization (welfare, technology, rights) for granted, without knowing or respecting the fragile spiritual and moral foundations on which they are built. The mass man is satisfied with himself, acknowledges no authority higher than himself, and claims the right to mediocrity. One of the most dangerous figures of the modern age is the “scientist-barbarian,” the specialist who is an expert in his own narrow field but lives in complete ignorance of everything else. For Ortega, true development is the aristocratic (not in the sense of blood, but of spirit) structuring of society, where the excellent, the minority that demands much of itself, shows the way to the self-satisfied majority.

At the heart of the modernity critique of the most distinguished conservative thinkers, we almost always find the image of the pre-modern, symbolic cosmos, which materialism has banished. Although not every conservative thinker delved into symbolism and the underlying—not in the Heideggerian sense—metaphysical meaning of things, in the truly conservative worldview, the world is not a collection of mere objects but a web of signs

and symbols that point to a higher, personal, and at the same time universal reality, which religions mostly call God. To take just one example: the “height” of the sky, as Mircea Eliade describes it, is almost universally a symbol of transcendence, the order of nature a reflection of divine intelligence (Eliade 1938, p. 38). Most importantly, for pre-modern man, the world was not a dead mechanism but a living, hierarchically articulated whole, extending from the lowest mineral level through the plant, animal, and human forms of being up to the highest divine principle. The depictions of the world tree in Uralic-Altai shamanism, or the spheres of the planets in Dantean cosmology, all express this hierarchical nature of existence. Titus Burckhardt points out that the traditional view is “vertical”: it connects the lower to the higher, the transient to the imperishable (Burckhardt 1987, p. 25). Things were understood not by the analytical examination of their material composition, but by interpreting their form within a metaphysical system of relationships.

The common denominator of the most significant arguments of philosophically elevated conservative thought is that they all condemn the modern project because it severs man from a transcendent or deeply historical source—be it God, Providence, the spirit of a culture, or the wisdom of the ancestors. The essence of the conservative alternative is therefore the restoration of this connection through Tradition. Tradition here is not a rigid adherence to customs, but the demand for and possibility of a continuous connection to a transcendent principle. In G. K. Chesterton’s brilliant formulation: “tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead” (Chesterton 1909, p. 83). True development, from a conservative point of view, is not horizontal (material accumulation in time), but vertical: the unceasing striving of the individual and the community to better conform to a timeless, transcendent order. This means moral, spiritual, and intellectual deepening, not technological expansion.

6. Conclusions: Ontological Nihilism and the Possibility of Transcendence

This study has outlined the conservative critique of the central self-justifying myth of modernity, the idea of progress. The argument has shown that the progressive narrative is not a scientific fact but a secularized eschatology, which has replaced the transcendent framework of Christian salvation history with a worldly, material utopia. We have seen that the main driving force of this myth is technocratic rationalism, which subjugates reality to the dominion of calculative reason (*ratio*), and whose logical endpoint is the transhumanist utopia, the program for the technological overcoming of human nature. We have uncovered that, at the heart of this way of thinking lies the philosophy of materialism, the final, most degenerate form of Western metaphysics, which is the consummation of the state of the forgetting of Being (*Seinsvergessenheit*): the oblivion of the whole of Being in favor of the manipulative domination of mere beings. In contrast to this diagnosis, the conservative alternative has been sketched out in its commitment to Tradition, the symbolic cosmos, and a vertical, transcendent order.

The question, however, remains: Where does all this lead? What is the ultimate meaning or destiny of our civilization? The final conclusion of Dezső Csejtei’s repeatedly cited study, following Schopenhauer’s line of thought, is deeply pessimistic. According to Schopenhauer, human life is a pendulum that swings between pain (lack, need) and boredom (fulfillment, satiety). Man is a miserable creature: if he is poor, he is tormented by the pain of lack; if, on the other hand, through abundance and prosperity, all his needs are met, “a terrible emptiness and boredom befall him.” The entire program of the modern progressive project is, in fact, an attempt to eliminate one end of the Schopenhauerian pendulum, pain. Technology, the welfare state, the global economy all serve the purpose of eliminating want, hunger, and disease. But as this project succeeds—at least in the Western world—the will of humanity is left without an object, and it swings to the other end of

the pendulum: the state of total boredom and meaninglessness. According to Csejtei, the political and cultural insanities of our age—cancel culture, gender ideology¹³—stem from this satiety: since modern man, in his prosperity, “no longer has meaningful goals, . . . then come the foolish, stupid, and later the mind-boggling, stomach-turning goals” (Csejtei 2023, p. 81). In this reading, Western civilization is essentially writhing in an ontological trap from which there is no escape.

The two great diagnosticians of the 20th century, Nietzsche and Spengler, also assessed this crisis, but came to different conclusions. Nietzsche predicted that after the “death of God,” an age of nihilism would follow, and as a solution, he envisioned the coming of the *Übermensch*: a new type of man capable of overcoming the old morality and creating new values faithful to the earth. The *Übermensch* was to be the answer to the loss of transcendence. History, however, has not vindicated Nietzsche’s hopes. As this study has argued, in the state after the deicide, what was born was not the creatively powerful *Übermensch*, but its caricature, the comfort- and security-seeking “last man,” the conformist citizen of consumer society. And the “superman” of transhumanism is not the heroic self-overcoming of the *Übermensch*, but the cowardly fusion of man with machine, a technological escape from biological existence. Nietzsche’s project has therefore—at least so far—failed.

In contrast, Oswald Spengler’s cyclical view of history precludes the possibility of a way out from the outset. According to him, the Faustian Western civilization is in the final, winter stage of *Zivilisation*, characterized by the rule of money, technical artificiality, and spiritual barrenness. This is a fateful, biological process against which nothing can be done. For Spengler, the task is not to seek a new beginning, but to dutifully stand one’s ground in the end, just as the Roman soldier remained at his post during the destruction of Pompeii. This is a heroic but hopeless perspective, which suggests dignified acceptance instead of action.

Is there a third way between Schopenhauerian nihilism and Spenglerian fatalism? Perhaps, but this possibility does not appear in the form of another human project or utopia. Here, the conservative alternative connects with the late thought of Martin Heidegger. For Heidegger, in the darkness of the age of the forgetting of Being, the only hope is the *Lichtung* (the clearing). The *Lichtung* is a glade in the forest of Being, an open space where Being (*physis*) can show itself, where truth as un-concealment (*aletheia*) can happen (Heidegger 1992, p. 146). This clearing is not something that man can create with his will and technology—any such attempt would merely carry on the logic of the Enframing. The *Lichtung* is a gift, an event, for which man can only prepare, which he can only await. This waiting, however, is not passive inaction, but a kind of alert openness, the state of *Gelassenheit* (releasement).

Unlike the relentless progressive drive that seeks to force meaning onto the world through technological domination, *Gelassenheit* offers an internal reorientation: it is the active refusal of the calculative mindset in favor of a spiritual readiness to receive Being. In this sense, the ‘remembrance of Being’ serves as the only authentic counter-stance to the self-destructive logic of technocratic rationalism discussed throughout this paper.

This Heideggerian thought gives the conservative alternative its ultimate meaning today. The preservation or rediscovery of transcendence is not a program for restoring the past. Loyalty to Tradition, the cultivation of the memory of the symbolic cosmos, respect for *physis*, the protection of the organic fabric of communities—all these are not points of a political program, but the tending of that clearing where transcendence might perhaps speak again. The conservative attitude, in this sense, is the practice of the remembrance of Being in an age of total forgetting of Being. It does not promise salvation, but it keeps its possibility open.

The Heideggerian practice of the “remembrance of Being,” however, is not something radically new: it has deep roots in the ancient and Christian tradition of mystical theology. This modern philosophical attitude corresponds to the practice of *hesychasm*, of inner silence, in Eastern Orthodoxy. The hesychast monk, through prayer and contemplation, silences the noise of passions and discursive thoughts, but his goal is not to “force” a divine experience, but to create an inner “clearing” where God’s uncreated light can shine forth as grace: the purpose of this apophatic method is the letting go of concepts for the sake of experiencing that which is Beyond Concepts (Rorem 2023, p. 10).

The Hungarian Béla Hamvas describes this turn as the adoption of the correct “basic stance.” In contrast to the neurotic, outward-turning, active basic stance of modern man, the authentic basic stance is inward-turning, contemplative, and open to Tradition. “Vertical deepening” almost perfectly describes this path, the goal of which is the restoration of authentic existence (Hamvas 2011, p. 42).

Ernst Jünger’s diagnosis of modern man’s situation is almost identical to that of Heidegger and Hamvas. The individual is a prisoner of an autonomous system rushing toward catastrophe. Jünger compares this to a speeding luxury liner on which man becomes a mere, passive passenger. Jünger’s Forest-Fleer (*Waldgänger*) is the one who, by an inner decision, “leaves the ship.” This act is not a physical escape, but a renunciation of inner obedience, a retaking of sovereignty. The Forest-Fleer’s decision to “leave the ship” is not a political program or a revolutionary act. It is an inner, spiritual distancing, a renunciation of obedience. This is also not another utopia, but an inner turn. The “forest” into which the Forest-Fleer steps is the existential equivalent of Heidegger’s *Lichtung* (clearing): an inner, free space where the individual can preserve his connection to Being (*physis*) within the totality of the technical world.

The solutions of conservative thinkers of different styles and types are, in essence, the philosophical, spiritual, and existential-cultural formulations of the same essential turn. They all reject the horizontal, temporal rush of modernity and designate a vertical, inward path, the essence of which is not action, but attention, silence, and keeping open the possibility of transcendence.

In this framework, the concept of true progress also gains new meaning. It is not the horizontal, temporal rush of technological accumulation, but a vertical deepening: the enabling of the individual and the community to hear the voice of Being. This means the development of moral self-discipline, spiritual deepening, and esthetic sensitivity—all those faculties that technocratic rationalism and the incessant materialist propaganda streaming through all channels simultaneously cause to atrophy in man. The authentic conservative solution is therefore not the promise of another utopia, but rather an attempt to create a foundation amidst the ruins, a foundation that might perhaps make possible a new beginning, sobered from the technical intoxication. The final question remains open, but according to the conservative standpoint, the answer lies not in further horizontal expansion or the machine programming of human consciousness and the grotesque fantasies of “transhumanism,” but in that quiet, inward-turning attention with which we attend to the concealment of Being and the depths of the soul.

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Notes

- 1 To mention only the most important among them, these are, above all, Yuval Noah Harari, Richard Dawkins, Steven Pinker, and, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, Neil deGrasse Tyson and Sam Harris.
- 2 The term ‘hidden’ is employed here in a phenomenological sense, not a conspiratorial one. It refers to the structural concealment of normative metaphysical assumptions within descriptive scientific language. The agenda is ‘hidden’ because it presents itself as value-free objective necessity rather than as a specific ideological choice.
- 3 The so-called “Whig interpretation of history” is an approach to historiography that presents the past as an inevitable progression from a past of ignorance and oppression towards a “glorious present” (Blackburn n.d.). The term’s origin is connected to the “Whig” (liberal) party, of which, paradoxically, the “father of conservatism” Edmund Burke was an active member (though after the party’s radicalization and his departure from it, Burke distinguished between the “Old Whigs” and the “New Whigs” (see Burke 1990).
- 4 Also known as the “law of three stages,” associated with Auguste Comte. According to the theory, human thought, and in parallel, society as a whole, progresses through a necessary developmental path with three successive stages: the Theological (or fictitious, primitive) stage, the Metaphysical (or abstract) stage, and finally the Positive (or scientific) stage. The latter, according to Comte, is the pinnacle of development, where man, instead of focusing on the ultimate causes of phenomena, concentrates on the “how.”
- 5 For Voltaire, one of the most definitive figures of the “Enlightenment,” the Middle Ages and preceding periods were eras of religious fanaticism, superstition, and tyranny. The contemporary Steven Pinker formulates a similar sentiment in his book *Enlightenment Now*: “Life before the Enlightenment was darkened by famine, plagues, superstition, childbed and infant mortality, marauding knights, sadistic torture-executions, slavery, witch hunts, and genocidal crusades, conquests, and religious wars” (Pinker 2018, chap. 21).
- 6 In the Middle Ages, the Greek noun νοῦς [nous] was translated with the term “intellect,” which does not simply mean understanding, but is a term derived from Greek philosophy (especially in the Platonic and Plotinian Neoplatonic sense), primarily meaning the apprehension of truth or reality. The term is only understandable, however, when placed in the context of Platonic philosophy. Just as for Plato true reality was the Ideas, not matter in which the Ideas are merely reflected, so too the Platonic nous had to refer above all to the apprehension of the Ideas: that is, to that which is beyond mere material reality and is truly real/true (see, e.g., Plato, *Timaeus*, 27d–28a).
- 7 Late scholastic nominalism is a key intellectual antecedent of modernity because it dismantled the medieval realist worldview on which earlier philosophy was built. Nominalism (especially through William of Ockham), by atomizing reality into a collection of individual facts, abolished the old, metaphysical foundation of knowledge.
- 8 Modern philosophy attempted to fill the resulting void in two ways: through empiricism focusing on experience (Bacon) and rationalism finding certainty in the thinking self (Descartes). Both paved the way for the dominance of purely calculative reason (ratio) over intuitive intellect (intelligentia).
- 9 “Physis is arguably one of the most complex concepts. Its main meanings important for us are the following: (1) It means not only the totality, the completeness of beings—which is expressed by our word ‘nature’—but also that which lies behind them and serves as their foundation: being” (Csejtei 2023, p. 72).
- 10 Similar critiques regarding the secularized eschatological nature of the progressive narrative have been formulated in Central European thought, most notably by Zdzisław Krasnodębski in *The Fall of the Idea of Progress* (*Upadek idei postępu*). Krasnodębski argues that once the metaphysical horizon is removed, the idea of progress inevitably degenerates into a technocratic substitute for salvation.
- 11 It is important to note that for Heidegger, “metaphysics” is the name for the whole of Western philosophy beginning with Plato and ending with Nietzsche, characterized by the forgetting of Being (Sein) and the investigation of mere beings (Seiendes). In contrast to this, however, metaphysics can be understood differently, for example, as the traditional school (René Guénon) interprets metaphysics as the highest, supra-rational knowledge, directed at timeless, universal principles. From this point of view, therefore, what Heidegger criticizes as “metaphysics” (the history of Western philosophy) can be regarded merely as “philosophy,” that is, a profane, purely human-rational form of thought. We profoundly agree with Heidegger (and Csejtei) in the diagnosis of the history of decline of Western philosophy; however, we wish to reserve the word “metaphysics” for its original, positive meaning: the sacred science directed at the ultimate Reality.
- 12 The classification of José Ortega y Gasset is a classic problem in the history of philosophy. Perhaps the most accurate way to put it is that, on the one hand, Ortega is an aristocratic liberal, and on the other, a conservative critic of liberalism: a thinker who wanted to save liberal civilization from the liberal mass society (Gray 1989, p. 65).
- 13 The term ‘insanity’ is used here in the context of existentialist cultural critique to denote the structural incoherence and loss of reality that occurs when a civilization severs its connection to transcendent order. This phrasing is a direct translation of the

author's original terminology (gyomorforogató). Csejtei employs this term not as a colloquialism, but as a philosophical descriptor expressing a deep ontological aversion to the violation of human nature, akin to the existentialist concept of Nausea.

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