

# Progress, epistemology and human health and welfare: what nurses need to know and why

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## Abstract

Human Progress is often understood to be a rather natural and obvious truth of human existence. That this is not necessarily so, is indicative of the pervasive social, psychological, and educational inculcation that sustains its ubiquitous acceptance. Moreover, the uncritical and ill-informed understanding of Progress as an unquestioned expression of human beneficence has serious consequences for those concerned with the health and welfare of people. It is argued in this paper that, much of what we might consider deleterious in the socio-political milieu that now confronts us is, to a significant extent, a matter of progressive ideological epistemology and its ensuing manner of human institutionalization. Part one contends that the current socio-political structure of the current postmodern affairs is in reality that of a pervasive postmodern economic ideology. Part two provides a brief overview of the historical and philosophical development of Progress as an idea, including some of the profound effects wrought by it on human affairs in the contemporary world. Finally, Part three presents a discussion of the influential effects of the philosophy of Progress on the epistemology of human health and welfare intervention, specifically that of nursing and its claim to a holistic ethic of Caring.

*Keywords:* epistemology, holism, modern progress, ethics, nursing philosophy.

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## Introduction

To simply utter the phrase *Human Progress*, whether in casual conversation, or in intellectual discourse, is to refer to something for which the overwhelming

majority, of North Americans at any rate, can claim a certain understanding. Indeed, I could not count the number of times I have encountered comments such as: 'that's just the way the world is', or 'it's human nature', or 'change is good' from my baccalaureate students, in general discourse, or even from other university professors on occasion. To be sure, most believe it simply to be the natural state of human affairs.

Such conclusions are disconcerting in that they are rarely the result of an underlying system of understanding, or even beliefs and values for that matter. On the contrary, they are, more often than not, the product of a tremendously successful inculcation by our social and educational institutions.

In fact, *Progress* is not merely a word used to describe the natural state of the human enterprise, but rather an idea for a means of conducting human intercourse. Moreover, a critical approach to the idea of Progress quickly uncovers the fact that it is: first, a rather recent theoretical construct and a thoroughly Western one. Second, it is by no means the only possibility for the organization of human congress, nor is it necessarily superior to all others. Finally, it is above all an *interventionalist* paradigm, which is simply to say that, its chief aspiration is to instantiate and perpetuate growth and as a necessary corollary – change.

The articulation that follows then, is intended primarily to address a grave concern with the pervasive, and largely uncritical, acceptance of the idea of Progress and the rather covert, yet hardly subtle, implications for the nature, philosophy, and consequently the practice of nursing. However, in order to properly examine such an issue, it is imperative that not only the nature, philosophy and consequently the practice of Progress be explicated, but as well, its historical development and some of the profound effects wrought by it on human affairs in the contemporary world. To this end, I have divided the paper into three parts.

In Part one I contend that the current socio-political structure of postmodern affairs is in reality that of a pervasive, yet insidious, economic ideology. In Part two, I shall attempt to provide a brief overview of the historical and philosophical development of Progress as an idea. In so doing, I shall argue that though the

economic ideologies of the modern and postmodern eras do differ, both in fact, contain philosophies of Progress that are open to serious question.

In these first two sections of the paper, I shall make little or no reference to health care in general, or nursing specifically. Instead these sections will function essentially to support the thesis that, much of what we might consider deleterious in the socio-political milieu that now confronts us is, to a significant extent, a matter of progressive ideological epistemology and its ensuing manner of human institutionalization. Part three then, will present a discussion of the influential effects of Progress on the epistemology of human health and welfare intervention, specifically that of nursing and its claim to a holistic ethic of Caring.

### Part one: economics as ideology

Over the last half of the 20th century, a myriad of writers, thinkers, and critics have warned of a very disquieting ideology which undergirds the so-called *Information Age*. In fact, the various labels given to the present period of history, *The Communication Age*, *The Technological Revolution*, *The Age of Media*, are themselves rather telling. I suggest that a better characterization of this most recent phenomenon of history be that of *postmodern economic ideology*.

Although the term postmodern does refer to a diffuse body of conceptual and philosophical thought that in some manner developed along with that of postmodern culture, it is mainly the latter usage that I hereafter employ. To clarify the matter, the actual term postmodern was coined in 1947 by Arnold Toynbee in his work *A Study of History* to denote: 'the concept of a "post-Modern" age, beginning in 1875, [and] delineate a fourth stage of Western history after the Dark Ages (675–1075), the Middle Ages (1075–1475), and the Modern (1475–1875)' (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 6). Although it would be impossible to completely separate *postmodern thought* from *postmodern culture*, it certainly is possible to speak of a *postmodern age* as an epoch of history apart from the conceptual and philosophical ideas with which it is often associated. In fact, there are those who hold

that there does not exist a postmodern age per se. Chief among them perhaps, the British sociologist Anthony Giddens and the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk who, as De Cock (1996) puts it, 'both rejected the conceptualization of postmodernity as an epoch and characterized our period as a time of high modernity' (p. 1). However, both Giddens and Sloterdijk agreed that the present age does differ significantly from that of modernity before it. The question is then: does it differ by virtue of a rejection of modern assumptions, as the majority of postmodern thought would have it, or as a result of some radical final fruition of modernity's foundational principles? The thesis of this paper is rather more sympathetic to the latter than the former.

### The postmodern economic ideology

Perhaps the first point in the explication of a postmodern economic ideology is to sell the idea that it is an ideology. This disturbing pun is wholly intended. In the economic conditions of the Western, postmodern world, everything is for sale. That is, from goods and services, to the very expression of the human psychological apparatus, such as ideas, theories, concepts, aspirations and the like, even, I dare say – the hopes and dreams, aspirations, and desires of people.

Preston (1996) provides a rather apt characterization of 'the culture of postmodernity' and the heavy dependence of its sociology on economics:

The culture of postmodernism centres upon the pre-eminent position in contemporary life of the commercial consumer marketplace . . . Indeed in the context of the marketplace centred non-aesthetic and non-ethic postmodernism, the production and consumption of novelties becomes prized simply because they are novelties. (p. 278)

He then goes on to identify and briefly outline six 'key characteristics of postmodern culture': deathlessness, ahistoricism, subjectivism, technologies, pastiche, and episodocity (p. 278).

Saul (1995), in a similar stance, contends that contemporary: ' . . . economic mythology . . . is dependent on such things as the glorification of the service economy, a legitimization of financial speculation and the canonization of the new communications technology'

(p. 7). Even the recent work of some economists not only serves to substantiate Preston's claims of a *post-modern economic ideology* as it were, but moreover, suggests that it is one with potential untoward results. 'By subtle fusion, human beings have become "consumers" and human desire has been defined in terms of goods; it follows that the only way to make people happier is to provide more goods. In other words, the objective is growth.' (Hamilton, 2004, p. 4).

Furthermore, what ought to be quite commonsensical, often requires emphasized articulation by academics and scholars: 'all economists, should exercise the necessary self-criticism . . . the willingness to adjust to a principle which is almost always forgotten: *the purpose of the economy is to serve the people, and not the people to serve the economy*' (Max-Neef *et al.*, 1991, p. 21).

Postman (1999) further sheds light on a most telling aspect of the postmodern economic ideology, in which, one also uncovers a path to the root of such an imbroglio:

The idea that if something could be done, it should be done was born in the nineteenth century. And along with it there developed a profound belief in all the principles through which invention succeeds: objectivity, efficiency, expertise, standardization, measurement, a market economy, and of course, faith in progress itself. (p. 39)

We have come then, to the precursor of the *post-modern economic ideology*, the *modern economic ideology*. And we may characterize it with a single word – *Progress*.

If, as some assert, the postmodern is more correctly characterized as the post-industrial, then the modern is really the industrial. Although both The Industrial Revolution and The Technological Revolution are products of the invention and subsequent employment of technological means, there is an important distinction to be made between them. For, despite the fact that Progress did not originate with the 'technological imperative', as Hopper (1991) asserts, 'it is technology that has come to provide the meaning of the term "Progress"' (p. 33). However, before there was Progress as technological ideology, and hence Progress as economic ideology, there was in fact, Progress as Ideology (or, a philosophy of Progress).

It is with the birth of the modern era that we shall find this.

## Part two: economic ideology as philosophical history

Essentially the modern era begins with Descartes in the mid-17th century with his postulation of the 'invariability of the laws of nature' and a view of the human being as a subjective agent (an individual) capable of grasping its environment objectively. Although there certainly were a number of inchoate thinkers and philosophies throughout the Renaissance (and indeed perhaps all the way back to the Classical Era) that laid the foundation and paved the way for the Cartesian system, as Bury (1987) asserts, '...in the realm of knowledge and thought, modern history begins in the seventeenth century... [and]...it was in the atmosphere of the Cartesian spirit that a theory of Progress was to take shape' (pp. 64–65).

Indeed, Progress was the very principle from which all of modernity would subsequently unfold. Along with Francis Bacon, and his proclamation of a new era of natural science and its cogent utility for human beneficence, Descartes' dualism (subjective–objective dichotomy) would give form and function to modern humanity:

In Bacon knowledge becomes the servant of human needs, and in Descartes the belief in Providence was set aside in favour of the universality and uniformity of the laws of nature, a development vital to the continued growth of a sure body of knowledge. (Hopper, 1991, p. 37)

Such *epistemology* was first, one of thought and ideation (rationalism and materialism), then as sociology and human activity (the secular and scientific revolutions), and finally, as economic ideology (capitalism and the market economy). It was this historical development that produced what I refer to as the *modern economic ideology* (Tarnas, 1991).

### Progress and the modern economic ideology

So what is Progress? Although there is some debate among scholars as to its actual meaning, and as well

its historical roots, there is a general agreement that it is unique to Western Culture, and moreover, that it's profound reception as a fundamental tenet of modern thought, stalwartly demarcates it from any understanding of it that might have existed prior to the modern era (Nisbet, 1980; Hopper, 1991; Lasch, 1991). As a recent Editorial (2004) in the *Journal of Nursing Management* puts it: '...a five word summary of the modern might be a belief in continuous progress...' (p. 2).

Bury (1987) defined it as: '...an interpretation of history which regards men as slowly advancing... in a definite and desirable direction, and infers that this progress will continue indefinitely' (p. 5). To which, Nisbet (1980) adds that, '...[progress] holds that mankind has advanced in the past – from some aboriginal condition of primitiveness, barbarism, or even nullity – is now advancing, and will continue to advance through the foreseeable future' (pp. 4–5). Tarnas (1991) expresses the early modern philosophy of Progress following the 'Copernican Revolution' and the emergence of science from the achievements of Galileo and Newton.

It was now evident that the quest for human fulfillment would be propelled by increasingly sophisticated analysis and manipulation of the natural world, and by systematic efforts to extend man's intellectual and existential independence in every realm – physical, social, political, religious, scientific, metaphysical. (p. 281)

Moreover, Tarnas clearly demonstrates the manner in which the philosophy became an economic ideology. 'Its [Progress] significance as a philosophy, and the cause of its great impact on the Western mind, lay especially in its scientific and then technological corroboration.' (p. 281).

By definition the ideology of Progress rests upon *at least* three fundamental axioms. First, it assumes an indefinite future, and generally tends to emphasize the future over the past as the focus of human activity and importance. Second, that human agency, or the will and freedom to act in accordance with individual decisions and choices which follow from knowledge and understanding, is the pre-eminent characteristic of the human constitution. Third, and perhaps of the greatest import, the ideology of Progress holds that,

improvement of the human condition is the general result of historical momentum, mediated of course, by human agency and an indefinite future (Nisbet, 1980; Bury, 1987; Hopper, 1991; Lasch, 1991; Tarnas, 1991; Postman, 1999).

Although these less than half of a century-old modern precepts have, in the postmodern era, become rather passively accepted as truths, none of the three are by any means philosophically indisputable. Moreover, many peoples and cultures throughout the world, even today, would not tend to structure their existence around such principles.

It is essential that we clearly recognize, with respect to Progress as an ideology, that all of the three aforementioned axioms taken together are to be construed as a fundamentally rationalist enterprise. This is to say that, as Toulmin (1990) explains, the modern disposition supposed that a rational social order (polis) is founded on the illumination of a rational natural order (cosmos), giving rise to a Cosmopolis, a world of rational harmony. Regarding knowledge, or modern epistemology, Connell (1995) explains:

Regardless of the specific orientation, modernist theories of knowledge generally share three defining characteristics taken from the legacy of Descartes: (a) a quest for certainty; (b) a clear delineation between subject and object; and (c) a view of progress that is always forward moving toward a unified system of knowledge ... the focus is on certainty, objectivity, and universal, unified systems of knowledge. (p. 2)

Throughout the modern era of the Western World the technological, scientific, and hence economic progress was astounding. Though derived from various paradigms and developing different permutations, it came eventually to be almost universally accepted as a capitalist democracy by the beginning of the postmodern era.

It expanded as a powerfully rational method of achievement, one which was thought to be fulfilling an unalterable, historically determined, progression of human improvement. In the United States, which would later become the birthplace of the postmodern economic ideology, it was referred to as *Manifest Destiny*, wherein the elemental aspects of Progress were explicitly decreed, and to be sure, expressly practised.

The modern economic ideology of Progress also produced a value system of power, control, wealth, expansion, possession, domination, subordination, and all too often the outright eradication, of less progressive peoples, religions, creeds, and cultures. In the words of John O'Sullivan (1839), who coined the term *manifest destiny*:

For this blessed mission ... has American been chosen; and her high example shall smite unto death the tyranny of kings, hierarchs, and oligarchs, and carry the glad tidings of peace and good will where myriads now endure an existence scarcely more enviable than the beasts of the fields. Who, then, can doubt that our country is destined to be *the great nation of futurity?* (p. 430)

### **Progress and Human Progress: dissenting voices**

Despite the adherence to the theory of Progress throughout the advance of the modern economic ideology and eventually into the postmodern, it certainly was, and of course still is, not without its critics. Perhaps the most ardent early antagonist to Progress was that of Jean Jacques Rousseau. In the mid-18th century, scarcely more than a century after Descartes, Rousseau boldly claimed that nearly all of the ills of the modern world which Progress was intended to eviscerate, were in fact the very product of Progress: '... all progress of the human race continues to move it farther away from its original state ... we now find only the grotesque contrasts of passion mistaken for reason, and intelligence in the grip of delirium' (Rousseau, 1974, p. 137). Though Progress continued, virtually unabated, despite the objections of Rousseau (and certainly others), the 19th century saw the expression of a similar opposition in the work of Nietzsche.

Nietzsche's philosophy is certainly not identical to Rousseau's but both viewed Progress, as an 'unnatural' phenomenon incommensurate with the true 'nature of man'. 'Mankind surely does not represent an evolution toward a better or stronger or higher level, as progress is now understood. This "progress" is merely a modern idea, which is to say, a false idea' (Nietzsche, 1990, p. 126). A number of disagreements would further be advanced over the ensuing decades even as Progress continued to be, in the words of

Turner (1970), '...the story of men ... marching under that banner toward the setting sun ...' (p. 8).

Though few critiques were as extreme as either those of Rousseau or Nietzsche, the major theme of disagreement with the idea of Progress was the charge that it is, in some essential way, a false, or at any rate suspicious, set of values and assumptions that cohere into an oppressive dogma of materialism and reductionist thought. Thus, Progress as an idea ignores certain indispensable sociological, cultural, and spiritual needs that simply cannot be expressed in terms of a strictly rational epistemology, or seen as inherently progressive. Heidegger (1977) asserted, regarding modern technology and its seminal configuration in the theory of Progress, that it, '... banishes man into that kind of revealing that is an ordering. Where ordering holds sway, it drives out every other possibility of revealing' (p. 309).

Even those of rationalist persuasion and with clear sympathy for some form of philosophical Progress have felt compelled to comment against certain manifestations of it. For example, Bertrand Russell (1976) declared that 'change is inevitable, progress is not'. While George Grant (1965) remarked that: '... men assume in the age of progress that the broad movement of history is upwards ... But this assumption is not self-evident. The fact that events happen does not imply that they are good ... We only forget [this] ... when we worship the future' (p. 38). Berry's (1990) criticism of modern progress, emanating from the environmentalist, or what O'Sullivan (2001) terms 'the ecozoic', perspective, is an obstreperous indictment of rational hypocrisy and dogmatic ignorance:

The experience of a sacred communion with the Earth disappeared ... Such [romantic] intimacy was considered a poetic conceit by a people who prided themselves on their realism, their aversion to all forms of myth, magic, mysticism, and superstition. Little did these people know that their very realism was as pure superstition as was ever professed by humans, their devotion to science a new mysticism, their technology a magical way to paradise. (p. 112)

This sentiment is also prevalent in the work of numerous others, for example, Turner (1980), Bohm (1981), McKibben (1989), Lasch (1991), Peat (1994), Dissanayake (1995), Greene (1995), Chomsky (1997),

Quinn (1999), and O'Sullivan (2001), to name just a few.

### The epistemology of postmodern progressive economics

Although the modern economic ideology and its situation within the greater theory of Progress has now become a postmodern economic ideology, one should not be fooled into thinking that it is any less a philosophy of Progress. I categorically reject Mumford's (1934) early 20th century declaration that progress is '... the deadest of dead ideas ... the one notion that has been thoroughly blasted by the twentieth-century experience' (p. 41). Or, Postman's (1999) assertion, despite criticizing Mumford for such a premature adumbration, that: 'no one believes, or perhaps ever will again, that history itself is moving inexorably toward a golden age' (p. 41). Progress may have been, and still might be, philosophically 'dead', but it is alive and well, thriving and *progressing* as a foundational precept in the postmodern economic ideology. How else should we take the international development, Third World restructuring and globalization decree, if not as a 'golden age' dream of sorts?

Indeed, it is more likely the case that, as Herdman (2001) states: 'while belief in progress has diminished in some areas ... it is still a popular notion for the general public and "intellectuals of a secular cast of mind" such as scientists, engineers, professionals with technical skills and those who operate within a positivistic world view. It is also gaining strength in the form of developmentalism ...' (p. 5). Moreover, it might well be that *Manifest Destiny* as an industrial and colonial call to progress is no longer a viable legitimization for the ends justifying the means, however, there is little doubt that there is a *Technological, Information, Communication Age Manifest Destiny*. As Saul (1995) remarks, 'real power today lies in neo-corporatism, which is in fact old fashioned corporatism' (p. 18).

Moreover, I suggest that the postmodern economic ideological expression of Progress is equally as insidious as that of modern colonialism for at least two important reasons. First, there might well be potentially addictive aspects of contemporary communica-

tions media. Second, there is frequently a clandestine, and largely unconscious, usurpation of human epistemology by the postmodern technological imperative.

### **The new 'opiate of the masses': an epistemology of addiction?**

It is surely a platitude to posit that contemporary media communication has resulted in a manner, degree, and rapidity of discourse unparalleled in human existence. Moreover, such discourse has not only changed the way human business is done, in virtually every facet of human concern, but it has also altered the very nature of human thought, language, and experience, and ultimately values and ethics.

It has, in effect, redefined, or is redefining, human epistemology, perhaps even irrevocably. Such a germane fact was noted by McLuhan (1964) even at the outset of the *Media Revolution*. 'The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without resistance' (pp. 28–33). Likewise, Heidegger (1977) declared, even before McLuhan that: 'if we pay heed to this, something astounding strikes us: it is technology itself that makes the demand on us to think in another way . . .' (p. 311). It is in the form of television, and related image-based media, that the present economic ideology and hence the very nature of postmodern socio-political relations has its most insidious effect on human epistemology.

The arguments for the influence of technology on epistemology generally fall into one of two categories. The first concerns the shift from a typographical, or written word epistemology, which formed the milieu out of which the psychology of the modern era developed, to the image and visual panorama of the postmodern. 'To put it plainly, television is the command centre of the new epistemology' (Postman, 1985, p. 78). Adherents to this position contend that the assumptions of Progress are not altogether invalid; however, the application of them over the course of the 20th century has become rather questionable.

The second issue of epistemological consideration points to the maladjustment, and perhaps outright

destruction, of a more holistic form of thought, one that certainly predates modernity by millennia.

Where evolution once described an interaction between humans and nature, evolution now takes place between humans and human artifacts. We coevolve with our machines, with ourselves. It's a kind of in-breeding that confirms that nature is irrelevant to us. (Mander, 1991, p. 65)

Thus it is, that human thinking, knowing, and as a direct result, acting, is being radically altered by the technology revolution. Furthermore, there is an even graver opprobrium at work here.

According to the work of Goldsen (1977), Mander (1978), Winn (1985), Shalit (1999), Klein (2000), Pawlowski (2000), Manning (2001), Quart (2003), and others, image-based media, and its resultant influences on human behaviour, may evince *addictive* properties. Though some might consider *addiction* somewhat of an embellishment of the situation, in her book *When Society Becomes an Addict*, Schaef (1987) suggests that it is not. Others have also used the term, or the metaphor of addiction, to call attention to the serious matter of postmodern social discord.

For example, Rowledge & Keeth (1991, as cited in O'Sullivan 2001) have referred to our unwavering postmodern preoccupation with growth and development as just that, 'economic growth as an addiction' (p. 108). While Hamilton (2004) labels the phenomenon a 'fetish', Lasch (1989) concludes that it is 'the last superstition'. Ritzer (1993), noting the growing trend of broadening social commitment to, and unquestioned emphasis of, concepts such as efficiency, predictability, calculability quantification, and control, identifies it as 'The McDonaldization' effect. Finally, it was perhaps put most bluntly by the Chilean economist Manfred Max-Neef (1991) who called our unwavering support for modern progress: 'a stupid way of life' (p. 105). He then goes on to claim, in a most unhumorous manner, to have founded: 'the discipline of stupidology' (p. 106), or by implication, the advancement of Progress as an unquestioned idea.

In a rather Rousseauian manner, some have suggested that the very nature and cause of virtually all addiction in contemporary social circumstances is a product of the foundational tenets of modernity and

postmodernity. Indeed, Alexander (2001) suggests that the free market economic system (capitalism) produces what he calls 'dislocation' of the individual, leading to the behaviour and lifestyle of various permutations of addiction. In the same manner, Reith (2004) posits that consumerism produces a paradox which might be the greatest impetus for an addictive psychology. On the one hand, there is the illusion of freedom even while it inculcates passivity. On the other hand, consumerism tends to hyper-stimulate thus preparing one for a life of perpetual momentum, often in the form of perpetual consumption.

For human beings, it is the worst possible combination of influences. It puts our brains into a passive alpha state, zapping our thinking processes and destroying our creative impulses. Simultaneously, it speeds up our nervous system, making us too fast to feel calm, too fast to read, almost too fast to relate meaningfully to other human beings, and too fast for nature . . . (Mander, 1991, p. 86)

Although the ramifications of such possibilities associated with a postmodern economic ideology are numerous, I will discuss only one other important consequence of the modern to postmodern ideological shift.

Karl Marx once declared religion to be 'the opiate of the masses'. If in suggesting such a thing, he meant that people were simply mesmerized, transfixed, and/or ecstatic about the romantic nature of their *being*, then I have no particular quarrel with him. However, if he intended to claim that in likening religion to opium, there was something principally untoward about it, I would seriously disagree. Logan Pearsall Smith (as cited by Tarnas, 1991) remarked not long after Marx that, 'those who set out to serve both God and Mammon soon discover that there is no God' (p. 488). Although it is certainly somewhat of an oversimplification, the demise of religion as a potent aspect of human understanding and meaning is often associated with Nietzsche's (1954) assertion in the late 19th century that 'God is dead' (p. 95). However, it is almost certain that Nietzsche meant this provocation to be a philosophical and metaphoric pronouncement, rather than a categorical rejection of human spirituality.

The real denouement of religion, and by extension 'the death of God', was instantiated by an economic ideology. 'The capitalist societies' increasing preoccupation with material progress could not but depreciate the urgency of the Christian salvational message and the spiritual enterprise generally' (Tarnas, 1991, p. 315). It appears that in the premodern epoch, the two most fundamental forces that guided and gave meaning to the human condition were religion and economics, largely in this order. Following the resounding success of the idea of Progress throughout the modern age, this order was reversed and economics came first and religion was relegated to a more ancillary position.

In the postmodern perspective however, economics and religion, are largely one and the same thing. God did not die; so much as undergo a conversion from religious and spiritual ideology to an economic one. Hence, Postman's (1999) use of the phrase: 'faith in progress', or Saul's (1995) outright admission that: 'God has been replaced today by another ideology called the marketplace' (p. 81). Or, even the recent assertion by the economist Clive Hamilton (2004) that:

The more we examine the role of growth in modern society, the more our obsession with growth appears to be a fetish – that is, an inanimate object worshipped for its apparent magical powers. Economic growth purports to be a very ordinary idea, no more than an increase in the volume of goods and services produced each year. But closer analysis reveals that it 'abounds in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties'. (Hamilton, 2004, p. 1)

Because Marx intended his religion as opiate characterization to be essentially metaphorical, is it unreasonable to suggest that, in fusing the nature of religion with the nature of economics in a postmodern ideology, we have effectively traded a metaphorical addiction for a potentially real one? And is that to be seen as progress? Do the means justify the ends if even in the course of improving the health of people; one increases (however, inadvertently) the risk of spiritual and cultural pathology? Such questions demand careful consideration. Moreover, they must be directed toward the idea of Progress and how it subtly reconfigures human epistemology and precip-

itates certain methods and actions of intervention commensurate with its predisposing psychological constructs.

Why is it that an alteration in human epistemology must invariably be seen as a negative outcome of economic and social progress? Is there not something to be said concerning the possibility of certain positive aspects of Progress, particularly when juxtaposed with the obviously deleterious conditions of poverty, ill health, social strife, and suboptimal living conditions we are currently beset with? These questions place us face to face with the most surreptitious aspect of contemporary economic Progress – the almost immutable belief in the *principally neutral* foundation of technology.

#### **The myth of technological neutrality: the epistemology that isn't?**

It would be facile to deny the astounding power of technology to bring about socio-political, and (once again, perhaps primarily) economic change. Certainly the last half of the 20th century has wrought immensely important changes for the human condition. And though there are indeed still problems which require to address, do we not now have the means and the will to do so? Under the surface of this hopeful veneer we too often find that the *means and the will* usually refer to the ill-conceived notion that it is possible to solve the problems of technology with the invention, introduction, and intervention of more technology (Winner, 1988; Postman, 1999). Cassell (1991) offers an impressive critique of medicine's lack of concern with human *suffering* (as opposed to pain) but is compelled to preface his argument with the following: 'I must make it clear at this point, as I noted above and will restate throughout, that nothing I say should be seen as anti-science or against technology. They are not, in themselves, the basic problem and there is no going back, thank heavens' (p. ix).

Perhaps Mander (1991) states the argument most forcefully:

'The problem is not with technology itself, but with how we use it, and who controls it.' This idea would be merely preposterous if it were not so widely accepted, and so danger-

ous. In believing this, however, we allow technology to develop without analysing its actual bias. (p. 35)

The logical oddity of addressing a problem – with a problem, is noted by virtually every individual who has rigorously critiqued the technological revolution, beginning perhaps with Jacques Ellul's (1964) *The Technological Society*. However, to contend that technology is decidedly *non-neutral* in its social, political, and perhaps ultimately economic effects is not to say that it is always inherently negative.

Yet charges of positive or negative regarding technological interventions are invariably based on fundamental underlying value assumptions held by individuals, groups, cultures, and/or social orders. In the contemporary era, as I have previously claimed, value assumptions are to a large extent influenced first, by economic consideration and second, by progressive ideology. Given that *addiction* is only one example of what Herdman (2001) refers to as: 'contemporary concerns over iatrogenesis' (p. 7), perhaps it is time that we ask ourselves in serious reflection, if we would wish such value assumptions as those of Progress, in the name of health and welfare, on people of different cultures or religions in the same way that we have wished them upon ourselves. And just why, one might wonder, do we appear to keep wishing it on ourselves – unless of course – we are somehow addicted to it?

A purely techno-rational basis of practice determines, or at any rate emphasizes certain means and ends over others as an inescapable result of its own assumptions, conditions of operation, and epistemological influence. Perhaps nowhere is the gravity of this salient fact more critical than for those who purport to intervene in the lives of people, families, communities, or indeed cultures and social orders in the name of health.

#### **Part three: Progress and human health and welfare intervention**

The implications of Progress and technological imperatives for intervention pertain to physicians, physiotherapists, educators, occupational therapists, and virtually any other discipline concerned, by defi-

dition, or professional aspiration, with the health and welfare of people. Nevertheless, I address this admonition to nurses in particular for two central reasons.

First, irrespective of the contextual nature in which nursing is carried out, the philosophy of nursing is usually conveyed as representing a commitment to some brand of holistic understanding and practice (Engebretson, 2002; Cody, 2003a; Cook & Cullen, 2004). Second, the theoretical nature of nursing, in the most general sense, amounts to a conscious dedication to the health practitioner–patient relationship (Benner & Wrubel, 1989; Bradshaw, 1995; McCance *et al.*, 1999; Rolfe, 1999; Cody, 2003b). Put differently, what is *best* for one's patient cannot be ascertained, in virtually any case, without a rather intimate parlance between practitioner and patient. As Bradshaw (1995) states: 'this, then, was the idea of a relationship as a covenant rather than a relationship as a contract' (p. 90).

Taken together, such premises represent the foundation of an ethics of nursing and it is chiefly to the ethics of nursing that the nature of postmodern Progress poses a potential threat. More specifically, it is the holistic ethical position of nursing over which such a threat looms.

### Progress and the caring imperative

I do not mean to imply here that an ethics of nursing is a simple matter to expound, for surely it is not. As Volker (2003) recently acknowledged, 'there is no agreement in the nursing literature as to the meaning of the term, *nursing ethics*' (p. 208). Nor is it my intent here to undertake such an explication. Suffice it say that, ethics is indispensable to holistic nursing practice. In addition, coupled with these principally self-defining ideas is the pervasive, theoretical at any rate, association of nursing with *Human Caring* (Watson, 1979; Benner & Wrubel, 1989; Leininger, 1991; Parse, 1992).

Despite the diversity of discourse throughout the history of nursing (the recent history at any rate) regarding the nature, definition, and practice of caring, it is generally considered a central and indeed motivating concept (Cody, 2003a; Volker, 2003; Cook

& Cullen, 2004). As a consequence, it is often suggested that caring in nursing differs markedly from that of most other professions dedicated to the service of human health and welfare, for example the biomedical sciences. Moreover, such divergence might well be considered the result of its holistic perspective. 'Holistic health care emphasizes human integrity and maintains that the body, mind and spirit are inseparable, interdependent, and should all be considered in the course of patient care ...' (Mariano, 2001, p. 24A).

As Owen & Holmes (1993) make abundantly clear, there are indeed many ways to define holism, and to be sure a number of different philosophical permutations of it. However, in many respects it is the opposite of the Cartesian dualism that instantiated both the modern era, and the theory of Progress. It is, generally speaking, a perspective of nondualism (meaning the subjective–objective dichotomy), nonreductionist, even to some extent nonrationalist (though by no means, of course, irrational), and certainly nonpositivistic. Moreover, once again unlike the idea of Progress earlier addressed, it does not necessarily stress the future as the quintessential goal of human labour, nor is it dependant upon unfettered, linear growth and incessant change.

Heidegger's (1977) critique of modern presuppositions, a philosophical corpus upon which much of current nursing theory is based, was an attempt to circumvent techno-rationalism, positivism, and scientific reductionism. He employed the term, *Seinsvergessenheit*, or 'forgetfulness of being', to denote the ascendancy of paradigmatic and abstract thought which, in his view, has tended to obfuscate and as a result ignore, certain fundamental human requisites. Indeed, the difference between the presuppositions of Progress and holistic thinking is just that – thinking – which is to suggest, quite dissimilar epistemologies. According to Hopper (1991): '... "the fundamental assumptions" of Progress and Providence are "incongruous"' (p. 40). An excellent illustration of such discordant epistemological perspectives is the uneasy relationship of biomedicine and traditional Canadian Aboriginal approaches to health and disease. As Waldram *et al.* (1997) note, they simply have

a rather difficult time finding any common ground of understanding:

In a sense, then, the issue is one of science versus faith . . . The philosophical underpinnings of science render it unlikely to accept traditional [Aboriginal] medical traditions which are not verifiable through the scientific method. Science is rigid, and hence it will either demand that Aboriginal medicine be examined scientifically or else will reject it as faith . . . (p. 215)

Given the progressive nature and the technological foundations of medicine, it is easy to infer in which direction the lines of influence and legitimacy will flow. The same authors also point out the cogent fact that nurses have far less difficulty interacting with such holistic ideas: ' . . . the situation is particularly enlightening because nurses are involved. The authors are also aware of many other anecdotal cases of local nurses working with local healers, sometimes publicly but often very quietly' (p. 214).

The amalgamation of caring, ethics, and holism to form what is essentially the theoretical foundation of nursing, however, ill-defined and ambiguous that may be, produces an internal moral dichotomy when placed in the context of a postmodern economic ideology. The juxtaposition of Progress and the foundation of nursing is, simply put, the nature of, and motivation for, intervention. As Volker (2003) cogently explains:

Technological advances, changes in healthcare economics, and increased consumer involvement are compelling forces that continue to reshape the nature of healthcare delivery . . . These same forces have an impact on the types of decisions people make about their care and treatment preferences. (p. 207)

Add to this the profound effect on the functioning and interventional behaviour of healthcare professionals, and we begin to get a sense of the influence of the working assumptions of Progress, whether one accepts them or not. Yet as Herdman (2001) asserts: 'to date there has been little analysis of the effect of medical science and technology on nursing practice. There is simply an acceptance that there is such an effect' (p. 7).

### Healthcare intervention: progress or Progress

In weighing the munificence against the harm of any given intervention, nurses are not simply preoccupied with nuances such as the side effects of pharmacotherapy, postoperative pain management, the effects of chronic illness, adjustment to disability, and so on. Obviously, these issues are of great importance but caring holistically significantly expands what calls for the nurse's attention. And the milieu of a progressive ideology, and an emphatically economic one, limits such vital mindfulness.

Time constraints, manpower shortages, bureaucratic opprobrium, policy inflexibility, technological imperatives, budgetary duress, lack of decision-making autonomy, to say nothing of an indelible interventionalist epistemology, all significant and unavoidable features of a postmodern economic ideology, combine to seriously hamper, if not outright eviscerate, the realization of quality holistic attention to health and welfare. Few nurses would disagree with such a conclusion but as Herdman (2001) notes, perhaps not surprisingly: ' . . . nursing literature contains the persistent theme of an all-pervasive belief in medical science and technology, and "progress" as the guiding light of nursing education and employment' (p. 7).

In a recent article entitled *Has Nursing Lost Its Hear?* Scott (2003) wonders if 'a spate of . . . publicity about poor [nursing] care' (p. 12) might be indicative of ill preparation, an obsession with academic education, a preponderance of concern regarding political and organizational awareness, and consequently a serious problem in nursing.

However, Mullally's (as cited by Scott, 2003) defence of nursing – 'it would be naïve to say that everything was right within nursing . . . But we are building on the things that improve nursing care and will keep going with that' (p. 13) – seems little more than a vague, if not public relations mediated, excuse, and a progressive one at that. Perhaps then, the time, commitment, resources, and spaces to care has a great deal less to do with any perceived deficiencies in nursing, than with the rather holistically hostile environment in which nurses are obliged to practise.

Peacock & Nolan (2000) argue a similar position. Namely that: 'care [is] under threat in the modern world' not so much from a lack of individual caring potential, but rather the fact that: 'when our thinking is underpinned entirely by the scientific/technological, everything, including care itself, can be measured and calculated . . . We may speak of the "quality" of health provision, but mean only what can be calculated, weighed, and assessed' (p. 1069). Clarke (2003) makes the same charge against nursing education. 'Nurse education at all levels needs to free itself from the straitjacket of quality assessments, curriculum equivalence and the technological limitations . . . and get back to some of the doubts and uncertainties' (p. 37).

Hussey (2004) has recently accused 'nurses and nurse philosophers' of 'intellectual seduction' by 'philosophical fashions' and 'mistaken or dubious conclusions'. He cites: 'such things as nursing models, holism, patient autonomy, therapeutic touch, post-modernism and so on . . .' (p. 105). Furthermore, although he does not explicitly articulate particular objections with any of these 'fashions', he is given to assert that: 'some are clearly benign or even laudable while others are of dubious value' (p. 105), and pointedly fails to identify which is which.

Although he is certainly 'diplomatic' in his elocution, there is an unmistakable implication that in alluding to the folly of 'irrationalism', 'relativism', and 'Guru worship', in the same manner that he subtly hints at the gullibility, or indeed explicates the reactionary nature, of nursing, one might infer that he advocates a philosophy of Progress similar to that which has been previously discussed. ' . . . these trends may be driven by the traditional resentment that nurses feel toward the dominance and purported superiority of the medical profession, and towards the male dominated, powerful and "authoritarian" institutions of science.' (p. 105)

It ought to be evident, particularly given what has been aforesaid concerning the history, epistemology, and philosophy of Progress, that one does not have to be a nurse to express a certain umbrage with the superiority of medicine, male domination, or authoritarian science. In fact, the majority of Hussey's comments, while certainly well placed in the erudite

atmosphere of university classrooms, when applied to the lives of real people in real circumstances they amount to what one sees when looking out of virtually any contemporary urban window – progressive ideology, or perhaps more to the point – technological *Manifest Destiny*.

Perhaps then, it is not unwarranted to propose that the most significant problem in the current provision of nursing care (not to mention health care in general), is not at all the holistic philosophy (vs. I suppose, technical proficiency, or rational acumen) of caring in theoretical nursing, but rather the fact that it is practised in a nonholistic world. For despite the concerted philosophical and intellectual attempt of *postmodern thought* over the last century to undo the techno-scientific foundation of the modern economic ideology, such rubrics of human understanding and behaviour are indeed, as I have earlier argued, still firmly positioned at the helm of the postmodern economic ideology and its regime of techno-corporate management. As Sorrell (2003) puts it:

In our complex and fast-paced society, we may not take the time . . . Too busy to listen, we find ourselves in a condition . . . [of] 'benumbment'. In the midst of the constant noise of our modern world, we fail to create the silence needed for developing practices of intimate listening to the victim's voice. (*Intimate Listening in Thin Places*, p. 2)

Moreover, the influence of such a pervasive incultation threatens not only the types and choices of intervention that nurses select, but indeed the very potency of a holistic caring philosophy in the orchestration of its commitment. In fact, some view the latest acclaimed development in the academia of health care, 'evidence-based practice', as just that. Meaning a proposal to hand over the burden of practice decisions and clinical determination of intervention to the objectivity of science almost exclusively, a process now termed – research utilization (Fealy, 1999; Rolfe, 1999; Winch *et al.*, 2002; Thompson, 2003; Rycroft-Malone *et al.*, 2004).

The literature of nursing practice, as well as that of education, is replete with testimony to the virtues for critical thinking, problem solving, clinical and ethical decision making, and personal and professional reflection as a means to further quality health care.

However, little will be accomplished if such meritorious endeavours do not include a critical awareness of the progressive context of nursing practice. That is, the socio-political and economic conditions within which it must occur. Similar conclusions have indeed been reached by others, most recently that of Hardingham (2004):

...approaches that emphasize the individual decision-making of particular healthcare professionals (whether based on principles of cases or ideals of virtue) 'will always be inadequate and that a more satisfying perspective on healthcare ethics must shift attention to the social relations and institutions of power' ... (p. 133)

Peter *et al.* (2004) suggest in a review of 'nursing resistance as ethical action' that: 'many have spoken of the need to change the culture of nursing from silence to voice, closure to opening, isolation to connection, and from thinking to action ... although this is a task of mammoth proportions' (p. 414).

Certainly I do not declare that all is right with 'the culture of nursing', yet it is very possible that the culture at large is an even more intractable impediment to the proper aim of nursing. An aim that is no less than, a deep and authentic concern for the furtherance of the holistic health and welfare of people. Such an aspiration is, no doubt, a 'task of [more than] mammoth proportions', particularly if we continue to hear the propagandist slogans of, 'that's just the way the world is', or 'it's human nature', or 'change is good', in reference to Human Progress, from our students, citizens, and even our presumably educated elite.

### Concluding remarks

Perhaps it appears that I have painted a bleak picture of our long-term prospects, particularly given the apparently inexorable advance of globalization, surely the quintessential evocation of Progress, over the last half of the 20th century.

Yet I think of O'Sullivan's (2001) irreproachable comment that, '...despair is a natural response to our present historical situation; it cannot and should not be banished by injections of optimism or sermons of "positive thinking". Our encounter with despair

must be acknowledged and worked through at a deep level of the psyche' (p. 35).

Along with such perspicacity, we might add, as have a plethora of thinkers, writers, and critics, that in the same manner that we would approach an individual suffering from *addiction*, the first step is to *admit* we have a problem.

To this end, we must first, begin a serious dialogue concerning *Human Progress* and the totality of its effects, influence, and inculcation. Second, we need to begin to stem the tide of what Bertrand Russell called 'the seductions of the eloquent' which is nothing less than the language, motivation, and indeed allure of the postmodern economic ideology and its veritable habit forming patterns upon us.

By definition nurses are educators. Moreover, the nature of their practice, more often than not, is characterized as one of honest, empathetic, trustworthy rapport with people of exceptional diversity. It seems to me then, that making an effort to educate these individuals, and encouraging a serious, critical examination regarding the contexts in which they are to practise, including its basic assumptions, historical situation, and chief claims, is the very least we might do for the future of human health and welfare.

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